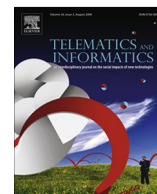




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Protesting the Singapore government: The role of collective action frames in social media mobilization



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ABSTRACT

This study engages collective action framing theory to examine the strategies employed by Singaporeans, rarely seen on the front lines of politics, on social media to organize a protest against the government's immigration policy. It addresses critical and theoretical questions on the formation and dynamics of collective action frames on social media, and the implications for social movements. An analysis of 1805 posts and comments on blogs and Facebook leading up to the May 1, 2013 protest reveals that while organizers and protestors resonated in their development of diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames, they placed different emphasis on the frames. This variable use of frames helps explain that while the protest was successful in mobilizing thousands to the outdoor site, it was not able to sustain the movement demanding immigration reform.

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1. Introduction

On February 16, 2013, an estimated 4000 Singaporeans of all ages and races gathered at Singapore's Speakers Corner to protest the government's white paper on raising the population to 6.9 million, nearly half of which will be immigrants. On May 1, a second protest against the Population White Paper drew an equally large and diverse crowd of protestors. The two mass political protests against the Singapore government were unusual on several accounts. They were unprecedented both in terms of size and purpose. In Singapore, restrictive laws on outdoor demonstrations and a history of arrests of protestors have deterred outdoor protesting. Anti-government coverage in the mainstream media is limited (Cenite et al., 2008), and the White Paper protests expectedly received marginal reportage from national media. Political participation in Singapore is also very low, even among youths who consume more political content online (Tan et al., 2012). The protests thus caught off guard the government and the nation, and caught the attention of international observers, all of whom are used to Singapore as a pacifist, multicultural country that epitomizes social harmony and economic growth grounded on foreign investments and pro-immigration policies.

The protests raised questions on what influenced a politically apathetic population in a pro-government media environment to participate in an anti-government protest. Both mainstream and international media typically feature Singapore as a wealthy, peaceful and cosmopolitan city. Yet, fissures against foreigners have been developing in the past decade, as relaxed foreign labor and immigration policies escalated the foreign population. The mainstream media diligently reported the government's stance on the benefits of its pro-foreign labor policies. Online, however, blogs and social media were rife with criticism and anger against foreigners by frustrated Singaporeans facing overcrowding, high housing prices, stagnating wages

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and competition for space, jobs and schools. The straw that broke the camel's back was the release of a Population White Paper in January 2013. In early February, Transitioning.org, a support service for unemployed Singaporeans, began mobilizing protestors through its blog and Facebook event pages, inviting over 40,000 people to join the first protest. News of the upcoming protest was quickly picked up and disseminated by alternative political blogs. Following the success of the first protest, Transitioning.org announced the second protest through similar social media channels in March 2013.

Undeniably, social media played an integral role in informing and mobilizing protestors to the offline protests. Given the protests' anti-government stance, mainstream news coverage of the event was expectedly limited. A survey of the protestors found that two-thirds learnt about the protest through social media, while only a fifth was informed by mainstream media (Pang and Goh, 2014). A Factiva search of news coverage of Singapore's three key mainstream English newspapers further indicated the first protest remained unreported until *post facto*. The protests thus made it to the mainstream news agenda only after the scale of the first protest signified its newsworthiness. Nonetheless, mainstream news coverage remained moderated. Of the 18 articles on the protests that were listed in Factiva, three provided basic news coverage of the protests, and only one article, a longer commentary by a senior editor, discussed one of the protest issues through protestors' perspective. The other reports focused on government officials' criticism of the protest organizers, the controversy that arose from a debate over the protests as xenophobic, and problems with the organization of the second protest, including the lack of a police permit and speakers pulling out. The papers also published opinion pieces that built on a minister's spin on the protest as a positive sign of citizen engagement and debate, while skirting the key protest issues of overpopulation and poor governance. Singapore's mainstream media reportage of the protests likely provided it greater legitimacy and increased public awareness. Their influence on the development of the movement, however, needs to be established.

In order to understand how framing processes on social media contributed to the emergence and development of the protest, this study examines the collective action frames used by protest organizers and participants. Though the first two protests drew unprecedented participation, the numbers dropped to 1000 for a third protest in October. The following year, on May 1, 2014, only 350 people participated. The protests also failed to effect changes by the government. This study thus examines the frames used by protest organizers on social media, and compares how individuals engage these frames during the process of mobilization. Through this study, we hope to understand how dynamic framing strategies on social media might have urged politically apathetic and timid Singaporeans to amass publicly to protest the government. At the time, we seek to understand through studying the framing process the factors that might have led to the waning of the movement.

2. Social media and collective action

Research on protest framing established that mainstream media typically either ignore or cast protests negatively (Hamdy and Goma, 2012; Stein, 2009; DeLuca and Peoples, 2002). Activists have thus been turning to alternative media – social media in particular – for collective action. Social media allow activists to rapidly organize and mobilize masses of supporters by capitalizing on individuals to disseminate mobilizing information and rally support through their own personal networks easily and at low costs (Bennett et al., 2008; Bimber et al., 2005). In less democratic environment, social media may be even more crucial for political dissent as the anonymity or non-political nature of the platforms help activists to circumvent authoritarian controls or avoid being targeted and marginalized (Fahmi, 2009; Tufekci and Wilson, 2012). Nonetheless, the effectiveness of using emerging technologies in developing a social movement is not a given (Bennett et al., 2008). Scholars point out that while social media may spur moments of collective action, the success of using social media in sustaining and determining protest outcome is contingent on how strongly the protest resonates with potential participants (Harlow, 2012; Pu and Scanlan, 2012; Kang, 2012; Ward and Ostrom, 2006). Social movements require a common purpose and involve sustained collective actions to challenge those in power (Stein, 2009).

In studying the emergence and development of social movements, scholars have identified political opportunities, organizational structures and framing processes as the three key components of collective action (McAdam and Scott, 2005). In this study, we focus specifically on framing processes in protest organization and development. In traditional social movements, framing, particularly in more mature movements, involves conscious, strategic decisions by social movement organizations (McAdam and Scott, 2005; Snow and Benford, 1988, 1992). While strategic framing requires formal organizations to be precise and consistent, Bimber et al. (2005) have pointed out that contemporary social movements using new technologies such as social media violate traditional theory as collective action often do not involve formal organizations to persuade and coordinate participants. Moreover, social movements today comprise members with looser ties and diverse interests who are likely to bring their own narratives into the mobilization process (Bennett et al., 2008; Bennett and Segerberg, 2011). With social media's heterogeneous and heterarchic nature, messages become meaningful only when other users pay attention to, respond and circulate it (Kang, 2012). Social movement organizations might lose control over their messages as this multitude of voices on social media could fragment or alter that movement's tone and agenda, weakening its power to influence (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011; Gillan, 2009; Olorunnisola and Martin, 2013).

3. Theoretical framework – protest framing

Framing refers to the selection of some aspects of a perceived reality that resonates with audiences' existing schemas, defining problems in particular ways to promote particular causal interpretation and moral evaluation, and recommend

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