

Impact of New Media on General Election 2011



Session II - Editorial Stances and Strategies of Alternative Online Media

Remarks by:

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Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

One major development facilitated by the internet has been the growth of amateur or “citizen” journalism, marching to the beat of a different drum.

Alternative media start from scratch with little institutional baggage and few organisational restraints. With such low barriers to entry, they are able to pick from a wide range of possible strategies.

My research focuses on strategic choices made by four prominent websites:

The Online Citizen,
Temasek Review,
Yawning Bread and the
Singapore General Election Portal.

My interest is not so much on their role in the elections as such. Rather, the intensity of online activity during the elections made this a great opportunity to observe blogs in action, in order to understand better a phenomenon that is sure to grow in importance.

I was interested in their policies towards regulatory obstacles, their thinking about fairness and balance, and where they situate themselves in relation to public opinion.

First, how did the websites respond to regulatory constraints?

The rules for online election advertising were significantly liberalised in time for the 2011 election, but there was also a new restriction in the form of Cooling Off Day.

For bloggers, this was a grey area. The letter of the law exempted only licenced news media – so unlicensed citizen media were presumably covered by the rule.

But since citizen journalists consider themselves to be fulfilling the same function as news organisations, it could be argued that they have the same justification as mainstream media to report and comment on the elections.

So would bloggers choose to observe the letter of the law or take the calculated risk that no action taken against them if they claimed for themselves the same right to publish as mainstream media?

Well, Tan Kin Lian's Singapore General Election Portal decided to respect the new restriction and ceased posting at 11pm the night before Cooling Off Day.

Yawning Bread ignored the regulation and published a 1,600-word review and commentary on Cooling Off Day.

Interviewed before the GE, TOC editor Andrew Loh said that he planned to challenge the restriction. Loh managed the GE coverage for TOC and sure enough posted one article on Cooling Off Day and another on Polling Day.

The behaviour of bloggers in 2011 was thus a continuation of what we saw in 2006, when there was some confusion about what exactly was permissible. Most simply ignored what they considered to be unreasonable restrictions and just went ahead. Once again we've seen that blanket bans are simply not going to be respected.

More specific legislation such as defamation and contempt of court are a different matter.

Those who operate openly and within Singapore's jurisdiction do not take chances with these laws. The Online Citizen told me that it did receive a lawyer's letter regarding a posting that defamed a PAP politician. The posting was put up by a reader in the comments section under one of its articles. It was duly removed by TOC editors.

The same comment was apparently circulating in Temasek Review, which is of course harder for regulators or plaintiffs to reach than TOC.

This raises the important question of why more blogs don't simply go underground the way Temasek Review has. Note that when Sintercom was asked to register before the 2001 election, it chose to wind up and resurfaced overseas. When TOC was asked to register and gazetted as a political association, it responded by throwing a party to signal to its supporters that it is hear to stay.

The contrast between the TR and TOC strategies is illuminating. On the one hand, TR's underground guerilla approach to journalism has made it Singapore's top rumour site. Many seem to value its whistleblower function and are willing to tolerate the fact that it is wrong most of the time if it is right once in a while.

TOC is more exposed to political risk that it has to be more careful, but arguably this limitation is more than outweighed by the benefits of being able to network face to face in Singapore. As long as citizen journalism remains a largely voluntaristic enterprise, it will be highly dependent on relationships of trust, and TOC has clearly been able to leverage on that. It has been moderately successful in getting donations and was very effective in drawing volunteers. They have also been able to work with civil society organisations and are playing a leading role in progressive movements.

The clearest benefit of TOC's open policy was its success in organising the pre-election inter-party forum last December, followed by the presidential debate in August.

Second, how do the blogs interpret the norms of fairness and balance in journalism?

These principles have been central to professional journalism for around a century. However, their centrality to journalism's mission has always been somewhat problematic and contested, as there is an even longer tradition of partisan journalism, and questions remain about how balance and independence are to be interpreted.

The most striking characteristic of Singapore's political blogs is that they are all on the same side of the ideological fence: all identify with the opposition underdogs and try to level the political playing field.

They see no responsibility to put out the PAP view as, in the words of Gerald Ho who ran SGEP for Tan Kin Lian, Singaporeans just have to lift their heads and they would be exposed to the PAP line.

They are not necessarily pro-opposition by policy, but believe that the best way they can contribute is to provide a platform for such voices that are under-served by mainstream media.

They reject the need to provide balance within their websites.

And instead claim to be providing a counterweight on an already unbalanced media landscape.

Thus, critics who accuse the blogs of being unfair or one-sided are right, but should realise that their criticism is missing the point and is unlikely to cause bloggers sleepless nights. Their goal is a more balanced media system, not necessarily more balanced media.

Third, where do they situate themselves in relation to their audience?

Most journalists will say that their first duty is to the public.

And most blogs brand themselves as representing a more authentic discourse than the mainstream media.

So we might expect that these political sites position themselves firmly on the side of public opinion.

While this is probably true of Temasek Review, the editors of all the other sites surprisingly expressed some disappointment with the public.

They were not comfortable with simply following public opinion because they did not trust prevailing popular sentiments on many issues.

Alex Au put it most candidly.

He and other like-minded bloggers know from experience that some of the progressive causes that are dear to their hearts – such as gay rights, foreign worker rights and the death penalty – are not popular with the masses.

Therefore, the task of winning votes for the opposition was less important than raising the level of political maturity of Singaporeans, including opposition supporters.

These bloggers I interviewed see themselves in a long-term struggle, in which the quality of the debate matters as much as their outreach or the election outcome. Temasek Review on most days may have more traffic than TOC, Yawning Bread and SGEP, but the latter sites do not think

of themselves as taking part in a popularity contest. They of course tracked their page views and unique visitors, but do not let this dictate their sense of what is important.

The attitude of these editors to their readers is most apparent in the policies on reader comments. At one extreme, Temasek Review practices no moderation, while at the other, Alex Au is resolute in his policy of pre-moderation. Comments are only approved if they meet his exacting standards.

This diversity in approaches should not be surprising since the distinction between mass market media and elite press was found in journalism long before the arrival of new media.

This and the other editorial choices that I have talked about today are ultimately dilemmas with no obvious answers. They involve trade-offs, reflecting unresolved tensions in the democratic role of journalism. We can be sure that alternative media will continue to evolve in Singapore, and we can be equally sure that they will not converge around a set of common norms. We can expect them to continue to be fragmented and diverse in their interpretations of their journalistic mission.

Thank you.