



Can blogs function as rhetorical publics in Asian democracies? An analysis using the case of Singapore



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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms such as blogs have been said to improve and expand the potential of the Internet in enabling open access to political discourse. Yet several factors may undermine such potential, even in a place like Singapore, where Internet penetration and usage of social media are high. Participation remains fragmented, with certain groups more active than others, raising questions on the viability of the Internet as a public sphere. The context and conditions under which online publics function provide important basis for understanding the use of social media, yet this has often been overlooked. We examine the use of blogs in Singapore as sites for discursive exchanges, civic engagement, and community construction, and discuss the sustainability of blogs as multiple publics in a functioning Asian democracy.

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1. Introduction

Habermas conceived the public sphere in his book 'The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere' in 1962 as a collective of individuals congregating together to deliberate on issues and matters of public concern. The premise of this idea underscores the importance of physical spaces where such deliberations and discussions can take place. However, there are structural limitations to participating in such physical spaces, such as the capacity of the space to facilitate productive dialogs, as well as the presence of physical disabilities in limiting certain individuals' participation to such spaces. Habermas also saw that the innovation of mass media reduced the effectiveness and pluralisation of the public sphere as the media represent and disseminate certain perspectives. Such structural communicative deficits lend strength to the potential of the Internet in facilitating participation in the public sphere. The Internet, with its flat structure and ease in using information and communication technologies, is poised as a mechanism by which more voices can participate in the public sphere, thus complementing collective perspectives and aiding the framing of issues of collective concern in the public sphere.

However, characteristics of certain individuals render them unable to participate using the Internet. For instance, limitations in technical literacy can exclude participation. Even if individuals were formally and technically literate, they may be informally excluded because of deficits in their powers of deliberation and therefore undermine their participation. These limitations can weaken social democracy, since these individuals would not be able to participate, and thus unable to have their views represented.

Additionally, Habermas does not include possibilities of other public spheres in his conceptualization of "the" public sphere, and with this point we see blogs on the Internet functioning amidst multiple publics that can be both digital and

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non-digital. Our paper attempts to provide an empirical perspective on the rhetorical discourse and discursive interactions witnessed in the blogosphere in a functioning Asian democracy to understand the extent to which participants were engaging in active deliberations, and discuss the extent to which blogs construct norms that can provide sites for civic engagement and construction for communal identities. While surfacing the assumptions of Habermas' public sphere (1989), this analysis also explores the rhetorical public sphere as proposed by Hauser (1998, 1999).

We situate our study in Singapore, one of the most networked cities in the world, where 82% of households have access to the Internet (IDA, 2011). With such access there is a significant growth of online content, notably the number of blogs being created, mainstream media putting their content online, citizen-led alternative news sites being created, and an increase in the number of people with social networking accounts such as Facebook and Twitter. At the point of writing, Social Bakers (2013) reported that the penetration of Facebook in Singapore is approximately 57% of the country's population, and 73% of the total online population. These trends reflect a collective enthusiasm in online media as playing an instrumental role in tipping the balance of power from the dominant ruling party during Singapore's 2011 election in favor of opposition parties. Although the ruling party eventually won the election, it gained only 60% of votes, the lowest since it came into power in 1965.

With heightened use of new media for political participation and shifts in political leadership in the republic, the need to examine the role of the Internet as rhetorical publics has reached a critical threshold. This is particularly relevant to Singapore where class differences are not a main determinant of technological access. As Warschauer (2001) describes it, Singapore is unique in the sense that "the country's leaders exert a level of social and political control" (p. 305), yet it is also highly aggressive in its pursuit of infusing the Internet at various levels in the government and society. This article examines how blogs collectively formed multiple publics based on rhetorical discourse during Singapore's 2011 General Election. We seek to explore how such publics function in a highly modernized and controlled republic focusing on the use of blogs during the 2011 General Election.

2. Theoretical framework

Bargh and McKenna (2004) identified three approaches that have been used by researchers to study the Internet. In the first approach, scholars such as Sproull and Kiesler (1985) identify the effects of the Internet on the interactions, communication processes and outcomes given both the absence and presence of certain communication cues on the Internet. In the second approach, scholars argue for the social context in guiding the use of the Internet – with Blumler and Katz's (1974) "uses and gratifications theory" as one good example of research birthed from this approach. The third approach focuses on "the interaction between features of the Internet communication setting and the particular goals and needs of the communicators, as well as the social context of the interaction setting" (Bargh and McKenna, 2004, p. 579). In other words, this approach considers both the structural features of the technology and the social context of users.

Both structural and agency characteristics of the Internet and participants in the blogosphere warrant a different understanding of blogs as possible publics. Since its creation, blogs have grown significantly, with Technorati reporting the 'blogosphere' doubling in size every five months (The Economist, 2006). Blogs have four unique characteristics: social nature, blogroll, trackbacks, and cultural ethos. Unlike personal journals, which are private, blogs are essentially social applications, with the comments feature facilitating responses to their posts. This is the social nature of discourse in blogs. Two other features of blogs include: (1) a blogroll, where links to other blogs are listed, and (2) trackbacks, which allows authors to be notified what other bloggers link to their posts. These two features support communication between blogs. Conniff (2005) also suggested distinctive features such as commenting, informality and chronological ordering within blogs. Although there has been much optimism in the democratic potential of such features (Benkler, 2006; Dahlberg, 2001; Shirky, 2011), critics such as Sunstein (2004) have also argued that the same features that empower can also undermine democratic deliberation. As Bohman (2004) pointed out, structural features of the Internet have brought about both optimistic and pessimistic views in the Internet as a public sphere.

Yet as Boyd (2006) rightfully pointed out, structural features of blogs alone do not explain how they are used and their social construction. Cultural ethos, aptly put across as 'blogging is also about style' (The Economist, 2006), also gives each blog an authentic and distinct voice, evident of its creator(s). For example, there are two kinds of socio-political blogs in Singapore: the first has a distinct individual behind it and the blog presents particular interests of the blogger. The second is formed by a collective of bloggers who lend their voices to the blog, although it may not be immediately obvious who is accountable. Needless to say, this is a coarse and deterministic generalization. In reality, blogs are very different from each other, and usually reflect the social contexts that they are used.

Ho (2007) for instance made the case for blogs as a form of public and democratic history making in Singapore. Especially after the 2006 General Election in Singapore, blogs gained prominence and are now accepted by the public and the state as being part of the mainstream public discourse (Lee and Kan, 2009). This must be understood in the context of parallel developments globally in the growth of blogs as a platform for political discourse by the early part of 2003 (Chadwick and Howard, 2009). In their examination of socio-political blogs in Singapore, Soon and Cho (2011) argued that regulations and actions by both the government and activist bloggers have contributed to the development of blogs "not just in terms of information sharing and dissemination, but also in promoting alternative perspectives that challenge mainstream hegemonic discourse" (p. 97).

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