



New Media and Collective Action: A Snapshot of Political Bloggers in Singapore

Carol Soon
IPS Research Fellow

A dominant theme in existing research on new media and collective action deals with how technology has become an integral tool in engendering political or social change. The propensity of new communication technologies to galvanise and mobilise collectives bound by common ideologies and shared goals has been demonstrated in different parts of the globe. From the Battle of Seattle in 1999, South Korean bloggers' candlelight demonstration in 2008 to the Arab Spring in 2011, blogs, social networking sites and micro-blogging sites have supported traditional forms of activism and created new ones.

Since its advent in late 1990s, blogging as an activity has evolved from being a strictly personal activity that yields therapeutic benefits to one that facilitates political participation and civic engagement. Bloggers that shape the political landscape are not limited to the West but extend to Asian countries such as South Korea, Myanmar and Malaysia. In Singapore, bloggers have stepped out in the online space to raise public awareness and garner support for specific causes, such as The Online Citizen's coverage of the plight of migrant workers in Singapore and Bloggers 13's advocacy for Internet de-regulation.

However, little is known about who political bloggers are, and furthermore, if and how they are involved in activism. Activism in this article refers to participation in activities with the intention of bringing about a change in opinions or behaviour among a target group pertaining to a specific issue, or advocating for regulatory changes. Drawing on survey and interview data collected in 2010, this article provides a snapshot of political bloggers in Singapore and their involvement in activism.

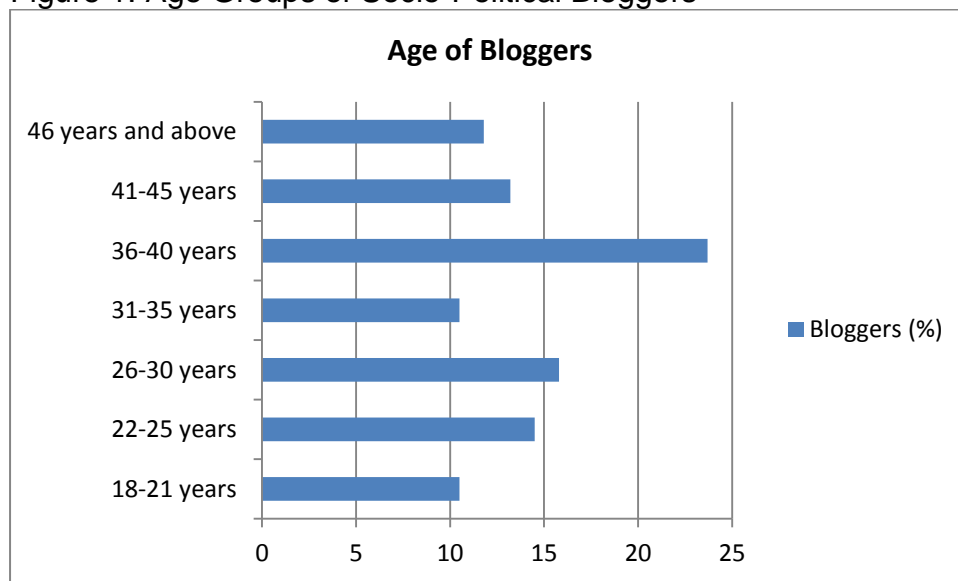
The target population for the study comprised political bloggers in Singapore. In a US study conducted by Gil de Zuniga *et al.*, political blogs are defined as "those that have mostly political content" (2010, 40). In this study, I have further defined political blogs as those that focus mainly on discussing issues pertaining to Singapore politics and governance, e.g., the Singapore government, the ruling party People's Action Party, the political system, the economy, censorship issues, education policies, and issues pertaining to gay rights, women's rights and migrant workers' rights.

To identify political bloggers in Singapore, keyword searches were conducted via Google and Yahoo! search engines. Personal or social blogs were excluded from the study. To reach population saturation, blog aggregators such as Singapore Daily and SingaporeSurf were also used (the latter has since stopped aggregating blog posts). At the final stage of sample collection, snowballing of the sample was conducted through navigating hyperlinks from the blogroll of each seed page, resulting in a population of 224 political blogs. These political bloggers were then contacted via email and or comment pages on their blogs. The final sample comprised 41 political bloggers who participated in in-depth interviews and 76 in the survey.

Demographics of political bloggers

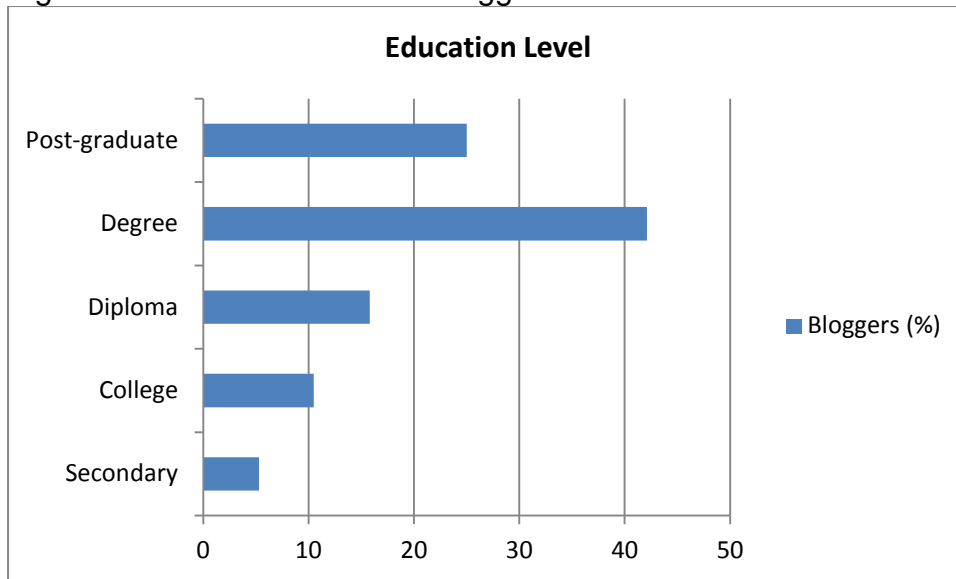
Out of the 76 bloggers who participated in the survey questionnaire, 88.2% were male and 11.8% were female. Figure 1 presents the breakdown of age groups for political bloggers in Singapore. Based on the chart, 51% of the bloggers were youths (defined as aged between 15–35 years by the Singapore Youth Council; see National Youth Council 2010). Respondents in their mid- to late-30s comprised 23.7%.

Figure 1. Age Groups of Socio-Political Bloggers



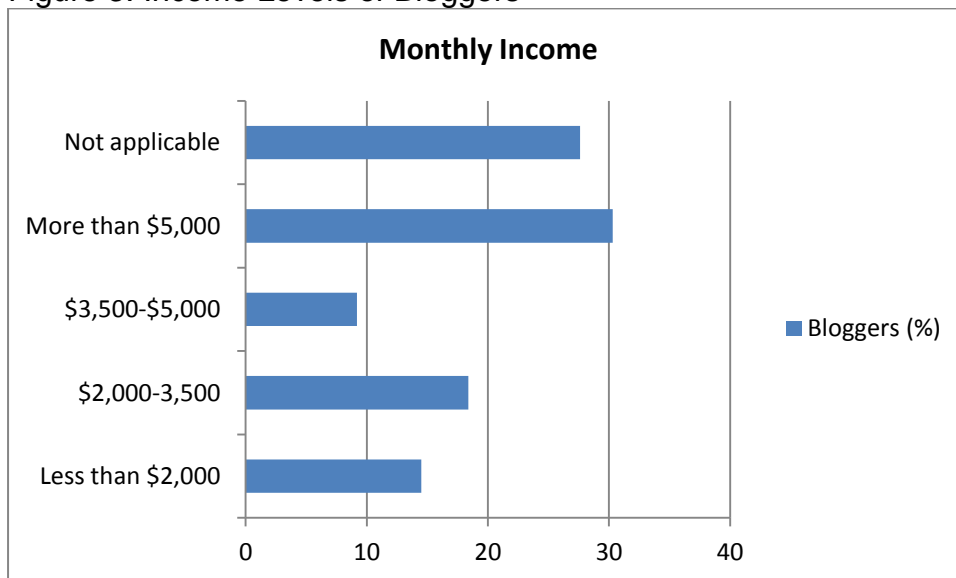
In terms of academic qualifications, 67.1% of political bloggers held a degree or post-graduate degree. Only 15.8% did not attain tertiary education. See Figure 2 for a breakdown of education levels among bloggers.

Figure 2. Education Levels of Bloggers



The majority of the bloggers (73.7%) were employed and among the remaining 26.3%, many were students and others were self-employed and declined to indicate their income. The survey also indicated that Singapore political bloggers came from all walks of life, and held wide-ranging PMET occupations. The occupational mix was diverse and comprised teachers, artists, technical and engineering officers, academics and researchers, lawyers, businessmen and medical doctors. See Figure 3 for a breakdown of income levels.

Figure 3. Income Levels of Bloggers



Political bloggers and civic engagement

Besides uncovering the demographic profile of the Singapore political blogger, the survey also provided insights to the extent and types of political bloggers' activism involvement. Around 40.8% were volunteers or were members of non-governmental organisations, and 65.8% had participated in some form of activism activity. Tindall's

scale of participation was used and adapted to the local context to further examine the nature of political bloggers' activism involvement. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the activities in which political bloggers participated.

Table 1. Types of Activist Activities Engaged in by Political Bloggers

Types of Activities	Yes n(%)	No n(%)	Total
			n(%)
Donated money to organisation	16 (32%)	34 (68%)	50 (100%)
Wrote a letter	25 (50%)	25 (50%)	50 (100%)
Signed a petition	34 (68%)	16 (32%)	50 (100%)
Participated in organised activity	31 (62%)	19 (38%)	50 (100%)
Attended a meeting	31 (62%)	19 (38%)	50 (100%)
Attended a rally or protest demonstration	20 (40%)	30 (60%)	50 (100%)
Participated in an information campaign for the public	26 (52%)	24 (48%)	50 (100%)
Advertised in the mass media	4 (8%)	46 (92%)	50 (100%)
Made a presentation to a public body	12 (24%)	38 (76%)	50 (100%)
Gave a lecture to schools or organisations	10 (20%)	40 (80%)	50 (100%)
Participated in press release or conference	16 (32%)	34 (68%)	50 (100%)
Served as a representative on an advisory board	8 (16%)	42 (84%)	50 (100%)
Purchased merchandise	16 (32%)	34 (68%)	50 (100%)
Wrote or called the media	21 (42%)	29 (58%)	50 (100%)

Displayed a banner or sign on website or blog	26 (52%)	24 (48%)	50 (100%)
Others	11 (22%)	39 (78%)	50 (100%)

Signing a petition was the most often cited activity (68%), followed by participating in an organised activity (62%) and attending a meeting (62%). About 22% of political bloggers who took part in at least one activist activity also listed other activities in the open-ended field. Responses indicate that Singapore political bloggers engaged in myriad activities at both offline and online settings. “Other” offline activities included distributing flyers and information pamphlets, giving public speeches, conducting classes in schools and setting up civil society organisations, while “other” online activities encompassed advocacy via social networking sites, blogging about an issue, posting on and commenting on others’ blog posts.

Conclusion

The community of Singapore political bloggers is thus a heterogeneous one in terms of demographic profile and activism involvement. Till now, there is a paucity of research that sheds light on the demographic profile of political bloggers in Singapore. This is largely due to the difficulty in collecting data from individuals who leverage the protection of privacy afforded by the Internet. Demographic data collected from the survey indicates that Singapore’s political blogging community is a well-educated one that is male-dominated, holding wide-ranging occupations. As the study focused on political bloggers and excluded other types of bloggers and netizens, the extent to which young and well-educated males dominate the larger online community remains unknown.

Activist political bloggers in Singapore also take part in a wide spectrum of activism work. Defined by Locher (2002) as alternative movements, some of these campaigns aimed to change people’s attitudes and opinions regarding specific issues, such as the welfare of migrant workers. Other campaigns and activism initiatives were more reformist in nature (Locher 2002) as they sought to effect policy changes on media regulation and censorship, and the rights of marginalised sexual communities. The activism work that Singapore political bloggers were involved in also varied in terms of duration, from prolonged campaigns (e.g., opposition party activism) to temporal causes (e.g., Repeal 377A, Free Burma Campaign and JBJ Commemoration). Coupled with the ease of participation afforded by new communication technologies, the expansion in the plethora of participation modes lowers traditional activism costs such as time and risks.

Existing anecdotal observations mentioned in the beginning of this article suggest that blogs are empowering regular citizens to become agents of change. In Singapore, a large proportion of political bloggers leverage on technology to participate in myriad campaigns. Although there are political bloggers who do not

participate in any form of activism, this study establishes that authors of user-generated media such as blogs are not mere echo chambers, but are part of larger collectives that work towards common goals and engender change.

References:

Locher, D.A. 2002. *Collective Behavior*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Gil de Zuniga, H., Veenstra, A., Vraga, E., and Shah, D. 2010. "Digital Democracy: Reimagining Pathways to Political Participation". *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 7, 36–51.

National Youth Council (2011). FAQ. Retrieved from <http://www.nyc.pa.gov.sg/index.php/faq#q1>

Tindall, D.B. 2002. "Social Networks, Identification and Participation in an Environmental Movement: Low-medium Cost Activism within the British Columbia Wilderness Preservation Movement". *CRSA/RCSA* 39(4), 413–52.

The views expressed are the author's and do not represent those of the Institute.

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg



© Copyright 2013 National University of Singapore. All Rights Reserved.

You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes and please ensure you cite the source when doing so.