Social Media Networks and Tactical Globalization: An Exploratory Case Study of Contesting Political "Space" in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory article attempts to interrogate the emerging responses of the traditionally powerful Singaporean city-state as it is confronted by the upsurge of social media networks. This inquiry is premised on the assertion that Singapore’s city-state, historically dominated by the People’s Action Party (PAP), acts as an overall enforcer by employing tactical globalization. In its drive towards development and nation-building, the city-state has identified protecting social cohesion among its diverse and multicultural population as one of its key vulnerabilities. Globalization, particularly heralded by the increasingly unpredictable electronic media, is anathema to the ethos of a city-state that leaves nothing to chance. The city-state pragmatically and selectively appropriates what it sees as benign aspects while at the same time discarding and de-legitimizing malignant features of the globalization phenomenon as it carries out its dominant role as creator and enforcer of policies. The information age characterized by the Internet provides an interesting case study of how tactical globalization is employed by the city-state. On the one hand, Singapore declares itself an open and wired nation with the goal of being an information hub. On the other hand, it controls social media through a repertoire of dominant party role-modeling, restrictive communications policies, and harsh legal regulations warning against “crusading journalism” that could lead to political instability and damage the nation-building project. Nonetheless, very recent high-profile and embarrassing events that have tarnished top members of the bureaucracy have been highlighted through social media networks. The Internet chatter caused by the slip-ups of elites associated with the ruling party seems to be a portent of the emergence of a “politics of scandal.” Levels of trust in government seem to have been dampened, evidenced by the most recent parliamentary elections that have witnessed an unprecedented defeat of a bailiwick of the ruling PAP. The unpredictability and intractability of social media networks poses a serious challenge to the Singaporean city-state that has built an ethos of control and shrewdly applied tactical globalization as it navigates the twenty-first century. This article explores the evolving responses of the city-state as it attempts to manage the potential power wielded by social media.
Introduction

This exploratory case study tries to address the following question: Have incipient social media networks, represented in this inquiry as Internet activism, redefined political “space” in the city-state, which has historically been under the tight control of the Singaporean government? This question will be answered through five sections in this exploratory article. The first section begins by providing a brief description of the unique Singaporean context where rapid economic development blends almost seamlessly with stunted political activism. The second section describes tactical globalization, a theoretical approach that helps articulate the control that Singapore’s government plays in an increasingly globalized context. This section provides an example of how tactical globalization is used specifically through the government’s different ways of controlling social media. The fourth section zeroes in on the 2011 General Elections, as an example of how the politics of scandal coupled with increased social media activity—measured through Internet activism—have helped redefine political “space.” The fifth and final section provides a discussion of what lies ahead.

Singaporean Context: Rapid Economic Development Alongside Stunted Political Activisms

On August 9, 2012, the Republic of Singapore celebrated its forty-seventh anniversary as a nation. Quite distant from its unsettled beginnings characterized by impoverished slums divided along ethnic lines and sporadic racial riots, the nation today has undergone a dramatic transformation. Gone are the chronic overcrowding and unemployment; instead, the nation boasts high home ownership rates and low unemployment rates. More importantly, Singapore’s high quality physical infrastructure has been meticulously planned to pay particular attention to ensuring that its housing, transportation sector, and public services, complement growth. Most recently, a report from Knight Frank and Citi Private Wealth declared that Singapore has the “highest GDP per capita in the world now and [will until] 2050.”

Despite these impressive achievements, one of the pervasive challenges that the multiracial nation confronts is its contentious record of civic and political participation characterized “by the prevalence of elite dominance, bureaucratic omnipotence and political indifference in the society.” Moreover, political activities and the consequent freedoms are
treated as “dysfunctional” and “unproductive,” and therefore do “not deserve to be encouraged.” Consequently, the state of civic and political participation in Singapore is a far cry from Putnam’s relations based on “mutual trust and not of control and subjection.” The Singaporean government, itself represented by the People’s Action Party (PAP) for most of the nation’s modern history, is unapologetic about its exclusive and “legitimate right to represent the whole nation,” its self-mandated role of maintaining the party’s interests and gaining “control,” and its purposeful characteristic of leaving “nothing to chance.”

The history and vulnerabilities of Singapore are the main causes for its government’s overriding trait of being an “administrative state,” or what other commentators describe as a “developmental state.” Its genesis as a nation was turbulent as it experienced an abrupt separation from Malaysia. Early in its tempestuous past, the fledgling nation realized that social cohesion among its diverse races was critical in order to accomplish nation-building goals. In its early years, the city-state deliberately adopted a developmental perspective with the understanding that the way forward was to pursue an ambitious opening up of its economy towards the goal of industrialization while paradoxically assuming all the features of the classic centrally-planned state. After effectively neutralizing the communist threat, minimizing the competitive influence of an opposing political party, and preventing mass media from adopting a Western-style liberal approach, the government successfully engendered a “controversial Singapore style of peaceful environment.” Additionally, the fact that the PAP has formed the government since 1959 has led to a consistency in policy formulation and implementation that has few parallels elsewhere.

**Singapore’s Selective and Tactical Globalization: Controlling Boundaries and Space**

With the dawn of the twenty-first century, Singapore faces different sets of vulnerabilities brought about by globalization. Globalization as defined in this inquiry “represents a complex, overlapping set of forces, operating differently at different levels.” Furthermore, viewing globalization as much more than a process and instead as a “tendency to which counter-tendencies may be mobilized” provides an appropriate analytical starting point. Globalization, heralded by the increasingly unpredictable electronic media, is anathema to the ethos of a city-state that leaves nothing to chance. The city-state pragmatically and selectively appropriates what it sees as benign aspects while at the same time discarding and de-legiti-
mizing perceived malignant features of the globalization phenomenon as it carries out its dominant role as creator and enforcer of policies.

Singapore, consistently identified as one of the top ten global cities in the world, provides an insightful picture of how a city-state responds to the dynamics of globalization. Scholars have already attempted to map the response of the powerful PAP-led Singaporean government in relation to the forces of globalization. Chong argues that Singapore practices “selective globalization” in its quest to balance global connectedness and retain entrenched traditions as it treads the path towards “national survival.” Koh provides an insightful and complementary viewpoint by describing the Singaporean city-state as an agent actively engaging and anticipating threats and opportunities presented by globalization forces by responding to these with well-thought out and carefully calibrated experimentation. Koh refers to this as “tactical globalization,” highlighting “the mobilization of state power through the construction of knowledge(s) and discourse(s) that effect the formation of specific subjectivities as Singapore continues to work with and against globalization.” Chong points out that this response has left the PAP-led government “with little choice but to constantly shift gears between the national and the global when it comes to policymaking,” further solidifying the Singaporean city-state’s role as pragmatic enforcer.

Evidence of the Singaporean city-state’s dominant role as pragmatic enforcer can be seen in the way that social media is regulated in Singapore. This inquiry posits that the Singaporean city-state astutely uses the tenets of globalization in controlling social media. This control is effectively done through tight regulation of the boundaries of social media and the “space” that is afforded to social media.

**Boundaries of Social Media**

The Singaporean city-state declares that the Societies Act (revised in 1985) is one of the safeguards established to protect social cohesion in Singapore. Scholars and practitioners have claimed that the Societies Act is one of the mediums of control employed by the city-state to regulate unbridled political activism. The Societies Act “blocks civil society by restricting political engagement to registered parties and associations and by severing the former from any social bases that could contribute to, or be mobilized around, reform programmes.” In effect the Societies Act defines the legally acceptable boundaries in which individuals and groups in Singapore may engage in social media. The Internal Security Act or ISA (revised in 1985), which has been described by the current Singaporean President as a “blunt instrument,” is the tool that enforces violations against the Socie-
ties Act. The ISA gives the government the right to arrest and preventively detain individuals that violate the act without trial for up to two years at a time. Aside from the Societies Act, the boundaries of social media are also regulated by the Media Development Authority (MDA). Consistent with the effort to control boundaries, the Films Act of 1988, under the purview of the MDA, was also enforced, effectively banning political parties from making and distributing films and videos.

Controlling the “Space” Afforded to Social Media

In 1985, the city-state established the Feedback Unit (FBU) that provided Singaporeans with a forum where they can engage in discussion, participate in national debates, and also come to understand policies. However, a major initial criticism against the FBU was that it served merely as a venue for policies to be explained and neither debated nor discussed, since, although authentic feedback from the masses was noted, it was never truly incorporated into final policy outcomes. In October 2006, the FBU was restructured into REACH (Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry @ Home). REACH was designed to move beyond gathering public feedback to become the lead agency for engaging and connecting with citizens. Nonetheless, the stigma of the rubber-stamp FBU remained. Recognizing that the Internet is a powerful source of unregulated feedback, the Singaporean city-state enacted the Internet Code of Practice of 1997 to control material transmitted through the Internet. It also deems unlawful “objectionable material on the grounds of public interest, public morality, public order, public security, national harmony, or is otherwise prohibited by applicable Singapore laws.”

Scholars and practitioners have argued that the Singaporean city-state’s “particular brand of authoritarianism is characterized by legal limits to independent social and political activities on the one hand, and extensive mechanisms of political co-option to channel contention through state-controlled institutions on the other.” But controlling information through an intensely-regulated feedback mechanism and controlling the type of material transmitted through the Internet are not the only mechanisms to limit “space.” A careful scrutiny of the existing patterns by the city-state shows that “legal and administrative controls to restrict the space for independent civil society has been extended to cyberspace.” Moreover, these controls essentially restrict “political engagement and competition to within a narrow sphere of party politics and/or formally registered and tightly regulated political discussion groups” ensuring that the control of political “space” by the dominant Singaporean city-state is complete.
Globalization in an information age characterized by the Internet sets the stage for an interesting case study of how selective and tactical globalization, as employed by the city-state, addresses incipient contestations of political “space” through emerging social media networks. On the one hand, Singapore declares itself an open and wired nation aiming towards its goal of becoming an information hub. It strategically positions itself by leveraging its strengths to “capture global opportunities in the ICT space.” It also ambitiously aims to become a renaissance city with “an environment conducive to creative and knowledge-based industries and talent.” On the other hand, it controls social media through a repertoire of dominant party role-modeling, restrictive communications policies, and harsh legal regulations warning against crusading journalism that could lead to political instability, potentially damaging the nation-building project.

May 7, 2011, which was General Election Day (GE 2011), proved to be a watershed in the incipient political history of Singapore: “Singapore’s long-ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) suffered its first-ever loss of a multi-member constituency, handing the opposition Workers’ Party (WP) five of the 87 elected seats in the city-state’s parliament.” Several months later on August 27, PAP’s candidate Mr. Tony Tan, who previously served as Deputy Prime Minister, was elected Singapore’s President, capturing thirty-five per cent of the votes with a narrow margin of zero-point-three per cent over the next closest opponent, former Member of Parliament (MP) Tan Cheng Bock. Crucial to consider were the days and weeks leading to GE 2011 and the August 2011 Presidential Elections, which saw a frenetic buzz in cyberspace, particularly among Internet forums and social media networks. Months and weeks heading into the elections saw a burgeoning increase of political activity: “Most murmurs of discontent can be found online: fears of reprisal are diminished for anonymous bloggers. On internet forums, blogs, Facebook and Twitter, grumblings about high housing prices, the widening gap between rich and poor, [and] immigration can be found. A month before the official nomination day for the elections (April 27), the volume of online activity (i.e. blog postings, Tweets, Facebook updates) increased by sixty-three per cent. The greater bulk of the online chatter centred on the PAP (sixty-six per cent). A further breakdown of the online activity directly related to the PAP reveals that “52.8 per cent were rated as positive or very positive, and 25.4 per cent rated either negative or very negative.” Mainstream me-
dia that hosted online platforms also experienced unprecedented traffic: Mediacorp had “49 million page and video views over the 12-day period from Nomination Day (April 27) to Results Day (May 8).”

Could one argue that the dramatic spike in Internet buzz around GE 2011 heralded a change in the political climate of Singapore, from control to greater openness? Was the watershed GE 2011, where the PAP ruling party suffered its first-ever loss, a clear sign of the powerful impact of social media networks in Singaporean politics? In order to fully address these questions, there is a need to re-visit the Singaporean context and specifically interrogate the strength (or even the existence) of a relationship between online and offline political activity. Without a doubt, the unprecedented Internet activity during GE 2011 and the August 2011 Singaporean Presidential elections showed the potential of cyberspace in allowing unnamed strangers to articulate their unfettered, radical, and unconventional political views to a huge and equally anonymous audience. Scholars have attempted to describe this proliferation of online political activity as a form of “liberation technology” that provides a safe venue, thereby enabling “citizens to report news, expose wrongdoing, express opinions, mobilize protest, monitor elections, scrutinize government, deepen participation, and expand the horizons of freedom.”

However, making judgments on levels of political openness by merely enumerating the number of new and free venues where online reporting and propagandizing is made available or measuring the fluctuations in the volume of online political chatter is insufficient. Scholars have argued for clarity in the relationship between “online activism” and how it “facilitates offline liberation strategies.” Thus, notwithstanding the emergence of new online portals and venues for political discussion and dramatic increases in online activism, the real test—particularly in the context of Singapore—would be to definitively answer whether these have contributed to a greater amount of political activity on the ground.

What complicates determining causal linkages between online and offline activism in Singapore is the role that the PAP-led Singaporean state performs in relation to regulating civic and political participation. The state apparatus is used unflinchingly in situations where national security is perceived to be compromised. To date, two local Singaporean films, the first in 2007 and the second in 2012, were banned by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA) under the Films Act since both were declared to be against public interest. In 2006, three bloggers who posted allegedly offensive racial remarks “were charged under the Sedition Act.” Police reports have also been lodged against individuals who have used online platforms that “threaten social harmony in Singapore.” Scholars and observers...
of media control and censorship, particularly those who study Singaporean cyberspace, have commented that what initially started in 1996 as a “light touch” approach \(^{37}\) “backed by a set of strict offline laws as well as a skillfully crafted control system” may seem to augur a “shift to a hard-line stance.”\(^ {38}\)

The Politics of Scandal

Unequivocal examples of this emergence of a “hard-line” position can be gleaned from official statements coming from the cabinet ministers of Singapore’s PAP-led government. This stance can be seen as an attempt to try to address online activities that seemingly threaten notions of an “inclusive, gracious society” or those that have precipitated an increasing amount of “vitriol towards foreigners” and a steady percolation of “xenophobic statements.”\(^ {39}\) The government determines that online discussions that become uncivil should not be tolerated, and therefore it must intervene to maintain order, and to ensure that the progress Singapore experiences is maintained if not improved. In the Singaporean context, the paternalistic rhetoric declaring that the nation’s welfare is protected and is in the good hands of incorruptible officials (who are also among the highest-paid in the world) has always been the cornerstone of the PAP. This has—to a large extent—contributed to the continual political successes of PAP during General Elections.

However, a “recent string of high-profile corruption scandals has highlighted Singaporean officials’ weaknesses to other forms of temptation as well,”\(^ {40}\) which has placed pressure on the aura of the PAP’s incorruptible government. The scandals began in earnest sometime in October 2010 when two senior officials of the Singapore Land Authority (SLA) were convicted of fraud amounting to over $12 million and using the ill-gotten wealth for purchasing apartments and luxury sports cars.\(^ {41}\) In January 2012, an official of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) was convicted of cheating the ministry of over $600,000 for personal purchases of luxury items.\(^ {42}\) These scandals reached their zenith in late January 2012 when lurid details of an illicit sex for contracts scheme broke out and “the head of the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB), Peter Lim Sin Peng, and the director of the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF), Ng Boon Gay, were dismissed for alleged corruption.”\(^ {43}\) The Internet chatter caused by the slip-ups of elites associated with the ruling party seems to be a portent of the emergence of the politics of scandal. Internet chatter\(^ {44}\) related to these scandals lit up Singaporean cyberspace. Figures 1 and 2 provide an illustration of the increase of
website hits corresponding to the disgraced ex-CNB head and ex-SCDF director respectively.

Figure 1: Web Hits on Google Search (Singapore) for “ex-CNB”

Figure 2: Web Hits on Google Search (Singapore) for “ex-SCDF”
The politics of scandal takes centre stage in political competition, in close interaction with the media system, and with the co-operation of judges and prosecutors, the new stars of our political soap operas. Politics becomes a horse race, and a tragicomedy motivated by greed, backstage manoeuvres, betrayals, and, often, sex and violence—a genre increasingly indistinguishable from TV scripts.

GE 2011, which saw the unprecedented loss of a PAP bailiwick to the opposition and the narrow victory of the PAP in installing the nation's second President, highlights the undeniable increase in political competition in the Republic. It may now seem evident that the days when the PAP dominated all forms of political contests will no longer be sustainable. In the context of the Singaporean government priding itself in being an efficient and incorruptible government, the increase of damaging political scandals weakens the PAP's competitive advantage against opposition parties. As Castells implies, political scandals "take centre stage in political competition," as such political contests become far removed from issues of policy and performance but instead degenerate into "tragicomedy." With the increasing number of PAP-associated scandals, the marginalized and fragmented opposition groups in Singapore do not need to exert efforts in trying to match the quality, caliber and resources of the PAP during electoral contests—they only need to wait for the next political scandal to erupt.

Selective and Tactical Globalization vis-a-vis Social Media Networks: Uncertain Future

Chong and Koh argue that as Singapore navigates the challenges of globalization, it practices tactics in which it selects features that allow the nation to be globally connected whilst clinging to deep-seated traditions. Furthermore, this tactical maneuvering is implemented with the use of state power and resources to "construct knowledge and discourse." Examples of these selective globalizing tactics in action were enumerated earlier: Singapore continually positions itself as a creative hub both for ICT and the arts (to be globally connected); yet it punishes those who use the Internet carelessly (enforcing entrenched traditions to protect national interests). The application of these selective practices of tactical globalization in managing social media networks worked well in Singapore particularly in a context where boundaries referred to in Singapore as (Out of Boundary) OB markers were very clearly distinguishable. However, this article argues that with the explosion of venues made
available through cyberspace and social media networks, the “space” demarcated by Singapore’s OB markers needs to be problematized.

This exploratory inquiry proposes that social media networks in Singapore and the specific example of increased Internet activism in cyberspace triggered by political scandals provides a case study where “space”—traditionally controlled via tactical globalization by the PAP—is undergoing transformation. Cyberspace, defined as “discursive space produced by the creative work of people whose spatial locations are ambiguous and provisional,” creates a context that could radically redefine how the dominant PAP regulates ordinary people engaging in political discussion. With cyberspace and the creation of virtual spaces for free and open discussion, “communal voices can now be uttered without pressures from real-life marginalizing forces”—represented, for example, by a dominant PAP that selectively exercises tactical globalization.

One type of society and economy that could be dominant in a twenty-first century globalized setting is what is referred to as an Experimentally Oriented Economy (EOE). In EOE “full penetration of state space for optimal positioning by all agents is impossible at each point in time, and (because of learning) at each future point in time.” This presents a situation where uncertainty and complexity are features of tomorrow’s society. The unpredictability and intractability of social media networks poses a serious challenge to the Singaporean city-state, which, as it navigates the twenty-first century, will build an ethos of control and shrewdly applied selective and tactical globalization. This exploratory article argues that the Internet and the emergence of social media networks can be seen as a critical discursive space for the “mobilization of countertendencies” to the dominant “tendency” typical of the Singaporean city-state’s role of pragmatic enforcer. The contours of this critical discursive space will be shaped and contested on the one hand by a historically strong and practically immovable apparatus underpinning the city-state and on the other an unpredictable and almost irresistible force brought about by the ubiquitous wave of the Internet and the ever expanding social media networks that come in its wake.

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Notes


5 The People’s Action Party (PAP) has been the dominant party in Singapore since 1963. In the 2011 Singapore general election, the PAP won 81 out of the total of 87 parliamentary seats, while receiving 60.14% of the total votes cast - its lowest percentage share in history. For more information, see Singapore Elections Department, Total Votes Cast for General Election 2011, (Singapore: Singapore Elections Department, 2011).

6 Vasil, Governing Singapore, 117.


9 H. C. Chan, Politics in an administration state: where has the politics gone?, (Singapore: Department of Political Science, University of Singapore 1975).


15 M. Hales, S. King and A. M. Pena, The Urban Elite: The AT Kearney Global Cities Index 2010 (Chicago, IL: ATKearney 2010) 1ff.


Rodan, “Embracing electronic media but suppressing civil society,” 505.

Media Development Authority, 1997, p. 1


Ibid., 518.

Ibid., 518.


The first film “Zahari’s 17 years” was banned by MICA on 12 April 2007. The second film “Dr. Lim Hock Siew” was banned by MICA on 14 July 2012. Both films were made by filmmaker Martin See Tong Ming.


44 The discussion refers exclusively to increased Internet activity. To determine whether these reflect increased social media activity would require more detailed analysis currently unavailable for this exploratory article.

45 Google (Singapore)’s search function was used to track the number of web hits from Jan 17, 2012 till 15 Aug 2012, which covers a total of 30 weeks.


48 Koh, Tactical Globalization, 195.

49 B. Y. Ng, “OB markers: We still need them?” Today, (2003, June 16).


51 Ibid., 488