

NEGATIVE ONLINE DISCOURSE AND THEIR POTENTIAL EFFECTS TOWARDS POLITICAL SATISFACTION

Katherine Toland Frith¹, James Chen² and Malcolm Chung³

¹School of Communication and Information
National Technological University, Singapore
E-mail: tktfrith@ntu.edu.sg

²School of Communication and Information
National Technological University, Singapore
E-mail: jameschen@pmail.ntu.edu.sg

³ School of Communication and Information
National Technological University, Singapore
E-mail: malcolm_chung@ite.edu.sg

ABSTRACT

The Internet had been hailed by Pitroda (1993) as the most participatory medium of political discourse in the modern world, with Rodan (1997) describing it as a non- hierarchical, interactive and global medium. Much of it has to do with the fact that the Internet has the ability to enhance each individual's ability to make himself/herself heard in public discussions, based on the characteristics that are synonymous with the Internet. These are described by Shapiro (1999) and Robbles (2001) as the ability to broadcast, the element of interactivity, its existence on a public domain, openness to new participants and universal reach and access. The ability of interactivity and free association has been identified by Hague and Loader (1999) as the most crucial characteristics of the Internet acting as a "democratizer" and alternative medium to facilitate freedom of speech.

The study thus seeks to explore on how exposure towards critical web content could affect the political satisfaction at ground level. Two identical surveys were conduct prior and after exposure to negative online political content. The pretest and posttest t-tests were used to measure the significance of the changes recorded in the findings. A focus group discussion was later conducted in order to understand the nature of the variation in political satisfaction and if it would potentially lead to an alteration in voting behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Defining blogs and their roles in promoting citizen journalism

In its simplest form, a blog could function as an online journal, publishing commentary on special interests and observations. Bloggers are creators of new content, facilitating ongoing conversations between the bloggers and its small private audience. Matheson (2004) commented on the fundamental differences that define the unique difference between blogs and traditional journalism. Blogs by nature challenge corporate journalism in terms of content and even OB markers as blogs function as a democratic, interactive tool, with the almost complete freedom of expression unhindered by gatekeeping and to some extent even implementation of regulations due to the sheer volume of blog sites.

Blogs are increasingly being described as a means for citizen journalism, as the technological make up of a blog creates low entry publishing barriers to the general public, supports a wide spectrum of intent for a multitude of content. Wall (2005) also determined in her study unlike traditional mainstream media, online postings on blog sites are the opinionated and often one-sided view of the blogger. However, blogs were still able to derive credibility from the close unique relationship they had formed with the audience (Kayes and Johnson 2004). As readers continually assists the blog owner in creating meaning to the news, this unique interaction that made blogs differ from the mainstream media, which are often had their say in the agenda setting of news content.

The relevance of blogs in the Singapore political sphere

In the run up to the 2006 General Elections, the Singapore government had placed a ban on explicit online political discussions, which Associate Professor Benjamin Detenber from Nanyang Technological University's School of Communication and Information commented was imposed to remind them that regulations would be enforced regardless of the medium used for political discourse (Wong 2006). However, reaction in blogosphere was the exact opposite. In a report by Siew and Chua (2006) on behalf of the Straits Times dozens of videos of political rallies were posted on YouTube and Google Video anonymously and there was even a satirical podcast on the Mr. Brown blogsite. In the same report, Associate Professor Ang Peng Hwa, the Dean of

the School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University had commented that it was apparent that the online buzz was due to the alternative content that was available online, since it seemed apparent that the mainstream media did not seem to be giving the opposition much airtime. In addition, Singapore Internet Research Director Randolph Kluver was quoted by Lee (2006) that there was a heightened usage of the Net as an alternative space for political discussion. This included satirical podcasts, serious discussions on election strategies, thoughtful analyses that clarified facts and increased understanding.

Despite the law and Government's reminders that blogs had to be registered if they promoted any political party or stance, many bloggers continued to pursue their own political agenda, but invited little criticisms or incurred few repercussions. This deliberate disregard of the law and testing of out-of-bounds markers by bloggers was surprising. Scholars like Associate Professor Benjamin Detenber as reported by (Wong 2006) had commented that the ban on political was imposed to potentially scare people and remind them that both online and offline political comments would be taken equally seriously.

In a speech by the Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts, Dr. Lee Boon Yang, acknowledged need for a maturing society like Singapore to allow greater access to information and to alternative points of view and also to have their say on the political process. He also recognized the political interest garnered during the 2006 General Elections, citing a report posted online on the Channel NewsAsia website on the 12th May, that the number of political blog articles during the General Elections grew nearly 10-fold during the nine-day election campaign, compared to before Nomination Day. Dr. Lee also cited the emergence of the new media and technologically savvy Singaporeans, which supported this interest, as many also see the Internet as increasing the political space to discuss the issues brought up during the election campaign. Finally, he also expressed the Government's intention of by reviewing policies governing the Internet and the new media, as the Government had to step up efforts in engaging Net-savvy Singaporeans. Bloggers welcomed the move towards allowing a lax in regulatory controls and felt that the Internet was capable of regulating itself as most readers valued credibility and would not support blogs or websites that were consistently biased or unfair (Koh 2006).

REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

Potential of the Internet as a tool for political discourse

Pitroda (1993) hailed the Internet as the most participatory medium of political discourse in the modern world, while Rodan (1997) describing it as a non- hierarchical, interactive and global medium. Much of it has to do with the fact that the characteristics of the Internet as a medium. . Hague and Loader (1999) identified interactivity on the Internet and free association has being crucial in facilitating freedom of speech, while Shapiro (1999) and Robbles (2001) added other dimensions such as the ability to broadcast, its existence on a public domain, openness to new participants and universal reach and access

However, other scholars such as Bogart (1998) argue that the Internet serves as a double-edged sword as it can also be used to undermine a democratic order, because mediums of communication are merely instruments that can serve both ends of the spectrum. Dennis (1992) was also another proponent to this ideology was he argued that whether Internet can be an effective tool for promoting democracy depends largely on whether it is readily accessible to all and, more importantly, whether people know how to effectively utilize it. Hermes (2006) though had a different point of view about the potential of the Internet as he asserted that the Internet merely differed in its power to facilitate and intensify concentration and communication, but continued to serve the same political goals, thus suggesting that the content and sender were more important than the medium of carriage.

Political Disposition as a measure to gauge the effect of blogs on political disposition

Regan and Fazio (1977) found that there was a strong relationship between people's vested interest and their behavior. In the case of political participation, one of the chief rewards is the sense of pleasure that comes from taking part in valued discretionary activity. Kinder (1998), found that individuals interested in politics were had been following the local political scene closely and have a good depth of knowledge in the happenings of the political sphere. Consequentially, taking an active part in politics (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995).

H₁: Respondents who are current online political participants, will demonstrate higher levels of political interest.

H₂: Respondents who are exposed to negative online political commentary, will demonstrate lower levels of political interest.

Political Efficacy refers to the feeling that an individual political action has on the impact of the political process (Campbell, Gurin and Miller 1954). Studies from scholarly work have shown that efficacy has a correlation with individual participatory activities (Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Milbrath (1965) categorized political participation involved based on the degree of effort. In addition, a study by Renshon (1974) highlighted that citizens who possess higher levels of political efficacy are also more likely to be interested in politics.

H₃: Respondents who are current online political participants, will demonstrate higher levels of political efficacy.

H₄: Respondents who are exposed to negative online political commentary, will demonstrate higher levels of political efficacy.

The other factor in affecting political disposition is political satisfaction, which refers to the securing of benefits for oneself (Kinder 1998). These benefits usually exist in the form of tangible benefits. Citizens are drawn to political parties based on the election sweeteners (Wilson 1973). However, when such benefits are not satisfied, citizens become motivated to express their feelings of dissatisfaction is known as political protest. Studies have shown that political participation increases when satisfaction with the ruling government decreases (Mash 1977).

H₅: Respondents who are current online political participants, will demonstrate lower levels of political satisfaction.

H₆: Respondents who are exposed to negative online political commentary, will demonstrate lower levels of political satisfaction.

Regulatory Concerns

Developments in many Asian countries have demonstrated the increasing role that online arena plays in providing political discourse. In Malaysia, the political commentary site Malaysiakini.com, serves 100,000 daily readers, and has garnered numerous local, regional and international awards and also press mentions in the local traditional mainstream media in the country since its inception (Malaysiakini Official Website 2002).

However, online political debate has not reached the same level in Singapore, despite a much higher level of Internet penetration. The main reason cited is the difference in the political climate in both countries. The political scene in Singapore is not as vibrant especially in terms of participation and involvement. This has also not been helped by the fact that the country has enforced strict rules regulating the Internet (Rodan 1997).

H₇: Respondents who are current online political participants, will demonstrate lower levels of regulatory concern.

H₈: Respondents who are exposed to negative online political commentary, will demonstrate lower levels of regulatory concerns.

METHOD

The survey used in the study was adapted from the survey by Yeo (2003). Prior to that, pre-testing of the survey had performed in order to finalize the survey questions. For the actual study, the respondents were asked questions pertaining to their current state of political disposition, which was broken down along the lines of political interest, political efficacy and political satisfaction.

Respondents who were not currently political participants were then shown the content of some online politically related blogs. The selected content was negative in nature as they were used to examine if there was any change in the respondents' preexisting political dispositions based on their exposure to the political content. Exposure to the negative online content was 10 minutes. This included information from two issues covered the 'James Gomes incident' as well

as the statement by the Prime Minister Lee on 'fixing the opposition', which he had later officially retracted. Both incidents occurred during the 2006 General Elections in Singapore.

The James Gomes incident was resultant of whether he had correctly submitted his election paperwork in his application to be considered as a minority candidate (DeSouza 2006). This incident has dominated the news in the state-run media ahead of the General Elections 2006. Although Mr. Gomez had initially remarked that the Elections Department had misplaced his document, he had later, retracted this and apologized, as security camera footage showed that he did not submit the application form, but putting it in his bag instead (DeSouza 2006). There was thus a debacle as to whether he made his allegations out of his own absent-mindedness or whether it was a malicious attempt on his part to discredit the elections.

The statement by was made by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at a lunchtime rally during the campaigning period in the run up to the 2006 Singapore General Elections. During the speech, the Prime Minister had addressed the issue of opposition MPs in Parliament, saying that if the opposition were to hold 10 to 20 seats in Parliament, he would have to spend much more time thinking what was the right way to "fix" them. He later clarified himself and apologized if it had caused any offence (PM Lee clarifies words used at lunchtime rally 2006).

Data Collection Methodology

The survey was self-administered via the drop-off method. The questionnaires were given to the respondents after permission had been sought from them to undertake the survey. These questionnaires were collected later after they had been completed.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics assisted in the understanding of the demographics of the respondents'.

The independent samples t-test was used for answering hypotheses 1 to 4. The comparison of the means was utilized to compare whether the means of respondents who are current online political participants as compared to the non-participants are similar or if there is a significant differences in some of the factors pertaining to political disposition.

For the purposes of hypotheses 5 to 8, two identical surveys were conducted prior and after exposure to negative online political content. The pretest and posttest t-tests were used to measure the significance of the changes recorded before and after viewers had been exposed to critical online political commentary.

Sampling Methods, Sample Size and Response Rates

The simple random sampling method was chosen to ensure respondents of different demographics have equal chances of being selected for the purposes of the study. A total of 200 respondents were approached with 114 completed responses being gathered at the end of the quantitative study, which attributed to a response rate of 57%.

Respondent Demographics

For the survey, all respondents were screened based on their nationality. Only local nations were recruited for the purpose of the interview, as questions in the questionnaire pertaining voting behavior was only relevant to Singapore citizens. 53.5% (N=56) of the respondents were male, while 46.5% (N=53) were females. 14.9% (N=17) of the respondents were aged below 20, whilst 67.5% (N=77) of those surveyed were between 20-<30. 14.0% (N=16) of them were aged between 30-<40, with the rest (3.6%, N=4) were aged 40 and above. 43.0% (N=49) of the respondents had their highest education below the non-university levels, while the remaining 57.0% (N=65) were university students. Of the 114 respondents, 14.9% (N=17) of the respondents had studied overseas, whilst 85.1% (N=97) of the respondents only received their education locally.

RESULTS

Quantitative Study

An SPSS reliability analysis of the scales was used to test the measures used to determine the usability of the measures proposed. The scales were based on a five point Likert scale. According to Hair et al. (1998), a Cronbach's alpha of 0.6 was acceptable for instances of exploratory research. All scales were usable as seen from the reliability analysis as seen below.

Reliability analysis

	Political Interest	Political Efficacy	Political Satisfaction	Regulatory Concerns	Media Dependency	Media Credibility
Cronbach's Alpha	.6663	.7100	.6903	.7457	.8072	.6746

Currently viewers of political sites

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	28	24.6
No	86	75.4
Total	114	100.0

Types of political sites viewed

	Frequency	Percentage (Out of 28 respondents)
From the ruling party	10	35.7
From the opposition parties	18	64.3
Independent parties	23	82.1

Of the 114 respondents, only 24.6% of the participants are currently active online participants. From the respondents who engaged actively in online political activity, 82.1% of them frequented sites or blogs of independent parties, while 64.3% of them visited sites of independent parties. Sites from the ruling party were least visited as the views of the government were already covered extensively in the mainstream media.

Independent Samples Test (Group Statistics)

	Currently view political sites	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Political Interest	Yes	27	3.2370	.72332	.13920
	No	86	2.9442	.58824	.06343
Political Efficacy	Yes	27	2.7593	.94432	.18173
	No	86	2.7558	.88698	.09565
Political Satisfaction	Yes	27	3.1111	.85735	.16500
	No	86	3.0814	.63439	.06841
Regulatory Concerns	Yes	27	3.7037	.52823	.10166
	No	86	3.3372	.68682	.07406

Independent Samples Test (Test for Significance)

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Political Interest	1.203	.275	2.133	111	.035	.2929
Political Efficacy	.552	.459	.017	111	.986	.0034
Political Satisfaction	5.147	.025	.194	111	.846	.0297
Regulatory Concerns	2.672	.105	2.544	111	.012	.3665

An independent samples t-test was performed to examine if there was any differences in the preexisting political disposition of people who were not current political participants as compared to those who were. From the results, those who were current participants in the virtual political sphere, results found significance at the .05 level for the variables on Political Interest and Regulatory Concerns, as current political participants had greater regulatory concerns and greater political interest.

Paired Samples t-test

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Political Interest	Pretest	3.5169	.94027	.11320
	Posttest	2.9478	.59275	.07136
Political Efficacy	Pretest	3.3406	.72504	.08728
	Posttest	2.6449	.90384	.10881
Political Satisfaction	Pretest	3.4464	.69294	.08342
	Posttest	3.1691	.69692	.08390
Regulatory Concerns	Pretest	3.2222	.71963	.08663
	Posttest	3.3623	.71940	.08661

Paired Samples Correlations

		Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Political Interest	Pretest & Posttest	.5691	4.315	68	.000
Political Efficacy	Pretest & Posttest	.6957	4.861	68	.000
Political Satisfaction	Pretest & Posttest	.2773	2.191	68	.032
Regulatory Concerns	Pretest & Posttest	-.1401	-1.142	68	.257

Based on the respondents who were currently political participants, but were exposed to the critical political content as part of the study, there were some significant changes to the preexisting political disposition of the respondents. For one, there was a higher degree of regulatory concerns pertaining to the online political participation. Many of non-respondents also recorded lower political interest, efficacy and satisfaction. A plausible rationale could be due to the nature of the critical commentary that was shown to the respondents. Both the 'James Gomes incident' and the 'PM Lee comment' made respondents concerned about the potential ramifications about getting on the wrong side of the law. It could be possible that as such respondents recorded higher scores in regulatory concerns pertaining to online political participation. Furthermore, the observation that respondents had lower scores in the aspects of

political interest, efficacy and satisfaction could be because they felt dissatisfied based on the ways that the government had handled both issues.

DISCUSSIONS

Limitations of the Study

Although the study has highlighted important issues pertaining to the factors that affect online political participation, there are limitations to the study. Firstly, the sample was skewed to younger respondents, as 96.4% of the respondents were aged below 40 years. The sample size of 114 participants was too small to allow for the generalization of the findings. However, it is hoped that this study would serve as a basis for future studies to be performed in the area of online political participation. Also, it had to be noted the setting of half of the study (on current non-political participants) was skewed towards a particular standpoint. The coverage was also limited as there were constraints on time (bearing in mind the respondents) and controllability of the variables.

Political Implications

From the study, it was observed that negative online content had the potential of changing aspects of political disposition. Thus, the ruling party would do well to monitor the sites in order to understand the nature and the reasons behind the issues raised.

An important point to note is that respondents interviewed were usually more willing to be passive observers, due to the political/legislative climate in the country. Many of the interviewees were afraid of being on the wrong side of the law. Thus, even though they were interested in the political sphere in Singapore and felt that there were areas that needed improvement, not all were willing to voice their opinions, even via online. Opposition parties and even the government should try to convince citizens that they are free to post their own political views as long as they were responsible and accurate in their political contributions. This would eventually bring forth more interested parties, and more importantly, active participants in the local political scene.

Research Implications

As seen from the findings of the survey, exposure to online political commentary would lead to an alteration in the political disposition of online users. Thus, an interesting study could be to be an experiment examining the potential differences in short-term as compared to long-term exposure to online political content.

CONCLUSION

The study has brought forth many interesting observations that can be used to develop a deeper understanding of the effects of exposure to online political content. This also being because the virtual political content is less regulated than the traditional mainstream media in Singapore. As such, there are different OB markers in the online as compared to the offline political realms. Political parties could do well to understand the differences in the genres as well as content of political discussion. In fact from the results of the findings, political parties should harness the potential of the Internet to engage with their target audiences, because it was seen from the study exposure to online content had the potential to alter mindsets.

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APPENDIX A: AGGREGATE BLOGS

1. Tomorrow (<http://tomorrow.sg>)
 - ❖ Bulletin of Singapore Bloggers
 - ❖ 15 editors
 - ❖ 4 million hits since 2005
2. The Intelligent Singaporean (<http://intelligentsingaporean.wordpress.com>)
 - ❖ 1 editor
 - ❖ > 40,000 hits since July 06
3. Singabloodypore (<http://singabloodypore.blogspot.com>)
 - ❖ Social and political issues related to Singapore and the South East Asia region
 - ❖ Anonymous editors
 - ❖ 360,000 hits since Sept 2003
 - ❖ Links to many political Singapore blogs including opposition party figures

APPENDIX B: GROUP BLOGS THAT PROVIDE
COMMENTARY ON POLITICAL ISSUES

1. Singapore Angle (<http://www.singaporeangle.com>)
2. Molly Meek (<http://mollymeek.blogspot.com>)
3. Talking Cock (<http://www.talkcock.com>)

APPENDIX C: INDIVIDUAL BLOGS THAT PROVIDE
COMMENTARY ON POLITICAL ISSUES

1. Mr. Brown (<http://www.mrbrown.com>)
2. Mr. Wang (<http://www.commentarysingapore.blogspot.com>)
3. Yawning Bread (<http://www.yawningbread.org>)
4. NoFearSingapore (<http://nofearsingapore.blogspot.com>)
5. New Media, Politics & the Law (<http://singaporemedia.blogspot.com>)
6. Gayle Goh (<http://i-speak.blogdrive.com>)
7. XenoBoy (<http://xenoboysg.blogspot.com>)