

Subverting Seriousness and Other Misdemeanours: Modes of Resistance Against OB Markers in the 2006 Singapore General Election

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(This paper was delivered at the 17th Annual Conference of the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC) on “Changing Media, Changing Societies: Media and the Millennium Development Goals” held on July 14—17, 2008, in Manila.)

Introduction

The May 2006 Singapore general election was heralded as the “Internet election” for two reasons. The first was the high popularity of blogging among Singaporeans and the advent of Web 2.0 technologies like YouTube that democratises media production and dissemination. The second was the relaxation by the Government of some rules against freedom of expression on the Internet, though it also imposed a few new restrictions at the same time. Before the elections, it was posited that the Internet would be able to circumvent and subvert the control on the flow of information, a control most effectively exercised in broadcast and print media, and imposed on politics in general and during elections in particular.

Singapore is variously described as a one-party dominant state or a hegemonic authoritarian state.¹ The state exercises control on the traditional mass media through laws that impose licensing and other requirements on mainstream/traditional media (that is, print and broadcast). It also employs softer strategies, such as the cultivation of non-adversarial relationships between editors and the political leadership. The advent of the Internet raises questions of the continuing effectiveness of these controls.

This paper is part of a larger study that focuses on two questions. The first examines whether – and to what extent – the Internet realizes its democratising potential as new media. Some theorists posit that new media is fundamentally different from traditional media because of their different technological characteristics². The study examines the extent to which the capabilities of new media – such as providing information to a very large audience very quickly and with very little blockage, creating easily accessible fora for discussion, and offering tools for measuring preference or organisation – were exploited by Internet users.

The second question examines whether – and to what extent – the Internet serves as alternative media by claiming the space left unfilled by the mainstream media, that is, media that espouses the accepted or acceptable views of the majority population. Mainstream media can be traditional (print and broadcast) or new (the

¹ Diamond, Larry (2002) ‘Elections without democracy: Thinking about hybrid regimes’, *Journal of democracy*, 13: 21—35.

² See, for instance, Tambini, D. (1999) ‘New media and democracy: the civic networking movement’, *New Media and Society*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 305–329.

Internet). Similarly, alternative media can also be traditional or new. Singapore's media landscape is interesting because unlike many other countries, almost the whole of traditional news media – newspapers, radio and television - is mainstream. It doesn't really have traditional forms of alternative news media, that is, newspapers, magazines and broadcast stations that articulate causes of minority groups and campaign for causes that do not reinforce the status quo. The lack of traditional forms of alternative media seems to offer an opportunity for new media to grow and even flourish. By examining both the content of blogs and online forums, the study analyses the current discourses in the context of the election. It also looks at the extent to which they were able to or failed to make use of the space afforded by the Internet to offer, firstly, alternative views, and secondly, alternative modes of expressing these views. The present paper focuses on the latter aspect of the research question: in what ways did bloggers express their views which were different from that of mainstream media?

Alternative Discourses

In terms of content, the issues taken up by blogs were largely similar to those covered by mainstream media, which in turn very much echoed what was said by politicians or the agenda of the ruling and overwhelmingly dominant political party, the People's Action Party (PAP). Indeed the blogs largely fed off the mainstream media in the issues they covered, but with the crucial difference that they were much more oppositional to the PAP than the controlled mainstream media. One subject which the blogs covered extensively but which was completely ignored by the mainstream media was the bias of the mainstream media for the PAP and against the Opposition. Other than this, few blogs ventured beyond the "mainstream" topics – that is, topics which were headlined in the press and discussed by the PAP politicians. Although new media brought some new perspectives to bear on issues, it was not a significant agenda setter for public discourse.

The OB Markers

This essay examines how new media brought in new forms of expression that were absent from traditional media. It is a peculiar feature of Singapore politics that the ruling party is able to set restrictions on public discourse not just by legal means but via a set of informal guidelines that it has dubbed "out of bound markers" or "OB markers," using golf nomenclature for the area beyond which playing is not allowed. The term "OB markers" remains extremely ambiguous in both definition and application. It includes a range of things from topics which are off-limits for open discussion to rules of engagement between citizen and state, government and politicians.³ The ambiguity is intentional on the part of the Government as it claims precision and clarity "would have been difficult in practice, and probably would not have been desirable in principle."⁴ It argues that such ambiguity gives more room for civil society and citizens to manoeuvre. Civil society and citizens, on the other hand, consider this disingenuous and contend that ambiguity stifles discourse and creativity by instilling fear of transgression.

³ <http://www.singapore-window.org/sw99/90526st.htm>; <http://www.singapore-window.org/sw03/030616to.htm>

⁴ Building A Civic Society (speech by Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at Harvard Club, January 6, 2004)

Topics which are considered OB markers include many types of speech on race and religion and “glamourising the gay lifestyle”⁵ For engagement in politics, among the rules that have been spelt out in legislation are prohibitions on foreign journalists getting involved in domestic politics⁶, and action and speech that engage directly in electioneering and party politics.⁷ Even here, ambiguity exists as these legal definitions themselves are broad and vague. Other rules of engagement, such as those described below, have no legal standing but are informal rules but nevertheless taken up seriously by both the Government and the citizen. For the purposes of this essay, they have been described as OB markers as they spell out how citizen should not “play”.

This paper focuses on three rules that have been articulated by the PAP Government as the proper way for citizen engagement with the authorities:

- a) Politics has to be treated with seriousness.
- b) Politicians have to be treated with respect.
- c) Citizens who engage in politics should join political parties.

The PAP leaders say the OB markers are to ensue that damage will not be done to trust and respect accorded to public figures and public institutions. It believes, with some justification, that is what a free press has done in the West. The traditional mass media in Singapore – print newspapers and broadcast stations – all observe these rules, as they must, considering the nature of the media laws in Singapore which could have led to closure otherwise. So, in Singapore, news and other coverage of politics in the mainstream media is mostly treated in a serious manner. News about Cabinet ministers, Members of Parliament, and other members of the establishment such as civil servants and the judiciary are often written in a neutral, or for the most senior Cabinet ministers even reverential, tone. The mainstream just does not poke fun at politics or politicians or treat either subject as entertainment (though the rules for Opposition politicians are somewhat more relaxed). Neither does it campaign actively against any issue espoused by the PAP nor does it attempt to set the political agenda in general.

However, since there is usually no prior censorship in the media, editors occasionally get it wrong. These instances are in fact exceptions which prove the rule. One such example is that the leading daily *The Straits Times* was reprimanded by the Government over a satirical commentary in 2003 by a journalist lampooning Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Even though the article was pro-Singapore, it made the mistake of making fun of the troubled bilateral issues and of a political leader, albeit a foreign one. Singapore’s then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s press secretary criticised the article as one “in poor taste”. He added, “It is an example of the type of articles that the media, on both sides of the Causeway, should avoid. Whatever others may say about us, it is better to reply in a dignified manner and set the record straight by stating the facts.”⁸ No newspaper dared questioned the Government on this stand.

⁵ MediaCorp fined for airing pro-gay scenes (*The Straits Times*, April 25, 2008)

⁶ Towards a Global Media City (speech by Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts Lee Boon Yang at the Singapore Press Club on November 12, 03)

⁷ Next step for civil society: Daring to walk the talk (*The Straits Times*, June 21, 2004)

⁸ Letter to the Straits Times Forum, from Burhan Gafoor, Secretary to Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, “Let’s Reply With Dignity”, 23 Feb 2007.

On the regulation of the Internet itself, before the elections, the Government said that it “has always maintained that political debates should be premised on factual and objective presentation of issues and arguments. The regulations governing Internet campaigning have served well to safeguard the seriousness of the electoral process.”⁹ After the election, the Government also restated its uneasiness with satire being used during the elections and that “we must remember that elections and choice of leaders for the country are serious matters. Elections are certainly not laughing matters.”¹⁰

Another case involved well known author Catherine Lim who wrote a critical article, published in the Straits Times in 1994, saying that Singaporeans respected the PAP’s record on the economy and other areas but lacked any real affection for the party. In a series of exchanges, Goh said he would have to respond “robustly” to any criticisms of him or his policies. Lim, who was not a journalist but had contributed the article to the paper, was told that if she wished to continue airing such views, she should enter politics. Also, he said, he would not stand for anyone “demolishing the respect for and standing of the Prime Minister and his government by systematic contempt and denigration in the media”. She apologised to him publicly - and privately.¹¹

As for journalists, at least one of the very few in the Straits Times who were seen as consistent critics of the Government was moved to non-writing positions because he was accused by the Government of harbouring an “agenda”. These complaints were made privately to the most senior members of the media companies.

Internet Regulations during Elections

Just before the 2006 elections, the PAP government announced voters would be allowed to write about the elections. This was in contrast to the previous elections in 2001 when the law was widely interpreted as not allowing any discussion by ordinary citizens on the elections. That the Government did not refute the interpretation was taken as indication that it was true. Although in 2001, Internet penetration in Singapore was already one of the highest in the world, it was before blogging became popular; there were very few personal websites. The result was that there was very little activity on the Internet on the elections. The relaxation of the rules in 2006 came with one important – and interesting – caveat. It was that blogs and other websites which were “persistently political” or carried “explicitly political” content (the definition of the terms was never made clear) would be asked to register with the authorities. A registered website must give information about its editor, publisher and financial backers, and could not take part in electioneering campaign. This meant it could not feature articles which said one candidate or one party was good or bad. In the past only two sites are known to have been asked to register as political websites. One refused and decided to close down.

It should be noted that the term “persistently political” and “explicitly political” is very similar to the third OB marker stating that those who want to be involved in politics must join a political party – or in this case, register themselves as political

⁹ Senior Minister of State for Information, Communications and the Arts Dr Balaji Sadasivan, in reply to a question during a Parliament Sitting on 3 April 2006 (Question no. *407 for oral answer)

¹⁰ Speech by Dr Lee Boon Yang, Minister of Information, Communications and the Arts, at the 5th Annual PR Academy Conference, June 1 2006.

¹¹ Chua Mui Hoong, “PM: No erosion of my authority allowed”, The Straits Times, December 5, 1994.

websites. This regulation would provide fodder for mockery for many bloggers, as detailed below.

Before the election, the government also announced that all video and audio broadcasts on the elections would be banned from the Internet.

The study looked at 71 blogs, 41 of which were political and the rest semi-political. The former were blogs that were mainly political in their content, and the latter were blogs that carried other content besides the political. Blogging is an extremely popular pastime, especially among the young, and these two types of blogs were far outnumbered by the number of other blogs. The study also tracked 41 non-political blogs (which mentioned the election by the by) and also online forums.

Defiance of regulations

During the 2006 general election, blogs essentially cocked a snook at these OB markers. They also ignored the additional restrictions that the Government placed on the Internet during the period of the elections. Even before Parliament was dissolved and the election date set, blogs were already challenging the laws and regulations and informal OB markers. For instance, nine election-oriented blogs were set up before the poll date was declared. Besides being obviously and “persistently political,” five of these blogs were created for the explicit purpose of carrying video and audio recordings of the elections, which were deemed illegal. Indeed one of the blogs defiantly called itself *Banned Singapore Election Podcast* (<http://bannedsglectionpodcast.blogspot.com>). It carried the tagline:

Tyrant Lee Party (TLP) recently banned podcasting. This blog and many more is meant to protest their silly ban.

(In this essay, grammatical and other errors in the original blogs and other sources are rendered as per original.) The blog carried audio files on subjects such as the defamation suits by PAP leaders against Opposition members. Another election blog was *SG Rally* (<http://sgrally.blogspot.com>), set up as a “Singapore elections rally archive” that aimed to “aggregate coverage of the elections.” It carried videos (many taken by mobile phone cameras) of hustings, including speeches by candidates, which it urged people to submit. These blogs were all anonymous, and their creators were probably aware that they were breaking the law, given the earlier publicity to this issue.

One blog, *The mrbrown* (sic) *Show* (<http://www.mrbrownsnow.com>), also picked up the gauntlet thrown by the government to “persistently political” blogs by cheekily declaring itself to be “persistently non-political” and a provider of “persistently non-political podcasts”. The owners of the blog, Lee Kin Mun and Benjamin Lee, wrote a note that went out with each podcast,

This audio podcast does not contain “persistent political content” because that is prohibited during the election period under the Singapore’s Election Advertising Regulations. Remember, prison got no broadband!

Nevertheless, its podcasts, which were satirical, were clearly political.

The specially-created election blogs and other already-established blogs that dealt with the election were clear challenges to explicitly stated rules and regulations. Other blogs used modes of expression, described below, which were against the three OB markers, and which were never used in the mainstream media.

Not treating politics with seriousness

Bloggers adopted modes of expression which defied the first OB marker, the notion that politics should be serious. As noted above satire was a weapon used by *The mrbrown Show* in its “persistently non-political podcasts” about the election. The very title of the series mocks the authorities’ injunction not to be persistently political. One of its podcasts called “Bak Chor Mee Man” (*Bak Chor Mee* is a noodle dish) lampoons the effort by the PAP to nail down an Opposition candidate, James Gomez, over a foul-up involving the forms he needed to fill in order to stand for election. In the audio skit that mirrored PAP charges against Gomez, a hawker took a customer to task for not stating clearly the kind of noodle he wanted and warned that he had a CCTV to prove what the customer ordered earlier. It received tens of thousands of downloads and was also widely circulated by email. Other websites which are satirical include the well-known *Talking Cock* (<http://www.talkingcock.com>). Among its posts was one which said, “Hey! We’re having elections – so that means we’re democratic, right?”. Another post announced that “it would abide by... and avoid any ‘explicit political content’ during the election period”. It urges readers to not discuss its articles, adding, “Keep your thoughts to yourself. Better still, DON’T EVEN THINK. Do exactly what the [Government] says. It’s safer.

Another of its posts said in reference to the Gomez form filling incident,

In response to the increasing need for candidates to correctly fill and submit their forms in order to stand for elections, [National University of Singapore] dean of Political Science Professor Wah Biang Eh announced today that Political Science majors will be given the option to minor in Form Filling with immediate effect.

It must be added that the PAP’s suspicion of satire was not necessarily that it did not know that the art form had serious purpose but rather because it viewed poking fun of politics and politicians as unhealthy.

Besides using satire, blogs also deployed other kinds of humour. *The Straight Times* (<http://straighttimes.blogspot.com/>), which billed itself as “Singapore’s Inimitable Newssource”, parodied the mainstream daily *The Straits Times*. In an article written in the style of its target about the May Day celebrations, which occurred in the middle of the election period, it wrote of the government-linked unions,

Regardless of these complaints, the government’s celebration with the union leaders was an awesome success. Union workers marched obediently together with the drums, draped in a colourous white, hand in hand chanting various slogans. Various union leaders interviewed all concur that the government has been doing an excellent job. The government also agreed with them.

Bloggers also used jokes. On what many saw as the hounding of James Gomez by the PAP over the mix-up with the forms, *ringisei* (<http://ringisei.wordpress.com>) commented in a reference to Singapore’s founding father Lee Kuan Yew, who was also standing for election,

This reinforces the image conveyed by that old joke about how a tourist is brought to a temple. He asks about the statue of the beautiful, kind-looking lady in flowing white robes with a hand held up in a gesture of compassionate benediction. Ah, says the guide, that’s Kuan Yin, goddess of mercy. And the other one? Fierce, overwhelmingly powerful and terrible to behold. Oh, that’s Kuan Yew, god of no mercy.

Gayle Goh, a student who authored the very popular *i-speak* blog (<http://i-speak.blogdrive.com>) wrote of a PAP rally which she attended,

It was also hilarious when I found myself and the rest of the crowd being introduced to Comrade Lim, Comrade Low and Comrade Shanmugaratnam during my visit. What's with all this communist allusion? The Red Guards referred to each other as 'comrades'. Let's also not forget Comrade Lenin, Comrade Stalin, and our dear friend Comrade Mao.

Bloggers would also referred to the PAP members as "MIW" or men in white, in reference to the all white official dress favoured by the party. The PAP is sometimes referred to as "Pappy" or as the TLP ("Tyrant Lee Party"). A PAP minister, Lim Hng Kiang, who once made an ignominious gaffe asking women to save on a perm so they could have a breast cancer screening, was referred to as "Hairdo Lim". Others called the PAP the "famiLEE LEEgime". On *The P.A.P. Insider's guide to the 2006 election*, the anonymous owner of the blog put a picture of Lee Kuan Yew with eyes blacked out under the "About me" panel.

Not showing politicians respect

Bloggers also acted in defiance of the second OB marker that politicians should be treated, in a nod to Confucian propriety, with the deference accorded to an elder. Many blogs spoke disparagingly of PAP leaders and, less often, also of Opposition candidates. As noted above, they gave funny names to Lee Kuan Yew, called him a tyrant and implied that the Lees were a dynasty. In a letter to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the son of Lee Kuan Yew, the writer of *Mr Wang Bakes Good Karma*, (<http://commentarysingapore.blogspot.com/>) urged him,

stop dumbing down to the people. Some of us are stupid, but many of us are not. When you dumb down the issues and dress up the facts, you only make it soooooo easy for people like Mr Wang to poke fun at you and tear your speeches and announcements into little pieces.

Comments posted to blogs are just as likely to ignore the OB markers. A comment to the *Mr Wang* blog cited above, said of Lee Hsien Loong,

He wants to win ALL the seats? What a pompous git. Any politician leader in any decent democracy will be happy to win 60% of the seats - totally content. This dude wants to win 100%?? Sort of reminds me of the anal kid in my school who wet his pants and screamed rolling on the floor when he got 97% average in his exams. He wanted 100%.

One person wrote in a forum of Opposition candidate, James Gomez:

*"*sigh* This Gomez is really something.....whats the word after dumbest?"*

Chee Soon Juan, an Opposition party leader, was also a target. One contributor to the soc.culture.singapore newsgroup referred to him as "DOG Chee", probably in reference to his doctorate. A participants in the Young PAP online forum, wrote of the Opposition MPs and candidates in his constituency in the past (CSJ refers to Chee Soon Juan):

*my zone dun have oppos to fight.
before under one oppo, the bugger never do anything so lost in next election,
came another bugger csj...*

Sometimes the bile is directed at the Government in general. *Beng Hacks* (<http://benghacks.blogspot.com/>) wrote of the regulations banning podcasts and restricting politically persistent blogging,

What a funny and stupid law! I find it funny that they only pay attention to blog and not other things like forums, websites, Usenet, etc. I find it stupid cuz it sounds like stupid people making stupid policies after reading Internet For Dummies!

Some bloggers painted certain politicians as somewhat ridiculous. *i-speak* wrote after listening to a PAP candidate at a rally criticising a group of Opposition parties, the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA),

Penny Low gave another barrage of examples which mostly had to do with widening roads and other upgrading projects with fancy acronyms. One thing about Penny Low: she is one scary woman! She kept yelling at the crowd anti-SDA things, trying to rouse them up into some sort of fervour. "SDA people in their trucks just go round and round and round! No direction! Round and round!"... "WHAT CAN THEY DO FOR YOU?!?", etc. As far as I could see, only the core supporters near the stage would cheer here and there, while the rest seemed to stand silent and vaguely discomfited. I'm very scared of her now :(I kept imagining her chasing after her kids with a rattan cane.)

Rudeness and outright vulgarity were also widely used. The blog *Singapore Election Watch* (<http://singaporeelection.blogspot.com>), wrote of a PAP candidate who spoke at a rally,

*Saw this candidate describing opposition parties as terrorists; they come and strike every five years, then disappear. 'In fact, they hung their posters in the middle of the night'... *ended off with a snobbish look, like he just won a farting contest...**

This was mild compared to other blogs. A post in *I told ya, Ma, one day I'd make it* (<http://goldfarp.livejournal.com/>) said in reference to the defamation suits that PAP leaders regularly took out against critics,

I'm merely presenting facts so I can't possibly be sued for defamation (I'm shivering in my seat as I'm typing this, by the way. Of course I'm kidding. Fuck you, losers).

The blog *Sg Election '06* (sgelection06.djournet.net) said,

If this GE spilit votes more than 3%, especially in certain GRCs like under fuckup Pappy minstas like Hairdo Lim, ooooooo residents in the constituency sending msg and something wrong liao.

The blogger of *Rojak or the melting pot* (<http://meltedpotsg.blogspot.com/>) wrote,

*So when Senior Minister of State for Information, Communication and the Arts Balaji Sadasivan announced that political podcasts would not be allowed during elections, and that blogs that persistantly espouse political views need to be registered and have to stay out of the blogosphere during the election period... well, I just wanted to run up and snog him. Hard. Roughly. Passionately. Upside down. Finally, someone shared my ambivalence about blogs. Knew my problems. My dreams. Even the littlest ones. Cared. *clutch hand to heart* (Actually, I*

don't mind snogging him anyway - he's in a pretty good shape for a Senior Minister. There's a slight paunch, but you know what they say - when you see a thin businessman, how can you do business with him?)

Talk Rock (<http://rockson.blogspot.com/>), a very popular blog that was very much the definite practitioner of vulgarity with its multilingual swear words, said of the PAP's call to voters to renew its mandate to govern,

Fuck your mother backside lah. Renew my lan cheow, ok? If they really believe in the new blood, how come still got Lau Lee and Lau Goh still there? Where is the Retire part?

Note that the use of Singlish – the patois English used by many Singaporeans - was also another feature of blogs that goes against the “seriousness” with which politics is supposed to be treated. Most people believe that the broken English was just a front for some bloggers. The anonymous blogger of *Talk Rock* (a play on the Singlish term “talk rot”, which means talking nonsense) seemed to be quite educated. Writing in Singlish gave him a certain authenticity, just as Cabinet ministers occasionally also use Singlish in their speeches to connect with voters, despite the Government's position that Singlish should be rooted out in favour of “good English”.

The vulgar vehemence of some of these posts suggests the anger of the powerless against those in power, the formerly voiceless now given a voice.

Not member of political parties but political

The third OB marker is also widely breached. This OB marker states that those who wish to be involved in politics must join a party, or, in its weaker variant, must be registered as a political website (if their blogs are persistently political) and hence subject to rules which forbid electioneering campaign. But dozens of bloggers wrote extensively about the elections, and were nothing else if not persistently political. The podcast blog *The mrbrown Show* has already been mentioned as one which was persistently political even if it disingenuously declared itself to be persistently non-political, a statement which is not so much a disclaimer as an assertion that pointedly mocked the regulation. Other blogs just went straight into the thick of it, writing a few posts a day during the election, and covering anything from nomination day, election rallies and speeches of candidates to commentaries on newspaper articles and other blogs. Among the notable ones, some of which have been mentioned, were *Yawning Bread*, *i-speak*, *Talk Rock*, *The Kway Teow Man*, *Akikonomu*, *Banned Singapore Election Podcast*, *Bend to the Wind*, *Black or White*, *Chemical Generation*, *Disgruntled Singaporeans*, *Singapore Election Watch*, *Xenoboy* and *Xenogirl*.¹² The bloggers were, in contravention of the OB markers and the regulations, asserting their right as citizens to participate in politics as *citizens* without any formal political affiliation.

¹² These are the URLs of the sites not previously mentioned: *Yawning Bread* (<http://www.yawningbread.org>), *The Kway Teow Man* (<http://kwayteowman.blogspot.com>), *Akikonomu* (<http://akikonomu.blogspot.com>), *Bend to the Wind* (<http://dansong.blogspot.com>), *Black or White* (<http://blackorwhite2005.blogspot.com>), *Chemical Generation* (<http://chemgen.blogspot.com>), *Disgruntled Singaporeans* (<http://disgruntledsporean.blogspot.com>), *Singapore Election Watch* (<http://singaporeelection.blogspot.com>), *Xenoboy* (<http://xenoboysg.blogspot.com>), and *Xenogirl* (<http://xenogirl.blogspot.com>).

Impact of Resistance

The blogs showed that the online world was not going to play by the rules of the game laid down by the PAP government. Certainly many of them set out to resist the hegemony of the PAP state and its controlled media (there was only one pro-PAP blog found in this study; half of the blogs were unequivocally anti-PAP, while the rest took a more neutral stance.) It is not clear, however, whether any of the bloggers had the OB markers in mind when they wrote in the way they did, deploying satire, parody, rudeness, obscenity, disrespect and other modes of expression. The first two OB markers (regarding seriousness and respect) were not discussed in the period leading up to or during the election. They remained in the background. During the election, no PAP politician reminded bloggers that the OB Markers were there, or complained that they were being ignored. The acts of resistance by the bloggers seemed to spring from an unexpressed dissatisfaction with the conditions laid down by the PAP regime on political discourse. The widespread circulation enjoyed by some of the content, such as the *The mrbrown Show's* satirical podcast on the “Bak Chor Mee Man”, possibly heard by hundreds of thousands of people, also seemed to indicate that the bloggers had tapped into popular feeling and had filled a need for some sense of connection, even community, between the members of the electorate.

In the end, despite the existing laws and regulations and the new ones laid down just before the election, the PAP Government did not take action against any blogger except for one instance when it asked a political party to take down a podcast. The Government practices what it calls a “light touch” policy for the Internet, suggesting that despite the big stick it carries, it uses it with circumspection. The authorities’ circumspection was quite surprising, considering that the bloggers’ transgressions were in direct contravention of the law, and not just of the OB markers.

No one knows how events would have unfolded if the Government had taken action against the citizen bloggers. For instance, if they had asked *The mrbrown Show* to register itself as a political website, would the blog have continued to do what it did and would it have been allowed to? Or if the Government prosecuted someone posting election videos, would other people have continued to do so in defiance or would there have been a retreat by everyone? In any case, the blogs continued to thumb their noses at the rules and regulations, some even becoming more emboldened as the election neared. While some action against bloggers would have deterred the more egregious examples of defiance and resistance, that is, those that were specifically against the law, it is not clear if the Government could have done anything about those bloggers who crossed only the OB markers.

Why did the Government not react? First, it may be because many of the bloggers were anonymous. But then, the Government could have acted against the known bloggers, such as *mrbrown* and *Yawning Bread*. However, that might not have stopped the anonymous bloggers. Second, in some cases of anonymity, those within Singapore jurisdiction, the Government clearly had the means to ferret them out and yet it did not choose to do so. If, however, the Government had revealed that the “anonymity” that some bloggers thought they had was an illusion, it would have had a chilling effect throughout cyberspace. Perhaps, the Government thought the cost of such a disclosure of its capabilities would be greater than the benefits. Third, in a few cases, the Government simply did not have the reach to catch those outside its jurisdiction, as international cooperation in suppressing political dissent is

very hard to get, especially from democratic nations where these bloggers often took refuge.

Another plausible reason why the Government did not act could be because the known dissident bloggers were small in number and, more importantly, were not mobilising the public to any degree. It would be interesting to see if, in future, anyone who succeeds in mobilising people would be let off so lightly.

After the elections, the Government said it would review the regulations concerning the Internet and elections. But it stated that it was uncomfortable in particular with the use of satire, perhaps cognizant of Orwell's maxim that "each joke is a tiny revolution." In April 2007, the Government set up the Advisory Council on the Impact of New Media on Society (AIMS) and its remit includes a thorough review of existing Internet regulations.

What is the impact of the Internet during the 2006 elections? The most obvious measure of this would be the election results. In the end, the PAP romped home with 66.7 per cent of the vote in the contested constituencies and lost only two of the 84 seats, the same as in the previous election. In those terms, the Internet had little impact. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the Internet also was not an agenda setter of issues for the election.

However, the defiance of the laws and regulations was a challenge to the hegemony of the PAP Government and its discourse on "proper" political behaviour. That many people participated in this resistance is a significant milestone in Singapore's recent political history. The regulation banning video and audio broadcasts during elections weakened the credibility of the ruling party because it was seen as cynical and unfair to the Opposition. The disregard of the regulation by a number of bloggers also raised questions about the power of the Government to control cyberspace since it was seen to be unable to enforce both the old and newly-minted proscriptions.

The defiance of the OB markers also had a subtle effect. It showed that the rules of the game laid down by the PAP Government need not be followed – at least online. On one level it resisted what each of the OB Markers stipulated, about the right way to treat politics, to talk to politicians, and to participate in politics. On another, it also challenged the very legitimacy of having OB Markers at all. Perhaps it would, in the long run, lead to a reorientation of values and attitudes in Singapore to electoral politics in particular and democracy in general.

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