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**All rants and no substance?:
A new framework for studying the rationality of cyberspace**

Carol Soon¹
Tan Tarn How¹

While the Internet has been used to galvanise people for the collective good, many have voiced concerns over the noise and vitriol present online and polarisation. In Singapore where the government regulates traditional mainstream media such as print and broadcast, the online space has been described as a “Wild Wild West” rife with rumours, untruths and misinformation. Such developments do not only exert a potential negative effect on the deliberative nature of public discourse but also skew bias towards the online space, affecting the ability of online users to communicate with authority and power. This study seeks to examine the rationality of the cyberspace through using a new “rationality” framework to analyse political discourse online. Comprising objectivity, emotionality and partisanship, the rationality framework was applied to a content analysis of 197 blogs with political content in 2014. The analysis indicated that the online political space was not the Wild Wild West that it was touted to be with significant levels of objectivity and non-partisanship. There was a stark absence of emotional discourse, and relationships were observed between bloggers’ anonymity and rationality. Cognisant of academia’s and policymakers’ interest on the quality and effects of online discourse, the proposed analytical framework and the study findings hold implications for both developed and developing countries.

Introduction

The ubiquitous adoption of information communication technologies and the embracement of broadband technology have led to greater collaboration and collective intelligence. Increasing online connectivity among users and the proliferation of easy-to-use social media platforms have changed how people access and consume information. Cyber libertarian rhetoric concerning the impact of digital technologies is premised on democratic principles. Advocates posit that the inherent technical characteristics of digital technologies (e.g. interactivity, many-to-many and

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anonymity) will promote deliberation and civic participation (Skoric & Poor, 2013; Vitak, Zube, Smock, Carr, Ellison and Lampe, 2011).

Information sharing via the Internet has reached unprecedented scale and speed, catalysed by social media and instant messaging applications such as Whatsapp and Viber. The consumption of information now takes place on the go. According to global social media agency We Are Social, social media have over 2 billion users worldwide, with 3.6 million people (66% of the population) in Singapore (“Digital, Social & Mobile in 2015”, 2015). However, existing research has also pointed to the limitations of digital technologies in facilitating opinion-formation through deliberation. 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 (Galston, 2003; Sunstein, 2009). Halberstam and Knight (2016), and Pariser (2011) highlighted the presence of echo chambers where individuals interact with like-minded others. At times, online interactions are reflecting offline geographic affinity (Hsu, Park & Park, 2013). Polarisation, often times driven by political ideology, is a common occurrence (see for example, Park & Thewall, 2008).

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 where one’s pre-existing attitudes are reinforced are proliferating in the cyberspace. In addition, online behaviours such as hate speech have also generated and contributed to perceptions of the Internet as the Wild Wild West, one that is rife with “DRUMS” (Distortions, Rumours, Untruths, Misinformation and Smears), as coined by a government official (Xue, 2013). In Singapore, 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).

The communicative power and influence of the public sphere in the online domain thus hinges on the rationality or perceived rationality of the discourse. 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 government. Grounded in existing research on political and media communication, and theories on deliberation and rationality, this study developed a framework to examine the rationality of the online space. The analytical framework was then used to analyse a snapshot of the blog space in June and July 2014 and the political discourse present. We present findings on the rationality of the cyberspace and implications for further study.

Blogs' Power Unleashed

Earlier studies showed that blogging is driven by the need for self-expression and narcissism rather than for political empowerment and civic engagement. The growing popularity of blogs soon after its inception was attributed users' ability to create an online personal journal and their control over the types of interactive features they wanted for their blogs (Kim, 2007). Earlier scholarship on blogs addressed the uses and gratifications of blogging (Blood, 2002; Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2004; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht & Swartz, 2004; Papacharissi, 2004; Trammell, 2005; Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu & Landreville, 2006). According to the study by Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright (2004), personal-type journal blogs were most popular and were used by bloggers to express their subjective perspectives on matters of interest to them. Similarly, Trammell's (2005) content analysis of 358 Polish blogs established that self-expression was the main motivation for blogging. Amir-Ebrahimi (2008) found that blogs provided Iranian women opportunities to share their intimate thoughts "in a society where women had no public forum, no opportunity to express themselves" (p.93).

However, it soon became evident that blogs had potential and power that extended beyond the personal realms to influencing public opinion. Unlike traditional broadcast and commercial networks that set the agenda and place pre-determined issues on the national agenda, bloggers functioned as grassroots intermediaries who accorded and enhanced visibility to issues which they deemed important to the public. In the process, they reframed the issues, ensuring that everyone (versus those in control of media) had a chance to be heard (Jenkins, 2006). By filtering information, providing short summaries and links to further information on related issues, "topic-oriented" blogs (defined as blogs with the purpose of conveying professional information) acted as one-stop information hubs for online users (Bar-Ilan, 2005). In the US, bloggers proved to be a new force to contend with during the Memogate controversy and the Howard Dean campaign in 2004 (Tremayne, 2007, p.xiv).

The communicative power of blogs has also been observed in other parts of the world. South African political bloggers and authors of citizen journalism sites often placed themselves in authoritative positions in the area of social commentary and actively influenced opinions (Bosch, 2010). In Asia, Japanese bloggers assumed the role of agitators who stimulated discussion and summarizers who provided summaries of discussions (Nakajima, Tatemura, Hino, Hara & Tanaka, 2005). During the 2008 election in Malaysia, the political discussions and criticisms about the government and its alleged (mis)management of the country's economy in the blogosphere supposedly culminated in the unprecedented loss of seats to the opposition (the Malaysian Prime Minister had admitted after the elections that the government's failure to tap into the blogosphere contributed to the election outcome). Likewise, in Singapore, Ibrahim (2009) described the blogosphere as putting up "politics of resistance" as individuals leveraged on the medium to challenge the boundaries of accepted norms in the society during the 2006 election (p.192).

State reactions to political blogs arguably are tacit acknowledgement of the communicative power of online discourse, particularly in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes. In Singapore, a

prominent blog called The Online Citizen was gazetted as a political association² by the government in 2011. More recently, legal action was taken against two prominent bloggers for insulting the integrity of the judiciary and defaming the Prime Minister respectively. Several blogs were also required by the government to register as “news websites” under the 2013 licensing scheme³. Besides having to put up a performance bond, registered sites have to comply within 24 hours to the regulator’s instructions to remove content which breaches content standards (Media Development Authority, News Releases, May 28, 2013). Such regulatory measures are underpinned by the state’s recognition of citizens’ power in shaping public opinion, made possible by technology.

Multi-faceted and Multi-dimensional Rationality

While levelling communication and removing barriers to participation (Rheingold, 1993), the anonymity of computer-mediated communication has also encouraged a more liberated expression of unpopular or controversial opinions (Ho & McLeod, 2008; Rains, 2007). The presence of a wide range of online speech and behaviour, from the pro-social to anti-social such as hate speech, harassment and online vigilantism, has generated mixed reactions and perceptions pertaining to the rationality of online discourse. What constitutes rationality has been contested for centuries past. Greek philosopher Aristotle described man as a rational animal who possesses the ability to reason, reflect and think (Bartlett and Collins, 2011; Bostock, 2000). Aristotle believed that ethically desirable behaviour can become our “second nature” through practice. On the other hand, Scottish historian and philosopher Hume argued that reason was inadequate to motivate behaviour and “passions” drive human action (Hume, 2010). In Asian philosophy, Confucian philosopher Xunzi viewed man as innately evil and would use reason to guide his actions in advancing his own interests, while Mengzi believed that man is predisposed to being moral and good, and that this innate quality could be further developed (Knoblock, 1998; Legge, 2011).

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 the Aristotelian tradition, Augustinian Christianity and the

² The gazetting of the blog meant that it was barred from receiving funds from foreign donors and letting foreigners take part in its events. In addition, the blog had to reveal the identities of its owners, editorial team and administrators.

³ Such a ruling applied to websites that regularly report Singapore news (report an average of at least one article per week on Singapore's news and current affairs over a period of two months) and have significant reach (at least 50,000 unique visitors from Singapore each month over a period of two months).

Scottish Enlightenment. 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 controversies 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, intense language, social verbs and emotes, punctuation and fonts) (Derks, Bos and 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 party membership or votes cast for a specific party. 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 although conceptually 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.

This study focused on political blogs and was guided by these research questions: To what extent is the online political space in Singapore rational or irrational? What are the relationships between objectivity, emotionality and partisanship? What factors may account for rationality in the online political space in Singapore, or lack thereof?

Method

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. Several controversial events took place

during this period. They included the annual event that supports gay rights (Pink Dot), the banning of two children's books with purported homosexual themes by public library National Library Board (NLB), debates on the national compulsory savings scheme, Central Provident Fund (CPF), the prime minister's defamation suit against a blogger religion. In this study, political issues run the gamut of social, economic and issues related to governance, the government and policies. Blogs which 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. We crawled the blogs using commercial search engines and snowballed the sample. The final sample consisted of the 197 blogs which met the above criterion. The blogs were of a wide variety, ranging to well-known political blogs such as those mentioned earlier (The Online Citizen and The Mothership). We did not select only political blogs but included blogs with at least one political post in June and July 2014. This meant that political content written by non-politically motivated bloggers such as lifestyle bloggers (such as those blogging on travel and parenting issues) was included in our analysis as well.

An approximate number of 1,000 blog posts were analysed by two trained coders from June to August 2014. These posts were related to political issues such as those mentioned in the above and were posted during the two months. The coders went through four rounds of training and coding, achieving an inter-coder reliability score (Cohen's kappa) of 0.80 based on a sample coding of 200 blogs posts (20% of the sample). The measurement scales for objectivity, emotionality and partisanship were refined through the process of sample coding. Besides determining the age of blog (determined by the length of time from the first blog post till time of coding) and the frequency of blog posts (calculated based on the total number of blog posts written in the months of May, June and July 2014 divided by the number of days), a content analysis of the following was conducted:

1. Type of blog: How political a blog 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 was available on the blog; Unknown - information on the blogger's background/identity was not available on the blog)
3. Journalistic objectivity: Rated 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. connected different ideas and arguments instead of being used as fillers.

4. Emotionality: Rated 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.

5. Partisanship for the PAP-led government (henceforth “government”) and opposition: Rated 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 [Monetary Authority of Singapore] 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 [People's Action Party] are like a bunch of animals in denial, who refuse to believe that Singapore is the most expensive city in the world, claim HDB [Housing Development Board] flats are affordable and reading their CPF [Central Provident Fund] 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.

Findings

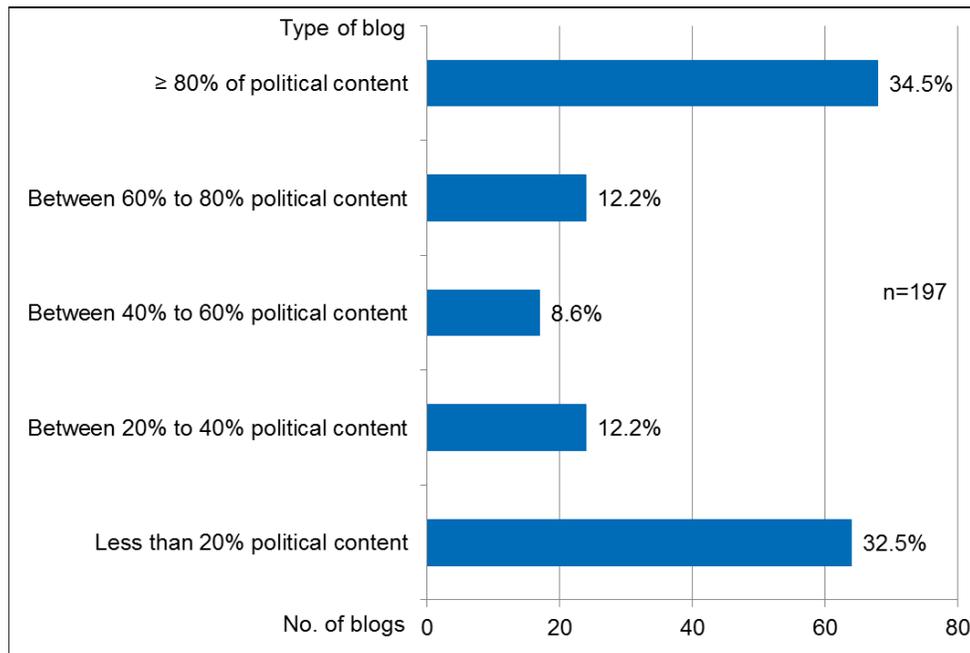
The 197 blogs wrote about a wide range of political topics. They included the controversial events mentioned earlier, and perennial hot topics such as religion, education, foreigners and immigration, cost of living, housing and public transportation. These topics reflected offline debates taking place 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

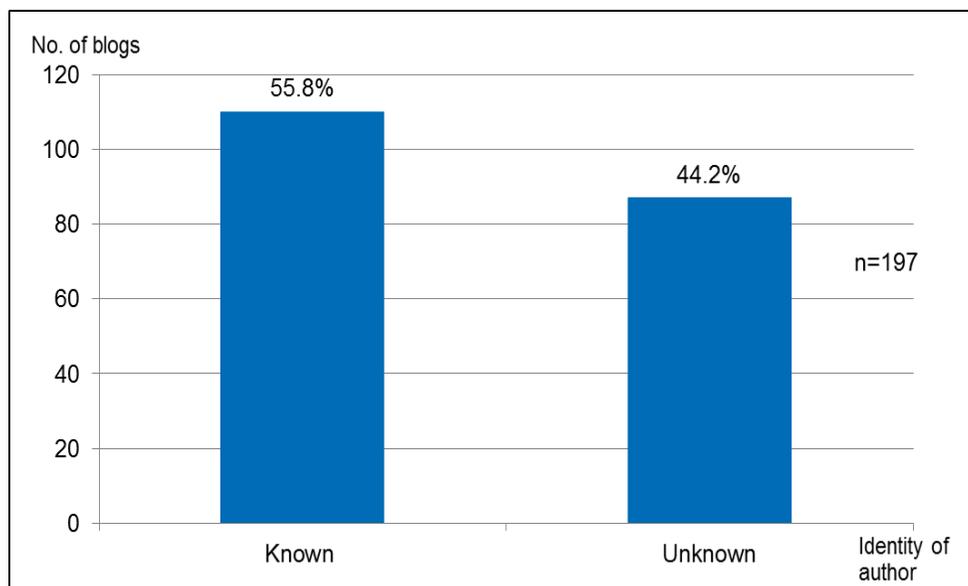


We divided the blogs into three main categories: those with a high amount of political content (60% to 80% of the blog content was political in nature), moderate amount (40% to 60% of the blog content was political in nature) and “low” amount (0% to 40% of the blog content was political in nature). Based 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/>) were examples of known and unknown bloggers respectively.

Figure 2. Bloggers' Identity

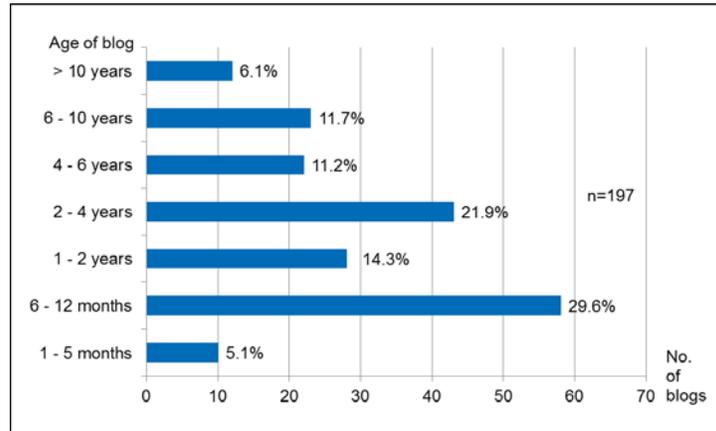


Age of blog

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.

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

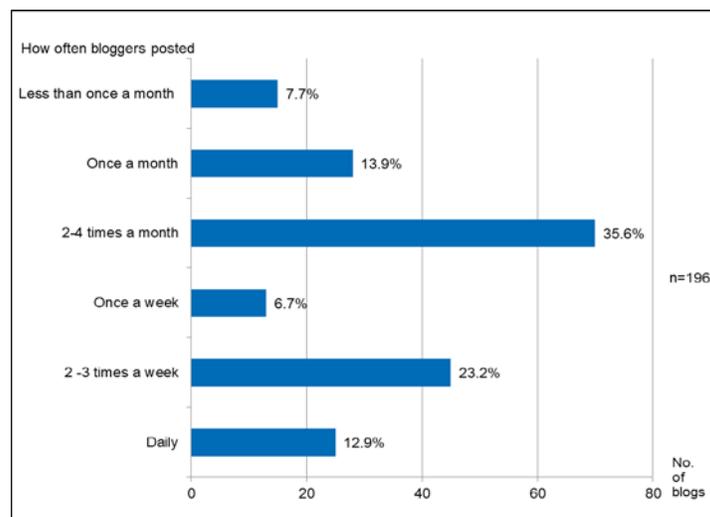
Figure 3. Age of Blog



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 while those that saw lower levels of activity included Chemical Generation Singapore (<http://chemgen.wordpress.com/>), Freedom To Think (<http://mrsv.wordpress.com/>), and NofearSingapore (<http://nofearsingapore.blogspot.sg/>).

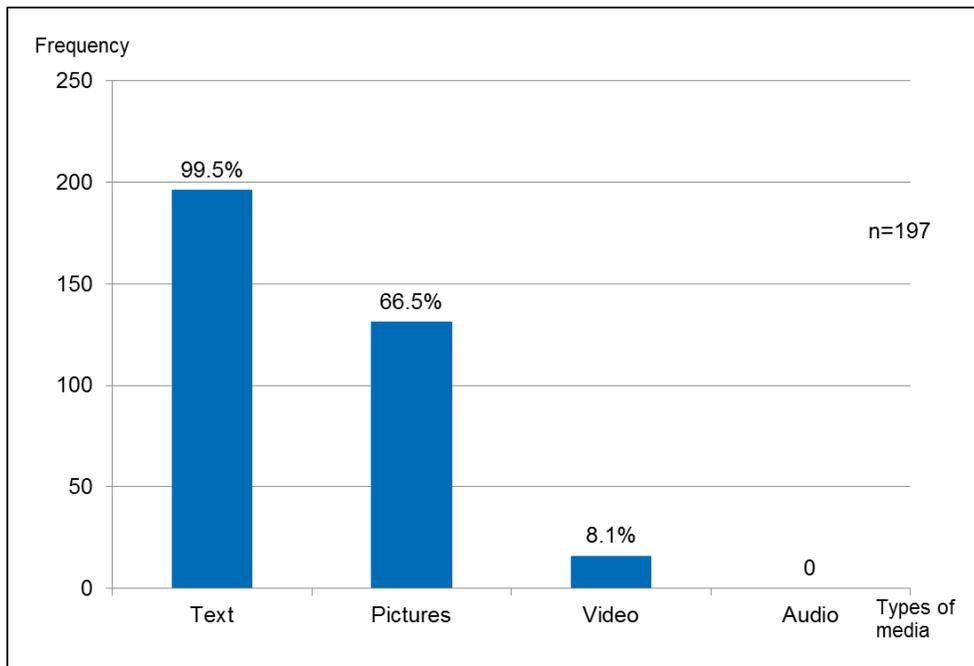
Figure 4. Frequency of Blog Posts



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 (i.e. 99.5%) and the next most popular medium was pictures. 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

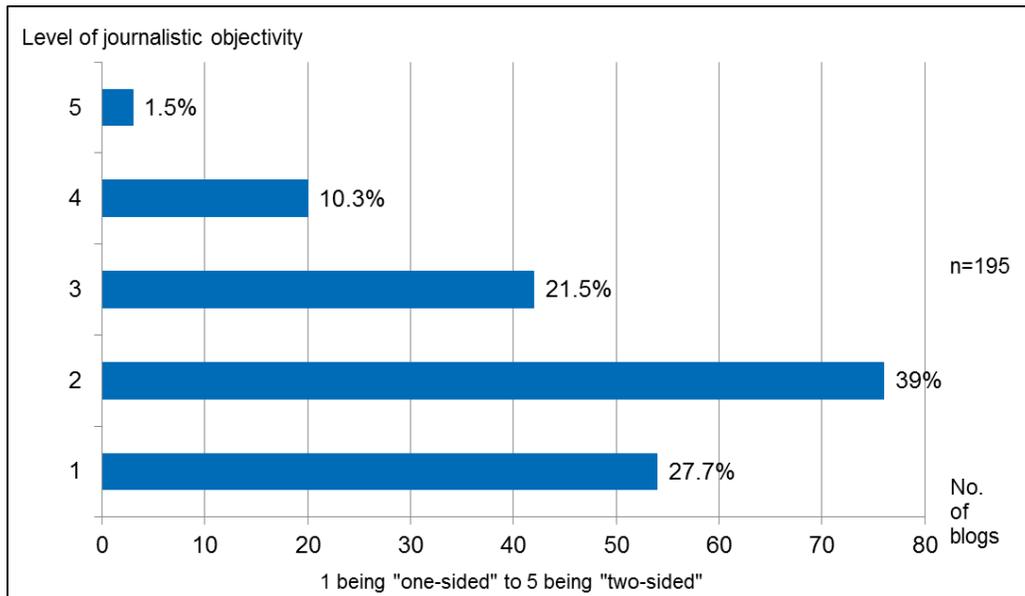


Rationality of the political online space

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

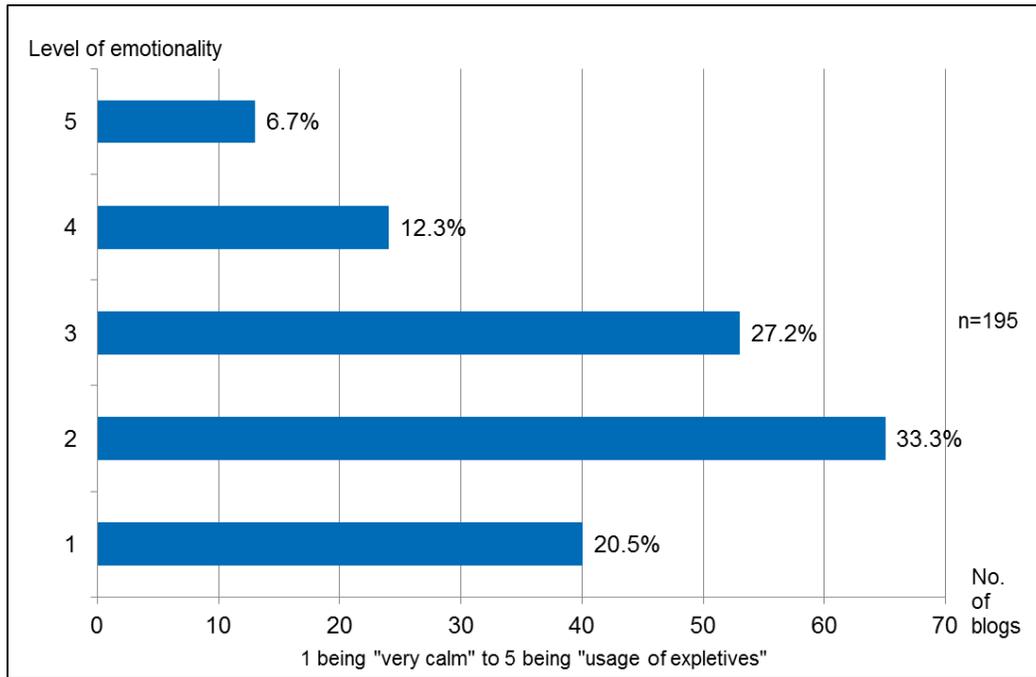


The blogs that scored low in objectivity included Sg Hard Truth (<http://sghardtruth.com/>), Simple and Gay Forward (<http://simpleandgayforward.wordpress.com/>) and Think for Me Singapore (<http://thinkformesingapore.blogspot.sg/>). Blogs with high objectivity included Jentrified Citizen (<http://jentrifiedcitizen.wordpress.com/>), 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 are 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.

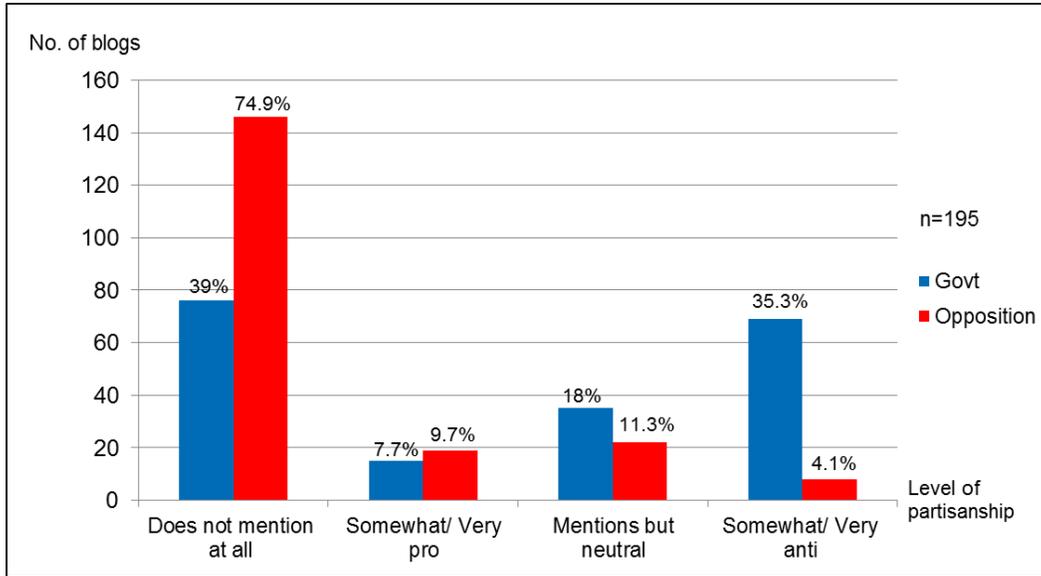
Partisanship for the Government and Opposition

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 Jentified 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 which 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)

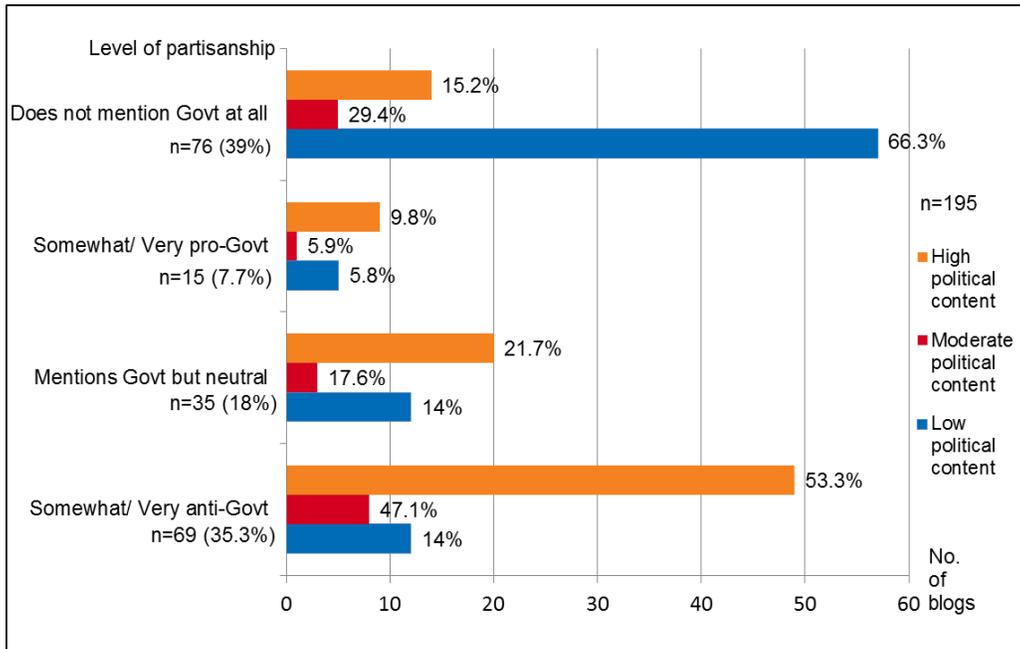
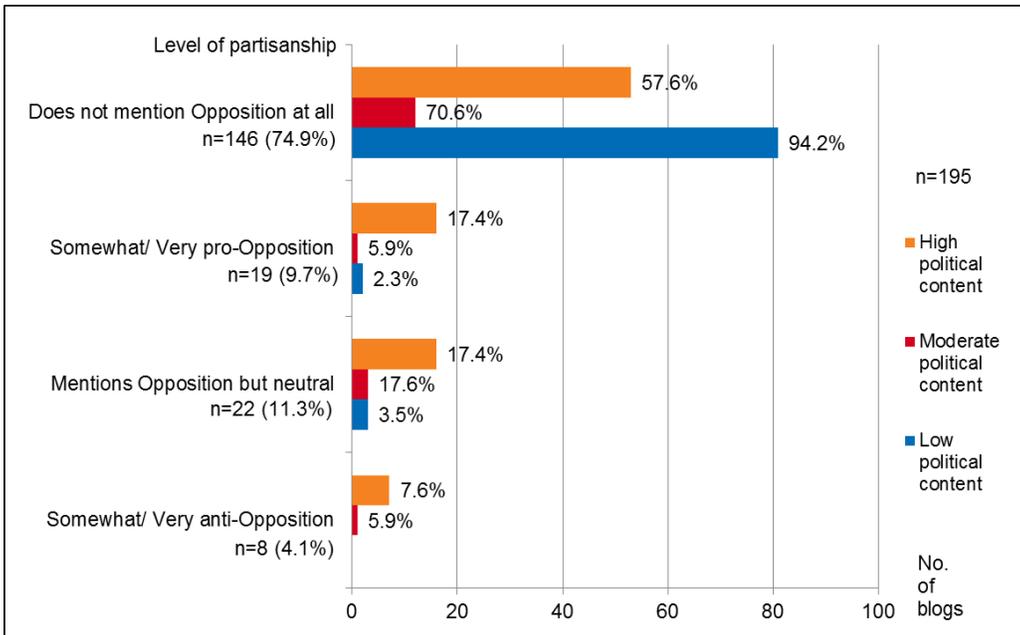


Figure 10. Partisanship (Opposition)



Among the 35% of blogs which were somewhat or very anti-Government, most 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 the relationships between rationality, blog type, identity, objectivity, emotionality and partisanship (see Table 1).

Table 1. Correlations between Blog Type, Identity, Objectivity, Emotionality and Partisanship for Government

Variables	Blog Type	Identity	Objectivity	Emotionality	Partisanship (for Government)	Partisanship (for Opposition)
Blog Type <i>Low</i> <i>Medium</i> <i>High</i>	-	.227**	.158**	.050	-.497**	-.398**
Identity <i>Known</i> <i>Unknown</i>	.227**	-	-.052	.229**	-.226**	-.188**
Objectivity <i>One-sided to two-sided</i>	.158**	-.052	-	-.278**	-.061	-.040
Emotionality	.050	.229**	-.278**	-	-.131	-.010

<i>Calm to use of expletives</i>						
Partisanship (Government)	-.497**	-.226**	-.061	-.131	-	-

Our analysis indicated that high political blogs tend to be written by unknown authors. Interestingly, the more political a blog was, 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.

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

Known bloggers were more likely to be calm or somewhat calm, and they tended to be pro-Government and 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 and pro-Opposition. On the other hand unknown bloggers tend to be anti-Government and anti-Opposition. This is perhaps because being negative is seen as socially unacceptable, because of fear among the anti-Government bloggers, or these blogs are written by authors who have some political or other reason for hiding their identity, for instance, they are actually fronts for certain organisations or groups.

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 and Opposition. This is another counter-intuitive finding as it challenges the conventional wisdom that people who are anti-Government or anti-Opposition (especially the former) are not objective. The reason could be that “anti” blogs believe that they are more persuasive if they present both sides of the story even if they eventually come down for only one side.

We found no correlation between emotionality and partisanship for the Government and the Opposition. Again, this finding contradicts the common assumption that people who are anti-Government or anti-Opposition are likely to be emotional when they discuss political parties. Like

the relationship found between being “anti” and objectivity, the reason for this could be that bloggers believe that they are more persuasive if they come across as calm rather than emotional.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to examine the rationality of the online space, i.e. how rational or irrational online political discussion was 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. The current framework does not include use of logic in blogging. Conceptually and methodologically, this study breaks new grounds by measuring rationality through objectivity, emotionality and partisanship. 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 PinkDot, 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 or not 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 was 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 online political 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 pro-Government (or pro-Opposition). Although more than half the bloggers blogged with their identity, there was still the presence of anonymous bloggers who blogged on political issues. This raises the question if there are 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 tend to provide alternative arguments to their position. This could be due to their recognition that balanced commentaries are 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 (Banerjee, 2002; George, 2006; Kuo, 1995) have pointed out. This was compounded by the ownership and 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. However, the study period which was a period rife with political developments and debates mitigated this limitation. The number of political posts (i.e. more than 1000 posts) compensated for the short period of time. 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.

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. In addition, a technique such as the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) for automated linguistic analysis of blog content can be explored. 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 recall errors. 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, 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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Appendix A: 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>)

Two-sided posts

“PM Lee refuses to yield on the Speak Mandarin (Forgo Dialects) policy” (Jentified 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/>)