

**RESISTANCE ON THE INTERNET:
A STUDY OF THE SINGAPORE CASE**

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SUMMARY

This thesis employs Antonio Gramsci's framework of hegemony to the context of Singapore politics to understand the dynamics of political resistance in Singapore. As scholars have largely focused on the issues of self-regulation, self-censorship and the use of the Internet by civil society in the Singapore context, this dissertation seeks to examine the scope for the struggle for hegemony on the Internet.

In attempting to analyse these various forms of resistance, this study employs textual analysis in the examination of the various cyberspace entities, “alternative” websites, forums and blogs, focusing on the online activities surrounding the 2006 Singapore General Elections, the various reactions by netizens and counter-reactions from the government offline. This study thus argues that the citizens in Singapore who are constrained by legal implications of open protests and confrontation exploit the use of the Internet—a realm that is impossible to control fully—to constantly negotiate the subtle disciplining mechanisms of the state, drawing from their arsenal various strategies of resistance: the veil of anonymity, gossip, rumour, the disguise of humour in satire/parody and “rightful resistance”; thereby offering counter-hegemonic readings, alternative discourses and dissenting opinions in various ways that circumvent existing laws and regulations.

James C. Scott's theoretical framework supplements the Gramscian framework in that the former refers to a third realm of politics that lies strategically between the “public” and “hidden” transcript—the politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of actors.

This study thus demonstrates the cyber terrain of resistance as a site of struggle for hegemony, illustrating how the state tries to win the battleground by imposing regulatory structures to counter resistance, among other means, in attempting to control the “public transcript”, while netizens try to resist by pushing the boundaries of the strategic realm between the "public" and “hidden transcript” on the Internet. In this complex process that invokes Gramsci’s notion of the “war of position”, both the state and netizens concede some pockets of space while trying to win others.

This thesis subsequently suggests that the “Singapore-model” of regulatory structures is not as solid as what the existing literature has suggested insofar as the strategies of resistance on the Internet have been and continue to be successfully practised.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the Internet has spurred scholars to examine how this technology helps to create new forms of community, empowering citizens and challenging existing power structures; yet, the same technology has been argued to reinforce these very same power structures. In the Singapore context, discourse on the political and social impact of the Internet has been clustered around two focal points: the use of the Internet by civil society organisations and regulatory structures on the Internet which limits the political impact of the medium. This thesis thus seeks to elucidate the significance of the Internet as a tool and platform for resistance in Singapore, which has not been adequately explored.

Literature Review

Internet technology is perceived as allowing for the carving out of an alternate public sphere that eases communication, deliberation and organisation. Studies conducted in this area have focused on the technical ability of the Internet to reduce the costs of organisation via surmounting the need for physical meeting spaces¹ and by reducing time costs through asynchronous communication.² Other studies have identified specific functions and capacities of the Internet: websites function as information providers and information clearinghouses,³ and the Internet has aided social and political mobilisation as evident by the presence of online protests and online drives.⁴

¹ See Jeffrey M. Ayres, "From the Streets to the Internet: The Cyber-Diffusion of Contention", *Annals, AAPSS* 566 (1999): 137 and Hans K. Klein, "Tocqueville in Cyberspace: Using the Internet for Citizen Associations", *The Information Society* 15 (1999): 218.

² Klein, 218.

³ Ayres, 137.

⁴ Roger Hurwitz, "Who Needs Politics? Who Needs People? The Ironies of Democracy in Cyberspace", *Contemporary Sociology* 28 (6) (1999): 660.

Online forums also serve as a space for discussion and re-education of citizens about participation in public affairs.⁵

Tambini specifies four functions of the capabilities of the Internet: information provision, preferences measurement (through e-surveys and expression of opinions in forums), deliberation (through online forums) and will-formation (through online protests and online drives).⁶ Ultimately, according to Hill and Hughes, “one of the truly revolutionary aspects of the Internet is that *everyone* is a potential broadcaster and participant in the realm of political communication”.⁷

Studies have also examined the limitations of the functions and capacities of the Internet. For example, Hurwitz opines that online discussions lose focus or quickly break down,⁸ and Klein and Levine argue that the reach of the Internet is dependent on the informational and organisational capacities of the Internet, while the issues of cost and literacy sustain a digital divide that may not be bridged in the short to mid-term.⁹ Other problems highlighted include thin social bonds that are developed online (as opposed to stronger bonds developed offline) and irresponsible, anti-social behaviour and mistrust due to anonymity on the Net.¹⁰ With regards to the creation of social capital, Uslander opines that in the context of declining civic engagement in the United States, the Internet will hardly help to create new communities and that Internet use neither consumes nor produces trust.¹¹ Dahlgren furthers this opinion by

⁵ Klein, 214.

⁶ Damian. Tambini, “New Media and Democracy: The Civic Networking Movement” *New Media and Society* 1 (3) (1999): 306.

⁷ Kevin A. Hill and John E. Hughes, *Cyberpolitics: Citizen Activism in the Age of the Internet* (Lanham, Maryland.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 23. Emphasis in original.

⁸ Hurwitz, 658.

⁹ Klein, “Tocqueville in Cyberspace”, 219 and Peter Levine, “The Internet and Civil Society” in Verna V. Gehring (ed) *The Internet in Public Life* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004): 79-82.

¹⁰ Peter Levine, 82-84 and Eric M. Uslander, “Social Capital and the Net”, in Verna V. Gehring (ed) *The Internet in Public Life* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004): 101-109.

¹¹ Uslander, 108.

stating that though the Internet may offer opportunities for engagement in public space, it is questionable to assume that this will have significant impact on overall patterns of political engagement.¹²

Thus it can be argued that the above mentioned issues are threefold as Resnick distinguishes that there are *politics within the Net* (that concerns the internal operation of the Internet), *politics which impacts the Net* (that concerns government attempts to regulate cyberspace) and *political uses of the net* (that concerns the use of Web sites to affect politics offline). This distinction helps Resnick advance his “normalization thesis”—the argument that politics offline has flooded cyberspace and shaped new uses in its image.¹³

Civil Society and the Internet in Singapore

Many scholars have examined the relationship between the Internet and the growth of civil society in Singapore. The arrival and commercialisation of Internet discussion forums, newsgroups, chat rooms and websites both local and overseas in the mid-1990s have accompanied a rise in civil society engagement.¹⁴ Initiatives such as *The Working Committee (TWC)*, *Think Centre (TC)* and *Fateha* have increased discourse on issues like civil society development, human rights and Muslim rights advocacy respectively. Newsgroups and alternative websites like the *Singapore Review*, *New Sintercom*, *Little Speck* and *The Void Deck* do likewise by distributing a wide variety of content, most of which deviate from government-controlled mediaspeak.

¹² Peter Dahlgren, “The Public Sphere and the Net: Structure, Space, and Communication” in W. L. Bennett and R. M. Entman (eds.) *Mediated Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 51.

¹³ David Resnick, “Politics on the Internet: The Normalization of Cyberspace” in Chris Toulouse and Timothy W. Luke (eds.) *The Politics of Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 1998): 48- 68.

¹⁴ James Gomez, “Reviewing Singapore Civil Society”, 12 May 2004, <<http://www.jamesgomeznews.com/article.php?AID=94&Page=1>> (10 June 2004).

These changes have prompted Alvin Tan, founder and artistic director of The Necessary Stage (TNS), to remark that he used to think Singaporeans were not political, “but people are becoming politicized online” and that one can “see it in the on-line interactions, the growing sophistication of the citizenry”.¹⁵ As such, some argue that the growth of Internet technology in Singapore has opened up new spaces and possibilities for activism, alternate community building and even resistance.¹⁶

The Internet has been argued to have benefited civil society organisations as it is a relatively cost effective, efficient and convenient administrative tool for communication and information dissemination.¹⁷ The Internet also serves as a platform for like-minded individuals to get together to share information and experiences, provide mutual support, thus facilitating social group formation within civil society. Such groups can launch homepages that serve as newsletters, and premises “with a shopfront, reception area, informational counter, resource centre and

¹⁵ Gordon Fairclough, “A World of Their Own” *Far Eastern Economic Review* 167(43) (28 October 2004): 61.

¹⁶ S. S. S. Koh, *The Real in the Virtual: Cyberculture on Internet Relay Chat*, Singapore: National University of Singapore, Department of Sociology, 1998 (unpublished, Honours Thesis) and Y. W. Neo, *Discipline and Reward: Cyberspaces in Social Life in Singapore*, Singapore: National University of Singapore, Department of Sociology, 2000 (unpublished, M. A. Thesis). Also see Suzaina Kadir, “Singapore: Engagement and Autonomy Within the Political Status Quo” in *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space*, Muthiah Alagappa (eds.) (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 324-354, who cites some examples in the literature of how the Internet has been a useful tool for civil society activists, and has been “a haven for Singaporeans wanting to question government policies, poke fun at the political system, and suggest alternative lifestyles”.

¹⁷ Ooi Giok Ling and Afiza bte Hashim, “Civic Groups and the Internet in Singapore”, in *Internet in ASEAN: Social and Cultural Impact*, Sankaran Ramanathan (eds.) (Singapore: Public Relations Academy, 2003), 86-87. Also see Tan Chong Kee, “Impact of Technology in Enabling Discussion and Interaction”, in Constance Singam et al (eds.) *Building Social Space in Singapore: The Working Committee’s Initiative in Civil Society Activism* (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2002), 107, who cites the cases of how two civil society initiatives, the *Sintercom* and *TWC*, had leveraged the Internet to their advantage; Tan Chong Kee and Constance Singam, “Available Spaces, Today and Tomorrow”, in Constance Singam et al (eds.) *Building Social Space in Singapore: The Working Committee’s Initiative in Civil Society Activism* (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2002), 160, which gives an insight on how the Internet aided TWC to communicate and network, and Cherian George and Harish Pillay, “Media and Civil Society” in *State-Society Relations in Singapore*, Gillian Koh and Ooi Giok Ling (eds.) (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000).

meeting room”.¹⁸ Thus, the Internet has allowed for the “emergence of niche civil society organisations that otherwise would not have come into existence”.¹⁹

Another significant contribution of the Internet lies in its provision for “alternative, mostly uncensored spaces for political expression and discussion, as well as alternative sources of information”—a contribution made possible through the infrastructure of the Internet—its “sheer massiveness..., its lack of a central source, its multiple avenues of communication..., its anonymity, and its constantly evolving nature”.²⁰ This inability to police and censor cyberspace has also met civil society’s demand for increased political space to freely discuss issues and to cater to advocacy of respective interests, for example, creating e-petitions.²¹ Nonetheless, online civil society organisations still face certain legal restrictions, especially if they are perceived as “overstepping their boundaries”.²² Thus, some note that though the Internet assists civil society advocacy, it cannot replace civil society activism in actual physical space.²³

Nonetheless, the impact of the Internet on civil society is undeniable, and Ho, Baber and Khondker’s study elucidates this. They observe that despite measures to control and regulate the public sphere and civil society, Singapore’s creation of a “knowledge based economy” through wiring up the nation has unintentionally expanded the public sphere and opened up civil society possibilities for certain kinds of engagement with state policies—a move virtually impossible in the pre-Internet

¹⁸ George and Pillay, 201.

¹⁹ Ooi and Hashim, 87.

²⁰ Ibid., 87. Also see Suzaina Kadir, “Singapore: Engagement and Autonomy Within the Political Status Quo” in *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space*, Muthiah Alagappa (eds.) (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 324-354.

²¹ Ooi and Hashim, 87.

²² Ibid., 88. Also see George and Pillay, 202.

²³ Ooi and Hashim, 90.

era.²⁴ Besides acting as alternative spaces, websites “can serve as beacons to attract dispersed citizens to an issue, a role Tocqueville attributed to newspapers”.²⁵ Using five search engines over a four-month period to identify Singapore-related websites, collecting information about web-content, target audiences and website characteristics with the aim of surveying the “cyber-terrain of resistance”,²⁶ the authors argue that the Internet, to some extent, has contributed to the emergence of an alternative public sphere. This therefore allows a free exchange of ideas in the abundance of websites, discussion groups and chat-groups devoted to the examination of critical issues that affect the lives of Singaporeans.²⁷

Besides concluding that with the Internet, civil society groups have new audiences and “possibilities for networking, organizing and debating and resisting the state’s agenda, contributing to the restructuring of state-society relations”,²⁸ Ho, Baber and Khondker acknowledge that social control through surveillance limits the carving of these alternative spaces, reinforcing Calhoun’s opinion that computer mediated communications enhance existing power structures to a certain extent²⁹ and that it is not easy to predict the possibilities and limits of resistance via this new technology in Singapore.³⁰ Cherian George has commented on this problem in his examination of online journalism in which he compared four prominent media projects in Malaysia and Singapore. George argues that Singapore media activists have not exploited the limited technological capital as much as their Malaysian

²⁴ Kong Chong Ho, Zaheer Baber and Habibul Khondker, “‘Sites’ of Resistance: Alternative Websites and State-Society Relations”, *British Journal of Sociology*, 53, 1 (2002): 133.

²⁵ Ho, Baber and Khondker, 134, with reference to Klein, 216.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 134, with reference to Klein, 135.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁹ Craig Calhoun, “Community Without Propinquity Revisited: Communication Technology and the Transformation of the Urban Public Sphere”, *Sociology Inquiry* 68 (3) (1998): 381. Quoted in Ho, Baber and Khondker, 146.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

counterparts, due to Singapore's less fertile socio-ideological ground.³¹ These issues of surveillance and auto-regulation are examined in the following section.

(Auto-) regulation on the Internet

As elucidated above, the Internet is perceived as a medium of heightened control of the citizenry since hi-tech methods can be employed for surveillance and monitoring on the World Wide Web (WWW). As such, freedom of speech and expression can possibly be deterred because of the Internet's panoptical nature—that one cannot know whether one is being watched and therefore it is judicious to regulate one's speech and actions automatically.³² Such self-regulation is particularly pronounced in Singapore, given the effectiveness of the state's subtle disciplining capabilities, coupled with tight legislation over the Internet as a medium. These modes of regulation have circumscribed the Internet's ability to play a larger role in expanding civil discourse sphere and curtailing opposition parties' abilities to use the Internet effectively.³³

Terence Lee examines the discourse of auto-regulation in a series of papers—arguing that “regulating the internet and new media in Singapore is mostly about ensuring an automatic functioning of power for political expedience and longevity”.³⁴

³¹ Cherian George, *Contentious Journalism and the Internet: Towards Democratic Discourse in Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006): 6-7. By engaging in the political process perspective, he explains the dynamics of contentious online journalism by concepts that social movements depend on: favourable shifts in political opportunities, the mobilization of resources and cultural framing work by activists.

³² The notion of the panopticon will be discussed in the next chapter.

³³ Randolph Kluver, “The Singapore Experience” in *Internet in ASEAN: Social and Cultural Impact*, ed. Sankaran Ramanathan (Singapore: Public Relations Academy, 2003).

³⁴ Terence Lee, “Internet Use in Singapore: Politics and Policy Implications”, *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy*, 107 (2003): 75-88. See also Terence Lee, “Auto-regulating New Media: Strategies from Singapore's Internet Policy”, *Australian Journal of Communication* 28 (1) (2001): 43-56; Terence Lee, “Policing the Internet in Singapore: From Self-Regulation to Auto-regulation”, *Communications Law Bulletin*, 19 (4) (2001): 1-5; Terence Lee, “The Politics of Internet Policy and (Auto-)Regulation in Singapore”, *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and*

Lee, along with David Birch, explores the ideology behind Singapore's internet policy especially the censorship of content through a "light-touch" regulatory framework, concluding that "media conservatism is likely to continue in Singapore despite recent moves that would appear to "open up" Singapore society".³⁵

This light-touch regulatory framework is expanded upon in Lee's other works, where he employs the Foucauldian framework and his notion of discipline as a functional apparatus that seeks to make the exercise of power more subtle, yet effective and efficient, thus arguing that a "light-touch" self-regulatory approach has worked—and continues to work—in Singapore because of "auto-regulation".³⁶ Lee illustrates how the authorities employ cryptic and arbitrary policies and legal codes to "shape, normalize and instrumentalize the conduct, thought, decisions, and aspirations of others",³⁷ and concludes that the Internet in Singapore is a highly contested space where the art of governmentality through various strategies is "tried, tested and subsequently perfected".³⁸

Garry Rodan also studies modes of regulation over the Internet, specifically examining the Peoples' Action Party's (PAP) authoritarian control on the Internet, bringing this medium under the same tight regimen as other electronic and non-electronic media.³⁹ Rodan argues that the Singapore model is successful because

Policy 101 (2001): 33-42; Terence Lee, "The Politics of Civil Society in Singapore", *Asian Studies Review* 26 (1) (2002): 97-117 and Terence Lee, "Internet Control and Auto-regulation in Singapore", *Surveillance & Society* 3 (1) (2005): 74.

<[http://www.surveillance-and-society.org/articles3\(1\)/singapore.pdf](http://www.surveillance-and-society.org/articles3(1)/singapore.pdf)> (20 January 2006).

³⁵ Terence Lee and David Birch, "Internet Regulation in Singapore: A Policy/ing Discourse" *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy* 95 (2000): 147-169. See also Lee, "Internet Use": 75-88.

³⁶ Lee, "Internet Control", 79.

³⁷ Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose, "Governing Economic Life", *Economy and Society*, 19 (1) (1990): 82. Quoted in Lee, "Internet Control", 79.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁹ Garry Rodan, "The Internet and Political Control in Singapore", *Political Science Quarterly*, 113 (1) (1998): 88.

“when the political will to obstruct certain information and views is coupled with such variables as an efficient and technically competent bureaucracy, an established regime of political intimidation and surveillance, and embedded corporatist structures facilitating cooperation between state officials and administrators across the public and private sectors, you have a formidable mix”.⁴⁰

Rodan further examines government measures directed at the Internet, which target attempts to harness the medium into organized collective action.⁴¹ He claims that constant adjustments of media controls can be seen as part of a wider process of fine-tuning the authoritarian regime that the PAP upholds,⁴² with the aims of preserving effective deterrents to civil society and limiting the Internet’s potential contribution to political pluralism.⁴³ Thus, Rodan surmises that the strategy of the PAP is to ensure that the Internet as a medium does not facilitate political mobilisation, via limiting political engagement and competition to a narrow sphere of party politics and/or formally registered and tightly regulated political discussion groups, and by ensuring that linkages between opposition parties and social groups cannot take root.⁴⁴ However, Rodan acknowledges that despite the tough measures, the expression of political views and the diffusion of, and access to information, have been able to take place because websites outside Singapore are hard to police. Nonetheless, Rodan suggests that the access to and political impact of Internet sites is still, to a large extent, mediated by surveillance, the ideological hegemony of the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 88.

⁴¹ Garry Rodan, “Embracing Electronic Media but Suppressing Civil Society: Authoritarian Consolidation in Singapore”, *The Pacific Review* 16 (4) (2003): 503-524.

⁴² Ibid., 519-520.

⁴³ Especially through the superimposition of the spirit of the Societies Act on cyberspace. Ibid., 513.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 505, 518.

PAP, and the high degrees of political alienation amongst the Singaporean populace.⁴⁵ Such factors impede the motivation of citizens to desire alternative accounts of domestic public affairs.

James Gomez comments on government regulations too, arguing that through its actions, the government has articulated a set of political out-of-bounds markers that remain vague.⁴⁶ This allows it to reserve the right to define and direct political expression, whilst keeping consequences of adversarial activities ambiguous. This vagueness of what-can-be-said and what-cannot-be-said, dissuades political expression for fear of repercussions. Gomez categorises the censorship mechanism into two levels—on the first level, the individual voluntarily censors himself or herself, either through no discourse, or disguising it under euphemisms that substantially reduces the bite. On the second level, the individual calls others to attention and prevents them from further articulating any potentially adversarial remarks.⁴⁷ This “culture of silence” and fear that pervades the average Singaporean has prompted scholars such as Wong Loong to remark that many are reluctant to voice their dissent because the idea of dissent is still dangerous to state and elite discourses and that the idea of the Internet has yet to take root.⁴⁸

Internet Political Discourse in the Region

The literature on Internet political discourse encompasses case studies of various countries in the region, including China, Indonesia and Malaysia. China has served as an interesting case study due to the complex relationship among the government, the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 518.

⁴⁶ James Gomez, *Self-Censorship: Singapore's Shame* (Singapore: Think Centre, 2000).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 56-57.

⁴⁸ Loong Wong, “The Internet and Social Change in Asia”, *Peace Review* 13 (3) (2001): 386.

Internet and the citizens. In “Who is setting the Chinese agenda”, Li, Xuan and Kluver examine a particular chatroom hosted by the *People's Daily* newspaper and find that participants in that forum have used it to post foreign news items and commentary that often undermined the government's position. Employing the case study of a political standoff with the United States involving an US surveillance aircraft that had crashed on Hainan Island,⁴⁹ the authors demonstrated how the Internet had created opportunities to introduce new ideas into influential forums, undermining the ability of the Chinese government to solely set the political agenda although it had sought to censor chatrooms.⁵⁰ They thus conclude that although the Internet might not directly challenge authoritarian regimes, it introduces information that forces authoritarian governments to respond and account for more outside sources, and in turn, increasing the transparency and professionalism of the Chinese sources themselves.⁵¹ They opine that if the Chinese government were to ignore the new information sphere brought about by ICT, their legitimacy would suffer, losing their capacity to influence public opinion.⁵²

Similarly, in Indonesia, the Internet has played a crucial role in providing otherwise inaccessible information and challenging the centralised information from the government. This had ultimately caused the downfall of ex-President Suharto of Indonesia, as described by Merlyna Lim.⁵³ Through the examination of the phenomenon of *warnet*, (the Internet cafe) that provided online access across

⁴⁹ Li Xiguang, et al., "Who is Setting the Chinese Agenda?", " in K. C. Ho et al. (eds.) *Asia.com: Asia Encounters the Internet* (London; New York: Taylor and Francis, 2003), 143-158.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵¹ K. C. Ho et al. (eds.) *Asia.com: Asia Encounters the Internet* (London; New York: Taylor and Francis, 2003), 13.

⁵² Li, 154-157. See also Nina Hachigian, "China's Cyber-strategy" in *Foreign Affairs*, 80 (2) (2001), 118-134 where the author argued that the Internet will become a political threat in China in the long term due to the increasing prevalence of political dissidence.

⁵³ Merlyna Lim, "From Real to Virtual (And Back Again): Civil Society, Public Sphere, and the Internet in Indonesia" in K. C. Ho et al. (eds.) *Asia.com: Asia Encounters the Internet*, 10

Indonesia, Lim traces the emerging participation of civil society found in chatrooms, forums, and other online sites of civil society. She argues that civil society must emerge from a sense of identity that is forged through political struggles and illustrates the potential for the emergence of civil society in an authoritarian regime. Moreover, she makes a useful observation that “democratization” is perhaps an empty term with reference to these societies since the emerging political activists and classes are mostly drawn from a new digital elite.⁵⁴ Only those who could afford the subscription fees and had access to computers could access the Internet.⁵⁵ Thus, Lim makes a valid point stating that the Internet, though a powerful force, is not neutral to power.⁵⁶ This is also applicable to the Singapore case, although there seems to be more direct access to the Internet by the population in Singapore but possibly less efficacy of Internet information in shaping politics. As this thesis illustrates, resistance on the Internet could be seen as taking a more passive role in the Singapore case than the Indonesian case.

Other scholars contend that the Internet’s potential for overthrowing authoritarian regimes has been an over-optimistic assessment. Kalathil and Boas’ *Open Networks, Closed Regimes* examines how societal and political actors in eight authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes employ the Internet, illuminating how the Internet may reinforce the mechanisms of control and give further power to authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, citing evidence from China, Cuba, Singapore, Vietnam, Burma, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.⁵⁷ They argue that although public and civil society organisations have used the Internet

⁵⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 118.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 125.

⁵⁷ Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor Boas, *Open Networks, Closed Regime: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).

substantially, it has only played a background role and has not had much impact in provoking or facilitating political change in Singapore.⁵⁸

Pertierra et al examine another technology, the cellphone, in *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*, refuting the common assumption that the mobile phone was *the* factor in leading to the fall of ex-President Joseph Estrada.⁵⁹ They argue that despite the crucial role of the cellphone as a communicative device in facilitating the organisation and coordination of "EDSA 2",⁶⁰ there were a host of other reasons that persuaded people to participate in the revolution. These factors include the perceived corruption and incompetence of the Estrada government and the vast amount of radio and television coverage of the Estrada impeachment trial.⁶¹ They further argue that the text messages disseminated were ineffectual in influencing the political views of these virtual citizens, since their views were already set. However, such messages would have reinforced the peoples' opinions and provided them with a sense of solidarity. Thus, according to the evidence the authors had collected, the technology's potential for overthrowing the ex-president had been wildly estimated.

The role of cellphones in Philippine politics could perhaps be compared to Internet politics in Singapore. While the use of cellphones in Philippines is widespread and the technology had played a major role in political mobilisation, the cellphone alone cannot bring about change in political mindset in Philippines. Similarly, in the case of Singapore, although there is a relatively high Internet

⁵⁸ Ibid., 74-83.

⁵⁹ Raul Pertierra, et al, *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, Inc, 2002),
Book available online at <<http://www.finlandembassy.ph/texting1,htm#contents>> 1 March 2007.

⁶⁰ EDSA is an acronym derived from Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, the major highway that encircles Metro Manila. The popular revolution, also known as People Power II, peacefully overthrew Estrada in January 2001.

⁶¹ Pertierra, et al, *Txt-ing Selves*. Available at <<http://www.finlandembassy.ph/texting7,htm>> 1 March 2007.

penetration rate, the impact of the Internet has not been great enough to bring about significant political change, although it has greatly assisted civil society organisations as a tool of mobilisation. Nevertheless, the nature of these technologies and their different patterns of usage entail their different roles in society.

The Significance of the Study and the Importance of the Singapore Case

As depicted above, a significant amount of literature has concentrated on the political significance and effects of the Internet in Singapore, with research clustering around two focal points: the use of the Internet by civil society organisations and the issues of regulation and self-censorship on the Internet. There also exist some comparative and single case studies of the region which focus on the Internet's potential for overthrowing authoritarian political regimes. These studies have varying conclusions on the potential for the Internet to bring about political change.

In order to supplement the existing literature on Internet political discourse, this thesis seeks to provide an insight to the particular context of the Singapore case, examining the specific modes of resistance practised. As highlighted above, the idea of the Internet as an effective site of resistance has unfortunately not been adequately explored in the Singapore context, for this politically significant question has been eclipsed by an emphasis on regulatory structures and their apparent gripping of the Internet as an arena for resistance. This neglect overlooks a rich amount of primary material nestled within websites, which can shed light on the modes in which netizens launched their own forms of resistance, exploiting loopholes in existing regulations, or uncovering different strategies in countering these forms of regulation. This thesis thus seeks to modestly contribute to the existing literature, by exposing the various

layers of strategies of resistance on the Internet, thereby re-examining the commonplace view that political cyberspace is weak vis-à-vis the regulating Singaporean state.

In Ho, Baber and Khondker's study, the authors identify websites by their orientation and nature of activity and point out that groups such as *Sintercom* and *People Like Us* (PLU) use the Internet as an effective medium for 'resistance' by refuting mainstream statements and providing alternative explanations.⁶² While their study has been useful in illustrating the diversity of positions in their analysis of web content; "the negotiation process between the state and civil society over various rights"; "how developments in cyber-space have implications for 'reality'" and "how censorship and content regulation itself is a complicated process in which social control and resistance are simultaneously and seamlessly implicated",⁶³ this dissertation focuses on the various methods of resistance *per se*, and the process of negotiation between state and citizens.

The implications of this study are pertinent to the region and similar regimes around the world. As observed previously, a significant part of the literature points to the impression that the PAP has devised a strategy to allow for an authoritarian regime to successfully engage the technology of the Internet and reap the economic benefits, without being overwhelmed by its attendant political effects⁶⁴. This model of Internet control has been regarded as influential amongst authoritarian states in Asia, with Vietnam and China attempting to duplicate the model.⁶⁵ If this study is sound, it will problematise the assumption that the Singaporean model of Internet control

⁶² Ho, Baber and Khondker, 141.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁶⁴ Kalathil and Boas, 83.

⁶⁵ Rodan, "Internet and Political Control", 87-88.

curtails political resistance in cyberspace, and that the Internet will solely consolidate a climate of fear and intimidation, create avenues of propaganda and information dissemination, and serve as another medium dominated by the powerful.⁶⁶

Therefore, this study will focus on what has been previously glossed over—the rich data on many forums, blogs and other websites that illustrate various strategies of resistance. Such findings from fieldwork conducted in this study will attempt to dispel the commonplace assumption that there is “disinterest in political uses of the Internet” due to the government’s intolerance for political dissent.⁶⁷ In a country where freedom of speech, expression and association is curbed by the state, and to a large extent by self-censorship, many turn to the Internet as a medium to exercise these denied rights. Although “active citizenry” is ostensibly encouraged by the ruling party, this is mere rhetoric because blurred out-of-bound (OB) markers as outlined by the state constrict critical discourse. Many choose to use the Internet as a testing ground to experiment with and locate the vague OB markers placed by the state, to push the boundaries to produce critical discourse, and to challenge the government’s stranglehold over the media.

Such forms of resistance are nuanced however, given the nature of the Singaporean case. How then, are we to recognise such elusive modes of resistance when they are expressed in socio-political life? That is a question that this thesis seeks to answer, through the analysis of the political importance of the Internet as a site of resistance. More specifically, the main research question is: **How can we understand strategies of resistance on the Internet in light of the panoptic environment in the**

⁶⁶ Ibid., 89.

⁶⁷ Lee, “Internet Control”, 78. Others argue that it is political apathy that explains the disinterest in political uses of the Internet. See Terence Chong, “Time to rouse ourselves from apathy”, *The Straits Times*, 14 January 2005, which examines the culture of political apathy in Singapore.

case of Singapore? In attempting to answer this question, this thesis seeks to make a modest contribution to existing literature via an in-depth analysis into the dynamics of resistance residing within forum discussions, blogs and other websites. The next chapter thus proceeds to lay out the analytical framework and outline the main argument of the thesis.

CHAPTER ONE

“Everyday Forms of Resistance” on the Internet

This thesis seeks to apply the Gramscian framework of hegemony to the context of Singapore politics to understand the dynamics of political resistance in Singapore. In particular, this framework is useful in explaining how technological advances generate ever-increasing possibilities for some segments of society, while the state continuously attempts to win consent for its Internet policies and wider legitimacy. In employing the larger Gramscian framework of hegemony to analysis the aspects of such struggles, this dissertation also invokes some concepts in the seminal works of James Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*⁶⁸ and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*⁶⁹ to illustrate the various strategies of resistance that netizens undertake in the Singapore context. By doing so, the study aims to conceptualise alternative and substantial ways to think about and analyse resistance in Singapore.

Analytical Framework

Hegemony, according to Hall’s reading of Gramsci, refers to:

all those processes whereby a fundamental social group [Gramsci speaks of alliance of class strata, not of a unitary and unproblematic “ruling class”], which has achieved direction over the ‘decisive economic nucleus’, is able to expand this into a moment of social, political and cultural leadership and authority throughout civil society and the state, attempting to unify and reconstruct the social formation around an organic tendency through a series of ‘national tasks’.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

⁶⁹ Scott, *Domination*.

⁷⁰ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and the Centre, some problematics and problems,” in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall et. al. (London: Hutchinson; [Birmingham, West Midlands]: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1980), 35.

For Gramsci, hegemony is never uncontested and “is always the (temporary) mastery of a particular theatre of struggle.”⁷¹

Thus, in examining the Singaporean case, this study dispenses with the tendency to regard hegemony as rigid, static, uniform—that there exists only one dominant, totalising culture of power—a reading Gramsci certainly did not intend. Instead, this study focuses on “counter-hegemonies and a whole series of competing alternative hegemonies”, “recognizing that hegemonies are constructed” and that they are “ongoing ‘projects’ of legitimating leadership and negotiating consent through a whole series of channels”.⁷² Some scholars interpret Gramsci’s invoking of the term “war of manoeuvre”, a term drawn from military warfare, as:

... seeing society as both a real and an ideological battlefield where everyone is trying to establish what side they are on, who are enemies, who are allies, what position they are in, what the terrain looks like, how the battle is progressing and what weapons they should use. It is a constant ongoing struggle within which ideas, beliefs, values and meanings are among the weapons. However, what is important is not any innate characteristics of these weapons but whether they are effectively deployed. This sense of hegemony as a process of active organisation is a useful one which is not restricted to understanding class relations.⁷³

Femia thus notes that Gramsci privileges the “war of position” (protracted trench warfare) over the “war of movement” (rapid frontal assault on the adversary’s base)—the former strategy referring to “a gradual shift in the balance of social and cultural forces”, an “organic” dimension of revolutionary change.⁷⁴ According to Gramsci, a “‘war of position’ on the cultural front” requires “steady penetration and subversion of the complex and multiple mechanisms of ideological diffusion”,⁷⁵ whereas a “war of movement” is futile.

⁷¹ Ibid., 36.

⁷² Elaine Baldwin, Brian Longhurst, Scott McCracken, Miles Ogborn and Greg Smith, *Introducing Cultural Studies* (Harlow: Pearson; Prentice Hall, 1999): 106-107.

⁷³ Ibid., 107.

⁷⁴ Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci’s Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 53.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 51-52.

Scott, in some ways, echo Gramsci's concept of "war of position", in that it involves probing for weak points in a façade of power, offering the marginalised a way to work the system to their minimum disadvantage. In *Domination*, Scott uncannily uses the metaphor of "guerrilla warfare" to understand the process of resistance, and states that:

[w]ithin relations of domination, as in guerilla warfare, there is an understanding on both sides about the relative strength and capacities of the antagonist and therefore about what the likely response to an aggressive move might be. What is most important for our purposes, though, is that the actual balance of forces is never precisely known, and estimates about what it might be are largely inferred from the outcomes of previous probes and encounters. Assuming, as we must, that both sides hope to prevail, there is likely to be a constant testing of the equilibrium. One side advances a salient to see if it survives or is attacked and, if so, in what strength. It is in this no-man's-land of feints, small attacks, probing to find weaknesses, and not in the rare frontal assault, that the ordinary battlefield lies.⁷⁶

Although the Gramscian framework can illustrate the complex struggle and negotiation of hegemony and power, Scott is particularly useful in illuminating the various strategies of resistance peasants employ that parallel those that some netizens in Singapore undertake. In *Weapons*, Scott summarises the problem of the expression of resistance by the "weak" when he says that open collective protest is rare.⁷⁷ His study of peasant resistance reveals how arson, petty theft, poaching, sabotage, and boycotts are the "garden variety resistances"⁷⁸ seen in everyday life in his

⁷⁶ Scott, *Domination*, 192-193. As the study of hegemony is integral to this thesis, it would be useful to problematise Scott's understanding of hegemony as the "dominant ideology thesis", although it is not the main focus of the thesis to do so. Scott's insistence on the power of the hidden transcript to inform opposition pivots around his critique of hegemony and "false consciousness", and in what is an admittedly "brief and schematic" critique of various approaches to Gramsci's understanding of hegemony. See Robin D. G. Kelly, "An Archaeology of Resistance" *American Quarterly* 44 (2) (1992): 294. Unfortunately, Scott ignores important theorists like Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. Furthermore, he barely mentions Gramsci's writings on hegemony, and his work on the crucial role of the "war of position". Scott concludes that the concept itself contains the "implicit assumption that the ideological incorporation of subordinate groups will necessarily diminish social conflict", thus implying that hegemony allows for little or no contest, and that whatever opposition arises can be easily incorporated or channelled. However, the Gramscian notion of hegemony presumes contest, and that hegemonic institutions are constantly forced to respond, to fight for territory which is often lost.

⁷⁷ Scott, *Weapons*, 29.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 241.

ethnographic study of peasant life in “Sedaka”, a village in Malaysia.⁷⁹ According to Scott, when we do see the instances of open collective protest or demonstrations, these are but ripples on the surface of a deeper and more diffuse pattern of struggles. What began as an attempt to understand the absence of open resistance in Sedaka gradually led to the conceptualisation of infrapolitics—a whole body of “behind-the-scenes” political discourse.⁸⁰

Infrapolitics can be seen as a way to explain the changing meaning of politics and resistance in most forms of day-to-day, dominant-subordinate relations. Scott notes that in the context of increasingly complex societies, the absence of openly declared contestations should not be mistaken for acquiescence. It is in the realm of informal assemblages such as the parallel market, workplace, household and local community, where people negotiate resources and values on an everyday basis, that “counterhegemonic consciousness is elaborated”.⁸¹ These are the sites of infrapolitical

⁷⁹ “Sedaka” is not the real name of the village that Scott spent his two years doing fieldwork in. It is a small (seventy-household), rice-farming community in the main paddy-growing area of Kedah.

⁸⁰ As Scott points out, the idea behind *Domination* developed as a result of making observations about power relations and discourse in a Malay village in his prior work, *Weapons*, which was as a “close, textural, contingent, and historically grounded analysis”. *Domination* is admittedly more “eclectic and schematic” in its approach, that draws similarities from the broad patterns of domination in the cases of slavery, serfdom, and caste subordination across cultures, “to see what it can teach us about power, hegemony, resistance and subordination”.

⁸¹ Scott, *Domination*, 200. Scott claims that he hopes to show “that the notion of hegemony and its related concepts of false-consciousness, mystification, and ideological state apparatuses not only fail to make sense of class relations in Sedaka, but also are just as likely to mislead us seriously in understanding class conflict in most situations” and argues that “the concept of hegemony ignores the extent to which most subordinate classes are able, on the basis of their daily material experience, to penetrate and demystify the prevailing ideology”. See Scott, *Weapons*, 317. He draws his critique of hegemony largely from what he calls the “excellent general critique of hegemony in its various guises” by Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan Turner, *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1980). However, he glosses over Gramsci’s take of hegemony which presumes contest, and hegemonic institutions are constantly forced to respond, to fight for territory which is often lost. According to Kelley, the dichotomy of “true” and “false” consciousness are “terms neither Gramsci, Hall, nor Williams ever accepted”. See Kelly, “An Archaeology of Resistance”, 295. To thus conceive of hegemony, as Scott has, by ignoring Gramsci’s focus on struggle, or to accept the rather inadequate dichotomy between “true” and “false” consciousness, is to erroneously reduce Gramsci’s theory of hegemony into a “theory of consensus”. See Kelly, 295. For Gramsci, therefore, hegemony is never uncontested and “is always the (temporary) mastery of a particular theatre of struggle.” This shows that Scott’s understanding and critique of Gramscian hegemony is misplaced and it would be befitting of this thesis to adhere to Hall’s interpretation (see Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and the

activities that range from foot-dragging, squatting, and gossip to the development of dissident subcultures.⁸²

Infrapolitics is thus identified by juxtaposing what Scott calls the “public” and “hidden transcripts”.⁸³ Public transcripts are the public records of superior-subordinate relations in which the latter appears to acquiesce willingly to the stated and unstated expectations of the former. Scott likens this to a performance between dominant and subordinate groups in which the oppressed, out of a prudent awareness of power, usually play the roles expected of them. However, Scott does say that the public transcript is not the real story, for offstage, in their “sequestered social sites”, subordinate groups challenge ideological hegemony by constructing the “hidden transcripts”—dissident political cultures that manifest themselves in daily conversations, folklore, jokes, songs and other cultural practices of oppressed people.

One can also find the hidden transcript emerging “on stage”, in spaces controlled by the powerful, though mostly in disguised or coded discursive forms. Hidden transcripts, in short, consist of what subordinate parties say and do beyond the realm of the public transcript or the observation of the dominant. This often surfaces as everyday forms of resistance—theft, foot-dragging, and the destruction of property.

Centre, Some Problematics and Problems,” in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall et. Al. (London: Hutchinson; (Birmingham, West Midlands): Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1980), 35 – 36. Scott could have also benefited from a reading of Raymond Williams’s work on Gramsci, for he would have then realised that despite his dismissal of Gramscian hegemony, he inadvertently echoes Gramscian thought. He states that “the subordinate classes to be found at the base of what we historically call revolutionary movements are typically seeking goals well within their understanding of the ruling ideology”, thus reinforcing the Gramscian notion that subordinate groups challenging hegemony frequently draw their arsenal from dominant discourses. Williams backs this notion when he opines that, “the dominant culture... at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture” (see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 114); that even the most militant opposition is almost always “structured” or constrained by the dominant ideology, “though subordinate groups are still capable of penetrating and breaking aspects of hegemony” (see Kelley, 295).

⁸² James H. Mittelman and Christine B. N. Chin, “Conceptualising resistance to globalization” in *The Global Resistance Reader*, ed. Louise Amoore (London and New York: Routledge, 2005): 22.

⁸³ Scott, *Domination*, 1-16.

In the context of surveillance structures set up by dominant class(es) or the state, hidden transcripts record infrapolitical activities that surreptitiously challenge practices of economic, status and ideological domination.⁸⁴

However, there is a third realm of subordinate group politics that lies strategically between the public and hidden transcript—the politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of actors.⁸⁵ According to Scott, rumour, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemism—a good part of the folk culture of subordinate groups—fit this description.⁸⁶ This thesis thus draws parallels of this realm of resistance to Singapore.

The applicability of Scott's works is admittedly confined to peasant studies and the politics of the subaltern. This draws a sharp contrast to the Singaporean Internet-users, the subjects of this study, who possess financial and technological capital, that excludes them from being compared the marginalised peasants that Scott was referring to. However, this does not diminish the worth of Scott's schematic concepts surrounding infrapolitics, for they are sufficiently fluid and relevant for this study. The term "weak" is thus reappropriated to the Singapore context, whereby the idea of weakness is translatable in the author's description of the regime of censorship. The "weak", "subordinate" or "marginalised"⁸⁷ in the Singaporean case are those who are constrained by legal implications of open protests and

⁸⁴ Mittelman and Chin, 22.

⁸⁵ Scott, *Domination*, 18-19.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁷ The reason why the words like "weak", "marginalised" and "subordinate" are used with inverted commas is due to the fact that these words used in the context of Gramsci and Scott are significantly different from this study. While Gramsci and Scott have used these terms to describe or represent those who are dominated in terms of class conflict: the working class/proletariat/poverty-stricken peasants, the same terms used in this study refer to a group of people who are actually affluent enough to have access to computers and the Internet—not exactly what one may consider subordinate groups.

confrontation, and those whose outlets are limited by the severe practice of self-censorship by the government-controlled press. The larger framework on dominant-subordinate relations thus resonates with the Singaporean context where the PAP appears to dominate public discourse and deny civil rights like freedom of speech and expression. Public protests and open declarations of these rights are therefore rare, for the political environment is such that individuals may face castigation if they attempt open confrontation. The voice of resistance is thus muted at this level of public transcript. Where it does speak, therefore, is on the Internet, sometimes under the guise of anonymity, of humour through satire and parody, gossip and rumour, as well as grumbling. This space seems to fall between the realm of the public and hidden transcript because such activity seeks to attract as much attention possible through the use of hidden messages to convey unhappiness over certain governmental regulation and policies. Therefore, this study suggests that the realm of such resistance in cyberspace is tangibly vibrant—a phenomena that has unfortunately escaped academic focus in works on the political aspects of cyberspace.

Assumptions that Singaporeans are politically apathetic,⁸⁸ voiceless and uncritical can therefore be re-examined in light of this growing phenomenon—that the Internet is being used as a tool of communication and site of counter-hegemonic resistance by “marginalised” citizens who have been largely denied the opportunities of freedom of expression and speech in the “offline” world.

With the Internet, citizens now have a political space to air their grievances, disaffection and discontent towards the dominant party and their respective policies in an arena that is impossible to monitor fully. These websites, forums and blogs appeal

⁸⁸ See Chong, “Time to Rouse Ourselves From Apathy”, which examines the culture of political apathy in Singapore.

to people because they can air their dissenting views rather anonymously, in a site between the hidden and public transcript. One can detect satire and humour that highlight injustice, unfairness and biased media framing in a site that lies strategically between the site of the hidden and public transcript. This contrasts with the public transcript, where one does not observe direct confrontation with authority (because the citizenry are not afforded the luxury of relatively safe, open political opposition).

This thesis argues that the "marginalised" in Singapore exploit the use of cyberspace, a realm that is impossible to fully control, to constantly negotiate the subtle disciplining mechanisms of the state, drawing from its arsenal various strategies of resistance: the veil of anonymity, gossip, rumour, the safe disguise of humour in satire/parodies and "rightful resistance"; thereby offering counter-hegemonic readings, alternative discourses and dissenting opinions in various ways that circumvent existing laws and regulations. The cyber terrain is thus a brimming site of resistance and struggle for hegemony, "always pressing, testing, probing the boundaries of the permissible".⁸⁹ It is therefore vital to demonstrate how, on one hand, the state tries to win the battleground by imposing regulatory structures to counter resistance, trying to control the public transcript, and how, on the other hand, the state has to concede some pockets of space to netizens who through various strategies, resist and push the boundaries of the realm of resistance that lie between the hidden and public transcript. This is the Gramscian notion of hegemony that presumes contest, and that hegemonic institutions are constantly forced to respond, to fight for territory which is often lost.

⁸⁹ Scott, *Domination*, 200.

This thesis will also re-examine and subsequently challenge the policy discourse of auto-regulation, by appropriating Foucault's critique of the disciplinary power of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison structure, thereby shedding light on the myth of the invincible authoritarian state. The panopticon functioned as a nineteenth-century version of the surveillance camera and was Bentham's plan for constructing a prison resembling a wheel around a hub of an observing warden, with the warden being able to look in on the prisoners but not vice-versa. Consequently, the prisoners would logically strive to behave according to expectations for fear of being watched by a warden that might or might not be there. The self-surveillance of the prisoners and the odious possibility of an all-seeing eye that might or might not be present is likened by Foucault to the state's ability to cause its citizen to police themselves, regardless of whether the state regulates them or not.⁹⁰

This phenomenon is especially reflective of the Singaporean case as Lee argues, for the surveillance structures that regulate activities on the Internet—auto-regulation, is based upon the belief that power, the “political management of the Singapore populace”, is perfected when it is “automized” and disindividualized”.⁹¹ Hence Lee, in Foucauldian fashion, opines that the auto-regulatory strategies of the state “are calculated to attain policy compliance and political subservience, [and] the shaping of disciplined and ‘docile bodies’”.⁹² In such a panoptic environment, Lee believes that “the technologies of governmentality can be readily mobilized for various social, cultural and political ends”.⁹³ These auto-regulatory strategies in the form of laws and regulations curbing Internet content will be elaborated in Chapter

⁹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York: Random House, 1977).

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 201-202. Quoted in Lee, “Internet Control”, 80.

⁹² Lee, “Internet Control”, 84.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 89.

Two. Although the Foucauldian analysis of the Internet is not the main focus of this dissertation, the literature on the Internet refers to this to a large extent. Thus, this study, using a Gramscian approach, seeks to respond to this.

Chapter Two illustrates the modes in which the government exerts pressures to minimize dissent on the Internet. In addition, this study will show how the state is incapable of censoring all forms of dissent on cyberspace, not only because of lack of technical capabilities to track anonymous users and to contain them, but also because of the difficulties in trying to penalise resistive strategies. Part of the argument of the thesis is that it is virtually impossible for the state to control political dissent in such a massive entity, and that the Internet remains as a site of political struggle.

This does not mean that it is totally impossible for the state to track down anonymous users on the Internet, but that it is cumbersome to do so, and subjecting them to prosecution would be tantamount to a political fiasco that would therein delegitimise the PAP's rule. The continuance of PAP's hegemony entails hard work as the state has to constantly fight for territory, amidst seeking legitimacy for its actions. So while the state can install built-in mechanisms in the mainstream media to censor dissenting views, the same techniques cannot be employed in cyberspace. Furthermore, censoring humour poses as a significant challenge, for attempting to regulate those who appeal to state rhetoric when expressing dissent, can be perceived as compromising the state's political legitimacy. It will be shown in subsequent chapters, that in trying to reclaim the public transcript, the state adopts these auto-regulatory strategies on the Internet, but seems to concede this space somewhat in the form of a "light-touch" strategy.

Strategies of Resistance: Anonymity, Gossip/Rumour, Satire/Parody and “Rightful Resistance”

In the chapter “Voice Under Domination: the Arts of Political Disguise”, Scott directs attention to the “manifold strategies by which subordinate groups manage to insinuate their resistance, in disguised forms, into the public transcript”,⁹⁴ where he examines the ways that “ideological resistance is disguised, muted, and veiled for safety’s sake”.⁹⁵ The realities of power subordination require that “we enter the world of rumor, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures and anonymity”.⁹⁶ This study attempts to examine the uses of satire/parody/humour, anonymity, gossip/rumour and “rightful resistance” as strategies of resistance on the Internet.

Anonymity, or cloaking one’s identity, is a strategy which netizens use while stepping into the “public transcript” online. As discussed earlier, a subordinate conceals the hidden transcript from powerholders because he fears retaliation. However, “if it is possible to declare the hidden transcript while disguising the identity of the persons declaring it, much of the fear is dissipated”.⁹⁷ As Scott highlights, prominent techniques to shield one’s identity while facilitating open criticism, threats and attacks include “spirit possession, gossip, aggression through magic, rumor, anonymous threats and violence, the anonymous letter, and anonymous mass defiance”.⁹⁸ In cyberspace, it is common for users on forums, blogs and other websites not to divulge their real identities, save for a few prominent bloggers. Therefore, the message is public but the messenger is hidden. Although it is not

⁹⁴ Scott, *Domination*, 136.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

technically impossible to trace the identities of Internet users given the extensive technical capacity of the authorities, it takes a significant amount of effort to trace the user. The idea of anonymity relates closely to the earlier discussion on the idea of the panoptic structure of the Internet—because the user feels that he is under surveillance, he wears a mask to hide from the prison warden. Under this mask, he feels a greater sense of security and is less intimidated by the prying warden and feels more confident of voicing the hidden transcript without immediate repercussion. As he is aware that there are many others in cyberspace who wear a mask just like him, he chooses to believe that it is impossible for the warden to be rigorously trying to unmask all of them simultaneously, and even if they successfully attempt to, are unable to discipline all of them at once.

Gossip is another prevalent online technique of resistance and “is perhaps the most familiar and elementary form of disguised popular aggression”.⁹⁹ Scott acknowledges that while gossip “is hardly confined to attacks by subordinates on their superiors, it represents a relatively safe social sanction”.¹⁰⁰

Gossip, almost by definition, has no identifiable author, but scores of eager retailers who can claim they are just passing on the news. Should the gossip—and here I have in mind malicious gossip—be challenged, everyone can disavow responsibility for having originated it. The Malay term for gossip and rumor, *khobar angin* (news on the wind), captures the diffuse quality of responsibility that makes such aggression possible.¹⁰¹

Gossip is thus distinguished from rumour in that “gossip consists typically of stories that are designed to ruin the reputation of some identifiable person or persons.”¹⁰² Scott asserts that above all, “gossip is a discourse about social rules that have been violated”, in that “a person’s reputation can be damaged by stories about

⁹⁹ Ibid., 142.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

his tightfistedness, his insulting words, his cheating, or his clothing only if among whom such tales circulate have shared standards of generosity, polite speech, honesty and appropriate dress”.¹⁰³ Gossip acts to “reinforce these normative standards by invoking them and by teaching anyone who gossips precisely what kinds of conduct are likely to be mocked or despised.”¹⁰⁴ Even in its strong form of character assassination, gossip is a “relatively mild sanction against the powerful”, but it presupposes “not only a face-to-face community, but also one in which reputation is still of some importance and value”.¹⁰⁵

Rumour, “a second cousin” of gossip, is not necessarily directed at a particular person, but is a “powerful form of anonymous communication that can serve particular interests”.¹⁰⁶ As Scott suggests “oral transmission of rumor allows for a process of elaboration, distortion, and exaggeration that is so diffuse and collective it has no discernible author”.¹⁰⁷ The spread of rumour on the Internet, albeit not oral in nature, acts in a similar manner. It is in cyberspace that information, whether true or not, can spread through the network of forums, newsgroups, blogs and other websites quickly. As a rumour travels, “it is altered in a fashion that brings it more closely into line with the hopes, fears, and worldview of those who hear it and those who retell it”.¹⁰⁸ Authorities often question the credibility of these two avenues of resistance by highlighting their anonymous nature as a serious point of contention. As such, gossip and rumours are often dismissed as frivolous “Internet chatter” that has no substance precisely because of its “unverifiable” or “false” nature.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 143.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 144.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 145. Instances of gossip and rumour on cyberspace will be illustrated in Chapter Four.

It will also be shown how the features of fiction and humour in satire and parody are strategies of hegemonic resistance on the Internet. The genres of satire and parody seem to fit what Scott suggests as the world of "...disguise, linguistic tricks and metaphors..."¹⁰⁹ The definitive elements of humour, theatrics and hyperbole in satire effectively humiliate authority figures and simultaneously places itself almost beyond the reach of litigation. Ironically, it is satire's place in the realm of fiction, comedy and Art that renders it impervious to authoritative constraint.¹¹⁰

Scholars have noted the difficulty in coming up with a neat definition of satire.¹¹¹ Satire is often defined by the necessary conditions that distinguish it. Frye suggests that wit or humor and attack are essential to satire,¹¹² while Nilsen adds a few more "necessary conditions" that are definitive of satire, namely: irony, negativity, distortion and humor.¹¹³ Combe notes that a key danger in theorising satire is "that almost irresistible urge to reify satire, unifying and totalizing a range of often incommensurate impulses and practices". He reasons that "individual satires are nothing if they are not, to borrow a phrase from Stephen Greenblatt, 'localized strategies in particular historical encounters'".¹¹⁴ However, this study utilises Stott's definition of satire, "a literary form that aims to criticize or censure people and ideas through the use of humour".¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 137.

¹¹⁰ A politician would be unable to substantiate his case on defamation by a satirist precisely because of satire's fictional nature.

¹¹¹ See Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe, "Theorizing Satire: A Retrospective and Introduction," in *Theorizing Satire: Essays in Literary Criticism*, ed. Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 1-15 and Kirk Combe, "The New Voice of Political Dissent: The Transition from Complaint to Satire," in *Theorizing Satire: Essays in Literary Criticism*, ed. Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 73.

¹¹² Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four essays* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957).

¹¹³ Don L. F. Nilsen, "Satire—The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions—Some Preliminary Observations" *Studies in Contemporary Satire* 15 (1988): 1-10.

¹¹⁴ Combe, "The New Voice of Political Dissent", 73.

¹¹⁵ Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (The New Critical Idiom) (New York: Routledge, 2005), 153.

Hodgart opines that “the perennial topic of satire is the human condition itself”, in which “satire, ‘the use of ridicule, sarcasm, irony etc. to expose, attack, or deride vices, follies etc.’ (as the dictionaries define it), has its origin in a state of mind which is critical and aggressive, usually one of irritation at the latest examples of human absurdity, inefficiency or wickedness.”¹¹⁶ He views humans as social animals who are “aggressive to their own kind” and who use “threat display” to maintain the efficient functioning of their hierarchy in each of their societies.¹¹⁷ These threat displays that social animals use against each other, until the inferior submits to the superior, seem to be the basis of “human expression of contempt, the curling lip and the mocking laugh”.¹¹⁸

The satirist’s anger is modified by his sense of superiority and contempt for his victim: his aim is to make the victim lose ‘face’ and the most effective way of humiliating him is by contemptuous laughter.¹¹⁹

According to Stott:

Satire aims to denounce folly and vice and urge ethical and political reform through the objection of ideas to humorous analysis. In the best instances, it takes the object matter from the heart of political life or cultural anxiety, re-framing issues at an ironic distance that enables us to revisit fundamental questions that have been obscured by rhetoric, personal interests, or realpolitik.¹²⁰

Raising the example of Stanley Kubrick’s 1963 film, *Dr Strangelove; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, Stott shows “how satire can ask a question that has been dismissed by the establishment as naïve, but remains absolutely crucial to the future of humanity”.¹²¹ Although Kubrick issued a disclaimer over the title sequence, stating that “...none of the characters portrayed in this film are meant to represent any real persons living or dead”, Stott points out the real life individuals

¹¹⁶ Hodgart, 10. The dictionaries which Hodgart consults are *Webster’s New World Dictionary* and *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 11.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Stott, 109.

¹²¹ Ibid., 110.

that the protagonists are based on. He argues that “the film’s insistence on its fictionality reveals its acute sensitivity to the potential volatility of its satire”.¹²²

Similarly, the definition of parody has been extensively explored by academics.¹²³ It has been defined as “any cultural practice which makes a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice” and can be thought of “as mode, or as a range in the spectrum of possible intertextual relations”.¹²⁴ Palmer suggests that in parody, “some pre-existing discursive entity is both repeated (in part or in whole) and simultaneously transformed, in some measure, commonly for humour and/or ridicule”¹²⁵ and the purpose “may be mockery of the original, mockery of some other associated entity, or mere playful allusion”.¹²⁶

One feature that surrounds satires and parodies on the Internet illustrated in this study is the element of comedy that disguises resistance. Stott points out that “humour has been demonstrably policed or punished by many governments who see it as a form of subversion”, citing the cases of the Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia and the US in the 1950s, during the McCarthy era.¹²⁷ Wary of the danger of humour and ridicule, politicians have sought to control satirists and comedians. The power of laughter thus seems profound indeed—people in positions of power, especially those who view themselves as highly rational, efficient, serious and important, feel the most powerless when they are ridiculed and their actions trivialised. This is where laughter

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ See Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: ancient, modern, and post-modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Simon Dentith, *Parody (The New Critical Idiom)* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) and Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 89-113.

¹²⁴ Dentith, 37.

¹²⁵ Jerry Palmer, “Parody and Decorum: Permission to Mock,” in *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*, ed. Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 80.

¹²⁶ Ibid. Palmer subsequently notes that in recent debates, “non-humorous “parody” has become increasingly central”.

¹²⁷ Stott, 105.

hits most acutely.¹²⁸ This is descriptive of the bureaucratic elites in the PAP, who are precisely threatened by the power of humour in the Internet.

Hodgart suggests that political satire requires “a degree of free speech” to flourish because tyrants dislike any form of criticism.¹²⁹ The domain of cyberspace allows for this element of freedom of expression because this space is not given the same value of importance as the mainstream media in terms of the extent of readership in the eyes of the authorities. In the following chapters, it will be exemplified how the government, in acknowledging that cyberspace is difficult to control, seems to undermine the strategies of resistance used in cyberspace, and yet concede some pockets of resistance.

Another strategy from the arsenal of resistance refers to Kevin O’Brien’s notion of “rightful resistance”:

a form of popular contention that 1) operates near the boundary of an authorized channel, 2) employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb political or economic power, and 3) hinges on locating and exploiting divisions among the powerful. In particular, rightful resistance entails the innovative use of laws, policies, and other officially promoted values to defy “disloyal” political and economic elites; it is a kind of partially sanctioned resistance that uses influential advocates and recognized principles to apply pressure on those in power who have failed to live up to some professed ideal or who have not implemented some beneficial measure.¹³⁰

In other words, rightful resistance works when people make “legitimate” claims, appealing to the sympathies of the ruling elites working within the parameters of official laws, regulations, or policies. They “normally frame their claims with reference to protections implied in ideologies or conferred by policymakers” and “since they often demand little more than scrupulous enforcement of existing commitments, theirs is a defiance based on strict adherence to established values”.¹³¹

¹²⁸ I am grateful to Dr. Kenneth Paul Tan for highlighting this point during our discussion on humour and laughter.

¹²⁹ Hodgart, 33.

¹³⁰ Kevin O’Brien, “Rightful Resistance”, *World Politics*, 49 (1996): 33.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

Thus, the Internet functions as both a realm for the hidden transcript where people engage in “offstage talk”, where a critique of power is spoken “behind the back of the dominant”, and a site of public transcript where individuals insinuate their resistance with the appeal of state rhetoric.

Methodology

In an attempt to analyse cyberspace in a systematic fashion, this paper presents a typology of cyberspace entities in Table 1, mainly websites that focus on providing alternative news or commentary pieces; websites that are owned by organisations or parties in order for public communication; websites that present politically satirical humour; communicative and interactive discussion forums, and blogs. This study acknowledges overlaps among the various entities, which will be elaborated in the following chapters.

TABLE 1: Typology of Cyberspace Entities

Types	Examples
Alternative News/Commentary Pieces	<i>LittleSpeck</i> < www.littlespeck.com >; <i>New Sintercom</i> < www.newsintercom.org >; <i>Singaporeans for Democracy</i> < http://www.sfdonline.org/ >; <i>Singapore Window</i> < www.singapore-window.org >; <i>Think Centre</i> < www.thinkcentre.org >; <i>The Void Deck</i> < http://www.thevoiddeck.org >
Satirical/Humour	<i>TalkingCock.com</i> < www.talkingcock.com >
Discussion forums/Newsgroups	<i>sgforums.com</i> < www.sgforums.com >; <i>Sammyboy's Alfresco Coffee Shop</i> < http://forums.delphiforums.com/sammyboymod >; <i>Singapore Review</i> < http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Sg_Review >; <i>soc.culture.singapore</i> < www.groups.google.com/group/soc.culture.singapore >
Blogs	<i>A Xenoboy in Sg</i> < http://xenoboysg.blogspot.com >; <i>Molly Meek</i> < http://mollymeek.livejournal.com >; <i>Mr Brown</i> < http://www.mrbrown.com/ >; <i>Mr Miyagi</i> < http://miyagi.sg/ >; <i>Mr Wang Bakes Good Karma</i>

	www.commentarysingapore.blogspot.com ; <i>SG Rally</i> < http://sgrally.blogspot.com >; <i>Singabloodypore</i> < www.singabloodypore.blogspot.com >; <i>Singapore Election Watch</i> < http://singaporeelection.blogspot.com >; <i>Yawning Bread</i> < www.yawningbread.org >;
Organisation Front/Public Communication	<i>Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE)</i> < www.aware.org.sg >; <i>Peoples' Action Party (PAP)</i> < www.pap.org.sg > <i>Singapore Democratic Party (SDP)</i> < www.singaporedemocrat.org >; <i>Workers' Party (WP)</i> < www.wp.org.sg >

This study disaggregates the notion of the Internet into various entities characterised by their functions and foci, such as providing alternative news, sites for discussion forums and personal blogs. This examination will hopefully elucidate the intricacies and dynamics of Internet resistance.

The qualitative research analysis is grounded in a study of Singapore-related websites, discussion forums and blogs that may or may not be hosted in Singapore. The study examines online activities surrounding the 2006 General Elections (GE2006), the various reactions by Internet users and counter-reactions from the government offline. The method of content analysis and process-tracing will be utilised to map out the evolving online discourse and the various weapons and strategies of the “weak”, and the resultant responses from the authorities. To study cyberspace, the field work undertaken combines ethnographic methods that analyse postings and threads in discussion forums—non-participant observation or “lurking”—which will not affect the outcome of the study.

An Overview of the Chapters

Chapter One has already set the stage for the study, by presenting the analytical framework. Chapter Two seeks to locate cyberspace in the context of Singapore, tracing the regulations imposed in the online world. Chapter Three fuses two different “entities” on the Internet and studies the nature and strategies of resistance in three websites: *TalkingCock.com* which deals with satirical humour, *New Sintercom* and *TC*, which offer alternative news and commentary pieces. Chapter Four then examines discussion forums, in particular, *sgForums*, *Sammyboy.com’s Alfresco Coffee Shop* and *soc.culture.singapore*. It will be elucidated that what may be trivialised as petty complaints and sarcastic remarks made on these Internet forums are congruent to Scott’s notion of the “weapons of the weak”.¹³² Lastly, Chapter Five is a study on the emerging trend of blogs and the political impact of these blogs in terms of its capacity for political resistance.

Limitations

As this thesis examines the various strategies of resistance that take place in cyberspace within Singapore, two limitations are delineated. Firstly, to avoid losing focus, this study has excluded an extensive discussion of the inseparable issue of the digital divide, in which less affluent members of society cannot afford computers and are not equipped with the technical skills to utilise this “weapon” and engage in any acts of resistance on the Internet. More specifically, although states in general are incapable of effectively monitoring and censoring cyberspatial counter-discourse, this dissertation acknowledges that this particular means of resistance is open only to

¹³² Scott, *Weapons*.

those who have access to computers, modems, and the Internet.¹³³ However, the focus of the dissertation is not in capturing the opinions of the entire populace, but rather, to study the significance of the Internet as a site in which the government and populace contest for hegemony.

Secondly, the attempt to discuss the Internet in Singapore is imprecise due to the global nature of cyberspace. This paper has therefore drawn the parameters of “Singaporean” matters on the Internet by identifying any online activity that deals with Singaporean political life. Thus, in this case study of Singapore, websites that are based overseas are also examined, regardless of whether they are within the jurisdiction of Singaporean authorities.

¹³³ Mittelman and Chin, 26.

CHAPTER TWO

Mission Impossible: Regulating Cyberspace

This chapter provides the context in which the study of resistance on the Internet is pursued. By accounting for the conditions various strategies of resistance on the Internet emerge from, this chapter seeks to understand what is unique about the Internet and how it presents itself an alternate platform for resistance. It examines the particularities of state-society relations in Singapore, elucidating the extensive laws and institutions that the state employs to control speech and activities in the “real” and “virtual” world, as well as “soft” restraints or OB markers that are in place that have elicited varying responses from netizens.

The Dominance of the PAP

Singapore has been labelled a “semi-authoritarian” regime, an “illiberal democracy” and a hegemonic party system by various scholars despite the holding of regular elections. Larry Diamond notes that Singapore is a “hybrid” regime, one that falls between liberal democracy and politically closed authoritarian regimes. Of these hybrid regime types, Singapore is categorised more specifically as a hegemonic party system, whereby a “relatively institutionalized ruling party monopolizes the political arena, using coercion, patronage, media control, and other means to deny formally legal opposition parties any real chance of competing for power.”¹³⁴

A wide range of means are employed to impede any significant challenge to the ruling party. These included intimidation of political adversaries and critical elements of the media by invoking the Internal Security Act (ISA), under which

¹³⁴ Larry Diamond, “Thinking About Hybrid Regimes” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2) (2002): 25.

people can be held indefinitely without trial. However, the more pervasive aspects of authoritarianism in Singapore involve a sophisticated combination of legislation and political cooption to channel contention through state-controlled institutions.¹³⁵ This has hampered the growth of a genuine civil society, thereby stifling PAP's political opponents and blunting political pluralism. An elitist ideology rationalises the PAP's political monopoly, depicting the government "as a technical process that must be the preserve of a meritocracy".¹³⁶ The government also holds rein on various para-political institutions such as the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC), grassroots organisations,¹³⁷ and even the local mainstream media. It is through these institutions that the party manages to sustain its support and dominance.

The state's rationales for security paranoia and climate of control could be traced back to the historical backdrop of Singapore's traumatic past just after colonial rule and during the merger with Malaysia. When self-government began in 1959, Singapore boasted a wide range of newspapers which were relatively free from government intrusion, allowing critical examination and scrutiny of public policies.¹³⁸ However, there was increased sensitivity to media reporting after the 1961 split in the ruling party that resulted in the establishment of the rival Barisan Nasional (National Front). This led to a new regime installed through a combination of pressures on editors and journalists and structural changes eroding the independence of media organisations.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Rodan, "Internet and Political Control", 65.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 65.

¹³⁷ See Kenneth Paul Andrew Sze-Sian Tan, "Democracy and the Grassroots Sector in Singapore", *Space and Polity* 7 (1), 2003, for an overview of the linkages between the grassroots sector and the PAP.

¹³⁸ Garry Rodan, *Transparency and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Asia: Singapore and Malaysia* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 19.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

There were many instances of media subversion that culminated in the state's security paranoia. For many months during the Malaysian years, the *Utusan Melayu*, the Jawi script newspaper, was the main vehicle that carried anti-PAP messages to the Singapore Malays. It published increasingly inflammatory reports of PAP repression of Malay rights in Singapore and generally painted the party as the chief threat to the Malays of all Malaysia.¹⁴⁰ In addition, The *Straits Times* branded the PAP as a ruthless and dictatorial communist organisation during Lee Kuan Yew's fight against the procommunists and leftists in 1959. Lee, in turn, accused the newspapers as "blooming scoundrels".¹⁴¹ These incidents had probably fuelled the leader's apprehension towards the independent media.

Thus the PAP took calculated moves against such potentially politically antagonistic media. Almost immediately after taking power, the PAP amended the Printing Presses Ordinance, which required not just annual permits from the government for the printing and publication of the newspapers in Singapore, but also for the sale and distribution in Malaya of newspapers printed in Singapore.¹⁴² These permits could be withdrawn without the government having to explain why.

Being increasingly intimidated by the government through various means, editors and reporters began to understand the seriousness of official sensitivity to critical or investigative journalism. The ISA, a repressive legislation inherited from British colonial authorities, was exploited as one of these means. Besides providing for detention without trial of suspected threats to national security, it also allowed the relevant minister in Singapore to prohibit the printing, publication and sale, *inter alia*,

¹⁴⁰ Robert O. Tilman, ed. *Man, State and Society in Contemporary Southeast Asia* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 504.

¹⁴¹ Hussin Mutalib, *Parties and Politics: A Study of Opposition Parties and the PAP in Singapore* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2004), 55.

¹⁴² Rodan, *Transparency and Authoritarian Rule*, 19

of subversive publications.¹⁴³ This Act was employed in 1963 on PAP's critics and adversaries in Operation Cold Store, involving the arrest of 111 people, including nine journalists from the Chinese, English and Malay-language print media.¹⁴⁴

In the early 1970s, the domestic media was still not as docile as then PM Lee Kuan Yew would have liked, despite the legal intimidation. He thus took further action to curb the potential for independent media to criticise the government. Besides targeting the Chinese language newspapers that had served a voice for ethnic Chinese who felt marginalised under the PAP's English-educated, middle class leadership, Lee also aimed to bring down English-language newspapers that were occasionally critical of the government too.¹⁴⁵ In a sequence of events in 1971, four editors of Nanyang Siang Pau were detained under the ISA, while the English-language Eastern Sun and Singapore Herald were closed down due to their alleged links to foreign operatives that were either Communist or capitalists bent on undermining the Singapore economy.¹⁴⁶ Subsequent amendments to the legislation of print media permitted the government to own newspapers and essential tightened controls over the ownership of the newspapers.

The early nineties saw a change in leadership and a transition towards the politics of consultation. During the 1980s, then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong mooted for institutions which functioned as official feedback channels (such as the Feedback Unit) to be set up, as part of a more participative government. In 1991, then Brigadier-General George Yeo, Minister for Information and the Arts gave a

¹⁴³ Ibid., 20

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 20.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

speech on civil society,¹⁴⁷ identifying the PAP government as a “banyan tree” which did not allow other civil or civic institutions to grow in its daunting shade and had therefore to be pruned.¹⁴⁸ During this period, the strength of civil society in influencing the political sphere seemed to be growing. Civil society groups such as the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) and Nature Society of Singapore (NSS) were more active in their respective affairs. The former petitioned the government on a series of issues relating to gender equality and domestic violence, while the latter lobbied the government to adopt a Green Plan to conserve nature areas in the run-up to the 1992 Earth Summit at Rio,¹⁴⁹ as well as successfully resisted plans by the government to develop a golf course in a nature area.¹⁵⁰

However it can also be argued that PAP, in the name of opening up space for civil society, has also expanded its own space and rooting its ideological hegemony. Through the Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) scheme and the incorporation of wider community involvement in the Government Parliamentary Committees, individuals add particular expertise to the decision-making process on a non-confrontational basis, rather than to represent any constituency.¹⁵¹ On the political parties’ front, key opposition figures such as Tang Liang Hong, JB Jeyaratnam and Chee Soon Juan continue to be targets of legal action by the PAP and have been crippled by lofty legal damages.

¹⁴⁷ Yeo preferred the term “civic society” to “civil society”, most likely due to the political connotations of the latter.

¹⁴⁸ George Yeo, “Civic Society—Between the Family and the State”, *Speeches* (Ministry for Information and the Arts, Singapore) 15 (3) (1991), 82.

¹⁴⁹ For an overview of the Green Plan as finally adopted, see Ministry of Environment, Annual Report 1993 (Singapore, Ministry of the Environment, 1993), 11.

¹⁵⁰ Nature Society of Singapore (NSS), *Proposed Golf Course at Lower Peirce Reservoir: An Environmental Impact Assessment* (Singapore: NSS, 1992).

¹⁵¹ Rodan, “Internet and Political Control”, 67.

The international press has also not been spared the harsh treatment. Amendments to the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act in 1986 gave the Minister of Communications and Information the capacity to restrict the circulation of foreign publications in Singapore that were deemed to be engaging in domestic politics.¹⁵² The *Asian Wall Street Journal*, *Asiaweek* and *Far Eastern Economist Review* had their circulation significantly reduced after commenting unfavourably of the PAP and its politics. Further amendments in 1990 gripped foreign publications tighter to the jurisdiction of local courts, requiring them to secure an annual permit and deposit a substantial fixed bond toward any legal liabilities that might be incurred.¹⁵³ After expensive losses of access to Singapore's circulation and advertising markets, foreign publishers have generally been more cautious. However, the *International Herald Tribune* was filed with two expensive suits arising from different articles in 1994, charging sensitive issues such as PAP nepotism and the absence of judicial independence in Singapore.¹⁵⁴

OB Markers

Despite the government's rhetoric of "pruning the banyan tree", civil society continued to operate within legal and "soft" constraints. The legal restrictions include the ISA and the Societies Act, with the former providing the Minister of Home Affairs the power to detain any individual who is suspected to be conducting activities that threaten the social fabric of the country, while the latter requires that all groups of more than ten persons meeting regularly should be formally registered with the Registrar of Societies, besides prohibiting registered organisations to engage in

¹⁵² Ibid., 68.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

political activity and restricting their activities to cover only the issues relevant to their declared constituencies.

The ambiguous demarcation of “out-of-bound” (OB) markers is also part of Singapore’s political discourse, specifically relating to the government’s low threshold of political opposition. An often-cited account of the government’s intolerance of criticism is the “Catherine Lim Affair”, in which the government reacted strongly to Lim’s ruminations in *The Straits Times* on the difference in governing styles between Goh Chok Tong and Lee Kuan Yew. The government emphasised that there were “OB markers” for public discussion, in which the government welcomed constructive criticism while warning those who seemed to “take on” the government. The former PM, Goh, remarked that those who used snide remarks and mockery must expect a “very very hard blow from the Government in return”¹⁵⁵ and explained that he could not allow journalists, novelists, short-story writers of theatre groups to “set the political agenda from outside the political arena”.¹⁵⁶ Lim was therefore told to join a political party if she felt strongly about the issues she raised. This affair was perceived by the general citizenry as a warning from the government, about the topics on what they could or could not talk about. A similar case happened several years later, involving a popular blogger and his column in the mainstream media, which is discussed in Chapter Five.

This ambiguous code of conduct not only has implications on the perception of the citizens, but also the mass media, in which journalists and editors, who play a major role in shaping public opinion, are hesitant on taking risks to speak against

¹⁵⁵ “PM: Debate Yes, but Do Not Take on Those in Authority as ‘Equals’”, *The Straits Times*, 24 January 1995.

¹⁵⁶ “PM Goh Remains Committed to Consultation and Consensus Politics”, *The Sunday Times*, 4 December 1994.

government policies, thus explaining the limited political commentary on local politics in the mainstream media. It is therefore not surprising that the official national ideology, known as “Shared Values”, discourage criticism and general dissent. One of the ideas include “consensus, not contention”, which are supposed to be perceived as antagonistic concepts. This view is based on the rhetoric that the profusion of opinions may hinder policy making, and that contention might lead to a chaotic society, given a multi-cultural backdrop that demands sensitivity and toleration.

These OB markers apply not only to speech, but also other forms of expression. For instance, some “white elephant” cut-outs were placed at the Buangkok MRT station in August 2005, a creative attempt to demonstrate unhappiness over the delay in opening of the station. The grassroots leader behind this “light” form of dissent was issued a stern warning from the police. The following January, a group of secondary school students were inspired by this incident to sell “save the white elephants” T-shirts at a carnival to celebrate the station’s opening. To the astonishment of many, they were also warned by the police that they needed a fund-raising permit before they could sell the T-shirts in public. Furthermore, the police advised the organisers that the wearing of the T-shirts en masse may be misconstrued by some as an offence under the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) (Assemblies and Processions) Rules.¹⁵⁷ This incident seemed to account for the unsuccessful attempts of similar (silent) “demonstrations”, and reinforces the “culture of fear” and silence that pervades the average Singaporean.

In light of these legal and informal restrictions, civil society associations are restrained in their attempts to offer alternate voices and critique of governance.

¹⁵⁷ Val Chua, “Teens’ White Elephant T-shirt Venture Gets Police Attention”, *Today*, 14 January 2006. <<http://www.todayonline.com/articles/95206.asp>> (6 March 2006).

Through major agents of socialisation such as schools and the media, students and the populace in general are trained not to question authority. Consequently, people do not speak publicly for fear of real or imagined repercussions, including being blacklisted by authorities. It is thus interesting to examine the Internet as a site for the hidden transcript, as a source of alternate voices, constructive criticism, as well as a “safer” public sphere where the authorities have less penetration and authority over, and where people are generally more daring in terms of political expression. According to the Media Development Authority (MDA), “Internet Content Providers are not disallowed from discussing politics or social issues. However, the laws of the land will continue to apply.”¹⁵⁸

Cyberspace: An Alternative Space

The Singapore government, which has long controlled its local print and broadcast media, has invested billions in its Internet infrastructure to become an “intelligent island”. The government in its bid to embrace new advances in information technology has upgraded information technology infrastructure to facilitate the creation of a network society. This has inevitably developed a relatively technologically-savvy population, and cyberspace can be seen as an alternate public sphere that could change the dynamics of Singapore politics. However, cyberspace is yet another arena in which the state attempts to dominate with the means of laws and “soft” restraints.

While one can be sued for making racist and libellous remarks, both on- and offline, under the Sedition and Defamation Acts respectively, no netizen has got into

¹⁵⁸ Clarence Chang, “Racist blogs Are Not Allowed But..Will Blogs on Politics Be Shut Down?” *The New Paper*, 15 September 2005.

trouble because of strictly “political” comments, and this is despite the many blogs, forums and other websites filled with provocative, critical commentaries, and sometimes even libellous entries about Singapore politicians, parties and policies.¹⁵⁹ In the last two years, political blogs have become regular features at elections in the US, UK and Australia and have arguably played a part in the 2006 GE in Singapore.

In the past decade, Internet-based organizations such as *Sintercom* were seen as contributing to a re-emerging civil society. This momentum was kept up when more initiatives such as *TC* and *Singapore Window* presented independent news and public forums that gave Singaporeans a chance to read and express criticism of government policies and actions within a domestic online environment. These sites exploited a grey area in the regulations, operating on the basis that such sites had not been specifically forbidden. Satirical website *TalkingCock.com* parodies politics in Singapore, while online newsgroups like *Singapore Review* and alternative websites such as *New Sintercom*, *The Void Deck*, *Singaporeans for Democracy* and *LittleSpeck* put up critical and investigative articles, focusing on local social and political issues, materials that would not be published in the Singapore press because of the risk of legal repercussion.

The Internet has indeed expanded the scope for the expression of political views, and the convenient dissemination of, and access to, information and even resistance. Additionally, these sites have been relatively safe spaces to voice dissent as opposed to publicly articulated views that are systematically challenged as in the case of the “Catherine Lim affair”. The advent of the Internet has also seemed to present a new reality for the ruling party because the easy access to alternative sources

¹⁵⁹ This refers to the individual comments posted on websites, blogs and forum and does not include websites that are required to register.

of information effectively mitigates the ideological hegemony that the PAP enjoys. Although legal and administrative measures have been taken to control the space for civil society and to hinder political mobilisation, the PAP's strategy to limit the political impact of the Internet is severed by the fact that it is technically impossible to monitor all websites. In establishing the "Speaker's Corner", the authorities are aware that this was something that they have to confront, since there have been many of such virtual corners in cyberspace.

Policing Cyberspace

The Internet has not escaped the unyielding grip of the PAP and is regulated just like the mainstream media. As George Yeo opined, "Censorship can no longer be 100 percent effective, but even if it is only 20 percent effective, we should not stop censoring."¹⁶⁰ The Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA) is in charge of regulating the Internet, concentrating on areas that may undermine public morals, political stability or religious harmony in Singapore.¹⁶¹ Besides the symbolic banning of about a hundred pornographic sites, the government has stated that the Internet will stay open. However, there is evidence to suggest that such claims should be re-examined.

Rodan notes that the most powerful force for self-censorship is possibly through the technical capacity for surveillance through government-owned Internet access service providers (ISPs).¹⁶² In 1994, a government official instructed a local ISP to scan 80,000 e-mail accounts of university lecturers, supposedly in a hunt for

¹⁶⁰ "Singapore to Censor Part of Internet," *United Press International*, 7 July 1995, quoted in Rodan, "Internet and Political Control", 80.

¹⁶¹ Singapore Broadcasting Authority, "Singapore Broadcasting Authority Statement on the Internet," *The Straits Times Interactive*, 5 May 1996.

¹⁶² Rodan, "Embracing Electronic Media", 512.

pornographic materials.¹⁶³ This demonstration of technical capability to search files on such a large scale does have an alarming effect, even after the government stated that it did not intend any further unannounced searches. Rodan also notes that even a special police task force had been assigned to “patrol the alleys of cyberspace to contain illegal activities”.¹⁶⁴ In May 1999, the IT Security Unit of Singapore’s Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) secretly wandered into the files of 200,000 private computers. This breach was discovered by a private computer enthusiast, which obligated the government to announce that SingNet, the Internet arm of the largely state-owned telecommunications giant SingTel, had breached security protocols,¹⁶⁵ although the latter explained that it was a virus detection exercise.¹⁶⁶

These episodes and the regulatory regime of the SBA display the need for caution for critical political engagement. Rodan highlights self-censorship as the main technique of control, rather than “technical interceptions or extensive prosecutions”.¹⁶⁷ He draws attention to the culture of fear already existent on cyberspace and illustrates that with a case of a contributor of *soc.culture.singapore* who voiced his concern his personal experience of being under close surveillance by the authorities, especially because of his job as a civil servant. Rodan is convinced that such claims are difficult to authenticate, but what matters more is the impact these messages have on other users and even suggests that it is possible that some

¹⁶³ Wong, 383. See also Rodan, “Internet and Political Control”, 76-77.

¹⁶⁴ Chong Chee Kin, “Patrolling the Alleys of Cyberspace” and “Singapore Hackers ‘Brilliant’”, *The Straits Times Interactive*, 2 November 1998. Quoted in Rodan, “Embracing Electronic Media”, 512.

¹⁶⁵ Wong, 383.

¹⁶⁶ Stan Sesser, “SingNet Apologises for Virus Scanning”, *The Asian Wall Street Journal Weekly*, 10 May 1999.

¹⁶⁷ Rodan, “Embracing Electronic Media”, 512.

claims are fabricated by or on behalf of authorities with the aim of creating apprehension and promoting self-censorship.¹⁶⁸

Regulations add pressure to practise self-censorship at all levels—from the Internet user to the ISPs. The 1996 regulations stipulate that firstly, local Internet Service operators and content providers will have to be licensed and subject to SBA-imposed conditions.¹⁶⁹ Secondly, all political parties, religious organizations, and other organizations and individuals with Web pages discussing religion or politics must register with the SBA.¹⁷⁰ Thirdly, service providers must take action to prevent the availability of “objectionable content” which threatens public and national defense, racial and religious harmony, and public morals. This includes “contents which tend to bring the Government into hatred or contempt, or which excite disaffection against the Government” and “contents which undermine the public confidence in the administration of justice.”¹⁷¹ The SBA will supply information on blacklisted sites, but ISPs will need to also exercise judgement in the provision of subscription services. The use of proxy servers is required of commercial Internet access service providers, while public providers are required to connect with the proxy server and install software to restrict access to objectionable content.¹⁷² Fourthly, licensees are required to provide details on readers targeted by their service; the names of editors, publishers, and organizations involved in the service; and keep detailed records on subscribers and their Internet use to assist with investigations.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ Anonymous posting to *soc.culture.singapore*, 29 October 1995. Quoted in Rodan, “Internet and Political Control”, 78.

¹⁶⁹ Rodan, “Internet and Political Control”, 81.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

Finally, electronic newspapers targeting subscriptions in Singapore must be registered and subject to local media laws under the Newspapers and Printing Presses Act.¹⁷⁴

The other laws such as the Penal Code, Defamation Act, Sedition Act and Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act apply as well. Rodan also attributes the amendments to the Parliamentary Elections Act, which had implications to both political party websites and non-party political associations' websites, to the PAP's worry that the Internet facilitate competition with the ruling party by enabling critics to get around the dominance of the government-controlled domestic media and "the potential of the Internet to foster a genuine civil society by challenging the officially enforced compartmentalization of political engagement and by facilitating collective political action".¹⁷⁵

The spirit of the Societies Act has been integrated into legislation and regulations affecting the Internet. The regulations in place include the requirement for websites of political parties and religious organizations to be registered and licensed. Rodan highlights an observation made by local journalist Koh Buck Song that the regulations "have a much more explicit party-political component in calling for protecting the security and stability of the 'government' as opposed to the 'nation'".¹⁷⁶ The barring of content that "tends to bring the Government into hatred or contempt, or excites disaffection against it" could "grant unchecked—possibly uncheckable power to the ruling body to deny any criticism of it on the Internet".¹⁷⁷ The extent of the control includes penalties applied at various levels of information

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Rodan, "Embracing Electronic Media", 515.

¹⁷⁶ Rodan, "Internet and Political Control", 82.

¹⁷⁷ Koh Buck Song, "Internet OB Markers Should Protect Nation," *The Straits Times*, 5 August, 1996, Life, 4. Quoted in Rodan, "Internet and Political Control", 82-83.

provision and authorship such as Internet service provision and newsgroup hosting and legislation that are open to wide interpretation.¹⁷⁸

The fate of *Fateha.com* was an example of how overstepping political boundaries in private internet postings constituted a real risk. In July 2002, the police investigated Zulfikar Mohamad Shariff, the former chief of the Singapore Muslim rights activist website on the grounds of criminal defamation. In early 2002, Zulfikar questioned the government's actions in denying the rights of Muslim girls to wear their *tudung* (traditional headscarves) to schools. Although this incident was particularly sensitive in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks and the uncovering of the Jemaah Islamiah terrorist plot in Singapore in January 2002, the investigation seemed to have more to do with political annoyance rather than a social threat.¹⁷⁹ Zulfikar was also under investigation for articles posted on the website questioning Muslim Affairs Minister Yaacob Ibrahim's standing as leader of the Malay/Muslim community, and criticising the appointment of Ho Ching (the wife of present-PM Lee) as Executive Director of Temasek Holdings.¹⁸⁰ The probes intensified the next day when the police confiscated the computer of another man, Robert Ho, for two articles that appeared in June 2002 in *soc.culture.singapore*, a popular internet newsgroup. The articles allegedly defamed government leaders and officials.¹⁸¹

The cases of *Fateha*, *Sintercom* and the *TC* (which are examined in Chapter Three), exemplify the pressures towards moderation and self-censorship on the

¹⁷⁸ Rodan, "Internet and Political Control", 88.

¹⁷⁹ Lee, "Internet Use", 82-83.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 83. For a clearer insight of the investigations, see A. Osman, "Ex-Fateha Chief Investigated for Net Comments", *The Straits Times Interactive*, 4 July 2002.

¹⁸¹ See A. Osman, "Second Man Questioned on Net Postings", *The Straits Times Interactive*, 5 July 2002. This incident is elaborated in Chapter Four.

Internet. The Foucauldian notion of “discipline” and auto-regulation due to the Internet as surveillance and policing technology, embodying the key elements of the panopticon, explain the political reality in the Singapore context.¹⁸² It is argued by Lee that “the Internet in Singapore is a highly contested space where the art of governmentality, in the forms of informational controls and ‘automatic’ modes of regulation, is tried, tested and subsequently perfected.”¹⁸³

[T]he major effect of the Panopticon [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary. [...] It is an important mechanism, for it automizes and disindividualizes power.¹⁸⁴

Thus, it seems that “auto-regulation, as a disciplinary tactic to ensure a panoptical, and thus automatic, functioning of power and control” allows for the “formation and operation” of what Lee calls “gestural politics” in Singapore¹⁸⁵: although citizens are encouraged to embrace the *Singapore 21* vision with regards to becoming active citizens, and although a Speakers’ Corner had been opened up, citizens are periodically issued stern warnings about “OB-markers and other state-defined conditions”.¹⁸⁶ Thus it is necessary to analyse the climate of auto-regulation, and whether it pervades the various entities of the Internet and if the “concept of technological auto-regulation that is conducted both ‘visibly’ and ‘unverifiably’ with regard to the Internet in Singapore [that] hinges on an ideology of control with the sole aim of producing law-abiding, self-regulated and therefore economically productive, docile and compliant citizens”¹⁸⁷ has been effective.

¹⁸² Lee, “Internet Control”.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 74.

¹⁸⁴ Foucault, 201-202.

¹⁸⁵ Lee, “Politics of Civil Society”, 110.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Lee, “Internet Control”, 86.

Elections and the Internet: “New Media, Same Rules”¹⁸⁸

The government has also taken notice of the Internet as a potential vote-swaying arena. It recognises that the Internet enables critics to get around the dominance of the government-controlled domestic media and worries about the potential of the Internet to foster a genuine civil society in terms of facilitating collective political action.¹⁸⁹

Internet election advertising was allowed for the first time during the GE2001, but it was restricted only to political parties, candidates and election agents. A “positive list” set out the types of election advertising allowed. They were allowed to carry texts, such as party manifestos, candidates’ write-ups and photos on their websites. However, the amendments of 2001 to the Parliamentary Elections Act banned the use of the Internet by political parties for any posting of opinion poll results and required the appointment of moderators to chat rooms and discussion forums who had to keep records of all exchanges and accept responsibility of content.¹⁹⁰ The amendments also barred websites of registered non-party political associations and all other websites from political promotion, advertising, or campaigning during elections, meaning that neither public nor private interest groups could use the Internet to support or oppose any candidate or party.

In 2006, further regulations were stipulated, including an update concerning the proliferation of podcasts. Dr Lee Boon Yang, Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, stated that those deemed to be promoting a certain

¹⁸⁸ This headline is taken from a heading of a newspaper report of an email interview of Minister Lee Boon Yang with Sue-Ann Chia, “New Media, Same Rules”, *The Straits Times*, 11 April 2006.

¹⁸⁹ Rodan, “Embracing Electronic Media”, 515.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

political line will be approached by the MDA to register their sites with authorities, and would subsequently not be allowed to engage in Internet advertising during the election period.¹⁹¹ This means that they cannot put up material related to the election that purveys a particular line. Neither can they have podcasts or videocasts containing content such as election rallies or views on the polls. Lee explained that the rationale for registration is that “political debate ought to be kept serious and those who participate in it must take responsibility and cannot remain anonymous. He added that podcasts¹⁹² and videocasts are banned as “they have a greater impact because of the nature of the medium”, that they have “a greater power to influence”.¹⁹³ It is for the same reason that party political films and videos are not allowed as there is a worry that such material may masquerade as objective documentaries, but are in fact “slanted propaganda to draw attention and score political points”.¹⁹⁴ Lee explained that “such videos cannot be easily countered with rational written arguments” and that they “evoke visceral emotions and are not conducive to a calm and dispassionate treatment of politics”.¹⁹⁵ He used the film *Fahrenheit 9/11* in “its selective use of images and out-of-context quotations”¹⁹⁶ to exemplify this point. These reasons are among those that the state evokes to perpetuate the idea of the Internet as irrational, chaotic and unreliable. These claims will be examined closely in the Chapters Three to Five.

The rules also are quite vague, as it is not clear how the line between discussion and “persistent propagation” of a political message are drawn. According

¹⁹¹ Sue-Ann Chia, “Govt Explains Ban on Political Podcasts”, *The Straits Times*, 15 April 2006.

¹⁹² Podcasting is the distribution of audio and video content via subscription over the Internet.

¹⁹³ Sue-Ann Chia, “Govt Explains Ban”.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

to Senior Minister of State for Information, Communications and the Arts Dr. Balaji Sadasivan, bloggers can discuss politics but have to register their site if they “persistently propagate, promote or circulate political issues relating to Singapore”.¹⁹⁷ It will be subsequently shown in the next few chapters how netizens harp on the term “persistently political” with reference to his statements. Some bloggers also claim that their views do not incite political fervour and found it not necessary to register their blogs¹⁹⁸ while many defied the rules blatantly. Despite the ban, SDP chief Chee Soon Juan uploaded a podcast of a speech criticizing the PAP for “going all out to crush the SDP” onto his party’s website, claiming that the Government had banned podcasting “knowing full well” that the SDP had set up podcast facilities last year to campaign for GE2006.¹⁹⁹ The new ban on new media has significantly highlighted a glaring contradiction in the PAP's policy rhetoric and its on-the-ground actions. Recent policy initiatives have aimed, at least conceptually, to promote creativity, yet the state has imposed more measures to stifle expression to further its own interests. The next chapter provides a brief overview of the Singapore elections and the activities surrounding GE2006.

¹⁹⁷ Sue-Ann Chia, Aaron Low and Serene Luo, “Opposition Parties Slam Podcast Ban Rule”, *The Straits Times*, 5 April 2006.

¹⁹⁸ Serene Luo, “No Thanks, We Don’t Want to Sign Up” *The Straits Times, (Digital Life)*, 11 April 2006.

¹⁹⁹ Lee Ching Wern, “Chee Puts Out Podcast Despite Ban” *Today*, 25 April, 2006.

CHAPTER THREE

“Alternative” Websites

The notion that there is a widespread culture of apathy and a lack of strategies of resistance in Singapore must be reconsidered upon examining the vast array of websites that offer alternative news, socio-political commentary pieces and satire that the mainstream press shies away from. This chapter explores the various modes of counter-hegemonic resistance in these alternative web sites, focusing on *TalkingCock.com*, *New Sintercom* and *TC*. In monitoring the activity of these websites around the electoral campaigning period, this paper traces online discourse and the dynamics of resistance between citizen and state.

However, in order to better analyse such Internet activity in relation to GE2006, it would certainly be useful to understand the nature of Singapore’s elections, as well as its unique electoral procedures, and specific incidents that transpired during and surrounding the election period.²⁰⁰

Singapore Political Elections

The PAP has maintained its political dominance by developing voter support through effective administration and sound economic policies, and through manipulating the electoral framework—by intimidating organised political opposition, and by circumscribing the boundaries of legitimate political discourse and action. As a consequence of these and other factors, opposition parties have been unable to tangibly challenge the ruling party—and this lack of resistance has been attributed by

²⁰⁰ This will also be taken up in Chapters Three to Five.

the PAP to disorganisation, weak leadership amongst opposition ranks, and lack of persuasive alternative policies.

Singapore holds regular elections and adopts a first-past-the-post electoral system. The parliamentary term lasts for no more than five years after the first sitting of parliament following a general election. However, the lack of opposition can also be traced to various electoral rules and procedures that can be construed as favouring the incumbent. These include: short notice given about periodic changes to electoral seats within Group Representative Constituencies (GRCs); frequent changes to the boundaries separating constituencies by the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee effectively disadvantaging the opposition; the ruling that a hefty deposit of S\$13,500 must be paid for a candidate to stand for elections, a sum which most disadvantaged opposition members might be unable to pay (the sum will be forfeited if the candidate fails to obtain at least one-eighth of the votes); the abrupt one-week period allowed for electoral campaigning, which does not allow sufficient time for the opposition to extend their reach to the masses; the formation of large GRCs, which allows new candidates to rely on political “heavyweights” such as Minister Mentor (MM) Lee, Senior Minister (SM) Goh and PM Lee to anchor the group’s win (with their limited resources and candidates, opposition parties have a slightly better chance of winning seats from Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) than GRCs—GRCs are usually constituencies with walkovers).

A few significant events stand out in GE2006. In February, PM Lee delivered the country’s Budget statement, releasing details of a S\$2.6 billion on a “progress package” to be given out a week before the GE2006 (the package included Central Provident Fund (CPF) top-ups, workfare bonuses and bonuses for national

servicemen). Opposition candidates such as WP's Low Thia Kiang construed this as a vote-winning ploy by the PAP, a charge which the latter dismissed.²⁰¹ This incentive did not seem to be effective however, because for the first time since 1988, the PAP was not returned to power from walkovers on Nomination Day, and the opposition contested for more than half of the total amount of seats.

The James Gomez saga also stood out during the elections period. Gomez, a WP candidate, claimed that the Elections Department had misplaced a set of forms he had submitted a few days earlier. The forms were vital in certifying him as a minority candidate if he was to stand in a ward that required one. After claiming that they did not receive the forms, the Elections Department released CCTV footage to the media of evidence that Gomez did not submit the forms, but had instead placed them in his bag. This footage was subsequently televised repeatedly by the mainstream media during the elections period and despite apologising to the staff of the Elections Department, the PAP went on the offensive, with the MM Lee calling him a liar and other PAP candidates following suit in highlighting the matter to the media.

Another incident that raised eyebrows amongst the opposition as well as netizens, was the National Kidney Foundation (NKF) scandal. The NKF controversy started in 2005 following the collapse of a defamation trial brought against journalist Susan Long and Singapore Press Holdings (SPH). This caused a massive backlash and fallout with donors to the charity, subsequently resulting in the resignation of Chief Executive Officer T.T. Durai and its board of directors. Allegations surrounding the scandal included false declarations on the shelf life of NKF's reserves, its patient numbers, an alleged installation of a golden tap in Durai's private office suite, his

²⁰¹ "PAP dismisses claims that Progress Package is vote buying", *Channel NewsAsia*, 7 April 2006. <<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/202053/1/.html>> (20 April 2006).

salary, the use of company cars and first-class air travel. Former NKF patron Tan Choo Leng, wife of SM Goh, sparked further outrage when she remarked that Durai's pay of S\$600,000 per annum was “peanuts”.

The upgrading of public housing, including the Lift Upgrading Programme (LUP), was another major issue during GE2006. The PAP had tied the scheduling of housing upgrades to the number of votes the party received in the election, arguing that those who supported its various policies, including upgrading, should be given priority. In hotly-contested wards such as Aljunied GRC, Potong Pasir and Hougang SMCs, upgrading seemed to be a carrot dangled by the PAP. This was taken up as an issue by opposition parties in their campaign speeches.

With this context in mind, the next section and subsequent two chapters will analyse the modes in which citizens have taken to the Internet to practise “everyday forms of resistance”, with textual evidence being provided of such “weapons of the weak”—strategies and tactics that Singaporean netizens employ to overcome regulations imposed to stifle dissent. These chapters thus illustrate the Gramscian “war of position” at play whereby citizens who practise such forms of resistance are trying to manoeuvre the battlefield, exploiting weaknesses in the opposition camp, to win the war.

***TalkingCock.com*: Not Just “Talking Cock”²⁰²**

TalkingCock.com, was founded in 2000 by husband-and-wife team Colin Goh and Woo Yen Yen “as a forum for friends to share jokes with each other”.²⁰³ It has since

²⁰² According to “The Oxford English Dictionary”, “talking cock” is a local Singaporean term meaning either to talk nonsense or to engage in idle banter.

²⁰³ *TalkingCock.com* <www.talkingcock.com> (20 March 2006). Goh was a former practicing attorney who has turned to full-time writing, producing and directing. Woo is an Assistant Professor at Long

then “garnered millions of page views and a subscribership in the tens of thousands”.²⁰⁴ This US-based website prides itself as “Singapore’s most powerful²⁰⁵ satirical humour website”, and serves an “alternative” source of information, albeit in a tongue-in-cheek manner. Besides providing local and international “news” articles with irreverent twists that seek to make fun of Singaporean society and politics in a genial way, there are columns and other features such as the “Coxford Singlish Dictionary”, a compilation of words that have been used in “Singlish”, a colloquial fusion of Chinese dialects, Malay and other languages.

One obvious and unique feature of this website is the use of Singlish in “quoted” material. The use of Singlish has been a controversial topic in the past decade, and the state has sought to promote Standard English despite recognising the prominence of Singlish in shaping national identity. The Coxford Singlish Dictionary, a lexicon of Singapore's vernacular English, is thus seen as the anti-thesis to the state’s agenda of discouraging Singlish because it is regarded as grammatically unsound, crass, and crudely put, a bastardization of Standard English. The state has advanced the argument that Singlish is a stumbling block to proper communication with non-Singlish-speaking foreigners, and its continued use will ultimately disadvantage Singapore economically. It is therefore to no surprise that some articles featured on the website, parody local politics and politicians from both of the ruling party and opposition, and are often written in Singlish, a blatant retort to state directives.

Island University in New York where she teaches graduate courses in curriculum theory, history and design. See <<http://www.colinandyenyen.com/wordpress/about/>> 1 March 2007

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ “Powderful” is simply a deliberate misspelling of the word “powerful”, most commonly used to imitate (and perhaps poking fun of) those who cannot pronounce “powerful” in a proper manner.

TalkingCock.com maintains that it is not a political website, but that is highly disputable. By sometimes using crude humour to convey ideas, and by distorting or fabricating names of mocked personalities, the website cleverly employs humour for legal protection. Although many prominent personalities have been parodied, this website has not been subjected to any state penalty. While the people behind the website “believe in freedom of expression and celebrating the uniqueness of Singaporeans”, and aim to “build a community of Singaporeans with a sense of humour and who enjoy life in all its complexity” by writing articles “which poke fun at local events and happenings”, they claim not to be writing mere nonsense for “satire is always rooted in reality”.²⁰⁶ They do, however, take pains to explain how *TalkingCock.com* is not a political website as “it has no political agenda of its own”, and argue that it is “only” satirical, “engag[ing] in social comment through the use of biting humour”, which may sometimes include commenting on politics.²⁰⁷ The website states:

1. Under the Singapore Constitution, citizens have the right to freedom of expression.
2. The content in TalkingCock is not of the sort that justifies abridging this fundamental right under the Constitution. It does not threaten Singapore's national security, foreign relations, public order or morality, and it is ludicrous to believe it does or ever will. Nor is it defamatory as our articles are clearly stated to be purely fictitious and humorous and not to be relied on. Frivolity and irreverence are not illegal, and a citizen has no legal right not to be outraged or offended.”
3. If any site with any political content is considered 'political', then all newspaper sites are also political. And if sites like TalkingCock or Sintercom are regulated, so should the Straits Times, The New Paper, Project Eyeball and Young PAP.
4. We believe the citizens of Singapore are now intelligent enough to cast their votes on the basis of issues, and not uncorroborated rumour. In any event, it should be the duty of political parties to address issues or rumours rather than seeking prophylactically to quell opinion.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ *TalkingCock.com*,
<http://www.talkingcock.com/html/faq.php?myfaq=yes&id_cat=1&categories>About+TalkingCock.com> (31 May 2006).

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

It is thus apparent that the editors understand that they cannot be prosecuted for they are within the “safety zones” of humour, fiction, frivolity and irreverence. The employment of legal terms to argue against censorship and regulation of the website, parallels Kevin O’Brien’s notion of “rightful resistance” in which the editors employ “rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb political or economic power” with “the innovative use of laws, policies, and other officially promoted values to defy “disloyal” political and economic elites”; using “recognized principles to apply pressure on those in power who have failed to live up to some professed ideal or who have not implemented some beneficial measure.”²⁰⁹

In other words, rightful resistance works when the editors make “legitimate” claims, appealing to the ruling elites through invoking official laws, regulations, or policies. They usually frame their claims with reference to government rhetoric and since they often demand little more than meticulous enforcement of existing commitments, theirs is a defiance based on strict adherence to established values.²¹⁰ The owners of the website frame their activities (of contention) by combining legal tactics with political pressure. Rightful resisters assert their claims “largely through approved channels and use [the] regime’s policies and legitimating myths to justify their defiance”, recognising that “the very symbols embraced by those in power can be a source of entitlement, inclusion, and empowerment”.²¹¹ This reiterates the Gramscian notion that subordinate groups challenging hegemony frequently draw from their arsenal of dominant discourses, being “structured” by the dominant ideology.

²⁰⁹ O’Brien, 33.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

Despite the strong belief in freedom of expression, *TalkingCock.com* decided that it was too “chicken-hearted” and announced that it was “taking no chances” and that it would not “persistently propagate, promote or circulate” any “explicit political content” during the election period following the announcement.²¹² However, they add a disclaimer:

But as ‘explicit political content’ is open to wide interpretation...,²¹³ and the Gahmen²¹⁴ is probably too busy to clarify exactly what it means, we ask for our readers’ cooperation. Tolong,²¹⁵ tolong, when you read our stuff—which we have to remind you is completely frivolous, made-up nonsense that you should absolutely NOT rely on when casting your vote—PLEASE DO NOT BELIEVE, DEBATE OR DISCUSS IT. Do exactly what the Gahmen says. It’s safer.²¹⁶

This acts as an “escape clause” whereby it is made obvious that the articles are entirely fictional, and should not affect the citizens’ voting choices in GE2006, and thus should not be construed as a threat to the ruling party.

Although the website posted many satirical articles pertaining to the elections before and after the election campaigning week, there was almost no sign of any dissenting articles against the ruling party during the campaigning week itself. However, one fictitious news report surfaced to poke fun at James Gomez’s negligence in handing up the minority candidate forms²¹⁷ and touched on the unfairness of the elections. The story depicted the National University of Singapore (NUS) launching a minor programme in form-filling for political science majors, insinuating that the elections entailed massive amounts of bureaucratic paperwork;

²¹² This is in reference to Senior Minister of State for Information, Communications and the Arts, Balaji Sadasivan’s comments on the Internet rules on election advertising as elaborated in the previous chapter.

²¹³ Referring to a real photo of Balaji Sadasivan, the Senior Minister of State for Information, Communications and the Arts, and a doctored picture of Sadasivan’s face superimposed on a body clad only in swimming trunks.

²¹⁴ “Gahmen” is an intentional misspelling of the word “government”.

²¹⁵ Malay word for “please” or “help”.

²¹⁶ “Talking Cock to Chicken Out During Elections”, *TalkingCock.com*, 23 April 2006, <<http://www.talkingcock.com/html/article.php?sid=1932>> (31 May 2006).

²¹⁷ See chapter 2 which elaborates the background to this episode.

and a Masters programme in Elections Engineering, implying that there was unfair competition in the elections:

Prof. Wah explained that students who minor in Form Filling will take courses that cover the ins and outs of Political Donation Forms, Minority Community Status Forms, Certificates of Eligibility, Rally Site Booking Forms, Nomination Forms, Presidential Election Forms, Rally Speech Permits, and Permits to Apply for Permits (PAP).²¹⁸

“Prof. Wah also hinted that NUS would soon launch a Masters in Political Science (Elections Engineering) to cater to postgraduate students who intend to play an active role in organizing elections. Pork-barrel Politics, Gerrymandering, Internet Elections Advertising, Defamation Law, Formulating Complicated Elections Procedures, Misplacing Submitted Election Forms, and Creating Pointless Forms (CPF) are among the courses that are likely to be offered. Our postgraduate programme is of first-world standard. Nobody teaches this kind of thing anywhere else in the world,” said Prof. Wah as he gave reporters a wide smile.”²¹⁹

After polling day, the articles poured in with full force. In a “post-election round up”, there was an attempt to poke fun at the “good” mandate that the PAP had garnered. “Pak Cham Kai” reported that the Ministry of Education had lowered the ‘A1’ grade from 75 marks to 66.6 marks, poking fun at the 8.7% drop in PAP’s vote to 66.6%, with Lee Hsien Loong, fighting his first election as PM, as compared to the GE2001 when Goh Chok Tong was PM. This mocking obviously was in reference to the significant drop despite PM Lee’s declaration that the percentage was “good”. The article also went on to “quote” Minister of Education “Tarzan Shanmugaratnam” (referring to Minister of Education Tharman Shanmugaratnam) as saying that “one of the complaints we kept hearing from citizens was how tough our exam system is and how everything in life depends on our exam results... [thus we have] decided that whoever scores 66.6 marks will be considered to have scored a distinction instead of a mediocre B3 grade like before”.²²⁰

²¹⁸ “Chee Ken Wing”, “NUS to Launch Minor in Form Filling for Political Science Majors”, *TalkingCock.com*, 30 April 2006, <<http://www.talkingcock.com/html/article.php?sid=1933>> (10 May 2006).

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ “Pak Cham Kai”, “Post-Election Round Up”, 7 May 2006, *TalkingCock.com*

Satire was also evident in a “certainly not persistently political” Bollywood script proposal that made reference to the NKF issue, as well as the progress package.²²¹ The “arts” section also parodied the elections drama by concocting a fictitious Chinese opera or “wayang”, *The Dragon Stomps Again*.²²² The opera related how the 83-year old emperor was surrounded by “obedient technocrats who [wrote] nice flowery scrolls but [had] no experience in battle”—a statement possibly alluding to the fact that some PAP ministers were in wards that were not contested and thus, did not have to go through the rite of passage of elections. The “wayang” went on to depict a court filled with “82 eunuchs” who were whipped into submission and “two token noblemen” who were “allowed occasional appearances of independence as long as they [did] not stray into [sic] beyond the emperor dictates”—a plot that in essence made fun of the fact that the Singaporean cabinet was filled with ministers controlled by the party whip, with only two token NCMPs who were politically constrained

PM Lee’s inappropriate use of the word “fix” in a rally speech was also taken up in cyberspace. A fictitious article surfaced soon after, reporting that Parliament had proposed a pay rise for the PM to enable him to multitask after he complained that he was unable to formulate policies if he had to think about *fixing* the opposition and buying supporters’ votes.²²³ This article based was based on a rally speech made by the PM on 3 May 2006, where he said:

Suppose you had 10, 15, 20 opposition members in Parliament. Instead of spending my time thinking what is the right policy for Singapore, I'm going to spend all my

<<http://www.talkingcock.com/html/article.php?sid=1945>> (10 May 2006).

²²¹ “Chicken Little”, “Bollywood Script Discovered in Taxi in Singapore”, *TalkingCock.com*, 7 May 2006,

<<http://www.talkingcock.com/html/article.php?sid=1942>> (10 May 2006).

²²² “Chicken Little”, “Wayang Set for Repeat Performance in 2011”, *TalkingCock.com*, 7 May 2006,

<<http://www.talkingcock.com/html/article.php?sid=1944>> (21 May 2006).

²²³ “Nyonya Kway”, “PM to Get Pay Raise to Help Him Multitask”, *TalkingCock.com*, 21 May 2006,

<<http://www.talkingcock.com/html/article.php?sid=1956>> (30 May 2006). Emphasis added.

time thinking what's the right way to fix them, to buy my supporters['] votes, how can I solve this week's problem and forget about next year's challenges?²²⁴

The report went on to quote a fictitious character, the PM's spokesman, who was trying to gather support for the PM by giving additional justifications for the increase in pay: to "buy supporters' votes", "hire staff to fix his opponents" and to "hire staff to fix any of his Freudian statements like using the word "fix" instead of "counter" (this was obviously a jibe at PM Lee's press secretary who had previously issued a statement saying that he meant "counter" instead of the "direct language" of "fix").²²⁵

References to other issues were also encapsulated in this short "report", such as the Ministers' high salaries and their constant increments, the state's policies on "foreign talent", dispensing election "sweeteners" to buy votes, and the ruling party's unsavoury tactics towards the opposition. There is no doubt that the constant reference to key words like "fix" and "buying votes" will resonate in readers' minds and that the ruling party's excessive methods in dealing with the opposition will be internalised by the reader to some extent.

It is thus evident that political satires function well as a less-than-aggressive, albeit exaggerated, commentary tools, enabling people to convey sentiments and viewpoints effectively, and to speak about "taboo" issues. In the narration of abovementioned "absurd" stories, the hidden message of the ruling party's double standards and its harassment of the opposition is revealed, and this strategy is effective because of the play made on the word "political": the editors behind the website claim that the website is merely a satirical website and has no political agenda

²²⁴ Sharon Tong, "PM Lee says countries worldwide respect and admire Singapore's proven system" *Channel NewsAsia*, 3 May 2006.

<<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/206313/1/.html>> (10 May 2006).

²²⁵ "PM Lee Clarifies Words Used At Lunchtime Rally: Press Secretary" *Channel NewsAsia*, 5 May 2006, <<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/206662/1/.html>> (18 May 2006).

of its own, and yet, the parodies of personalities and the mockery of policies serve as political critique and resistance.

This strategy also works because it taps into pervading state rhetoric that if something is entertaining and frivolous, it is not to be taken seriously and it does not need to be addressed. Tactical prudence ensures that *TalkingCock.com* does not blurt out its hidden transcript overtly, but through the employment of humour and “dispelling” the importance of satire, they imply the sentiment that they are grudging conscripts to the performance. The state also appears to concede this pocket of space that resists it, since it relegates humour to entertainment and deems it of little political value. *TalkingCock.com* has managed to publish its satirical articles without becoming blocked and perhaps on the official transcript, its plea to the authorities has worked:

We urge the government to act with restraint as regulation of speech invariably restricts plurality of debate and will hamper the creation of an environment where citizens engage in dynamic and creative thought. It also makes us look very cock on the international stage, and unbecoming of a global, 21st century metropolis. The government has had a stellar record of economic achievement, and we hope they will match this in the social arena by demonstrating the tolerance of opinion and diversity that makes nations great, and not merely rich.²²⁶

The war of position seems to be enacted here: by alluding to government rhetoric of transforming Singapore into a creative global city, and by praising the record of the PAP and even by emphasising that they are not partisan in their satire as they also make fun of the Opposition, *TalkingCock.com* seems to have won this pocket of space, to the extent that state has not sought to take over this space. However, to ensure its long-term survival, *TalkingCock.com* has taken the side of caution, and during the election week it abstained from publishing more satirical articles, demonstrating that they are grudging conscripts to the performance.

²²⁶ TalkingCock.com, <http://www.talkingcock.com/html/faq.php?myfaq=yes&id_cat=1&categories>About+TalkingCock.com> (31 May 2006).

TalkingCock.com has been successful employing this strategy of humour and caution, knowing that any clampdown will be detrimental to its survival and thus *TalkingCock.com* can be seen as a strategic site between the public and hidden transcript where individuals can insinuate resistance in disguised forms.

The Reincarnation of *Sintercom*

An examination of the *Singapore Internet Community*, or *Sintercom*, reveals that the strategy of hosting websites overseas seems to grant it immunity. *Sintercom* was started in 1994 by Tan Chong Kee, who was based in Stanford at that juncture. He wanted to start “an independent forum for Singaporeans ... who did not find the country’s newspapers and broadcasters sufficiently reflective of the full range of public opinion”.²²⁷ Tan did not start out intending to exploit the internet’s potential for evading authority, rather, it was a regulatory loophole that allowed Tan and his collaborators to publish legally without a license.²²⁸ The editors did not hesitate to relocate the site from overseas campuses to Singapore when the opportunity arose, secured allies within the administrative elite to further their cause, and were even showcased on the official national homepage, *Singapore Infomap*.²²⁹ The editors also forged links with other groups in civil society through the *TWC* initiative, in which *Sintercom* served as the online publicity platform.²³⁰

Besides producing moderated and archived versions of *soc.culture.singapore*, *Sintercom* began *SGDaily*, an email service that disseminated articles on Singapore. Another feature included a *NOT the Straits Times Forum*, a section that published

²²⁷ George, *Contentious Journalism*, 100.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

contributions that were rejected or carried in edited form, by the letters page of *The Straits Times*. This was evidence of *Sintercom*'s status as a "contentious" medium "challenging the status quo", allowing readers to judge the extent of censorship of letters by the national newspaper, and to highlight cases of questionable journalism.²³¹ However, due to the impending elections in 2001, authorities demanded *Sintercom* to register, and the justification was that registration intended "to emphasize the need for content providers to be responsible and transparent when engaging in the propagation, promotion or discussion of political issues relating to Singapore".²³² Due to the conditions attached to being a registered site, and with the pressures of self-censorship, Tan decided to close down the site.

However, *Sintercom* was reborn as *New Sintercom* a week later, hosted on the Geocities service based in the US. This placed the site out of the jurisdiction of the Singapore authorities. It was run by an anonymous editor but had other contributors who were not as guarded about their identities. Singaporeans could still visit *New Sintercom* and have access to most of the *Sintercom* archive. This not only illustrated the resilience of the Internet media, but also the strength of *Sintercom*'s open, informal structure and its communal ownership.²³³ The site's content is based on the contribution of columnists, and it regularly features alternative opinions. Readers' comments on the site do not seem to reflect any form of self-censorship as well.

During the GE2006 period, the site was not registered, and the site owner claimed that MDA did not approach it to register.²³⁴ The campaigning period also saw

²³¹ Ibid., 102-103.

²³² Ibid., 115. Yvonne Ann Paglar, Letter from S.B.A to Tan Chong Kee and Wynthia Goh, 5 July 2001.

²³³ Ibid., 116.

²³⁴ "Newsintercom", "Online Electioneering", *Newsintercom*, 28 April 2006 <<http://www.newsintercom.org/index.php?itemid=433>> (20 May 2006).

new articles being posted, and the readers did not shy away from commenting on them, perhaps knowing very well that the site did not come under the jurisdiction of local authorities. Columns featured articles with headlines such as “How the Ruling Party twists the courts to their favour”,²³⁵ “Aljunied—the Battle of Red Cliff”,²³⁶ “Ward Upgrading and Singaporean Interests”²³⁷ with more articles rolling in after the polling results. The content of “Aljunied—the Battle of Red Cliff”, arguably constituted electoral advertising even though it did not sell a particular party per se, for it was certainly blatant in trashing a certain PAP candidate in the Aljunied ward, and praising a candidate and the rest of the team fielded by the WP as “ready”.

One of the major issues discussed among readers were the regulations governing the use of the Internet. As early as January 2006, *Yawning Bread*, a regular blogger,²³⁸ had already contributed an article regarding blogging and internet regulations during the elections period.²³⁹ He suggested grey areas of the legislation to exploit, such as the time-fence of “election period”, changing the time-stamp of commentaries to before the election period and setting up an anonymous blog on a foreign server that is untraceable but establish hyperlinks from the known blog to the anonymous blog. He was in effect promoting the exploitation of such technical ambiguities, and suggesting that these could be potential strategies of resistance.

This was taken from one of the replies of the site owner to questions posed by a *The Straits Times* reporter.

²³⁵ “SilentAssassin”, “How the Ruling Party twists the courts to their favour”, *Newsintercom*, 25 April 2006, <<http://www.newsintercom.org/index.php?itemid=430>> (20 May 2006)

²³⁶ “Breaking News”, “Aljunied--the Battle of Red Cliff”, *Newsintercom*, 1 May 2006, <<http://www.newsintercom.org/index.php?itemid=434>> (20 May 2006).

²³⁷ Tan Wei Hann, “Ward Upgrading and Singaporean Interests”, *Newsintercom*, 4 May 2006, <<http://www.newsintercom.org/index.php?itemid=437>> (20 May 2006).

²³⁸ See <www.yawningbread.org> and chapter 5 for further articles contributed by Yawningbread.

²³⁹ “Yawningbread”, “Blogging During Elections”, *Newsintercom*, 27 January 2006, <<http://www.newsintercom.org/index.php?itemid=402>> (20 May 2006).

The concern over internet regulations was also voiced by a regular contributor to the *Sintercom*. The columnist, Dharmendra Yadav posted the letter he sent to the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA), including the reply that he received.²⁴⁰ He requested that the authorities take measures to reform legislation on internet campaigning, as well as to manage media and media professionals that supported certain political parties so as to not compromise the interests of media consumers which included receiving “factual and objective” information. By publicising the correspondence (and in some cases, silence) from the relevant authorities such as MICA inform readers how the latter respond and correspondingly, how well the public opinion is taken into account by the government and to what extent do they act upon their promises. Yadav thus seems to have appealed to rightful resistance, applying pressure to those in power to enforce existing commitments, increasing the levels of public accountability.²⁴¹ He also furnishes the readers with details from an email interview with a local journalist to elaborate on the issue, stating that he was rather satisfied with the response from MICA, despite only getting a reply after his second letter to the Ministry.²⁴² The idea of allowing such information to be accessible to the general public would be unthinkable without the Internet.

By allowing visitors to *New Sintercom* to post their comments on the articles featured, readers are engaged in issues which makes the experience a rather interactive process. This is something not possible in the print media due to limited

²⁴⁰ “Dharmendra Yadav”, “Consult People on General Election Media and Internet Coverage”, *Newsintercom*, 9 May 2006, <<http://www.newsintercom.org/index.php?itemid=439>> (30 May 2006).

²⁴¹ This method of contention through the web is also highlighted by George in his discussion of *TC*. See George, *Contentious Journalism*, 126-127.

²⁴² “Dharmendra Yadav”, “Interview: Internet Campaigning and Media Bias: E-mail interview with Lee U-Wen of Today on 9 May 2006”, *Newsintercom*, 10 May 2006, <<http://www.newsintercom.org/index.php?itemid=445>> (31 May 2006).

space and self-censorship issues.²⁴³ In the article “Ward Upgrading and Singaporean Interests”²⁴⁴ the columnist makes a case for all tax-paying Singaporean, regardless of the wards they are in and their preferred political party to be considered equally for the utilisation of public funds for the purposes of upgrading of their living environment, particularly lift-upgrading for Housing Development Board (HDB) flats. Many responses followed this posting, which attacked various governmental policies.

Although *New Sintercom* seems to be safe from the jurisdiction of the local authorities, there are still remnants of fear of conforming to existing rules. A few days after polling day, a columnist sang the praises of WP candidate Sylvia Lim, and highlighted the fact that the article was posted after the GE, and that he was conforming to the rules of domination, adhering to the “public transcript”.²⁴⁵

Think Centre: Online Activism

Unlike *TalkingCock.com* that focuses on political satire and *Sintercom* that emerged from online communities, *TC's* website developed as an adjunct to traditional offline political activities. It has been registered as a society in 2001 by James Gomez, an activist who is currently a candidate of the WP.²⁴⁶ *TC's* motto conveys a pledge “Towards a Vibrant Political Society” and describes itself as “an independent, multi-partisan political non-governmental organization” which aims to “critically examine issues related to political development, democracy, rule of law, human rights and civil

²⁴³ Publishing one’s letter on *The Straits Times* forum also entails giving the editors leeway for further editing and censorship.

²⁴⁴ Tan Wei Hann, “Ward Upgrading and Singaporean Interests”, *Newsintercom*, 4 May 2006, <<http://www.newsintercom.org/index.php?itemid=437>> (20 May 2006).

²⁴⁵ “BREAKING NEWS”, “Sylvia as NCMP”, *Newsintercom*, 9 May 2006 <<http://www.newsintercom.org/index.php?itemid=443&catid=2>> (10 May 2006).

²⁴⁶ Gomez was the founder of *TC* and now acts as an advisor.

society.”²⁴⁷ *TC*’s activities include research, publishing, organising events and networking, and launched the website as a means of publicity and mobilisation.

The site’s role progressively grew to include the more journalistic function of reporting and commenting on current events, but based on a model of its activist roots. It blends advocacy into its journalism, breaching the mainstream media’s firewall between observation and participation.²⁴⁸ Besides featuring reports on *Politics 21*, a political education program, the website also publishes reports under *Human Rights Watch*, *Media Watch*, *Policy Watch* and *Election Watch*. These sections carry some original content but mostly reports and commentaries from other sources, such as international human rights groups, foreign publications and local press reports.

The media watch component highlighted a key element that *TC* was protesting against—the lack of political freedom in a society where vital avenues for political expression, including the press, were controlled by the state. This was illustrated by the mainstream media’s “blatant omissions to subtly pejorative framing” of the “Abolish ISA event” that was organised together with the *Open Singapore Centre* to mark International Human Rights Day.²⁴⁹ Although it had an online discussion board, its Speakers’ Corner Online forum, *TC* closed it down in response to the amendments of the Parliamentary Elections Act’s provisions on campaign advertising because it could not control what was said on the forum, and closing it was the only way to ensure that the site did not inadvertently contravene the new regulations. As the open forum function was not a key aspect of *TC*’s mission as it was for Sintercom, the

²⁴⁷ Think Centre, <<http://www.thinkcentre.org/aboutus/index.cfm>> (30 April 2006).

²⁴⁸ George, *Contentious Journalism*, 5.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

former did not shut down entirely like the latter did. During the campaign period of 2001, *TC* recognized that there was no clear definition of what comprised election advertising and thus opted to take the safer course of not updating its *Election Watch* section. This caution was reinforced as soon as the group was directed to take down an article entitled “Young Singaporeans Can the PAP Safeguard your Future?” The letter from the authorities notified *TC* that it had flouted the rules because the author was a candidate of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party.²⁵⁰

During the next round of elections, the *TC* editorials decided to a break “to avoid political campaigning”, and promised to return after the GE 2006 to examine Singaporean's choice.²⁵¹ Yet, articles pertaining to politics were still being posted, although they were not dissenting articles per se. For example, an editorial urged the citizenry to vote wisely and also subtly asked readers to look at the larger issues of human rights and political freedom instead of materialistic and municipal issues of upgrading, among others. Another example was an article by the foreign media reporting about a forum²⁵² held before the elections, “Singapore’s Ruling, Opposition Parties Debate Political Freedom”²⁵³ that focused on a few issues, one of which involved the nature of the climate of fear present in Singapore. Two earlier articles concerning the GE were posted within two weeks before the campaigning period. The first was comparing the ruling party with the opposition in terms of strategy, while the

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 126. Taken from “Shame Again, Elections Department!” *Think Centre*, 24 October 2001.

²⁵¹ “General Elections 2006”, *Think Centre*, 28 April 2006, <<http://www.thinkcentre.org/article.cfm?ArticleID=2736>> (20 May 2006).

²⁵² The forum was organised by the National University of Singapore Society which featured a panel comprising of Sin Kek Tong, chairman of Singapore People’s Party, Catherine Lim, a Singapore writer and political commentator, Singapore Democratic Party leader Chee Soon Juan and PAP MP Indraneel Rajah.

²⁵³ “Singapore GE2006: Debate on Political Freedom”, *Think Centre News*, 28 April 2006 <<http://www.thinkcentre.org/article.cfm?ArticleID=2735>> (20 May 2006).

Taken from Bloomberg <<http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=10000080&sid=a9FkT1og2axc>>

second editorial concerned the media as a determinant “that may boost or capitulate the Opposition’s electoral chances” and criticised the media for being biased in their reports, and often casting the Opposition in a negative light. Although the site was registered, it attempted locate and push the OB markers, publishing these articles that were political in nature.

TC also seized the opportunity to place foreign press articles before the campaign period, such as an article stating that international press freedom group *Reporters Without Borders* (RSF) had condemned Singapore’s restrictions on political discussions in blogs and websites ahead of general elections. It also highlighted that Singapore ranked 140th out of 167 countries in its annual press freedom index the previous year, alongside the likes of Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Egypt and Syria.²⁵⁴ Although *TC* did not flout regulations, its bold articles were certainly not helpless acquiescence to government intimidation, but an outright critique of the government’s stance.

Alternative Websites as Sites of Resistance

Although the group behind *TC* had been significantly limited by its circumstances, especially by its status as a registered site, this locally-hosted website shows Singaporeans that independent alternative views can be expressed without punishment, illustrating that boundaries of resistance were more elastic than assumed. The regulations imposed for the election campaign was thus more successful in impeding the website’s efforts to be an alternative source of political information during that period. Compared to the unregistered *New Sintercom*, *TC* had to

²⁵⁴ Think Centre, “Singapore Web Rules: Condemned” *Agence France Presse*, 9 April 2006, <<http://www.thinkcentre.org/article.cfm?ArticleID=2727>> (10 May 2006).

compromise in the field of struggle, threading the line more safely and abiding by the rules. However, it would be an understatement to state that the *TC* was severely limited by the regulations as it had moved into gear with the *Election Watch* series, a week-by-week editorials that centred on the opposition, well in advance and in anticipation of the elections. *TalkingCock.com* was more secure in its zone of being an “entertainment” site rather than a “serious” political website, therefore managing to circumvent the election regulations.

CHAPTER FOUR

Online Forums: Virtual Coffee Shops

Over the past decade, the virtual world has witnessed the emergence of countless online forums. Forums typically allow anyone to start a new discussion, otherwise known as a thread, or to reply to an existing thread. The range of topics discussed on forums is usually quite wide. Besides offering links to news from foreign media, providing an arena for an assortment of views to be aired, being a platform for socio-political commentary pieces and satirical articles that the state-controlled mainstream press does not offer, Singaporean online forums can also be viewed as online “coffee shops”.²⁵⁵ This chapter seeks to examine content on these online forums, laying out the strategies that “forumnites” use in everyday forms of resistance and illustrating the constant struggle for hegemony in such arena.

This chapter suggests that online forums are useful sites of resistance, as they function as arenas for discussion groups and allow for the alternative opinions less available in the offline world. It will also demonstrate how netizens engage in “coffee shop talk” in these sites by discussing and debating rules and processes of elections that have historically worked to the PAP's advantage, expressing unhappiness with the ruling party's policies and strategies during elections; discussing weaknesses of the opposition; posting news from alternative sources from the local mainstream media and other media sources, as well as recommending articles and discussion topics from

²⁵⁵ The term “coffee shops” used in this context refers to the informal dining places in various parts of Singapore, where it is a familiar sight to see various groups of people, often senior citizens, congregating to exchange views and comments on politics, amongst other topics. Coffee shops are thus perceived to be the traditional places of public discussion, where views are aired freely, away from state surveillance.

other forums and blogs. Although new legislations on electronic communications that are political in orientation outlaws all forms of citizen journalism related to the 2006 election, political banter did not disappear. Interestingly, the profiles of some of these forums have been raised by the mainstream media. One or two threads from Singaporean forum sites may be summarised and added to the *Webthread* section of *The Sunday Times* weekly; such threads selected are obviously never those that are perceived as too controversial due to mindfulness of ambiguous political OB markers.

sgForums: The Online “Speakers’ Corner”

Started in 1999, “Singapore’s Online Discussion Network” or *sgForums.com*, is a popular online forum which constitutes a network of online communities. Apart from having “chit-chat”, “aunt agony”, “cars”, “food” and “sports” sections, the site features a “politics” segment “Speaker’s Corner”, that enables one to “make a point” in “politics, government, education” and other related issues. Only registered members are allowed to post comments and any *sgForums* user can create a forum. He or she can assign up to three other users as moderators who have the authority to change, edit, lock or delete any topic in that forum.

The elections certainly stirred up many discussion topics, with many threads subsequently consolidated into two main topics by the moderators for neatness sake—“We want fair election” and “General Election 2006— Results”. As of 5 June 2006, these topics had 236 and 806 replies and 40866 and 14304 views respectively.

Sammyboy: The Online “Alfresco Coffee Shop”

Sammyboy’s Alfresco Coffee Shop was set up a few months after “Sam Leong” (or “YK Leong” as he revealed to the local press later) started the *Sammyboy* sex forum. According to an email interview with *The New Paper* which he published online, the forum “was created to cater for the spillover of non sex related discussions which were polluting the sex forum”.²⁵⁶ Like *sgForums*, *Sammyboy* test-controls a regime like Singapore. Over the years, *Sammyboy* has been morphing into an outlet where Singaporeans vent and satirise life in the city-state—a “no-go area, where the government’s patience has traditionally been pretty short”.²⁵⁷ Claiming that “the real Singapore is right here at Sam’s Coffee Shop” and that the forum “may be hard hitting at times”, he states that it exists for the “larger good” of Singapore society.²⁵⁸ According to “Leong”, he chose *Delphi Forums* because it was free, the messages did not expire, the IP address did not appear, and tools were provided which could be used to control access to the forum.²⁵⁹

soc.culture.singapore: the Alternative Newsgroup

soc.culture.singapore is a popular newsgroup that offers many topics for discussion. It spun off from “*soc.culture.asean*” in 1992, and postings on these newsgroups, which predated the www “occasionally ventured into free-for-alls on politics and current affairs.”²⁶⁰ In essence, newsgroups are a means of “public discussion” which resembles e-mail, and can be read by many around the world. One significant

²⁵⁶ “The Email exchanges which lead up to the New Paper Article on 3 Sep 2000”, *Sammyboy.com*, <<http://www.sammyboy.com/tnpinterview.html>> (20 May 2006).

²⁵⁷ Eric Ellis, “Asia Buzz: Sexy Singapore: Pushing the Boundary in the control-minded city-state” *Time Asia*, 16 January 2001 <<http://www.time.com/time/asia/asiabuzz/2001/01/16/>> (20 May 2006).

²⁵⁸ *Sammyboy.com*, <<http://forums.delphiforums.com/sammyboymod/start>>

²⁵⁹ “Sam’s Delphi Forum FAQ- Updated 29 Nov 2001”, *Sammyboy.com* <<http://www.asiangirlsnextdoor.com/forumfaq.html>> (20 May 2006).

²⁶⁰ George, *Contentious Journalism*, 79.

difference between forums and newsgroups or electronic mailing lists lies in the fact that the latter automatically delivers new messages to the subscriber, while forums require the member to visit the website, and check for new posts. Also, additional software, a “newsreader”, is usually required for participation in newsgroups, while visiting and participating in forums normally requires no additional software apart from a web browser.

During the GE2001, the authorities signalled that they were watching cyberspace and that dissent would not be tolerated. Just after the GE, Robert Ho Chong was sent to the Institute of Mental Health for psychiatric evaluation after allegedly posting inflammatory articles on the Internet. He was accused of posting the article “Break the Law and Get Away with It, Like PAP” on the *Singaporeans for Democracy* website and *soc.culture.singapore*, allegedly encouraging electors to enter polling stations without authority on Polling Day. This incident was classified as an attempt to incite violence or disobedience to the law which was likely to lead to a breach of peace.²⁶¹ The article was written with the intention of highlighting the hypocrisy of the ruling party, because some PAP ministers were seen entering polling stations without authority on polling day in 1997, and if what they did was not illegal, then the same should apply for all other Singaporeans.

Major Issues of Contention During the Election Season

During the 2006 election season, recurring issues of justice and unfair practices by the ruling party were raised in these forums. In *sgForums.com*, posts pertaining to the elections started as early as February with main topics of discussion being: the

²⁶¹ “Man allegedly “encouraged law-breaking on Web” *The Straits Times*, 18 November 2001.

unfairness of the GRC system as it favoured the incumbent;²⁶² the basis on which PM Lee appealed for votes for the PAP (that if PAP did not receive a strong mandate, it would signal higher political risks to potential foreign investors, thereby hurting the local economy);²⁶³ the PAP's "buying of votes" through the Progress Package, among other "goodies";²⁶⁴ the ministers' high salaries and their personal attacks against opponents;²⁶⁵ as well as other contradictions in the PAP's policies.²⁶⁶ Some even suggested boycotting the elections²⁶⁷ and using the Internet, e-mail and short message system (SMS) to launch a mass movement to demand for fair elections.²⁶⁸

In *Sammyboy*, the number of messages posted did not wane in the face of electoral regulations as well. On the contrary, many posts relating to the elections were put up with the central topics of discussion being: the ban on political podcasting,²⁶⁹ the use of new technologies to override regulations,²⁷⁰ and the eroding legitimacy of the PAP.²⁷¹

²⁶² "PRP", *SgForums.com*, 14 February 2006,

<http://www.sgforums.com/?action=thread_display&thread_id=178346> (20 April 2006).

²⁶³ "durai", *sgForums.com*, 2 May 2006,

<http://www.sgforums.com/?action=thread_display&thread_id=178346&page=7> (20 May 2006).

²⁶⁴ "I.M.ME", *sgForums.com*, 3 May 2006,

<http://www.sgforums.com/?action=thread_display&thread_id=178346&page=7> (20 May 2006).

²⁶⁵ "Heartlander", *sgForums.com*, 4 May 2006,

<http://www.sgforums.com/?action=thread_display&thread_id=178346&page=7> (20 May 2006).

²⁶⁶ "Sunnytv", *sgForums.com*, 5 May 2006,

<http://www.sgforums.com/?action=thread_display&thread_id=178346&page=8> (20 May 2006).

²⁶⁷ "tohyi", *sgForums.com*, 14 February 2006,

<http://www.sgforums.com/?action=thread_display&thread_id=178346> (20 April 2006).

²⁶⁸ "PRP", *sgForums.com*, 25 February 2006,

<http://www.sgforums.com/?action=thread_display&thread_id=178346&page=1> (20 April 2006).

²⁶⁹ "KnyghtRyder" *Sammyboy.com*, 25 April 2006,

<http://forums.delphiforums.com/n/main.asp?qu=elections&webtag=sammyboymod&ctx=search&cl=287006&af=31&o=relevance&be=0> (20 May 2006).

²⁷⁰ "Makapa", *Sammyboy.com*, 12 May 2006,

<<http://forums.delphiforums.com/n/main.asp?qu=elections&webtag=sammyboymod&ctx=search&cl=287006&af=31&o=relevance&be=0>> (20 May 2006) and "Wah Piangz", *Sammyboy.com*, 12 May 2006,

<<http://forums.delphiforums.com/n/main.asp?qu=elections&webtag=sammyboymod&ctx=search&cl=287006&af=31&o=relevance&be=0>> (20 May 2006).

²⁷¹ "PeasantJUDGE", "PAP: Judge and jury?", *Sammyboy.com*, 4 May 2006,

<<http://forums.delphiforums.com/n/main.asp?qu=elections&find=Search&webtag=sammyboymod&ctx=search&cl=287006&af=31&o=relevance&be=0>> (10 May 2006);

Like *sgForums* and *Sammyboy*, *soc.culture.singapore* hosted active discussions on politics during the election campaign. One can observe significant amounts of postings dissenting to the ruling party. The highlights of discussions include the PAP's control of the "weapon of mass deceptions"—the mainstream media;²⁷² the use of election sweeteners;²⁷³ the PAP's handling of the Gomez affair;²⁷⁴ the ruling party's lack of consultation with the masses before policy implementation²⁷⁵ and PM Lee's usage of the word "fix" during the lunchtime rally.²⁷⁶

In all three forums, forumnites voiced their unhappiness with media bias in the reporting of the election results, the meagre air-time given to opposition winners, with many congratulating the winners from opposition teams after polling day and voicing their opinions on the merits of having more opposition members in parliament. Some even questioned if the ruling party would live up to their promises in the next five

"STARDUST0080" *Sammyboy.com*, 4 May 2006, <<http://forums.delphiforums.com/n/main.asp?qu=elections&find=Search&webtag=sammyboymod&cx=search&cl=287006&af=31&o=relevance&be=0>> (10 May 2006) and "Mihailov75", *Sammyboy.com*, 4 May 2006,

<<http://forums.delphiforums.com/n/main.asp?qu=elections&find=Search&webtag=sammyboymod&cx=search&cl=287006&af=31&o=relevance&be=0>> (10 May 2006).

²⁷² "Stop PAP now before it's too late", "PAP defeated, I see a new dawn and hope", *soc.culture.singapore*, 28 April 2006, <http://groups.google.com/group/soc.culture.singapore/browse_frm/month/2006-4?start=8750&hl=en> (10 May 2006).

²⁷³ "Wong Fei Hung", "Those PP monies", *soc.culture.singapore*, 28 April 2006, <http://groups.google.com/group/soc.culture.singapore/browse_frm/month/2006-4?start=8750&hl=en> (10 May 2006).

²⁷⁴ "Bald eagle", "Ministers acting like childish kids", *soc.culture.singapore*, 2 May 2006, <http://groups.google.com/group/soc.culture.singapore/browse_frm/month/2006-5?start=250&hl=en> (10 May 2006); Rodney, "Betraying a friend", *soc.culture.singapore*, 3 May 2006, <http://groups.google.com/group/soc.culture.singapore/browse_frm/month/2006-5?start=1250&hl=en> (10 May 2006) and "truth", *soc.culture.singapore*, 3 May 2006, <http://groups.google.com/group/soc.culture.singapore/browse_frm/month/2006-5?start=1250&hl=en> (10 May 2006).

²⁷⁵ "Merlion King", "Khaw out to CON Singaporeans about health costs", *soc.culture.singapore*, 2 May 2006, <http://groups.google.com/group/soc.culture.singapore/browse_frm/month/2006-5?start=250&hl=en> (10 May 2006).

²⁷⁶ See postings by "citizen" and "hitler", *soc.culture.singapore*, 4 May 2006, <http://groups.google.com/group/soc.culture.singapore/browse_frm/month/2006-5?start=2000&hl=en> (10 May 2006) and "w-o-r-l-d-p-i-s-s-e-d", "LHL is IRRELEVANT", *soc.culture.singapore*, 5 May 2006, <http://groups.google.com/group/soc.culture.singapore/browse_frm/month/2006-5?start=2750&hl=en> (10 May 2006).

years, pressurising them to fulfil these expectations. This essentially demonstrates the workings of hegemony as a process, for the ruling party can only obtain consent through hard work.

Online Forums as Sites of Resistance

This section examines the various strategies of resistance on Internet forums, which mainly include: exploiting linkages among cyberspace entities, employing tactics that counter biased media coverage, gossiping, as well as donning a veil of anonymity.

The Network of Forums, Blogs and Other Cyberspace Entities

Information tends to be circulated amongst forums to allow for conveyance of important news. Forumites also post interesting articles from blogs and other sources, demonstrating the complex network of resisters. A member from *sgForums* posted two articles by Seah Chiang Nee of *LittleSpeck* on gerrymandering and unfair media coverage,²⁷⁷ exemplifying the way in which one Internet form promotes another. “Duotiga83” posted a photo that has been widely circulated amongst other blogs and forums, showing a vandalised electrical box near a traffic light in Singapore bearing graffitied words “jobs for foreigner [sic]”, “N.S. for S’poreans” and “Lee Dynasty”.²⁷⁸ This act of vandalism eludes to what Scott envisioned—that “everyday forms of resistance” should stop short of outright and collective defiance, and instead draw from “the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging,

²⁷⁷ “lotus999”, *sgForums.com*, 10 March 2006, <http://www.sgforums.com/?action=thread_display&thread_id=178346&page=2> and 22 March 2006, <http://www.sgforums.com/?action=thread_display&thread_id=178346&page=3> (20 April 2006).

²⁷⁸ “Duotiga83”, *sgForums.com*, 1 May 2006, <http://www.sgforums.com/?action=thread_display&thread_id=178346&page=6> (20 May 2006).

dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on”.²⁷⁹ Therefore this study seeks to offer an unobtrusive account of non-compliance, that the “marginalised” citizens who have restricted political space to manoeuvre, use the Internet as a space to grumble, and exhibit the grumblings of others. As Scott suggests, “the purpose of grumbling is often not simply self-expression, but the attempt to bring the pressure of discontent to bear on elites”.²⁸⁰ The “grumblers” have to be extremely prudent, for “if the message is too explicit, its bearers risk open retaliation; if it is too vague, it passes unnoticed altogether.”²⁸¹

Sammyboy was also popular as a conducive spot for to dissemination of information and for seeking support for online petitions. For instance, the online petition set up by some forumnites in *Sammyboy* “Upgrading should be a separate issue from the General Election”, had collected 2128 signatures thus far,²⁸² with publicity for such petitions being supplied by blogs such as *mrbrown.com* and *Singapore Election Watch blog*.²⁸³ Although the petition was not largely successful in terms of signature-collection and was fraught with repeated signatures causing credibility problems, it is not an exaggeration to state that these forums have been useful sites of dissemination for public mobilisation tools, not to mention being good platforms for citizens to air views. Online petitions seem to be the new wave in local social mobilisation for in 2005, at least 43,654 signatures were collected to call for the

²⁷⁹ Scott, *Weapons*, xvi.

²⁸⁰ Scott, *Domination*, 156.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁸² See *Sammyboy*’s forum for support of petition at *Sammyboy.com*, 16 April 2006, <<http://forums.delphiforums.com/n/main.asp?webtag=sammyboymod&ctx=search&o=relevance&af=31&be=0&f=this&qu=petition>>.

Petition found on <www.petitiononline.com/mod_perl/signed.cgi?merlion1> (7 June 2006).

²⁸³ See “v’s” comments on *Mr Brown.com*, 30 March 2006,

<http://www.mrbrown.com/blog/2006/03/v_for_viennetta.html> and *Singapore Election Watch*

<<http://singaporeelection.blogspot.com/2006/04/petition-against-linking-votes-to.html>> (1 May 2006).

resignation of (former) NKF CEO T.T. Durai, and it is evident that people in positions of power did take notice of these signatures with politicians referring to the petition or Internet discussions on occasion.²⁸⁴

Links to, and analysis from other blogs such as *Yawning Bread*, *Mr Wang Bakes Good Karma* and *Singabloodypore* were also present in such forums as sources of alternative information. Besides *Sammyboy*, *soc.culture.singapore* has also been a platform for contributors to disseminate links to a series of satirical podcasts from *mrbrown.com*,²⁸⁵ one of which contains a spoof of the election drama surrounding the James Gomez issue. This series of podcasts that enjoyed immense popularity will be discussed in the next chapter.

Countering Unfair Media Coverage

These online forums had exploited technology to critique the perceptible biased media coverage of the elections, as well as rules governing election advertising. In the case of *sgForums*, a rally speech by Steve Chia of the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) was posted. Other members followed suit by adding the links to videos of the opposition parties' rally speeches and by posting articles from the foreign media critical of the ruling party.²⁸⁶ Forumites in *Sammyboy* were also confident of the

²⁸⁴ However, the petition might not be the sole reason for action to be taken. As in the case of the casino debate, the government went ahead with the development plans anyway even though there was widespread disapproval.

²⁸⁵ "Tulang", "Really funny!", *soc.culture.singapore*, 6 May 2006, <http://groups.google.com/group/soc.culture.singapore/browse_frm/month/2006-5?start=3000&hl=en> (10 May 2006).

²⁸⁶ See posts by "Copacetic", *Sammyboy.com*, 4 May 2006, <<http://forums.delphiforums.com/n/main.asp?qu=elections&webtag=sammyboymod&ctx=search&cl=287006&af=31&o=relevance&be=0>> (20 May 2006), who posted articles such as Michael Backman, "Singapore's farcical election undermines its achievements" *The Age* 3 May 2006, available at www.theage.com.au, "Singapore Prepares for Polls Amid Lawsuits, Personal Attacks", *Bloomberg*, 5 May 2006; Sebastian Berger, "Lee's opponents refuse to be silenced by Singapore dynasty", 5 May 2006, available at <www.telegraph.co.uk> and "Singapore needs more than prosperity", *The Jakarta Post.com*, 5 May 2006.

capabilities of the technology in overriding regulations, with “Makapa” highlighting an excerpt from the blog *Singabloodypore*, demonstrating that even though podcasts, pictures and videocasts of political rallies are banned by the authorities, they would still surface on blogs, forums and other websites. “PeasantMoNkEy” opined that “there is no way [the government] can stop such technologies from being used” and was quite confident that more new technologies such as instant video streaming from and by a cell phone will be available in the next GE.²⁸⁷ “Wah Piangz!” agreed that if they do, “[the government would] bring bad publicity to themselves and risk becoming a laughing stock”.²⁸⁸

soc.culture.singapore had also acted as a site for citizen journalism, as one member’s posting about turnouts for various parties’ rallies. The posting reported the sharp discrepancy between the turnouts of the PAP’s rally on 1st May and the WP’s rally on 30th April.²⁸⁹ This posting was significant because the government banned posting of photos and videos of rallies on websites for the election campaign week. The site therefore acted as an alternative source of election rallies coverage that made up for the mainstream media’s inadequate coverage.

Forums are thus perceived to be credible sources of information by some netizens—and they are not as irrational, chaotic and unreliable as the government has claimed them to be. Statements by netizens in threads corroborate the credibility of information on such forums and this is indicative of the reliability of forums as sites

²⁸⁷ “Makapa”, *Sammyboy.com*, 12 May 2006, <<http://forums.delphiforums.com/n/main.asp?qu=elections&webtag=sammyboymod&ctx=search&cl=287006&af=31&o=relevance&be=0>> (20 May 2006).

²⁸⁸ “Wah Piangz”, *Sammyboy.com*, 12 May 2006, <<http://forums.delphiforums.com/n/main.asp?qu=elections&webtag=sammyboymod&ctx=search&cl=287006&af=31&o=relevance&be=0>> (20 May 2006).

²⁸⁹ “Sally Paycheck”, “Rally photos don’t lie”, *soc.culture.singapore*, 2 May 2006, <http://groups.google.com/group/soc.culture.singapore/browse_frm/month/2006-5?start=250&hl=en> (10 May 2006).

of resistance. For instance, “banzie” from *sgForums* declared that he used to be quite supportive of PAP and just a little of WP, but after nine days of pursuing news from online forums and blogs, he grew more supportive of the opposition. He expressed thanks to those who posted news in the forum, stating that he was “pretty fooled by the media” and that he was “very angry that our media had such a bias stand”.²⁹⁰

Gossip and Rumour

Gossip was also a regular feature in these forums for they serve as sites for ridicule and “elite-bashing”. A particular forumnite in *Sammyboy* referred to the father, son and daughter-in-law as the “Unholy trinity”²⁹¹ while another spoke of “the father, the son and the holy Goh”.²⁹² The forum was also not short of sarcastic messages laced with hints of irony. One member urged other forumnites to “Leave PAP Alone!”²⁹³, arguing that we ought to “be grateful to PAP and [the] Lee family” for without them, “we [would be] still farmers”, because the opposition was “hopeless” and “redundant”. He went on to exclaim that “Singapore is PAP and PAP is Singapore”, urging readers to “forget about elections and alternative” and hailing China as an

²⁹⁰ “banzie”, *sgForums.com*, 7 May 2006, <http://www.sgforums.com/?action=thread_display&thread_id=178346&page=9> (20 May 2006).

²⁹¹ “Indiscorner”, *Sammyboy.com*, 30 April 2006, <<http://forums.delphiforums.com/n/main.asp?qu=elections&webtag=sammyboymod&ctx=search&cl=287006&af=31&o=relevance&be=0>> (20 May 2006). The “unholy trinity” presumably refers to MM Lee, PM Lee and Ho Ching, the wife of PM Lee, who heads Temasek Holdings, the company that owns and manages the direct investments of the Singapore government both locally and overseas.

²⁹² “JW5”, *Sammyboy.com*, 1 May 2006, <<http://forums.delphiforums.com/n/main.asp?qu=elections&webtag=sammyboymod&ctx=search&cl=287006&af=31&o=relevance&be=0>> (24 May 2006). The trinity presumably comprises of MM Lee, PM Lee and SM Goh.

²⁹³ “xfactorxmen”, *Sammyboy.com*, 24 April 2006, <<http://forums.delphiforums.com/n/main.asp?qu=elections&webtag=sammyboymod&ctx=search&cl=287006&af=31&o=relevance&be=0>> (20 May 2006).

example because of its “prosper[ity] under one party rule [with] everyone ... going China ... [whilst] ... Taiwan [being] so chaotic with elections”.²⁹⁴

As Scott suggests, gossip can function as a kind of “democratic ‘voice’ in conditions where power and possible repression make open acts of disrespect dangerous”, thereby “achiev[ing] the expression of opinion, of contempt, of disapproval while minimizing the risks of identification and reprisal”, allowing for the “chip[ping] away at the reputation” of the ruling party.²⁹⁵ It is acknowledged though that it is difficult to decipher gossip from truth, because the unnamed sources cannot be traced easily. Two scenarios are evident though—one, that those who believe the rumours and will continue to spread them because they think that others ought to know the truth, and two, that they continue spreading rumours albeit knowing that they are not true. This study suggests that many treat stories passed from forum to forum as gossip—a safer option to prima facie belief in all information.

Nonetheless, such rumours do get disseminated as acts of resistance against elites. As such rumours travel, they are “altered in a fashion that brings [them] more closely into line with the hopes, fears, and worldview of those who hear [them] and those who retell [them]”.²⁹⁶ A rumour circulating in the forums revolved around views by a “well regarded senior journalist/editor from SPH” who had “top level access to a lot of people”. These views, as “Duotiga83” quoted from “Serenditpity” [sic] from the *Sammyboy* forum,²⁹⁷ consisted of various comments ranging from the PAP’s worry that they were not returned on nomination day, to claims that “many

²⁹⁴ “xfactorxmen”, *Sammyboy.com*, 24 April 2006, <<http://forums.delphiforums.com/n/main.asp?qu=elections&webtag=sammyboymod&ctx=search&cl=287006&af=31&o=relevance&be=0>> (20 May 2006).

²⁹⁵ Scott, *Weapons*, 282.

²⁹⁶ Scott, *Domination*, 145.

²⁹⁷ “duotiga83”, *sgForums.com*, 2 May 2006, <http://politics.sgforums.com/?action=thread_display&thread_id=188273&page=4> (20 May 2006).

[were] really concerned with the kind of damage that LKY [was] doing with his interviews”, to suggestions that “the entire ISD [was] busy trying to dig up something on Sylvia”, to statements that the PAP was actually happy that WP had not aggressively touched on the core issues of jobs and CPF cuts, and that their strategy was to keep the WP busy with the Gomez issue, so that other important issues would get sidelined.²⁹⁸ The rumour thus effectively portrayed the members of the PAP as vulnerable, fallible humans, not entirely confident of winning the elections and feeling threatened enough to use the ISD to mudsling Sylvia Lim, a WP candidate, who stood a fair chance of winning the Aljunied elections. Insofar as the truth-content of these issues remains somewhat unverifiable, the very act of raising such concerns does demonstrate the possibility of insecurities within the ruling party which can in turn affect voter confidence to a certain extent.

Anonymity

Online forums are also conducive sites of resistance because of the anonymity allowed in the posting of messages. The power of such anonymity lies in allowing netizens the freedom to express dissent—a liberty not sufficiently enjoyed offline. An overall observation of forum postings points to the fact that there are many forumnites who do contribute constructive criticism and offer credible alternative points of view. However, there are also those who use abusive language, post irrelevant and nonsensical material, and those who seek to damage reputations with malicious rumours. Not many posts are of such nature however, and most are highly critical and

²⁹⁸ “duotiga83”, *sgForums.com*, 2 May 2006, <http://politics.sgforums.com/?action=thread_display&thread_id=188273&page=4> (20 May 2006).

insightful. Unfortunately, the content of such posts can be misconstrued especially if satire is employed.

There are those who misunderstand the tone of the posts, taking them at face value, and misinterpreting the author's intentions. Nonetheless, observations show that those who do make such mistakes, or even those who spread obvious false information are reprimanded by other participators, and thus, it is apparent that a premium is placed on a certain extent of research and accuracy in the content of postings (like the offline world). It is therefore too sweeping a statement to declare that forums are a convenient arena for the flaming of rumours, because they are quickly quelled by other more discerning forumnites.

It is also interesting to observe that some forumnites hesitate to use the full names of targeted characters of critique, opting to use abbreviations instead. This can be attributed to convenience and perhaps, more likely so, it marks an attempt at caution for fear of reprisal. Dissent under the veil of anonymity is what Scott deems as an "everyday form of resistance". Although such abbreviations are easily decipherable, a possibly strong reason for invoking them would be that abstinence from using a full name weakens the case for libel (although the courts may use a test of the man-on-the-street to judge the case).

As the discussion of anonymity in Chapter One suggests, the idea of anonymity relates closely to the analogy of the panoptic structure of the Internet. To say that it is impossible for authorities to identify the authors would be an exaggeration, given that the methods of hi-tech surveillance are constantly refined and updated. Thus, to minimise the possibilities of being tracked down, many employ ways and means to prevent identification, for instance, providing false particulars

when registering in various forums. This mask of anonymity gives the Internet user greater confidence in conveying his or her true feelings, that is, in voicing the hidden transcript without fear of repercussion. Of course, such precautions are still taken despite consciousness of the near impossibility of mass state prosecution, given the fact that at any one time, there are many individuals who are simultaneously cloaked in disguise.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Emergence of Blogs

This chapter engages textual analysis in exploring web logs, commonly known as blogs, to investigate the various forms of counter-hegemonic discourse, specifically analysing the pursuit of different strategies in voicing political opinions and disenchantment with official discourse and state policies. From blatant rants to poetic reflections and satire, this chapter uncovers the everyday individual activities that fall short of open, declared and collective opposition. It seems that bloggers in Singapore have found an alternate sphere for political discourse in cyberspace without the ramifications of state penalty. The weapons are not only the communicative tool of the Internet itself but are also expressions of various narrative forms in cyberspace that take advantage of the openness of the Internet. This chapter thus explores the use of blogs as a “weapon of the weak” by examining a few key blogs from the local blogging community, seeking to examine how these bloggers have managed to voice dissent by taking cover behind apparent meanings, circumventing legal penalties, especially in light of tighter regulations during the election period.

Blogs are forms of interactive media that serve as popular communication tools,²⁹⁹ and are, put simply, personal journals that are published on the web. According to Kahn and Kellner, the relative ease in creation and maintenance of blogs means that even non-technical web users own blogs without significant problem, contributing to the success of such blogs.³⁰⁰ In fact, *Technorati.com* claims to be

²⁹⁹ Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner, “New Media and Internet Activism: From the ‘Battle of Seattle’ to Blogging”, *New Media & Society*, 6,1 (2004), 91.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

tracking 48.5 million blogs and counting.³⁰¹ Kahn and Kellner argue that this relatively new blogging subculture is relevant for political analysis, because some bloggers are technoactivists who favour democratic self-expression and networking, and global media critique and journalistic socio-political intervention.³⁰² They expound that new media developments in technoculture such as blogging has led to a reconfiguration of politics and culture and a refocusing of politics on everyday life.³⁰³

Singaporeans are part of this global phenomenon as a quick count on the “Singapore Blog Directory and Blog Search Engine”³⁰⁴ on the Internet throws up about 1400 blogs, with categories ranging from art and photography, entertainment, lifestyle, news,³⁰⁵ personal and diary, to sports and technology. In most of these blogs, readers can leave their comments, making it a rather interactive process between blogger and reader. Blogs are also linked to one another, enabling the reader to jump to the author’s recommended blogs. There are also specific links of words in blog entries called “tags” to link words to similar entries on other blogs. The process and structure of linkages builds informal networks, contributing to a sense of cyber-community. Blogging is also becoming identified as “citizen journalism” as bloggers have been known to raise socio-political issues in their blogs and report on everyday happenings. The local blog scene has also been followed rather closely by the mainstream media, occasionally highlighting issues that have been discussed

³⁰¹ Sourced from Technorati <<http://www.technorati.com>>, a website that claims to track what is going on in the “blogosphere”. Technorati feature tags that link blogs to one another and the site.

³⁰² Kahn and Kellner, *New Media*, 91.

³⁰³ Ibid., 93.

³⁰⁴ Singapore Blog Directory, <www.bloggersg.com> (26 May 2006). The online blog directory showcases blogs started by Singaporean bloggers. Bloggers are encouraged to add their blogs here and let others rate their blogs, hence the website features “top-rated”, “most popular” and “newly-added” blogs.

³⁰⁵ The subheading for this category is “political blogs and government blogs”.

online.³⁰⁶ More famous blogs include *Mr Wang Bakes Good Karma*,³⁰⁷ *Yawning Bread*,³⁰⁸ *Singabloodypore*,³⁰⁹ *mrbrown.com*, *mrmiyagi.com* and *A Xenoboy in Sg*.³¹⁰ Led by well-known bloggers mr brown (Lee Kin Mun) and Mr Miyagi (Benjamin Lee), some Singaporeans have started the web site www.tomorrow.sg, a daily log of the best Singapore blogs.

Indeed, the rising trend of blogs in recent years has attracted the attention of the authorities. In January 2006, the Institute of Policy Studies, on behalf of the government, conducted a closed door discussion (“Blogging and the Law”) with some local bloggers to get a better understanding of the blogging phenomenon.³¹¹ Just before the recent GE2006, the state attempted to tighten its grip over Internet content by implementing further legislation and guidelines that affected the blogging and podcasting community. This did not seem to deter bloggers. During the nine-day election campaign, the number of blog articles on the subject averaged over 190.³¹²

During a political dialogue held a few weeks after the elections, Denise Phua of the PAP voiced her concern with regards to the political influence of blogs, especially “the negative political views expressed in internet forums during the hustings”.³¹³ Concerned with seemingly slanted views on the Internet, the MP opined that “...something has gone wrong when more than 85 per cent (of the traffic) writes

³⁰⁶ The weekly “Digital Life” section of *The Straits Times* devotes a column to some blog discussions.

³⁰⁷ Mr Wang Bakes Good Karma <<http://commentarysingapore.blogspot.com/>>

³⁰⁸ Yawning Bread <<http://www.yawningbread.org/>>

³⁰⁹ Singabloodypore <<http://singabloodypore.blogspot.com/>>

³¹⁰ A Xeno Boy in Sg <<http://xenoboysg.blogspot.com>>

³¹¹ “Mr Brown” from <<http://mrbrown.com>>, “Mr Miyagi” from <<http://miyagi.sg/>> and “Mr Wang” from *Mr Wang Bakes Good Karma* <<http://commentarysingapore.blogspot.com/>> were among those invited to participate in the discussion.

³¹² Farah Abdul Rahim, “Blogging activity up during election campaigning” *Channel NewsAsia*, 12 May 2006 <<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/207967/1/.html>> (26 May 20/06).

³¹³ S. Ramesh, “Reasons for 12% of non-voters, spoiled votes should be analysed: NUS Forum” *Channel NewsAsia*, <<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/210087/1/.html>> (26 May 2006).

negatively about the PAP”.³¹⁴ While stating that “this is something that the PAP would do well to take into account...and to manage this channel of communication”,³¹⁵ it seemed only apparent that the authorities had taken notice of the Internet in terms of its ability to influence public opinion. Even though the Internet did not possess the capabilities to considerably challenge local conventional media in terms of outreach the masses it did seem evident that people were hungry for alternative sources of news, and growing less afraid to voice dissent on the Internet. As the GE2006 had tossed up some controversial issues, the following section highlights how bloggers used cyberspace as a weapon to resist the hegemonic discourse of the ruling party.

Covering the 2006 Elections

As elaborated earlier in Chapter Two, the government established a stricter set of election advertising regulations in 2006, including making those who “persistently promote[d] political views” register their sites with the MDA. Arguing that the regulations “set a certain standard and help[ed] maintain order and accountability in the way political issues [were being] discussed over the Internet”,³¹⁶ the state is effectively controlling the political discourse and disciplining the Internet. The web community would, more likely than not, have to practice self-censorship with the knowledge that “political” websites were being monitored and thus be somewhat

³¹⁴ Derrick A Paulo, “PAP Must Address ‘Negative Internet’” *Today*, 24 May 2006. The dialogue was organised by the National University of Singapore Society (NUSS) and the panel included Dr Chee Soon Juan, secretary-general of the Singapore Democratic Party, Perry Tong from the WP and political scientist Dr. Ho Khai Leong.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Chia, “New Media, Same Rules”.

stifled as critical commentaries and debates would have to be toned down with people becoming more hesitant to voice out their thoughts on political issues.

Nonetheless, despite initial concerns of the clampdown, the “blogosphere” was abuzz with activities. In response to the imposition of these new regulations, bloggers were observed to have come up with creative ways of bypassing these rules with some ignoring these rules altogether, playing the game of how “political” could be defined, and how the terms “explicitly political”, “election advertising” and “during elections” could be construed.

Blogs as Sites of Resistance

Exploiting Technical Ambiguities

Some bloggers have made interesting observations to circumvent existing regulations, taking advantage of the technical ambiguities involved in definitions and other issues. One of the rules involving podcasting is elaborated on by Dr. Balaji Sadasivan, the Senior Minister of State for Information, Communications and the Arts:

There are also some well-known local blogs run by private individuals who have ventured into podcasting. The content of some of these podcasts can be quite entertaining. However, the streaming of explicit political content by individuals during the election period is prohibited under the Election Advertising Regulations. A similar prohibition would apply to the videocasting or video streaming of explicitly political content.³¹⁷

Local poet/writer and blogger, Alfian Bin Sa’at,³¹⁸ highlighted one of the technical ambiguities of the election advertising regulations on the Internet aptly:

‘During elections’ is a very interesting phrase. One can understand that a campaigning period is the time when people can start doing things like hold election rallies, canvass door-to-door for support, allow the Speak Mandarin Campaign to take a rest as candidates charm heartlanders with Teochew in Hougang and Hokkien

³¹⁷ Hasnita A Majid, “Podcasting is not allowed during elections” *Channel NewsAsia*, 3 April 2006. <<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/201330/1/.html>> (30 April 2006).

³¹⁸ This paper uses the real names of bloggers if they have intentionally revealed their real identities on their blogs. However I will only use the pseudonyms of the blogger if he/she does not reveal it on the blog, even if his/her identity has been disclosed by other sources.

in Toa Payoh. But what does this mean for blogs, which consist of continuous entries, sorted by date? Does this mean one has to stop blogging during the election period? But then there are archives—consisting of entries which are technically written before this time period comes into effect. How to import this concept of the ‘election period’ into blogs? Obviously an ‘election period’ holds for rallies, because we are dealing with a synchronic idea: ‘at a specific moment in time’. But the blog is a diachronic creature: ‘occurring over a period of time’.³¹⁹

Opting to nitpick on technical issues that are difficult to resolve offers resisters maneuvering space because dates on blogs can be easily manipulated and links to earlier political commentary can be made without contravening the rules.

Commenting on the justifications for registration, Alfian attempted to question the underlying intentions:

Is it really as innocent as asking people to be accountable for their statements? I don't think many bloggers in Singapore—from mrbrown to Alex Au at Yawning Bread are anonymous. What I think is that scaremongering tactics are at work—the very mention of 'register' conveys surrender to some unsavoury surveillance.³²⁰

Consequently, Alfian took offence at the minister's attempt to relegate the medium as “quite entertaining”, because it implied that podcasts were for those whose “deviant tastes actually find this stuff worth their attention”,³²¹ insinuating that Internet content and podcasting were found frivolous, and not credible enough to be taken seriously.

The issue of political content also raises a few issues. Firstly, what is explicitly political? Secondly, does it mean that ‘implicit’ political content is allowed? Alfian proceeded to play a game with the readers (and perhaps lurking surveillance personnel) by displaying three different captioned pictures that had dual (or more) meanings, which interpreted in certain ways, seemed to constitute swipes at the ruling

³¹⁹ “Ban the internet why don't you”, *Alfian's Secret Wank Shed*, 6 April 2006 <<http://alfian.diaryland.com/ban.html>> (16 April 2006).

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Ibid.

party and particular personalities. This “game” was played by many other bloggers as illustrated later.

Nicknaming/Character Assassination

In the same post, Alfian nicknamed Dr. Balaji Sadasivan, the Senior Minister of State for Information, Communications and the Arts, the “Minister of State for Misinformation, Miscommunication and the Art of Gossiping with Unnamed Epidemiologists”.³²² This act of nicknaming or character assassination makes reference to earlier events, in particular a series of speeches made by the minister the previous year that had stirred controversy. The name-calling is thus purely symbolic resistance which “achieves the expression of opinion, of contempt, of disapproval”,³²³ congruent to what Scott had described of the peasants in Sedaka.³²⁴ These forms of resistance such as gossip and character assassination which involve an appeal to shared normative standards are grounded by its sanctioning power, albeit in a mild form. The condemnation of the minister is inscribed with it the intention to belittle his social standing and influence as a politician.

Rightful Resistance

It is also observed that bloggers routinely employ rightful resistance in their narratives. Shortly after the announcement of the new regulations, *Mr Wang Says So*

³²² In this description, Alfian makes reference to a speech made by Dr Sadasivan made during a Ministry of Health budget speech on 9th March 2005 during Parliament whereby he stated that an epidemiologist had suggested that the sharp increase of HIV in the gay community maybe be linked to the annual predominantly gay party in Sentosa- the Nation Party-“which allowed gays from high prevalence societies to fraternize with local gay men, seeding the infection in the local community. Speech obtained from the Ministry of Health official website

<<http://www.moh.gov.sg/corp/about/newsroom/speeches/details.do?id=30507044>> (31 May 2006)

³²³ Scott, *Weapons*, 282.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 282.

seemed to have taken the cue from authorities and revealed in his blog that he would be talking about “interests outside the sphere of Singapore politics and current affairs”.³²⁵ As a hint, he published a photo of the PM speaking to reporters with the caption: “I’m very disappointed, Mr. Wang. Obviously you don’t trust me, even though I’d said in 2004 that one of my goals as PM is to make Singapore an open society.”³²⁶

Upon clicking on the link “open society”, one is led to another page on his blog that features a letter published on *The Straits Times* forum in which the contributor, Associate Professor Koo Tsai Kee, defended his views of Singapore being an open society, rebutting George Soros’ statements.³²⁷ As part of the response to the letter in that earlier post, *Mr Wang* listed chronologically a series of thirteen events/issues during the period of May to December 2005 that showcases limitations in freedom of expression, press freedom, freedom of association and academic freedom, in which he ends by stating “Tell me again, Tsai Kee, with a straight face, that we are an open society. I’ll try not to laugh”.³²⁸ This act illustrates the employment of “rightful resistance”,³²⁹ the framing of claims with reference to the ideology or policies used. When *Mr Wang* made reference to PM Lee’s speech, he

³²⁵ “Mr Wang Has Psychic Powers”, *Mr Wang Bakes Good Karma*, 7 April 2006 <<http://commentarysingapore.blogspot.com/2006/04/mr-wang-has-psychic-powers.html>> (30 April 2006). A review of the April and May archives of the blog reveals that Mr Wang did not stop writing about issues pertaining to Singapore politics after all. In a later reply to readers’ comments, he revealed that the hits on his blog jumped from 13,000 in March and April to 25,000 in May due to the elections. See comment by *Mr Wang*, 31 May 2006,

<<http://www.blogger.com/comment.g?blogID=12908820&postID=114903724336154270>> (1 June 2006).

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ “Open Society. Ha.”, *Mr Wang Bakes Good Karma*, 24 January 2006, <http://commentarysingapore.blogspot.com/2006/01/open-society-ha_24.html> (30 April 2006), on the forum letter by Assoc Prof Koo Tsai Kee, “S’pore Is An Open Society Despite What Soros Says” *The Straits Times Forum*, 24 January 2006.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ O’Brien, “Rightful Resistance”.

demanded the enforcement of existing commitments, and a strict adherence to the rhetoric of policymakers, in this case, making Singapore a more open society.

Another post includes an open letter to PM Lee on his blog. In the letter, *Mr Wang* harped on PM Lee's insecurity about the opposition and appealed to the PM not to destroy his political opponents for if they were truly incompetent, they would "expose themselves", but if they were not, then their contributions mattered too.³³⁰ Also, *Mr Wang* urged PM Lee to "stop dumbing down to the people" as that made it very easy for people like himself to ridicule him and his speeches. He also advised PM Lee not to forget "the little man", "the old and poor", "the Normal Stream kids", the ex-convict trying to put his life back together, the "old ah ma" still washing public toilets, the "single mum who can't apply for a HDB flat", the "70 year-old man still trapped in his Potong Pasir flat because you don't build a lift for him to get down" and not to remember them only every five years, i.e. just before the elections.³³¹

By writing this open letter and by publishing it in the public sphere of the Internet, this method of resistance is thus successful not because the PM will heed his advice, but the message is evident and conveyed, leaving little reason for the PM to threaten legal action. Furthermore, considering that if the letter was sent to the PM himself, there would be no guarantee that it would be read by anyone at all. In fact the impact of posting the letter on this sphere is more effective, because it signalled to the other readers that the ruling party had much to do to win the consent of the masses.

³³⁰ "Mr Wang, I think I may be messing up", *Mr Wang Bakes Good Karma*, 5 May 2006, <http://commentarysingapore.blogspot.com/2006_05_01_commentarysingapore_archive.html> (31 May 2006).

³³¹ Ibid.

Humour, Satire and Parody

Bloggers also make use of humour, satire and parody to convey political messages. A post by *Mr Wang* included a link to a report that named Singapore as the 83rd most democratic country in the world. Under the post was a cleverly inserted picture of Kim Jong Il captioned: “Damnit! Narrowly defeated by Singapore again!”³³² insinuating that Singapore was almost comparable to the authoritarian regime of North Korea. *Mr Wang* also referred to PM Lee’s statements of “*fixing* the opposition” and the PAP’s “buying [of] the supporters’ votes” as a “self-slap in the face”.³³³ In a later post, he cheekily displayed a photo of Saddam Hussein with the caption “More than 85% of all Iraqi bloggers write negatively about me! There’s just no balance... I need to *fix* them!”³³⁴

Many bloggers have also reacted strongly to the PAP’s (and the state-controlled media’s) offensive during the James Gomez saga.³³⁵ In response to the dramatisation of this episode by the PAP, comments in the blogosphere have been scathing and abundant. Meanwhile, *Mr Brown* and *Mr Miyagi*, two popular bloggers had been putting up a series of “persistently non-political” election podcast bulletins that revolved around the election issues and drama.³³⁶ One extremely popular download during that period was an audio podcast parodying this episode, framing it

³³² “Things That the Local Press Probably Won’t Report”, *Mr Wang Bakes Good Karma*, 26 May 2006, <http://commentarysingapore.blogspot.com/2006_05_01_commentarysingapore_archive.html> (31 May 2006).

³³³ “The Biggest Election Story”, *Mr Wang Bakes Good Karma*, 7 May 2006, <http://commentarysingapore.blogspot.com/2006_05_01_commentarysingapore_archive.html> (8 May 2006). Emphasis added.

³³⁴ “The ‘Negative’ Internet”, *Mr Wang Bakes Good Karma*, 24 May 2006, <http://commentarysingapore.blogspot.com/2006_05_01_commentarysingapore_archive.html> (26 May 2006). Emphasis added.

³³⁵ See Chapter Two for the background to this issue.

³³⁶ Browncast: the persistently non-political podcast no. 6, <http://media.libsyn.com/media/mb/tmbs-060501-the_persistently_non-political_podcast_no6.mp3>, found on *mrbrown.com*, 1 May 2006, <<http://www.mrbrown.com/blog/podcast/index.html>>, (20 May 2006).

as “persistently non-political” because MICA Minister Balaji Sadasivan had earlier announced that “persistently political” podcasts were banned. The parody portrays James Gomez as a customer, “Jeff Lopez”, and the PAP as a “bar chor mee” seller and depicts a “misunderstanding” between both parties, when the “bar chor mee” seller serves Lopez “bar chor mee” with liver, causing Lopez to complain, insisting that he did not want any liver. The parody goes on to depict the indignant hawker retorting that Lopez had never specified that he did not want any liver, and that he had only specified he did not want chilli. To prove his point, the hawker produces a CCTV recording to show that Lopez did not state what he claimed to have said upon placing his order. The hawker subsequently continuously insists that Lopez explain himself despite the latter’s apology.

The parody is not difficult to decode. The parallels between the use of CCTV monitoring at a hawker centre and the seller’s refusal to accept repeated apologies, and the events that transpired in the James Gomez issue, are uncanny, cleverly encapsulating the absurdity of the whole episode. The intent of the parody is obviously to poke fun at the PAP for harping on such a small issue and for demanding an explanation from Gomez even his apologies. This parody of a minor paperwork bungle has been downloaded 30,000 times, excluding partial downloads.³³⁷ This does not include the number of times the clip has been circulated through mobile phones and emails. This episode has been said to have raked up sympathy for Gomez and scored points for the WP in general.

In response to this podcast, Lee Boon Yang, Minister for MICA, stated that he had received the podcast from a friend during his campaigning, and that he had to:

³³⁷ “OMG! the mrbrown show is NUMBER FIVE THREE on the Libsyn Hott 100!!!”, *mr.brown.com*, 5 May 2006 <<http://www.mrbrown.com/blog/podcast/index.html>> (30 May 2006)

... congratulate Mr Brown ... for his funny and clever work ... However, my assessment is that this is symptomatic of the nature of the Internet. The root issue which was parodied in the podcast was actually a serious issue of intention and integrity. So while podcasts can be very entertaining, it would be dangerous if important decisions such as electing representatives of Parliament were based on which side can make the most funny video or podcast. It is good to have a sense of humour but we must take care not to allow humour or satire to mask the key issues. The bottom line is that a sense of humour is necessary but, more importantly, we must remember that elections and choice of leaders for the country are serious matters.³³⁸

Contrary to Lee's sentiments, the parody is far from frivolous and has acted as a powerful medium to convey a strong political message to audiences. In this case, the pre-existing discursive entity of the ruling party's rhetoric is repeated and simultaneously transformed, for humour and/or ridicule.³³⁹ The satire is, in essence a mask to redefine the key issues as laid out by "legitimate" political discourse. Thus, it is natural that Lee publicly devalued satire, for the ruling party could possibly lose the power of agenda setting, in the face of undermining satirical critique. To the PAP, the "serious issue of intention and integrity" was key, but to the satirist and to most audiences of the parody, the extent to which the PAP blew up the whole episode is the underlying message. It also seems ironic that the detractor in this case is the one who made humour an imperative.

Another example of parody being employed as a mode of resistance in blogs can be seen in another popular audio podcast made by *Mr Brown* and *Mr Miyagi*. The clip contains a conversation between two students discussing the "struggles of the education system" in Singapore.³⁴⁰ It seems apparent, to discerning listeners, that the students are in fact questioning the "clear mandate" of the PAP. One student equated

³³⁸ "A Keen Eye On GE Bloggers, But Touch Gets Lighter" *Today*, 1 June 2006 and "Bak Chor Mee Was a Clever And Funny Work. But ..." *The Straits Times*, 1 June 2006.

³³⁹ Palmer, 80.

³⁴⁰ Browncast: the persistently non-political podcast no. 11
<http://media41b.libsyn.com/a3eaeJh1m33IfGx6aHuf05mlYHKY/podcasts/mb/tmbs-060510-the_persistently_non-political_podcast_no11.mp3> found on *mrbrown.com*, 10 May 2006
<<http://www.mrbrown.com/blog/podcast/index.html>> (30 May 2006).

the score of 66.6% (the percentage of votes that the PAP obtained in GE2006) to a grade of B3 and hinted that it was not a clear mandate by alluding to a previous “test score of 75%” that was “good” in comparison, making the “B3” result less admirable. This analogy is apt, especially for a state that tends to be obsessive about results and the streaming of students at a young age. Thus, these bloggers have succeeded in conveying a message with equivocal meanings, avoiding streaming “explicit” political content.

Alternative Media/Citizen Journalism

Blogs have also served as credible alternate sources of information as compared to the mainstream media. This is especially so because of its penchant for countering biased framing of issues by the mainstream media and its provision of alternative coverage on election rallies. *Mr Wang* took issue with the statements made by PM Lee, who urged voters to send the right signals to two multi-national companies planning to invest in projects in Singapore, stating that their decision hinged on the outcome of the elections.³⁴¹ *Mr Wang* referred to the statements made by one of the companies, Shell, on the factors that would influence the decision,³⁴² and reported that none pertained to the elections or political climate of Singapore.³⁴³ *Mr Wang* thus effectively debunking the official discourse of the ruling party’s that equated the presence of opposition parties in parliament with socio-economic instability. In backing up his claims with official statements from the giant economic investor itself,

³⁴¹ Chuang Peck Ming, “Two Mega Oil Projects Hinge On Polls: PM” *Business Times*, 2 May 2006.

³⁴² “Spring 2005- Islands of Integration” *Shell Chemicals Magazine*,
<http://www.shellchemicals.com/magazine/1,1098,894-article_id=185,00.html> (20 May 2006).

³⁴³ “Oh, Really?”, *Mr Wang Bakes Good Karma*, 2 May 2006
<http://commentarysingapore.blogspot.com/2006_05_01_commentarysingapore_archive.html> (29 May 2006).

he highlighted the insecurities of the ruling party and their inability to accept the existence of opposition members in the parliament. This sort of analyses is rarely found in Singapore's government-controlled mainstream media.

Although "explicit political content" was disallowed during the election period, bloggers were still able to detect biased media slants on issues and they did attempt to offer alternative and more well-balanced takes on the same issues. For instance, Alex Au of *Yawning Bread* offered coverage at the Hougang WP rally, one that the mainstream media did not cover. He offered a "factual transmission" and a rather detailed description of the emotions felt, taking the trouble to capture pictures of the large crowd present at the rally.³⁴⁴ He uploaded pictures of rally turnouts for the PAP and WP for comparison, a move that the media conveniently refrained from making. This comparison on his blog managed to show how *The Straits Times* attempted to create the effect of a "crowd" at PAP rallies with camera-angle techniques and selectivity in photos published. All this was done by Au despite the ban on posting photographs of opposition rallies online.

Yawning Bread also raised the issue of the mainstream media's covering up of PM Lee's use of the word 'fix' in his speech during a lunchtime rally at Boat Quay.

Mr Lee took the tack that more Opposition members in Parliament—perhaps 10 to 20—would cause gridlock in Government as the ruling party begins to focus on 'fixing' the Opposition instead of on implementing the 'right policy for Singapore'.³⁴⁵

Highlighting the fact that *Today* had used the word "fixed" in inverted commas and *The Straits Times* had replaced the word with "countered", *Yawning Bread* endeavored to expose the media's feeble attempt to perform damage control for the

³⁴⁴ "On Hougang Field", *Yawning Bread*, May 2006 <http://www.yawningbread.org/arch_2006/yax-581.htm> (20 May 2006).

³⁴⁵ Derrick A Paulo, "Not Perfect, But Not Bad: PM" *Today*, 4 May 2006. Available at <<http://www.todayonline.com/articles/116344.asp>> (Accessed on 10 May 2006).

fiasco.³⁴⁶ *Yawning Bread* also pointed out that even after Lee's press secretary issued a public clarification to say that he meant "counter" even though he said "fix", the Singaporean who only depended solely on *The Straits Times* for information, would not have known what was transpiring because the word "fix" never appeared in reports. *Yawning Bread* remarked in jest:

It's like newspapers in totalitarian countries one morning reporting that the government, with much pomp and ceremony, has declared the epidemic over, without ever having reported that there was an epidemic in the first place.³⁴⁷

The PM's unsavoury use of the word "fix" has also been derided in many other blogs besides *Yawning Bread*. The arguments are usually framed along the lines of justice, fairness and promises by the ruling party for an open society. *Molly Meek* devoted an entire post harping on the word "fix",³⁴⁸ which hinted that perhaps it was the bloggers who were going to be "fixed" next. This was with obvious reference to the frequent discrepancies between the ruling party's rhetoric and its actions.

Other blogs such as *Singapore Elections Watch* also took issue with PM Lee's word choice.³⁴⁹ The blog pointed out the hypocrisy of the PAP by comparing PM Lee's slip of tongue when stating his intentions to "fix" the opposition MPs and "buy" votes, to the Gomez case. The blog cleverly argued that it was odd that the PM could get away with a slip of the tongue whilst Gomez could not, being pressed with criminal charges for his absent-mindedness about the forms.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁶ "Flat Footed and Worse", *Yawning Bread*, May 2006 <<http://www.yawningbread.org/>> (20 May 2006).

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ "Fixing the Blues", *Molly Meek*, (posted on 7 May 2006) <<http://mollymeek.livejournal.com/tag/fix>> (Accessed on 10 May 20/06).

³⁴⁹ "Singapore Election", "With their mouths on fire, they say it's human nature", *Singapore Elections Watch* <http://singaporeelection.blogspot.com/2006_05_01_singaporeelection_archive.html> (30 May 2006).

³⁵⁰ "Singapore Election", "Don't let this happen to our citizens again!", *Singapore Election Watch* <http://singaporeelection.blogspot.com/2006_05_01_singaporeelection_archive.html> (31 May 2006).

Citizen journalism played a significant role in GE2006, and it was pivotal in obliterating the monopoly held by the mainstream media over the provision of information. What the mainstream media failed to provide, the Internet did—in terms of citizens' reports, videos and photographs of rallies that were widely available despite the ban of such material. It is thus undeniable that blogs altered the dynamics of information distribution, if not revolutionising it. *SG Rally: the Singapore Elections Rally Archive blog* was one such blog that was able to fill in information gaps. The blog featured much footage from contributors that was unavailable from the mainstream press. Anyone who wished to view photos and videos from party rallies could simply do so with a few clicks of the mouse. Blogs such as *Singapore Election Watch* also featured online polls even though it was explicitly legislated that “no person [could] publish or permit or cause to be published the results of any election survey” during the election period.³⁵¹ The blog did not hesitate to post PM Lee’s approval ratings online, and daringly published the results that more than half of those polled disapproved of him.³⁵² The poll was interestingly contrasted with George W. Bush’s approval ratings that were placed right below. Elsewhere, the blog also featured polls of candidates in GRCs, displaying results that leaned in favour of the candidates from opposition parties.

Blogs have proved to be valuable sites of counter-hegemonic discourse and they have persistently and defiantly resisted regulations governing them. What is interesting is the range of possibilities of further resistance that can and will emerge when different technologies are combined. Tan Tarn How raises the example of *SG*

³⁵¹ Parliamentary Elections Act, Chapter 218, Section 78C. Available at <<http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/>> (30 April 2006).

³⁵² “Lee Hsien Loong rating hits rock bottom”, *Singapore Election Watch*, 3 May 2006, <http://singaporeelection.blogspot.com/2006_05_01_singaporeelection_archive.html> (10 May 2006).

Rally: the Singapore Elections Rally Archive blog set up by an anonymous person for the production of videos of election rallies available for online viewing. As Tan explains:

The legality of doing so is made moot with identity hiding. Contributors who want safety in numbers can use www.pledgebank.com to find pledgers for ‘I will send in my rally videos if 20 other people will join me.’ tomorrow.sg can highlight the videos, and bloggers can e-mail them to the world at large.³⁵³

Grey areas of the law are exploited as a form of resistance: if podcasts and vodcasts are not on the positive list of electoral advertising, one can easily obtain them from *YouTube* and *Google Video* instead on blogs. Blogs examined earlier also provide many analytical articles and are widely perceived to be rather credible sources of information, especially *Yawning Bread*. Judging by the proliferating number of Singapore-based blogs, a new, Internet-savvy generation of voters seems to have reached a critical mass and apparently is less satisfied to sit back and remain mum about dissent, less eager to allow the PAP unbridled latitude to dictate and handle Singapore's affairs.

Rational Cyberspace: an Oxymoron?

The government routinely stereotypes the Internet as a “chaotic and disorganized” site, where “false story or rumour” once started, is “almost impossible to put ... right”.³⁵⁴ Closer observation, however, shows this assumption to be not entirely true,

³⁵³ Tan Tarn How, “Singapore’s Internet Comes of Age” *Politics Online*, 10 (8), (April 2006). Available at <http://www.politicsonline.com/netpulse/soundoff.asp?issue_id=10.08>. (30 April 2006).

³⁵⁴ Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, Press Releases “Email interview with Dr Lee Boon Yang, Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts with *The Straits Times* on 13 April 2006. <http://www.mica.gov.sg/pressroom/press_0604173.htm> (accessed on 30 April 2006).

and as *Xenoboy* surmises, cyber surfers are also discerning individuals who do not merely input information without digesting.³⁵⁵

For the MICA or IDA officers performing the study on Internet during GE 2006. Read this well since you drop by every day. There may be wild articles, irresponsible allegations during this period but the Net community itself regulates them simply by ignoring them. Because, the audience that surfs the Net for alternative viewpoints consists of discerning and not an agglomerate of naive individuals. Only the good articles, like the Yawning Bread series, get spread with speed across cyberspace. Only pictures which are withheld from mainstream media get hungrily devoured by cyberspace. The un-credible creates a stir and is quickly debunked by a community intelligent enough and well versed in cyberspace reflexes to detect it.³⁵⁶

Thus, it is evident that reason does reign in an allegedly “irrational cyberspace” that is supposedly filled with anonymous individuals and “non-truths”. Another demonstrative example of “rational” cyberspace can be gleaned from *Singapore Election Watch’s* accusations that *Channel NewsAsia* had deliberately edited the web pages before showing the screen shots on television, effectively censoring and thereby misrepresenting the blog’s content. Screen shots were then pasted on the blog as evidence of controversial headings that had to be “edited” out.³⁵⁷ What followed showed a series of comments issued by readers, discussing the possibilities of what happened. An anonymous observer subsequently pointed out that a technical glitch was possible because the headings were not visible when he or she used a cached version of the URL from Google and the observer invited others to check if the same happened when using a certain version of the Internet browser, Internet Explorer. Subsequent postings became heated arguments, albeit with well-substantiated technical evidence from both sides, accounting for what could have happened. This episode illustrated how readers could be discerning enough to search for the truth themselves instead of believing without question what others wrote. It

³⁵⁵ “Threshold”, *Xenoboysg*, 14 May 2006, <http://xenoboysg.blogspot.com/2006_05_01_xenoboysg_archive.html> (16 May 2006).

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ The headings were “Lee Hsien Loong’s Territory Up for Grabs: Go Out Tonight, And Rule In Numbers!” and “Shady Company #1: GIC”.

also dispelled the idea of the Internet being a space for just for lies and untruths to spread.

Offline vs. Online World

The recent suspension of the regular column by *Mr Brown* in *Today*, following a chastisement from the government regarding his piece on the high cost of living in Singapore, is probably the most demonstrative of how the state views online and offline material articles differently. In his article, titled “Singaporeans are fed, up with progress”, *Mr Brown* commented that increases in taxi fares and electricity tariffs had come after the GE2006 and at a time when a government survey showed a widening income gap.³⁵⁸ In response, the press secretary to MICA, Ms K. Bhavani wrote a letter that was published the following weekday, where she said Mr Brown’s views “distort[ed] the truth” and offered no solutions.³⁵⁹

If a columnist presents himself as a non-political observer, while exploiting his access to the mass media to undermine the Government’s standing with the electorate, then he is no longer a constructive critic, but a partisan player in politics.³⁶⁰

In addition, she stated that his views were “polemics dressed up as analysis” and suggested that “instead of a diatribe, mrbrown should offer constructive criticism and alternatives”.³⁶¹ Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan, Second Minister for MICA commented that the mainstream media had a responsibility to ensure certain standards in national debates, as such debates were not quite the same as discussions in Internet chatrooms. He stated that no one should, in the name of humour, “distort or aggravate on the

³⁵⁸ Mr Brown, “S’poreans Are Fed, Up With Progress”, *Today*, 30 June 2006.

³⁵⁹ K Bhavani, “Distorting The Truth, Mr Brown? When a Columnist Becomes a ‘Partisan Player’ in Politics”, *Today*, 3 July 2006.

³⁶⁰ Ibid. This seems reminiscent of the “Catherine Lim affair” as discussed in chapter 2.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

emotional level”.³⁶² MICA Minister Dr Lee Boon Yang also issued a statement defending the government’s position that it was merely exercising its right of reply to unfounded allegations which were “under the guise of humour”.³⁶³ He also made another interesting comment:

If he had posted the same comment on his blog, we would treat it as part of Internet chatter, and we would have just let it be.³⁶⁴

Thus, this statement seems to reflect that Lee is aware of the hidden message, but because it is published in a mainstream newspaper, the public transcript is trespassed upon. He added that as the Internet was often a “free-for-all” arena, certain critical and humorous elements were acceptable and it was not the government’s intention to chase after every posting on the Internet.³⁶⁵

Three points are thus apparent: firstly, that one is not allowed to comment on government policies without being labelled a “partisan player in politics”, and one is only allowed to speak if one has “constructive criticism”. Secondly, the government is drawing a clear line between the Internet and the mainstream media, by arguing that that the same rules do not apply to what is said online and offline—that is, what is tolerated online may not be tolerated offline (incidentally, this can also be ingeniously construed as license to exercise greater freedom of speech, if indeed “Internet chatter ... would [be] just [left alone] as Dr. Lee claims). Thirdly, the government is aware of the level of threat that humour can pose, but realises that it cannot control humour itself as a communicative tool—on the one hand, the government, in acknowledging that cyberspace is difficult to control, seems to concede cyberspace as merely

³⁶² Lee U-Wen, “Mr Brown’s Recent Comments ‘Unjustified’”, *Today*, 13 July 2006.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁵ “Why Government Has to Respond to Mr Brown’s Comments”, *AsiaOne*, 12 July 2006.

<http://www.asiaone.com/a1news/20060712_story6_1.html> (15 July 2006).

“internet chatter”, while on the other hand, attempting to undermine the humour as a strategy of resistance used in cyberspace.

The government, in knowing that it cannot physically control dissent in cyberspace, thus seems intent on launching a rhetorical campaign against the Internet as an alternative media. In various statements made in response to the satirical podcasts and *Mr Brown's* article in the newspaper, activities on the Internet, such as blogging, are stereotyped by the authorities as mere “entertainment”. The routine stereotyping of the Internet as being “emotional” and a site of “humour” serves to delegitimise the Internet as a sphere of credible information, as compared to the mainstream media that is typically associated with “responsible”, “objective” and “rational” discourse. The very techniques of resistance on the Internet of anonymity, gossip, rumour and satire are routinely undermined and demeaned by state rhetoric with the frontier between the which is constituted as acceptable and not being a zone of constant struggle between the state and netizens—the state struggles to define and constitute what counts as the public transcript, but it also gives concession for the partially “hidden” transcript to be at play. While netizens insinuate almost routinely contempt for the dominant in cyberspace, taking advantage of anonymity, humour and gossip, implying that they are “grudging conscripts to the performance”, they also concede some terrain of the public transcript, if not most, to the dominant.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to employ the Gramscian lens in examining forms of netizen resistance by Singaporeans who are politically constrained. As scholars have largely focused on the issues of self-regulation, self-censorship and the use of the Internet by civil society in the Singapore context, this dissertation seeks to examine the scope for struggle and resistance on the Internet. By disaggregating cyberspace entities into alternative websites, discussion forums, and blogs, the study has examined various strategies of resistance employed during the months surrounding the election period. In spite of the panoptic nature of surveillance in cyberspace, netizens have succeeded in devising a range of stratagems for resistance—by exploiting loopholes in media regulations through employing humour, satire, parody, cloaks of anonymity, gossip and rumour; and by launching “rightful” resistance.

In this regard, Scott's theoretical framework supplements the Gramscian framework in examining specific strategies of resistance employed by the "weak" in Singapore. Specifically, they have exploited the use of cyberspace, a realm that is impossible to fully control, to constantly negotiate the subtle disciplining mechanisms of the state, drawing its arsenal various strategies of resistance: the veil of anonymity, gossip, rumour, the safe guise of humour in satire/parodies and "rightful resistance"; thereby offering counter-hegemonic readings, alternative discourses and dissenting opinions in various ways that circumvent existing laws and regulations. The cyber-terrain is yet another site of resistance and struggle for hegemony, where the state tries to win the battleground by imposing regulatory structures to counter resistance

and where netizens resist and push the boundaries through their various strategies of resistance.

As the introductory chapter has pointed out, this study of political resistance on Internet has a wider set of implications. Firstly, what seems like acquiescence on the public transcript, (i.e. the lack of demonstrations and strikes on the street or critical articles on newspapers) does not necessarily indicate socio-political apathy in Singapore, nor does it suggest that the citizens are subservient to existing hegemonic structures. The various strategies adopted by individuals on the Internet forces the state to respond differently in differing circumstances, treading a thin line to legitimise its rule. This highlights the delicate play of processes in the struggle for hegemony. Secondly, the “Singapore-model” of regulatory structures is not as solid as existing literature has implied. Strategies of resistance have been successfully practiced despite the heavy-hand of legislation and surveillance. Regimes seeking to emulate the Singaporean model will therefore benefit from examining the Singapore case. Finally, it is difficult to safely assume that the Internet is a “chaotic and irrational” domain without a regulatory structure of its own in correcting false information.

Although the state attempts to ensure “that its regulatory control over technology remains watertight”³⁶⁶ by instilling a panoptic and auto-regulatory environment in Singapore, the element of fear does not seem to be as resilient as some scholars proposed. Netizens seem to be emboldened by various strategies that take advantage of loopholes in the system, taking advantage of the “light-touch” self-regulatory approach of the authorities. Although the closure of *Sintercom*, the

³⁶⁶ Lee, “Internet Control”, 92.

gazetting of *TC* as a political society by authorities, as well as the criminal investigation of Zulfikar and Ho, seem to have locked the doors of opportunity for the use of the Internet as a tool for voicing alternative opinion, this dissertation argues that a closer examination of cyberspace entities suggests the opposite—that the Internet community is more resilient than perceived. Contrary to what Tan Tarn How suggests, the Internet community has not been “spooked”³⁶⁷ by these events, with *Sintercom* being reborn as the *New Sintercom*, remaining active throughout the election campaign, and with *TC* continuing to operate with relative degrees of freedom despite intentional clamping of activities during that same week. Apart from the arrests of a few bloggers under the Sedition Act for posting racist remarks on the Internet in 2005, no other individuals have come under investigation for online posts since.

It is also noteworthy to refrain from generalising the “Internet” as a monolithic whole, for further analysis shows that there exists variance amongst forums, blogs and other websites. In comparing interactive sites such as blogs and forums, one can observe that firstly, unlike blogs, forums typically allow anyone to start a new discussion, otherwise known as a thread, or to reply to an existing thread. Secondly, the range of topics discussed in forums is usually wider, as a website running forum software generally has more than one forum, each dedicated to a different topic. Thirdly, while many blogs allow visitors to post comments in reply to authors, the number of people creating entries tends to be quite limited, with the range of viewpoints being correspondingly narrow given that readers typically post comments without aiming to engage in a debate with the blogger. This differs from discussions

³⁶⁷ Tan Tarn How, “Probe into Web Articles Spooks Net Community”, *The Straits Times Interactive*, 6 July 2002.

forums, where issues are debated more comprehensively, with diversity of opinions being generated. Fourthly, blogs in question are also observed to host more analytical articles as compared to the online forums examined; that the comments on blogs tend to more “civil” in nature whereas debates in online forums can degenerate into name-calling catfights laced with offensive language. Finally, the modes of resistance also differ, with satirical and sarcastic comments on blogs, but more informal, direct language and more personal attacks in forums. This disparity might most likely be due to issues of accountability, for there are more recognisable personalities that host or partake in these popular blogs.

The cloak of anonymity seems to be an obvious reason why netizens are confident to post remarks online without fear of legal repercussions. With the setting up of anonymous blogs, by using overseas proxies as well as by exploiting technological advances in *Youtube* and *Google Video* as media hosting sites, many online forums and blogs have flouted existing regulations during the GE2006 campaign week. The authorities have also realised that it is impossible to fully control these areas:

We also accept that Internet and new media are evolving. In five years' time, with new technologies and services, even more people will be Net-savvy. So our policies must also evolve. We will review our policies on the Internet and new media during the election period bearing in mind the changes taking place. We will consider how to better embrace these changes so that by the next GE, we may be able to adopt a lighter-touch approach during the election period.³⁶⁸

Anonymity of individual identities can be a double-edged sword, however, for though it can function as a shield or mechanism for damage control, people do tend to trust anonymous comments less. This is evident in some threads in online forums where readers question the sources of particular information. Nonetheless, the same

³⁶⁸ Opening speech by MICA Minister Lee Boon Yang at the conference organised by the Public Relations Academy, quoted from Leslie Koh, “Blogs and Podcasts May Get More Leeway At Next GE”, *The Straits Times*, 1 June 2006.

does not apply to anonymous blogs such as *Xenoboy* and *Molly Meek* because they function less as information providers than analytical arenas. It is also observed in Chapter Five that the Internet is not as chaotic, irrational and frivolous as assumed by many, for false information or weak arguments are quickly corrected by other net users. The assumption that readers are passive consumers of information therefore needs to be dispelled. As Stuart Hall highlights, the readings of texts can be “dominant-hegemonic”, “negotiated” or “oppositional”,³⁶⁹ with the processes of discursive translation and decoding differing from reader to reader.

Another key observation of this study is that the network of online forums, blogs and other websites is very vast. As explicated in Chapters Three to Five, these cyberspace entities promote each other by way of linkages, forming an intricate network of cyberspace entities. On online forums, members recommend posts and articles from other forums and blogs. Likewise in the blogs studied, there exists many links to other blogs by way of tags and URL linkages to other websites. Some blogs also highlight discussions in certain forums, further elucidating the vast extensiveness of cyberspace networks, and the visible salience of loose “online communities” that are united in certain fronts: in opposing biased media framing, perceived unreasonable policies and hegemonic discourse in general.

Thus, it will be interesting to observe how the state continues in its attempt to win consent, whilst endeavouring to suppress the emergence of an increasingly politicised Internet community. MICA’s intention to review the way it manages new media, and its aim to adopt a “lighter touch approach” at the next polls, seems to be a step in the right direction. Indeed, the impact of blogging and online forums in

³⁶⁹ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding” in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980).

GE2006 has demonstrated that swift developments in technology have shifted the balance of power in the political landscape. Online discourse cannot be effectively eliminated due to technological opportunities present in overseas and anonymous proxies, and the implementation of harsher policies would be likely to incur the wrath of increasing numbers of techno-savvy Singaporeans seeking new outlets for political expression and resistance. Even if a “lighter touch approach” is to be implemented in the next election, and if the populace were to rise to the occasion by using the Internet as a space for free speech, it would be giving too much credit to authorities to presume that netizens would move into spaces intentionally ceded by the former. It would be more accurate to envisage a space for resistance on its own, for by the next elections, newer developments in technology would have empowered netizens further, increasing the political impact of the Internet.

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