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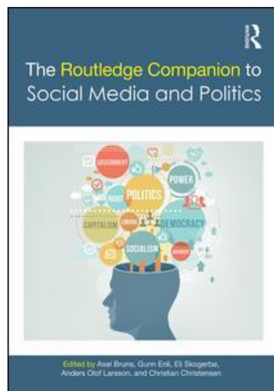

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Weak Publics, the Online Space, Spatial Relations, and Collective Action in Singapore

Natalie Pang and Debbie Goh

Introduction

With the mass adoption of social media, much has been said about the robustness and the inclusiveness of the online space as a sustainable public sphere. This involves a reinvention of political deliberation and participation, reflecting a shift and negotiation of power between the state and citizens, and participants moving back and forth between online and offline media environments. In social media, opinion expression can also be closely followed by political action, and activities in one country can affect similar protests elsewhere. For instance, the mobilisation of people for civic or political causes as in the case of social media and the protest in Tahrir Square (Tufekci & Wilson 2012) can lead to eventual motivation and mobilisation of people to support the White Paper protest in Singapore (Pang & Goh 2014).

In Singapore, the average social media penetration rate is 70 per cent, one of the highest in Asia (Hashmeta 2014), with Facebook being the most popular, followed by Instagram and Twitter. In a recent study comparing 9,417 Internet users in France, Germany, India, Singapore, the U.S., and the UK, Singaporeans were revealed to be the most emotionally connected to the Internet (Tata Communications 2014), with 78 per cent reporting negative emotions when they are without Internet access. Such results have a number of implications: Singaporean users are heavily dependent on the Internet for information; the Internet may have emerged as a space where users interact meaningfully with others and form what they perceive to be substantial relationships; and/or the Internet is such an integral and important part of their everyday lives that they are emotionally affected without it.

With the amount of time Singaporeans spend online, boundaries distinguishing their lives online and offline are increasingly blurred, and online interactions can often lead to deliberate actions and the mobilisation of social and political movements. The

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mobilisation potential and use of social media is clear enough—but what functions do online chatter serve in social and political movements? In what ways are online communities functioning, and how do they contribute to the dynamics of such movements? This chapter will examine these questions via three case studies conducted in Singapore between 2011 and 2013. Two cases focus on the context of political participation and information seeking during two elections, and the third is concerned with social media use during a protest. The cases are selected as they form part of our case-based investigation into social media use in the sociopolitical context from 2011 to 2013. We begin with the first study in 2011 on social media use during Singapore's general election, move to the by-election in 2012, and end with the study of a protest in 2013.

Social Media and Social Movements in Singapore

The Internet and social media landscape in Singapore should be understood within the context of changing policies on relaxing public and free speech. It was only in 2000 that public speeches were encouraged in Singapore, with the gazetting of a Speakers' Corner in central Singapore to allow citizens to give public speeches without a public entertainment license. The space, however, was rarely used for eight years, until the easing of restrictions to allow public demonstrations and rallies without a police permit, although the privilege was only for Singaporeans and excluded non-citizens residing Singapore. Since then, use of the space has grown, but remained largely focused on civic and social issues such as LGBT rights (Berger 2004).

In 1994, Sintercom (short for the Singapore Internet Community) was founded. Like the U.S.-based WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), which has been described as the most influential virtual community born in the 1980s (Rheingold 1993), Sintercom flourished within a short time, with more than 20 editors and 1,200 subscribers on its mailing list at its height (George 2006). The site was shut down in 2001 due to disagreements with the authorities over the introduction of the Class License scheme (Rodan 1998), which asked Internet content providers that discussed religious or political issues to register and to "bear full responsibility for contents on the website and [take] all reasonable steps to ensure that such content comply with the laws of Singapore" (MDA 2010: 6). Two decades later, social media have become instrumental in filling the gaps left behind by Sintercom: growing civic journalism (Kirk 2014), fostering alternative discourse and public deliberation, and providing opportunities for direct engagement.

In May 2013, 17 years after the introduction of the Class Licensing scheme, new plans to govern online discourse were announced: online news sites that report regularly on issues related to Singapore and have significant reach among readers would require an individual license, to be consistent with the requirements imposed on traditional news platforms (MDA 2013). Public exchanges highlighting objections to the new rules, and ambiguity from the media authorities eventually led to a social movement framed as #FreeMyInternet in Singapore, with the first protest held on 8 June 2013 at the Speakers' Corner (Reuters 2013).

The Public Sphere Reloaded

The original conception of the public sphere by Habermas (1962) has received much attention and criticism, largely relating to the structural limitations to participation

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and the class differences between individuals able to come together for public deliberation (also cf. Chapter 4 by Bruns & Highfield in Part I of this collection). Mass media were also seen critically, in their potential influence on public opinion—thereby reducing the effectiveness and pluralization of the public sphere.

The media environment and communication technologies have changed much since 1962, especially with the introduction of social media into the landscape. The dissemination of information, even via mass media, is rarely one way, and anyone can participate if they want to. The plurality of voices birthed and facilitated by the Internet implies that more can be heard, more issues may be raised, and more people can rally around a common cause.

Such democratizing potential, however, may be limited by different levels of access to the Internet. Marginalized groups who do not have access for reasons such as affordability and digital literacy are unable to participate; but even if they had access, their voices may be undermined because of differences in language, abilities in expressing opinions, and dominance relative to others online.

The online sphere as originally conceptualised by Habermas (1962) also did not include the possibility of other public spheres. With social media bringing about 'new' kinds of spaces in which online discourse about salient issues can flourish, they can function as 'weak publics', which function as spaces of deliberation and discourse, participated in by private individuals and performing discursive checks on the decisions made by the state.

Furthermore, Fraser (1990: 64) suggested that since "a space of zero degree culture, so utterly bereft of any specific ethos" is highly unlikely, having multiple publics is in fact advantageous since it will foster a greater plurality of perspectives and enable less dominant cultural groups to participate.

The Online Space

Findings from many studies have pointed to the fact that people congregate in distinct enclaves online, forming their own social norms and values to guide their behaviour and interactions (Rheingold 1993; Wojcieszak & Rojas 2011). Echo chambers sometimes result from these online enclaves, where information and beliefs are reinforced and amplified.

The small-world concept developed by Chatman (1991) may provide further clues for understanding the function of online enclaves as multiple publics, their use of social media, and their implications for social movements. In small worlds, interactions are guided by what Chatman (1991: 444) described as "first-level lifestyle": people are dependent "either on personal experiences or on hearsay from someone who is accepted as having knowledge of things being discussed" (Chatman 1991: 215). For them, information is sought "from others much like themselves" and rejected especially when such information threatens and challenges their beliefs and norms. Such defensive behaviour is partly due to their worldview as "insiders" and a distrust of anyone who is not part of their intimate small world. These insiders set "boundaries on behavior" (Chatman 1991: 214): they define and redefine what is acceptable and normative within their community. Such small worlds provide a common sense of social reality and the problems associated with it. Members of a small world share beliefs which are reflected in collective action and social movements, aligned with the expectations and reality they believe exist.

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Traditional theories of collective action have been challenged in recent years for their relevance and external validity within the changing media environment (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl 2005). Bimber et al. (2005) questioned the assumptions of free-riding and central organisation in such theories, expanding the theory to account for other contemporary collective action, especially in online situations when individuals cross their private boundaries into the public to come together for collective discourse and action. Both are key ingredients for social movements, but should also be understood within the small world contexts of how they come about.

The Cases

Social Media and the General Election of 2011

Since Singapore's independence in 1965, it has grown rapidly, rising in prominence through its economic and infrastructural development—an achievement that is often associated with the dominance of its ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP), since 1959. With the government's control also over the mainstream media platforms in the republic, the growth of the Internet and social media has been seen as positive in assisting with the development of deliberative democracy, as many Singaporeans are taking to these platforms to express their opinions on various issues and to connect with other like-minded citizens.

In 2011, Singapore held its 16th general election, described by both academics and political parties as a 'watershed election' (Lim, 2011). It was a 'watershed' also in the way that social media were at the forefront of the contest between the ruling party and the opposition parties. Opposition parties used social media actively during the elections, and citizens used them to either express their opinions and/or connect with the respective parties or political candidates.

With the goal of understanding how opposition parties and citizens used social media, as well as examining the discourse within these platforms, our project focused on the online content created and used both by political parties and by citizens during the general election. A total of 1,380 Facebook posts, six party websites, and 764 blog posts were analysed (for full details, see Pang & Goh, 2012; Goh & Pang, 2012).

Issues that dominated the online discourse were identified. Some of these issues would later resurface in our subsequent study in the following year, which we discuss below. From the content analysis, we generated two main findings contributing to the theoretical propositions. One of them relates to the generation of issues and agenda setting: whilst there were core issues identified by mainstream media, political parties and citizens were both able to further deliberate and analyse those issues online, and generate different sub-issues and agendas. Certain sites also exhibited more intense and cohesive interactions within the online community, to the point that individuals who diverged from their social norms or introduced new kinds of information were asked to leave.

The By-Election of 2012

Momentum from the 2011 general election was picked up again with a by-election for the constituency of Hougang in 2012, after the dismissal of an elected member of parliament belonging to the opposition camp. Two parties contested this by-election, namely the ruling party (PAP) and the by-now-dominant opposition Workers' Party.

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By now, there was interest in the representation of online voices, and our goal was to investigate whether and how opinions and discourse were similar or different online and offline. Issues identified from the earlier study of social media content in the general election in 2011 were incorporated into the coding of online discourse and opinions here (for a detailed discussion, see Goh, Pang, & Ang, 2013).

Our content analysis revealed that there were unresolved, persistent issues since the last general election, and online, there was much dissent and negative sentiments building up towards them. One example was the issue of foreign labour, which led to a protest and social movement at the Speakers' Corner in 2013. Our findings in this case reinforced our proposition that social media were functioning as weak publics that were fluid but also significant in sustaining momentum and dialogue on issues of interest. The discourse generated online was also providing much context for the development of frames to examine the subsequent collective action and protest.

The White Paper Protest: Proximal Groups and the Shaping of Participation

By early 2013, dissatisfactions with certain issues gained much ground online. One issue was the issue of relaxed foreign labour and immigration policies, leading to an increase in the number of foreigners in the small republic. By 2013, Singapore citizens comprised only 62 per cent, or 3.3 million, of the country's population of 5.3 million. Blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter feeds were filled with growing resentment against foreigners by locals facing growing social fragmentation, overcrowding, high housing prices, depressed wages, and competition for space, jobs, and schools.

In January 2013, a Population White Paper was released, aimed at controlling and calibrating the growth of foreigners to a more steady state. It projected a population growth to 6.9 million by 2030, of which 50 per cent would be foreigners. The Population White Paper, with its best intentions to recalibrate population growth, backfired, with citizens enraged by what they perceived to be a lack of concern about salient problems, the welfare of citizens, and the stubbornness of government in continuing with its liberal foreign labour and immigration policies.

Weeks after the release of the White Paper in early February, Gilbert Goh, the founder of a website providing support services to unemployed Singaporeans, called for a protest against the White Paper. News of the protest went viral on social media and was picked up and disseminated by various sociopolitical blogs. On 16 February 2013 an estimated 4,000 Singaporeans of various ages and races turned up at Singapore's Speakers' Corner for the protest. Although the number of protesters in Singapore may seem small compared to mass protests elsewhere, the protest was highly significant given the country's small population and history of strict laws against public demonstrations. It was also the first mass political demonstration against the PAP government.

Following the success of the first protest, a second protest was quickly announced and held on 1 May 2013. Social media played an integral role in mobilisation, since mainstream media did not cover news of the event. A diverse crowd of participants turned up at the protest, almost equalling the number of participants to the first protest. The social movement was nevertheless short lived. Participation at a third protest in October dropped to around 1,000 people, further decreasing in a fourth protest. The first two protests raise questions about how social media mobilised a politically apathetic

population. The failure to sustain the social movement also presents doubts about the efficacy of social media-driven collective action.

Our study, focused on the second protest, consisted of two parts: a content analysis investigating the way social media framed the protest, and a survey done in real time during the protest, seeking to understand protesters' motivations, uses of social media, information behaviours, and exposure to different collective action frames prior to attending the protest (for a full analysis, see Goh & Pang, forthcoming; Pang & Goh, 2014).

Theoretical Propositions

From our work we provide three propositions by which social media shape collective action and social movements. These were derived from our findings but also provide directions for further research.

Proposition 1: Social Media as Weak Publics

As in many societies, there is a cohesive system of social control in Singapore (George 2005), and some demographic groups may be more dominant than others in their access to social media. Dominant voices tend to be younger and have also received higher levels of education. Not everyone has access or chooses to access social media, although barriers to entry are low in Singapore. With the ability to be anonymous that comes with many social media sites, a good plurality of perspectives and issues can be raised. However, the anonymity of discourse does not hold individuals accountable to the discourse, resulting in a questionable quality of deliberation. These factors can result in a weakened democracy.

What is the function of such online discourse? With greater plurality, more issues can be raised—although some of them may not necessarily reflect the interests of the general public, and were raised because of the dominance of certain social groups online. For instance, in our 2011 project we began by coding online content for those issues that mainstream media and the authorities thought to be pertinent issues for the electorate. But we found many more issues raised and discussed online.

But those discourses that also reflect the interests of the general public can evolve into protests and social movements, as we observed between 2011 and 2013. Back in 2011, the issue of foreign labour was recognized as a salient issue by the mainstream media, and it was also widely discussed online. The same issue was raised again in 2012 during the by-election, and by 2013 the dissent and discourse had culminated in a series of protests.

Other issues can also result in social movements. However, they are of a much smaller scale and are not attended by a wide representation of various demographic groups. For instance, a protest against the ruling government's move to regulate the Internet, which happened soon after the White Paper protest, saw participation and attendance at the Speakers' Corner on a much smaller scale compared to the White Paper protest. To date, the #FreeMyInternet movement is still largely driven by a small locus of activists.

In this sense, we can use social movements to answer the question of how online discourse reflects the interests of the larger public. There is no unified model to explain all these dynamics, but what we have observed since 2011 is that if the movements reflect a plurality of people and perspectives, online discourses are quite aligned to the sentiments and opinions of the larger public. But if the movements are composed of

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a relatively homogenous and focused group of people, it is not likely that the online reflects the offline.

The framing of the collective action also mattered as they reflect a collective aggregate of how individuals interpret the problem and protest (Gamson 1992): most of the frames we found in the White Paper protest were motivational, and used various reasons to motivate participation and promote both individual and collective agency. The second dominant frame (diagnostic) focused on identifying the problem to be solved and the perpetrator of the injustice. The third frame we found related to the prognostic frame, associated with identifying solutions to the problem.

Thus, whilst the online sphere is not *the* public sphere, because of its fragmentation, it serves two purposes as a weak public: (a) it acts as a platform for salient issues to be surfaced, some of which gain momentum enough to evolve into an offline protest and a larger social movement; (b) it acts as a space in which framing around collective action and other activities associated with a social movement is deliberated. Such framing can have effects on actual protest motivations and behaviours. Diagnostic frames which interpret the situation by identifying the injustice, the perpetrators, and the victims were significant in driving purposeful actions at the White Paper protest. People who were exposed to and engaged with this particular frame were more likely to participate in the protest in order to drive change, rather than joining it because of other reasons (such as bandwagon behaviour).

Proposition 2: The Small World Online

Like Wojcieszak and Rojas (2011), we draw the conclusion that online, people function in egocentric publics, and some such egocentric publics are more exclusive than others. It is through the existence and interactions of people in these small publics that social norms, social roles, and worldviews are shaped and lend impetus to civic action and social movements. Whilst social media can act as a tool and mechanism for mobilisation, the tool alone is insufficient. Other scholars such as Putnam (2000) and Hebenstreit (2014) have expressed similar opinions, arguing that there is much fragmentation and clustering of like-minded people who do not easily interact with others online.

Like-mindedness can also evolve into collective defence, described by Chatman (1991) as 'defensive information behavior'. Such individuals are fiercely defensive of the social norms operating within, and reject outside information that may oppose or threaten the beliefs and norms within their communities. Although it is difficult to define the boundaries of online communities since individuals are not limited by physical, spatial borders and can move in and out of multiple communities, such defensive behaviours were observed at various online sites.

In our content analysis of posts during the 2011 general election and 2012 by-election, there were been many instances where an individual posts comments that were contrary to the discourse that was developing within the discussion. The fact that there were outsiders and insiders was apparent: the regulars (the commenters and, in some cases, the people who posted the original messages) responded to outsiders by telling them to, in some cases, 'get out of here' or by 'ganging up' negatively on them.

Through such responses and gatekeeping processes they set boundaries on what is acceptable according to the social norms within the community, regardless of whether or not the new information is useful or relevant. With these boundaries they create a 'worldview' for themselves, along with language, values and symbols that give particular

meanings to the problems perceived with the worldview. Chatman (1991) found that, so long as the community is still functioning, such worldviews result in information avoidance or rejection. Hebenstreit (2014) also argued that deliberation on issues in such contexts encourages polarization—and we argue that this provides also the basis for framing collective action and, eventually, social movements.

Especially in situations where an issue is limited to a relatively small group of individuals (not of interest to the general public sphere), such small worlds provide the impetus and momentum for collective action. This offers new perspectives on the concept of the critical mass in collective action theory. Traditional theories of collective action posit that the critical mass—"a relatively small cadre of highly interested and resourceful individuals" (Marwell & Oliver 1993: 2)—is responsible for driving collective action. In the online round, social media not only shape the ways in which these individuals come together; they also remove the social barriers for these individuals, in effect 'persuading' those who have social proximity (even if only perceived) to engage in the same cause and collective action. For instance, in our study of the White Paper protest, those who perceived greater social proximity to the core activists—the critical mass—were also more motivated to attend the protest out of support for the cause.

Proposition 3: Social Media, Space, and Collective Action

The year 2011 saw a widespread increase in social media use by various social movements. Many studies have emerged not only examining the mobilisation role of social media, but also the meanings they convey. As Mason wrote:

> Facebook is used to form groups, covert and overt—in order to establish those strong but flexible connections. Twitter is used for real-time organization and news dissemination, bypassing the cumbersome "newsgathering" operations of the mainstream media. YouTube and Twitter-linked photographic sites—Yfrog, Flickr and Twitpic—are used to provide instant evidence of the claims being made. Link-shorteners like bit.ly are used to disseminate key articles via Twitter. (Mason 2012: 75)

But as Gerbaudo (2012) rightfully pointed out, whilst the mobilisation role of social media is obvious, a pressing question is how we can understand the "spatial relationships" (Gerbaudo 2012: 12) between social media and protest camps (protests and social movements that take place outside the online realm of the Internet). The types of interactions online and at protests are vastly different: online, individuals interact over a distance and retain their individualization (Bauman 2001) while at a protest, interactions are much more intense and there is much pressure to conform to and as a collective. Protesters who used mobile chats in Hong Kong in the Umbrella Movement, for instance, were more likely to engage in frontline activism—that is, to directly participate in the protest (Lee 2014).

It has been argued by many scholars that elements of a Panopticon exist inherently within the structures of the Internet (Brignall 2002; Tang & Yang 2011; Campbell & Carlson 2002). In a Panopticon, 'prisoners' are perpetually exposed to the gaze of watchers. They know they are under surveillance, but do not know exactly when because they are not able to see the watchers or watchtower (Bentham 1843). As a result, they take responsibility for regulating their own behaviour and "a state of conscious

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and permanent visibility" is induced in them (Foucault 1977: 201). On social media, everything we do is tagged to our identities: the posts, the likes, the links and posts we share, the things we purchase online, the articles we read, our tagging activities, and the things we are tagged in. No one may actually be reading all this, but it is also equally likely that many are watching. Consequently, we are conscious about what we do, and this consciousness is permanent, and the only people who are exempt from this effect are those who do not use the Internet, or those who do not care.

The Panopticon effect of social media has far-reaching impacts on contemporary movements. Identity is created by liking and sharing information about a protest; and those with whom such information is shared become the guards and watchers as individuals augment their identities with actual attendance. Our study of the White Paper Protest revealed that attendees had mixed motivations: some were there as authentic supporters of the cause, some were there to seek first-hand information, and the rest were exhibiting bandwagon behaviour. Even though there were mixed motivations, they were there on the ground, and they would be known by their acts, even if no one was actually watching.

This Panopticon-like space influences the interactions of people even as they move in and out of multiple communities and identities. Although they are not bounded by one community or organisation, there is an induced state of consciousness serving to remind people to follow through on what they have supported online with offline actions.

Media theorists such as Benkler (2006) and Shirky (2008) argue that, contrary to what many other scholars believe, interactions on the Internet are in fact dominated by a "power law distribution" (Shirky 2008: 125). Gerbaudo (2012: 145) described such organisation as "liquid," arguing that new, softer forms of leadership arise as a result, making use "of the interactive and participatory character of the web 2.0 environment". This was also our observation: only a core group of activists were responsible for organising and promoting the protest, but a large outer circle supported the protest by sharing, commenting and liking. Collective action in the liquid assembly in this context had both traditional and new elements: there is still a core group of organisers, activists and mobilisers, as has been the case for many forms of collective action—but the outer circle beyond this core group is large and fluid, supported by the participatory elements of new media and driven by a loose sense of connectedness and belonging.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have synthesised findings from the three cases from 2011–2013 to present three theoretical propositions on the role of social media and social movements. We began with a general election and ended with a protest against population policy in Singapore. The nature of the cases is highly interrelated: the deliberation and discourse on issues which emerged in 2011 during the general election gained momentum in the events of 2012, and when the Population White Paper was released in 2013, the issue of foreign labour evolved into protests and a social movement. Whilst social media intensified and mediated the interactions and discourse between people, they were only part of an environment that brought people into the streets. This environment is mediated by the 'weak publics' of social media, the nature of online enclaves and interactions functioning in both the online and offline environments, the structural attributes of the social media space, and the types of organisation that is facilitated by the participatory characteristics of social media.

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From these cases we proposed new insights into the ways social media function as weak publics; the importance of understanding online enclaves, which, although they are not always obvious, have distinct social norms and behaviours; and the role of social media in social movements, specifically going beyond their obvious roles of information dissemination and mobilisation.

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