'Digital Frontiers Series: 1'

Seminar on
"Assessing the Rationality of Political Online Space: Man and Machine"

Wednesday, 11 February 2015

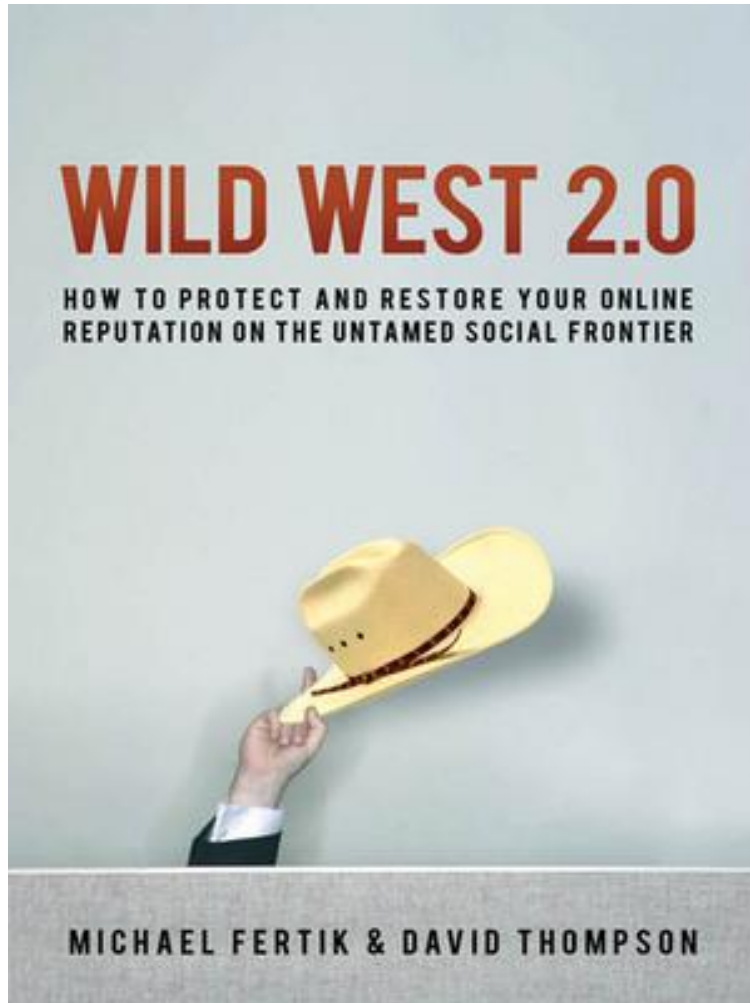Conference Room, Level 1, Oei Tiong Ham Building

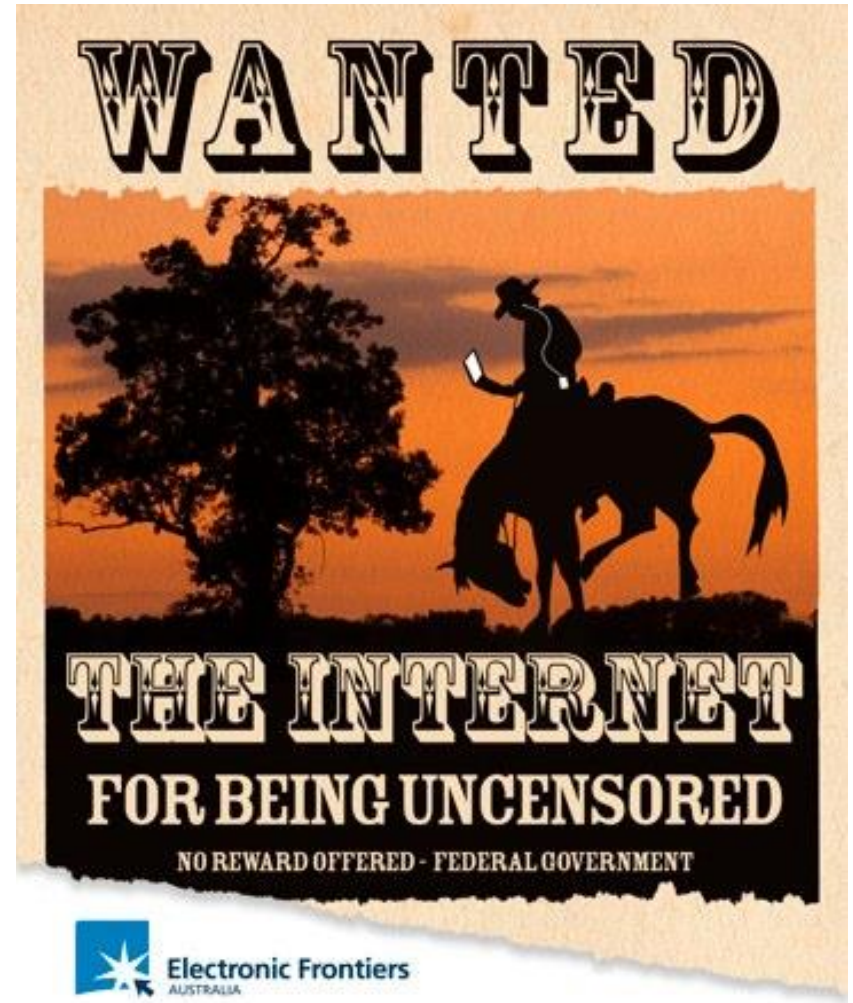# Study on the Rationality of Political Online Space

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11 February 2015

Descriptions of online space: "Wild Wild West", "polarizing", "hiding behind cloak of anonymity", "irrational"

http://theweeklybookscan.blogs.realtor.org/2011/02/09/make-your-online-image-shine-with-wild-west-2-0/

https://www.efa.org.au/events/wild-west-internet-forum/

What is "Rationality"?

- Concerns over irrationality
  - Compromises the Internet's deliberative potential
  - Negative influences and divides real world communities
- But what is rationality?
  - MacIntyre's "Whose Justice? Which Rationality?" (1998):

  .. **No such thing exists as a rationality that is not the rationality of some tradition**. .. Each tradition developed within a particular historical context and sought to resolve particular conflicts.

  - Alberto Guerreiro Ramos (1981): Rationality can only be understood within the broader historical and social context in which it finds itself.

Research Aims

- Lack of empirical study on the rationality of online discourse

- In this study, "rationality" is based in the context of local discourse and journalism - being objective, unemotional and non-partisan

  1. What topics were blogged about during the months of June and July 2014?

  2. Is the online political space rational or irrational?

  3. What factors are linked to rationality?

Research Scope

- Theoretical and analytical frameworks adapted by studies in journalism, political communication and psychology
    - Simon & Lacy (Measuring balance, fairness and defamation, 1989, *Journalism Quarterly*)
    - Wahl-Jorgensen (Emotionality in journalism, 2013, *Journalism*)
    - Convers & Pierce (Measuring partisanship, 1985, *Political Methodology*)
    - Diddi, Fico & Zeldes (Partisan balance and bias in TV coverage of elections, 2014, *JBEM*)
- Research in Singapore's context
    - General Election 2011: Pang & Goh (*in press*). Pro, anti, neutral: Sentiment analysis of political blogs.
    - Hougang By-election: Goh, Pang & Ang (2013). How media exposure, political cynicism and supporting online deliberation influence consonance in online and offline public opinion.

Methodology

- Snapshot of June and July 2014
  - Must have **at least one** political post during that period
  - Excluded blogs by NGOs, political organisations and e-versions of traditional media
  - Total: 197 blogs, over 1000 posts
- Training of coders plus sample coding to achieve inter-coder reliability
- Content analysis to determine:
  - Structural characteristics: Type of blog (how political the blog is), age of blog, identity of the blogger (known/unknown), frequency of blog post, use of multi-media , writing style
  - "Rationality" : Objectivity and Emotionality
  - Partisanship (for both Govt and Opp)

Coding Scheme

Author's Online Identity

- Known: Name and details on blogger's background/identity are available
- Unknown: Information on the blogger's background/identity is not available

Journalistic Objectivity (Only political posts in June/July)

- 1 = 0% of blog post content discusses an alternative view (completely one-sided)
- 2 = 10% of blog post content discusses an alternative view
- 3 = 20% of blog post content discusses an alternative view
- 4 = 30% of blog post content discusses an alternative view
- 5 = 40% - 50% of blog post content discusses an alternative view (balanced)

Coding Scheme

Emotionality (Only political posts in June/July)

- 1 = Very Calm

- 2 = Somewhat calm

- 3 = Slightly ranting

- 4 = Ranting (without expletives)

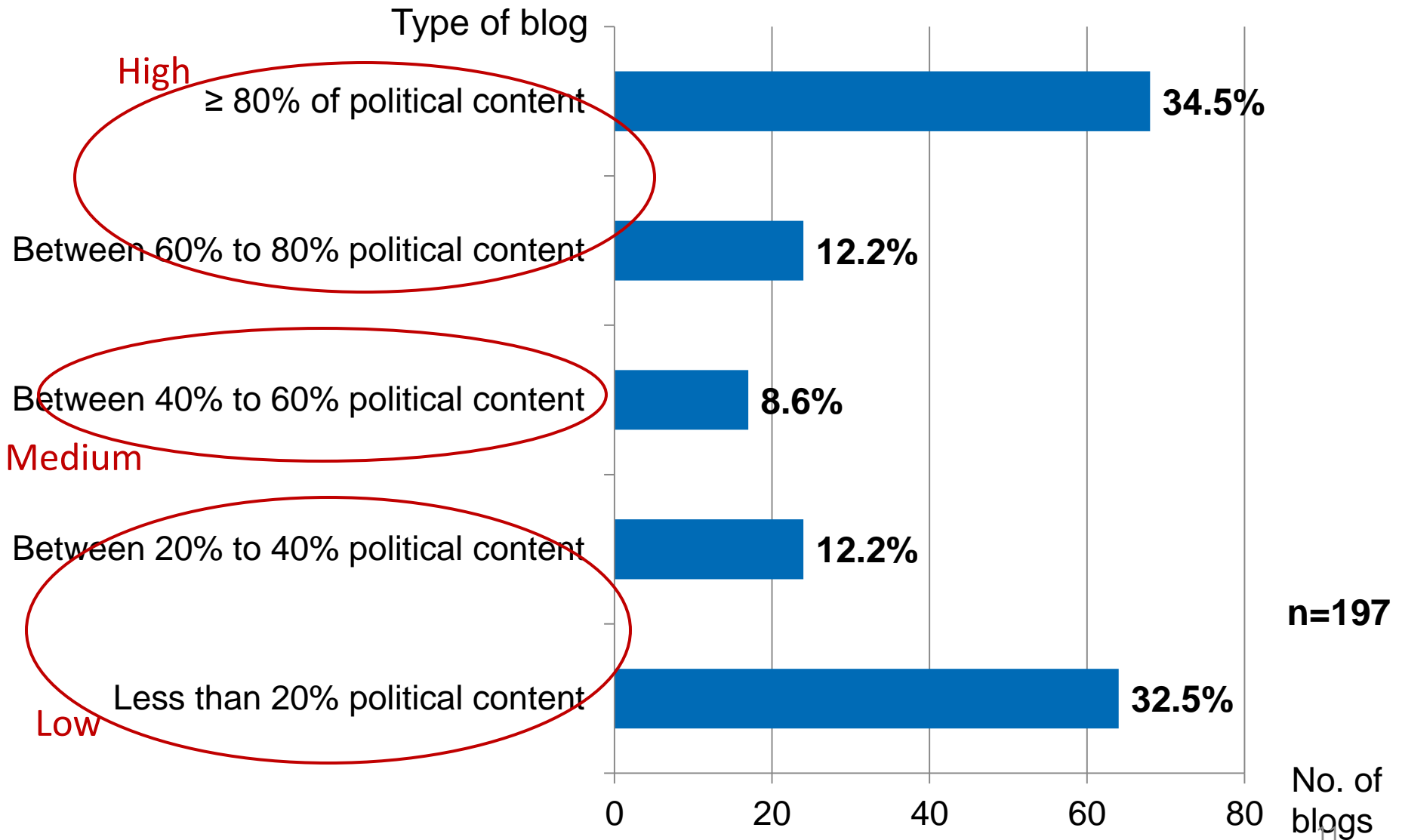- 5 = Usage of expletives

Partisanship for Govt/Opposition (Only political posts in June/July)

- 1 = Very Anti-Govt/Opposition

- 2 = Somewhat Anti-Govt/Opposition

- 3 = Mentions Govt/Opposition but Neutral towards it

- 4 = Somewhat Pro-Govt/Opposition

- 5 = Very Pro-Govt/Opposition

- 6 = N.A. (Does not mention Govt/Opposition at all)
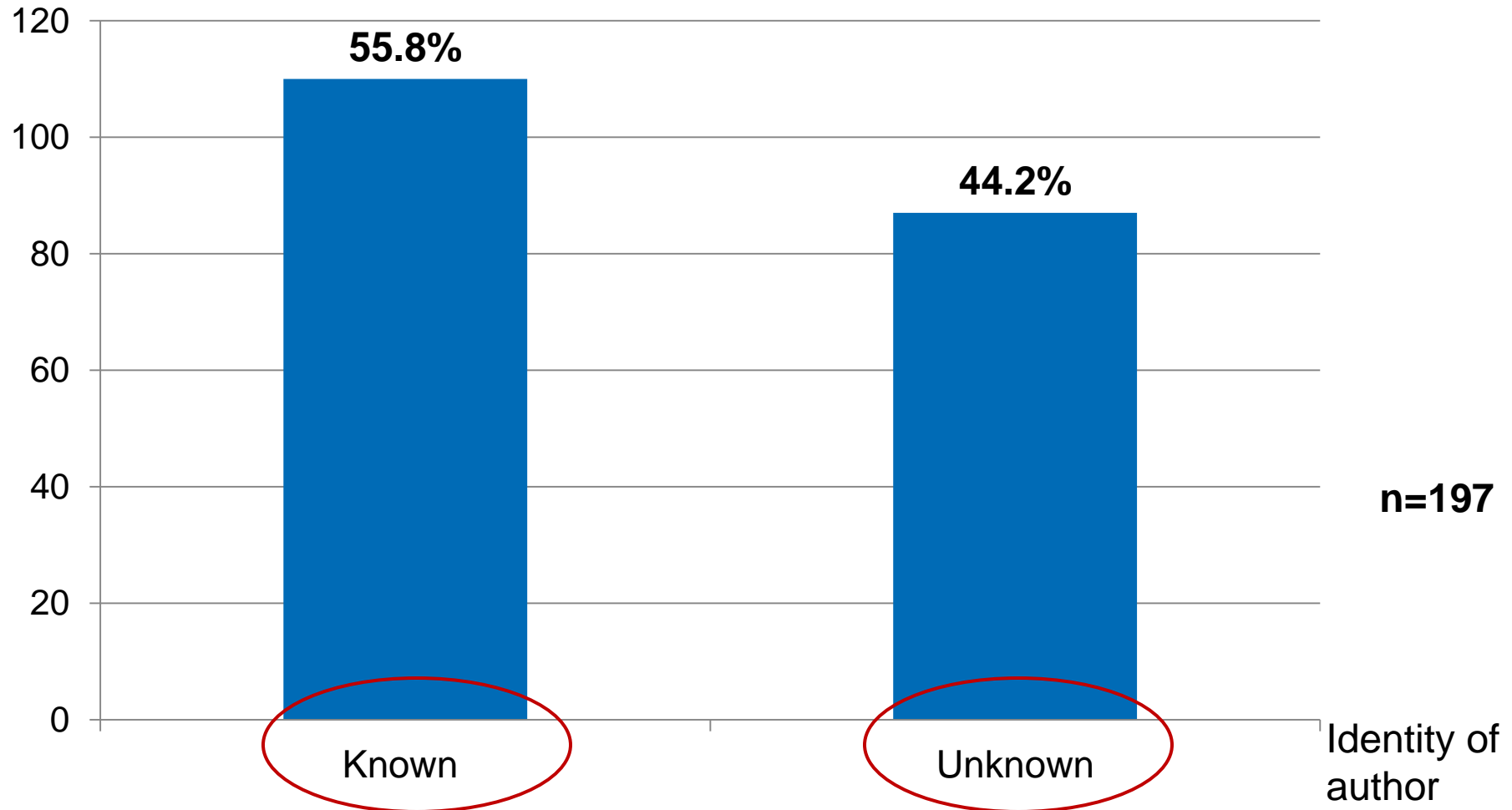
Some of the Topics Blogged About

- National Library Board's book ban
- Prime Minister Lee and Roy Ngerng
- Homosexuality, LGBT, PinkDot
- Religion
- Education, P1 registration
- CPF, Minimum Sum, MediShield Life
- Foreigners and immigration
- Employment and salary
- Living standards, housing, public transport
- Government

Type of Blog

Type of blog

High

≥ 80% of political content — **34.5%**

Between 60% to 80% political content — **12.2%**

Between 40% to 60% political content — **8.6%**

Medium

Between 20% to 40% political content — **12.2%**

n=197

Less than 20% political content — **32.5%**

Low

No. of blogs

0   20   40   60   80

Author's Identity

No. of blogs

n=197

Journalistic Objectivity - Examples

Despite

On the other hand, ..

But..

However, ...

Such a statement requires evidence that...
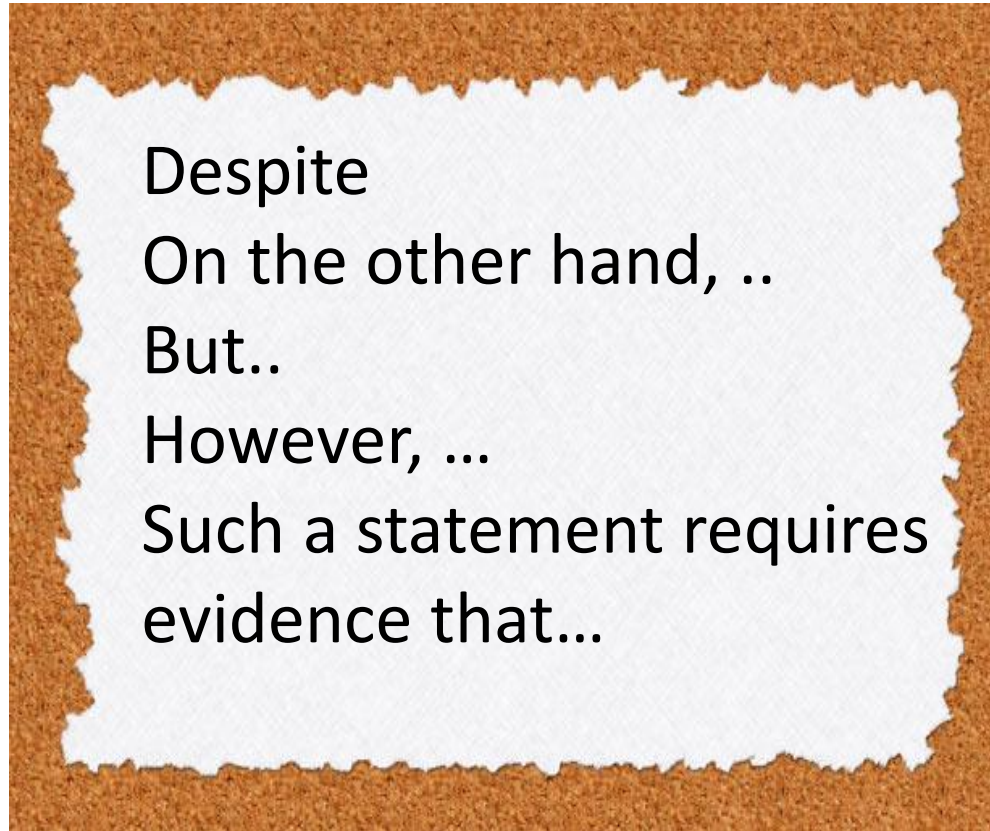
Plus human judgment

Journalistic Objectivity

Level of objectivity

5 — 1.5%
4 — 10.3%
3 — 21.5%
2 — 39%
1 — 27.7%

n=195

No. of blogs

0   20   40   60   80

1 being "one-sided" to 5 being "two-sided"

14
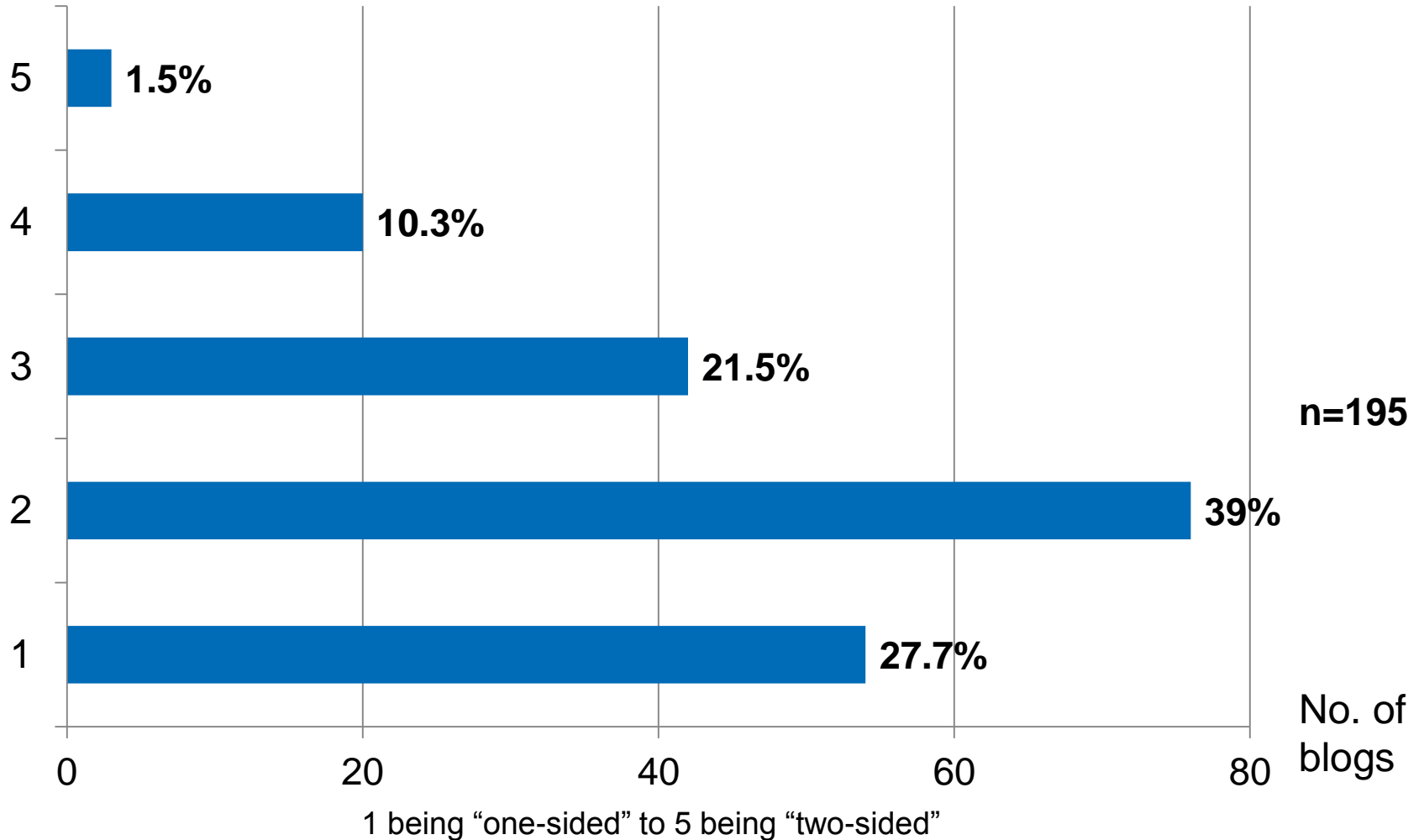
Emotionality - Examples

It's turning into a war for the nation's soul vs human rights, with the pro-anti-shove-your-****-up-the-***-of-who-you-choose lobby on one side, and the pro-anti-shove-your-religion-down-my-throat lobby on the other. I know right, it sounds so funny right about now.
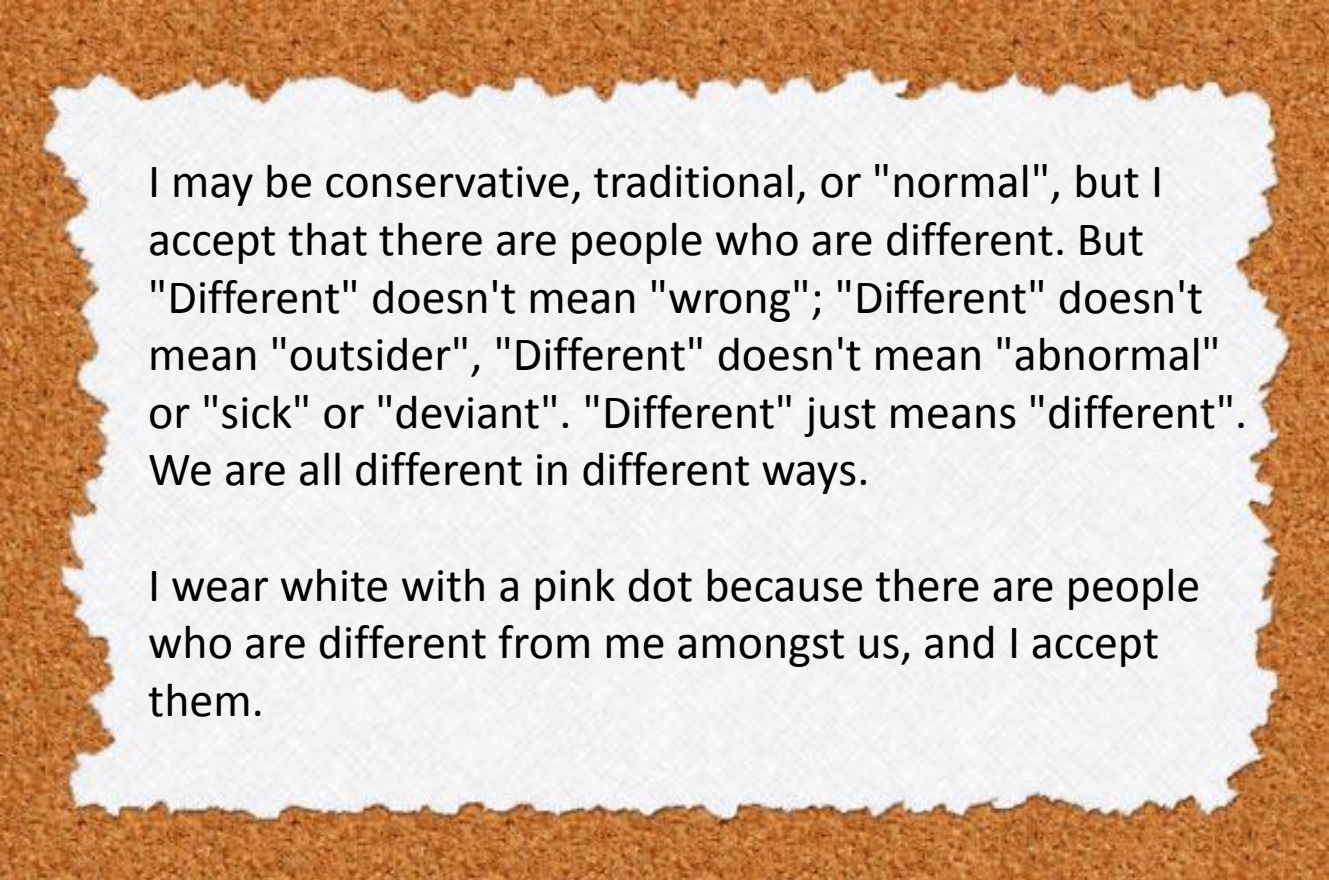
Use of Expletives

Use of ALL CAPS

That will SHUT ALOT OF ~~RELIGIOUS~~ people up and give gay people a place in society and recognition they deserve... So to me, if religious groups are so HELL BENT on telling me that being gay is wrong and it's not genetics, then PROVE it to me via scientific research.

Emotionality - Examples

Calm

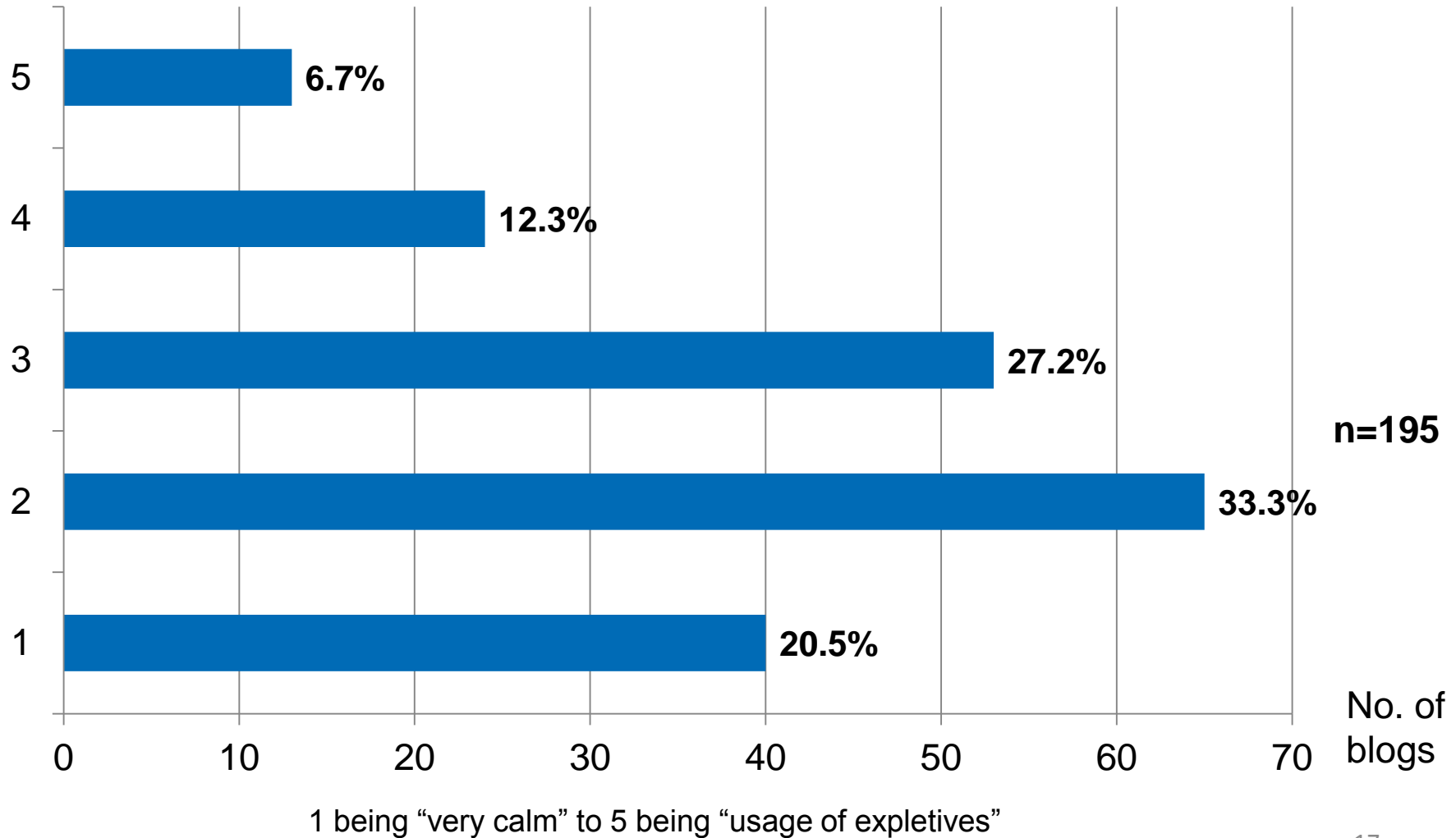I may be conservative, traditional, or "normal", but I accept that there are people who are different. But "Different" doesn't mean "wrong"; "Different" doesn't mean "outsider", "Different" doesn't mean "abnormal" or "sick" or "deviant". "Different" just means "different". We are all different in different ways.

I wear white with a pink dot because there are people who are different from me amongst us, and I accept them.

Emotionality

Level of emotionality

5	6.7%
4	12.3%
3	27.2%
2	33.3%
1	20.5%

n=195

No. of blogs

0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70

1 being "very calm" to 5 being "usage of expletives"

Partisanship (Govt) - Examples

PAP are like a bunch of animals in denial, who refuse to believe that Singapore is the most expensive city in the world, claim HDB flats are affordable and reading their CPF statements make them happy.
A simple majority of 50 seats is more than enough. All it takes is 20 strong candidates and 30 electable candidates, and we can kick the PAP out of power.

Anti-Govt

A lot of the increase comes from the increase in prices of food, oil and other commodities in the global marketplace.. The MAS is trying to mitigate this by letting the Sing Dollar strengthen. Perhaps the issue is how we help the lower income cope, rather than say that the PAP has caused the increase.

Pro-Govt

Partisanship (Govt)

Level of partisanship

Does not mention Govt at all
n=76 (39%)
- 15.2%
- 29.4%
- 66.2%

n=195

Somewhat/ Very pro-Govt
n=15 (7.7%)
- 9.8%
- 5.9%
- 5.8%

Mentions Govt but neutral
n=35 (18%)
- 21.7%
- 17.6%
- 14%

Somewhat/ Very anti-Govt
n=69 (35.3%)
- 53.3%
- 47.1%
- 14%

Legend:
- ■ High political content
- ■ Moderate political content
- ■ Low political content

No. of blogs

0 10 20 30 40 50 60

19
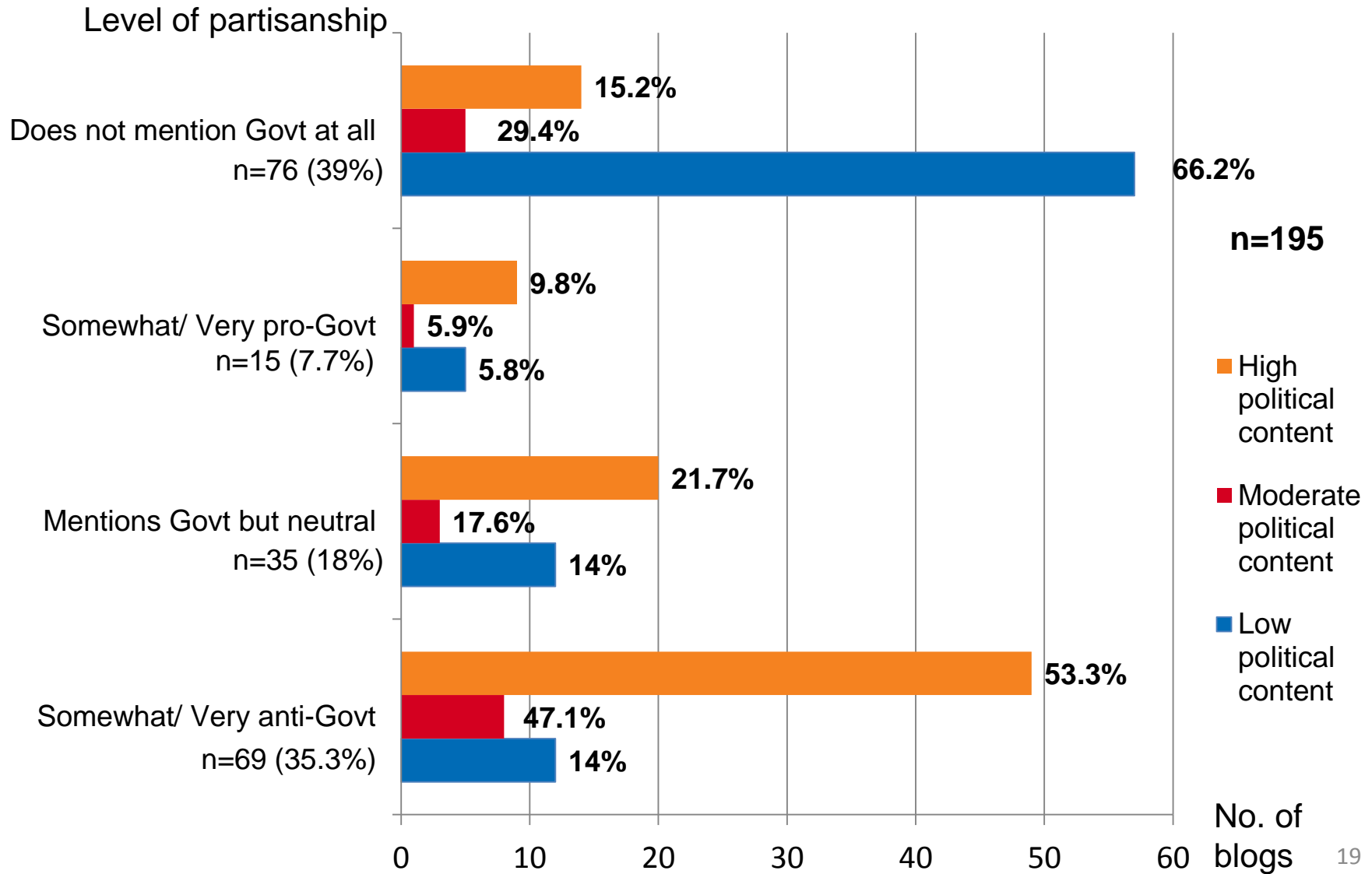
Partisanship (Opp) - Examples

Pro-Opp

I am a fan of Sylvia Lim, Pritam Singh, Michelle Lee and Nicole Seah and I hope to hear them speak more often.

Typical Oppie tactic:
To post controversial questions to cast a bad light as though as those questions were not addressed properly and strengthening biased and erroneous perceptions... By the time those fools are lied to, it is already too late, their (people's) minds are poisoned.

After warning about the abrasive, disruptive and dishonest opposition in the form of SDP, it is time to move on and warn about the other useless opposition party - The Workers' Party. Like I've often said, there is no such thing as good opposition in Singapore.

Anti-Opp

Partisanship (Opposition)
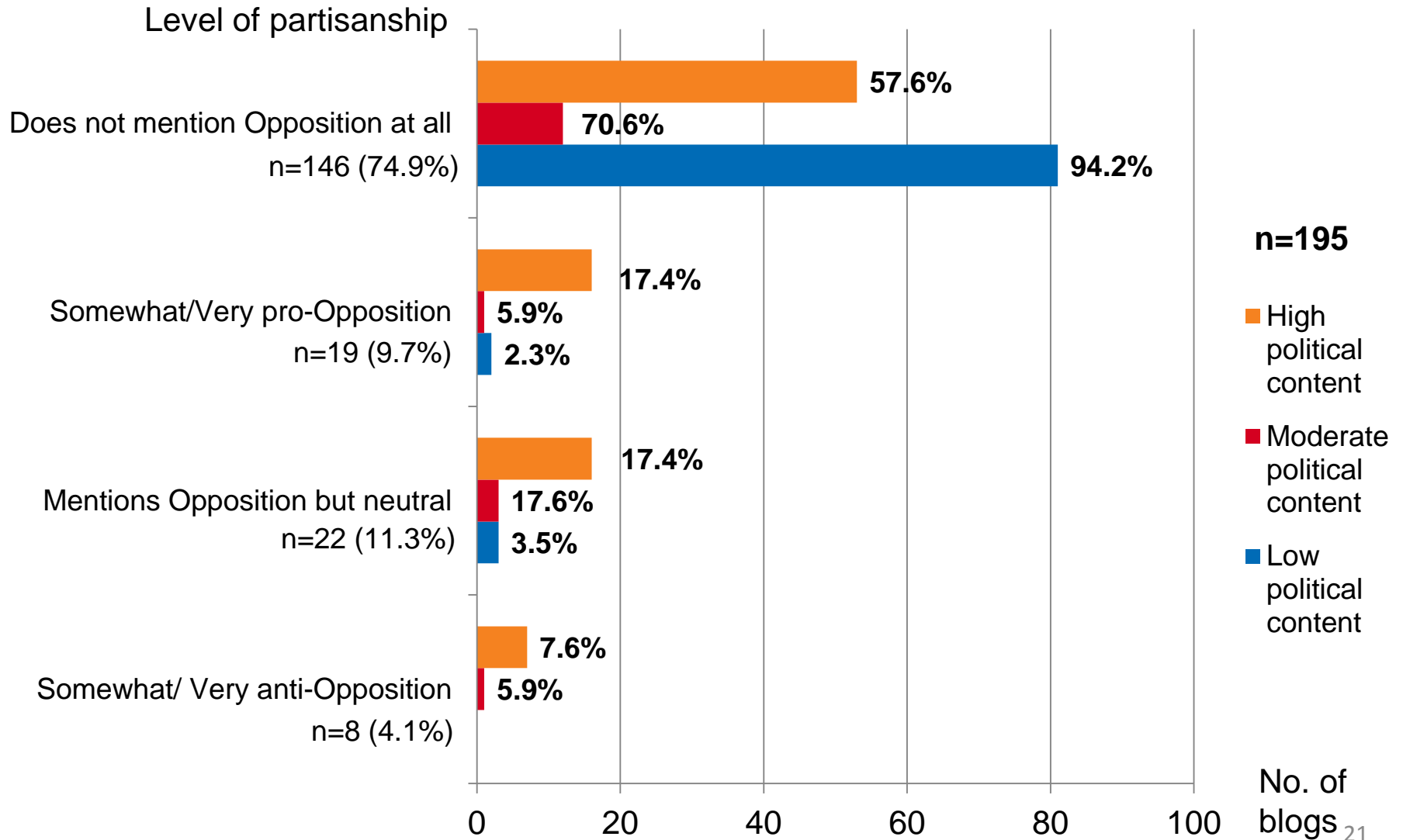
Correlations between Blog Type and Identity, Objectivity, Emotionality, Partisanship

1. "High" political blogs tend to be written by unknown authors.
2. The more political a blog is, the more objective it is.
3. No correlation between blog type and emotionality.
4. "Low" political blogs tend to be more pro-Govt/Opp; "high" political blogs tend to be more anti-Govt/Opp.

Blog Type	Identity	Objectivity	Emotionality	Partisanship
Low Medium High	.227**	.158**	.050	-.497** (Govt) -.398** (Opp)

Spearman's Correlation

Correlations between Identity and Objectivity, Emotionality, Partisanship

1. There is no relationship between blogger's identity and objectivity.
2. Known bloggers tend to be calm or somewhat calm.
3. Known bloggers tend to be pro-Govt/Opp; Unknown bloggers tend to be anti-Govt/Opp.

Identity	Objectivity	Emotionality	Partisanship
Known/ Unknown	-.052	.229**	-.226** (Govt) -.188** (Opp)

Spearman's Correlation

Correlations between Objectivity and Emotionality, Partisanship

1. The more objective a blogger is, the more calm the blogger is; blogs that are less objective tend to be more emotional.
2. **There is no correlation between objectivity and partisanship for Govt and Opp.**

Objectivity	Emotionality	Partisanship
One-sided to two-sided	-.278**	-.061 (Govt) -.040 (Opp)

Spearman's Correlation

Correlations between Emotionality and Partisanship

1. There is no relationship between emotionality and partisanship for Govt.
2. There is no relationship between emotionality and partisanship for Opp.

Emotionality	Partisanship
Calm to use of expletives	-.131 (Govt) -.010 (Opp)

Spearman's Correlation

Summary

1. Online reality mirrors offline reality?
   - Political issues were popular in June and July (at least 60% of blog content was political for almost half the blogs)
   - High activity with almost 70% of bloggers blogging at least 2-4 times a month or more frequently
2. More than half are not anonymous
3. About 70% are not completely one-sided in their commentaries, with one-third scoring "3" to "5" for objectivity
4. More than 50% were somewhat/very calm
5. Bloggers who mentioned the Govt tend to be somewhat/very anti-Govt
6. Bloggers who mentioned the Opp tend to be somewhat/very pro-Opp

Summary

7. Presence of anonymous keyboard warriors who blog on political issues – fears of repercussion?

    – Known bloggers tend to be more calm and pro-Govt/Opp

8. Political blogs tend to be two-sided in their approach – a recognition that balanced arguments are required to sway minds?

9. Political blogs also tend to be more critical of both Govt and Opp

10. Journalistic objectivity and being unemotional go hand-in-hand

Conclusion

1. **Not a Wild Wild West.**
2. **Highly political blogs are more anti-Govt but they are also more anti-Opp.**
3. **Highly political blogs, irrespective of partisanship, are more objective.**

Limitations

1. Corpus of blogs
2. Length of study
3. Accuracy of coding
4. Only one part of online political space

Future Work

<u>Triangulation project</u>

1. Use online archive of blogs/FB etc and see how they predict surveys/election
   - Which part of social media is best predictor of what?
   - Available data:
     - I. 2011 election
       - 2011 elections results
     - II. 2011 IPS post-election survey
       - Demographics, political traits, media consumption, participation, voting
     - III. Pang and Goh coding of blogs
     - IV. 3 TB of blog, FB, YouTube, online mainstream media archive
     - V. 2011 Hougang by-election
       - Pang and Goh coding of sentiments
       - Pang and Goh survey
       - Election results
     - VI. Rationality of blogs
       - Soon and Tan human coding
       - Lim (LARC) big data analysis

Future Work

2. Create models from above
3. Apply to the next election/future surveys
4. From there, see if can be used for day to day sensing, and longer-range forecasting.
   – Human taught
   – Self-learning, artificial intelligence, emergent.
5. Obstacles:
   – Existence: Is there data (polling results, surveys, archives of online material)?
   – Acquisition: Can the data be collected?
   – Mining: Are the techniques/understanding available? Can you match/beat humans? Artificial intelligence, collective wisdom, emergence properties

Future Work

What kinds of questions

- How are people feeling about this issue?
- How do they feel about the party, candidate, issue?
- Are they for this policy or that or they don't have an opinion?
- What part of the space (people, sites, sub-sites) has the best predictive value, and what combinations do so?
- What events affect sentiments in which way?
  - For example, was there chilling effect from Roy Ngerng defamation case? Alex Au? Racism cases? Xiaxue harassment order? To Singapore With Love?
- What issues are emerging?

We are looking for collaborators

Thank you