Online Organization of an Offline Protest: From Social to Traditional Media and Back

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Abstract
This paper is a qualitative examination of the participatory potential of social media, focusing on a student-organized protest against censorship in Singapore. While the debate regarding the impact of new media on politics is well-documented, few studies have explicitly detailed the process of online civic mobilization in terms of its contribution to the more traditional forms of political participation, including real-world protests. This case study provides a detailed account of how social media platforms, such as Facebook, as well as traditional media forms were used to organize a student protest against censorship. The findings indicate that social network sites provided easily accessible, inexpensive and effective means for civic organization and mobilization. In addition, blogs and forums were used to foster public debate and deliberation on the issue. We also found that the activists used social media not to circumvent but rather to engage traditional media stakeholders and amplify the impact of their messages and actions.

1. Introduction
In late 2008, news coverage of a politician’s visit to Nanyang Technological University in Singapore was censored in two student media outlets by the University’s administration, sparking protest. Students, unhappy about the sudden and clear loss of control over their media outlets, turned to online media in order to organize an offline, real-world, protest against the censorship [1, 24, 25]. The following case study provides an in-depth analysis of the process of political mobilization via new media, with a particular emphasis on social network sites (SNSs) and their participatory affordances.

We also aim to highlight several longstanding and often misunderstood issues in the new media realm. It is argued that new and traditional media labels are not useful labels, as the issues around their use are not simply about whether a medium is online and digital or not, but run deeper to issues that have been previously explored with traditional or old media. Separating old and new media use misses how people use both simultaneously, and how many old media forms and stakeholders are present in the new media realm. Hence, in this study we attempt to map the flows of mobilization information across different media forms and platforms and examine how activists use social media not to circumvent but instead to utilize traditional media and magnify the importance of their actions and messages. We look at the issues of access to communication forms, i.e., gatekeeping, motivations of the users, and their perspectives about the various media channels used. Using the data from interviews with the organizers and participants, we aim to provide a detailed anatomy of the protest that can be viewed both as a practical guide for civic activists and as a theoretical model for understanding new media-initiated civic action.

2. Literature review
The use of distributed multi-use media such as the Internet and mobile phones for organizing protests has been a recent focus of the general news media as this specific type of organizing is relatively new, although organization of protests through media is certainly not. Recent examples include election protests in Iran in 2009, where new media use, especially Twitter, was instrumental in organizing protestors [2, 10, 20]. The death of one protestor (Neda Agha-Soltan), who was shot and killed, was captured by a mobile phone and viewed around the world on the Internet. There was also Ukraine’s Orange Revolution in 2004, where the election protesters used the Internet for organizing [19]. The Internet and its access technologies (computers and mobile devices) have been well-covered in the literature across different disciplines, with different frameworks, and even with disagreement regarding their impact. The issues related to social and political engagement and gatekeeping have received much ink in recent years.

In this study, we seek to directly examine the motivations and perceptions behind uses of new technologies, particularly SNSs, for civic engagement, and map the flows of mobilization information across different media. Some scholars have voiced concerns about declining civic engagement, especially among
youths [11][14]. Others uphold the optimistic view of the Internet as a forum for political engagement [12, 33] and because youths typically display an affinity for new media [18], new media may be a useful channel for young people’s political engagement. The Internet’s decentralized architecture is well-suited to the social networks of youth movements (and of all movements), and provides activists with resources for both inter- and intra-organizational communication and networking [21]. Low barriers to entry and affordable access to the online public sphere makes civic participation on the Internet more attractive to young people, who would likely be marginalized otherwise [4].

We also aim to more closely explore the role of social media in engaging traditional media gatekeepers. Gatekeeping as a topic of academic inquiry was more popular before the arrival of the Internet, but has continued to receive some attention in the Internet era. Indeed, despite being somewhat overlooked, it is still an important issue for the online world, especially when it comes to the coverage of public and political affairs. Generally speaking, the Internet is considered a serious blow to gatekeeping and gatekeepers. Walsh [32] examined how traditional media gatekeepers refrained from publishing rumors of President Clinton’s affair with intern Monica Lewinsky, while new media muckraker Matt Drudge, acting outside of the traditional power structure, did not. Williams and Delli Carpini [34] provocatively pronounced “the collapse of gatekeeping” thanks to the Internet, and Levinson [17] wrote how the Internet makes gatekeeping “unnecessary.”

Some, however, have found that while the Internet helps people avoid gatekeepers, there are times when Internet users may want to access media that has gatekeepers. Poor [22] found that individuals are aware of gatekeeping and utilize different media, both online and offline, to suit their needs. Gatekeepers can be useful, and Singer [28] noted that “online users... may actually be looking for some sort of gate keeper” under situations where they want to avoid or find certain information. From this and other work, it is clear that the Internet helps people avoid gatekeepers, but sometimes gatekeepers are appreciated, much as we will see from the data in the current case study.

In recent years the rise of social media, particularly social network sites, has reinvigorated the debate regarding the Internet’s impact on civic and political life. SNSs such as Friendster, Facebook and MySpace function as an online platform for users to represent themselves through construction of profile pages, as well as to maintain or form social connections. Individuals’ social networks are articulated and negotiated on Facebook via linking and viewing of profiles [5]. Recent studies report that a strong reliance on social media sites like Facebook, MySpace and YouTube is positively related to civic participation [35]. Kobayashi, Ikeda and Miyata [15] suggest that close-knit online networks can lead to positive outcomes, including “perceived norms of generalized reciprocity and generalized trust” (p. 589). In the domain of SNSs, Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe [6] found that college students benefitted from Facebook use by aiding a variety of social bonds.

Arguably, SNSs can be viewed as providing specific technological affordances that may promote productive social relations more conveniently and efficiently than before [23]. For instance, Facebook’s features and applications allow for the maintenance and extension of users’ social networks [16, 13]. Features like “Status Updates”, the “Wall” and “News Feeds” enable Facebook members to share personal thoughts and stay updated on the current happenings in each other’s lives. Users can upload different kinds of content including videos and photos. In addition, features of Facebook such as “Groups” and “Events” allow users to organize, coordinate and stay updated on various group activities and events. Not surprisingly, Facebook’s “Groups” function has recently been linked with increased civic and political participation among young people in the United States [31]. Still, although it is clear that the Internet and social network sites have potential to facilitate social activism, boyd [3] feels that social networking, especially among youths, has not come close to reaching its full potential.

The vast popularity of SNSs, however, cannot be disputed. At the time of writing, Facebook is the most popular social network site in the world, with more than 500 million active users as of August 2010 [7]. Young people in Singapore are among Asia’s most prolific SNS users [9], with one estimate citing more than 2 million Facebook visitors in May 2010 [8], a remarkable number for a city-state with a population of less than 5 million [29].

3. Case study: Student protest in Singapore

While overt voicing of one’s opinions through public demonstrations is common in most democratic societies, similar expression has been largely confined to cyberspace in Singapore. Following the rapid proliferation of social network sites, new media is no longer just an avenue for self-expression but a viable instrument of offline civic mobilization as well. When finally a designated area where citizens could protest legally was introduced in Singapore on September 1st, 2008 [25], new media’s potential for facilitating offline civic events would be tested.

The protest described in this paper stemmed from a visit by the opposition politician Dr. Chee Soon Juan to Nanyang Technological University (NTU) on August 26, 2008. Campus media outlets, The Nanyang Chronicle (campus newspaper) and Nanyang Spectrum (broadcast news program) covered his surprise visit. However, the on-campus news reports were swiftly pulled by the university administration, who acted as gatekeepers for the information. Their action sparked outrage among students over the censorship.

A group of students pledged a protest event against the censorship, initiating their efforts by creating a Facebook group, ‘Stand Up For Media Freedom on...’
Campus’, and inviting friends in their networks to join their cause. As the word spread, the student activists stepped up their game by using MSN nicknames, blogs such as The Online Citizen, and local online forums to propagate awareness of the event. They also sought the attention of the traditional media by issuing press releases detailing their cause and the planned protest. Their efforts culminated in an event held at the Speaker’s Corner in Hong Lim Park on October 5, 2008, which was attended by approximately 100 people including the press. The protest gained news coverage from several newspapers and wire agencies including Reuters and AFP [1, 24], which further increased the visibility of the event among the general population. In order to guide our research, we have formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: Which new media channels were used by the activists to organize the protest? What were their motivations for use?

RQ2: What are the specific features of social network sites that are effectively used by the activists to organize an offline protest?

RQ3: How and why did the activists engage traditional media? What were their expectations?

4. Method

This study adopts a qualitative method of semi-structured face-to-face interviewing in order to elicit personal accounts of how the protest organizers and participants used and perceived different media channels. In-depth interviews were conducted in late 2008 and early 2009 with 18 students associated with the protest event. Participation was voluntary and no incentives were offered to any of the interviewees. The length of the interviews ranged from 14 minutes to 49 minutes. Each interview was conducted, audio-recorded and subsequently fully transcribed by the researchers.

The first wave of interviews was conducted with the four student activists (aged 23 to 26) who organized the event. The interviews broadly addressed the student activists’ usage of new media throughout different stages of planning and execution of the protest. Questions probing the importance of specific features of Facebook were posed to the student activists to discover how characteristics of social network sites contributed to the mobilization process. The student activists were also invited to discuss how they used traditional media and new media in order to disseminate information about the protest event to the general public. To fully depict the flow of information behind the protest, student activists were asked to identify individuals whom they invited to participate in the event via Facebook. A second wave of interviews was conducted with 14 of these individuals (aged 20 to 25) who formed the subsequent tiers (friends, friends of friends, members of the public) in the civic mobilization process.

5. Findings

The data collected was used to describe specific mechanisms behind the process of civic mobilization starting from the organizers to the following tier of individuals receiving the mobilizing communication. The accounts from the student activists shed light on how various forms of new media were used for specific purposes; for instance, how blogs and news aggregator sites served as good platforms for civic debate, while SNSs like Facebook worked best as information dissemination centers focused on an immediate circle of friends and acquaintances. On the basis of the data gathered from interviewees, we reconstructed the flows of mobilization information; a diagram outlining the anatomy of the protest shows both the media channels used and the audiences reached (see Figure 1).

Student activists clearly identified Facebook as the main channel they used to generate quick public awareness of their cause through the “Group” and “Event” pages set up in support of the protest event. I think it’s the fastest way to get to many people… Currently it’s probably one of the most efficient media to go. I mean, you can’t SMS everyone right? I mean, people can pass on the SMS, but I don’t think that’s the way that Singapore culture would work. [Male student activist, 25]

So you can just, uh, it’s like snowballing, you know. Just people, and click on friends and yeah, it’s easier to reach a very large group of people in that way. [Female student activist, 23]

Moreover, as one activist stated, using Facebook allowed them to circumvent the cost of publicity through traditional media, giving them a “cheap way of targeting people” they could not otherwise reach. Both the activists and participants agreed that Facebook was most adept in facilitating mobilization, with its specific features such as “News Feed” and “Notes”, which stimulated interest in the cause among Facebook users already connected by their friendships at the university.

Because when you go into your home page right, then you will see, you know, oh so-and-so is attending, or how many millions of your friends are attending this event. [Female participant, 23]

I saw it on the newsfeeds. The Facebook newsfeeds. Some people have joined. Some people have written passionate notes about this protest. And some people were tagged in notes. Yeah, so basically out of curiosity, I went to click and that’s how I discover it. [Female participant, 25]

A number of protest participants came from a circle of friends of the student activists as well as other students from the same school who received group and event invitations over Facebook. This seems to be a crucial point regarding the use of Facebook for civic mobilization. SNSs like Facebook are based on trust between friends, which subsequently endows mobilizing communication with more credence and trustworthiness. Friends, as can be seen by the below
quote, can also be viewed as gatekeepers who present worthwhile information.

Figure 1. The flows of mobilizing information: Media channels used and audiences reached.

I think you have a wider reach, like for example, your friend believes in the cause, and he thinks you might be interested, so he can send you links, quite conveniently, then you can take a look and see whether like, it interests you. [Female participant, 21]  
I trust my friends to have good judgment and not give me nonsense... I mean, if this issue is very close to my friend's heart and, you know, I know she feels very strongly about it and I also want to go support her... [Female participant, 21]

Additionally, participants highlight that SNSs like Facebook may promote civic engagement simply through group membership or RSVP-ing to an event due to the mediating factor of commitment.  
I mean, uh, it's not only a forum. But, it sort of, like, gives an identity - like, oh, by joining this group, I'm part of this people. [Female participant, 21]  
Whether by choosing to not be part of it at all or be part of it. 'Cause even by not being part of it, they are taking a stand... And that would make those that take part in it, even more... it says much more
about their conviction and what they feel. [Male student activist, 26]

In a similar vein, instant messaging platforms such as MSN were used to spread the information and to constantly update friends and acquaintances about the protest.

‘Cause it’s like, people will pass you the link on MSN, so you’ll just go and read it as well. So it was from there that I actually found out about the whole issue, if not I wouldn’t have known. [Female participant, 21]

However, the student activists pointed out that Facebook pages were not ideal for facilitating meaningful debate and public deliberation about the issue. Instead, the respondents pointed out that other online media platforms were more suitable for those purposes. For instance, an online political news blog, The Online Citizen (TOC) covered the censorship issue and protest event extensively during the period, generating much debate among its readers in the articles’ comments section. As one of the student activists stated:

I don’t think Facebook is a quality comment thing. People go there just for fun. TOC is a serious issue thing. So I left my posts on TOC. [Male student activist, 26]

Perhaps more importantly, the activists stressed that The Online Citizen blog was ideal for reaching other politically engaged netizens outside the immediate environment of friends and university students. They suggested that the blog’s high visibility and traffic made possible to spread the word of the protest among those who, while not directly involved with the issue, supported students’ action against censorship.

Similarly, the student activists found online forums to be a good way to promote their cause to those who are generally interested in political and public affairs. For the activists, these forums represented the gates to different “attentive publics” who frequently engaged in heated debates featuring a wide range of diverse voices and viewpoints.

I still think forums… they’re the best. Because when you think about it, Facebook, it’s like groups. So people who are invited to the group, who join the group, usually follow the group’s agenda already. There’s no varying viewpoint. In forums, people will join and they will shoot their opinion on it. They’re not obliged to follow the group. [Female participant, 21]

In spite of their enthusiasm for new media platforms and the reduced gatekeeping usually found there, the involvement of the traditional media remains patently important to the activists. They acknowledged that the event would have been less successful without the pre- and post-event press coverage from the established wire services and mainstream newspapers. Because the traditional media are gatekeepers, they typically cover information that is considered trustworthy or notable to some extent. Coverage of the student protest by traditional media sources gave the protest respectability, whereas self-promotion in new media sources could not. Students also expressed concerns regarding the limitations of Facebook and other new media in reaching certain audiences, highlighting the agenda-setting power of the mainstream media.

The mainstream media coverage and publicity would confer importance to our issue... And the mainstream media will be able to reach out to an audience that we simply cannot do so. [Male student activist, 23]

Protests participants concurred that they continued to associate greater credibility with what is reported in the traditional media due to the gatekeeping of the traditional media: not all potential news stories are covered. Participants also suggested that the traditional media provides more in-depth coverage of issues. In contrast, participants recognized the speed and ease of information dissemination and consumption as the key features of new media platforms.

New media, the news that I get is more brief, it’s more of speed than details. Whereas traditional media, it’s more detailed and they have more in-depth report and it somehow just appear more credible. So right now I do get sources from both and I just mix them together to get my overall worldview. [Female participant, 21]

Online media is on the rise, it helps me to get more young people to start reading the news better and it’s a quick way to access like little bites and also it’s going to be awhile before online journalism can improve its quality to match that of traditional media, so until then I don’t think that new media will be able to replace traditional media. I think that traditional media is still very established in our society. [Female participant, 21]

The traditional media is credible because it has gained that reputation but I’m not excluding the possibility that one day the new media will gain that, the same kind of credibility. [Male participant, 23]

6. Discussion

This study details how a group of student activists successfully utilized social media to overcome traditional obstacles and bring about a public demonstration against media censorship. This particular protest is especially significant in illustrating the reciprocal relationship that exists between new and traditional media, as well as the drawbacks and benefits of the actions of those who have gatekeeping powers in both the new and traditional media.

The findings suggest that social network sites provide an effective means for reaching audiences in one’s immediate and extended networks of friends and acquaintances. Facebook features such as “Group” and “Event” invites as well as “Status Updates” are fast, easily accessible and cost-efficient ways of disseminating information about an event. They provide civic activists with tools not only to reach their
audiences with specific event messages, but also to keep them flooded with a constant stream of related communications, including those simply aimed keeping esprit de corps high. New media may not be able to reach a wider audience, especially SNSs which rely on pre-existing “friend” connections or other networks. It is here that traditional media, with its gatekeeping, comes into play, if indeed one can hurdle the gatekeeping barrier.

The findings suggest a mediating role of social connections maintained in online social networks and highlight the importance of trust and close friendship ties. Our participants’ responses verify that social ties play an important role in the process of civic mobilization by making citizens not only more receptive to mobilizing messages, but also more committal to offline events. Indeed, Kobayashi et al. [15] found that some forms of collective Internet use such as participation in online communities enhance a sense of reciprocity and trust shared by members, with possible spillover effects into offline participation. This is supported by our data where the participants affirm that knowing the mobilizing message on Facebook was from a friend would boost their inclination to respond to the mobilization in addition to possible personal interest in the cause. Here, the pre-existing trust in the other person would allow for motivation. If people were not immediately part of a pre-existing social network, and so message originators were unknown to them, motivation could be still occur through the message recipient’s trust in the traditional media’s gatekeeping function.

Still, we share boyd’s [3] view that SNSs are “not going to make people engage” (p. 244) as they typically allow politically engaged people to seek out others who are similar, including their friends. The key concern appears to be how we could activate the “alienated and uninterested” (p. 243) citizens and subsequently influence their networks of like others. Hence, while our findings demonstrate a particular stage of political engagement, more could be done to further examine how social network sites can be used to convey the mobilizing communication to the “inactive” individuals. It is evident that while blogs and forums were able to reach audiences outside the activists’ circles of friends and acquaintances they were still largely reaching those already engaged “issue publics” or “attentive publics”, rather than those who were disengaged. So, what could potentially engage the disengaged?

Paradoxically, it seems that traditional media is the answer. The on-going importance of traditional media in the process of civic engagement is also evident from the findings, as the participants demonstrated persistent faith in traditional media even with their affinity for online media, believing in its credibility and quality of reporting. This is the benefit derived from traditional gatekeeping. Indeed, Scheufele and Nisbet [26] suggest that forms of Internet use “will not translate into real political empowerment” without the complementary presence of traditional media (p. 70). Nevertheless, we do not discount that the growing preference of the younger generation for the Internet and the development of more interactive [27, 30] and perhaps more credible content may eventually supplant traditional media usage as a better predictor of political participation and political efficacy.

Generally, the findings address the objectives of our study in depicting the mechanism behind civic mobilization and noting the capacity of social media in overcoming logistical concerns and limitations such as cost and speed in order to promote civic participation. Our study also discusses the reinforcing and complementary role that traditional media played in terms of promoting civic participation for this protest, where press coverage in traditional media channels is still seen by many as giving credence to the issue and cause. Finally, we explored the mediating factors that stood between the use of new media and the effectiveness of the civic mobilization for this event – including the norms of perceived generalized reciprocity, generalized trust and commitment.

7. Conclusion

This paper explores the participatory potential of social media as well as the role of traditional media in facilitating civic engagement among citizens of Singapore. It was found that new media such as blogs, online forums, instant messaging and social network sites in particular are great means for mobilization of citizens due to their low barriers to entry and fast diffusion of information. Social network sites such as Facebook are found to be effective in civic mobilization among immediate and extended networks of friends and acquaintances, but less effective in providing a space for discussion and deliberation and reaching the inactive citizens. Traditional media, not defined by technological but rather by historical, organizational and societal characteristics, still has an important role to play, serving to lend credence and clout to civic and political issues and causes.

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9. References


