



## Collective Identity and Political Bloggers' Activism

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Earlier in the [February issue](#), I had written on political bloggers in Singapore and their activism. Besides shedding light on their demographic makeup, the article also established that political bloggers took part in a wide plethora of activism work. Digital technologies have also enhanced active citizenry by offering individuals a wider array of options in terms of the type and duration of activism involvement.

Besides overcoming practical concerns such as the ease and cost of participation, other factors come into play in one's decision-making concerning activism.

Social movement theorist Buechler argued that "for many mobilisations, the most central process is the social construction of a collective identity that is symbolically meaningful to participants and that logically precedes meaningful calculation of the costs and benefits of joining in the collective action" (Buechler 1993, 228). This line of argument resonates with our globalised world that is linked by information communication technologies, where collective action is able to find supporters far and wide.

One key dimension of collective identity is the presence of a shared consciousness driven by commonality among members in a group. This commonality fosters a sense of "we"; it can be based on similar values, goals, religions, ethnic backgrounds or nationalities. Among individuals within a movement, there is also recognition of what being a member entails and specific ways of doing things (Jenkins 2002).

In addition, a collective identity is articulated by what members say about themselves and how they relate to others outside the movement — a process that involves conceptualising differences between them from "the others" (Cohen 2000). A group's self-identity is distinguished by identity signifiers or markers comprising of social or cultural practices that set members apart from non-members.

However, bloggers as a collective challenges the conventional notion of bloggers as individualistic and almost narcissistic people. Pioneering studies that examined uses and gratifications of blogging established that blogs are used to express one's thoughts and feelings on matters of personal interest, and to fulfil one's desire to be read (Blood 2002; Herring et al. 2004; Papacharissi 2004; and Trammell 2005). Yet

existing research establishes that collective identity experienced by a movement's participants is integral in galvanising participation.

Is there then a collective identity among activist bloggers in Singapore? If collective identity is present among activist bloggers, what are their shared goals and identity markers? Drawing on interviews with 41 political bloggers that included 15 who did not participate in any activism activity, i.e., non-activist bloggers, this article examines the seemingly paradoxical relationship between blogging as a personal activity and activism as a collective one.

Supporting excerpts from interview transcripts are used to maintain the authenticity of data interpretation and pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality.

### **Shared consciousness among activist bloggers**

A commonality that emerged from the interviews with all 41 political bloggers is their desire to fill a void in public discourse. Regardless of the level of their activism participation, Singapore political bloggers used their blogs as a platform to communicate and disseminate views that they deemed to be alternative to those perpetuated in mainstream discourse.

However, despite this commonality, the recognition of a community distinguished activist bloggers from non-activist bloggers. For instance, there was shared understanding among the activists as to what being political bloggers entailed; they were also aware that they were a part of a larger collective of "socio-political bloggers". The term, "socio-political blog", was self-ascribed and used by activist bloggers when they referred to other bloggers with whom they identified.

*I can identify with some Singapore bloggers whose blogs are mainly socio-politically oriented.... These bloggers have the same concerns as I have about the current state of politics in Singapore and the future of the country.*

— Daryl, an activist blogger in his 20s

There was also an acknowledgment of group membership and references to being part of the "same blogging community". In the case of Chong who was involved in the campaign for Internet de-regulation, he acknowledged group membership and made explicit references to himself and other political bloggers as being part of the same community. Another activist blogger described how blogging and participating in online debates engendered the feeling of being part of a collective, a "socio-political blogging community that informs Singaporeans of what's going on".

Activist bloggers were also bound by their vision for blogging — to foster a greater interest in active citizenry among their readers. They blogged to promote deliberation on important issues among their readers. By providing information and alternative perspectives, they hoped their blogs would empower citizens to take charge of their own lives by playing an active role in a specific issue. For instance, V5 derived a sense of gratification when his blog encouraged readers to take action on the death penalty by lending their support to the anti-death penalty campaign.

*When I write my personal pieces, I like reflect on my engagement with activism, why I am involved and whom I look up to. I encourage people to get involved and to get in touch with me.... We blogged about the anti-death penalty campaign and we asked people to come forward and people did.*

— V5, activist blogger

On the other hand, although non-activist political bloggers wrote about similar topics, they did not see themselves as being part of a community of socio-political bloggers and stressed that they blogged for personal reasons, such as cultivating introspection and self-development. When asked about his motivation for blogging, Benedict described the personal gratifications he derived from blogging.

*My blog is personal and I created this blog to document my own journey and learning, and I am not sure how long this will last. This blog is like a personal diary for me.*

— Benedict, a non-activist blogger

### **Identity signifiers and perceptions of “the others”**

Della Porta and Diani (2006) posit that the production of identity is rooted in particular symbols, practices and rituals unique to a group. Identity signifiers strengthen one's identification with a collective and in the case of political bloggers, these signifiers comprise blogging practices. To activist bloggers, “the others” comprise both social bloggers and non-activist political bloggers.

The first blogging practice that differentiates activist bloggers from other bloggers is the type of information they post. None of the activist bloggers posted information on their private lives. Activist bloggers drew the line at blogging about their own lives unless the subject matter was related to their activism work.

Another blogging practice that separates activist bloggers from the rest of the bloggers “out there” is the use of their real identities. Activist bloggers identified anonymity as a key differentiator between them and non-activist bloggers. They blogged using their real names while the majority of bloggers “out there” blogged anonymously. For instance, Zazzi, a gay rights activist, took pride in being one of the first online contributors who posted content using their real identities. Similar sentiments were expressed by Tan who identified with other activist political bloggers who wrote with their real names and participated in activism. He explained:

*I use my real name and that links me to people who are active in the circle [activists].... Many people who are not active in the circle use pseudonyms. They are online commentators only and they don't use their real names.*

Tan, activist blogger

Revealing their identities on their blogs contrasts with non-activist political bloggers who preferred to blog behind the comfort of anonymity. Epilogos, a non-activist blogger, admitted that he enjoyed the unbridled freedom that anonymity provided. To quote him: “One of the things about hiding behind a pseudonym is that you feel that you have the freedom to express yourself, even in the most extreme ways.”

The third differentiator between the two groups is their approach to writing. Non-activist bloggers were perceived by activist bloggers as irrational, irresponsible and instinctively biased in the way they critiqued political issues. The latter shared a common understanding that objectivity and reason was needed to help them reach out to the public and change the public's attitudes. There was a heightened awareness among activist bloggers that self-moderation in terms of writing and commentary style was important to doing well in the "marketplace" of the blogosphere. Objectivity and rationality was linked closely to fact-finding and substantiating one's critique with facts.

Majority of the activist bloggers expressed their disapproval of bloggers who engaged in "knee-jerk analysis" instead of providing quality analysis based on facts and well supported arguments. Furthermore, they expressed frustration at how such "irresponsible" bloggers were undoing the work that they were doing. One of them expressed:

*When you oppose, there must be a good reason for opposing. It is easy to lament, everyone can lament and oppose. But when you don't have an alternative to that, you are just sounding an empty gong. Sometimes it gets too personal in terms of how the person is blogging about his or her thoughts. I feel that such emotions should be kept in check.*

The Pen, an activist blogger

Their deliberate use of reason was juxtaposed with the irresponsibility and extremity of other bloggers who blogged on social and political issues in Singapore. An activist blogger and co-founder of a citizen journalism blog shared how the group's blogging style evolved over time as editors and writers realised that rationality and objectivity were critical to changing mindsets and convincing their target constituents, which include policy-makers:

## Conclusion

Ceren (2006) and Custard (2007) advocated that Internet-enabled networks bring people from diverse backgrounds to converge in cyberspace and cultivate a shared or collective goal. In the case of Singapore, a collective identity pervades among political bloggers who take part in activism. Although they come from different backgrounds, activist bloggers share a strong sense of collective identity and an understanding of what that collectiveness entails. The shared goal — one that encompasses the promotion plurality in perspectives, cultivates a more vibrant and politically-conscious electorate, and empowers citizens — binds individuals with different interests and brings them together in various campaigns.

Blogging practices — using one's real identity; refraining from writing about personal issues; and deploying rationality in one's commentary of socio-political issues — functions as boundary markers that facilitate activists' identification with others in the same community. There was deliberate distancing from "other" bloggers whose approach towards blogging was perceived to be instinctively anti-government. There was a distinct sense of mutual respect among activist bloggers who saw others

within the community as civic-minded and bold individuals who backed their critique of government policies with what they called “real-world action”.

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