

THE RATIONALITY OF THE POLITICAL ONLINE SPACE

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IPS Exchange Series

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THE RATIONALITY OF THE POLITICAL ONLINE SPACE

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Executive Summary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The online space has been described as a Wild, Wild West rife with Distortions, Rumours, Untruths, Misinformation and Smears (“DRUMS”, coined by Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen in 2013). While the Internet has been used to galvanise people for the collective good, many have voiced concerns over the noise and vitriol present online, cyber harassment and polarisation. The cyberspace has also often been described or referred to as an irrational space with unfavourable comparisons made between alternative and mainstream media.

Thus, how rational or irrational are the voices online? The months of June and July in 2014 saw much buzz online as bloggers with diverse interests jumped into the fray to comment on hot button issues such as the Pink Dot and Wear White campaigns, debates on the Central Provident Fund (CPF) and National Library Board’s (NLB) withdrawal of two children’s books.

IPS identified over 190 blogs with socio-political content in those two months and conducted a content analysis of their structural features and rationality. The research questions for the study were:

- 1) What topics were blogged about during the months of June and July 2014?
- 2) Is the political online space rational or irrational?
- 3) What factors are linked to rationality?

In this study, “rationality” relates to objectivity, emotionality and partisanship. Theoretical frameworks and definitions of objectivity, emotionality and partisanship were adapted from existing research on journalism and political communication. Through correlational analysis, this study established relationships between the type of blogs, the identity of the bloggers and their objectivity, rationality and partisanship.

This study is an “existence” study, one that examines a snapshot of blogs during a period of time (i.e., June and July 2014) and not an “impact” study. The topics that were discussed in blogs reflected events that were taking place in the offline context, e.g., Pink Dot, CPF, the NLB’s initial book ban, and the lawsuit between Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and blogger Roy Ngerng.

The level of activity was high with about 70% of bloggers blogging at least two to four times a month or more frequently. Contrary to popular assumptions concerning anonymous “keyboard warriors”, our study established that more than half the bloggers blogged using their real identity

or made their identity known through personal descriptions and photographs.

This study also shed some light on the rationality of the political online space, and the findings challenge existing assumptions of the Internet as a largely irrational space. Albeit a snapshot existence study, it is an important first step in addressing what has not been studied in research on the online space in the Singapore context. We discuss limitations of the study and make recommendations for future work.



Chapter 1

Introduction

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Increasing online connectivity among users and the proliferation of easy-to-use social media platforms have changed how people access and consume information. The ease of publishing information, low cost of adoption and ease of coordinating activities have created “producers” (Bruns, 2008). These refer to users of technology who do not only passively consume information but actively produce content either on their own or with others. Traditional media no longer hold the monopoly of information production and dissemination.

Advocates posit that the inherent technical characteristics of digital technologies, i.e., its interactivity, many-to-many form of dissemination, and anonymity — promote deliberation and civic participation. However, existing literature has also point to the limitations of the Internet in facilitating deliberation.

First, the perceived anonymity and mediated nature of the online space cause disinhibition on the part of users. That is, people may say or do things that they would not in the real world. There is also the persistent “coffee shop” effect where people feel that they are sharing their private thoughts among a known group via their social media accounts. However, a “sticky” comment that is attention-grabbing, especially a sensational one, can be replicated and transmitted to many others instantaneously through social media.

Second, the selectivity accorded to technology users has led to the fragmentation of audiences because individuals tend to expose themselves only to those who share similar interests or opinions online (Sunstein, 2009). This is evident in the congregation of bloggers who are ideologically similar, as seen both in the US and Singapore contexts (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Lin, Halavais, & Zhang, 2007; Soon & Cho, 2011; Soon & Kluver, 2014). Thus, instead of promoting divergent perspectives and attitude change, echo chambers that reinforce one’s pre-existing attitudes are proliferating in the cyberspace.

Online behaviours such as corrosive speech (Soon & Tan, 2013), cyber-vigilantism, cyber-lynching and “DRUMS” have generated perceptions of the Internet as the Wild, Wild West. Policymakers, community leaders and the members of the general public have expressed concerns on how the Internet creates undue panic and fear. There are also fears of its polarising effects when it highlights and sometimes exacerbates differences between groups (e.g., locals and foreigners, religious groups and supporters of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transsexuals and queers [LGBTQ]).

A common perception held by people of the cyberspace is that it is an irrational space. In Singapore, comparisons have been made between mainstream media (newspapers and broadcast channels and their websites) and non-mainstream media (blogs, Facebook, forum, etc., where alternative views are expressed). The latter has been described as unobjective and emotional, with a bias against the PAP-government.

Studies on the Internet in Singapore have focused on uses and gratifications, baseline analysis of users (e.g., their characteristics) and political implications of the Internet. However, this study examines the rationality of the online space through content analysis of blogs that contained political posts in the months of June and July 2014. We adopted theoretical frameworks and operationalised study variables from existing research conducted in journalism and political communication. This paper presents the methodology we used to determine the rationality (or lack thereof) of the political online space and our findings. The study also provides a starting point for the exploration of mixed-method collaboration involving traditional social science methods (e.g., content analysis and survey) and big data analytics.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study focused on blogs that were part of the political online space, i.e., blogs that discussed social and political issues related to Singapore. It was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What topics were blogged about during the months of June and July 2014?
- 2) Is the political online space rational or irrational?
- 3) What factors are linked to rationality?

The Internet's democratising impact — levelling political participation and enabling different voices to influence societal discourse and policymaking — is underpinned by rational discourse. Irrationality compromises the Internet's deliberative potential because facts and truths are obscured by noise which comes in the forms of misinformation, rants and raves (Sunstein, 2009). However, what is rationality? It is evident from philosophical discourse that rationality assumes different forms and meanings, such as that of the Aristotelian tradition, of Augustinian Christianity, and of the Scottish Enlightenment. The concept has seen contestation in Eastern philosophy as well (Soon, 2015).

MacIntyre (1991) posited that rationality is linked to a specific tradition of discourse and that each tradition of discourse develops within a particular historical context and seeks to resolve particular conflicts. Similarly, Brazilian sociologist and philosopher Alberto Ramos (1981) said that rationality could only be understood within the broader historical and social context in which it finds itself. Both philosophers converged in their argument that there is no single or universal rationality, suggesting that rationality's malleability over time and place.

Hence, we derived our definition of “rationality” from discourse in the Singapore context, from official, mainstream media and public discourses. Based on comments made about the online space and comparisons drawn between it and the mainstream media, our study focused on three dimensions — objectivity, emotionality and partisanship.

There are several ways in which objectivity, emotionality and partisanship are studied by researchers. In their study of balance and fairness in newspaper coverage of controversies¹ involving local governments, law enforcement and businesses, Simon, Fico and Lacy (1989) defined balance based on the number of words used for each side or each position. Fairness refers to the presentation of statements from principals in the story and balance refers to “the relative amount of coverage devoted to a particular side in a story. The more one-sided the story, the less balanced it is” (p. 428).

The display of emotionality can take place either on the macro level (e.g., types of narratives) or micro level (e.g., word choice, judgment and appraisal) (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013). Scholars have identified how users communicate their emotions in the online context, and the strategies include the use of emoticons, task-oriented and socio-emotional language, intense language, social verbs and emotes², punctuation and fonts (Derks, Bos & Grumbkow, 2007; Radford, 2006; Riva, 2002).

Pertaining to partisanship, it can take the form of an attitude (operating at the latent level) or a behaviour (operating at the manifest level) (Converse & Pierce, 1985). Thus partisanship ranges from an attitude, a predisposition or an abiding identification to political party membership or votes cast for a specific political party.

1. “Controversies” are defined as stories that “included wrongdoing, impropriety or conflict” (Simon, Fico and Lacy, 1989, p. 429).

2. Emotes are narrative descriptions of conversational nonverbal behaviours typed-out by users, and social verbs are small pre-programmed scripts that express actions and emotions through abbreviations, e.g., “smiirro” which means “smile ironically” (Riva, 2002, p. 587).

Partisanship can be measured by the order of mention, amount of time or space given to each party and the type of content, e.g., quotes from the party or candidate (Diddi, Fico & Zeldes, 2014). It should be pointed out that conceptually, although being partisan does not imply being irrational, in Singapore critics have used partisanship as indicative of irrationality. It is for this reason that we have included partisanship under the concept of “rationality” here.



Chapter 2

Methodology

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

We crawled the web and identified blogs that contained at least one post that discussed political issues in Singapore during the period of June to July 2014. In this study, political issues run the gamut of social, economic and issues related to governance, the government and policies. Blogs that belonged to political parties, corporations and non-government organisations were excluded from the study as our focus was on citizen participation in public discourse online. We also excluded blogs that were online versions of mainstream media.

Our sample consisted of the 197 blogs that met the above criterion. The blogs were of a wide variety, ranging from well-known political blogs such as The Online Citizen and Temasek Review Emeritus and personal blogs to non-political blogs, e.g., lifestyle and parenting blogs (see Appendix A). We did not select only political blogs but blogs with at least one political post in June and July 2014. In other words, we also examined political content written by bloggers who did not typically write about politics such as lifestyle bloggers (such as those who usually blogged about travel or parenting issues).

More than 1,000 blog posts were analysed by two trained coders from June to August 2014. The coders went through four rounds of training and coding. The inter-coder reliability score (Cohen's kappa) based on a sample coding of 20% of blogs posts was 0.80³. The measurement scales for objectivity, emotionality and partisanship were refined through the process of sample coding.

We conducted a content analysis of the following:

- 1) Type of blog: How political a blog was, based on the amount of political content blogged about from January to July 2014
- 2) Blogger's identity: Known or unknown
 - Known — name and details on the blogger's background/identity are available on the blog
 - Unknown — information on the blogger's background/identity is not available on the blog
- 3) Duration of blog: Length of time from the first blog post

3. Existing literature on content analysis states that kappa scores over 0.75 are excellent, 0.40 to 0.75 are fair to good, and below 0.40 are poor.

- 4) Frequency of blog posts: Based on blog posts written in May, June and July 2014
- 5) Use of multimedia: Presence of text, pictures, audio and video files
- 6) Journalistic objectivity: Rating of political posts written in June and July 2014, on a scale of 1 to 5
 - 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

Linguistic connectors such as “despite”, “on the other hand”, “but”, “however” and “such a statement requires evidence that” were indicative that a post presented an alternative or alternatives sides of the issue. However, when we analysed the content for objectivity, we depended on human judgment to ascertain if such connectors were used appropriately, i.e., that they connected different ideas and arguments instead of being used as fillers.

- 7) Emotionality: Rating of political posts written in June and July 2014, on a scale of 1 to 5
 - 1 = Very calm
 - 2 = Somewhat calm
 - 3 = Slightly ranting
 - 4 = Ranting (without expletives)
 - 5 = Usage of expletives

Besides text (word choice), we also examined emotions manifested through emoticons, punctuation, colours and fonts. The below are two examples of emotional posts.

Use of expletives:

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 all capital letters:

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.

- 8) Partisanship for PAP/Government: Rating of political posts written in June and July 2014, on a scale of 1 to 6.
- 1 = Very anti-Government/Opposition
 - 2 = Somewhat anti-Government/Opposition
 - 3 = Mentions Government/Opposition but neutral towards it
 - 4 = Somewhat pro-Government/Opposition
 - 5 = Very pro-Government/Opposition
 - 6 = N.A. (Does not mention Government/Opposition at all)

The following are examples of pro- and anti-Government/Opposition posts.

Pro-Government:

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.

Anti-Government:

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.

Pro-Opposition:

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



Anti-Opposition:

Typical Oppie [sic] 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.



Chapter 3

Findings

CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS

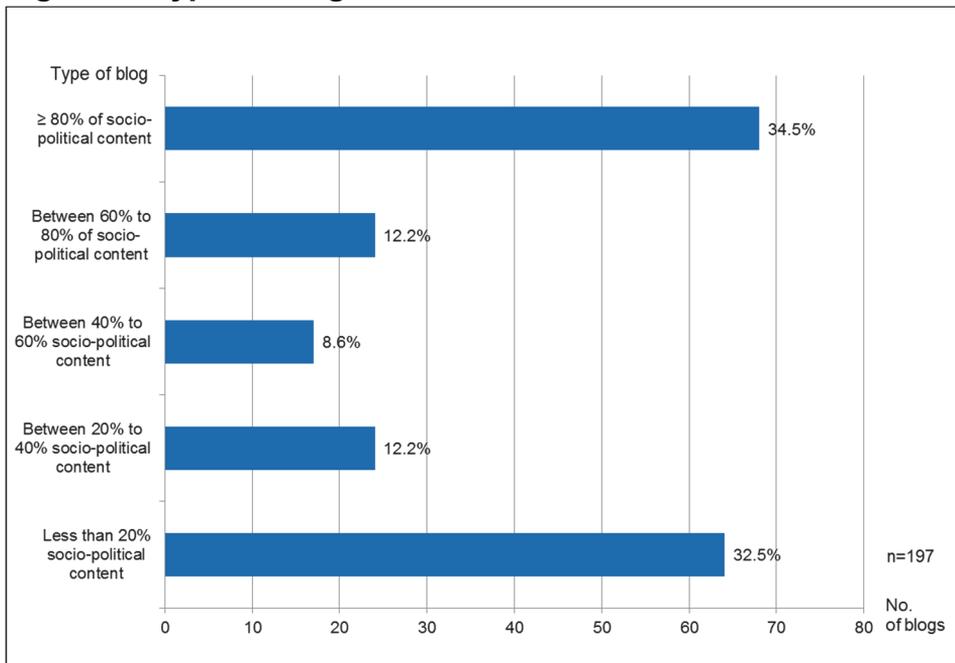
The 197 blogs wrote about a wide range of political topics. They included the NLB’s book ban, the CPF, PM Lee’s defamation suit against Roy Ngerng (blogger of “The Heart Truths”), the MediShield Life government health insurance scheme, LGBTQ, the Pink Dot and Wear White campaigns, religion, education and Primary 1 registration, foreigners and immigration, employment and salary, living standards, housing, and public transportation. These topics reflected offline debates taking place then.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POLITICAL ONLINE SPACE

Type of Blog

There were two main groups of blogs — those that had political content in more than 80% of their posts (34.5% of blogs) and those that had political content in less than 20% of their posts (32.5% of blogs). The latter group suggests that bloggers who did not blog about political issues on a regular basis were responsive to developments in the offline world during the period (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Type of Blog



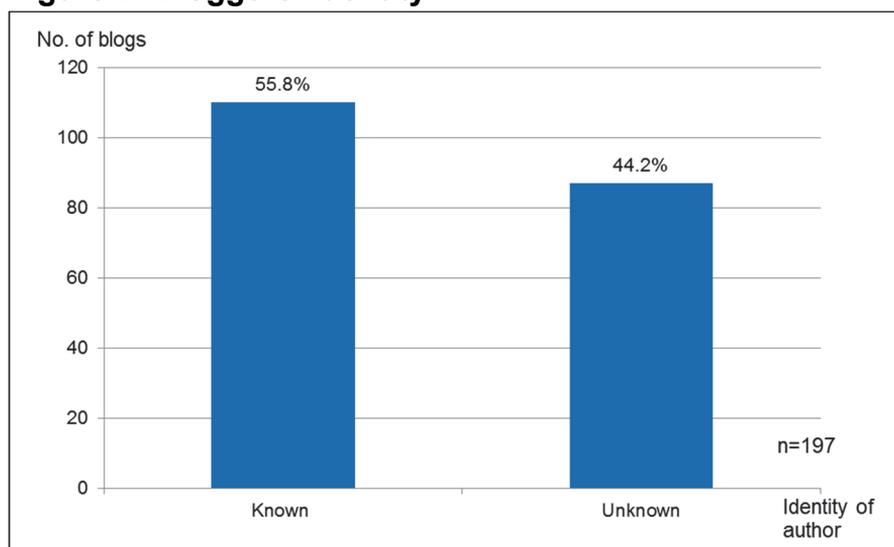
We divided the blogs into three main categories: Those with a high amount of political content (60% to 80% of the blog content was political in nature); moderate amount (40% to 60% of the blog content was political in nature); and “low” amount (0% to 40% of the blog content was political in nature). Based on this categorisation, 46.7% of the blogs had high political content, 8.6% had moderate political content and 44.7% had low political content.

Examples of a blog with low political content or high political content are Diary of a Noob Father (<http://noob-father.blogspot.sg/>) and The Online Citizen (<http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/>), respectively. Examples of blogs with moderate political content are Just Speaking My Mind (<http://happyartfood.blogspot.sg/>) and Ryan Goh: Through These Eyes (<http://ryangoh.wordpress.com/>).

Bloggers’ Identity

We were able to determine bloggers’ identity for more than half the blogs (i.e. almost 56%). This means that 44% of the bloggers were anonymous. Many of the “known” bloggers posted their personal details on their profile pages and photographs on their blogs (see Figure 2 for bloggers’ identity). Poached Mag (<http://poachedmag.com/>) and Spittle Splat: The Fuss of Us (<http://spittle-splat.blogspot.sg/>) are examples of known and unknown bloggers, respectively.

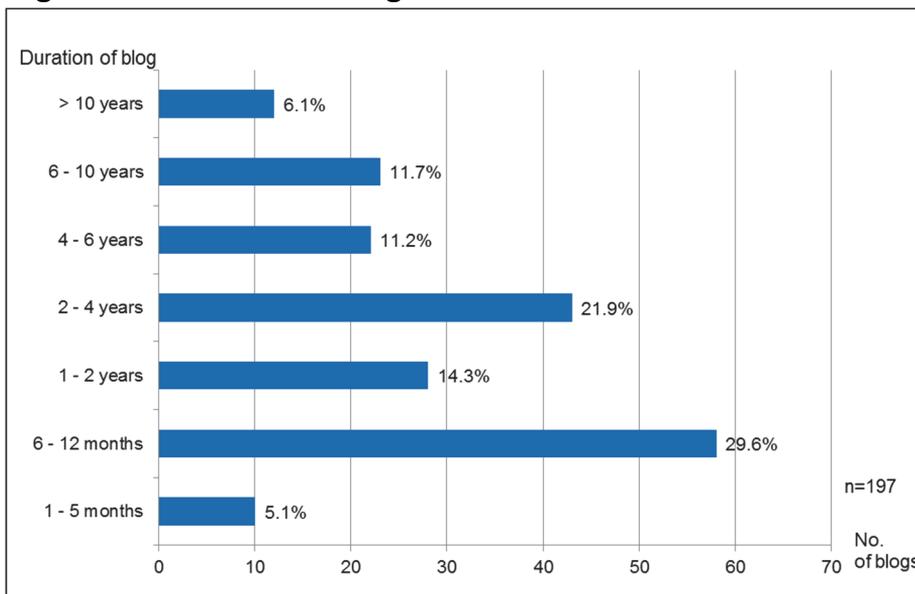
Figure 2: Bloggers’ Identity



Duration of Blog

The majority of the blogs (65.8%) had been around for six months to four years (see Figure 3). This suggests that many people took to blogging after the watershed General Election in 2011 despite the growing popularity of social networking sites such as Facebook⁴.

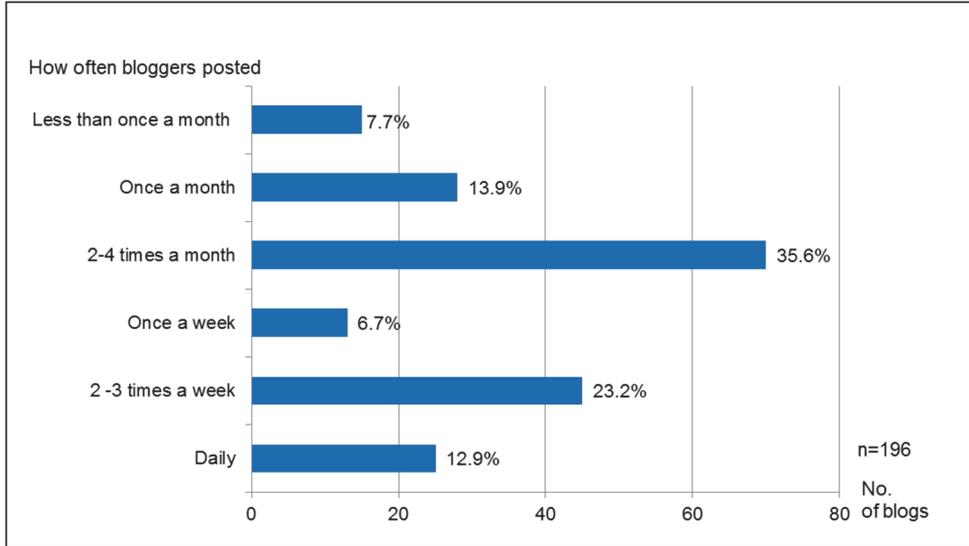
Figure 3: Duration of Blog



Frequency of Blog Posts

The months of June and July 2014 saw a high level of activity with 23% blogging two to three times a week and 36% blogging two to four times a month (see Figure 4). Blogs such as Five Stars and A Moon (<http://www.fivestarsandamoon.com/>), Leongszehian.com (<http://leongszehian.com/>) and The Independent Singapore (<http://theindependent.sg/>) had high levels of activity. Those that saw low levels of activity included Chemical Generation Singapore (<http://chemgen.wordpress.com/>), Freedom To Think (<http://mrsv.wordpress.com/>), and NofearSingapore (<http://nofearsingapore.blogspot.sg/>).

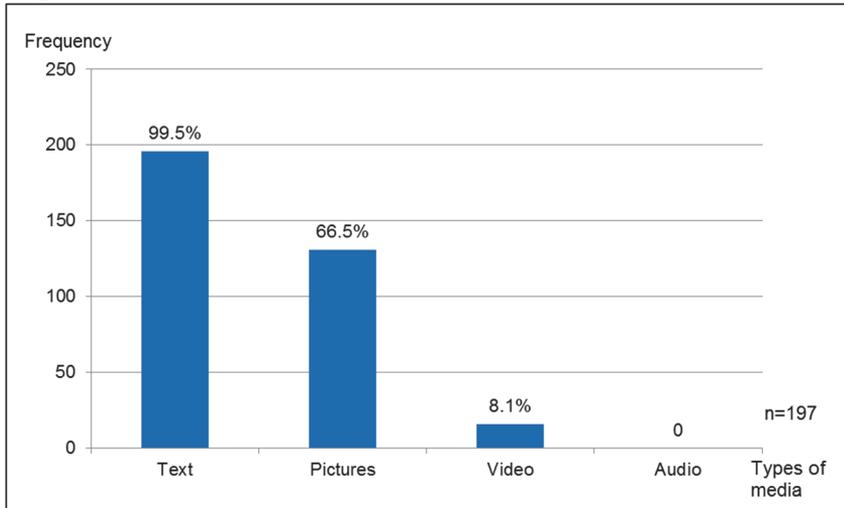
4. Some 3.6 million people in Singapore — or around 66% of the population — used Facebook, according to 2015 statistics from the global social media agency We Are Social. This is up from 50% in March 2013.

Figure 4: Frequency of Blog Posts

Use of Multimedia

Some 67% of the bloggers used more than one type of media (i.e., text, pictures, audio and video files). Figure 5 shows that text was the most common medium of communication (99.5%) and the next most popular medium was pictures (66.5%). While 8% included videos in their posts, none of the blogs in our study sample included audio-only files in their June and July blog posts.

Figure 5: Use of Multimedia

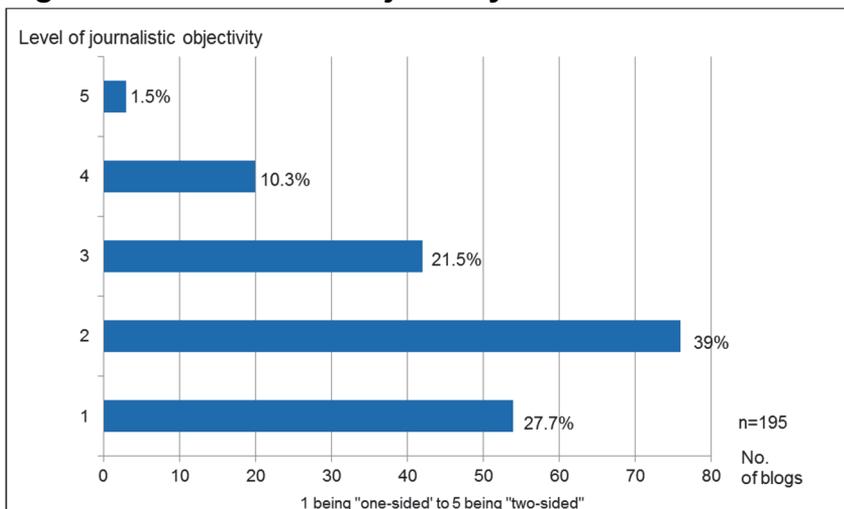


RATIONALITY OF THE POLITICAL ONLINE SPACE

Journalistic Objectivity

Some 28% of the blogs were completely one-sided in their political posts, while more than 70% provided alternative perspectives. More than 30% devoted at least 20% of their blog content to discussing different sides of an issue (see Figure 6). Refer to Appendix B for examples of posts.

Figure 6: Journalistic Objectivity

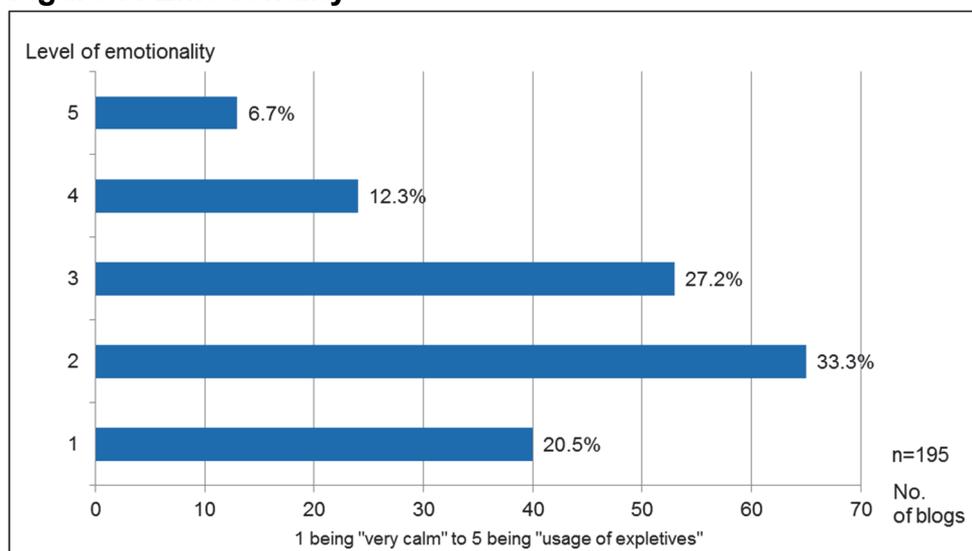


Blogs that scored low in objectivity included Sg Hard Truth (<http://sghardtruth.com/>), Simple and Gay Forward (<http://simpleandgayforward.wordpress.com/>) and Think for Me Singapore (<http://thinkformesingapore.blogspot.sg/>). Blogs with high objectivity included Jentrified Citizen (<http://jentrifiedcitizen.wordpress.com/>), Reflections on Change (<http://refocusing.blogspot.sg/>) and The IFA on Duty (<http://www.ifa.sg/blog/>) (see Appendix B).

Emotionality

More than half of the bloggers were not emotional when they discussed political issues. Almost 54% of the blogs were somewhat or very calm while 19% ranted and used expletives (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Emotionality



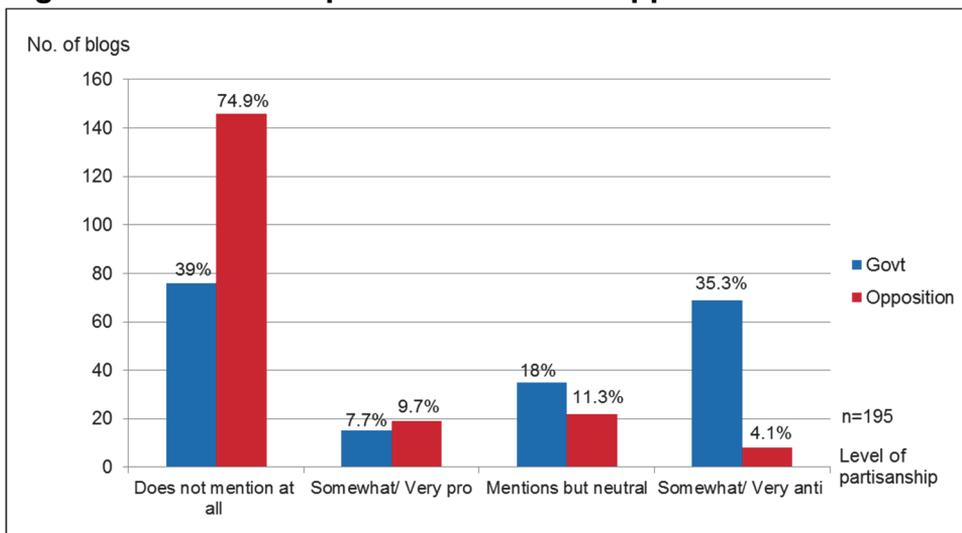
Mothership (<http://mothership.sg/>) and Rachel Zeng's Blog (<http://rachelzeng.wordpress.com/>) were two examples of blogs that were somewhat or very calm, while Temasek Review Emeritus (<http://www.tremeritus.com/>) and Yours Irreverently (<http://yoursirreverently.wordpress.com/>) were blogs that included rants and/or expletives.

Partisanship for the Government and Opposition

When bloggers wrote about political issues, a significant proportion (almost 40%) did not mention the Government. Those who mentioned the Government and were somewhat or very anti-Government made up 35% of all the blogs, while 7% were somewhat or very pro-Government, and 18% were neutral. Examples of pro-Government blogs included Insight of Me (<https://thatsmyopinions.wordpress.com/>) and Sg Hard Truth, while anti-Government blogs included Jentrified Citizen, The Heart Truths (<http://thehearttruths.com/>) and Singapore Alternatives (<http://singaporealternatives.blogspot.sg/>). This finding that almost half (47%) of the blogs were not anti-Government contradicts the conventional wisdom that the cyberspace is almost entirely anti-Government, at least as far as the blogs are concerned.

Almost 75% of the bloggers did not mention the Opposition in their political posts, 11% were neutral and 10% were somewhat or very pro-Opposition (see Figure 8). The blogs that were somewhat or very anti-Opposition included Insight of Me, News Clips (<http://heresthenews.blogspot.sg/>), Sg Hard Truths and Singapura Pundits (<http://singapurapundit.blogspot.sg/>). Those that were somewhat or very pro-Opposition included All Things Singapore (<http://thetactlesscritic.blogspot.com/>), PijiTailai (<http://pijitailai.blogspot.sg/>) and Rethinking the Rice Bowl (<http://sonofadud.com/>).

Figure 8: Partisanship for Government/Opposition



We further divided each group of bloggers based on the level of political content present in their blogs (see Figures 9 and 10).

Figure 9: Partisanship (Government)

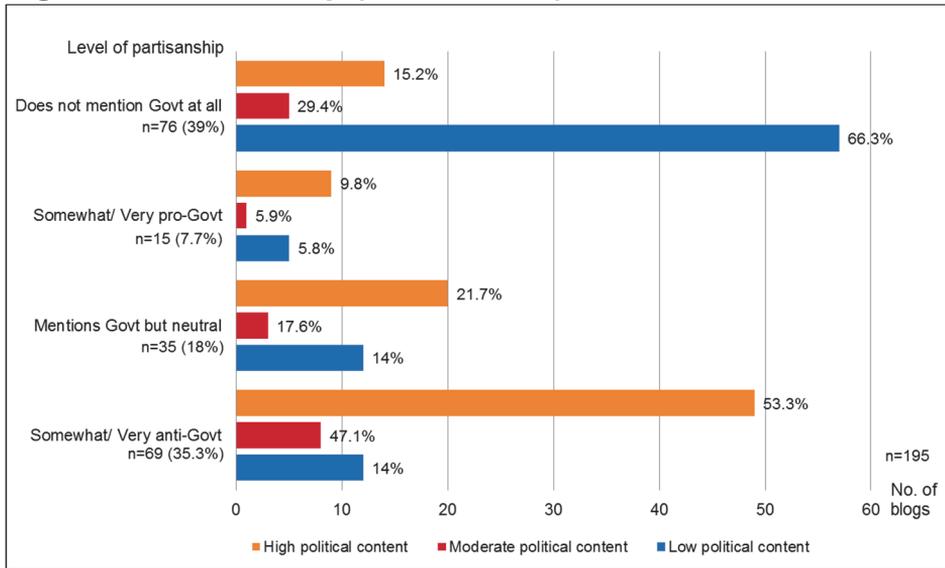
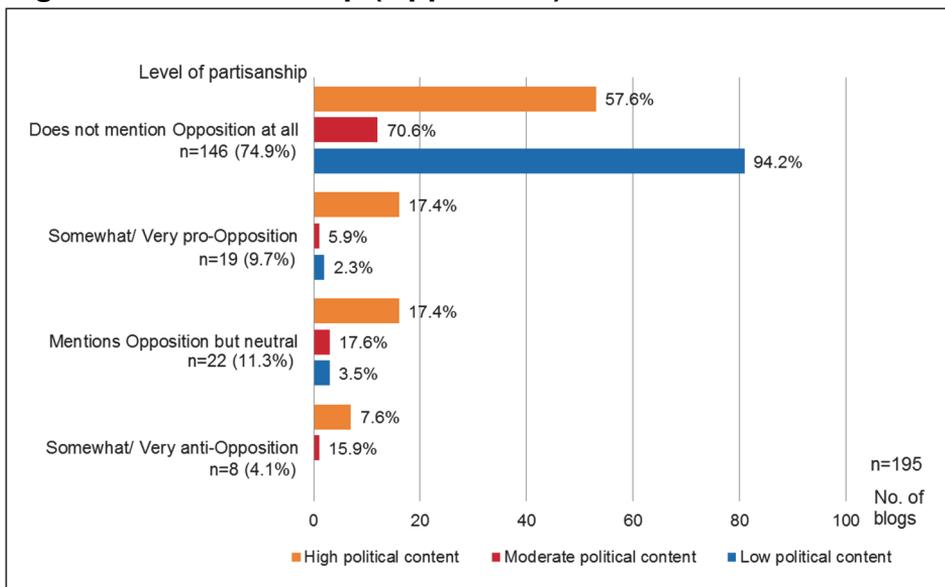


Figure 10: Partisanship (Opposition)



Among the 35% of blogs that were somewhat or very anti-Government, slightly more than half of them (53%) had high political content. Similar to our analysis on partisanship for the Government, we further divided the blogs based on their level of political content. The findings do not indicate any pattern for blogs when it came to partisanship for Opposition.

CORRELATIONAL ANALYSIS — FACTORS LINKED TO RATIONALITY

We performed correlational analysis using Spearman correlation to identify factors that are linked to rationality (see Table 1).

Table 1: Correlations Between Blog Type and Identity, Objectivity, Emotionality and Partisanship

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

** $p < 0.001$

Our analysis indicated that high political blogs tend to be written by unknown authors. Interestingly, the more political the content, the more objective it was. This finding challenges popular assumptions that bloggers tend to be less objective when they blog about political issues.

We did not find a relationship between blog type and emotionality. However, we found that high political blogs tended to be more anti-Government and anti-Opposition. Low political blogs however tended to be more pro-Government or pro-Opposition.

Table 2: Correlations Between Identity and Objectivity, Emotionality and Partisanship

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

** $p < 0.001$

We performed a second set of correlational analysis between bloggers' identity (known or unknown) and their objectivity, emotionality and partisanship (see Table 2). We did not find a correlation between bloggers' identity and objectivity. This contradicts conventional wisdom that anonymous bloggers were less objective.

Known bloggers were more likely to be calm or somewhat calm, and they tended to be pro-Government or pro-Opposition. This suggest that people may recognise the need to be more circumspect in their speech when blogging with their identity. In addition, known bloggers tend to be pro-Government or pro-Opposition. On the other hand, unknown bloggers tend to be anti-Government or anti-Opposition. There could be a number of reasons for this — the perception that negative views are socially unacceptable, fear of reprisals, or a need to conceal their identity, for instance, when they are actually fronts for certain organisations or groups.

Table 3: Correlations Between Objectivity, Emotionality and Partisanship

Objectivity	Emotionality	Partisanship
One-sided to two-sided	-.278**	-.061 (Government) -.040 (Opposition)

** $p < 0.001$

Our study found that the more objective a blog was, the more calm it tended to be, and that less objective a blog was the more emotional it tended to be. This fits in with the idea that rationality in terms of objectivity and calmness are somewhat related concepts. However, we did not find a relationship between objectivity and partisanship for Government or Opposition (see Table 3). This is another counter-intuitive finding as it challenges the conventional wisdom that people who were anti-Government or anti-Opposition (especially the former) were not objective. The reason could be that supposedly “anti” blogs believed that they were more persuasive if they presented both sides of the story even if they eventually agreed with one side.

Table 4: Correlations Between Emotionality, Partisanship

Emotionality	Partisanship
Calm to Use of expletives	-.131 (Government) -.010 (Opposition)

We found no correlation between emotionality and partisanship for the Government and the Opposition (see Table 4). Again, this finding contradicts the common assumption that people who were anti-Government or anti-Opposition were likely to be emotional when they discussed political parties. Like the relationship found between being “anti” and objective, the reason for this could be that bloggers believed that they were more persuasive if they came across as calm rather than emotional.



Chapter 4

Discussion

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to examine the rationality of the online space, i.e., how rational or irrational online political discussions were in blogs. It is an “existence” study, one that examines what was out there via a snapshot of blogs during a period of time (i.e., June and July 2014). It is not an “impact” study that looks at which blogs and discourses were the most popular or had the most influence in shaping people’s perceptions of political issues. Albeit an existence study, it is an important first-step in addressing what has not been studied in research on the online space in the Singapore context.

Conceptually and methodologically, this study breaks new grounds by measuring rationality through objectivity, emotionality and partisanship. The current framework does not include use of logic in blogging. Determining logic involves studying the presence of reasoning, the validity of reasoning and the structure (i.e., connections) of arguments, which requires developing a separate instrument for another study.

Our study showed that the topics discussed in blogs mirrored offline events. Issues such as Pink Dot, the CPF, the NLB’s initial book ban, LGBTQ issues and the court case between PM Lee and blogger Roy Ngerng were among the political issues blogged in June and July 2014. These topics were discussed even for blogs that typically had low political content.

The level of activity was also high, with about 70% of bloggers blogging at least two to four times a month. Bloggers leveraged the online space to discuss political issues pertinent to the Singapore society. In addition, it was interesting to note that contrary to popular assumptions concerning anonymous “keyboard warriors”, our study established that more than half the bloggers blogged using their real identity or made their identity known through personal descriptions and photographs.

This study also shed some light on the rationality of the political online space. We measured rationality based on objectivity, emotionality and partisanship. We did not analyse whether bloggers were logical or coherent when expressing their positions regarding political issues in their commentaries. In terms of objectivity (presenting more than one side to an issue), about 70% of the study sample were not completely one-sided in their commentaries, with one-third devoting at least 20% of their blog posts to discussing alternative perspectives. Pertaining to the emotion dimension of rationality, we found that the online space was not as emotional as anticipated as more than half the bloggers were somewhat or very calm when they discussed political issues.

On partisanship, our study showed that on the whole, the political online space was more critical of the PAP-led Government than of Opposition parties. Among those who mentioned the Government in their posts, they were more likely to be somewhat or very anti-Government. This is contrasted with those who were somewhat or very pro-Opposition when they mentioned the Opposition.

This study shed some interesting insights into the implications of blogging with one's identity. Known bloggers tend to be more calm and either pro-Government or pro-Opposition. Although more than half the bloggers made their identities known, there were also anonymous bloggers who blogged on political issues. This raises the question if there were still fears of repercussion of blogging on political issues or being critical of the Government.

We also observed some patterns surrounding highly political blogs. While they were more likely to be critical of both the Government and the Opposition, they also tended to provide alternative arguments to their positions. This could be due to their recognition that balanced commentaries were required to change opinions and convince readers of their arguments.

A more general discussion of the political and media context of Singapore is necessary to properly understand the above findings and the persistent views in some quarters that the Internet is a Wild, Wild West. First, curtailment of political and other kinds of expression in Singapore reduced greatly the diversity of views, especially those that are anti-establishment, as scholars have pointed out (Banerjee, 2002; George, 2006; Kuo, 1995). This was compounded by the regulation of traditional media (print newspaper and broadcast radio and television). The advent of the Internet changed this landscape, and Singaporeans with anti-establishment views dominated the discourse online. In the later years, as mainstream media itself established their presence online, Internet users could get a more balanced palette of political views. However, one reason that the Internet continues to be seen as a bastion of irrationality could be due to the expectation that partisan discourse (especially of the anti-Government and anti-PAP variety) cannot be objective (two-sided) and calm.

There were a few limitations to this study. First, the study captured a small snapshot of an online space that is colossal both in terms of time and space. A longer study period would have yielded a greater corpus of data for analysis. Nonetheless, the study period, which was a period rife with political developments and debates mitigated this limitation, meant that the number of political posts (i.e., more than 1,000 posts) compensated for the short period.

The second limitation is related to an inherent challenge of the content analysis method. Qualitative coding for latent (as opposed to manifest) content involves some subjectivity when coded by different coders. However, we minimised errors in human coding by training and re-training coders and conducting sample coding for 20% of the blogs. The inter-coder reliability score was approximately 80%, which pointed to a strong reliability among coding done by different coders.

The third limitation of the study is its scope as the study analysed only one part of the online space (i.e., the blogosphere). We examined only blogs and did not include other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. This is due to the Facebook's privacy settings, which limited our access to users' content. The brevity of Twitter posts constrains analysis for objectivity, an important dimension of rationality. We also believe that blogs, as a platform for extended discourse, are qualitatively different from other short-form platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which perhaps allowing for more spontaneity engenders less objectivity and calmness. Hence, analysis of Facebook and Twitter content might reveal less rationality than found on Singapore blogs. This is a possible area of future research.



Chapter 5

Conclusion

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In summary, the study has shown that many common assumptions and widely accepted opinions about the nature of the political cyberspace are patently untrue. In particular, it demonstrates that the political online space in Singapore is not the “Wild, Wild West” as many had thought it is. A significant number of bloggers were unemotional and considered alternative sides of issues when they commented on important Singapore political events. Although “highly political blogs” tended to be anti-government, a small group of them was critical of the Opposition or pro-Government. While there were exceptions, “highly political” blogs tended to be objective regardless of their partisanship, suggesting perhaps that bloggers recognise that balance helps to sway minds and change opinions.

Future research could incorporate the use of different methodologies, combining traditional methods used in the social sciences (e.g., survey and content analysis) and new techniques in big data analytics. The limitation of the content analysis method was discussed in the earlier section. Pertaining to surveys, existing studies highlight potential weaknesses such as the tendency for people to give socially acceptable answers, people’s fear of reprisals for telling the truth and errors in recall. Similarly, big data analytics also face issues such as the representativeness of the users of the larger population, lack of basic information such as the sex, age and social economic status of users, and the rapidly changing patterns of use.

A triangulation of different methods in future studies will enable researchers to leverage the strengths of traditional methods and new big data techniques for sensing, tracking and predicting public opinion, while mitigating the limitations of each methodology. Such an approach will enable researchers to examine how people feel about specific issues, political parties and candidates; their opinions on different policies; what part of the online space has the best predictive value; and how different events affect sentiments, and in which way, with greater accuracy.



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Appendices

Appendix A: List of Blogs with Political Posts in June–July 2014

No.	Blog Name	Blog URL
1	2econd Sight	http://2econdsight.wordpress.com/
2	365 Things that Annoy Me!	http://michaelinmadrid.wordpress.com/
3	Air-conditioned Nation	http://www.airconditionednation.com/
4	A Brit in Singapore***	http://britinsingapore.blogspot.sg/
5	A Kind of Fruit	http://litford.net/
6	A Load of Fish: Musings from a Dude in Singapore	http://aloadoffish.blogspot.sg/
7	A Singapore Stock Investor (ASSI)	http://singaporeanstocksinvestor.blogspot.sg/
8	A Singaporean in Australia	http://asingaporeanson.blogspot.sg/
9	Abdillah Zamzuri	http://abdillahzamzuri.wordpress.com/
10	Akikonomu	http://akikonomu.blogspot.sg/
11	Alice Cheong	http://blog.alicecheong.com/
12	All Singapore Stuff (ASS): Singapore's Fastest Growing Online Community	http://www.allsingaporestuff.com/
13	All Things Singapore	http://thetactlesscritic.blogspot.com/
14	Alvin Pang . Abroad	http://alvinpang.tumblr.com/
15	Alvinology	http://alvinology.com/
16	Angry Fat Man	http://limjialiang.wordpress.com/
17	Another Dot In The Blogosphere	http://ashleytan.wordpress.com/
18	Anyhow Hantam	http://anyhowhantam.blogspot.sg/
19	Aspirant SG	http://www.aspirantsg.com/
20	Axl Planner Blog	http://axlplanner.wordpress.com/
21	Balderdash	http://gssq.blogspot.sg/
22	Barry's Blog	http://barrismyth.blogspot.sg/
23	Basis of Singaporean Spirit (BOSS)	http://basisofsingaporeanspiritboss.blogspot.sg/
24	Because Hate is a Big Burden to Bear	http://concerned-parents-sg.blogspot.sg/
25	Bertha Harian	http://berthahenson.wordpress.com/

26	Blinky Mummy	http://blinkymummy.blogspot.sg/
27	Bloggng for Myself	http://blogging4myself.blogspot.sg/
28	Change Maestro	http://changemaestro.com/
29	Chemical Generation Singapore	http://chemgen.wordpress.com/
30	Christian Hub	http://christianhub.org/
31	Commonsense Thinking Blog	http://faithfulthought.wordpress.com/
32	Deadpris.com	http://www.deadpris.com/
33	Defunct Creakings of a Cog	http://rationalityofaith.wordpress.com/
34	Dewdrop Notes 露语	http://chanjoonyee.com/
35	Diary of a Noob Father	http://noob-father.blogspot.sg/
36	Dim Sum Dolly	http://www.dimsumdolly.com/
37	DKSG	http://blog.dk.sg/
38	Dr Wealth	http://www.drwealth.com/
39	Embracing Your Identity	http://cowpehcowbu.wordpress.com/
40	Empty Vessel: Thoughts, Technology & Tales	http://iantan.org/
41	Everything Also Complain	http://everythingalsocomplain.com/
42	Expat Bostonians	http://expatbostonians.com/
43	faerieimps.blogspot.com	http://faerieimps.blogspot.sg/
44	Faith, Music, Politics, Gastronomy	http://lemoulard.wordpress.com/
45	Fiat Lux	http://xfiatlux.wordpress.com/
46	Five Stars & A Moon	http://www.fivestarsandamoon.com/
47	Flaneurose	http://flaneurose.blogspot.sg/
48	Focus on Your Family	http://focusonthefamilysg.wordpress.com/
49	Food Fuels Me To Talk	http://singaporegirl.wordpress.com/
50	Freedom to Think	http://mrsv.wordpress.com/
51	Fresh Grads	http://freshgrads.sg/
52	Fynding Noor	http://fyndingnoor.wordpress.com/
53	Gimyuen.com	http://gimyuen.com/
54	Gintai 昇泰	http://gintai.wordpress.com/
55	Give Them Roots and Wings	http://www.loveourchildrenow.sg/
56	Greenisforever	http://greenisforever.wordpress.com/

57	Growing Your Tree of Prosperity	http://treeofprosperity.blogspot.sg/
58	Guan Yin Miao's Musings	http://guanyinmiao.wordpress.com/
59	Gureation	http://gureation.wordpress.com/
60	Haus of Yuene	http://yuene.wordpress.com/
61	Hello Summer	http://welcomebacksummer.blogspot.sg/
62	Homosexuality & Science	http://homosexualityandscience.wordpress.com/
63	I am a Human Being Too	http://iamahumanbeingtoo.wordpress.com/
64	I on Singapore	http://ionsg.blogspot.sg/
65	Iamambulance	http://www.iamambulance.com/
66	In My Words...	http://axlching.wordpress.com/
67	In Transit	http://thatinsatiablegeek.wordpress.com/
68	Insight of Me	http://thatsmyopinions.wordpress.com/
69	Insights Health Associates	http://insightshealthassociates.wordpress.com/blog/
70	Investment Moat\$	http://www.investmentmoats.com/
71	Iron Bowl	http://robinlow.blogspot.sg/
72	It's a Zoo Out There	http://spacefan.blogspot.sg/
73	Jason Erik Lundberg	http://jasonlundberg.wordpress.com/
74	Jentified Citizen	http://jentrifiedcitizen.wordpress.com/
75	Jeremy Chen's Website	http://jeremy-chen.org/
76	Jess C Scott	http://jesscscott.wordpress.com/
77	Just My Observation	http://just-my-observation.blogspot.sg/
78	Just Speaking My Mind	http://happyartfood.blogspot.sg/
79	Kennethism	http://kennethism.com/
80	L.A.M.	http://johnislam.blogspot.sg/
81	Leongszehian.com	http://leongszehian.com/
82	Life Sucks	http://lifebesiderunning.blogspot.sg/
83	Like Dat Oso Can Meh	http://likedatosocanmeh.wordpress.com/
84	Limpeh is Foreign Talent	http://limpehft.blogspot.sg/
85	Literally Kidding	http://literallykidding.blogspot.sg/
86	Living Investment	http://limkimtong.wordpress.com/
87	Loh and Behold	http://lohandbehold.com/

88	Lu Kee Hong Singapore	http://lukeehongsingapore.blogspot.sg/
89	Lukey is Handsome	http://www.lukeyishandsome.com/
90	Magbytesssss	http://magbytes.blogspot.sg/
91	Marcellie	http://marcellie.com/
92	Marcusan.net	http://marcusan.net/
93	Martin Lee @ SG	http://www.martinlee.sg/
94	Masked Crusader	http://maskedcrusader.blogspot.sg/
95	Material World	http://materialworldsingapore.com/
96	Medium: Everyone's Stories and Ideas	https://medium.com/
97	Miss Hallelujah	http://www.misshallelujah.net/
98	Molitics Writing I Silence	http://mollymeek.wordpress.com/
99	Money\$mart.sg	http://blog.moneysmart.sg/
100	Mothership	http://mothership.sg/
101	Mr Miyagi	http://miyagi.sg/
102	Mr Seah (Dotcom!)	http://mrseah.com/
103	Mrbrown.com	http://www.mrbrown.com/blog/
104	Mum in the Making	http://makingmum.blogspot.sg/
105	Musings from Singapore	http://sudhirtv.com/
106	Musings from the Lion City	http://hardhitting-nobs.blogspot.sg/
107	My Bones are Super Chill	http://mybonesaresuperchill.wordpress.com/
108	My Journey. My Life.	http://fuzzielemon.blogspot.sg/
109	My Little Corner	http://chantc.blogspot.sg/
110	My Political Pennies' Worth	http://risatan.wordpress.com/
111	My Singapore News	http://mysingaporenews.blogspot.sg/
112	My Two 'Sense' Worth	http://asayaki.blogspot.sg/
113	New Nation: 50% Real News	http://newnation.sg/
114	News Clips	http://heresthenews.blogspot.sg/
115	Nocturne.noctalis.com	http://nocturne.noctalis.com/index.shtml
116	NofearSingapore	http://nofearsingapore.blogspot.sg/
117	Of Kids and Education	http://hedgehogcomms.blogspot.sg/
118	Offspring	http://offsprings.blogspot.sg/

119	One Writer's World: Musings of a Garden Herb	http://gardenherb.wordpress.com/
120	Open Urbanism	http://openurbanism.blogspot.sg/
121	Pelicularities	http://pelicularities.net/
122	Poached Mag	http://poachedmag.com/
123	Political Writings	http://politicalwritings.wordpress.com/
124	Popagandhi	http://popagandhi.com/
125	Poskod.sg	http://poskod.sg/Index
126	Publicopinion: Everyone has a Voice	http://publicopinion.sg/
127	Rachel Zeng's Blog	http://rachelzeng.wordpress.com/
128	Random Thoughts of a Free Thinker	http://searchingforenlightenment.blogspot.sg/
129	Ravi Philemon	http://www.raviphilemon.net/
130	Reflections of a Disciple	http://reflectionsofadisciple.blogspot.sg/
131	Reflections on Change	http://refocusing.blogspot.sg/
132	Rethinking the Rice Bowl	http://sonofadud.com/
133	Revelation is Real 2.0	http://cherubim777.blogspot.sg/
134	Rictusempraa!	http://rictusempraa.wordpress.com/
135	Rilek 1 Corner	http://rilek1corner.com/
136	Run the Gamut	http://benjywong.tumblr.com/
137	Ryan Goh: Life Through These Eyes	http://ryangoh.wordpress.com/
138	S M Ong: Published/Unpublished/U ncut	http://smong.net/
139	SaifulSaleem	http://saifusaleem.com/blog/
140	Samantha De Silva	http://samanthadesilva.com/
141	Sam's Place	http://samteeplace.blogspot.sg/
142	Sam's Thoughts	http://thinkingbetterthinkingmeta.blogspot.sg/
143	SeksiMatashutyrmouf	http://sietecho7-8.blogspot.sg/
144	SG Hard Truth	http://sghardtruth.com/
145	SG Politics	http://www.sgpolitics.net/
146	SG Wealth Builder	http://www.sgwealthbuilder.com/
147	Sharan Kaur(ner)	http://sharankaurner.wordpress.com/
148	ShiroiRyuu @ Dusty Corner	http://shiroiluke.wordpress.com/

149	Signs Of Struggle	http://doulosyap.wordpress.com/
150	Simple & Gayforward	http://simpleandgayforward.wordpress.com/
151	Singapore 2B	http://singapore2b.blogspot.sg/
152	Singapore Alternatives	http://singaporealternatives.blogspot.sg/
153	Singapore Armchair Critic: A blog about politics and policies in Singapore and beyond	http://singaporearmchaircritic.wordpress.com/
154	Singapore Ideas	http://singaporeideas.wordpress.com/
155	Singapore New Policy Thinking	http://sgnewpolicythinking.tumblr.com/
156	Singapore Notes	http://singaporedesk.blogspot.sg/
157	Singapura Pundits	http://singapurapundit.blogspot.sg/
158	Small Steps for Social PR	http://socialpr.blogspot.sg/
159	Song of a Reformed Headhunter	http://jeeleong.blogspot.sg/
160	Sonny Liew's Secreter Robot Spy Factory	https://sonnyliew.wordpress.com/
161	Spittle Splat: The Fuss of Us	http://spittle-splat.blogspot.sg/
162	Spotlightonsingapore	http://rogerpoh.wordpress.com/
163	Spuddings	http://spuddings.net/
164	Story of Jasmine and Lai Huat	http://jashuat.com/
165	Sze Zeng	http://szezeng.blogspot.sg/
166	Taming the Crowd	http://tamingthecrowd.wordpress.com/
167	Temasek Review Emeritus (access is limited to preceding three months)	http://www.tremeritus.com/
168	Thatboyhuman.com	http://thatboyhuman.com/
169	The Blogfather	http://blogfather.sg/
170	The Heart of the Matter: Live, Love, Laugh	http://kenarah.wordpress.com/
171	The Heart Truths	http://thehearttruths.com/
172	The IFA on Duty	http://www.ifa.sg/blog/
173	The Independent Singapore	http://theindependent.sg/

174	The Influencer Media	http://theinfluencermedia.com/
175	The New Era	http://tnesingapore.wordpress.com/
176	The October Man Diaries: Celebrating the mature man	http://octobermansg.wordpress.com/
177	The Online Citizen	http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/
178	The Rambler: As I Ramble on.	http://vivitelaeti.blogspot.sg/
179	The Real Singapore	http://therealsingapore.com/
180	The Sun Shines on Singapore	http://thesunshineson.wordpress.com/
181	The Wacky Duo	http://www.thewackyduo.com/
182	Theuncleflipsprata	http://theuncleflipsprata.wordpress.com/
183	Think For Me, Singapore	http://thinkformesingapore.blogspot.sg/
184	Thoughts of a Cynical Investor	http://atans1.wordpress.com/
185	Transitioning	http://www.transitioning.org/
186	Unravelling1987	http://unravelling1987.blogspot.sg/
187	Value Investthink	http://8percentpa.blogspot.sg/
188	Veritas	http://veritas-lux.blogspot.sg/
189	Vulcan Post	http://vulcanpost.com/
190	Wise Mental King	http://wisemental-king.sg/
191	Lime-sorbet.blogspot.com	http://lime-sorbet.blogspot.sg/
192	Yours, Irreverently	http://yoursirreverently.wordpress.com/
193	Yours Truly Singapore	http://trulysingapore.wordpress.com/
194	Yoursfaithfullysg	http://yoursfaithfullysg.wordpress.com/
195	Yu-Mei Balasingamchow: Too Many Thoughts /blog	http://blog.toomanythoughts.org/
196	今天天气多云... Today's Mostly Cloudy	http://cloudywindz.blogspot.sg/
197	否极泰来PijiTailai	http://pijitalai.blogspot.sg/

Appendix B: Examples of One-Sided and More Objective Posts

One-sided posts

“How many ‘homeless’ and ‘poor’ Singaporeans are genuinely homeless and poor?” (Sg Hard Truth, <http://sghardtruth.com/2014/06/22/how-many-homeless-and-poor-singaporeans-are-genuinely-homeless-and-poor/>)

“Children’s books featuring gay families to be destroyed” (Simple and Gay Forward, <https://simpleandgayforward.wordpress.com/2014/07/12/6066/>)

“I support the book ban (Part 2)” (Think for Me Singapore, <http://thinkformesingapore.blogspot.sg/2014/07/i-support-book-ban-part-2.html?view=timeslide#!/2014/07/i-support-book-ban-part-2.html>)

More objective posts

“PM Lee refuses to yield on the Speak Mandarin (Forgo Dialects) policy” (Jentrified Citizen, <https://jentrifiedcitizen.wordpress.com/2014/07/20/pm-refuses-to-yield-on-the-speak-mandarin-forgo-dialects-policy/>)

“Government’s CPG public relations” (Reflections on Sg, <http://refocusing.blogspot.sg/2014/07/governments-cpf-public-relations.html>)

“Madam Pusparani, widow of killed Changi Airport worker, is now broke but no fault of hers”) (The IFA on Duty, <http://www.ifa.sg/madam-pusparani-is-now-broke/>)

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