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Redefining Youth Activism through Digital Technology in Singapore

Weiyu Zhang

Introduction

Generational shifts in civic engagement are evident around the globe. In most of the liberal democracies of the western world this shift has been manifested among younger people as an increasing disengagement and disaffection with traditional participatory mechanisms. The mechanisms of representative democracy are no longer adequate to mobilize young citizens. Young people are involved less and less in voting, the fundamental participatory act of a representative democracy (Putnam, 2000). Party membership has dropped, and the nature of involvement with a political party has changed (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). Distrust of elected political figures, such as parliamentarians, has been found to be high among young people (Dalton, 2004). Youth have withdrawn from many traditional participatory acts, such as attending to news (Delli Carpini, 2000; Mindich, 2005). Instead, youth in the West seem to be attracted by a variety of new forms of civic engagement: issue-based activism, lifestyle politics, identity politics, and consumerist acts have become increasingly popular among the young (Bennett, 1998; Ward and de Vreese, 2011). These changes suggest a new political horizon. However, whether this horizon is shared by youth in other parts of world remains an open question.

Generational replacement also happens in countries that are in transition, or in the early years of democracy. However, the prevailing conditions are vastly different from those seen in mature liberal democracies. In many new democracies young citizens are fighting against historical barriers, such as fear-driven political cultures or repressive colonial laws. Furthermore, recent

developments in liberal democracies, such as the decline of party politics and disenchantment with representative mechanisms, also influence the way in which young citizens in the new or still developing democracies interpret their future. Against this particular backdrop of political developments, youth activism in young or semi-democracies is expected to manifest through distinguishing patterns, creating unanticipated implications for their societies.

The introduction of information and communication technology (ICT) since the 1990s has played a significant role in the generational shifts. Children born into this era, and growing up with digital technology, are variously known as the Net generation (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008), Generation Y (Americans born after 1976), Millennials, or DotNets, as they are defined by their coming of age along with the Internet (Zukin et al., 2006). However, it remains unclear whether, and how, ICT reshapes politics. While Internet use can be linked to traditional political participation (Kim and Kim, 2007), scholars have also been drawn to the political potential of an online public sphere (Zhang, 2006). Both participatory democracy and deliberative democracy have been used as guiding models when looking at the impact of ICT. Such impact is supposed to be even more apparent among the young, as their everyday lives are organized around the new media. In addition, the promising role of ICT in promoting democratization has been confirmed by real life events, such as the Egyptian and Libyan revolutions. Scholars have documented the power of ICT to both reinforce dominating regimes and to challenge them (Yang, 2010; Zheng, 2008). When the younger generation seizes the power of ICT in their own hands, how will it affect their civic engagement, and how will their participatory acts change the political landscape? These are the thematic queries that mandate this investigation.

This article aims to examine the relationship between youth, ICT and civic engagement, within the context of an authoritarian democracy, Singapore. Youth, as describing an age group, without doubt includes a diverse collection of people. In order not to fall into the trap of over-generalization, this examination is focused on younger people who, not only have the access to ICT, but who also are involved in some form of civic activity. In-depth interviews with 23 young activists in Singapore were used to gather information about the emerging phenomenon of digital activism. The findings are presented in three parts. First, I explain how the concept of activism has been understood in the Singaporean context and how young activists have redefined, appropriated, or rejected this concept. Through this exercise of defining activism, we are able to see how ICT goes beyond functioning as a tool, to become an important component of their political lexicon. Second, I examine generational shift through the young activists' own accounts of their parents and seniors, including how the prominence of ICT differs between older and younger generations. Third, I explore the details of using ICT in

activism, examining different forms of technology, with their advantages and disadvantages. I conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and political implications of the findings.

Activism in an Authoritarian Democracy

A basic definition of democracy suggests that the rulers have to be selected by the ruled. Singapore fulfills this definition, as it holds regular elections to select its legislative body and presidency. The elections have broad suffrage, as almost every citizen has the right to vote. In addition, the voting procedure is fair and does not involve fraud. However, in Singapore there is an effective single-party system, in which opposition parties have never overturned the domination of the ruling party. Singapore has held 11 general elections since its independence in 1965, and the People's Action Party (PAP) has continued to return to power, with an overwhelming majority, with the recent 2011 election yielding a 60% majority. Competitive party politics has been absent from most of the past elections, due to electioneering and legislative devices (Chua, 2004). For instance, the Internal Security Act (ISA) gives the government the power to detain anyone for a period of up to two years, without the need for a public trial. This Act has been invoked twice recently, in 1987 and 2001.

The hybrid nature of the Singaporean political system has, to a great extent, shaped the activism now occurring in the city-state. Political activism is narrowly defined as opposition party politics that challenges the dominance of the PAP (Chua, 2004). Civil society organizations are not allowed to affiliate with political parties, preventing coalitions developing between oppositional social forces. This means that many social entities that are not necessarily pro-opposition, but are critical of certain governmental policies, are unable to find an efficient means for exerting influence. Some scholars have therefore claimed that Singapore has a strong state, but a weak civil society (Lam, 1999; Ming, 2002).

Strong state intervention is evident in many areas, including its youth policies. The government has purposely cultivated young leaders. Many awards (e.g., a National Youth Achievement Award) and various government-funded scholarships are handed out to young Singaporeans who excel, and who are expected to pay back through their contribution to society. The average youth is not left out of the governmental plan, either. In fact, the government has been promoting charity-focused activities, as well as community-based volunteering, in the society as a whole, and particularly among the youth. The government has adopted the objective of providing Singaporeans with essential services, such as education, housing, and health care, while reducing the welfare burden on the state (Cheung, 1992). Therefore, the role played by local philanthropic organizations is crucial to Singaporean society. Citizens are

also encouraged to contribute actively to charities, exemplified in the regular fundraising telethons. For younger citizens, co-curricular activities (CCAs) are compulsory, non-academic activities in which Singaporean students must take part. These CCAs often happen in groups, including clubs, societies, and associations. Such group activities are often linked to community-based volunteering, such as helping in the homes of the elderly. Both philanthropy and volunteering work are activities performed by many Singaporean youth. These group activities, although not aimed at political change, nevertheless foster social capital, and cultivate civic identity among young people. The causes supported through these activities are mostly collective, in contrast to personal interests, such as hobby groups. Therefore, it is inaccurate to say that the youth in an authoritarian democracy are given no chance of getting involved in social activism.

Young activists, growing up in such a political environment, are expected to be different from the older activists. The older generation of activists in Singapore, as represented by oppositional party leaders, carries the image of being radical, antagonist, and unsuccessful. For example, Tang Liang Hong, an electoral candidate affiliated with the Workers' Party, was sued for defamation, and fled as a fugitive to Australia after failing in his challenge of the ruling party. Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam, another opposition politician, was declared bankrupt after failing to keep up his payments for damages owed to PAP leaders as result of a libel suit. These examples illustrate how the older activists have been presented to Singaporeans. The youth activism as seen today thus both inherits and differentiates itself from this tradition of oppositional politics. The spirit of promoting social change is maintained, but the practicalities of being oppositional are neutralized. In short, a new wave of activism is emerging among Singaporean youth.

ICT, Youth, and Civic Engagement

Singapore has enjoyed high ICT penetration since the government initiated a master plan of developing the city-state into an 'intelligent island'. The computer ownership rate was 84% in 2010 (Infocomm Development Authority, 2010). Internet access had increased to 78% in 2010, as compared to a mere 6% in 1996. Mobile phone penetration in 2009 had reached 137%, meaning that many Singaporeans use more than one phone. These figures not only exceed the regional average, but also put Singapore among the most developed ICT countries in the world.

Considering the prominence of ICT in Singaporeans' everyday life, it may be expected to have a significant impact on civic engagement. However, the reality shows otherwise. The political culture under an authoritarian democratic system (Skoric, 2007) has rendered the majority of the population

either apathetic, or afraid of getting involved in politics (Tamney, 1996). A media system closely controlled by the government presents the prevailing political culture. Nation-building is considered the primary function of local press (Lee, 2000: 217–218, 225). Mass media are supposed to inform and educate citizens rather than provide a platform for all kinds of political expression. Publishers and journalists who have neglected this primary goal have been punished under the Newspapers and Printing Presses Act, or the Defamation Act (Lee, 2002; Seow, 1998). The regulations relating to the Internet service are similar to those of the mass media. For example, all Internet service providers (ISPs) must be licensed by the Media Development Authority (MDA). Another example is that the MDA maintains a symbolic list of 100 blocked sites to showcase their authority in censoring online content. An apathetic and fearful citizenry, along with careful control of media, makes some scholars think that any kind of organized resistance, even online, would be fraught (Rodan, 2003).

However, it is worth discussing whether the lack of influence of ICT on civic engagement holds true among the younger section of the population. There were 818,500 Singaporeans who fell into the category of youth (20–34 years old) in 2010, which comprised around 22% of the total population (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010). These younger people were socialized in an environment where poverty is a remote memory, and all the post-Second World War chaos has been dealt with. They do not necessarily buy into the nation-building argument, because the need for strong intervention by the government does not seem to be as urgent as before. They are also very much influenced by more liberal countries, such as the UK and US, as Singapore shares the same official language, English, and Singaporeans are exposed to many cultural products from the liberal West. The political culture forged in the earlier years of the nation is thus not that applicable to the younger generation. Instead, they are better educated, exposed to wider worldviews, and feel more comfortable with voicing their concerns and demanding to be heard.

The introduction of ICT accompanied the socialization of this younger generation. Young people use ICT for various purposes, including both social and political. A recent survey (Lin and Hong, 2011) shows that during the 2011 General Election, people aged between 21 and 34 were far more actively involved in online politics, such as writing about the elections on blogs, Facebook, or Twitter (28% youth vs 10% total population), and forwarding or sharing online content (20% youth vs 10% total). In addition, among those who agreed to reveal their voting decisions, 16% of younger respondents said they supported the opposition, in comparison to an overall rate of 11%. These numbers show that younger Singaporeans not only are less likely to share with their seniors an apathetic and fearful culture, but also are more likely to

express their political views through online platforms. This present article is thus motivated to examine how young activists in Singapore, socialized in an ICT-saturated environment that is increasingly distanced from political apathy and fear, engage in civic activities.

Method

A snow-ball sampling method was used to recruit interviewees. An age limit of 18–34 years old was set. There was an average age of 24 years old among our 23 interviewees. The recruitment of interviewees was conducted with a clear intention of reaching both demographic and opinion diversity. In order to make sure that various types of young activists, as well as various perspectives, were included in our interviews, informants were recruited from three communities: student volunteers, who are mainly involved in charity work and community volunteering; issue activists, who are motivated by specific issues, such as the environment and human rights; and political activists who are engaged in party politics. An effort was made to ensure that both genders were equally represented in the sample (12 males and 11 females) and that racial minorities were included as well (1 Malay, 3 Indians, 1 Caucasian, and 1 Eurasian).

Our sample showed an average of 15 years of education, which equates to a college degree in Singapore. The interviewees reported that they were somewhat, or very, interested in politics (M \bar{M} 3.5 on a 1–4 point scale) and they paid quite a bit (M \bar{M} 3.76 on a 1–5 point scale) of attention to political and governmental news. On two or three days every week they watched TV news, read newspapers, and talked with others about political and governmental issues. All these numbers confirmed that our sample was not a sample of average youth, but was more skewed toward the active members of society. In addition, our sample was also an ICT-experienced group. They had an average 10-year history with the Internet, which meant that they had started using the Internet in their teenage years. On average, they surfed the Internet for news on politics and government on five days a week, which is clearly higher than their use of other media channels, such as TV and newspapers, for the same purpose. These figures suggest that our sample is indeed a group of young people growing up with digital technology.

The potential interviewees were first contacted through either personal ties or emails. The interviewers scheduled the interviews at a time and place convenient to the interviewees. Some of the interviews were conducted in a university meeting room and others were in public spaces, such as coffee shops. Each of the interviewees was provided with a document that introduced the project in detail, and they signed a consent form before proceeding to the actual interview. The interviews took from one to two hours, and except for

two interviews (one email and one instant messaging), all were conducted face-to-face. The interviews were conducted between September 2009 and February 2010.

All interviews were audio-recorded (with the interviewees' permission) and transcribed by qualified personnel. A three-step analysis was carried out. First, an overall reading of all transcripts was done, and various notes were added to the margins. Second, a number of themes were identified by combining and comparing the notes. Finally, different themes were organized under the three major topics: contesting activism in a digital age; a Net generation of activists; and the pros and cons of ICT in activism. These are presented below, as the main findings of this analysis.

Contesting Activism in a Digital Age

Activism, by definition, emphasizes action. However, there are numerous ways to take action on varying issues. For this reason, activism becomes a highly debatable concept. Through an exploration of the meaning of activism we can see how political contexts, as well as ICT, can play their roles in influencing young Singaporean activists' perceptions and identifications. Although all of our interviewees were involved in one or more activities that advocated certain causes, their interpretations of the simple identification of being an activist were quite diverse. Some dedicated youths saw this identity as very true to their hearts, and considered activism to be a crucial characteristic defining who they are. C.1 is a human rights activist and she answered:

I would identify myself as an activist. It's ingrained in my personality. I find it sometimes hard not to be political, even when in normal conversations.

G., another student activist who focuses on human rights issues, said:

I would say it's very much a part of me, as in how I am, what I believe. It drives me in a sense because of my interest in it, so that's why what I'm studying now actually, I feel, gives me a better understanding of civil society.

Some interviewees even felt that they were not doing enough to qualify as activists, although they were eager to become one. S., a university year-4 student, who advocates for animal rights, expressed her feelings:

OK, to be very frank, I wouldn't consider myself an activist now, because of my level of commitment to work. But before, in my year 1, year 2, year 3, I could say I was really involved. I really had a voice. I really could channel my voice. And I really tried to do things that would change the environment, even in the university environment, or the larger environment. But I don't think that with my lack of initiative at the moment, it's not fair to say

that I'm an activist. But what I really hope to do in the future – I definitely cannot, as in – to me, a real activist, is the people who work in these NGOs like chose to put themselves there and they chose to fight for different things.

On the other hand, some young activists denied being an activist up-front. For instance, Z., a member of several environmental groups, said:

I am not too sure if I am considered an activist. I tend to do things on a very sporadic level as in I don't tend to get involved in too many things. As in I don't tend to specialize too much I tend to be very generalist . . . I will just simply say I am a concerned citizen who just wants to make the world better.

The distance Z. put between himself and the title activist probably reflects the political context in which activism is defined. It is mainly due to the perception that activism has negative connotations. Z. explained this perception and its formation very well:

Activists in Singapore tend to [be connoted] more in the negative light. Because people will think that you are neglecting your commitments just because of this cause, or you are just an attention seeker. Or people will say that being an activist is being anti-establishment, or you just trying to get yourself into more trouble, you know.

S.N., a member of a migrant worker NGO, shared the view that activism is linked to oppositional party politics, and therefore denied being an activist:

I don't know if I can be called an activist, 'cause I don't know what it means. In Singapore we don't get an education about what activism means. And I think the forms of activism we have, it doesn't seem like, it just seems like it's that and there's nothing more. And if there's more, it would be to take a political position into an opposition party. But that is not so desirable for me.

Activism in Singapore is often narrowly understood as political opposition that is against the establishment. The methods that have been used by the older-generation activists are often antagonist and radical. Therefore, the media portrait of such behaviors shapes a perception of activism as civil disobedience. Such a perception has inevitably influenced young activists, and how they plan to approach the initiation of social change. One approach, in contrast to the oppositional style of activism, emphasizes a cooperative relationship between activists and government. K., a leader of volunteer work, stated how he engaged with the ruling powers:

I'd say that the way the activists [who try] to bring the messages across is rather [a] confrontational method, through demonstration, rally, riot

to bring the message in a hard way to the government to some extent, that people might be affected, arrested. To me, I don't agree with the way they do things. Yes, we want to provide feedback to the authority, but that should be done in a proper mode of communication, which is the consultation mode.

Another interviewee, R., works on environmental issues. She termed her activities awareness building, rather than activism. She said:

I haven't personally gone hard core online to actively protest. It's a very aggressive way. At the end of the day, what we need is a conducive environment for both parties, if you were to introduce tension and restriction over there, it's just gonna create more resistance, so I tend to call it not activism but awareness.

The role of ICT in this debate over activism is to function as efficient tools in building awareness and recruiting participants. L.J., a mental health activist, described how his activism was prompted by the Internet:

I don't think I would be so interested in going into activism if not because a lot of what I've read is online, even though now I've started reading some books as well. And then, how do I volunteer for Maruah [a human rights NGO]? I did it online. How do I reach out to people? I do it online. How do I find out about events? I do it through Facebook.

In addition, the recruitment is not always intentional. For instance, one of our interviewees, S., described how she 'bumped into' an activity that interested her:

I was writing a happy birthday message on my friend's wall and I saw it under the groups she just added. I clicked on it because the name sounds cool, you know 'vibrant colors'. Actually I heard about it before, they [had been] to my secondary school to promote the program.

The recruiting of young people into advocating public causes is not limited to local activities: several of our interviewees had engaged, via the Internet, in international causes, such as those run by the United Nations, or even issues that were local to other countries. S.L, for example, had participated in the Free Burma campaign in Singapore, mostly through online means, such as reading Burmese news websites.

Some activists went a step further in defining their activism as being through ICT-based activities. If activism emphasizes actions, online actions qualify as online activism. In other words, it seems to them that online involvement is no less active than offline engagement. A., a prominent local blogger, said:

If you look at our website, we call ourselves bloggervists, not just bloggers or activists. It's a combination of both. Sometimes we just blog, sometimes we become activists fighting for a cause ...

According to our young activist interviewees, they argued against the negative connotation of activism in Singapore, either by proudly identifying themselves with activism, or by tactically denying being an activist in the sense of opposition party politicians. Furthermore, they seemed to be open to various means of advocating social change. They not only accepted the method of cooperating with the ruling power, but also valued basic activities, such as awareness building, no less than those activities that aim for immediate and real effects, such as petitions, protests, rallies, and so on. ICT supports this expanded understanding of activism by facilitating information dissemination and participant recruitment. Some young activists assigned to their online activities equal importance with offline activities by calling themselves 'bloggervists', a term that illustrates a new form of activism. This new form of activism, emerging in the Singaporean context, is distinguished from the confrontational approach of opposition party politics, and also incorporates ICT-based activities as part of its repertoire.

A Net Generation of Activists

Young activists in Singapore are different from the older generation in many ways. For one, they are offered more opportunities to engage in public matters than their parents were. For instance, one interviewee, S., mentioned that the civic education young people receive forges them into a new generation of civic-minded citizens. In addition, chances to visit parliament, and other political institutions, are provided to the youth, which were not available in previous eras. These new opportunities expand the possibilities for civic activism among younger people.

These changes in opportunities for activism should be seen in the larger context of the nation's developmental stage: Singapore was still a developing country when independence was declared. The living conditions under which the older generation grew up were very different from those today. Therefore, the kind of activism that the older generation got involved in was different, too. O., a sportsman who later became an environmental activist, pointed out that:

They [his parents] fundamentally thought about how to survive. When you don't have enough money, when you have to go to hospital, let's put together enough money for your hospital bill. When you don't have a house, come, let everybody contribute. Now we're different. Now we have different system whereby you should have enough money to live on your own, beautifying the house, what level you want.

The improvements in living conditions have given activists time and resource to work in activism, as their basic needs are no longer urgent. The nature of the causes that attract people to take action have also changed. The survival issues have already been solved, and sporadic cases of need can be taken care of by existing institutions. However, precisely because of this situation, O. felt that his generation is not as civic minded as his parents' generation was. He said:

We're on a thin line, we cannot call it civic. Achieving civic is a challenge because civic means an ideal whereby I will act socially because I want to help you naturally. But for us, we're going further from this. We all want something better, which is directly opposite from civic.

Another difference the young activists observed, is a difference in challenging authority. The political culture in Singapore, established through making known the failed cases of political activists, is marked with fear and apathy (Rodan, 1998; Tamney, 1996). While older generations were busy surviving, and the authorities thought controlling the citizenry was necessary for nation-building, the widespread attitude was to avoid getting into trouble through being silent, or by turning one's back on certain issues. However, this is no longer the case. N., an active community volunteer, stated the difference quite clearly:

The main difference you would see is that the younger generation is more willing to speak up. We fear the government less, maybe. My grandmother thinks if you say anything, [the] police will get you and you'll die. My mom thinks if you say things responsibly, it's OK. For me, I think you can say anything as long as you have facts to back it up responsibly, it shouldn't be a problem.

There were a few interviewees who came from families with an activist tradition. However, even in cases like this, our interviewees still saw differences in perspectives, priorities, and experience. For instance, Y.W., an environmental activist, pointed out that he does not necessarily share his father's perspective, as his father used to be in the socialists' organization. Nevertheless, the influence of the older generation is evident. Although parents and children do not always agree upon causes and methods, their values and beliefs with regard to activism and good citizenship are held in common. R. commented on this:

Since young they [her parents] already infused us with values, attitudes. I don't see myself thinking very much differently from my parents, which is why some of my fellow peers often said that my way of thinking tends to be old-fashioned. It's about how you preserve these values or beliefs. They have never proved to be the wrong ones, and often, new solutions

are not always the best solutions, so it's always good to be on the same track with those who have gone [along] the path.

L.J. expressed appreciation of his parents:

I have a good fortune to have my parents talking about politics at the dinner table. I think not [all] parents talk about politics to their children. It got me interest[ed] even though I'm not very interested in politics. I know that my father generally talks about it, but he actually does not do anything about it, and my mother was a civil servant so it's not entirely her fault.

Despite a continuation of activist values and attitudes, there are clear variations between the generations in understanding and actually 'doing' activism. The reasons for these differences are many. As discussed before, the opportunities presented to younger people to access civic activism are broader now. Compared to their parents, who by necessity had to focus on bread and butter matters, younger people today have a more supportive environment, allowing them to engage in various activities. The civic education they receive in schools also helps them to get past the mentality of fear and apathy. ICT serves as another important information source and engagement platform, for potential young activists.

The Pros and Cons of ICT in Activism

When talking about the differences between the younger and older generations, S. thought one big difference is that younger people do not read newspapers as much as older people. Instead, younger people rely heavily on online media to access and disseminate information.

Mailing lists, as one of the oldest online media, remain important in disseminating information. Most of our interviewees subscribed to mailing lists belonging to various organizations, and received event notifications and other information from those organizations. Blogs have increasingly become another major information source. When asked where they get their information, most interviewees referred to local blogs and social network sites. A., an influential local blogger, has used blogging as his major approach to activism. He emphasized the importance of laying the foundation of a credible online information source, which is judged by intelligent readers who pass on the information to more citizens. He said:

Once people know that you're credible, they're fine. They're the ones who will tell their friends about this, and I know it, because I know teachers, lecturers have been passing it on. I know there was a teacher who happened to find us on the Internet, she emailed us and said, 'I'm recommending this to the whole class when they're doing their social

studies.' This is great. From one person to a whole class, 30–40 students. When they find it credible, the opinion makers, people who can influence others, they can pass it on.

However, not all the young activists felt comfortable voicing their opinions online. The political culture still seemed to influence a few of our interviewees, and made them practice self-censorship. S. explained why she did not get involved in blogging about serious stuff:

No, because I wouldn't want to say the wrong thing. And because there are newspaper reports of some people writing political stuff and getting sued for it. So that one I try not to touch, but for example, when I went for the parliament thing, I just said something like 'It's a good experience', a generic thing.

The contribution of these blogs or websites is recognized by young activists as primarily providing an alternative voice that cannot be heard in the traditional mass media that are controlled by the government. G., for instance, commented:

I would say so because a lot of times alternative media carry a lot more interesting information that may not be reported in The Straits Times (the major daily newspaper in Singapore).

However, this recognition is not accepted without caution. Many of our interviewees were conscious about the potential biases of online sources. K., an active volunteer, pointed out:

In terms of a disadvantage, the level of trust or credibility of the information published on the website, there [are] still some doubts over it. As an Internet user, sometimes when we blog about articles, we input our own personal thoughts that might be quite subjective. To me, that's the disadvantage of the new media.

In addition to blogs, social network sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, are also widely used in activism. Many of our interviewees mentioned that they use Facebook to gather information, to broadcast their events and activities, as well as to participate in activist groups, and to get in touch with fellow activists. A. relied on Facebook as a source, not only for personal information, but also for news gathering. He said:

Every morning you go to Facebook and see news, something you don't know. Sometimes my friends have their own sources. If they find something interesting, they also post on Facebook, and I see it, then I post it on my blog, then 5000 people see it, then it gets passed on. Going viral is very useful that way, for news gathering as well as for news dissemination.

G. is responsible for the Facebook account affiliated with her organization. She explained what she did when managing the Facebook account:

Actually what I do is just add people, update the events, photos, advertisement or whatever platform that we have. That's mainly what we do for Facebook. . . . Because it offers us the convenience of inviting people, because it's a very central platform that a lot of youths use, from there we decided that's the best way to reach out to our friends. Unless you go directly and ask your friend face to face, 'Can you come to this event?' you just need to do a Facebook invite. It's just that with the Facebook invite, some people may say that they're attending, but they may not turn up.

In addition to information exchange, blogs and social network sites also support debates and dialogues among Internet users. H. made this point clearly:

Facebook – mainly for commenting on people's links, notes, and status updates – and the comments threads on TOC, KRC, etc. . . . Besides Facebook, I participate in online debate and discussion on current affairs news sites such as The Online Citizen, SG Daily and the Kent Ridge Common.

The role of ICT has also been incorporated into the everyday running of activist groups. Several interviewees mentioned that they use Google groups and Google documents to organize their activities. They relied on ICT to the extent that online communication can replace some of the offline meetings. L.J. said:

I guess it's quite important because in the organizations where I'm in, we don't really meet that frequently. Much of the things we do are online, so it's kind of more informal. A lot of stuff is organized online. It makes things more convenient and it also compresses the time we need to discuss things. You don't have to meet at a specific time. I guess it helps in the organization of events and discussion on whether to proceed with certain things.

The capacity of ICT in facilitating organizations is particularly crucial for activists who work internationally. Young activists all over the world are able to collaborate on common issues, thanks to ICT. V., who has run an international project, was technologically savvy enough to take full advantage of the Internet. He used Google documents creatively to share information, as well as to organize voting (with an online spreadsheet). He also used a content management system to put up agendas for real-time online meetings. Real-time reports of such meetings were also published through this system. V. concluded:

The Commission on Sustainable Development, the one that I work with the UN for. By the very fact that I'm the only one who is from Singapore, from Asia actually, for the CSD 17 that I'm coordinating, we had to gather inputs from across the world, across various people who spoke different languages, who had different time zones, definitely the Internet turns to be a huge thing.

Twitter, another social network tool, is reported to be less important than Facebook. Most of the time our interviewees synchronized their Facebook, blog, and website activities with their Twitter accounts. Twitter only functions as another dissemination channel. The reasons given for not fully utilizing Twitter include its 140-character limit, the fragmented nature of the tweets, and the lack of popularity of Twitter among both activists and the general public. It was also observed that online forums, a typical Web 1.0 social platform, are not very much used by these young activists. Lack of interaction in online forums was cited as the major reason for their not being used.

While the significance of the Internet in information exchange was fully acknowledged by our interviewees, they were not blind to the shortcomings, or inherent disadvantages of ICT. Information overload was one of these shortcomings. L.J. used the exact term in referring to his difficulty with Facebook:

Information overload, definitely! It shows you all [this] supposedly interesting stuff but I mean you have so many friends on Facebook, this whole list of update, even though it's not important, I don't really care what other people are doing anyway. Sometimes people send out mass invites, I'm guilty of that too, such as application invites. Recently I just make sure that I ignore all app invites.

A concern about the homogeneity of online communities was also voiced. H., a social worker on food issues, pointed this out, after complimenting Facebook on being instantaneous:

The downsides are that I am exchanging views with people I regularly speak to already, as well as a particular demographic group, such as students/social activists/social media people, etc. rather than a wide spectrum of the affected population.

Loss of privacy was named as another side effect of using a Facebook personal account to raise awareness and organize activities. N., after listing the benefits of online channels, said:

As much as I love how much it reaches everyone, I think your own personal privacy . . . When you do projects like, all the more you want to focus on it, not on you, but people tend to link both together. You don't want that.

A major frustration facing many interviewees was how to turn online support into offline action. A. had organized quite a few real life actions, but they had not drawn a sufficient number of supporters. He described one of the events:

One of the downsides is people prefer to stay online, and it's proved through all the events we organized at the Speakers' Corner. For one event, the Facebook group has 5000 members but only 200 people turned up on the actual day. I think mostly social networking platforms are good for dissemination and like I said, gathering news. It's not very effective from what we can see in organizing people to come out in real life.

C. made a similar comment by recognizing the role of ICT in raising awareness, but not in translating into real action:

I think ICT has been very useful to raise awareness, at least to put it in the consciousness of the people, just to let them know that the issue exists. I think the challenge is how to translate it into real action. Anyway, signing an online petition is very easy, but at the end of the day, does it actually influence decision-makers? That's where we have to find this link.

While how to activate online support remains a challenge to almost all activists in the world, one contextual reason should not be ignored, and that is the lack of responsiveness from local politicians to online sentiments. G. mentioned that:

For us, I don't think we use ICT to influence a politician because this is Singapore and they don't really recognize [ICT] . . . They always say that alternative media is there, but maybe not significant enough to create a great impact, so they don't really care. Even though they monitor, they don't really care a lot.

Although mobile phones enjoy complete penetration among the Singaporean population, they are generally not used for most activist purposes, with a few exceptions. The first exception is that mobile phones are used to keep in touch with fellow activists, just as with interpersonal communication with friends. Another exception is that a migrant worker organization used a helpline to assist migrant workers. S.N. introduced the topic:

This mobile number is alternating among staff members. We have a social worker who handles the calls, it's a separate mobile. But if she's not around, I take over.

However, in most cases mobile phones are not used for activist work. The short message service (SMS) has never been used in coordinating large-scale offline gatherings in Singapore, whereas the Philippines, a neighboring country, has exploited SMS in its public demonstrations, such as People's Power. One of the reasons is that mobile phones are often considered to be

personal devices, meant for private use, not for public communication. A. explained why mobile phones were not used in his news gathering:

The other time we were thinking about having a hot line. We were to get a phone card with a number. If people have a news tip, they could SMS us. After I thought about it, it's going to bring a lot of hassle, people will just give us wrong information, we will have to spend time running around, when we are there, we realize that people play us up, it's a false alarm, it's going to be a lot of waste, so no.

Despite the different extents to which ICT is used in activism, all of our young activists had made use of at least one or two ICT tools to help them with their activities. The best use of ICT was found to be for accessing and disseminating information. As a result, the information is able to reach a broader readership and mobilize interested individuals to participate, especially when some online-based activities are effortless to participate in. The scope of the reach sometimes goes beyond national boundaries, which clearly facilitates international collaboration regarding certain widely shared causes (e.g., environmental issues). However, concerns over ICT-based activism were expressed. These ranged from issues of credibility and information overload, to homogeneity and privacy. A major challenge is to translate online activities into offline actions that have a real impact on government and policy-making.

Conclusions and Discussion

This study's findings suggest that in contrast to the declining political participation among youth in many liberal democracies, Singaporean young activists are not less actively engaged in activism than the older generations. Rather, they seem to be active in both the old (e.g., community volunteering) and the new (e.g., issue-based activism) arenas of activist work. However, the accepted definition of activism, or the popular type of activist work, does show a generational shift: whereas most of the older generation of Singaporean activists were either intentionally or unintentionally involved in opposition party politics, most of our interviewees did not show any interest in joining opposition parties. They are instead attracted to a variety of social issues that do not directly challenge the ruling power, but, nevertheless, require work to raise awareness and obtain support from the general public. ICT has been highly effective in serving the goal of information dissemination, both among the young activists themselves, and to the public they want to reach.

Weiss (2011) claimed that, in Singapore, '[a]ccessing information becomes, in effect, activism'. She went on to explain that the very act of engaging online is, in itself, a form of protest. The significance of accessing information through ICT has to be understood within the context of the Singaporean information infrastructure. As mass media are controlled by the authorities, and the

physical space allowed for debate and discussion (e.g., Speakers' Corner) is limited, there are almost no alternative venues for acquiring information, except via the Internet. Going online to get alternative viewpoints is an expression of activism because these alternative views are not readily available in the dominant public sphere (i.e., through mass media). What the activists have done is to exploit the tools of ICT to seek for, as well as to supply, such alternative viewpoints from the Internet. This purpose has been, to a large extent, successful, according to the interviewed activists.

What is challenging is how to build a link between online activism and actual policy making, which still largely happens offline. First, the convenience and ease of use of ICT for activist work do not change the inconvenience and difficulty of participating in those offline activities that could bring pressure to bear on policy makers. Therefore, an increasing engagement with online activism does not necessarily mean that people will be motivated to take offline actions that can influence policy makers – the demands associated with such activities are considered to be too onerous. Second, the existing decision-making structure has yet to incorporate online forms of participation into its regular routines. In other words, day-to-day policy making remains offline, and if online actions are not extended into the offline mechanisms (e.g., through protests or appeals to members of parliament) the system seems to disregard what is being done in cyberspace. Due to these two reasons, ICT-based activism has not been successful in directly influencing policy making and governmental decisions in Singapore.

Our analysis shows that the role that ICT can play is shaped by contextual factors. The extent to which ICT can make an impact is also constrained by contextual factors. The Singapore situation suggests that how young activists perceive the contribution of ICT to their work is limited by the historical trajectory of political development, and the current arrangement of institutions. If there is a new horizon in youth activism, it is definitely the increasing prominence of ICT. However, the exact impact of using ICT varies. I would argue that the difficulty facing young activists in Singapore is not disengagement or disaffection; indeed, we have witnessed a peak of youth engagement in the recent elections (Zhang and Lim, 2012). But the challenge facing young activists in Singapore is how to take advantage of ICT while avoiding the disadvantages of this technology, in order to promote democratization in the light of various barriers, be they historical, institutional, or psychological.

This article ends with a few policy implications. First, the findings suggest that complete control over information flow is almost impossible in the Internet era. Formal institutions, as well as social organizations, should not shy away from joining the flow, and need to actively promote their messages through cyberspace. This has to be done effectively, rather than half-heartedly.

Otherwise, the backlash effect would put these efforts into a negative light, and harm the institutions and organizations that set up the channels and send the messages. An effective means for engaging citizens online is to provide constant and interactive communication. Not only should messages be broadcast, but conversations with Internet users should also be held in a timely manner. Second, although our young interviewees are all online, policy makers should not ignore the fact that a large number of the older population is not online. The situation is particularly tricky when mainstream on the Internet equates with alternative to the offline world. In other words, if young people receive their information largely from alternative online sources, that hold very different positions compared to the national mass media, the risk of seeing a polarized nation becomes real. Those who rely on mass media would perceive the country's situation quite differently from those who rely on online alternative media. Policies are needed to bridge the digital gap as well as the perceptual gap, and thereby to facilitate integration.

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Endnotes

- 1 Interviewees' initials are used for the purpose of protecting their identity and privacy.

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Annotation

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When approaching a new article, case study, or even dataset, it can be helpful to first examine the origins of the piece, in order to adjust our expectations accordingly. Our academic backgrounds and schools of thought deeply influence the way we are trained to read a piece, the questions we expect to be asked and answered, and the way in which we evaluate research. The piece in question, a case study on digital youth activism in Singapore, was originally published in a communication studies journal. Therefore it answers different questions than would a piece published in an anthropology or political sciences journal. Academia is not a monolithic entity, but full of deeply ingrained theoretical biases, critiques, and practices which act as points of contention between different fields.

When reading a text, it is also helpful to examine the sources cited and examine the origin of other case studies and theories present in any work. As this case study examines Singapore, it is helpful to examine how many of its cited texts directly relate to the Singaporean, or even Asian, context. How many sources are regional case studies, and what type of theory shapes the argument? The author references a number of Singapore-specific case studies and historical research to base the case study on. Unfortunately, most of the core theoretical texts within the

evolving and interdisciplinary field of social media studies are based solely on American or European case studies, including many referenced in this case study. Many academics, myself included, feel forced to cite these core works when their relevance to other contexts is deeply problematic, and this is an issue which needs to be challenged.

Examining the methodology of the study can also provide additional insight into a case study. In this case study, the author uses personal contacts and “snowball” interview techniques to approach participants, and meticulously notes a variety of participant personal information, including the gender, education, and age of participants. While the author is very clear about the type of participants involved in the study, one must always be cautious of sampling bias creeping into any study, or at least acknowledge its existence. The relatively high level of education among the Singaporean participants could skew the relative importance of digital mobilisation. Many of the participants appeared disenchanted with traditional political mobilisation (or strictly oppositional politics), working on issues of the environment, mental health, and even a “Free Burma” campaign. However, issues of class, education, gender, language, and access to digital spaces must be considered when making claims to representativeness within a society as diverse as Singapore.

Bringing history and context into focus, Singapore represents an

interesting challenge to what has historically been considered “activism.” Many of the participants rejected the label as being linked to historical oppositional politics, which they appeared to feel very little affinity with, in spite of the fact that some of their parents had participated in earlier political movements. Active civic participation is encouraged, but appears to be linked to the state. The consequences of protesting the state may be potentially severe, which could lead to an understandable reluctance to report dissent in the digital and offline world in Singapore. The much-touted benefits of digital activism are the ease with which activism can be accomplished. When the consequences of these “easy” actions are fairly severe, how does

this challenge our understanding that digital activism somehow requires less of us than activism on the ground?

To summarise, it is helpful when approaching any text to be aware of its methodological and theoretical origins and to evaluate any work bearing our own personal and academic biases in mind. It is additionally crucial to be aware of the applicability of theory outside of its geopolitical context. This case study is a good entry point into the use of ICT among youth activists in Singapore and encourages us to make further enquiries into the complex historical, political, social, and geographical context of the country.

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