



SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICS

Online Social Networking and
Political Communication in Asia



EDITED BY PHILIP BEHNKE



Konrad
Adenauer
Stiftung

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Singapore

Media Programme Asia

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Foreword

At any gathering of communicators, journalists and marketers these days, the impacts and possibilities of social media and social networking are some of the most vigorously talked about topics. Not only since Barack Obama's successful use of online communication, but also among politicians of all persuasions and ages. Although there's still a wide range of different opinions about the right use of these tools and their real impacts, one thing is clear: "Why" is no longer the question. It's just "How"! Social media is here to stay. Facebook with its already more than 500 million users is the third biggest 'country' in the world!

When Paul Linnarz, Director Media Programme Asia of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, and I met for the first time to talk about a new publication, we both agreed at the outset that social media and its use in political communication in Asia should be our topic. A look at the pure numbers and facts underscored our decision: 90 per cent of Malaysia's youth are on Facebook, Indonesia has some 22 million people using social networking on a daily basis, and the Philippines is rightly known as 'the social networking capital of the world'. Not to mention China and India, with low penetration rates so far but with impressively enormous growth rates.

As occurs with so many topics regarding Asia, a general overview or somehow lumping together the development, would not have been the right choice. Asia is too diverse, especially when it comes to politics. Furthermore, we had different political agendas in the countries in 2010: Elections in the Philippines, Australia (included because of its unique use of Twitter) and South Korea; revolts and revolution in Thailand; plus the usual re-orientation and reorganisation of political parties in between general elections. In addition, the uncontested rise of social media has had its own impacts and led itself to changes in the behaviour of politicians, journalist and voters.

Social Media and Politics — Online Social Networking and Political Communication in Asia is a comprehensive and highly topical overview of current developments throughout the region. This book is more than a snapshot of the situation in Asia as at the end of 2010. It is also a well-compiled summary of the stages of development in various Asian countries. Each of the 13 chapters covers the situation and progress in one of 13 Asian countries. The authors are all media experts, and/or journalists, professors and writers with a range of experiences in the fields of social media and/or political communication. My sincere thanks go to all of the authors who not only analysed and described the current situations, but also made great use of the opportunity to choose their own angle on the topic!

We have 13 highly topical articles, each covering one or more case studies on the use of social media in political communication, giving a broad overview of the use of online networking tools in a specific country, or providing a personal reflection enhanced with poetry. Each of the pieces itself, and especially all articles together, provide a significant representation of the progress that has been made in the use of online social networking tools for political reasons. Isn't that what social media is all about? The little stories, one-to-one communications, personal recommendations which have increasing influence, bloggers speaking on behalf of small groups that suddenly become a powerful voice through numerous 'retweets'? This book is a collection of those 'little' stories, and that is exactly where it is getting its pace from.

Is Facebook really becoming an emerging campaign tool? Chapter one of this book deals exactly with this question. I don't want to give too much away, but in the case of the latest elections in the Philippines, the answer is 'Yes'. President Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III made good use of this tool, and so did his comrades-in-arms. The author delivers some nice insights and background information. How about Twitter? No other social networking tool has received so much attention in recent months. Four chapters of this book deal with the use and impact of Twitter, each with a different focus. In Thailand, Twitter became the most important information source for journalists and people during the Red Shirts' agitations. The pure numbers prove this fact. In addition, the author of the Thailand chapter managed to get some 'real voices' that are underlining the partly dramatic importance of Twitter for journalists and political activists.

On the other hand, Twitter has also proved that it is the tool of choice for quickly mobilising masses. Actively intended or not, in South Korea, Twitter led to a change in the results of a nationwide election, when a huge group of young 'afternoon voters', encouraged by the tweets of their friends, helped to snatch a promising victory from the conservative party. One quote in this chapter might say it all: "I voted around 5 pm by sparing some time while on the job," said Mi-jin Kim, a 28-year-old company worker living in the capital Seoul. "It would have slipped my mind if it wasn't for Twitter."

The author of the Australia chapter even quotes people speaking from the 'twitterised' unscheduled Australian federal election in June this year. Hip or hype? — find out in Chapter Six.

Known as scarf, or 'weibo', microblogging has made its way into China's mainstream culture. The author of the chapter on China finds evidence that microblogs have already started to micro-change the society.

Another continually popular social media tool in Asia is blogs. In Vietnam, for example, despite having 174 newspapers and 470 magazines, blogs are having a huge acceptance and impact with their number exploding in the past few years. Celebrity-blogger, Joe Ruelle, says about the beginning of this persistent era:

“And it was all blogs. It wasn’t Facebook, it wasn’t Twitter, it was all blogs at the same time.” Unfortunately it is a risk in Vietnam to have a different political opinion, and detentions of bloggers are still happening.

Essays with a more general view on the use of Internet and social media in various countries complete this book — with some surprising insights. Who would have believed that in India, despite being highly respected for its IT expertise, Internet and social media are not the mediums of political communication? The article gives us some very interesting facts and figures on this. Kind of similar is the situation in Japan. Although one of the most advanced broadband nations, due to legal restrictions in elections campaigns, Internet and social media do not play a significant role in the public discourse. Certainly, less surprising is the limited development in countries like Pakistan and Cambodia, although both countries are catching up. In line with the rapid development of mobile phone devices and their abilities for audio-visual content, social media has the potential to play an increasing role in these countries. How long it will take to draw level with Indonesia and Malaysia is hard to say. In both these countries Internet and social media have long arrived, especially in Malaysia where investments in the knowledge economy and infrastructure made almost 20 years ago, are now paying off. There’s not much more to add about a really wired country with citizens already transformed into netizens.

Whether this is the right way, is of course another question. And maybe a very good one. Therefore, to respond to this question, we also have a critical voice in the book. No other than our author from Singapore, the most wired country in Asia (and beyond), who shares his more or less critical assessment of the current developments.

Once again, my sincere thanks to all authors who made this publication possible. Thanks a lot for your enthusiasm and wholehearted work and support! I look forward to our next collaboration. A big ‘thank you’ also to Paul Linnarz and Britt Gehder from the Media Programme Asia of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, as well as to Olivia Yeo and Chris Leather for taking care of the details.

I hope you enjoy reading *Social Media and Politics* at least as much as I did.

Philip Behnke
Editor

Chapter 1

Facebook and Twitter — Democratising participation in the Philippines

Justine Espina-Letargo

Justine Espina-Letargo's research on online political communication began at the Communications and New Media Programme of the National University of Singapore where she completed her Master's thesis on the highs and lows of campaigning on the Internet. A political journalist based in Manila, she continues to monitor how both politicians and the Filipino online community use the web. She is currently a producer for the multi-media desk of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ).

When Joylyn Alonso circulated a web message about her grandfather's dying wish, little did she expect to see his dream of seeing Senator Aquino in person, become a reality. Her personally penned 'Open Letter to Noynoy', caught the attention of Senator Noynoy Aquino's staff via their official Facebook page, in late January 2010. It was also published as a web-link on Alonso's blog. The exposure and recognition received by her letter enabled Aquino to make an unannounced visit to the cancer-stricken elderly man at a local hospital, the following day. Aquino's unprecedented visit to the 63 year-old Barangay official from Taguig City, came after a visit by Alonso's sister Viel and avoided the glare of media fanfare. While the mainstream press did not cover the incident in its usual frenzy, the widespread popularity of Facebook and the Internet helped to publicise news of the visit, earning for Aquino, both commendation and ire from the online community.

Aquino's decision to vie for presidential candidature had been buoyed by supporters, shortly after the death of his mother, the former President Corazon C. Aquino, on 1 August 2009. His decision to make an impromptu call to attend to the dying man was lavished with praise on his Facebook page. According to Vicente Romano, head of the Aquino campaign's New Media Bureau, "it was a big deal for the girl, even to the community of supporters", referring to the outpouring of emotional support and pledges of prayer for Alonso, who had in turn idolised Aquino's parents as the country's iconic figures of democracy. However, other Netizens did not look too kindly on the visit, arguing that visiting the sick is typical

for candidates during the campaign season. While the debate about Aquino's intentions raged online, it was clear that Aquino's visit to Alonso's deathbed without any press coverage endeared Aquino to his supporters. This was evident when shortly after, photographs of the visit were posted on Aquino's official Facebook page — some 800 fans 'liked' the entry and posted positive messages about it.

Aquino's New Media Bureau credited the discussion and photos about the visit, mostly to the efforts of Alonso's granddaughter and Aquino's fans on Facebook, and not to the campaign team. In addition, the incident "did not even see print", implying the lack of print media comment or speculation, which was surprising considering the media-fuelled politics that typically characterise campaigns. In emphasising that the encounter was not leaked to the press, Romano made a distinction between what he believed was a sincere action and the scripted or staged events involving politicians that the press and the discerning public are all too familiar with. The perceived genuineness of Aquino, which generated the positive buzz on Facebook and consequently spread virally across the web, reflects how valuable online users consider this trait to be. Former Facebook executives believe that the authenticity of letting ordinary citizens speak for a campaign creates a groundswell of support, such as the Obama phenomena.

It would also seem that Filipinos similarly demand honesty and spontaneity from their candidates. A 2009 study conducted by the Communications and New Media Programme of the National University of Singapore (NUS), using six focus group interviews with Filipinos based in the Philippines and Singapore, showed that the majority of respondents aged between 18 and 40 were turned off by candidates who launched 'hard-sell' campaigns on their official candidate websites. According to the study, the respondents wanted to see the candidate in action, interacting and engaging with real people. Romano was also behind the online petition 'e-lagda'. The petition called on former President Joseph Estrada, to step down from office, echoing the findings from the above-mentioned NUS study, which suggests that Filipino online users, currently estimated at around 30 million, are a 'discerning' audience. This audience is made up of the upper and middle-classes, according to the 2009 and 2010 AC Nielsen-Yahoo Index Reports. The latest report, which surveyed 1500 respondents in 22 urban areas, notes that



One of several Facebook accounts created against Manny Villar

70 per cent of users between the ages of 10 and 39 mainly access the web from Internet cafes.

A Whole New Numbers Game

In a press release, Aquino's office said that those who believe in the senator's reforms are "propelling the massive wave of support that has consistently grown the fan page's numbers that increase by several thousand in a single day". The site started with slightly more than 11,000 followers in September 2009, when the page was first commissioned by the New Media Bureau to be Aquino's official Facebook fan page. The site began running shortly after Aquino decided to run for the presidency, and exceeded one million fans on 25 March 2010. Aquino personally posted his appreciation to his almost 40,000 followers, on Twitter, which the campaign had also tapped into for communicating with supporters. Such was Aquino's popularity with Filipinos online, that administrators also set up other accredited fan pages on Facebook, "to host discussions, answer questions by supporters, and even help supporters' personal messages get to Sen. Aquino", they said. With over 78,000 interactions a week, Aquino's team claimed they defeated all other presidential aspirants who were waging a popularity game on Facebook. Facebook became the social medium of choice for candidates in the May 2010 presidential contest.

An independent study by Netbooster showed Aquino's ratings to be neck-in-neck, in terms of the number of fans on Facebook, with his reputedly closest rival in the polls, Senator Manuel 'Manny' Villar. In contrast to Aquino, Villar faced more antagonism than support. His campaign also boasted over a million supporters on his official Facebook page towards the end of the campaign period in June 2010. Villar, who ran his campaign on an anti-poverty platform, became the target of much ridicule and resentment in cyberspace. Facebook circulated Villar's much-talked about television advertisement which dramatised his widely-touted rise from poverty, accompanied by a catchy jingle, that spawned at least five 'hate accounts'. Elsewhere on the web, the popular video-sharing site, YouTube, was awash with Villar campaign material, and with the frenzied posting of users' own interpretations and revised versions of the senator's 'Dagat ng Basura'(Sea of Garbage) — an environmentally-themed advertisement.

Inside Network, a provider of news and research market data on Facebook, reported that during February 2010, the number of Facebook users in the Philippines exceeded 10 million. This phenomenon coincided with the first half of the official campaign period, when campaigns were fired up for rallying supporters to recommend and circulate their fan pages to more friends. The Philippines is second only to Indonesia in terms of the number of Facebook users, but as a percentage of population 11.4 per cent Filipinos are users compared to 7.88 per cent of Indonesians. Interestingly, only 43.83 per cent, or less than half of the

total number of online users in the Philippines, are users of Facebook. Based on Yahoo and Nielsen's Net Index Survey in 2010, Friendster is still popular among the 1500 respondents surveyed across 22 cities in the Philippines. It had an 84 per cent share in 2010, although that decreased from 92 per cent last year. Loyalties are evidently changing, as the same surveys showed Facebook which had four per cent of users in 2009, jumping to a huge 83 per cent in 2010. Facebook's members come mainly from the 18-24 age bracket, followed by the 25-34 age group. However, those over 35 years are said to be the social networking site's fastest growing demographic. A 2009 Universal McCann study noted that social networking is a popular way of connecting people globally, especially in countries like the Philippines, which has close to two million Filipinos working overseas.

Competition between the two front-runners in the surveys turned an ugly corner, about a month after Villar's official website was allegedly defaced. Aquino's New Media Bureau reported that their own official Facebook page had been hacked, with supporters maliciously being unsubscribed in the final stages of the campaign. The Aquino campaign first learned about the hacking via a tweet from a supporter who could not access the fan page. Twitter, dubbed as the next 'hot thing' in social networking, served a critical purpose at this juncture. Both the campaign teams of Aquino and Villar used their microblogging service to update their supporters on the latest campaign schedules and developments, as well as to alert each other on the spread of fake sites and negative advertisements. The service worked in tandem with other online platforms that asked fans to report election related incidents and recruit poll watchers for election day duties. The spread of paid advertisements, including negative propaganda against both candidates, and the invasion of trolls in their respective fan pages, heightened the already highly-charged online environment. The 'mud-slinging' between Aquino and Villar's camp was manifesting itself on Facebook, which clearly demonstrates its increasing influence as a tool that goes beyond social networking. Typical mud-slinging appeared in both Aquino and Villar's accounts, as paid Facebook advertisements containing so called 'black' propaganda material sprang up, forcing both campaigns to respond to the negative publicity both on and off Facebook. Even traditional media took notice of the intense online battle between the two frontrunners, bringing it to the attention of the rest of the population.



Ad appearing on Facebook, March 25, 2010

Emerging campaign tool

The bitter rivalry between candidates was not always centre stage during the earlier days of the Internet in the Philippines. Before Facebook, the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) reported that in 1998, the web was used mostly by private individuals for seeking information rather than its destructive use in the hands of political campaigners and public relations practitioners. In the election years that followed, from 2001 to 2004, election portals run by civil society organisations and private individuals provided basic voter information on the candidates running for public office. It was the mobile phone with its SMS application that was mostly exploited by political campaigns for the promotion of candidates and rapid dissemination of black propaganda against their opponents. It was the tool wielded by a section of the population that helped to oust former President Joseph Estrada in 2001.

News organisations launched their web presence in 2004 when they covered the electoral process alongside citizen bloggers who provided 'alternative reading fare' for the public. Even as major candidates for the presidency began creating websites in 2004, campaigning mainly took the form of e-mail lists and discussion boards and had no other direct line of communication with the online community — with the exception of Raul Roco's campaign team. According to the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), Roco, who contested the presidency twice, had been the technology-savvy candidate who first used the Internet in tandem with mobile technology in his first campaign in 1998, to mobilize and communicate with supporters.

In the 2007 legislative and local mid-term elections, the majority of senatorial candidates launched websites and placed profiles on popular social networking sites such as Friendster and the photo-uploading site, Multiply, a relatively new medium being experimented with for campaign purposes. Both social networking sites began to be invaded by the so-called 'trapo' or traditional political culture. However, the level of online disagreement between candidates from the administration, candidates who claimed to come from the genuinely-intended opposition and from independent candidates, was not intense enough to grab the attention of the mass media. Nevertheless, broadcast networks did notice that candidates were invading cyberspace via YouTube, Friendster, blogs, Wikipedia, and their websites. Some of the most notable coverage by mainstream and online media in the 2007 campaign was on the use of the Internet by senatorial candidate, Francis 'Chiz' Escudero, of his website to chat online with Filipinos based abroad.

Candidates have continued to use mobile phone technology to campaign, to the dismay of irate subscribers who were helpless against the deluge of text spam and alerts from campaigners. With mobile campaigning in 2010 delivering propaganda texts by the millions via text-blasting, the estimated 35 million mobile

phone users in the Philippines were already getting tired of its use as a campaign tool. It didn't help that regulations were still not in place to stem the surge of unsolicited election-related messages during election periods.

With the cellphone getting 'old', Facebook was starting to make an impact with both campaign organisations and the online community, which discovered new and improved ways to boost candidates' chances. Upon closer scrutiny, the campaigns were criticised for their apparent short-sightedness. Even some users thought that their limited circles on Facebook should only involve like-minded people. These criticisms reflected a lack of understanding of the new medium — its nature, as well as the potential of the popular social networking site to go beyond expanding friendly connections.

Hits and misses

The Aquino New Media Bureau credited the success of its online campaign to a wide base of volunteers in the country and from abroad, including support from the masses which they stressed was driven by passion and not by resources. The enthusiasm and zeal exhibited on Facebook was evident, not merely by the number of fans and the messages they posted on Aquino's official Facebook page and other accredited sites. It was also demonstrated in what they were willing to do in order to see him through the campaign. This was facilitated by an army of administrators who ensured that supporters were informed of all campaign-related activities and fund-raising projects. It was a balancing act for the online team led by Romano, which responded to important requests from supporters, but let the fans themselves react to hostile visitors who questioned Aquino's ability to rule and his record of public service. One incensed blogger, who claimed she had been blocked from the fan page, criticised Aquino's administrators on

User 1: "What I don't understand is that you logged into Facebook, became a "fan" of Villar, went to his discussion board, clicked on my topic and responded. There's no way of getting here accidentally. So either you have a mission to bash people who support Villar, you don't have anything better to do or you just know that Villar supporters don't like Noynoy so you come here and try to debate with them."

User 2: "There's no rule on facebook that you have to "like" in order to post a comment. if that were the case then you would never have heard from me. i did not "like" and still don't. besides, what's the point of a discussion board if you're all in agreeem?"

Facebook. She said it was 'pathetic' to block her for posting a negative message, which she claimed had not even been intended for, or directed at, Aquino himself. Despite his popularity, Aquino was also chided for riding on the legacy of his parents, and that he had nothing to show for his stint as a congressman and senator. The controversies surrounding his celebrity sister, Kris, as well as the family-owned Hacienda Luisita, also possibly sidetracked the more important issues in his campaign.

Administrators of Villar's Facebook account also let fans and unwanted guests argue on their fan page, with Villar's most ardent defenders demanding hostile visitors leave the page. Below is a quote from an exchange in his fan page shortly after the elections.

The online argument illustrates a common finding from studies that examined the profiles of online visitors to candidates' websites. It is reputed that most of these visitors are actually supporters of the candidate. Understandably, fans are fiercely protective of their respective candidate and do not welcome any unfavourable opinions or comments on the fan page about their candidate. Allowing a free-flowing discussion though, among fans, augers well for any campaign as it shows the candour of a no-holds-barred online exchange and this is valued by audiences. The majority of the 33 focus group participants from the NUS study tended to equate the uncensored online content with the credibility and integrity of a campaign. Anything less was considered self-serving and reeked of political propaganda typically seen in the mass media, which most participants opposed.

In contrast to candidate websites where campaigns can still get away with one-way communication, and control the subject matter and the flow of debate to a certain extent, spinning the truth on social media is seen as futile. Both Aquino and Villar attempted to counteract the negative comments against them on Facebook and other online forums. They began posting videos and links to sites where campaign staff responded to news reports, criticism and clarified positions on issues. It was notable that candidates themselves were not actively engaging with their fans on Facebook, which visitors wanted to see more of. As most studies of online political communication suggest, candidates need to understand that while there are inherent risks in having open communication with fans, supporters and visitors to the fan page, they can let the online audience know the extent of their concern through constructive responses to criticism. Senator Francis Escudero, who was the first to engage overseas Filipinos in live chat when he launched his senatorial bid in 2007, says, "Any kind of feedback is valuable input, be it a lie, or a personal attack".

As a tool for promoting interaction between campaigns and their audiences, both the Aquino and Villar camps were holding back, as they preferred to provide prepared statements in text form, instead of engaging their visitors occasionally via live chat. This preference for polished statements may be understandable

considering that studies have shown candidates are afraid to lose control of issues in online discussions. Both Aquino and Villar instead directed fans to links on their websites, which they could click on to be informed about issues affecting their candidacies. Villar went a step further by posting a video link on his fan page, which showed him responding to his fans on various allegations and controversies raised by the mainstream news media. The series of videos first appeared on his official website.



Villar addressing his Facebook fans

In terms of organising real-world campaign events at grassroots level and mobilising their supporters offline, Facebook was put to good use by Aquino and Villar, at different levels. Both enjoyed the support of large constituencies. However, after having been elected to the Senate, Aquino declared his intentions of vying for the presidency, only five months before the 90-day official

campaign period began in February 2010. His cash-strapped and newly-organised campaign was hard-pressed to access many campaigning opportunities. The New Media Bureau, led by Romano, lost no time enlisting the support of family and friends via Facebook to participate in organised meetings and campaign rallies. However, while thousands pledged to support Aquino online, Romano found that little had changed in Filipinos' attitudes when it came to translating that support into action. He noted there was a 'big jump' between people committing to support an individual online, and taking committed actions such as attending a campaign event. "Online engagement is easy", says the veteran cyber-organiser behind the online petition 'e-lagda' against Estrada, adding that he didn't expect people to do the same in real life. With younger users, however, there was hope. On the 24th commemoration of the People Power Revolution in February, the Aquino campaign announced that some 200 of his fans on Facebook had organised a collective march along the historic highway, which was headlined in a press release as "Online support translates to people power on the ground".

While Aquino had his yellow army, Villar was also rallying his troops or 'Katropra' online. The one-time House Speaker and Senate President had been elected into congress before Aquino and was widely perceived to have campaigned for the presidency for years before Aquino started his campaign. As with other veteran legislators, who ran for re-election in the Senate in 2007, Villar, who had served three terms as congressman for his district, also had the advantage of a wide, existing network of supporters on the ground, which could be mobilised during a

campaign. This, however, did not stop his camp from tapping into Facebook and Twitter to reinforce his networks on the ground, and to organise new groups in locations where they had not yet established a footing. Social networks were also used extensively to round up his 'orange' poll observers in preparation for election day, in keeping with the colour-coded campaign.

When Aquino's team harnessed social networking, they also used it to raise funds, which Villar's camp did not. In the previous elections of 2007, senatorial candidates had deliberately rejected raising funds via the Internet because they feared being set up by political rivals and receiving donations from unfavourable sources such as illegal gambling and drug lords. To raise funds for Aquino campaign t-shirts and other paraphernalia were sold on Facebook and other online sites. New Media Bureau head, Vicente Romano, said it was a matter of providing different avenues for potential donors to support the campaign. Romano was pleased with the contributions of five to 20 dollars, coming mostly from overseas Filipinos, which he said were much appreciated by the campaign. These efforts, according to the Aquino campaign reflected a 'people's campaign' versus the 'paid campaign' being waged by their opponents. The slogan echoes the clichéd 'people power' which had installed two presidents into office in the Philippines, and which has been periodically exploited for other political ends. But catchy slogans were not the only recycled elements that were attracting online-crazed Filipinos.

Politics as usual

Facebook developers were attuned to the ways in which their expanding market was adapting their platform, when it launched an application that facilitated communication between users and candidates for the 2008 United States presidential election. Aquino and Villar's uptake of Facebook and Twitter took its cue from Obama's phenomenal online draw, just as Philippine politics had always mimicked American-style campaigning. However, campaign organisations here were revamping their own brand of networking via Facebook, hoping to start a revolution online. Ironically, traditional political communication also began to play out in the new medium. From the campaign images to the rhetoric on their Facebook accounts, it was apparent some of the messages posted by fans were reflecting the age-old culture of favouritism towards clients that has characterised Philippine politics for centuries.

For the younger breed of online users, the invasion of 'trapo-style' politics perpetuated by the candidates on the web is not acceptable online. This was shown by the results of the focus-group interviews conducted by NUS. Respondents between the ages of 18 and 25, based in the Philippines and Singapore, were turned-off by images in candidate websites showing politicians posing with indigent people, or of candidates and their celebrity-endorsers raising their arms in victory. It should come as no surprise that candidates coming from political dynasties are the ones who carry on this patron-seeking behaviour in cyberspace.

It was only a matter of time before social media began to cultivate the patron-client culture so deeply-ingrained in the Filipino psyche. In the 2007 senatorial contest, a few technology-savvy campaign organizations provided a mechanism in their websites that would facilitate and respond to requests for medical assistance from constituents. Some campaigns even devoted office personnel to respond specifically to online requests for all sorts of assistance. In the case of a candidate's Facebook account, there could be unrelated posts in the middle of a thread, where someone suddenly interjected an appeal for medical and financial assistance for a nephew's diabetes condition. The fans did not mind, and campaign staff picked up on these requests. The situation could be explained in cultural terms, where in the Philippines, the poor consider a leader "as provider and guide, and as one who thinks about the future and desires the good of the children".

In some cases, the fans themselves tried to help out by offering advice or referring people they knew who could also provide some form of assistance. As administrators realized how altruism manifests itself on Facebook, the incoming Aquino administration saw how it could tap the new medium in its program to fight corruption in government.

Power to the people

Taking its cue from their previous and existing online campaigns, the newly-elected government of President Noyonoy Aquino announced it would use Facebook and Twitter for engaging the pulse of the community. Aquino also expressed hopes that social media would improve the communication processes between government and its people. In June 2010, the Supreme Court also jumped on the social media bandwagon when it announced it would similarly tap into the two popular social media sites to provide the latest updates on important cases and in acquiring feedback from the populace.

In July 2010, Facebook made the news when local police apprehended a murder and robbery suspect by monitoring his account. In the same month, the Finance Department reported that it wanted the people to be its partners in apprehending tax evaders and smugglers, by reporting on similar misconduct and unethical actions via Facebook and Twitter. The new government hopes to use the goodwill of people towards the newly-elected leader, in his bid to clean up the bureaucracy. Although the Internet provides anonymity and user-choice on whether to reveal their identity, there is concern about compromising the security of those who provide information that leads to suspected corrupt officials and tax evaders.

Recent local events have shown the influence and visibility of the social networks as a means of bringing people together and attaining positive results. Most notably, Facebook was instrumental in providing real-time updates to Metro

Manila residents affected by typhoon Ondoy in September 2009, and in helping to organise help for the victims of the flooding. In early 2010, Facebook made the news again when the police apprehended a murder and robbery suspect by monitoring his Facebook account. Mainstream media networks have already capitalised on the Filipinos' fondness for social networking and the rapidly growing appeal of the Internet, when they promoted citizen journalism through online news sites in the 2007 election. ABS-CBN's 'Boto Mo, Ipatrol Mo', which initially encouraged citizens to report election-related incidents via the Internet, later evolved into a wide-ranging participatory tool using Facebook and Twitter to enable citizens to report cases of government abuse and talk about social issues.

Aquino kept his word about using Facebook as a means to get the public's feedback on important issues. Days after the Luneta hostage crisis on 23 August 2010, Aquino responded with scathing comments on his Facebook account that were followed by 1.9 million fans. Amidst the slew of negative content about the bungled rescue by the authorities that resulted in the death of eight Hong Kong nationals and the Filipino hostage-taker, a message was posted on his site saying, "We reserve the right to block anyone who fails to follow these rules and report them as spammers to Facebook".

Keeping it real

Judging from the effectiveness of the online campaigns of Aquino and Villar, it is easy to see their appeal. The extensive use of Facebook and Twitter, by political campaign teams and the online community, are shaping social networking platforms into something bigger. In the process, the popular sites have enhanced the dynamics of electoral campaigns and integrated the political consciousness of people. As to the nature and extent of its effect, that remains to be further scrutinised. What is certain is that both the government and the governed are moulding it to their own liking, with a segment of the population wielding more power by using the sites to communicate their ideas quickly. There can be no going back, as social media has inevitably become an integral part of politics — notwithstanding that only 30 percent of the population is able to use the Internet, and only a portion of them use Facebook. The mainstream media may take notice of what's going on in these social networks, to the amusement or bewilderment of the rest of the population who are fixated by television. However, they may remain out of the loop without access to the Internet. Even with the rapid increase of Internet cafes in urban areas, a big portion of the population would still be unable to participate without the knowledge and skills to use the Internet. Whether or not the online public continues to use Facebook will largely depend on how politicians and governments can keep it real. As the new adage goes — "Honesty is the only policy on the Internet", and this extends to how accountable and reliable politicians are in keeping their promises, and in convincing the public that their messages will be read.

Chapter 2

Thaksin's Twitter revolution — How the Red Shirts protests increase the use of social media in Thailand

Alastair Carthew

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Prologue

September, 2010: Four months after the chaos

On 19 September 2010, a peaceful mass rally of about 10,000 Red Shirt supporters of deposed fugitive, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, was held. It marched through Bangkok's Ratcharprasing intersection, scene of a bloody confrontation between the Red Shirts and the military in May 2010, to remember the fourth anniversary of the 19 September 2006 coup that toppled Thaksin. It was the relative calm after the storm of a revolutionary civil society uprising that generated another revolution of its own — the explosion of social media as a devastatingly effective means of distributing information to multi-layered audiences in Thailand and overseas, projecting the kingdom into a new era of online media and telecommunications.

The numbers are stark. In the four months between the May bloody confrontation that ended the Red Shirts' uprising and the September mass rally to commemorate the bloodless coup of 2006 in September, Thailand's Facebook users went from 2.4 million to more than 5.3 million. This was one per cent of the 500 million Facebook users globally, and much of this increase is attributed to the violent uprising and the subsequent national debate about reconciliation. At the same time, there were around 910,000 Twitter members.

Since the Red Shirt confrontation in Bangkok, the main protagonists have reverted to the more traditional, even very basic, communication tools forced on them by the government's state of emergency. The mass rally on 19 September, defied the state of emergency, in stark contrast to the May uprising, when

Red Shirt leaders blasted messages to clapper-waving supporters over high-powered loud speakers and used satellite links and their own television station to communicate. The Red Shirt organizer of the September 2010 rally addressed his followers using a hand-held loud speaker allegedly borrowed from the police, as the emergency decree forbade any other form of communication.

In other parts of the country, organizers rallied their supporters by cell phone. The mass rallies in September were covered in a low key way by the traditional media, with no discernible increase in blogging, Twitter or chat room traffic, unlike the overwhelming use of new media to communicate the final troop assault on the Red Shirts in May. Instead, in the months after the May crackdown, the debate raged over reconciliation, who was to blame for the 91 deaths during the uprising and what to do about Thaksin, seen as the agitator of much of the chaos. It was carried out in old fashioned, face-to-face forums in academic institutions, newspaper editorial and opinion pages and on state-owned television. A Red Shirt radio station launched during May was shut down, as were many blogs. Thaksin, the main backer of the Red Shirts, who actively encouraged them to protest against the government through satellite links and Twitter messages, went suddenly very quiet, and had very little communication with his followers.

There were other sinister consequences. For example, the appearance of what have been called 'digital witch-hunters' who group together to hunt down those who express views contrary to their own. These 'witch hunters' are alleged to hunt down the numbers, e-mail addresses, workplaces and other personal information of those who disagree with them. Some of these are associated with the Red Shirt movement.

In the months since the Red Shirt confrontation, Thailand's elite, academics and media have fiercely debated the rights and wrongs of the deaths, the Government's role, who is to blame, Thaksin's continued strong influence on Thailand and the way forward to reconciliation. Will reconciliation ever be achieved? Many people in Thailand are not overly optimistic, merely because the two non-governmental organizations responsible for the unprecedented upheaval in Thai society in the last five years are highly unlikely to accept electoral victory by the other. One group is the military supported, pro-monarchy Yellow Shirts drawn from the middle class and elite, and the other is the pro-republican, Thaksin-funded, Red Shirts drawn from the rural poor and dispossessed. The Red Shirt uprising itself was a model template for how such violent incidents that impact on all of civil society, are being covered by the traditional and new media.

But how did it come to this and how influential was the new media in moulding public opinion in Thailand and overseas? The social media revolution in Thailand cannot be denied and all the while, the number of Facebook and Twitter users has kept rising. The answer has to be that it took the lead over traditional media because of its instantaneous effect. To trace just how influential it has been, we

must go back to April and May 2010 and get down into the 'trenches' with some of the journalists who covered the event.

April-May, 2010: The Confrontation

Social media's enormous impact on the crisis

The Red Shirt crisis that plunged Bangkok into violence in April and May 2010 was a catalyst for the rise and rise of social media, particularly Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. 'Old' media like newspapers, television and radio, were all major and controversial players in this unprecedented showdown between different contrasting sectors of Thai society. But it was social media — namely Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, the blogosphere and SMS's on mobile phones — that held sway, particularly with the Red Shirts and their backers.

In January 2010, Thailand had an estimated 720,000 Twitter users, ranking it 25th in the world and seventh in Asia. In February 2010, visits to Twitter.com for that month in Thailand was 910,000, placing it sixth in Asia. Overall, in the first two months of 2010, Thailand had 40 million mobile phone users, 12 million mobile internet users, 16 million fixed Internet users, 25 per cent Internet penetration rate, 3.1 million Facebook users (aged 18+) and 6 million Hi5 users. Thailand is 25th overall for blogging, which in Asia puts it well behind Japan (third with 4.9 per cent share of voice) India (12th with 2.1 per cent) and Malaysia (14th with 1.7 per cent).

Statistics are not currently available for Twitter use in April and May 2010, but if the Facebook experience is any indication, it would be considerably higher. Thailand went, in the course of a few months, from being an 'also ran' in the social media stakes, to experiencing one of the fastest growth rates of any Asian country, particularly on Twitter and Facebook.

Much of this can be attributed to a thirst for immediate information about the ongoing Thailand crisis that mainstream media could not provide. This phenomenon is examined in more detail in the following analysis of the impact of social media, the fallout surrounding international coverage, particularly on television, and the steps being taken by the Thai authorities to implement media reform. But what better way to start than with firsthand accounts by journalists from around the world who covered the events minute by minute on blogs, Twitter and Facebook.

The numbers tell a story. Facebook's growth resulting from the crisis was staggering. In January 2009, there were 250,000 Facebook members in Thailand. By 6 April 2010, membership was 2.5 million, by 26 April it was 2.78 million and by 21 May it was 3.1 million. This was a staggering 500,000 people added in less than six weeks. By September, it was more than 5 million.

A Tweeter's firsthand account

Mark MacKinnon was one of those journalists. He was working for *The Globe* and *Mail of Boston*, in the United States. He covered the Bangkok riots, basically on Twitter. Here is his firsthand account of his experience, including his initial reaction to a loud boom in the middle of Bangkok that adequately captures the chaos through social media.

"All three of us reached immediately for our BlackBerries. A year ago we might have e-mailed our editors to see what the news wires were reporting, or checked a television set for an update. But in Thailand's fast moving and violent political crises, there was no time to wait for those 'old media' to tell us what was going on. What we needed to know was: What were people tweeting?"

"The information was fast and dubious. Someone tweeted that the sounds were made by bomb blasts, which would have been a serious escalation in the violence. Others suggested they might just be fireworks, which Red Shirts regularly used to target helicopters. Eventually the number of tweets about people injured on Silom Road became a body of evidence too large to ignore."

MacKinnon went on to say that "never before" has a social media website played the kind of role in a conflict that Twitter played in the nine week anti-government uprising. Basically, Twitter was used by propagandists on both sides and by members of the Thai public to express frustration, to warn others about the areas of Bangkok to avoid and as a way around the heavy censorship of websites.

MacKinnon went on to describe how he used Twitter in a serious situation where he was under fire. "Please RT, I wrote, using the shorthand for 'retweet', or spread the word. People around me are dying because they can't get to hospital across the road because of fighting. I attached a picture I had taken with my BlackBerry of three wounded men beside me, one of whom appeared near death after being shot in the back. Within minutes my pleas had, indeed, been retweeted hundreds, maybe thousands of times, in English, Thai and other languages. They were posted on the websites of Britain's *The Guardian* newspaper and other international media."

But while acknowledging the positive benefits of Twitter in filing information for newspapers and disseminating them through the media, MacKinnon also noted the downside of tweeting, particularly relating to what he controversially labelled 'hate speech'.

He observed, "It was common to read comments on my Twitter feed that compared supporters of Mr. Abhisit to Nazis, and followers of the Red Shirt movement to livestock. It would be easy to dismiss the hate speech as irrelevant voice if not for the fact that both the Red Shirt leadership and Mr. Abhisit's government were both paying rapt attention to what was being said online."

But MacKinnon was not the only active participant to credit Twitter with such an impact. Two prominent Thai Twitter users, @thaicoam and @thaifaq, observed online: "The latest communication technologies and social networking systems are spewing out a flood of information while giving more traditional media a run for their money." Enthused independent television producer, Eric Seldin, well known in Bangkok for his award winning work: "Without Twitter no one would know what's going on. It's a stream of consciousness. Everything in real time. I'm totally addicted."

Thaksin's Twitter revolution

But Eric Seldin was not the only one addicted. Another was, and still is, Thaksin Shinawatra himself, who arguably did more to position social media as a propaganda and communication tool in Thailand than any other. From his first tweet on 17 July 2009, Thaksin used the URL, twitter.com/Thaksinlive, to attack his political rivals, mobilise his supporters, console and encourage his three children and defend himself against allegations. One of his regular messages is his lamenting, "I want to go home".

More recently, leading up to the Bangkok mayhem, @thaksinlive Thaksin started using Twitter as an alternative means of communication with his thousands of supporters in Thailand after the government made it increasingly difficult for him to continue direct live telecasts into large gatherings from Dubai, his base in exile. He also has a second Twitter account, @thaksinbiz, dedicated to business, but with less than 6000 followers is less prolific than his main account. It serves to reinforce Thaksin's business credentials.

Thaksin quickly built a vast Twitter network of more than 65,000 followers at the time of the crackdown (compared to Prime Minister Abhisit's 50,000, both will have grown considerably since) where there had been virtually none before, creating one of the largest and most politically charged Twitter communities. Poomjit Sirawongprasert, an Internet freedom activist, whose tweets became one of the 'go to' sources of information about action in central Bangkok, said, "People were not really that interested in Twitter until Thaksin started using it. He made it a trend".

Thaksin's frequent and increasingly strident exhortations to the Red Shirts, demanding them to continue confronting the soldiers and government, were a rallying cry that even the state's vast mainstream radio and television, Twitter and Facebook resources found it hard to combat. The government, in some

ways, forced Thaksin to develop Twittering as a primary communication tool, as state media was forbidden from interviewing him. Strangely, after the military crackdown, apart from a short tweet of condolences to those killed or wounded, Thaksin's tweeting went silent.

Thaksin's effective adoption of Twitter as a political tool is not surprising. Thaksin's billions, which he used to help support the Red Shirt uprising, came from a shrewd appreciation he displayed early in the mobile phone revolution decades before, that such means of communication were the way of the future. He took a risk in launching ShinCorp, his flagship telecommunications company, which also included early entry into satellite technology, to create an empire. So Thaksin's understanding of the impact of social media, and his public relations ability, proved a lethal combination for the Abhisit government during the crisis.

Thaksin also used other weapons during and after the violent crackdown, to communicate. He gave interviews to wire agencies, such as Reuters, in which he talked about how a military crackdown would lead resentful Thais to 'become guerrillas'. After the Red Shirts were dispersed and their leaders arrested, Thaksin hired Robert Amsterdam, a Canadian lawyer from the law firm, Amsterdam & Peroff, with a reputation for taking on tough public relations assignments, to carry the message to the international media. Amsterdam was highly criticized for his emotional and somewhat inaccurate comments, such as when he responded to an editorial in *The Nation* English language newspaper, questioning the wisdom of a Thaksin initiated investigation, by claiming the newspaper was 'government controlled'. If Mr. Amsterdam had done his homework he would have discovered that *The Nation*, of all the Thai media, is the most rigorously independent and critical of all parties in Thailand's body politic, no matter what side of the political spectrum. (Amsterdam's other famous clients include Mikhail Khodorkovsky, chief executive officer of the Russian company, Yukos-Group, which challenged the Russian government. Khodorkovsky ended up in prison. Amsterdam has used his blogs www.robortamsterdam.com and <http://corporateforeignpolicy.com> in Russia to good effect, and Twitter to defend Thaksin).

The unfettered nature of Twitter, Facebook, MyFace, Hi5, Skoosh, Skype and other social media available in Thailand, means people like Thaksin could convey an unedited message to his followers. But what about the media? There are ethical questions to be answered in their use of Twitter, for example, to report events.

Prime Minister Abhisit, a product of an English-speaking upbringing and education, also had his own Twitter account so he could monitor the Red Shirts' Twitter traffic. MacKinnon observed, in summing up the impact of Twitter, which is not as widespread in Thailand as other Asian countries, but quickly became a communication tool of necessity: "Twitter didn't create the hatred, it amplified it." Strong words indeed, but it was not Twitter that had the most phenomenal growth resulting from the crisis. That belongs to Facebook.

Facebook: A phenomenal increase

Facebook's growth during the crisis was staggering, with up to 500,000 people added in less than six weeks. It has continued apace since. Chaulia, a researcher on international affairs, based in New York, commented on the use of new technologies like Facebook and Thaksin's use of it and other media: "Thaksin appears to have been able to inflict much political damage to the current Thai government from his unconfirmed location in Hong Kong or Dubai." The Thai government finally pulled the plug on satellite broadcasts, claiming they had caused chaos. But the quantum leap in global communications of the past two decades is a boon for exiles and a bane for regimes caught up in obsolete methods of survival. Look no further than Thailand for confirmation of how technology is altering political landscapes and rattling rulers.

A powerful Facebook site that sprang up was, "I Love Thailand", and "Thailand Social Network Center to integrate the great power of the Thai Nation". There were hundreds of others in a similar vein. But other social media also came to the fore, notably YouTube.

YouTube influential

They say, 'a picture tells a thousand words'. YouTube proved this by becoming an influential conduit of information because of the thousands of pictures being posted of soldiers shooting, wreckage, men in black parading with guns, Red Shirt leaders demanding that parliament be dissolved, Red Shirt gangsters beating a soldier, snapshots of 'mysterious laser targeting' and the list went on. One site, 'Truths from YouTube', kept regular updates, including quotes from Human Rights Watch via <http://pad.vfly.net/showcase/1295/red-songkarn-2010-youtube/>. PAD stands for People's Alliance for Democracy, which also caused widespread disruption and financial harm to Thailand with its closure of Bangkok's two airports and assault on parliament in 2008. Known as the Yellow Shirts, PAD supporters are sworn enemies of the Red Shirts. They, like the Red Shirts (and the media) also used blogging as an effective means of communication, albeit a somewhat dangerous one for many opponents of the government.

Bloggers fed off rumour mill

Complementing the 'picture tells a thousand words', YouTube format was the written word through bloggers feeding the inevitable Thai rumour mill during the crisis; so much so that mega-bloggers like Tony Joh (thai-faq.com) expressed concern that other bloggers were trying to emulate his success by single-handedly covering the 10 April bloody battle between protestors and troops. He posted three video blogs that night which, he claims, received more than 300,000 hits worldwide. "I worry that other bloggers are trying to do the same thing by putting themselves in danger. They shouldn't risk themselves just to get some hits," he

said. But bloggers, of course, must work off Internet sites, which, themselves have been the target of government crackdowns.

Website crackdown: Internet censorship rife

Since the Red Shirts crisis, however, Thailand's somewhat shameful record of closing thousands of websites, has intensified. A billboard along Bangkok's expressway now warns that "bad websites are detrimental to society" and should be reported to a special hot line. Poomjit Sirawongprasert, president of the Thai Hosting Service Providers Club, said, "Thailand is getting increasingly like China when it comes to Internet censorship." On 7 April the government closed 36 politically-oriented websites, which had been blocked when it became clear the Red Shirts were digging in for a long campaign. Later, this increased to around 420 sites. Reporters without Borders estimate that more than 50,000 sites have been blocked in Thailand in the past few years.

The crackdown in April and May was aimed specifically at the Red Shirts, but others, such as the respected Prachatai.com, run by respected journalists, senators and press freedom activists, were also caught up in the catch-all approach. Users also try and circumvent blocking by using proxy services. But censorship is not the answer, according to Chiranuch Premchaiporn, webmaster of Prachatai.com. She said, "The political crisis intensified after media were suppressed. The government is looking down on the people." A good example was creation of a new government agency to crack down on websites deemed injurious to the national good.

Social media under "Thorough Watch"

Inevitably, as a result of the Red Shirt crisis, social media became a more organized target of Thai authorities, such as the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MICT), as it became clear that much of the information being received by ordinary citizens, and overseas through the international media's use of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, was having a large impact on winning hearts and minds. The government censored a number of websites supporting the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), and the National News Bureau of Thailand (NNT) issued this warning: "Internet users have been warned to use the internet in the right way or with appropriate purpose and avoid disseminating information that could create misunderstanding or institute violent actions among the public. Also, all popular websites and social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, hi5 and MySpace will be under thorough watch."

On 15 June, the Thai cabinet approved creation of a new cyber crime agency to stamp out criticism of the monarchy. Under Thailand's computer crime law, introduced in 2007, actions of defamation and posts of false rumours online are punishable by five years in jail and a fine of 100,000 Baht. Many Red Shirt

sympathisers were accused of posting anti-monarchy sentiments on websites. Some see the Abhisit government's censorship as a double standard when it consistently advocates press freedom. This from American James Stent in a lengthy analysis of the Thai political landscape on his blog, *Poppy Journal*: "Another double standard issue that needs to be addressed forthwith is censorship including the blockage of opposition radio stations, websites, and other forms of media. This censorship is in stark contrast with the democratic values which the Abhisit government claims to be upholding, and is a blatant example of double standard since the equivalent Yellow Shirt outlets are not blocked or censored." This type of comment gave rise to the whole question of journalistic standards and ethics in Thailand.

Journalistic standards and ethics debated

Such journalistic standards and ethics have long been a concern. Newspapers can be partisan toward a political party depending on connections, and the broadcast media is almost overwhelmingly owned by the state, with one or two exceptions such as ASTV, which supported the Yellow Shirts, and PTV, which supported the Red Shirts. It was inevitable that such issues would become a topic of debate affecting social media during the crisis. The Mark MacKinnon case is a good example. While he and other media were able to provide reports of events directly from the front line that would end up in quality English newspapers like *The Guardian* within minutes, this type of action raised the question of journalistic standards, ethics and professionalism that must be addressed.

Blogger, Blake Gooch, an expatriate resident of Mae Sot on Thailand's western border with Myanmar, who followed the drama from Mae Sot where he works as a trainer for Wide Horizons School for World Education Thailand, said, "Personally I think that Twitter is a morally neutral tool. It may not, however, prove to be a morally neutral phenomenon". Gooch made an interesting observation about the use of social media in Mae Sot, relatively divorced from the Bangkok mainstream and where there were few supporters of the Red Shirts. "The fact that Mae Sot remained so quiet heightened the importance of social media networks such as Twitter for me. By all accounts coverage of the protests and growing civil conflict by the Thai government and national news agencies left much to be desired. I kept track of events via twittered reports from the Bangkok Post, Cable News Asia, CNN and reports from folks at sites of protests armed with BlackBerries and/or laptops."

The Thailand-based, jonathan-russell.com blogsite dug deeper into the ethical dilemma facing journalists in Thailand using social media, such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs, by surveying a range of Bangkok based journalists. Here are three examples:

Patrick Winn, Thailand correspondent for *The Global Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*: "Absolutely, there is caution and danger to be wary of as a journalist using

social media. Reporters are liable to write something, on purpose or by accident, that suggests a political bias. Hardliners will always try and shove journalists into 'the tank' for one side or the other if something you have written irks them. There's a way to tread the middle path and be engaged. Reporters that only surface on Twitter to link readers to their latest story are missing the point. Users want immediacy and they want some back and forth with journalists."

Karla Cripps, City Editor, CNNGo, Bangkok: "There are definite risks to using social media. It is easy for journalists to use Twitter to have a kneejerk reaction to rumours and race to tweet some tidbit without taking the time to research and substantiate the information. This is particularly dangerous when you are dealing with issues like the ongoing political protests, as it allows rumours to spread faster than when you contain them. It is also easy to get lazy. I often remind myself that Twitter users are not exactly representative of the whole population, especially in a city like Bangkok."

Social networkers also saw new media as a means of monitoring, not only the mainstream media, but themselves. Take this comment from International Data Group (IDG News) a leading media technology company, in an analysis of use of social media during the riots: "Accountability and accuracy are something you'd expect from any major publication or news network, but there is no shortage of people on Facebook or Twitter who are willing to call out reporters and news companies when presented with a lopsided report or reporting rumour as fact."

Greg (@BKKgreg) on his blog, gretdodiffer.com, commented on the influence of Twitter during the unrest, for keeping expatriates informed. "Over the past few weeks the constant stream of information coming into my phone and computer via Twitter has given a real time update on what's going on on the street directly from my friends' mouths (or fingers) and unmolested by any attempts at censorship or spin. Well [...] usually." But it was not just Twitter and other social media that had an impact. The most powerful 'traditional' media, television, also became part of the news itself because of the coverage of CNN and the BBC.

CNN and BBC coverage heavily criticised

Both international agencies took a pounding for their coverage of the Bangkok riots. Politicians, Red Shirts, ordinary citizens, bloggers, letter writers and, most tellingly, other media, all criticised CNN's veteran Thailand correspondent, Dan Rivers, his associate on his show, Sarah Snider, and the BBC who had various times had Alastair Leithead, Rachel Harvey and Jonathan Head, reporting from the front line.

Rivers, however, was the target of the most vitriol, particularly amongst the social networking sites. Facebook pages were set up against him and he received death threats. Take this lengthy piece in *The Nation* by David Sherman, a freelance writer who lives and works in Bangkok. "Dan Rivers' assertion that CNN's coverage of the crackdown was 'impartial' is simply untrue. The

misinformation, generalizations and biases seen on CNN and BBC cannot be easily excused, especially because these reports brought the story of Thailand's conflict to the world, and the story the world saw was not the story of what actually happened."

"When Rivers reported on 14 May that soldiers were firing on protesters, whom Rivers repeatedly insisted were unarmed, he was misinforming his views. He was omitting the fact that the soldiers were firing defensively on men who had been attacking them all morning with makeshift weapons, guns and grenades." Sherman went on in a similar vein, picking out incidents where he alleged Rivers was biased against the government forces and pro-Red Shirts. It was a familiar refrain.

The Nation tweeted an open letter from one, Napa na Pomberjra, on Facebook about Rivers, part of which was, "CNN's journalists and researchers have a collective responsibility to follow the journalist's code and ethics to deliver and present facts from all facets of the story, not merely one-sided, shallow and sensational half-truths. All of Mr. River's and Ms Snider's quotes and statements seem to have been solely taken from the anti-government protest leaders or their followers/sympathizers. Yet all details about the government's position have come from secondary resources."

This was one side of the fierce debate that raged throughout Thai civil society, not just the media. However, there was another side, best articulated by Haseenah Koyakutty, in the Asia Sentinel, a Malaysian based independent news and analysis web site, (www.asiasentinel.com) who offered the theory that foreign media such as CNN and the BBC, report conflicts through western eyes and fit conflicts like Bangkok's into a standard third world stereotype. In other words, the foreign media does not understand Thailand. However, Haseenah did try to rationalize the international coverage and bring some balance to the debate thus: "The media coverage was as fair as it could be under the difficult and life-threatening conditions in which many reporters operated. In-depth coverage was a luxury under deadline and budgetary pressures. CNN and BBC are easy public targets given their global impact. The outcry (about them) is therefore not unusual. What is unusual, however, is the vitriol hurled at certain media outlets or specific reporters."

The Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand (FCCT) itself was also criticised when it organised a series of talks and photographic exhibitions of the unrest. Sumet Jumsai, a Thai social commentator called the foreign media "intellectually bankrupt" and, in Hassenah's report of the FCCT event, "presenting a caricature of hacks who can be found along Bangkok's saucy Soi Cowboy, lacking both taste and curiosity".

This was an interesting conflict as it was also acknowledged that the Thai media was hopelessly biased toward the government itself in reporting the conflict. Lined against the Red Shirts with their PTV (eventually re-opened then

closed down), pro-Thaksin community radio stations (of which up to 3000 were closed) and limited use of social media (apart from Thaksin), was the full might of state-controlled radio and television networks and a good proportion of the privately owned newspapers. The Thai media was also guilty of withholding vital information from the international media that was more readily available to them as Thais, such as the existence of the sinister 'men in black' who were accused of being terrorists and causing much of the violence against the soldiers long before the foreign media began reporting about them.

FCCT president, Marwaan Macan-Markar, Inter Press Service's (IPS) Bangkok correspondent, brought some rationality to the foreign media debate when he said the criticisms were being driven by "anger and emotion and not by fact or reason. It was a fast moving story. In any conflict it takes a while for the truth to emerge. To go with allegations, without proof, is a problem".

Compared to Dan Rivers, the BBC escaped similar vitriolic personal abuse, but their correspondents, Alastair Leithead, Rachel Harvey and Jonathan Head were also criticised for 'biased' reporting. Said David Sherman in his *The Nation* article: "CNN and the BBC chose to create simple, distorted narratives rather than tackle the complex reality of this truly fascinating story. The disservice they did to the story, to Thailand, to their viewers and to themselves was immense."

Of interest in all this was the role played by Al Jazeera. It had correspondents like Tony Birtley and 'roving correspondent' Wayne Hay reporting from the heart of Bangkok for television and the Internet. Their coverage never attracted any criticism. In the end, however, such criticism was overshadowed by the deaths of two foreign journalists.

Physical danger to journalists

The toll on individual journalists covering the uprising was high, not only were two foreign journalists killed, but a dozen were wounded, two newspapers were forced to send employees home for fear of being attacked and state-owned Channel 3 was set alight with 100 people trapped inside. An Italian freelance photographer and a Japanese cameraman were both killed while covering the events, indicative of the lethal situation on the streets where few local journalists eventually went. Much of the information that journalists received was from social media. However, the local Thai media was also subjected to strong criticism as both sides attempted to influence Thai citizens throughout the country, of the 'merits' of their case in the confrontation.

Attacks on Channel 3/PTV

This battle for hearts and minds through television channels saw government closure of the Red Shirt's channel, People TV and, in turn, an arson attack forcing the closure of Channel 3. On 9 April the Red Shirts stormed the Thaicom centre

where PTV was housed demanding it be restarted. After a dramatic three hours the government capitulated and the station was back on the air.

These attacks on 'old media' were catalysts for unrelenting verbal assaults by both sides, with the government accusing PTV of 'hate messages', describing Abhisit as a dictator. For the Red Shirts, closure of PTV was yet another example, to them, of double standards. The Democrat-led coalition government had not closed ATV, a pro-government channel owned by a leader of the Yellow Shirts, who had similarly held the country to ransom in 2008 with the closure of both Bangkok airports and Phuket Airport in their campaign to rid the country of two pro-Thaksin governments.

PTV employed around 50 people funded by 'friends of Thaksin' and was a major communication channel for many Red Shirt supporters outside of Bangkok, where use of social media was less widespread or sophisticated. Certainly, coupled with Thaksin's video links and tweets, PTV was a motivating force for both informing and entertaining the Red Shirts. It was, however, also guilty of broadcasting unedited speeches and other information, that, in the normal course of upholding broadcasting standards, would not have been aired. All of which had led the Thai government to include media reform as one of six steps in a 'road map' toward 'reconciliation' of a bitterly divided nation. The media's role, including the controversial one played by the international media, was viewed by many as critical in elevating the conflict, particularly the role played by state media channels.

Channel 11's controversial role

Controversy centred on Channel 11. Throughout the ongoing saga, state media backed the government stand, with Channel 11 the main conduit. Now known as National Broadcasting Television (NBT) and run by the government's Public Relations Department, the channel was invaded and set fire to by Red Shirts during the chaos.

Red-Shirt protesters were incensed that a report on NBT implied the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) was against the monarchy. The reports said that Thaksin speaking via video link at a Red Shirt rally said a member of the aristocratic elite — the amataya — who is more than 80 years old, should step down. Many took this as reference to His Majesty the King, although the Red Shirts insisted it referred to the head of the Privy Council, General Prem Tinsulanonda.

At one stage, a large number of UDD supporters gathered in front of NBT using loudspeakers to call on the people to come out and join forces with them to topple the aristocratic elite and pressure the government to dissolve the House of Representatives. An M67 grenade was also fired at the station, but missed. In the aftermath of the UDD leaders' surrender, NBT was one of many buildings torched.

Cheering the government from the sidelines was ASTV, a channel owned and operated by a founder of the Yellow Shirts, Sondhi Limthongkul, a media tycoon who's initial falling out with his former friend, Thaksin, in 2006, eventually led to the coup. Such partisan reporting by the Thai media led many to question the media's role in civil society and there were calls for reform.

Media reform part of 'Reconciliation'

It was inevitable that out of the media storm surrounding the crisis, the staggering growth of social media and its impact, criticism of the international media's coverage and the innate desire of Thai authorities to control the flow of media information as much as possible through the state apparatus, that media reform became one of the six pillars for 'reconciliation' in Prime Minister Abhisit's 'road map' to try to heal the wounds inflicted on the country. Media reform was to be headed by Yubol Benjarongkij, dean of the Faculty of Communication Arts of Chulalongkorn University. It was to gather opinions from five groups — media professionals, media organizations, academics in the field of journalism and mass communications, and agencies such as the National Telecommunications Commission.

At the end of 2010, the media reform 'pillar' is being subjected to extensive discussion and submissions from a wide section of civil society. It is a daunting task. Thailand has some deep-seated media issues that mean its once proud position in the media freedom stakes has slipped badly. In 2009, Reporters Without Borders, the international media monitoring organization, ranked Thailand 130 out of 175 countries on its list. In 2002 it was 65th. By 2006 it was 122nd and moving down.

What has been the reason for such a drop in press freedom and what can 'media reform' do to arrest this slide? Thailand is in the company of the likes of Zimbabwe, Chad, Honduras, Madagascar and Nigeria — all of which have dubious records of press tolerance and freedom. And, in particular, how will any reform affect the ability of social media to continue its runaway success as a source of uncensored information?

Helpfully, major media groups publicly signalled their support for media reform. The Thai Journalists Association (TJA), the Thai Radio and Television Reporters Association, the National Press Council and the National Radio and Television Broadcasting Council were to represent all mass media in the reform process. The reform committee was expected to concentrate on accelerating the reform of state media and regulation of the state-owned broadcast media; investigate and solve problems relating to press freedom; improve self-governing mechanisms covering media organisations; improve the training of professional media practitioners and strength organisations that study and monitor the media.

These are tall orders in a country where the state has traditionally run broadcasting media as vehicles of state-directed information and filtered news.

This includes Channels 5 and 7 run by the Army, Channel Nine by the Mass Communications Organization of Thailand (MCOT), Channel 11 run by the government Public Relations Department, and Thai Public Broadcasting Service (TPBS) the only 'independent' channel, but still owned by the state and Channel 32, run by MCOT.

Prime Minister's Office Minister Ong-art Klampiaboon, who is overseeing the reform process, said he expected the government to be a "facilitator not a regulator". He said, "The reform is essentially to make things better without one side dominating or leading the other." Leading media experts, such as Kiatchai Pongpanich of the Press Council of Thailand, also emphasized the need for the reform to examine the private sector and the government Public Relations Department.

Reform moves were also taking place against a backdrop of ongoing government closures of community radio stations and Internet sites. The closures are ongoing, so accurate figures are not possible. However, the website, www.thai-anxiety.com, reported that as of 21 June 2010, 113,000 websites had been blocked.

On 9 May 2010, the Thai Information Ministry (MICT) and the Thai emergency law agency, the Centre for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES), admitted blocking at least 50,000 websites and adding 500 more per day, according to the website. The National News Bureau of Thailand Public Relations Department issued a statement in April warning that it would strictly curb all defamatory interest content "that is likely to pose serious threat to national security with an aim of preventing further division in society". This included Facebook, Twitter, hi5 and MySpace. Many of the blockages by authorities are under the *Lèse majesté* law of Thailand, which forbids criticism of the royal institution. Calls for a review of this law have been around Thailand for many years.

Lèse majesté laws remain controversial

Media and academic commentators have publicly stated that a compelling argument for media reform would be to eliminate, or at least modify, the *Lèse majesté* laws (*Lèse majesté* refers to the crime of violating majesty, an offense against the dignity of a reigning sovereign or against a state). Although freedom of speech is guaranteed by the 1997 Constitution, the *Lèse majesté* laws and defamation laws have been frequently used to silence dissent, particularly during the Thaksin years (2000-2006). Prime Minister Abhisit, two years ago promised to look at the *Lèse majesté* law, recognising that it had been abused, but no action was forthcoming. Consequently, self censorship is rampant in the Thai media. During the Thaksin era the Thai Journalists Association labelled press freedom in Thailand as an era of 'fear and hatred'.

Section 37 of the 1997 Constitution prohibits interference in communication, including the Internet, but authorities continue to employ several techniques

to censor the Internet, such as caching, and blacklisting domain names or IP addresses. Thailand has not gone as far as China's 'Great Firewall' which aims to censor all Internet traffic, so Internet users can still interact with other users.

On 2 July 2010, the MICT announced it was joining forces with the justice and education ministries to launch 'Cyber Scout', a project to build a network for volunteers to monitor inappropriate content on the Internet. It will train volunteers to engage with cyber society and monitor websites that compromise national security as well as the royal institution.

Said Prime Minister Abhisit: "It is so important to encourage good moral use of technology for people." The project would recruit 200 people from around the country who have computers and Internet literacy. Such reviews of Thailand's media laws are long overdue. Perhaps the Red Shirts have been beneficial in focusing the authority's minds on it after many years of little action.

Thailand's media landscape

The cornerstone of Thailand's broadcasting legislation is the Broadcasting Act which came into force in 2000. It established two regulatory authorities. One, the National Broadcasting Committee (NBC), formulates policy for television and radio by granting licenses, but successive governments have dragged their feet in transferring regulatory powers to it. The second, the National Telecommunications Committee (NTC), formulates policy and plans for telecommunications and radio frequencies. The Broadcasting Act (2007), which came into force in March 2008, saw the government's licensing of all categories of radio and television broadcasting whether through frequency bands, cable or satellite networks. It regulates and supervises public, private and community media outlets.

As a result of the 2000 Broadcasting Act the NTC now has power to issue licenses for Internet providers. The NTC is to change the way licenses are issued to encourage more investment in the Internet.

Conclusion

The events of April and May 2010, were a watershed in Thailand's media history. Long hailed as having one of the freest media in the world, Thailand's reputation has slipped in recent years. Traditional newspaper media freedom has improved under the Abhisit government, but the broadcast media remains firmly in state control, with a few partisan exceptions that support either the Yellow or the Red Shirts. It has been the incredible explosion of social media resulting directly from the Red Shirts confrontation that has set Thailand's media on a new path. Despite frequent censorship and closing down of blogs and websites by authorities, the Thai cyberspace remains resilient and ever resourceful at reinventing itself. However, despite the opening up of new communications distribution channels most people in Thailand will be hoping that it will not take another catastrophic event to invoke further change.

Chapter 3

India unwired — Why new media is not (yet) the message for political communication

Anisha Bhaduri

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In 2008, Democratic presidential candidates in the United States of America (USA), Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, hailed 'smart power' as the next big thing that would transform American policies and perspective, and inform the way the rest of the world perceived the country that had invaded Iraq. Barack Obama described his foreign policy as one that would "shape events not just through military force, but through the force of our ideas".

On the other side of the world, the largest democracy was beginning to get ready for its 15th General Election. And the Indian political establishment was closely watching developments in the USA.

The journalist and Michelle Obama's biographer, Elizabeth Lightfoot, writes, "To say that the Obama campaign truly mastered the art of online fundraising would be an understatement". Obama's inspiration for 'smart power' came from the former United States diplomat, Joseph Nye's 1991 coinage, 'soft power'. 'Soft power', defines Nye, is "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies".

When Obama was inaugurated as the USA's first black president in January 2009, at least one key Indian political party recognized the force of his campaign ideas and sought to borrow some.

The curious case

In India, the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), had been cooling its heels for five years as the country's principal opposition. The party, which had a 10 year stint of running the federal government, sought to come out of the

political wilderness it found itself in since 2004, when it had been voted out of power. Incidentally, it was also the first party to launch its website during the 1998 elections.

In early 2009, the BJP had two main problems. Firstly, it was perceived as a hardline political entity with a strong fundamentalist agenda. It was during the tenure of a BJP government, in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, that Hindu zealots razed the disputed Babari Masjid on 6 December 1992. This sparked off India's worst communal riots since independence from the British in 1947, and at least 1,000 people died. It bequeathed a legacy of organized terrorism that sponsored the 1993 serial bombing of India's financial capital, Mumbai — the first in a series of many that would target this Westernised metropolis and the rest of the country in the years to come.

The BJP's hardliner image was again reinforced in February 2002, when in Gujarat, a BJP-ruled western Indian state, persecution of Muslims in the aftermath of the burning of a train full of Hindu nationalists in a small station called Godhra, assumed the proportion of a pogrom. As the bodies of murdered Muslims piled up across the state, scores of Muslim families were displaced, children lost, women raped and left to die after brutal disfigurement and torture, the BJP-led government of Gujarat was increasingly perceived as a silent facilitator. The BJP was branded as a political party that was more interested in promoting a nationalist Hindu agenda than putting India on the path of development. It lost the people's mandate to lead the federal government in May 2004.

BJP's second problem ahead of India's 15th General Election stemmed from its hardline agenda. Saddled by an adverse view of its secular credentials as a national political party, it also had to battle the perception that it was a 'party of old men' and regressive. The party's two most visible faces — former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was 85, and its prime ministerial candidate for the 2009 general elections, LK Advani, was 82.

The BJP, and the country's other major political party which currently leads the ruling coalition, the Indian National Congress (INC), were looking at a voter-base of which 30 per cent were youth in the 18-30 age group.

With borders of parliamentary constituencies redrawn ahead of the 2009 polls, keeping in mind population density, the importance of tech-savvy and wired Indian urban youth, increasingly adept at social networking, was not lost on the poll-bound parties. Between 2000 and 2010, India posted a user growth of 1,520 per cent. Of the total 621.28 million telecom subscribers (wireless and wire line) 63.33 per cent lived in urban areas.

The Indian political parties were intensely aware of the implications of such statistics and what ensued was the most expensive Indian election ever. Two billion dollars was spent in a space of months, which far outstripped Obama's \$1.8 billion campaign orchestrated over a year. At the same time, it was marked by an unprecedented digital initiative from Indian political parties. Intensely aware of

the Obama campaign's 'soft' power of persuasion, they raised their digital media spending from one per cent in the previous general election held in 2004, to 10 per cent in 2009.

Yet, the BJP, the country's second largest political party, which spearheaded the digital poll campaign initiative in India, saw its vote percentage decline to 18.8 per cent in the 2009 General Election, from 22.2 per cent in 2004. On the other hand, the winning INC, whose digital thrust while canvassing votes was nowhere near as acute as the BJP's, improved its vote share from 26.5 per cent in 2004, to 28.5 per cent in 2009.

Not only that, a survey conducted by IMRB International, a leading market research firm in India whose studies extend across 14 countries, revealed startling results. Carried out between 1 and 5 May 2009, when the five-phase 15th General Election was under way, it sought to gauge the impact of the social and political campaigns on Indian individuals aged 18 to 29 in four metropolitan cities — Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai and Kolkata. Forty-nine per cent of the respondents said political and election advertisements disseminated via the Internet didn't influence them at all. In fact, only 7 per cent recalled Internet advertisements by the INC and 4 per cent for the BJP.

Vivek Gupta, senior vice-president at IMRB International, said over the telephone: "The leaders the political parties were hard-selling were too old to appeal to the young tech and social networking savvy electorate and that's why the digital campaigns didn't work [...] Also, the issues didn't resonate with them." He said it was important for non-traditional media to reach the masses — something that wasn't happening.

According to the National Association of Software and Service Company's (Nasscom) fact sheet released in February 2009, in 2008, the global market of Indian software and services industry had been worth US\$967 billion and was estimated to exceed US\$1.2 trillion by 2012. Between 1995 and 2005, Indian immigrants founded 26 per cent of the start-ups in the USA's Silicon Valley. Communication scholar, Paula Chakravarty, writes: "The success, and particularly the 'confidence', of the Indian diaspora in Silicon Valley led to 'reputational spillover effects' such that the 'Indian software programmer' became a kind of 'brand name' indicating quality in the same way that 'made in Japan' signals reliability in consumer products (2001)."

Around the globe, Brand India, as it were, rode on the crest of indigenous software innovations and technological superiority. The world slowly became increasingly aware of a highly-educated, technologically innovative, English-speaking, mobile workforce that rose above the reductionist impressions of India — drawn from its essentially agrarian economy, abysmal poverty, social ills, rampant corruption and a teeming population. When it also started posting fantastic growth rates propelled by the economic liberalization of the 1990s, it only helped reinforce India's leadership in the technological arena.

The knowledge economy that these highly-skilled transnational workers came to symbolize gave rise to a new middle class that scholar, Smitha Radhakrishnan, suggests, “has become invested with the symbolic authority to make claims about the nation as a whole[...] this ‘new’ (urban) middle class becomes, thus, a ‘central agent for the revisioning of the Indian nation in the context of globalization’”.

A key theme of the concept of ‘New India’ hinges on the notion of a specific kind of knowledge that is technology driven and hardware supported. With the increasing mobility of knowledge workers, an essentially diasporic urge to connect in an easily available wired situation ushered in the social networking wave in India. And it was embraced heartily by urban, educated young Indians. In December 2009, Indians represented 20 per cent of all Orkut users globally, behind Brazil and the United States, and 44 per cent of Indian user’s time online was spent with social networking.

Yet, this revised perception of a ‘New India’ takes a beating when statistics show that Internet penetration in India stands at a mere 6.9 per cent in 2010. Despite the most intensive-ever digital campaign orchestrated by political parties, ahead of the general election in 2009, surveys proved that voters barely responded to electoral messages mediated through new media technologies (NMT).

This dichotomy characterises digital India’s NMT space dynamics and informs about contemporary political communication in the country. This peculiarity calls for a study that must take into account India’s unique realities.

Hard look

India is the third largest economy in Asia and according to the World Bank, its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is worth US\$1,296 billion or 2.1 per cent of the world economy. Since 1997, the Indian economy has posted an average growth rate of more than seven per cent, reducing poverty by about 10 per cent.

However, until the early 1990s, India, since its independence in 1947, led a somewhat insular existence. Mass media was largely state-controlled and Bollywood, the largest film industry in the world, was the principal source of entertainment. The Gulf War brought satellite television to India in 1990. From its launch in 1959 until 1990, the state-owned Doordarshan was the only source of television in India and to date, the state-owned All India Radio, with a 99 per cent reach is the only radio channel allowed to broadcast news. In the words of late Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao, whose government was credited with ushering in economic reforms in the early 90s, “India faced, at the time of its independence, the daunting task of modernizing a colonial economy while ensuring social justice and self-reliance. We had a very poor industrial base and very limited capital resource. This led to the adoption of a ‘mixed-economy model’, with the government playing a major role in the industrialization process. There was extensive government regulation and control over the management of the economy in accordance with our development priorities.”

There were two consequences of this insularity. At the more quantifiable level, communications scholar, Rohitashya Chattopadhyay, quotes Gurcharan Das to point out, "India 'adopted an inward-looking, import-substituting path, rather than an outward-looking, export-promoting route, thus denying itself a share in world trade and the prosperity that trade brought in the postwar era.'" Referring to Das, he cites this as the first of six flaws in India's planning model. "The rest are setting up 'a massive, inefficient, and monopolistic public sector', 'overregulated private enterprise', discouraging 'foreign capital' thus not enjoying the 'benefits of technology', pampering labor although there was low productivity, and ignoring the education of children." The emotional/spiritual consequence of the inwardness that persisted till the INC-led, Narasimha Rao government came into power in mid-1991, largely involved the confusions of a post-colonial identity. As a former British colony, India's urge to reject and resist Western influences was at odds with its fascination for the development that was transforming First World nations. Rao wrote, "We needed, as Mahatma Gandhi had said, to open our doors and windows to the rest of the world without being swept off our feet." But swept off its feet India was. With the economy liberalized in 1991, India's technology industry grew by leaps and bounds. Nasscom, which couldn't post any figures for IT-enabled services (ITES) in 1996-97, reported the value of ITES exports for 2004-05 at US\$17.9 billion. ITES includes both Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) and Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO) industries. Similarly, the value of software exports grew from US\$1.1 billion in 1996-97 to US\$12.2 billion in 2004-05.

The software boom facilitated the global movement of a highly-skilled Indian workforce whose diasporic urge to stay connected to its roots aided the satellite television revolution in India in the 1990s, and the social media and social networking phenomenon in the middle of the 2000s. The National Readership Survey for 2001 suggested a 52 per cent increase in television viewers during the last decade, to 160 million. At that time, the number of television channels in India was about 80. By March 2010, India had 502 channels and 21.3 million satellite television subscribers. According to a Datamonitor report, the Indian media industry generated total revenues of \$14.8 billion in 2009, indicating a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 8.2 per cent for the period spanning 2005-2009. By comparison, the Chinese and South Korean industries grew with CAGRs of 8.7 per cent and 2.2 per cent respectively, over the same period. The study also suggested that the broadcasting & cable TV segment was the industry's most lucrative in 2009, generating total revenues of \$5 billion, equivalent to 33.5 per cent of the industry's overall value.

In a study tracking the Indian electronic media consumption trends published in March 2010, Amity Business School academics, Jonardan Koner and Priyanka Goyal, revealed that 44 per cent of the respondents use all three electronic mediums, i.e., TV, radio and the Internet together. Radio or Internet alone is

not used by any of the respondents. A key finding was that, "Internet is mainly used by the salaried class and students. While students mainly used it for social networking and watching and downloading audio-visual content, the salaried class mainly used it for communication activities such as e-mailing, messaging, etc."

Youth and the Internet

Census data reveal more than half of India's 1.1 billion people are under 25 years and two-thirds under 35. According to data released by the Government of India in July 2010, the country has 16.18 million Internet subscribers and 8.77 million broadband subscribers, as at March 2010.

A survey conducted jointly by IMRB International and the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) suggests India had 45 million active Internet users as at September 2008. IMRB International defines active Internet users as those who have used the Internet at least once in the past month, which it says is an internationally accepted benchmark for enumerating Internet users.

In India, the use of Internet grew exponentially on the back of the social media and social networking wave. Convergence scholar and associate professor in journalism at Deakin University, Dr Stephen Quinn, writes in the book 'Asia's Media Innovators Vol.2', "Social media describes the media that people create when they connect with each other, and share content online [...] Social networking works on the same sharing principle as social media, as people use digital tools to connect and network with each other [...] The terms social media and social networking are often lumped together, described by the term 'Web 2.0'." He cites the best examples of social media as YouTube and Flickr and that of social networking as Facebook, MySpace, Orkut, LinkedIn and Twitter.

In August 2010, according to the California-based site tracker, Alexa, Google was the most visited site in India followed by Facebook at number 3, Yahoo at number 4, YouTube at 5, Orkut at 7, Twitter at 10, LinkedIn at 11 and Flickr at 43.

In 2009, there were 1.27 million Twitter users in India. At the global level, LinkedIn was fastest growing site in the country with three million users. According to a July 7 2010 CyberMedia report, a new global survey commissioned by workspace solutions provider, Regus, revealed that 52 per cent of Indian businesses successfully used social networks to get new business. As per the report, 32 per cent of the firms surveyed set aside a proportion of marketing budget specifically devoted to social networking activities.

According to the digital media measuring company, comScore, in 2009 Indians spent about 110.4 minutes on social networking every day. A 2007 survey conducted by WATConsult, a Mumbai-based firm which specializes in social media consultancy in India, found that of Orkut's seven million Indian users, 3.5 million

belonged to the 18-25 age group. A 2009 comScore press release reports that between 2007 and 2008, visitation to the site category increased by 51 per cent with more than 19 million visitors in December 2008. The comScore press release said that Orkut was the most visited social networking site in December 2008 with more than 12.8 million visitors, an increase of 81 per cent from 2007. Orkut's audience was three times the size of its nearest competitor in the category. Facebook was at number 2 position with 4 million visitors, up 150 per cent from a year ago, followed by Indian social networking site, Bharatstudent.com, with 3.3 million visitors (up 88 per cent) and hi5.com with 2 million visitors (up 182 per cent).

WATConsult identified that one of the key drivers of the youthful Orkut users in 2007 was politics. In that year, there were more than 60 communities and 20,000 members dedicated to Indian politics. BJP boasted 8,000 members and the INC 4,000.

Web 2.0 and politics

Political communication in India is essentially election communication. Traditionally, political parties always come out with their roadmaps, ahead of the polls, for an incumbency lasting five years. General elections, held every five years unless mid-polls determine otherwise, are the only time when political parties actually hammer out and put in place strategies to actively engage with the electorate. But until a decade ago, the efforts had largely been unilateral and consisted of public meetings, election rallies and door-to-door canvassing, backed by local hoardings and print advertisements in vernacular languages (of which there are 19) plus 200 dialects recognised by the Constitution of India. Hindi, the country's official language, is spoken by only 40 per cent of the population. Therefore, local issues always take precedence over the national. Excessive provincialism in a country larger than Europe, generally attributed to its staggering diversity, has always marked India's socio-political discourse and is an Indian peculiarity. In fact, one scholar, Johan Lagerkvist, went so far as to say, "There are even those who argue that Indian nationalism does not exist. There is no concrete sentiment of 'we are Indians' — like the common feeling and national identity among Han Chinese in the People's Republic of China".

Before 2004, poll campaigns had been more or less geared accordingly. Two things changed the orientation thereafter. Firstly, was the rise of coalition politics, which called for more evolved, professionally managed campaigns for image building. Until 1984, the INC had won every general election conducted in India since 1949, by a simple majority, i.e. by winning 272 of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha or the Lower House of Parliament. The Indian Parliament has two Houses — the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, the Upper House. Parliamentary polls are held every five years for the lower house, to elect representatives to form

the ruling government. With INC's waning dominance as the party with the key two-thirds majority needed to single-handedly form the ruling government, the thrust was on evolving poll campaigns that would convince the electorate of the strength of newly-emerging smaller parties. Image building was also key to the communication agenda of smaller parties with national aspirations because most of them were provincial and therefore, with little pan-Indian recognition.

The second thing that prompted Indian political communication praxis to break away from its unilateral mode was the rise of information technology. This had an innate agenda of promoting technical-aided human interaction, and the quantum leap in its usage brought into focus a burgeoning middle class that was highly educated, globally mobile or aspiring to be so, technologically savvy and urban. Essentially, 'the new face of India'.

Dr Kavita Karan, associate professor at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, who shared an unpublished paper with the author that she prepared with Jacques DM Gimeno of the University of Asia and the Pacific, writes, "Indigenous use of new media technologies has been the hallmark of all political parties in India. From the use of films, audiocassettes and the famous video-on-wheels, to the Internet and the mobile technologies, Indian campaigns have it all".

It was the BJP that pioneered the new trend in Indian political communication ahead of the 14th General Election in 2004, by commissioning a professionally-managed campaign targeting the urban electorate. According to prominent Indian blogger and the 2008-2009 Yahoo! Fellow at Georgetown University, Gaurav Mishra, it "allocated 5 per cent of its campaign budget to an e-campaign (targeting 150 million people), for revamping its campaign website, pushing out text messages, pre-recorded voice clips and e-mails to its database of 20 million e-mail users and 20 million phone users, and offering campaign-related mobile ringtones for download".

With statistics indicating spiralling Web 2.0 activities for the Indian electorate, almost all political parties were intensely aware of the possibilities of effectively positioning digital campaigns to garner votes. Ahead of the general election spread over April and May 2009, the BJP was unquestionably the most active political party in the cyberspace. The party's septuagenarian prime ministerial candidate, LK Advani, was trying to engage youth through live chats and via Facebook, Orkut and YouTube. Advani also launched a website named, www.lkadvani.in. The BJP had placed banner advertisements with the legend "Advani for PM" on 2,000 websites and placement advertisements across 50,000 websites. According to Gaurav Mishra, who also launched the crowd-sourced election monitoring platform, Vote Report India, the party ran India's "biggest-ever Google AdWords and short message service (SMS) outreach campaign", which set a precedent in electoral campaigning. The chief minister of the western Indian state of Gujarat,

Narendra Modi, another key BJP face, used podcasts, Twitter, Google SMS and widgets to campaign for the party.

The INC's president, Sonia Gandhi, and its other visible face, Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, had separate dedicated websites, www.soniagandhi.com, and, www.manmohansingh.org. Sonia Gandhi's 39 year old son, Rahul Gandhi, extensively positioned by his party as the politician after the predominantly youthful electorate's heart, had a dedicated website too — www.rahulgandhi.us. Incidentally, Gandhi was also the party's youth wing leader and in April 2009, he had more than 3,000 supporters on Facebook. The two largest parties of the country and rivals, needless to say, had updated websites of their own — www.congress.org.in and www.bjp.org.

What distinguished this election from earlier ones was the effective engagement by parties, with supporters in the digital world. Supporters of both BJP and the INC had started groups on Facebook and Orkut to rally voters. Mishra, also the co-founder of social media agency, 2020 Social, points out how well the BJP campaign had, "embraced the Web 2.0 value system. It co-opted independent groups such as Friends of BJP into the campaign; reached out to first-time voters through the advani@campus programme and built an army of online volunteers through the Bloggers for Advani initiative". In a telephone interview, Mishra said digital and mobile initiatives such as SMS, "had been effectively employed to rally voters and volunteers" in the run-up to the 2009 General Election held in five phases. "Also, such initiatives generated at least 100 online campaigns which persuaded at least 50,000 voters to register themselves online."

According to a news report published in business news portal, www.livemint.com, on 18 March 2009, the INC had an election advertising budget of US\$32 million and spent five per cent of it on digital campaigning. The same report quoted the firm handling the BJP's poll campaign account as saying that the party's budget was US\$25.5 million and that it used a '360 degree approach' to cover the traditional and new media spends. The www.livemint.com report pegged the 2009 advertising budget for all political parties at US\$85 million.

And yet, the turnout in the 2009 election was 58.8 per cent, and not much different from the seven Lok Sabha elections held in the past two decades (1989-2009). Also, according to a survey conducted by the New Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), sponsored by the Government of India, not only the voter turnout among the youth (18-25 age group) was lower than the national showing, it was also lower than the percentage recorded in the previous general election of 2004. The voter turnout was 55 per cent for youth in 2004, and dropped to 54 per cent in 2009 — way lower than the all-India percentage of 58.4. CSDS data also revealed that 38 per cent of the respondents were only marginally exposed to the media, while 13 per cent had high exposure to it during the 2009 election campaign. Another key CSDS finding derived from

the National Election Survey 2009, was that only 39 per cent of voters took an interest in election campaigning in that year.

The IMRB International survey cited at the beginning of the chapter reveals facts even more startling when examined against the intensive digital and mobile campaigning in the run-up to India's 15th General Election. Despite millions spent on advertising, only 67 per cent of urban youth in the surveyed 18-29 age group, recalled INC advertisements and 53 per cent recalled BJP advertisements. Not only that, voter turnout in the metropolitan cities of Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore was way below the national figure of 58.8 per cent. India's financial capital, Mumbai, saw a turnout of 43 per cent — lower than in 2004. India's IT hub Bangalore recorded 51 per cent, down 9 per cent from 2004. The national capital, Delhi, recorded 53 per cent.

What went wrong

Perhaps the essentially elitist nature of the digital political communication as devised by political parties ahead of the 2009 elections, failed them. The BJP's pioneering 'India Shining' campaign in 2004, targeting young, urban and tech-savvy voters, 'bit the dust' with the party's defeat in the 14th General Election because it was deemed distant from the experiences and aspirations of most Indians. In 2009, the parties it seems, were blinded by statistics that reinforced India's information technology prowess and fantastic growth rates, and suggested that more than half of India's 1,150 million population was younger than 25. They were also targeting 42 million new voters who had helped expand the electorate base since 2004. But it remains undisputed that 74.7 per cent of the Indian population lives in rural areas without the many infrastructural benefits enjoyed by the 24.3 per cent of the population that inhabits urban areas. Also, the 2001 national census put the literacy rate in the country at 64.84 per cent — not exactly a figure that supports extensive Web 2.0 engagement.

In fact, economist, Vamsi Vakulabharanam, writes in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, "The Indian growth strategy of the 1990s and this decade have led to increased economic inequality among its population [...]. Several studies have pointed to increased distress in the agrarian sector in India. More than 100,000 farmer suicides have occurred between 1998 and now [...] It is now well known that the Indian government (as the rest of the world) has been seeing the Indian economy as primarily driven by service sectors." Vakulabharanam's doubts about the government and political parties' ability to see things in perspective, were shared by others.

When interviewed, Ravindra Kumar, editor of one of India's oldest English-language, and most respected, national daily newspapers, *The Statesman*, said, "Communication works when it bridges a knowledge gap. The 2009 digital campaigns only told the voter that his/her candidate was now also in the digital

sphere; nothing was done to increase the voter's knowledge of the candidate or of the opponent. Therefore, they were seen — rightly in my view — as little more than gimmicks. So far, at least technology-driven trends in Indian political communication have a curiosity value, more than a substantive value. Blogs are largely confined to the chattering classes, e-mails are treated largely as spam and perhaps only SMS, "if used effectively, which it hasn't thus far," holds the promise of being an effective communication tool. Blogs and e-mail are deemed elitist, and it is well-recognised that the elite have not played a major role in the electoral process".

Dr Mrinal Chatterjee, professor at the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, couldn't agree more. "Social media and other technology-driven initiatives will only be partially successful in political campaigns in India. Inequitable access to and use of technology is one reason. Strong likes and dislikes of the community using tech-driven media is another. In fact, such users have already made up their minds. Influencing them is one thing and actually persuading them to land up at the polling booth are two separate ball games." Referring to the 2009 initiatives, he said, "It was ahead of its time in India".

Abijit Saxena, CEO of Netcore Solutions, the firm that handled the BJP's mobile campaign account for the 2009 General Election, concurred. In a telephone interview, he said the political parties were simply aping the Obama campaign without taking into account the Indian realities. But he defended the digital and mobile media. "Don't shoot the messenger! That simply won't do. In a few years time, the immense possibilities of new media technologies will be apparent." Like Kumar, he too felt that in the Indian context, SMS had a better chance of acceptability than other NMT-mediated communication tools.

Gaurav Mishra thought that NMT-driven tools or social media tools had a lot of untapped potential that could be harnessed for encouraging politicians to attempt better engagement with their electorates. When pointed out that Indian politicians rarely resorted to social networking to engage with members of their constituency, Mishra thought that was "very unfortunate because the possibility to promote good governance was immense".

Notwithstanding the IMRB International revelation that in spite of moderately good awareness of political party websites, very few voters had been motivated enough to actively visit the websites. Is that because the tech-savvy, wired, urban Indian youth, with a marked sense of entitlement, lacked the maturity to respond responsibly to participatory democracy? "The Indian youth combines feelings of disgust and cynicism about the political situation. It doesn't have anything to do with the age of the contender. Therefore, while youth may engage with the digital campaign, they are unlikely to be moved, or provoked by it," Kumar said. According to Dr Chatterjee, "No, they do not lack maturity. Some of them are nihilistic though." But despite the disappointments, it is difficult to write off the

possible impacts of NMT-mediated networking on Indian political communication in the years to come. Saxena felt whatever might have happened in the last polls, in the next general election scheduled for 2014, political parties would set aside at least 20 per cent of their advertising budget for digital and mobile initiatives.

“Social media is unlikely to make a major direct impact on voter judgment in the next election. But perhaps by the election that follows in the next 5-7 years, trends seen on social media will begin to get reflected in actual elections, not because of direct involvement of social media practitioners but because they will create ripples that might impact on non-practitioners through other media,” Kumar said.

Gaurav Mishra was confident that e-campaigns would have a significant impact on voters in 2014 though unlikely to be ‘a game changer’. Dr Chatterjee couldn’t deny that social media “is gradually making an impact, especially among the young generation. It may impact the result in 2014 general elections. But it would take more time to have a profound impact”.

Philip E. Egre writes, “Institutions do often change as a result of the opportunities that a new technology makes available, but it is only through the workings of the institution that the dynamics of the change can be found [...] If nobody can devise an action pattern for deploying the technology in ways that mesh with the existing gears of the institution, then no significant effects of the technology’s adoption are likely to be found.” For digitally-aided political communication to work in India effectively, it is important that the government and political parties alike use traditional media to begin with, to educate and inform the masses about the benefits of adopting and adapting to an information technology-driven milieu. Promoting familiarity by factoring in parameters of illiteracy and poverty, among others, is the first step towards fitting in the new technologies to the existing mechanics. And, once that happens, the distance between familiarity and fruitful deployment of digitally-aided, political communication in India, will no longer remain insurmountable.

Chapter 4

Social networking in Cambodia in early stages

Ky Soklim

After 12 years of experience as a journalist and former Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the French-speaking newspaper, Cambodge Soir, and equipped with a Bachelor Degree in French Literature and a journalistic diploma, Ky Soklim is now a correspondent for Radio France Internationale.

Cambodia has a population of 13.4 million, but 30 per cent still live below the poverty line. Its economy relies mainly on four sectors: agriculture, construction, tourism and textiles. The Cambodian economy saw a substantial 10 per cent growth each year from 2004 to 2007. However, the global economic recession of 2008 reduced the growth rate to below seven per cent for 2009 and 2010.

The technology sector has grown over the last few years, but it is still of poor quality and development. There are only pockets of Cambodian people who have access to Internet. The reasons that limit Cambodians' access to Internet are high costs, a limited knowledge of languages (Khmer and English) and a low standard of living.

According to a census conducted by the Cambodian Ministry of Planning, in 2008, 98.9 per cent of Cambodian families don't have Internet. In other words, only more than one per cent of Cambodian families have access to Internet. Indeed, the use of Internet is still limited, but the census showed that the number of users in towns and provinces is higher than in rural areas. For instance, in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, 95.4 per cent are without access to the Internet compared with 99.6 per cent in rural areas. The Kingdom of Cambodia has an estimated 2.8 million families, of which 2.3 million families live in the countryside.

Young generation use of Internet

Despite the low use of Internet by the elderly, the young generation are keen learners. However, the Internet-using population is limited to students, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), employees at companies and government officials. It is difficult to estimate the exact number of Internet users at present.

In the beginning, people used only e-mail to exchange information, but over the last few years, social media has grown in Cambodia. Some have started to use Facebook, blogging and Twitter to share information.

Ung Chamroeun, an English newspaper journalist based in Phnom Penh, has created a blog called, roubroum.blogspot.com, which began running a few years ago. Many young Cambodians use Facebook and also occasionally use Twitter and blogs to update each other on music trends, personal hobbies, and share photos and sports stories. Nobody talks about politics. Its views are rarely expressed in the social media by young people.

Ou Virak, the director of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights (CCHR), noted that Cambodians between 16 and 25 are very active Internet users. According to him, between 10,000 and 20,000 young Cambodians are social media consumers, with Facebook as the most popular social media outlet. He observes that young people often obtain news from social media sources, rather than traditional media such as the newspaper.

Anonymous political blog

A political blog named, Ki-media blogspot, is viewed by many young readers, but the blogger is not identified. The blogger on Ki-media does not express individual or personal views but collates reports and accounts of Cambodian political issues. The blog allows readers to comment on each article, and sometimes features resentful and malicious comments towards the Cambodian government.

Aside from the anonymous political blogs, each Cambodian political party has its own separate website which publishes the party statement, leader's speeches and activities of the party — these sites do not allow comments to be published by public readers.

Impact of social media on future Cambodian elections

Cambodia had its most recent commune (local government) election in 2007 and a national election in 2008. Both elections are held every five years. For these two recent elections, social media did not have any role or impact on the outcome of the elections. However, politicians and civil society leaders are now concerned about social media's future influence. Due to the slow increase in the number of Internet users, many do not expect social media to have an impact on elections in 2012 and 2013, but warn that its influence will be significant and visible from 2017 and beyond.

Ou Virak, of CCHR, and also a political observer, confirmed that Cambodian politicians should be keen to tap into the Internet by 2018 (the next national election), if they want to win the election. "It is very necessary to use the social media," said Ou Virak.

Professionals from the Cambodian elite, journalists and lawyers, recognise the potential of social media on subsequent Cambodian elections and its long-term impact. For them, social media is only beginning to emerge in the country and will take time to bring about change and progress.

Although many contemplate the important role that social media will play in future Cambodian elections, Khiev Kagnarith, a spokesman from the Ministry of Information, argues that in five years, social media will not have any influence or impact on the elections. According to Khiev, traditional media will still have a considerable role in shaping the Cambodian elections. He adds that personal interaction and direct contact with voters will ultimately determine the choices and responses of voters.

“Cambodian people are used to being cheated by many regimes, so now they vote by watching the concrete action instead of voting by reading the ideology,” said the government spokesman.

Chapter 5

The power of the blog in Vietnam

Stephen Quinn

Stephen Quinn is head of the Division of International Communication at the University of Nottingham's Ningbo campus in China. Before the Australian became an university academic in 1996, he was a journalist for two decades with some of the world's premier news, such as the Bangkok Post; the UK Press Association, BBC-TV, Independent Television News and The Guardian, in London; the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in Sydney; and Television New Zealand and daily newspapers in New Zealand. Dr Quinn has been a university professor in Australia, the United Arab Emirates and the United States of America.

Blogs have become big news in Vietnam over the past few years. As of mid-2010, Vietnam had 174 newspapers and 470 magazines, yet blogs had made huge inroads in terms of audience acceptance. They have become more influential than much of the government-controlled media.

The number of blogs exploded from about mid-2005, after the introduction of Yahoo 360°, an invitation-only service available in seven countries, including Vietnam. Yahoo closed the service in 2008 but announced several 'Vietnam-centric' initiatives as part of their Southeast Asia business strategy. One of these initiatives was Yahoo360°PlusVietnam, a new blogging application. At the same time, other social networking sites became available, such as Multiply, Zing and Blogspot.

Vu Thi Hai Anh, a public affairs officer at the Embassy of Canada in the capital city, Hanoi, said blogs had become the most influential social media in Vietnam — more so than Facebook and Twitter. Many people had several blogs, she said. "They are so popular. IT is an amazing factor in Vietnam. We are catching up with the world fast."

Joe Ruelle, a Canadian who lives in Hanoi, said the number of blogs had 'exploded' in the past few years. Ruelle has become a national identity because of the popularity of his quirky blog about life in Hanoi — *Joe's blog*, written in Vietnamese. It became a nationally syndicated newspaper column and led to Ruelle being invited to host entertainment programs on Vietnamese TV, in Vietnamese.

"It was like the Wild West. There was like the whole Billy the Kid bloggers being bad and naughty and all that stuff. It was kind of seen as a teen phenomenon,"

Ruelle recalled. A teen phenomenon, with two million people in Vietnam all using the same service. "And it was all blogs. It wasn't Facebook, it wasn't Twitter, it was all blogs at the same time," Ruelle said.

The problems at Yahoo 360° opened a window for other blog companies. VNG Corporation, an online business based in Ho Chi Minh City, started in 2004 with online gaming, and has generated healthy profits and a cabinet full of awards. In 2007, the company added online news, business, music and social networking to its range of offerings, via Yobane.

Two weeks after Yahoo 360° closed, VNG added Zing Me (www.zing.vn/news) to its various offerings. It is often called the Vietnamese version of Facebook. By early 2010, it had more than one million active users, outpacing Facebook's 802,000. Zing had the country's second highest Internet audience, after Goggle, with one in four Internet users in Vietnam using one or more of Zing's various websites between October and November 2009. "We began with content (gaming) and moved into social media and relationships", explained company vice-president, Vuong Quang Kai, a 30-year old entrepreneur who studied sciences at Columbia University in the United States but was lured back home to VNG by the vision of being a leader in online technology.

He said Zing tries to blend the egocentric aspects of VietSpace and MySpace, the relationship aspects of Twitter and Facebook, and the content-centric aspects of some of its site rivals such as Tamtay.vn, Yahoo360°PlusVietnam and the government supported Go.vn. He said Zing targeted a young audience rather than trying to compete with well-established online newspapers, such as Vn.Express, that catered to older audiences. "We want to become the second home of Vietnam's netizens," he said. All Zing's applications are localised or developed for Vietnamese culture because "Vietnamese is the first priority".

The strategy seems to be effective because Zing Me has become the biggest website in the VNG portfolio. The company employs more than 1,200 people. Their average age is 26. Unlike some of its rivals, Zing has a 30 person editorial team based in Hanoi. They generate 70 per cent of the site's news — mostly entertainment and feature stories — and they steer clear of politics. But Zing does have a moderator and software filters to deal with offensive or politically incorrect content on the blogs.

"Two years ago there was no talk about politics allowed on our blogs. Now we're mainstream and we can't avoid people talking about politics," Vuong Quang Kai said.

Internet access

Blogs can only exist when people have Internet access. By the middle of 2010, Vietnam's Internet penetration rate was 27 per cent, according to the Vietnam Internet Network Information Center (VNNIC). That was well above Asia's average

of 20 per cent. Vietnam's Internet penetration is similar to countries like China, the Philippines and Thailand, but it has experienced more rapid growth than most other countries in the region. Data from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) confirmed the growth. The ITU said Vietnam had 24,269,083 Internet users as of June 2010, equivalent to 27.1 per cent of the population. The country's population was 89.6 million in 2010, according to the United States Census Bureau.

It is useful to track the significant growth. In late 2008, Vietnam had about 20 million Internet users in a population of 88.6 million, according to the World Bank's world development indicators. A little over a year later, by the end of 2009, the number of users had jumped to 22.7 million, according to the Internet World Statistics web site. Between 2000 and 2009, the number of Vietnamese using the Internet grew by a phenomenal 10,882 per cent. Details can be found at www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm.

The *Vietnam NetCitizens Report: Internet Usage and Development in Vietnam*, released in March 2010 by Cimigo, an independent marketing research company based in Ho Chi Minh City, found that most of the 22.8 million Internet users in late 2009, went online from home (75 per cent) and work (25 per cent). Homeowners pay from \$13 to \$15 dollars a month (250,000-300,000 VND) for a package.

The report also found that people younger than 25 were three times more likely to post to online forums and write blogs, compared with users older than 25. Several reasons can be found for this phenomenon, including a need to express personal opinions, and a desire to speak out about perceived corruption at various levels of government. The country has many famous bloggers but some remain anonymous as they fear their opinions will result in jail or reprisal from authorities.

The Cimigo survey of 3,000 Internet users in six Vietnamese cities (conducted in October and November 2009) found that most people went online to get information or read the news (90 per cent), followed by entertainment such as music, movies, gaming (76 per cent), chatting and e-mail (70 per cent), and forums, blogs and social network sites (40-45 per cent).

Google was the favoured website for search and research activities, followed by Zing (a Vietnamese site) for online entertainment and for e-mail, instant message and chatting. About 15-20 per cent of those surveyed went online to read newspapers such as *DanTri* (<http://dantri.com.vn>), *VnExpress* (www.vnexpress.net/GL/Home) and *TuoiTre* (<http://tuoiTre.com.vn>).

The level of interest in the Internet continues to grow because the vast majority (91 per cent) of the people Cimigo surveyed said they considered it an important source for news and information. This was despite the fact that many people (58 per cent) did not trust online information, and considered television and newspapers more reliable.

Vietnamese are drawn to the Internet for chat, e-mail, blogs and social networks. The survey showed that four in five people believed the Internet helped them connect with friends and new people. The *Vietnam NetCitizens Report* can be downloaded at <http://cimigo.vn>.

Joe Ruelle noted the widespread adoption of the Internet among young people. "Television is just not in the equation," he said. "Newspapers cannot compete with online. And television does not have any shows that capture the imagination of that age group. Teenagers are constantly online with Yahoo messenger. So the online newspapers tend to link to blogs and chat sites."

"In Canada, if someone hosted a television show and ran a blog aimed at teenagers they would get more attention and fame from the television show," Ruelle said. In Vietnam it is the reverse. Teenagers respond to blogs. "I get street cred[ibility] from my blog in Vietnam."

The *Vietnam NetCitizens Report* also found the number of people writing blogs dropped from 27 to 20 per cent after 2007 and surmised "the main reason for this might be the closing of Yahoo 360° in 2009, which had been by far the most popular blogging application in previous years". It might also have something to do with increased government monitoring of activities on the Internet.

Monitoring of blogs

The monitoring of blogs and other Internet forums is a big job. Younger age groups (21 per cent) tend to use Internet cafes, though their popularity is waning as more people get their own computers, and wi-fi becomes widely available in major urban areas such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Prices to go online at Internet cafes in Vietnam fell dramatically in the four years to the middle of 2010. In 2006, it cost 10 cents (2000 VND) per minute of computer time. By mid-2010 it was 15 cents (3000 VND) for an hour.

A December 2008 edict from the Ministry of Information requires bloggers to restrict their postings to personal content, and bans postings about politics or issues the government considers state secrets, subversive, or threats to national security and social order. All Internet Protocol (IP) addresses in Vietnam are owned and controlled by state-owned Internet Service Providers (ISPs).

On 26 May 2010, Human Rights Watch, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in New York, said the Vietnamese government had launched a sophisticated and sustained two-pronged attack against online dissent. The government was detaining and intimidating independent Vietnamese bloggers while also permitting cyber attacks from Vietnam to disable websites critical of the government, the NGO said.

"In the past two months [since May 2010], Vietnamese authorities detained at least seven independent bloggers, subjecting them to extended interrogations and, in some instances, physical abuse. This intensified harassment has coincided

with systematic cyber attacks targeting websites operated by some of these bloggers and other activists in Vietnam and abroad.”

The NGO said the most damaging attacks deployed ‘botnets’. These consist of ‘malware’ disguised as software to support a Vietnamese-language keyboard, which caused crippling denial-of-service attacks against websites. Hackers switched popular software for inputting Vietnamese-characters written by the California-based Vietnamese Professionals Society (VPS), called VPSKeys, with a ‘malware’ version that took over people’s computers, according to McAfee, an Internet security firm. To get users to download the ‘malware’, given the name ‘W32/Vulcanbot’ by McAfee, a fake e-mail from VPS was sent to specific recipients informing them of “updated software of VPS” and asking them to download the “new” [fake] version of VPSKeys. Because of the cyber attacks, some bloggers moved their blogs to servers outside the country.

Google and McAfee confirmed and then condemned the attacks. “The government targets these Internet writers simply because they voice independent opinions, criticise government policies, and expose wrongdoing,” said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “Evidently the government is worried these bloggers will reveal the inside story of government abuse and corruption, and report on incidents and issues it prevents from appearing in the state-controlled media.”

In a blog entry on 30 March 2010, McAfee’s chief technical officer, George Kurtz, wrote, “The rogue keyboard driver [...] connected the infected machines to a network of compromised computers. During our investigation into the ‘botnet’ we found about a dozen command and control systems for the network of hijacked PCs. The command and control servers were predominantly being accessed from IP [Internet Protocol] addresses in Vietnam”. Kurtz said he believed that the perpetrators may have had political motivations and may have some allegiance to the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. “This incident underscores that not every attack is motivated by data theft or money.”

Neel Mehta from Google’s security team wrote in his blog, “This particular ‘malware’ broadly targeted Vietnamese computer users around the world. The ‘malware’ infected the computers of potentially tens of thousands of users who downloaded Vietnamese keyboard language software. These infected machines have been used both to spy on their owners as well as participate in distributed denial-of-service attacks against blogs containing messages of political dissent. Specifically, these attacks have tried to squelch opposition to bauxite mining in Vietnam, an important and emotionally charged issue in the country.”

A Vietnamese government spokesperson dismissed Google and McAfee’s allegations as “groundless”. But Human Rights Watch said it had evidence that challenged the government’s claims. Websites that have been bombarded by hundreds of attacks — including the political commentary website, *Thong Luan*

and a Catholic website, *Dong Chua Cuu The Viet Nam* (www.dcctvn.net) — traced some of the attacks to the IP address for Viettel, a state-owned telecommunication company operated by Vietnam's Ministry of Defence.

Vietnamese officials have admitted the government has shut down websites. Human Rights Watch reported that at a national news conference on 5 May 2010, Lieutenant General Vu Hai Trieu, deputy director of the General Department of the Public Security Ministry, told several hundred Vietnamese media representatives that the department had "destroyed 300 bad Internet web pages and individual blogs".

The *Vietnam Express* web site in May 2010 published the transcript of an interview with Pham Quoc Ban, director of the Hanoi Department of Information and Communications. The story's headline was "Hanoi to control Internet café users". The interview concerned a decision by the Hanoi People's Committee on 26 April 2010, to regulate Internet cafes. Part of the translated transcript is shown below.

Pham Quoc Ban: Hanoi presently has around 4,000 Internet agents. [...] we will use technology to manage Internet shops. Specifically, competent agencies will install specialized software designed by National University. This software will oversee the activities of users and the owners of Internet shops to know whether or not they are obeying the law.

Vietnam Express: It is said that controlling the users at Internet shops will violate their right to privacy. How do you respond?

Pham Quoc Ban: At present, control of users at Internet shops is very poor. People of less than 18 years old can freely visit websites with bad content. If we continue the loose management of these shops, Vietnam will have corrupted youth infected with bad thoughts. Their personalities will be harmed because they easily see porn and violent materials. Security also worsens because some people become addicted to online games and, to have money for games, they become robbers. This is a pressing matter for society and citizens have asked the People's Council several times to crackdown on this situation. Therefore, controlling the behaviour of users at Internet shops is a popular move.

The full interview (in Vietnamese) can be found at www.vnexpress.net

On 10 June 2010, Google policy analyst, Dorothy Chou, wrote on the Google policy blog, "Internet users in Hanoi will soon find that they can't reach certain sites when browsing the Web at local Internet cafés. A regulation enacted in April requires that all retail Internet locations install a server-side application by 2011. The application will likely allow the Vietnamese government to block access to websites, as well as to track user activities."

"The implementation of an application like this one would choke off access to information for many in Hanoi — given how popular Internet cafés are among Internet users in Vietnam. If the regulation spreads beyond Hanoi, it will impose these vague and non-transparent restrictions on users all over the country. Together with the security attacks we detected on Vietnamese human rights activists earlier this year (see our security blog post on 'The chilling effects of malware') and intermittent blockages of Facebook and other social networks, this regulation is a troubling example of a government threatening free expression online and an open Internet."

The United States' State Department has made Internet censorship a key pillar of its foreign policy and now factors the issue into its diplomatic relations with every nation. In every meeting with foreign dignitaries the issue is "on the table", Alec Ross, senior advisor for innovation to Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, told an event hosted by the Media Access Project, a non-profit law firm and advocacy group in Washington, on 11 June 2010.

On 27 April 2010, the Viet Tan advocacy group released a report blaming the Hanoi government for illegal computer attacks. Based on the IP addresses it obtained, Viet Tan said it determined that the attacks originated from Vietnam. The full report can be downloaded at www.viettan.org/en. Viet Tan has launched a freedom campaign on the Internet to support Vietnam's citizen journalists and digital activists.

Protests over bauxite mining

Vietnam's largest civil action to date relates to the mining of bauxite, a mineral used to produce aluminium. The world's third largest bauxite resources — about 8.3 billion tons — are in Vietnam. Most of the bauxite is found in the country's ecologically sensitive Central Highlands.

In January 2009, bauxite mining suddenly became a national issue when General Vo Nguyen Giap, a hero from Vietnam's war with America in the 1970s, issued the first of three open letters. The general, then aged 98, argued that bauxite mining would ruin the environment, displace indigenous ethnic minorities and, most significantly, threaten national security because of the high numbers of Chinese workers in the strategic Central Highland. The latter would provide China with economic leverage, he wrote. General Giap's photograph featured prominently on the bauxite website. Suspicion of China runs deep in Vietnam

Detention of Bloggers

Human Rights Watch in New York has documented some of the recent incidents in which bloggers were detained:

On **8 May 2010** provincial authorities terminated the telephone and Internet service at the home of Ha Si Phu, one of Vietnam's best-known dissident bloggers. Ha Si Phu's telephone service was disconnected at the written instructions of the Bureau of Information and Media, based on a police investigation alleging that he had used his telephone lines to transmit "anti-government" information. Since the beginning of 2010, Ha Si Phu's blog and website have been plagued by periodic cyber attacks.

On **1 May 2010** police detained two bloggers, Vu Quoc Tu (also known as Uyen Vu) and Ho Diep (also known as Trang Dem), at Tan Son Nhat airport in Ho Chi Minh City as the couple was boarding a plane to Bangkok for their honeymoon. The police interrogated them for hours and forbade them from travelling abroad, contending the restriction was based on reasons of national security.

On **28 April 2010** Lu Thi Thu Trang, an Internet activist associated with the pro-democracy group Block 8406, was beaten by police officers in front of her 5-year-old son. The police then took her to the police station and detained her for seven hours, interrogating her and repeatedly hitting her on the neck and face.

Another blogger, Ta Phong Tan, was detained at least three times during April and May 2010. On **20 April 2010**, police forced their way into her home in Ho Chi Minh City, took her to the police station for interrogation, and later released her. Ta Phong Tan is a former policewoman who blogs about corruption and injustice in the Vietnamese legal system.

On **17 April 2010** police detained and interrogated Phan Thanh Hai, a blogger known as AnhBaSG, who reported on illegal land seizures, and Le Tran Luat, the defence lawyer for Catholics at Hanoi's Thai Ha Church where they were protesting against the government confiscation of church properties.

On **3 April 2010** hackers broke into the Internet accounts of the blogger Bui Thanh Hieu (who writes as *Nguoi Buon Gio*, or “Wind Merchant”). Ho Chi Minh City police also detained and interrogated him for a week in early March and for 10 days in August 2009, after he posted blogs criticising the government’s policies toward China, bauxite mining in the Central Highlands, and disputes with Catholics over church properties.

In **January 2010** human rights activists Le Cong Dinh, Tran Huynh Duy Thuc and Le Thang Long were convicted on charges of attempting to “overthrow the government” for supporting the formation of an opposition party. They were sentenced to prison terms ranging from five to 16 years. All opposition political groups are banned in Vietnam.

because of a long history of conflict. The two countries fought a border war in 1979 and they have ongoing disputes about two archipelagos in the South China Sea — the Spratlys and the Paracels.

In March 2009, leading academics initiated a petition calling on the government to reconsider its bauxite policy, especially its involvement with a Chinese state-owned company not known for its environmental stewardship. The China Aluminum Company, or CHALCO, had won the bid for the contract in partnership with the Vietnam National Coal Mineral Industries Group (VINACOMIN). In 2008, small numbers of Vietnamese environmentalists and scientists protested against the development in the absence of an environmental impact study. They were mostly ignored.

Three men who opposed the government’s plans to open the bauxite mine founded a website in 2009, named *Bauxite Vietnam* (<http://bauxitevietnam.info>) and hosted it on a server in France. The site attracted millions of hits. Faced with this new challenge, Vietnamese authorities sought to shut the site down. The site’s manager, Nguyen Hue Chi, said when the site was first blocked in 2009, he played an online cat-and-mouse game with unknown hackers. He moved it to a new web address, but it was hacked again. From the time it opened until it was closed in January 2010, the bauxite site had more than 20 million hits from readers concerned about the government’s mining plans. Vietnamese authorities denied any involvement in the demise of the *Bauxite Vietnam* site.

Chi told news agency, Agence France-Presse (AFP), the site had been founded because Vietnam’s state-controlled media had ignored the dispute over the bauxite mine. Chi said he wanted to work with the Communist Party, not replace it. He expressed confidence that the government would gradually ease restrictions on

expression. "The right to independent thought and free expression is enshrined in the Vietnamese constitution," Chi said.

Dr Carlyle Thayer, a professor of politics at The University of New South Wales in Australia, published a long article in 2009 about the mine controversy in the *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*. "The anti-bauxite controversy of 2009 presented a new public challenge to state authority. For the first time, the competency of the government to decide on large-scale development projects was called into question by a broad national coalition of mainstream elites including environmentalists, scientists, economists, social scientists, and retired officials," he wrote.

On 17 May 2010, an Australian member of parliament, Christopher Pyne, wrote to the Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Nguyen Tan Dung, to remind authorities that Vietnam was a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The covenant expects governments to respect and uphold the civil and political rights of individuals, including the right to freedom of speech. Yet Article 98 of Vietnam's criminal code, which criminalises 'propaganda' against the government, contradicted the ICCPR and has been used to arrest and deter peaceful democratic activists. "Vietnam has immense potential in furthering its progress and I believe that this will be achieved only if freedom of expression and political belief are upheld and respected," Pyne wrote.

On 27 August 2009, Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security distributed an official dispatch to prominent Internet providers in Vietnam ordering them to halt their users' access to eight websites, including Facebook. The dispatch said, "For security reasons and to fight against propagative activities that oppose the Party and the government, Department of Professional Technology — Office of Security Administration — Ministry of Public Security suggests that the addressed companies to apply technical methods to block thoroughly these following websites."

Vietnam ISP's followed orders from government authorities, have put up firewalls and have intermittently blocked the popular social networking site, Facebook, since November 2009. On 1 December 2009, the BBC quoted foreign ministry spokeswoman, Nguyen Phuong Nga, as saying the government was blocking some websites "which were being used to provide information damaging to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam". At the time, Facebook had more than one million users in Vietnam, and the number increased after Facebook added a Vietnamese language version. Most Facebookers use the site to communicate with friends and family, and to expand their social networks by sharing photos, Internet links and blogs. Alexa.com lists it as the seventh top site in Vietnam.

Some analysts said Facebook opened up communication between Vietnamese citizens and overseas Vietnamese who fled after the American-Vietnamese war. The government views the latter group with suspicion. China has blocked Facebook

since July 2009 and has also shut down Twitter and YouTube. Vietnam's largest Internet service providers said they had been swamped with calls from customers in November 2009, complaining they could not access Facebook.

Some tech-savvy Facebook fans have found ways around the problem by adjusting their web browsers to a different configuration, or accessing Facebook through another (proxy) server. The instructions are posted online. It should be noted that using proxy servers and other 'tools' to circumvent the government's efforts at regulating the Internet, is illegal in Vietnam.

Challenge for mainstream media

On 19 January 2010, the VietNamNet Bridge web site reported that Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung told the annual conference of the Ministry of Information and Communications that "Vietnam must build powerful media groups". But the press, "should not report information that harms the country's interests", he was quoted as saying.

The prime minister said the ministry needed to work closely with the Central Propaganda and Education Committee to guide the press. "Directing and managing the press and media doesn't mean restriction, but assistance in the development of our revolutionary press in terms of content, form and skills," he said. Vietnam's more than 17,000 journalists must be "loyal soldiers serving the nation".

"The truth is always the truth, but we must choose the suitable time to tell the truth to ensure the country's interests," he explained. The ministry is promoting a project to establish an Information and Communication University, working with the Central Propaganda and Education Committee to hold training courses for journalists.

The explosion of the Internet has presented challenges for the government-owned and controlled mainstream print and broadcast media. "We have the agenda of the government to consider. That means we have to abide by their agenda," said the managing editor of the *Saigon Times*, Nguyen Van Thang.

Pressure also came from online citizen newspapers, blogs and forums. For example, Ngyyen Van Thang credits the work of online media, *Bauxite Vietnam* <http://bauxitevietnam.info/bixutvn.net>, for breaking the story about widespread leasing of more than 300,000 hectares of watershed forests to foreign investors. Ngyyen Van Thang said in February 2010 that two retired military officers, Major General Nguyen Trong Vinh and Lieutenant General Dong Si Nguyena, approached the mainstream media with their concerns over the leases and the effects of such extensive logging.

"None of us would print the stories, none of us would publish it. Only after it's published on a website, only then mainstream newspapers interviewed the two generals and after that the government had to stop those contracts. So that is direct impact."

He said this showed that mainstream press in Vietnam was discovering they no longer had the monopoly of producing news. In 2009, Nugyen Van Thang said he suggested that major daily newspapers open up their websites and publish some of the popular bloggers and invite readers to comment freely, but the idea was shot down. "Because there is the dilemma if you are a famous blogger you have your own forum, your own medium, you don't need another news organization. But when you work for a news organization you have to abide by its rules and censor yourself. No blogger would like to do that," he explained.

Nugyen Van Thang said if the media wanted to develop it had to move to private ownership, but that was not happening. Within the confines of government control, Nugyen Van Thang wants the *Saigon Times* to focus more on the grassroots. "They [the government] need to listen to the voice of the people, whether they are faring well, what the people are thinking. We can play that kind of a role. It also coincides with what the government wants us to do."

And the mission of mainstream media in Vietnam depends on the audience. Blogger, Joe Ruelle, described the English language press in Vietnam as "more like a tourism brochure". "Its role is not to provide news, but to make Vietnam look good. Vietnamese do not necessarily want to be airing their dirty laundry in the English language press to the world. But Vietnamese people definitely want to air things to other Vietnamese in their own language."

One could argue that the local language press in Vietnam operates in a tiny sphere of influence, relative to the impact of the English language press, because English is the world language. Ruelle said Vietnamese people demanded news and were reading the Vietnamese language press. "There is a saying in Vietnamese that translated says: 'The King's edict is nothing against the village's will'. It is difficult for the federal government to tell people at the local level what to do. Local people are extremely stubborn and self-reliant. They would not let their local press get away with ignoring stories."

Chapter 6

Hip or hype? Twitter and Australia's 2010 federal election

Stephen Quinn

On the evening of Wednesday 23 June 2010, ABC News 24 political editor Chris Uhlmann tweeted: "Kevin Rudd's leadership is under siege tonight from some of the Labor party's most influential factional warlords. Watch ABC news NOW!"

In 134 characters Uhlmann alerted his Twitter followers to the possible demise of a prime minister. By late that evening, for the first time in Australia's history, an elected prime minister had been removed during his first term in office by his own party. Most people turned on their television, not their personal computers, for all the gory details. Later that night, Latika Bourke, a political reporter with radio station 2UE, tweeted: "Text from Labor MP. 'it's done. There will be a new PM tomorrow'." At about the same time, Sky News political editor, David Speers, tweeted: "Cabinet source: it's all over. Gillard-Swan ticket has the numbers locked in."

It is interesting to note that most of the journalists sourced their tweets, but declined to name those sources. The information came to the journalists via text message, not Twitter. Interestingly, at a conference about social media that the ABC hosted in November 2009, the author heard political editor, Chris Uhlmann, say Twitter was not useful for reporting. But it is a great tool for alerting people to breaking news. Its strength lies in its potential as a delivery medium for news.

The next day, on Thursday, 24 June 2010, Labor's caucus was scheduled to meet. Some analysts predicted a 'spill' — an Australian term referring to an open ballot to elect a leader — with Labor MPs forced to choose between Rudd and his deputy, Julia Gillard. Samantha Maiden, online political reporter for News Ltd, publisher of *The Australian* and the *Daily Telegraph*, tweeted: "Labor MP text: it's Julia no ballot." Party bosses had talked Prime Minister Kevin Rudd into stepping down and Gillard had stepped into his role to become Australia's first woman prime minister.

Again, Twitter was the fastest delivery medium. The real news had come via text message. Samantha Maiden had simply used Twitter to accelerate the reporting process. Sources remain important for political reporters, ahead of their ability to find news via Twitter.

News of the coup flooded onto the news wires and was read on radio and television news bulletins. The new prime minister, Julia Gillard, admitted she had

not been chosen by the electorate and said she would go to the polls to seek a mandate. She also declined the chance to live in The Lodge, the prime minister's official residence in the capital, Canberra, saying she would only move in when elected. Until then she remained in her Melbourne home.

A little over three weeks after the coup, on 17 July, Gillard announced an election would be held five weeks later, on 21 August. In a magazine article that appeared soon after, John Bergin, digital news director of Sky News Australia, wrote: "Australia can look forward to a federal election that will be conducted and covered via social media in ways previously unknown.

In the same article Bergin quoted academic, Julie Posetti, who said the election would be 'Twitterised'. "Twitter will be a platform for citizen journalism, interactive political reporting and engagement between politicians, voters, analysts and the fourth estate. It will also be a reporting, news gathering, commentary and news dissemination platform for individual journalists and media outlets." The phrase 'Twitter election' became a shorthand way of suggesting the key role that social media would play in the campaign. Posetti repeated her argument in a series of articles in the media.

Bernard Keane, political editor for the Crikey blog, writing on 25 November 2009, identified Twitter as "media in its purest form, with all the flaws and benefits of media similarly magnified". Keane said he could find "virtually no difference between journalists camped outside the party room and voters in Sydney, Perth or on the other side of the world". Instantaneous live coverage, he said, was "just a tweet away".

Robert Wainwright, a London-based reporter for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, described the impact of social media on the United Kingdom elections in May 2010 as "minimal, perhaps even peripheral, and certainly far from influential". Wainwright wrote in the Walkley magazine of the Australian journalists' union that social media had accelerated the news cycle in the United Kingdom. "But the evidence of its actual influence is confusing, and, at least for now, a measure is virtually impossible."

What was the impact of social media on Australia's federal election in August 2010? Was it the first Twitterised election? As Wainwright noted in the previous paragraph, it is difficult to measure. This chapter will suggest that the Twitter election was more hype than reality. Twitter may be the hip and cool new face of social media, but it had little impact on the result of the 2010 Australian federal election.

Twitter's growth in the past two years has been phenomenal. In 2007, the global Twitter population was posting 5,000 tweets a day. A year later, the number had jumped to 300,000 a day, and the figure leapt to 2.5 million a day in 2009. By mid-2010, the world's 93 million Twitter users were posting and forwarding — the term for forwarding a tweet is 're-tweeting' — 50 million tweets a day. Twitter's astronomical growth in 2009 and 2010 has caused media commentators to give

it more credence than it really deserves. Let us look at the numbers more closely. They show a less sensational picture.

The Australian Electoral Commission said just over 15 million people voted in the August federal election. In June 2010, Nielsen, the data analysis company, said the number of people in Australia actively using Twitter was 1.2 million. In an article published 6 August 2010, Joshua Grech, Internet reporter for the *Daily Telegraph* in Sydney, said Australia had 1.3 million Twitter users, with Sydney as 'the capital'. If we take the higher figure for the number of Twitter users, and assume all of those 1.3 million are 18 or older and qualified to vote, the Twitter population represents only 8.6 per cent of voters.

Research from advertising agency, The Works, published in August 2010, showed that Sydneysiders generated the most tweets during business hours, compared with other major international cities such as London, New York, Munich and Paris. The study was based on a sample of more than 491,000 people in Sydney over a week. The most prolific tweeters lived in the outer western suburbs and Sydney's North Shore. The former was a key focus during the election.

Hashtags as a measure of Twitter activity?

People use hash tags on Twitter to aggregate content, and make it easier for others to find as many tweets as possible on a single theme. But Twitter has no coordinator, so hash tags appear organically. In the federal election campaign at least four main hash tags appeared: #ausvotes, #electionwire, #2010election and #mofo. The last represented Labor's election slogan "moving forward".

Between 17 July and 21 August — the period of the election campaign — the ausvotes hash tag appeared in 449,611 tweets by 36,162 participants. Twitter flared on election day, 21 August. By 9.30pm, Twitter users were posting 273 tweets a minute with the ausvotes hash tag. Eight days later that hash tag topped the list of most popular tags in Australia. But these numbers are very small. Assuming an average of 12,846 tweets with the ausvotes hash tag for each of the 35 days of the campaign, that means under one per cent of the total Twitter population (based on the 1.3 million Twitter users in Australia) contributed a tweet with that hash tag.

Antony Funnell, presenter of the ABC's Future Tense program, said 'political apparatchiks' believed it would be a Twitter election. But the main political parties had largely ignored the fragmented social media space and concentrated their communications efforts on traditional forms of media: television, newspapers, radio and letter-box pamphlets.

Blogger Stilgherrian told Funnell's program on 5 August 2010 that the number of people using Twitter was "really quite small". Those people were vocal and very well connected with each other, Stilgherrian said, "but I don't think they're terribly representative of the swinging voters in marginal electorates, which are

of course the people that the politicians want to connect with". Stilgherrian said the major political parties had not engaged with social media. The Labor and Liberal parties had 'tarted up' their websites: "They've got the latest policies and photos of the candidates, and they've got that veneer of Web 2.0. There's buttons for a Facebook group and for photo-sharing on Flickr, and YouTube videos and Twitter, and so on. But if you actually look at what they're doing with this, there's not a lot happening, and what is happening is just still the politicians talking at people." Stilgherrian said social media campaigns needed time to unfold, and the five weeks of the election was not long enough. "Social media spreads very slowly [...] and if you're coming in at the last minute, I don't think you're really going to make a lot of difference. So perhaps the political parties are making the right choice and concentrating on good old-fashioned mass media."

Twitter demographics

What are the demographics of the Twitter audience? No-one really knows, because Twitter will not release the data and various research companies have produced conflicting analyses. The Twitter blog provides no hits for the search term 'demographic'. In February 2009, the Pew Internet and American Life Project released a report about social networking, and said university-aged adults were the driving force behind Twitter's rapid growth.

Half a year later the Nielsen Company released a study that concluded, "Teens don't tweet". But in February 2010, Google Ad Planner said the average Twitter user was 37. The Google report said university students and older adults had embraced Facebook but tended to ignore Twitter. Research that the author conducted suggests that students at one Australian university have embraced Twitter, though the research only applies to journalism students at that one university and cannot be extrapolated to the general university-aged population. Details can be found near the end of this paper.

Can we measure Twitter's influence by the number of Twitter followers of the key political leaders? Individuals choose whom to follow, suggesting that a higher number of followers might indicate political popularity. The August 2010 vote was the most presidential and inward-looking election Australia has had. It is interesting to note that neither the prime minister nor the leader of the opposition gave a speech about foreign policy during the first 30 days of the 35-day election campaign. This reflected the inward-looking nature of the campaign. Possibly because of the short time frame, the campaign focused on the leaders more than policies. Both were new leaders. Tony Abbott was elected leader of the Liberal Party (and thus leader of the Opposition) in December 2009. Gillard was deputy prime minister from November 2007 until she wrestled the leadership from Kevin Rudd on June 24 and called an election on July 17. Senator Bob Brown, leader of the third-largest party by votes, the Greens, was Australia's longest serving party leader.

Two days after the election was called, the website, TweetMP.com.au, listed the 50 federal Members of Parliament who used Twitter (27 Liberal, 17 ALP, five Green, one Family First Party). That's only a third of all MPs, which speaks volumes for the other MPs' interest in social media. Tony Abbott won the leadership of the opposition in December 2009, by one vote from Malcolm Turnbull, with one abstention. Turnbull has always been a prolific user of social media. "Politicians and political parties are in the business of communication which means they need to use every means of communication available to them," he said. "The social media in particular enable politicians to communicate directly with the electorate without being edited or filtered by the traditional news media."

Meanwhile, the man Gillard replaced as prime minister changed his Twitter profile, resetting his username from @KevinRuddPM to @KRuddMP. As of 18 August, the new site had 943,968 followers, by far the highest in the country. Rudd's Twitter biography emphasised his Queensland origins, probably because that state was expected to vote against Labor in reaction to its axing of Rudd as prime minister, and Labor was keen to use Rudd to improve its electoral chances. The biography read, "Federal Member for Griffith. Proud father of 3 great kids with my wife Thérèse. Born and raised in country Queensland."

Federal Environment Minister, Peter Garrett, became a regular Twitter user during the International Whaling Commission Conference in August 2010, under the username @PGwhalewatch. During the election he became @PGarrettMP, explaining: "Liked tweeting so much from #IWC that I've rebadged my account today and will be sending general updates from now on, not just on whales."

Let us look at the social media use of the party leaders.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard — Twitter: @JuliaGillard

Gillard joined on July 2 with the message: "I've decided it's time to take the Twitter plunge! Hopefully I'll master it." Michelle Grattan, political editor of *The Age* (@michellegrattan), soon tweeted, "Now Julia's here, Twitter election assured". Sally Jackson, media reporter for *The Australian* said expectations that Twitter would provide a dynamic new platform for political interaction had been 'dampened'. "After joining the social networking site with great fanfare in early July, Prime Minister Julia Gillard, (@JuliaGillard) has tweeted only sporadically, with most posts written by staff," she wrote on 9 August 2010 — more than half way through the election campaign — in a story headlined, "Neither leader worth following on Twitter".

Platforms like Twitter were merely echoing discussion that started on traditional outlets like television and radio, Patrick Baume, media adviser at Media Monitors, told Jackson on 5 August 2010. "The volumes have been pretty huge on Twitter. People are tweeting quite a lot. But mostly it's a reflection of what we see in talk-back [radio] and mainstream press. It's mainly fed off TV," he said. "Quite a lot of it is derivative [...it's] not driving debate."

Gillard had 24,379 followers on 18 July, the day after election was announced, and 42,363 as of 18 August. Her Facebook account at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Julia-Gillard/161674172327>, had 34,459 friends on 18 July; 54,442 on 4 August; and 65,083 on 16 August.

Leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbott

Opposition leader, Tony Abbott, had 12,055 followers on 18 July, the day after the election was announced, and 19,054 as of 18 August. *The Australian's* Sally Jackson said Abbott (@TonyAbbottMHR) had not posted a word since the day the election was called. "The only party's leader who even occasionally interacts with followers is the Greens' Bob Brown (@SenatorBobBrown)."

Abbott had a Facebook account at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Tony-Abbott/216342268645>, and he had 8,208 friends on 18 July; 10,398 on 4 August and 11,717 on 16 August. Two weeks into the campaign, the official Abbott page had been last updated at the end of June.

Leader of the Greens, Bob Brown

Bob Brown's Twitter account was @SenatorBobBrown and he had 11,095 followers on 4 August 2010, and 13,469 on 18 August. His Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/Senator.Bob.Brown>, had 21,672 friends on 4 August and 24,557 on 16 August.

The results of the election bear no correlation to the number of people following the leaders on Twitter, or the number of 'friends' each leader has on Facebook. But Twitter gave journalists and the public a few opportunities to laugh. New South Wales Liberal Opposition Leader, Barry O'Farrell, (@barryofarrell), referred to Gillard as 'the ranga' in a private message that went public. The slang term 'ranga' refers derisively to a red-headed woman. Next day, one red-haired Twitter user (not Gillard) told O'Farrell he owed Gillard an apology. He replied, "If you're offended, of course I do. (But in my family it's a term of endearment.)"

Axel Bruns, associate professor at Queensland University of Technology, and an author of books on social media and blogging, said social media including Twitter, was not much of an issue with the 2010 federal election. "To be a Twitter election means the candidates had to use Twitter, and they did not. Much of the time it was candidates' staff who were sending tweets." Most of the traffic on Twitter appears to have been a reaction to events unfolding on mainstream media, especially television. The single debate between the two leaders on 24 July 2010 generated some Twitter traffic, but over three million people watched the event on television. Dr Bruns said social media played a lesser role in the 2010 federal election than it did for the 2007 federal election.

Ziggy Switkowski, former chief executive officer of Telstra, Australia's biggest telecommunications company, said Twitter was a useful platform for politicians,

who could use it to follow the issues or communicate events as they occur. "But I wouldn't describe it as a Twitter-driven election." Samantha Maiden, chief online political correspondent for Rupert Murdoch's, *The Australian*, described Twitter as "just another reporting platform".

Fake Twitter sites about politicians

Fake and parody Twitter sites became a fascinating phenomenon in 2009 and 2010. Since 19 May 2010, an almost endless flow of sardonic tweets have been streaming from a fake Twitter account that parodies the BP oil company's public relations fiasco after the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion. The Twitter account, @BPGlobalPR, had more than 191,000 followers as of mid-September 2010 — more than 10 times the number for BP's real Twitter PR account, @BP_America (18,589). Forbes magazine of 2 August 2010 noted that @FakeSarahPalin's grammar was almost as bad as her spelling skills: "Does anybody know the definitionism of the word 'obtuse?' I AM NOT FAT IF THAT'S WHAT IT MEANS."

The number of fake Twitter accounts about Australian politicians soared during the election campaign. @JuliaGillardPR was one of a handful of fake Gillard sites, but the site's official-looking photograph taken from the real prime minister's Twitter site (@JuliaGillard), and a link to the real PM's web site in Canberra's parliament makes the site appear real. But the biography gave it away: "Prime Minister of Australia and Queen Ginger". It only had 134 followers by the end of the election campaign.

It was the same with @Gillie_THE_PM. The Twitter biography at the start of the campaign said: "Marxist Member of the Aussie ALP, now PM of Wales & Australia who is leaving soon 2 join the UN. U can call me Ur Highness. Mate of Andrew Bolt" [a prominent newspaper columnist]. Near the end of the campaign the biography read "Marxist Member of the Aussie ALP, now PM of Wales & Australia. Kevin is leaving soon 2 join the UN. Wireless Washing Machine Freak. Good question, yes I'm sexy." The account had 302 followers as of 18 August, three days before election day.

After the first two disastrous weeks of the campaign, Gillard announced she would be more 'real' for the rest of the campaign. The reaction on Twitter was amusing and pungent:

- * Labor's 'real Julia' - copy and paste from the West Wing 26 April 2000 Season 1, Episode 19 called "Let Bartlet be Bartlet" #ausvotes
- * If this is now the real Julia Gillard, who have I been following the last 2 weeks? #ausvotes
- * Gillard v2.5 seeking to maximise credibility today by wearing face no. 21 combined with personality no. 6, and a smart slack suit #ausvotes

@RealJulia_G had a mere 37 followers as of 18 August, and this biography: "Values voters - Do you know the real Julia Gillard? If you believe in family and moral values, please DO NOT let her continue as PM - for Australia's sake."

Incidentally, Twitter verified legitimate accounts, signified by a blue tick on the site. But Twitter officials have tended not to remove fake accounts unless the site is offensive.

Mark Latham, a former Labor leader, provided distractions in the election campaign by becoming a reporter with Channel 9's flagship current affairs program, 60 Minutes. A spoof soon appeared with the Twitter handle, @LoonyLatham and a bio that said, "Hi! I'm Mark! I hate Julia and I have a helmet made of tin foil." As of 10 August the site only had 23 followers. By the end of the campaign, the number of followers had dropped to 15. Most of the tweets were puerile. For example, "I'm like Jesus/Nick Nolte. Instead of water into wine I turn wine into embarrassing public spats and common assault!" and "I think @juliagillard is following me because of that saying 'keep your friends close and your enemies closer' or however it goes!"

Opposition leader Tony Abbott attracted several Twitter parodies including, The Mad Monk (@PhoneyTony) whose biography said, "not to be mistaken for phoney_tony, Future leader of the free world. Mega Catholic. Beach Bunny." As of 18 August, the site had 179 followers. The @phoney_tony account had a biography that described him as "Leader of the Opposition for Opposition's Sake. Member for the Gospel Truth (except in the heat of the moment)." It had 785 followers as of 18 August. The most real-looking parody was @tonyabbottmp, but the biography "Federal Member for Warringah, Shadow Minister for everything Holy" gave it away. By the end of the campaign, it had 1,131 followers. The 'beach bunny' referred to media images of a healthy Abbott in brief swimwear taking part in triathlons. The monk and holy references linked to Abbott's early years when he considered the priesthood as a career.

Australia's citizens used YouTube extensively during the campaign, mostly to mock their political rulers. A parody of Julia Gillard at, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PE_vr0t3FA, had received 367,542 views by the middle of the campaign. A parody of Tony Abbott at, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqHP-LtEN7w>, was watched 75,246 times at the same time.

During the campaign, the Liberal Party launched an online game urging voters to "Give Labor a whack" (<http://www.givelaborawhack.com.au/>) and Labor depicted opposition leader, Tony Abbott, as a dinosaur. In the game, players used a virtual mallet to hit Labor politicians, including Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Environment Minister Peter Garrett and Deputy Prime Minister and Treasurer, Wayne Swan. As the various politicians appeared out of holes, a pile of debt and refugee boats grew in the background before overwhelming the screen. This was a reference to two key campaign issues: the Opposition's claim that Labor was putting Australia into danger through excessive spending and its misguided immigration policy.

Labor launched a YouTube video showing a child's drawing of Tony Abbott as a dinosaur digging up Work Choices (a controversial form of employment regulations) before Julia Gillard, depicted as a magic fairy, makes Abbott disappear.

Twitter and the hung parliament

The election ended with Labor and the opposition each holding 73 seats, meaning a hung parliament. Given the 150 electorates in parliament, a party needed 76 seats to form a government. Four independent MPs decided the fate of the 2010 federal election. One quickly gave his vote to Labor, while the other three spent two and a half weeks making their choice. During those weeks they received lots of media and Twitter attention.

Sally Jackson, *The Australian's* media reporter, noted on 30 August 2010 that the federal member for Lyne, Rob Oakeshott (@OakeyMP), one of the three independents, "emerged from Twitter obscurity". His number of followers jumped from under 30 the day before the 21 August election to more than 1,200 a week later. Yet Oakeshott had not posted anything to Twitter since 18 August when he wrote: "There is bubbling interest in this 'hung' parliament potential. Bring it on!"

Another independent, Bob Katter (@Bobkatter), the member for Kennedy, posted nothing on Twitter apart from his first and only post on 27 May. It read: "Getting on Twiter (sic) to connect with the real Australians — country Australians." Yet he had 963 followers as of mid-September, significantly more than the average number of followers on Twitter (150). Lack of posts has not stopped the Twittersphere talking about him, using the hash tag #bobkat and generating the #bobkatterfacts meme. Some examples include:

- * "Bob Katter is so tough he once fought Mark Latham for a cab."
- * "Bob Katter is planning to change the name of the town Innisfail to InnisWIN."
- * "When Bob Katter threatens to kill an MP, he sharpens the edge of his hat."
- * "There are two types of people in this world: those who like Bob Katter, and those who didn't."

The federal election traffic caused major spikes in online audiences and on mobile phones. Nielsen Online managing director, Matt Bruce, said a rise in the ownership of smart phones and more affordable data plans had seen mobile Internet usage increase in recent months. Nine News (ninemsn.com) had the largest increase in mobile traffic in August compared with the previous month, attracting an average of 21,113 visitors a day, or a rise of 27 per cent. Fairfax Digital's *SMH* mobile site saw traffic rise 21 per cent, while News Digital Media's News.com.au and The Age each grew traffic by 18 per cent.

The biggest spikes to news sites occurred on the day of the federal election and the day after. Another spike occurred on 7 September, when the three independents announced their decision — two decided to back Labor, which was then able to form a government. The smh.com.au, web site, reported that 882,436 unique browsers visited the site on 7 September, peaking at 285,115 in the hour from 3pm to 4pm when Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott announced they were giving their support to Labor. That result topped the site's previous record for online traffic of 24 June, the day after the Gillard coup which made her prime minister. On that day, the site recorded 243,039 unique browsers between 9am and 10am. The News Digital Media's news.com.au website attracted 599 on 24 June and 535 unique browsers on September 7, about double the normal traffic.

Twitter use among a student group

It is interesting to consider how people aged 18-24 use Twitter, albeit at one university. The author surveyed journalism students about their use of Twitter in August and September 2010. The size of the sample was small: 37 out of 210 journalism students responded via a Survey Monkey online survey (a response rate of 17.6 per cent). Of the respondents, 75 per cent had a Twitter account and had used it before they were required to have it for university work. All but one student was aged 18-24 (she was 17) and four in five were female. Half of the respondents do not send tweets but preferred to follow other people for information and entertainment. Half of the respondents had not sent a tweet in the previous week.

Students were asked in the last question of the survey to "say anything you like about Twitter". Half of those qualitative responses were negative. They included: "I don't understand why it is so popular. Can anything meaningful really be conveyed in 140 characters?" one student wrote. Another described Twitter as 'pointless' and said Facebook was 'more interesting'. Another echoed those sentiments. "I don't see the point of Twitter, if you use Facebook". And another admitted she joined "because I wanted to see what it was all about, and what people were so excited about", noting that Twitter "never really kept my attention. I've only 'tweeted' a couple of times, because I tend to forget about it". Another student described Twitter as "lots of small bits of info in the one place. Good for journos and celeb stalkers, not to useful for everyone else."

The other half of the qualitative comments were positive. The included: "Twitter is a fantastic tool for the promotion of both yourself and your business/products/services." "I like that compared to Facebook you are able to be 'followers' of anyone — it is not solely for your actual 'real life' friends, as Facebook is." "Twitter is an effective media to promote, inform, and persuade people about anything." "As a freelance journalist, I use Twitter for a number of reasons: Primarily to

promote my own work, gain a following of readers or an audience for my articles/work, to connect with my readers and also get feedback from them.” “Twitter is easy to use, and fast. That’s why I use it.” Few responses were neutral. This was the only one that could be categorized as indifferent: “It’s more of a networking tool than a means of maintaining personal relationships with friends/family.”

Twitter received much publicity in 2010 and various pundits suggested it and other social networking sites would have a major impact on the federal election held in August 2010. An analysis of a range of data about Twitter showed this was clearly not the case. For this election traditional media — especially television — played a much more important role as candidates strived to spread their message, and in journalists’ reporting and interpretation of those candidates’ messages.

Chapter 7

From citizens to netizens — Social media and politics in Malaysia

PA Fama and CM Tam

PA Fama is a freelance writer based in Southeast Asia. Previously he worked as a senior journalist at two leading international news organisations, the BBC and APTN. The bulk of his career has been in television news, but he has also worked in newspapers, radio and magazines. He has been based in the United Kingdom, Hong Kong and Malaysia.

Freelance writer CM Tam has spent most of her 10 years of media experience in print where she especially covered political issues in Malaysia and Singapore. In her last appointment as a producer with a global television network she also covered international issues and affairs.

There is an old anarchist saying, “it doesn’t matter who you vote for, it is always the Government which takes power”, and there are few democracies in the world where this is more true than in Malaysia. Ever since independence in 1957, Malaysia has been ruled by a coalition government led by Umno (United Malays National Organisation). Up until 1973 this was known as the Alliance, but since that time, as Barisan Nasional (National Front). Even in 1969, when the opposition gained an absolute majority of the popular vote, the Alliance won nearly two-thirds of the seats in the lower house of parliament. Umno has maintained its vice-like grip on power by a variety of methods, but essentially it comes down to a ‘carrot and stick’ approach — rewarding people for their support, and punishing them for their opposition. Probably its single most effective tactic has been co-opting opposition politicians, and on several occasions, whole opposition parties, into the ruling coalition.

Vote early, vote often

As recently as 2004, this worked well. Barisan won nearly two-thirds of the vote, and nine-tenths of the seats in parliament. The fragmented opposition took just 21 of the 222 seats contested. Fast forward to 2008, and the picture could not have been more different. Despite a relatively loyal media, the state-run Election Commission, the huge resources at the government’s disposal, Barisan suffered its biggest ever electoral setback. It gained barely half the popular vote and lost 58 of its seats in parliament, taking it below the two-thirds threshold necessary

to change the constitution, for the first time in four decades. It would have been even worse, but for several uncontested seats, and its disproportionate success in Sabah and Sarawak. At a state level, the picture was even worse. Of the 12 states which held elections for their local legislatures, five were won by the opposition and four of them for the first time since independence.

Two main factors have been credited with this turnaround between 2004 and 2008. The first was the decision of the main three opposition parties to form a loose coalition, known as the People's Alliance (Pakatan Rakyat, PR). Although it gained little more than a third of the seats in parliament, despite taking just under half the vote, the outcome was less skewed than in previous elections. Essentially, these three parties — the conservative Pan Malaysian Muslim Party (Parti Islam SeMalaysia, Pas), the reformist Malay-led People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR) and the progressive Chinese-led Democratic Action Party (DAP) — have almost nothing in common. But Malaysia has grown used to incongruous political alliances. Barisan, for example, includes Chinese and Indian parties, which support discrimination against the communities they are supposed to represent.

The second factor was the perceived victory of the opposition in the 'battle of the Internet'. While Barisan relied on a traditional campaign strategy, which had served it so well in the past, the opposition embraced the possibilities offered by the digital world. A hugely effective tool was the use of text (SMS) messaging. Easy, cheap and quick, they proved to be a good way to spread the word. Opposition activists would send a text to their contacts, and ask those people to forward the messages to their friends and family. Within a few hours, tens of thousands of people would have received 'personal' messages. E-mails, blogs and social media sites, were used extensively for the first time too. A prominent blogger, Jeff Ooi, was even elected to parliament, under the DAP banner. Essentially, the opposition turned a necessity into a virtue. Cut off from the traditional media, because of pro-government bias, it threw itself wholeheartedly into the digital revolution.

Ibrahim Suffian, who runs an independent polling firm, the Merdeka Center, acknowledged in a local news website report that Malaysians are resorting to digital media for their information: "In previous surveys conducted by Merdeka Center, we found that about 90 per cent of the people got their political information from the traditional media. But the (2008) election results show that the BN only managed to garner slightly more than half of the popular vote. So it implies that many people did not believe what they had read. They turned to secondary sources for information, such as the alternative media, and especially the Internet. The secondary market for alternative news is between 60 per cent and 65 per cent. We believe this is what tipped the balance in favour of the opposition in the last elections."

These two factors were most clearly linked in the person of Anwar Ibrahim, once the country's deputy prime minister, and now a charismatic opposition

leader. Despite spending six years in jail on corruption and sodomy charges (the sodomy charges were later dismissed), he remains a highly popular figure. Although banned from standing in the 2008 election, he is credited with being the driving force behind the People's Alliance, as de facto leader of the PKR. An early enthusiast of the Internet, he and his allies used social media to counteract pro-government stories in the traditional media. When he was arrested on fresh sodomy charges in July 2008, he even tweeted from his police cell. Without this active engagement with the digital media, it seems likely that the 'no smoke without fire' argument the Government was banking on, would have gained much greater credence. As it is, most of his supporters assume he is innocent, and that the charges are politically motivated. Anwar was elected to parliament in August 2008, despite the ongoing court case.

Moving with the times

One of the truisms of the Internet age, is that nothing stands still for long. Barisan may have ignored social media almost completely in 2008, but it no longer does so now. The Prime Minister, Najib Razak, is an active blogger, while Umno has several Facebook groups, as do many of its members of parliament. The 1-Malaysia campaign, which seeks to promote racial harmony, or justify Malay dominance, depending on your point of view, has a large online presence. Najib has signalled quite clearly that he will not allow the opposition a free run in the next election's battle of the Internet. But not all government members, or supporters for that matter, are 'singing from the same song sheet'. As recently as January 2010, the Information, Communication and Culture Minister, Rais Yatim, warned of the dangers of being immersed in foreign Internet culture. Quoted by the official news agency, Bernama, he said, "We must be strong in our beliefs and culture because the identity and image of our country depends on us. They are just selling Facebook, Twitter, as a product but we do not do such business. We accept all this in a state of cultural shock."

Although his comments were greeted by ridicule on Twitter, Facebook and other social media sites, he is far from being alone among Malaysians, in viewing the Internet as a threat to traditional social and religious values. But whatever conservatives like Rais may hope it would be near impossible to put the 'djinn back in the bottle'. Malaysians have fallen in love with social media, and there seems to be no sign of this love affair ending any time soon. The latest available figures for Facebook, suggest there are now more than eight million users in Malaysia, a rise of 181 per cent in just a year. That's nearly one in three Malaysians and more than half of them with Internet access. It is now clearly the country's most popular site, with a large lead over second-placed Friendster. Twitter is credited with about half a million unique users, with an estimated three times that number, accessing tweets through other social media sites. Even Wong Sai Wan, the executive editor

of *The Star*, Malaysia's best selling English language newspaper, acknowledged how important social media is now: "In 2008, it was blog sites and e-mails that were effective. If the next general election is held within the next 24 months, Facebook and Twitter will be more effective, as these two media have proven to have massive viral capability."

Mind the gap

In October 2010, the international research company, TNS, released the findings from what it claims was the largest ever study of Internet usage. It surveyed 50,000 people, in 46 countries. Out of all these countries, it was Malaysia which saw the highest usage of social networking sites. On average, those surveyed spent nine hours a week on sites like Facebook and Friendster. What's more, Malaysians had more Facebook friends than anywhere else — 233 compared to just 29 in Japan. Overall, TNS's Chief Development Officer, Matthew Froggatt, noted a greater engagement among developing countries like Malaysia, than in mature economies: "In rapid growth markets that have seen recent, sustained investment in infrastructure, users are embracing these new channels in much more active ways. Online consumers in these markets are leaving those in the developed world behind in terms of being active online and engaging in new forms of communications."

Before getting too carried away with the seeming tidal wave of digital engagement in Malaysia, it must be remembered that Internet access is still limited to less than 70 per cent of the population. Radio, by contrast, reaches nine out of ten people. In most rural areas, information is still received via traditional media, which is firmly pro-government. People in these areas are generally poorer, more socially conservative and less educated. They are still largely cut off from the Internet. These people are the natural constituency of Umno and its conservative Muslim allies. Apart from the heavily Malay north eastern state of Kelantan, where Pas has governed for most of the last four decades, Barisan does disproportionately well in poorer, rural areas. The big question is, whether Umno and its allies can take this support for granted in the next election.

Backwater or bellwether?

In early November 2010, Barisan faced two by-elections, one for the Batu Sapi constituency of the national parliament, and the other for a seat in the Kelantan State Assembly. Barisan cruised to victory in the former, confirming again its overwhelming dominance in Sabah. No serious commentator expected a different outcome, but the size of the victory was impressive. Barisan also won the other contest, taking back Galas from Pas, turning a 646 vote deficit into a 1,190 vote majority. The government was quick to see the by-election results as a sign that public opinion was turning in favour of Barisan. Quoted by Bernama, deputy Prime

Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, said, "This development may be due to the people's acceptance of the government's policies and the leadership of the prime minister, as well as the hard work we have been doing the last one or two years".

On the face of it, both these results represent a significant setback for the opposition, and for the idea that 2008 ushered in a whole new style of non-traditional campaigning. Although social media was full of comments about the by-elections, whether this had any effect on the outcome is highly doubtful. Both Galas and Batu Sapi have low Internet penetration compared to urban areas, and also higher than average illiteracy levels. Social media is practically impotent in these types of places, at least when set against the full weight of a traditional Barisan campaign. What social media can do though is alter the public perception of the political process, and even the interpretation of electoral results. Before the Internet became so important, there was a single narrative in Malaysia — the official one decided by Barisan, and publicised by the traditional media.

It ain't necessarily so

In the case of Galas and Batu Sapi, the official narrative was one of growing government popularity, as a direct reward for strong, effective leadership. While even a few years ago, this would have been the only narrative most Malaysians heard, that is no longer the case. In Batu Sapi, for example, the official narrative barely mentioned the fact that the winning candidate was the widow of the late, former member of parliament, bringing into question how big a part the sympathy vote played in her victory. It took social media to remind people of that fact. As for Galas, within hours of the polls closing, social media was full of accusations of irregularities, including photographic evidence of alleged vote-buying. It is not that these types of allegations are anything new. The difference now is that while in the past, they would have received little or no coverage in the traditional media, because they contradicted the official narrative, now they can be given full voice through social media, thus creating many different narratives. Here is one alternative narrative on the Galas result. "Voters especially in rural/semi rural constituencies continue to accept a false reality that their future and well-being are dependent on the political masters. There is little awareness of the role of politicians, the relationship between politicians and voters, and the election process as a democratic instrument for them to measure the effectiveness of politicians. Elections and their votes are taken as something they must give politicians in exchange for services and assistance."

While it is natural for the opposition to be chastened by the by-election results, there is a danger of Barisan taking too much comfort from the traditional campaigns it fought in Batu Sapi and Galas. For one thing, it simply does not have the manpower or resources to fight that way at every contest in the next state and national elections. And secondly, poor, rural areas do not stay that way forever.

The Internet is spreading fast in Malaysia. Telecommunication firms, both private and public, are required to inject cash into a government controlled Universal Service Provision Fund, which in turn is used to finance community broadband centres in rural areas of Malaysia. These centres are equipped with computers and mobile devices with full Internet coverage, with the aim of bridging digital divide. It is an irony that the government is pushing for a policy which may end up undermining its media dominance in poorer, rural areas.

Levelling the playing field

Galas and Batu Sapi are small places, but they are representative of Malaysia's digital divide, and how this might have an impact on the next national election. If the opposition can make further in-roads in poorer, rural areas, while keeping its urban strongholds, then it is almost certain to win a majority of the popular vote, and possibly even deny Barisan an overall majority in parliament. For Barisan, the challenge is to stop Pas, and to a lesser extent the PKR, from increasing their support in rural areas, while challenging the DAP and PKR in their urban back yard. There seems little doubt that the battle of the Internet will play a large part in urban areas, although what the net result will be in terms of seats, is anyone's guess. In rural areas, online engagement will be less marked, but because it will be new to many voters, there could be a boost to whichever side best uses the social media tools at its disposal. What is not in doubt is the value of the rural vote, as smaller average constituency sizes make them relatively more important.

While these conventional electoral contests were going on in Galas and Batu Sapi, a wholly different type of political battle was underway. In October 2010, Najib set out his government's budget for the following year. Many commentators saw the number of give-aways, the lack of any real effort to reduce the fiscal deficit, and the announcement of large infrastructure projects, as a sign that Barisan is planning to call an early election. Within minutes, social media sites were alive with criticism of one particular announcement — the building of a new hundred storey tower in the capital. One Facebook page protesting against the development, garnered more than 30,000 fans in just four days after it was set up. While Facebook administrators reportedly 'blocked' comments to be written on the page, it did not stop the surge in numbers. A month from when the page was created, more than 240,000 people were part of this 'digital protest'.

This demonstration made it possible for conventional media to follow up on the issue, and forced the government onto the back foot. It announced that no public money would be going into the so called Mega Tower, but even this failed to stop the growing campaign against it. Two weeks after the fan page was set up, the company behind the development, Permodalan Nasional Bhd (PNB), sought ways to manage this damaging public relations campaign. It is a textbook

example of how quick and effective social media can be, over single issues. But Jahabar Sadiq, former Reuters TV producer and now chief executive officer of the news website, The Malaysian Insider, said it was a challenge to turn this kind of Internet campaign into votes. "Support can be instantaneous and spontaneous but keeping the support is essential. It's the start, not the guarantee of support. The reality is that there is a real life out there. Social media is not a substitute to meet people. Just a forum of like-minded people getting to know each other before ever meeting up. It's the starting point. Not the journey or the destination."

Politicians, whatever party they come from, see the Internet as a tool to get votes. And in these stark terms, judging success or failure is difficult. Perhaps the best way to see the effect of social media on politics in Malaysia therefore, is to look at a wider picture than politicians are apt to do. The 2008 election didn't change the government. It did, however, lead to a major change in the way the government engaged with its citizens. It's easy to be cynical about something like 1-Malaysia, but it represents a sea-change in how the authorities present their policies. Rather than simply taking a decision, announcing what that decision is and then moving onto the next policy decision, the Government now has to put its case. That means in newspapers, on the radio, on television, and increasingly through social media.

Chapter 8

Social websites' political benefits still far-off in Pakistan

Taseer Dhuddi

Following 25 years in journalism, Taseer Dhuddi is currently assistant editor at The Nation, one of the leading English newspapers in Pakistan.

As news coordinator he is also responsible for the organisation of the news flow between the different sections of the newsroom.

When writing, he specialises on political and social issues.

In Pakistan, a South Asian country with a population of approximately 180 million, politicians are long way from using social networks to their advantage or understanding their capabilities. Although no head of any major political party has a presence on a popular social website, there are groups and smaller parties, which are using social media consciously to disseminate information to the voters and the people at large.

No web account also means no profile. A profile page encloses basic information about the website user and what they wish to share with the online community, which globally consists of millions of people. The same is true when the campaigning for the 2008 general election in Pakistan is examined. Even the second-rate leaders of political groups claiming broader public support, were not that skilful in applying the tools of social websites to connect themselves with constituents. They did not consider it important to share their views and broadcast programmes online for political gains in the elections.

After limited success for two years, the heads of political organisations are slowly becoming aware of the worldwide appeal and potential of the rapidly developing Internet technology, including the 'big four' of new media — Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and Flickr. Politicians are starting to understand the impact of social media on the election campaigns. They have realised that ignoring the use of new media would cost them a huge loss of support from potential voters. However, most political actors are not fully convinced that social networks, even if exploited tactically, can bring any big change to their support. They view social media as an accessory to several other accessible forums, which could be used for contact with voters.

Reaching out to voters through conventional platforms

Politics in this part of the world is still mostly on the well-treaded path they believe leads them to their self-visualised goal: a higher political seat with immense influence. This strata of society comprise people holding public office and others with similarly high ambitions. They also use conventional platforms to interact with people of substantial rank and influence, allowing them to achieve their objectives or helping them in making their presence felt in the field. These platforms range from political meetings with constituents and parleys with power-wielding people, to the issue-driven rallies.

The newspaper is of course another strong medium deployed by political settings to communicate their policies and party-related news to those at the grassroots level. The print media has always been the preferred choice of the politicians to reflect their views on issues and programmes to the voters. Newspapers are highly effective as a tool in their own right, having the power to make or break a political leader.

This standard political practice has been ongoing since the country's independence from British colonial rule in 1947. Pakistan, as the sixth most-populous country of the world, has passed through crises of varying degrees during its 62 years history. The undemocratic politicians are being blamed for the 'democracy far-off' tag in Pakistan.

Talk shows are now talk of the town

Daily political talk shows have emerged lately in Pakistan to serve as a forum for to public, with the potential to shape and develop public opinion. Though the political talk show can be an appropriate medium to convey messages and opinions, it is not a forum that can be adopted by every politician. Only eloquent political figures with a trustworthy and relatable personality, and armed with up-to-date knowledge, can conduct the show in an impartial way. The other candidates see no chance to sell their party's message to the voters through these talk shows.

But, it is a misconstrued notion that politicians in Pakistan are altogether too naïve to gauge the huge significance of social media in politics in the time to come. They are largely aware of the effectiveness of the Internet's influence in electoral campaigns and understand its equally extensive reach among political figures in the developed and democratic sphere. Through the examples of elections in the United States and Europe creating successful web campaigns, the global benefits have been visible and recognised.

With political groups in Pakistan using the Internet to appeal to other media outlets and constituents for over a decade, the major political parties are now using social networking sites to transmit information through political forums and blogs. This shows that Pakistani politicians are aware of tapping on the social utilities in the future general election set down for 2013.

Political parties of Pakistan — Their ideas and beliefs

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Pakistan Movement for Justice), a relatively new political party is headed by a man whom one can describe as a modern politician. Imran Khan, a former cricket hero, founded the party in 1996. Apart from its official website (www.insaf.pk), the party's supporters have created separate blogs to interact with the voters and the people at large.

According to the moderators, the aim of 'PTI Blog' was to propagate news of the leaders' activities, such as party's events, initiatives, campaigns and membership launch. "It will also help them get closer with the people and to have knowledge about their views on different issues. This will serve the means of having bi-directional interaction, which needs to take place on different topics," a moderator said.

"A big change is coming," Imran Khan said when asked to comment on the use of social networks by his party. He was very hopeful of support and feedback from the young people, whom he said form 70 per cent of the population of Pakistan. He believes youth, particularly students, spend more time surfing the applications of social networks, and his party relies mostly on the web interactivity of the students.

The Internet users can follow PTI on Twitter. Each time the party's coordinators update the PTI website, it gets a status update that is tweeted onto Twitter. 'Ask Chairman' is a new initiative, which gives PTI members, supporters, sympathisers and the general public an opportunity to ask questions. The party chairman answers the questions over a selected interval. The questions can be emailed to ukpti@insaf.pk.

The organisation had 786 online members (till 19 July 2010), while the overall number has risen to 35,495. A total of 126 voters joined the party in a single day. The online membership campaign by the party seems to be a success story. According to a report of International Republican Institute (IRI), the PTI is the second most popular party in NWFP province (now renamed as Khyber Pukhtunhawan). Pakistan has now five administrative units. The report was released in 2007. Though he has no presence or profile on any social site, the PTI chief said his party raises funds online using Internet technologies. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf gets funds largely from its wealthy supporters living in Europe and North America.

Muttahida Quami Movement (United National Movement) is recognised as the fourth major political party in Pakistan. Party officials in Punjab say almost all the elected representatives of MQM have their profiles in one or other social website. The party founded in 1984 in Karachi by Altaf Hussain, sits comfortably in the national government of Islamabad and in the provincial government of Sindh, the second biggest province of Pakistan, as a coalition partner.

"Party leader Altaf Hussain needs not to be a user of any social website as he aspires not to public office," said Syed Kashif Khursheed, a party official in

Lahore, capital of Punjab. Hence, the head of the party who holds the potential to mobilise huge segments of the Sindh population, claims to represent some 98 per cent of Pakistan, but has decided not to be part of any social networking site. Altaf Hussain leads his party from the United Kingdom where he has resided for the last 19 years. Whenever he feels it necessary, he addresses through an overseas phone call, a message to the party's leaders and workers while they are gathered at an open space or inside a big hall. This telephonic contact with people by the nation's leader sitting thousands of miles away from them is the hallmark of MQM.

Pakistani political leaders and their use of social media

Syed Mustafa Kamal, one of the most popular figures in the Muttahida Quami Movement, however, has over 102,000 Facebook fans. The strong presence of Mustafa Kamal on the social website has pushed him to the top of the list of Pakistan's most popular personalities on Internet. Kamal is a former mayor of Karachi, the largest city of Pakistan with a population of 18.5 million. Dr Farooq Sattar is second when measured by recognition of the party's online fame.

The party's official website, www.mqm.org, however, remains the major online forum with requests to update addresses of the registered members and the supporters. The media and website managers of the party are satisfied with what they describe as "very encouraging views and participation in party's events and programmes advertised through website". The party's media manager in Punjab, Kashif Khursheed, quoted visitor figures of 7399 to www.mqm.org, in Punjab only. "We don't need to go door-to-door or to spend thousands of rupees on announcement posters to inform our voters and supporters that the party has arranged a programme at a certain place," said Khursheed. "Putting a few lines on the party's website is enough to convey the message to the people," he elaborated.

A bigwig without any web account

Like other political bigwigs, Asif Ali Zardari does not have an account on any social website. The profile page of the user of a social network site makes available his or her personal information to millions of online community members. According to the moderators of Facebook, the number of users of this popular social website has reached 500 million. Asif Zardari is the co-chairman of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the largest political party of Pakistan. Victory in the indirect presidential polls on 6 September 6 2008, made him President of Pakistan. His election campaign's data mentions no use of any social website. Seemingly, he didn't need any, as he had to seek votes from only 702 members of the electoral college.

Before Zardari's run for election, his party, PPP, had secured the largest possible number of seats in the national assembly needed to form a government with

the help of other parties. The entire political process — from election campaign to cobbling together a coalition government — was completed without using social media.

Writing the tweets to show political vigour

Salman Taseer, PPP governor in Punjab province, stands out prominently among a few of the party's personalities who have a presence on social websites. A veteran politician, Salman has been maintaining a web page on Twitter (@SalmanTaseer). "He writes five to six tweets daily and has a total of 2,613 followers," said Sobia Saleem, the media consultant at the Governor House. Salman Taseer mostly mocks the Punjab administration for its reputed bad governance. Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, a rival party of PPP, runs the Punjab Government with Shahbaz Sharif as its party head.

With a distinctive profile, Salman Taseer enjoys posting tweets, which often catch the attention of producers at the television channels who take them as tickers (short news). The online members follow his web feeds fervently with comments as his tweets are lined with colourful humour. "Basically the governor invites the members of online community and his followers to share their views with him on 'news of the day', and the feed is often positive," said Sobia Saleem. Denying criticism that Twitter was a vehicle for propaganda, she defended the microblogging network as a means of sustained and meaningful engagement with the voters and the general public. She was confident that the tweets written by the governor had potential to reach more people.

Governor Taseer demonstrated his intense interest in social networking a few days ago when he uploaded two videos on YouTube. The uploading apparently was in response to questions he had received on his email. In fact, he had tweeted his identity on Twitter inviting the public to ask questions and offering his help in certain matters. People can visit Salman's YouTube channel at, www.youtube.com/user/salmaantaseerdotcom.

The other identifiable user of Twitter (@SenRehmanMalik), is Rehman Malik, a representative from the Pakistan People's Party. He is a federal minister and heads the Ministry of Interior. His tweets reflect the vigour of his speech and his candid interaction with journalists from all media. He reflects about his professional duty in his latest tweet: "Fellow countrymen/women, law&order is a provincial matter. My duty is to only give policy and provide federal force upon request from province".

It is appropriate to quote two comments found on one of Rehman Malik's tweets. Adeel Sami: "I just thought none of our political icons are any aware to the technology called Internet RM proved wrong!!!" Ashfaq: "I never had any interest in Twitter but R Malik is making me change my mind. Now I have to join Twitter and then I can have a go at R Malik."

Basking in the support of Facebook fans

Pervez Musharraf, a former military ruler of Pakistan, is an avid user of the social media site, Facebook. Living outside of Pakistan for the last two years after he was forced to resign as president, the former military dictator surprised his adversaries with his 36,000 fans on Facebook after only having joined the website for one month. His fan club has now swelled to a membership of over 140,000. Recently, Musharraf posted a video which said: "Welcome to my Facebook page, which I launched about one month back. I am extremely encouraged by the positively enthusiastic response that I received. It is my pleasure to be interacting with all of you. The youths are extremely concerned. I may even say extremely disturbed about what is happening in Pakistan presently, what has happened with Pakistan in the past, how it happened and also what holds for the future of Pakistan."

The retired army general who has ruled Pakistan for nine years is careful with answering all the questions sent to him by his Facebook fans. He often uploads videos, and posts status updates as well. Eighty per cent of his fans are reportedly to be in the 18 to 34 age group. Previously serving simultaneously as the army chief and the president, Musharraf now consults his supporters in Pakistan on plans to launch a political party by the name of 'All Pakistan Muslim League'.

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) is the second largest political entity of Pakistan. Residing in Lahore, the capital of Pakistan's Punjab Province, party leader Nawaz Sharif had been elected twice as the prime minister of Pakistan (from 1 November 1990 to 18 July 1993 and from 17 February 1997 to 12 October 1999). The party's position was strong enough to claim its seat in the government of Punjab after defeating its opponents in the earlier provincial elections in 2008. Over 60 per cent of the Pakistani population reside in Punjab. Presently, the PML-N is engaged as the official opposition party at federal level. The head of the opposition party enjoys popular support and can attract thousands at any place across the country, but there are no social websites that host his profile page — he has yet to sign up with one.

It appears the party is contented with its official website and other Internet forums initiated by supporters and voters. The website (www.pmln.org.pk), which is updated daily, features useful and relevant information. Some of its coverage includes topics ranging from the history of the party to political news released to the press.

'No need for social websites in politics'

The Jamaat-e-Islami (Islamic Party) is arguably the oldest religious party of Pakistan. Founded on 26 August 1941 in Lahore, by Syed Abul Ala Maududi, the party has been campaigning and contesting parliamentary elections for a pure Islamic state, governed by Sharia Law. The Jamaat fervently opposes ideologies such as capitalism, socialism and secularism. Despite being a well-organised and

disciplined political group in Pakistan, Jamaat-e-Islami is far from attracting the majority of voters into its fold, even 70 years after its birth. It shows its presence strongly in protests against actions or policies of the sitting government or by addressing concerns raised by stakeholders, which conflict with government beliefs. However, the party's presence in the assemblies has largely remained weak in every election it has contested.

The party has a strong organisational structure, largely due to its online communication network. Jamaat-e-Islami's official website (www.jamaat.org) opens the way to several other parties' websites. Website visitors can find information about the group and its propaganda-associated material in three languages — English, Urdu and Arabic. However, no leaders of this politico-religious party use social websites and are not likely to in the future. This point of view was made clear by Nadeem Sarwar, the party's spokesman in Lahore. "Yes no one in the party uses social networks," he said, when asked about the use of social websites for access to peoples' personal lives and interaction with the party's supporters and voters.

Activists from Jamaat-e-Islami were in the forefront of political resistance when Pakistan protested against 'sacrilegious contents' posted on Facebook in May 2010. They organised rabid rallies throughout Pakistan asking the government to lodge a protest with the America-based social website. The government has since blocked 450 links. During the protests, Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (Party of Islamic Scholars), another hard line religious party of Pakistan, was outraged and called for a total ban on all Western websites "promoting liberal culture and indecency".

The latest web technologies have energised the parties' cadres. Hampered by financial constraints and having a restricted reach to the people in the past, these parties were unable to disseminate messages to the people. They could hold only small gatherings to interact with voters and the public. They staged unimpressive rallies protesting against the policies and decisions made by the administration, which they considered to be self-centred and against the interest of the population. The mainstream media had refused them coverage, and belittled their importance by treating them as 'pressure groups'. Consequently, these parties failed in moulding public opinion to their favour and in expanding their political base.

Using the Internet for a big gain

With the phenomenal rise of Internet technology, the following groups are able to reach thousands of people without spending too much. Using websites strategically, they hope to increase their support in the future. One of these smaller political parties is the Labour Party Pakistan (LPP). Launched in 1997, the party reported a membership of 7,300 in 2009. The party has no acting president but a general secretary, Nisar Shah.

“Within 24 hours of registering Labour Party Pakistan on the Facebook on 19 January 2010, we received response from over 200 friends,” said Farooq Tariq, the spokesperson of LPP. “We are noticing more and more friends on our LPP Facebook page every day.” added Tariq. Being handled by two moderators — Kashif Aslam and Shahbaz Bajwa — the party Facebook page had 1,200 fans as of 2 August 2010. Tariq aims to have 5,000 friends by the end of 2010.

The LPP has also created a Yahoo email group by the name of Socialist Pakistan News (SPN). With 5,400 members, the SPN is regarded to be the largest political web group in Pakistan. Launched in 2004, the SPN is the country’s fundamental and primary source of information, offering a forum to exchange views and engage in progressive elements such as lively debates and discussions. “Eminent persons like Faharuddin G Ibrahim, Aitzaz Ahsan and Hamid Mir, are members of the group,” said Tariq.

“In the past we had a not-so-costly platform to create awareness among the masses about our party programmes. But today we post five to seven messages on the website and get 50 to 60 responses,” boasted Tariq. Citing donation appeals posted by the party on the webpage, spokesman Tariq said the responses they received in a variety of emerging situations in Pakistan were heartening. The politicians of LPP are harnessing the power of social networking sites in their favour.

How social media can shape and enhance the political climate of Pakistan

Social networking involves a well-managed environment and absolute democracy, while catering to the views and supporting the people that matter most. The approval of the public generally seals the fate of a politician and the term of his reign, and only voters have the power to change the country’s leadership for a promising and productive future.

Pakistan is not such a country and has never been. Although people cast their vote in every election and are called upon for opinions about the person to be their representative, their views have largely not been represented or respected. The locals are of strong belief that three forces — the establishment, the army and the United States of America — decide whether a political party wins or loses. The person who succeeds in securing the seat of prime minister or president may not be the most popular choice among voters.

Other formidable factors exist, which make the democratic process grubby in certain constituencies — most notably are feudalism and poverty. Wealthy landlords in Pakistan enjoy unwavering and permanent voting support from their ‘subjects’, while the rich candidates purchase votes from the poor. These two segments of society have no say in the election of a person to a political post. Feudalism is well-entrenched, while poverty is widespread in Pakistan. So, neither the poor nor ‘subjects’ of landlords, have a place on the pages of social websites.

It's safe enough to say that the number of web users in a country is directly proportional to conditions such as the rate of poverty (affordability), state of education and access to the Internet. The situation in Pakistan is disappointingly bad. According to the Human Development Index (HDI), 60.3 per cent of Pakistan's population live on \$2 a day. And the 17.2 per cent of 180 million Pakistanis below the poverty line elaborates the prevailing situation. Pakistan has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world. In 2004, only 46.6 per cent of adult Pakistanis were literate. Male literacy was 60.6 percent, while females were at 31.5 percent. A low education rate means less use of computers. The more poor people there are, the fewer computers.

"Internet usage in Pakistan is expected to see three digit growth rate in next couple of years, while total Internet base will hit 22 million mark by the year 2013," said the chairman of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA). As of 2009, 18,500,000 (10.6 per cent of Pakistan's population) had access to the Internet. Twenty two million is low in comparison to the over 180 million population. Internet users are unlikely to sign up with more than one social website. Taking part in forum-hosted political discussions and commenting on a political event announced through social media, is a new phenomenon. "In the first place, a good number of our politicians are not computer-literate, and the others who have some know-how are not getting customised to the ever-growing social technologies. Secondly, they are not aware of the potential the social media employs to affect a change in the opinion and views of people," said political observer, Zahir Hussain. The older generation of politicians are the least interested in using new media to address the broader public, he observed. Hussain, like other observers, does not see extensive online campaigning by candidates for the national elections in Pakistan in 2013.

"Very true, the political actors in Pakistan, at present, are not excited about adopting the powerful tools of social media for a direct talk with the grassroots people. But, it does not mean that the political institutions and individual politicians will be doing functional politics in near future without using the platform of social websites," said media consultant, Sobia Saleem. "Politicians in Pakistan have started realising the high potential of social media for the advancement of democracy and for running an effective election campaign," she remarked. Sobia agreed there exist factors other than people's votes that were were still strong enough to determine the status of a politician, but said the trend would change entirely with the improved strength of democracy in Pakistan.

It is very unlikely that the PPP, the most popular and largest political organisation of Pakistan, would be fielding candidates in the next scheduled elections in 2013 who would be addressing their audience on the forum of social websites. Traditional candidates (big landlords, tribal leaders and custodians of shrines) with secured constituencies would be running their election campaigns

using a traditional pattern where the tools and applications of new media have no place. If this left-of-centre party brings young and new faces into the party, they are most likely to be relatives of the 'old guard'.

The same can be said about the PML-N, the second major political group. This right-of-centre party draws its election candidates largely from the same segments of society the PPP does, with the addition of some industrialists. Being considered modern compared to 'tribal chieftains', the industrialists and big traders are enthused about adding social networks to the conventional political platforms, to contact new voters. Based in Punjab, a relatively prosperous province, the PML-N candidates are tempted by the access to the Internet for strengthening the party's stronghold in the national elections.

Ethnicity has always been a strong contending factor in politics. A great majority of all voters and followers of MQM, the third largest political party of Pakistan, are Urdu-speaking. The party's candidates would not need to use social media in campaigning and shaping the views of new voters in their constituencies. MQM politicians are likely to use more new media campaigns during the 2013 elections to communicate with the public, the party's events and programmes and its values and ideologies. But it's still too early to predict the political gains the MQM would reap in the upcoming elections by employing more tools of social media.

The smaller parties in Pakistan can ill-afford to ignore the tremendous potential of social networks for direct access to potential voters and possible supporters in the next elections. In fact, the funds-strapped groups are already utilising low-cost forms of new media more extensively than their well-funded counterparts. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, Labour Party Pakistan, and several other parties must be grateful to the creators of social websites for offering them huge opportunities to reach millions of people in a short time. Pakistan's 2013 national elections will surely see small groups or 'pressure groups' using the current and latest applications of social media that will continue developing in the next three years.

Chapter 9

The Internet has long arrived in Indonesia

Max Lane

Dr Max Lane is author of "Unfinished Nation: Indonesia before and after Suharto" (2008) and "Catastrophe in Indonesia" (2010). He is also translator of the four "Buru Tetralogy" novels of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, including "This Earth of Mankind", as well "Arok of Java" and the "Chinese in Indonesia". He has also translated plays and poems by W.S. Rendra. He is Honorary Fellow at the Asia Institute, University of Melbourne.

The Internet has long arrived in Indonesia, and so has social media. The first commercial Internet Service Provider, RADnet, began operations in May 1995. By 1996, Internet cafés were active, often linked through wasantara.net. By 1996, there were 31,000 subscribers and 110,000 users, and in 2010 it is estimated there are over 30 million users. The biggest single leap was between February 1999 and March 2003, when the peak traffic carried by the Indonesian Internet Exchange increased 300-fold (from 2.05 MBps to 620.595 MBps). It then doubled to 1.2 Gbps by December 2003. In 2010, it is estimated that 12.3 per cent of the total population — or about 27 million people — have use of the Internet. This is a five- fold increase from 2001, when it was estimated the figure was two per cent.

Twenty seven million is a lot of people — more than the total population of Australia. However, 12 per cent is a much lower proportion of the population than in Australia or in most advanced industrial countries. Furthermore, the usage has been concentrated in narrow sectors. In 2001, estimates indicated that 75 per cent of all users were in Jakarta and another 15 per cent in Indonesia's second largest city, Surabaya. These two cities account for around 30 million plus people, or around 12 per cent of the total population. Therefore, only 5 per cent of the remaining 80 per cent plus of the population were using the Internet. It is estimated that 40 per cent of users were accessing from an office and another 40 per cent accessed from Internet kiosks and cafes. The concentration in Jakarta is also reflected in the availability of Internet kiosks, with one per 20,000 people in Jakarta, but only one kiosk per one million people in Sumatra and Sulawesi.

Wireless connectivity has had, and is having, the effect of accelerating the expansion. It is estimated that by 2012 there will be between 70 and 80 million

Internet users. Wireless subscriptions expect to top 100 per cent of the population. Many people will have more than one wireless subscription as large numbers begin to access the Internet from their mobile phones or other mobile devices, such as netbooks, BlackBerry's and tablets. There is also under way, a rapid increase in the use of USB mobile broadband, allowing laptop owners to access the Internet wherever mobile phone coverage is available. The same expansion is reflected in the use of social media in Indonesia, where there are 22 million Facebook members in 2010, representing one in every 23 Facebook users globally.

However, it should still be noted, that even if Internet users reach 80 million by 2015, it will still be less than 30 per cent of the 2015 population. Despite innovations by Internet activists allowing for some village communities to access the Internet via shared, inexpensive parabolas, Internet usage remains dominated by middle and upper class layers of society — but includes the urban lower middle class made up of skilled and white collar workers.

The present: mainstream and parliamentary politics

To date, the rapid expansion of the Internet, including social media, has had no significant impact on mainstream or parliamentary politics in the period since the fall of Suharto. All major political parties and many political figures have websites as well as Facebook and Twitter accounts. However, it is television, which reaches far beyond the 12 per cent of Internet users, that remains the dominant technology of political communication. Television has penetrated almost every household, including lower middle class (i.e. skilled and white collar workers) as well as unskilled workers and village households. Televising of political news dominates and is backed up by the major newspapers, often owned by the same, or related, conglomerates. All of these dominant media also have websites which reinforce the impact of the major media conglomerates.

In the ten years since the fall of President Suharto, no major political development has occurred where the Internet or social media have played an important role. The fall of President Abdurrahman Wahid and the rise of Megawati Sukarnoputri, as well as the 2004 and 2008 elections, were all primarily fought out over television, radio, the newspapers and the roadside — through roadside poster advertising. Most candidates recruited teams of young 'tech-heads' to do websites and blogs for the presidential candidates in 2008. However, they made little impact.

Since 2008, Internet usage has continued to increase but still has not begun to impinge significantly on mainstream politics, except to inject additional scandal material into Indonesia's scandal-ridden political terrain. In 2010, for example, self-recorded footage of pop music star, Nazriel Ariel from the band Peter Pan, having sex with two female celebrities, one of whom was married, circulated widely on the Internet. The footage was obtained after Ariel's laptop

was allegedly stolen. He is still in gaol, arrested under anti-pornography laws. Pornography on the Internet has been a major cyber world concern for the Yudhoyono government, reflecting Yudhoyono's alliance with Indonesia's most conservative and fundamentalist Islamic parliamentary parties, especially the Indonesian Welfare and Justice Party (PKS). Their leader, Tifatul Sembiring, has been appointed by Yudhoyono as Minister for Information, in which role he has oversight of the media.

Elite and the masses in Indonesia: 1990s until 2010

Mainstream parliamentary politics that dominate the current political terrain, are only affected in minor ways by the Internet and social media, despite the massive growth of usage in the last few years. However, the Internet and social media have, and are still playing, an important role in accelerating inter-connectivity in the myriad of political and social movement groups that are mushrooming outside the formal structures of the parliamentary party system.

In order to understand the role played by the Internet and social media in post-Suharto Indonesia, it is necessary to understand the consequences of thirty three years of authoritarian rule on the operations of the parliamentary system and its relationship with society in general. A very significant symbol of this relationship is the fact that the current Indonesian parliament, elected in 2008, represents less than 50 per cent of the population. Around 45 per cent of the population either did not register to vote, or having registered, did not vote or voted informally, probably on purpose. In addition, another 15 per cent of the population voted for parties that did not meet the electoral threshold of 2.5 per cent to win a seat (although some of these won seats in local parliaments). There has been a steady decline from the very high level of participation in the 1999 elections, at all levels — local, provincial and national. There can be little doubt of a steadily increasing alienation of large sections of the population, from the political elite and the formal political structures.

While the credibility of these structures steadily erodes, they still monopolize the formal political system as well as access to the media. The erosion has not yet completely undermined the foundation structures of the system. However, there is a steady increase in organizing activity outside of these formal structures. It is tempting to refer to this sector as 'civil society', but it is less defined by any general relationship between 'society' and the 'state' and more defined by the specifics of the long history of authoritarian rule in Indonesia. The existing political parties are all top-down, patron-client machines, borne out of the fragmenting of the political and business elite of the New Order, after the fall of Suharto. As the foundation of the new post-Suharto structures, they were inherently alienated from the mass of the population, which the New Order defined as the 'floating mass', i.e. a mass of non-active citizens. Political activity was a punishable offence.

Suharto's legacy, therefore, was a political system implemented by an elite that was alienated from the mass of the population on the one hand, and a population at large which was not involved in any meaningful way in ongoing (permanent or semi-permanent) political organisations. Independent and politically active trade unions, peasant unions, women's organisations and similar mass organisations, were non-existent. Government controlled organisations existed and were run top-down with little more than paper memberships. This lack of organisation also meant that the mass of the population was politically disconnected from each other.

During the 1990s, a new political opposition developed and grew sufficiently effective to be able to force Suharto to resign under conditions which also legitimized and opened up democratic space and an impetus towards liberalizing reform ("reformasi") — both of which reversed the previous period's insistence on inactivity. This new opposition emerged around 1991 and peaked in influence in May 1998, while retaining significant momentum until November 1998, after which its levels of mobilisation declined rapidly. During the 1991-1998 period, and despite huge mobilisations in 1996 and 1997, the opposition never developed any significant mass, although two or three small, consolidated, activist organisations developed — the strongest of which was the Peoples' Democratic Party (PRD). The period was too short, especially with persistent heavy repression, including gaolings, kidnapping and murders, for any new forms of permanent or consolidated, organisational mass connectivity to develop. Almost all mass mobilization for protests and demonstrations was organized by temporary action committees.

From pagers to email — the 1990s

In the 1990s, with mobilizing occurring through a myriad of small temporary action committees, communication technology played an important role in increasing connectivity. In 1990, activists, usually university students but occasionally factory workers, would arrive at a meeting in central Jakarta hopping off a dilapidated Metro Mini bus or on the back of a worn-out motor bike. Attached to their belt would be a piece of technology which was usually associated with hospital doctors or onsite engineers — the pager. Relatively speaking, the pager was expensive in Indonesia in 1990 but it was a crucial instrument in overcoming the disconnectivity that the absence of organisation structures, or infrastructure (such as offices and phones), had created. Activists would receive messages of meeting places or news of events, or be asked to find a phone to telephone somebody.

The widespread use of pagers by protest movement activists was a harbinger of things to come, although it would take the establishment of RADnet in 1995 for the next major advance to take place. Between 1990 and 1995, even computers were minimally used by protest movements. Costs were still high for computers,

laser printers and software — although piracy eventually resolved the price issue of software for many activists. The first important protest movement publication was *Progres*, put together by individual activists also active in the group INFIGHT (Indonesian Front for the Defence of Human Rights). Materials were collected and typed on to floppy discs using early word-processing programmes, and then mailed to supporters outside Indonesia, who laid them out using more advanced software. Documents were then printed out and the pages mailed back to Indonesia to be printed.

The next revolution was e-mail, which emerged as a new tool after RADnet was established in 1995, and then expanded as new Internet Service Providers (ISPs) set up. E-mail played the same role as the pager, but in a qualitatively more superior manner, allowing the transmission of statements and articles, as well as simple communications between activists. Increased connectivity amongst the broad opposition was its main political role. During the dictatorship, the formal political structures allowed even narrower participation than in contemporary Indonesia. E-mail assisted in keeping connection between the increasing numbers of people involved in political activity, outside the narrow, regime-controlled formal structures. E-mail connection was important given that working outside the structures meant there was neither permanent mass organisation, or the ability to legally publish and distribute political materials. *Progres* magazine, mentioned earlier, for example, was distributed in a clandestine manner and was eventually banned.

The best evidence of the extent of reliance on e-mail for connectivity is the *apakabar* e-mail list, an open list initiated by United States Internet activist, John McDougal. At its height, it attracted 250,000 users. The overwhelming majority of these were people involved in supporting or following the oppositional political activity outside the repressive formal structures. The whole of the *apakabar* archives is publicly available and now housed by Ohio State University in the United States. There are hundreds of thousands of messages in the archive. It may not be an exaggeration to say that it would be possible to write a history of the Indonesian opposition to Suharto, by using that archive as the sole source. It includes political statements and analysis as well as detailed minute-by-minute chronologies of protest actions, strikes and confrontations with the security apparatus. Everything (almost) is there.

E-mail was not the only form of connectivity established among the myriad of temporary action committees and the masses they were trying to mobilize. Short printed leaflets also played a major role, especially in taking key, basic messages to the massive section of the community that was beyond the reach of the Internet. During the 1995 to 1998 period, only a tiny percentage of the population was connected to the Internet. The point was, however, that this connectivity enhanced the effectiveness of activity organizers, who then had to

find other ways to reach out beyond themselves. Simple leaflets were one way. Street protest actions and factory strikes, large enough to force the mainstream media to cover them and their demands and slogans, was the primary way. The e-mail connectivity meant that such actions and activity could be coordinated nationally, magnifying the impact.

2010

In 2010, Internet users comprise 12 per cent of the Indonesian population. Most people do not use the Internet for political activity, but for social networking, business and accessing pornography. Exclusion from formal political structures is no longer the result of repression but the result of two phenomena. Firstly, an ongoing ten year process by the elite to alienate more and more of the population from these processes as it became clear that the system was geared only to benefit the elite themselves. Secondly, has been the construction of a system where effective participation requires large amounts of money.

E-mail, of course, remains a significant technique of connectivity, and e-mail contact now is the norm for all office-based communications in all sectors. Webmail, which enables people to send e-mail messages without having an e-mail account, by accessing via other accounts (e.g. in an Internet café), has also increased usage, especially among those who have no office base, such as students. E-mail is now taken for granted as the primary form of day to day communication. However, it is websites and blogs, and increasingly the social network media, especially Facebook, that are now helping the re-organisation of political forces outside the formal structures of mainstream politics. Mainstream political organisations also use websites and blogs, but they are insignificant supplementary tools for these organisations, compared to television, newspapers and radio. For the embryonic alternative sphere of political activism, they are a crucial tool for achieving a higher level of connectivity.

E-mail lists abounded during the first several years after the fall of Suharto, as different constituent segments of the 1990s anti-dictatorship movement carried on discussions about what to do next. Many of these continue today but with less potency, reflecting either the co-option of people from those sectors into the formal structures, or demoralization taking the form of a retreat to personal life and economic survival. Over the last three to five years, as a new generation of activism has begun, it has been blogs, websites and Facebook that appear to be playing the bigger role.

All of the new alternative political groups have websites, although some are more developed and sophisticated than others. The four embryonic, radically-oriented, alternative political groups that have some national spread are, the Committee for the Politics of the Poor — Peoples Democratic Party (KPRM-PRD), The Indonesian Struggle Centre (PPI), the Working People's Association (PRP)

and the People's Struggle Front (FPR). All of these groups have websites (see appendix for a list). Most have affiliated sectoral organisations (students, women, workers) that also maintain their own blogs. These blogs carry political statements, analysis and reports of actions, and also reproduce reports from the mainstream media that are relevant to the organisation's activity. Similar blogs can be found for radical think-tank groups and local groups — however, many of these only last a short while. Even the main websites of these four groups, all of which have survived now for more than five years, sometimes are not maintained on an ongoing basis. This partly reflects the lack of financial resources of such activist groups and their reliance on volunteers, but partly also, because these blogs still speak to a relatively small and enclosed audience. They work more as a means of intensifying connectivity within a group, than as a media that can reach out to a broader readership. This, in turn, is a reflection of both the fact that political activists would still be a tiny proportion among the 12 per cent of the population that use the Internet, and that there is still 88 per cent of the population who do not regularly access the Internet.

Perhaps, for now, it is not the blogs and websites of the steadily growing radical, alternative groups outside the formal political structures that tell us something about likely political usage of the Internet, but rather activity on Facebook. Probably most symbolic of the potential was the one million-strong Facebook petition that developed in defence of the Anti-Corruption Commission (KPK), when it came under attack from the police during 2008 and 2009. This huge petition, however, did not develop into any kind of on-the-ground movement and did not make the transition from cyber world to the street-world, although some groups did try this.

All the same, the fact that the petition could collect so many signatures indicates that among the 22 million Indonesian Facebook followers, at least a million could be cyber mobilized on an anti-corruption issue. Indeed, all political, intellectual and cultural groups now operate Facebook accounts. All of the four embryonic radical groups operate accounts, as do many of their individual members. Almost all of the smaller groups outside the formal structures operate accounts. Individual political operators (of which there are many) among the myriad of committees and ad-hoc groups, as well as figures inside the formal political structures (but trying to appeal to those outside), are also active on Facebook.

New, alternative book publishers, magazines and cultural groups, advertise their books, magazines and activities via Facebook. It is possible to monitor much of Jakarta's political, intellectual and cultural activity, especially that outside and alienated from the formal structures, on Facebook. Networks also extend very quickly. I personally have more than 2,300 Facebook friends — 90 per cent of whom are Indonesian. This number has accumulated without me seeking or asking anybody to be my 'Facebook friend' but as a result of me adding people as friends

who contact me to request this. I am not an active 'fesbucker', only irregularly update my status and rarely tag articles or photos. I did initiate a 'cause', i.e. a campaign. This campaign was to demand that Indonesian literature be introduced as a compulsory, separate subject throughout Indonesian state high schools. At the moment, there is no serious teaching of Indonesian literature in schools at all. Within a few weeks, the number of Facebook users who had subscribed to this 'cause' was over 3,000. I have not attempted to build this cause further and the numbers now only increase slowly. True Facebook activists can achieve much bigger networks more quickly. These networks are then used to publicise political and cultural events, reaching a large, alternative political network that would otherwise be unreachable given the absence of alternative newspapers or large mass organisations that have internal channels of communication.

Facebook has also become a significant platform for promoting new magazine blogs or websites. In the progressive, civil society milieu, two magazine style blogs stand out. These are *Indoprogress* (<http://indoprogress.blogspot.com>) and *Historia* (www.majalah-historia.com). *Indoprogress* is edited by New York based, Indonesian dissident intellectual, Coen Husein Pontoh. Pontoh had been active in the Peoples Democratic Party (PRD) in 1996 and was imprisoned for three years from 1996. The web magazine publishes regular comment pieces on Indonesian politics and economics, as well as articles on political and economic theory. Pontoh has been able to recruit activist writers both from the embryonic radical sector and from young Indonesian academics at home or abroad. There have been attempts to establish similar hard copy magazines. However, none have been able to sustain themselves as long as *Indoprogress*, which is still going strong. *Indoprogress* does not need the same financial resources as a magazine and, perhaps more significantly, the Internet enables it to overcome the serious distribution problems of publications in Indonesia. Non-government organisations (NGOs) and activist offices are infamous for having stocks of journals they have printed, pile up undistributed in their offices. They have no mass membership through which distribution could be organized, or the financial resources to do the marketing and promotion needed to succeed in commercial distribution. Each time an article is published on *Indoprogress*, it is also advertised via Facebook. Facebook and blogs or websites become mutually supportive.

A similar story applies to *Historia*. *Historia* is edited by Bonnie Triyana, a young historian graduate from Diponegoro University. He has been at the forefront of campaigning against the falsification of history, implemented by the Suharto government during its 33 years of power. Around 2008, he conceived the idea of a popular historical magazine, such as *History Today*, in the United Kingdom, or *L'Histoire* in France. Since the dictatorship, there has been a steady surge of interest in history. More than 3,000 new history books have been published. Historical documentaries on television are popular. Triyana wanted to both

promote this general interest in history (distorted and dirtied during the Suharto period) and put the spotlight on the many parts of Indonesian history that have been covered over or hidden. He took business plans to a number of investors who showed interest. However, in the end, history was still too alien a subject for business to understand as a saleable commodity. As a result, *Historia* was launched on the web, where start-up resources needed are much less.

Now attracting thousands of readers, *Historia* published articles on aspects of Indonesian history rarely accessible to the public (such as different interpretations of what happened during 1945-49) as well as commentaries that link historical issues with contemporary politics. It also published many popular articles on social and cultural history, from Indonesia and other parts of the world. *Historia* also started history schools to provide exposure for journalists, teachers and activists, to new, dissident versions of history.

Indoproggress and *Historia* are two of the most interesting magazine sites that have evolved as a part of the Internet based processes of developing connectivity among embryonic, radical political sectors, outside formal political structures. The websites of the four national radical groups mentioned earlier, supplement this, as do trade union sites such as Allianssi Buruh Meggugat (<http://buruhmenggugat.or.id>), or the websites of women's rights organisations and publications, such as *Jurnal Perempuan*, which has sustained itself over a long period. However, there are still many more such sites that present specific perspectives on current issues.

Connectivity of the vanguard and going beyond the 12 per cent

The focus of this essay has been the use of the Internet within a small activist community because, despite its narrow outreach through the Internet, it has facilitated a degree of connectivity which is enhancing the activist sector's effectiveness. For this sector, the blog world and social media is crucial, whereas for the political elite, with access to television and other media (in fact, owning the television and newspapers and all websites associated with them), these forms of connectivity are of minor importance.

While blogs and social media have been an enormous boon to the embryonic, alternative political forces outside the formal structures, they do not provide a solution for the problem of reaching out to the 88 per cent of people who do not have access to the Internet. This is not a problem that is likely to be answered in the near future, simply by an expansion of access to the Internet. Even the most optimistic projections do not see Internet usage going beyond 20 per cent of Indonesia's (growing) population within the next two decades. For the time being, television will dominate over the mass audience. The role of the Internet and social media in the next decade is likely to echo that of the pager and e-mail in the 1990s. It will be crucial as a mechanism for increasing connectivity among

the under-resourced dissident political sectors. It remains probable that as in the 1990s, they will need to develop tactics that will force the mainstream media, owned and dominated by the political and business elite, to cover their activities, ideas and demands. While the Internet is no doubt making money for the elites, it is also likely to be a key component of the armory that will eventually see them challenged.

Chapter 10

Microblogs in China – Micro-changing a society

Zhai Zheng

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The year 2010 has witnessed a phenomenal growth of microblogging in China. According to a survey conducted by the Data Center for the Chinese Internet (DCCI) in July, the majority (60 per cent) of Chinese microbloggers started microblogging less than half a year ago, while only 17.8 per cent of them have more than a year's experience. Thirty nine per cent of microbloggers publish entries via the mobile phone and 61 per cent via the computer, and 41.7 per cent of microbloggers write new entries every day. DCCI further predicts that the number of active user accounts will hit 65 million by the end of 2010, and 100 million by 2011.

Affectionately known as scarf, or 'weibo' (the Chinese transliteration of 'microblogging'), the Twitter-like platform for mass expression, which enables users to send 140-character messages and/or follow the postings of other users via provider websites or mobile phones, has quickly caught on in China, especially among the younger generations. After polling 3,282 people (91.6 per cent aged below 40) nationwide in August 2010, the Social Survey Center of China Youth Daily found that 92.4 per cent have tried microblogging at least once and 45.3 per cent microblog frequently. The survey also shows that nearly all people (94.3 per cent) say their lives have been changed as a result of microblogging.

What do people write about? Apart from engaging in lively discussions on entertainment, lifestyle, the job market or flogging a company's products, microbloggers also spend a lot of time jotting down their personal thoughts and feelings, looking for 'think-alikes', and discussing topics of common interest. The service, therefore, is able to connect different news sources and social activists in real-time. Although over half (55.6 per cent) of microbloggers follow their friends, they also closely follow experts (46 per cent) and public figures (45.7 per cent).

Short history of microblogging in China

Since Twitter debuted in 2006, the population of Chinese microbloggers has been steadily growing. The growth has been accelerated by the launch of home-grown Twitter-style services, of which Fanfou is the most famous.

Founded in May 2007, Fanfou's registered users had reached almost one million, or a quarter of Twitter's worldwide users, by the end of June 2009. A group of liberal intellectuals used it as a platform to disseminate news and information, making it a very popular site. During the 5 July 2009 riots, in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, its function as a conduit to disseminate news and information was suddenly amplified. Soon afterwards, the service was shut down because the authorities thought it had helped 'spread misinformation' and 'stoked violence' in the ethnic unrest. The same fate befell other microblogging services in China, including Digu and Jiwei. Twitter had been blocked a month earlier.

Ironically, the influence and impact of microblogging was just beginning to be recognized and flaunted by the traditional media in the summer of 2009. For instance, at the end of June, the Beijing News did a feature on Twitter; the Southern Weekly ran a report entitled "Welcome to the Twitter Era"; and the 21st Century Business Herald probed into the potential profit models of microblogging.

Given China's relatively strict Internet regulations, it did not come as a big surprise when both Twitter and most of its early Chinese imitator services became inaccessible. Since the closure of these sites, other services, especially those provided by the four major web portals in China, soon sprung up and filled the void. These portal-run services quickly changed the nature of microblogging from a chic toy of the social or techno-elite, to something like a household item, thanks in large to their huge existing user-base and cross-promotion within their diverse offerings. By the end of July 2010, the penetration rate of portal-run microblogging services was 92.3 per cent, but that of standalone microblogging websites was a mere 32.7 per cent, DCCI statistics show.

At present, the biggest microblogging service in China is Sina Weibo, home to 60.9 per cent of microbloggers in the first half of 2010. In order to survive and prosper in China, Sina Weibo has modified some of the tweeter functions, such as listing comments under the entry like a traditional blog and supporting embedded picture and video attachments. More importantly, it exercises heavy self-censorship.

At a new media symposium held on 13 June 2010, Chen Tong, chief editor of Sina.com, acknowledged that, "monitoring the content of microblogs is indeed nerve-racking" as microblog entries travel fast. He detailed Sina's monitoring system as follows: Sina's two teams — the content supervision team and the editorial content team — monitor microblog postings on a 24/7 basis. They exchange their findings through e-mails every hour and have one meeting every day. The punitive measures for disseminators of inappropriate messages range

Top ten Chinese microblogging services in 2010

Service	Date of release	Remarks
Zuosha	2007	One of the earliest Chinese microblogging services, Zuosha is now facing major financial troubles. In late July 2010, the CEO of Zuosha announced his intention to sell the company.
Digu	Launched in February 2009; suspended between July 22 to Oct. 26, 2009; officially released as a LBSNS on July 1, 2010	Repositioned as an LBSNS (Location-Based Social Networking Service), it had over 1 million mobile phone users as of August 2010.
Tongxue	Microblogging service launched in May 2009	Tongxue is a campus social networking site founded in May 2006.
9911 Weibo	My 2009	Founded in 1998, Sina is one of the top four web portals and commands the largest market share of microblogging in China.
Follow5	June 2009	
Sina Weibo	August 2009 (beta version)	
Sohu Weibo	Launched on Dec. 14, 2009; open beta test since April 11, 2010	Founded in 1998, Sohu is one of the top four web portals in China.
Baidu i Post Bar	Launched in November 2009	Founded in 2000, Baidu is the leading home-grown search engine in China. It also offers many community services, including an online collaboratively-built encyclopedia, and Baidu Post Bar, a query-based searchable community to exchange views and share knowledge and experiences. The updated Baidu Post Bar offers the "i Post Bar" feature, a microblogging service.
NetEase Weibo	Closed beta test since Jan., 2010	Founded in 1997, NetEase is one of the top four web portals in China.
Itencent Weibo	Small-scale open beta test since April 1, 2010	Founded in 1998, Tencent's diverse services include social networking applications and instant messaging service. It is also one of the top four web portals in China. As early as 2007, Tencent launched Taotao, a microblogging service. Due to operation problems, it terminated the service on Jan. 26, 2010.

Source: Based on the information set forth in the "White Paper on China's Microblogging Market: Year 1", 2010

from private notice, public warning or deleting the entries in question — all the way to revoking user IDs and putting them on a blacklist. Besides, Sina also encourages other users to report inappropriate messages. In an interview with the China Daily, Hu Yong, an expert on new media from the School of Journalism and Communication at Peking University, observed, "The suspension of Fanfou makes one thing clear — a 100 percent Twitter clone won't survive in China. Striking a balance between the country's Internet regulations and users' increasing demand for speedy real time information is like 'tightrope walking'", he added.

Indeed, operating a microblogging service in China is a feat that calls for skill, endurance and political sensitivity. On 9 July 2010, roughly one year after the shutdown of Fanfou, Sohu Weibo suddenly went offline "for maintenance" and was not restored until 12 July. The NetEase Weibo began its "maintenance" on 13 July. Sina Weibo, which had been operating for more than a year by then, suddenly announced itself as a "beta version" on 12 July. And that was not all. Aside from Tencent and NetEase, which had been advertised as "beta versions" all along, the microblogging services at Sohu, Phoenix Online and even the party-

backed People's Daily Online Weibo, all put up this "beta version" label. As a result of this switch, some services have done away with their search functions, and others have placed restrictions on links to content outside the site. As is known, beta version implies that the system is still unstable and might need maintenance from time to time.

A 29 July report in the *Century Weekly* quoted an unnamed insider close to the Sina management, as saying those measures were the result of pressure from regulators. As early as the summer of 2009, some Internet regulators proposed that, as with websites, "microblogging services must also be approved before they are allowed to operate in China's market". Therefore, before the promulgation of such a regulation, all microblogging services must be run in test mode. The same insider also acknowledged that in the early days of Sina Weibo, in order to make sure the new service was not killed at the outset, Sina practiced the highest level of self-censorship by revoking user IDs after spotting any derisive or disrespectful comments about the government. However, he said that now, the level of self-censorship has been lowered to a large degree, with deleted entries only accounting for a negligible proportion.

The latest development is that eight Beijing-based microblogging service providers, including Sina, Sohu and NetEase, have appointed 'self-discipline commissioners'. Their decision was announced at an Internet oversight meeting held in Beijing on 27 August 2010. The job of the commissioners is to monitor and censor anything that could "threaten China's security and social stability". They will target content linked to illegal activities, pornography and violence, as well as slander and libel. Although hired by the website, each commissioner will be responsible for its content and will be operationally independent.

In the face of the new round of intensified government control over China's microblogsphere, Charles Zhang, one of China's Internet pioneers and founder of Sohu.com, published the following entry through Sohu Weibo on 16 July 2010. "The seemingly sudden popularity of microblogging in China has been no easy feat. It is the culmination of the development of Internet applications over the past decade. Thanks to the decade-long evolution and popularity of such PC-based Internet applications, as well as the adoption of the mobile phone as the preferred means of communication, microblogging, a brand new interactive Internet application, was created. While individually-centered, it also enables group relationships. Besides, it approaches real-time and can be used at any time and place. This is a great product brought about by technological progress and changes in user behavior. It was not easy. Won't everyone please treasure it?" While neatly summarizing the defining characteristics of microblogging, Zhang's final words carry significant meaning and expectations.

Power of microblogging in China

Although often used as a channel for uttering insignificant comments in mundane life, microblogging's real power lies in its ability to quickly knit together the countless Chinese blogs, forums and other websites that are the dominant outlet for public expression, thus initiating a piecemeal revolution. Notwithstanding the strict government control, microblogging has achieved impressive scores in breaking through information blockades, social resistance, citizen journalism, scandal exposure, cleaning up of rumours, assisting the needy, disaster relief, epidemic alert, and charity drives.

For instance, after the deadly earthquake that shook Yushu in northwestern China's Qinghai province in April 2010, tens of thousands of microblog entries played an important role in exchanging information, relaying requests for help, and describing on-site situations. In August, when a huge mudslide swamped a remote town in Gansu Province, it was a 19-year-old college student who filed the very first 'field report' through microblogging. Before the arrival of professional journalists, he virtually acted as a one-man news agency, feeding real-time news stories to tens of thousands of followers. It was also a microblogger who found out that the former president of Microsoft China had faked his PhD — a revelation that drew the attention of netizens and the traditional media alike, to the problems of diploma mills and the credibility of public figures, including government officials.

While some microblogged events are endorsed by the media and the government, others are not. When the Chinese media played down Premier Wen Jiabao's remarks calling for political reform and freedom of speech in an October interview with CNN, sophisticated Chinese netizens shared his remarks enthusiastically through microblogs. This new avenue of communication was also one of the few places where Chinese can talk relatively freely about the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner, a Chinese dissident. As Michael Anti, an outspoken Chinese journalist and political blogger, put it, "microblogging, a great revolution in communication, has totally changed news operations and ways of information gathering". The following two recent cases further elaborate the point.

Qiu Ziming Case

From 5 June to 26 July 2010, Qiu Ziming, a business reporter, published four reports in the *Economic Observer*, a well-regarded business weekly in China, disclosing the alleged insider trading of the Suichang-based, Kan Specialties Material Corporation, as well as how its chief had embezzled state-owned assets during its transformation from a state-owned company to a publicly listed one. The company denied the charges and accused Qiu of libel, initiating a police action. Qiu soon found himself on a "nationwide police most-wanted database".

The news was first broken by a microblogger named Mao Anlin through Sina Weibo at 22:12 on 27 July. The entry reads, "Journalist put on the nationwide



most-wanted list for reporting! It is said that Qiu Ziming, a reporter with the *Economic Observer*, has been deemed as a fugitive by the Public Security Bureau of Suichang County on grounds of 'allegedly damaging a company's reputation' because of his coverage of the connected transactions of Kan Corporation (002012), a listed company based in Suichang County, Lishui, Zhejiang Province. An arrest warrant has been issued nationwide.

A search of the internal database of the Ministry of Public Security confirms that a 'Qiu Ziming' is wanted by the police. Further confirmation will follow soon." Within five minutes, this entry drew the comments of over 100 people, and was eventually retweeted 2,367 times. Published at 0:06 on 28 July, Mao Anlin's second microblog entry confirming the news, was soon forwarded 1,054 times. In the following days, microblogging became one of the major sources of information on the Qiu Ziming incident, with hundreds of thousands of microblog entries discussing the matter.

Qiu, while dodging the police, continued to defend his innocence and demand justice by writing his own microblog entries through his Sina Weibo account. "What I reported is the truth," Qiu said in an entry on 28 July. He said he was aware of the potential risks of being tracked down by the police from the Internet Protocol (IP) address of the computer he used, but said that he was not afraid. "This is not over. I will get an apology from the Suichang police," he added. His Weibo account quickly gained over 8,000 followers and garnered broad support on the Internet.

His case also generated immediate media coverage. On the evening of 27 July, a reporter with the *Southern Metropolis News* learned the story and started to check its accuracy. The newspaper even extended the deadline time for one and a half hours. On the next day, the story entitled, "Reporter with *Economic Observer* Put on Internet Wanted List for Covering Corporate Wrongdoings", was published and quickly posted online. All major web portals and China Central Television (CCTV), the state-owned broadcaster, picked up the story.

The *Economic Observer* itself published a statement at 14:30 on 28 July on its website, defending Qiu's innocence and saying it believed Qiu had "abided by the principles of objective and fair reporting". The statement also condemned

the use of public power to suppress public opinion and threaten the personal safety of journalism practitioners. It also said that local public security organs should prudently and legally exercise their power in order to protect the rights of civilians.

On the morning of 29 July, entries circulating on Sina Weibo said the local police bureau would soon scrap the arrest warrant. The news was soon confirmed — at 10:30, the *Economic Observer* was informed by the police bureau that Qiu was no longer on the wanted list. At 20:30 on 30 July, the chief of the Information Department of Suichang County and the deputy chief of the Suichang Public Security Bureau paid a visit to the headquarters of the newspaper in Beijing and apologized to Qiu Ziming.

This showdown between a reporter, who was backed by numerous microbloggers and netizens as well as the traditional media, and the local police, ended on a positive note. The incident shows that the Chinese media are becoming more aggressive in exposing corporate and official malfeasance. More importantly, it demonstrates the immense appetite the Chinese people have for participation in news events and the growing power of populist sentiment.

If the eventual success of Qiu could partly be contributed to his job as a reporter and his active use of microblogging as a weapon, the next case will shed some light on how microblogging, and the Internet in general, could help those who are left behind in the digital landscape.

Li Mengmeng case

Li Mengmeng, a 21 year-old high school student, had a roller-coaster experience while applying for college in the summer of 2010. Coming from a poor rural family in Kaifeng County in central China's Henan province, Li studied very hard at school as she had been cherishing a college dream for years. In the course of saving money to send her to university, her father broke his legs from overworking and her younger brother and sister both dropped out of school to work in the city.

In early June, Li took the national college entrance exams and scored 565, a score that could help her get into a good university. On 30 June, she went to the Internet café of the village where she lives and attempted to file an online application for college admission. Due to her inadequate computer skills, however, the application was not submitted properly, and her teacher advised her to go to the admissions office of Kaifeng County the following day. She didn't visit the office until 7 July, when the deadline for online

Li Mengmeng holding her college offer letter



Source: t.sina.cn/liangchia

applications had expired by two days. Nonetheless, she filled in a written form and asked the computer operator to help her complete the application process. When classmates who had underperformed her in the exams gradually received their offers, Li became more and more anxious.

On 3 August, she went to the admissions office and found that her application had not been registered online. In the following days, Li's father inquired about the case a dozen times. Finally, the family found out that the computer operator forgot to upload her data and locked the hard copy of Li's application in a drawer, causing her to miss the deadline to get into any university. Li's father, accompanied by representatives of her high school and the admissions office of Kaifeng County, visited the Public Complaints Office of the Henan Provincial Admissions Office. A clerk there told Li to go back home, write a formal inquiry, get an official seal from the local government, and then resubmit it at the provincial level. After the paperwork was duly completed, the inquiry met with a dismissal, on the grounds that almost nothing could be done because colleges have already recruited their students, and government intervention would undermine fairness for other students.

Dismayed, the poor girl asked her sister-in-law to post her plight online at the Baidu Post Bar on 12 August. Knowing there are numerous calls for help of all kinds online, none of the Li family entertained any serious hope — they didn't even bother to read the comments to their original post. By sheer accident, a reporter with a Chengdu-based newspaper happened to read the post while looking for news tips, on the night of 14 August. After travelling over 1,300 kilometres, the reporter arrived at Kaifeng County on August 16 and began his investigation. On 18 August, the story on Li Mengmeng went to press and the reporter called all his reporter friends, and his own relatives and friends, asking them to relay the story online and send out microblog entries.

On 19 August, another helper emerged. Liang Shuxin, a popular microblogger and commercial operations director of the Tianya forum, posted the news from a hotel room at 22:47, through his Sina Weibo account with the key words, "I wanna go to college". To Liang's surprise, within just two days, it was retweeted 93,396 times and received 22,948 comments. In the meantime, Li Mengmeng's story set off a ripple effect both on and offline, drawing the attention of leading media organizations at the national level, including the Xinhua News Agency and CCTV. Recognizing the power of microblogging, Liang wrote a microblog entry at 11:34 on 20 August, calling for China's Minister of Education to watch the development of the story. At 14:00, Liang's new entry read, "Microblog entry (on Li Mengmeng) retweeted for 70,000 times. Please keep retweeting it until Li Mengmeng gets an offer." Numerous chief editors, editors, reporters, and bloggers were mobilized as these microblog entries were retweeted. Interview requests and complaint calls bombarded the Henan Provincial Admissions Office, Henan Education Department, Kaifeng Information Office, and Kaifeng Admissions Office.

As a result of the intensive public pressure and media coverage, on 20 August, the Henan Provincial Admissions Office issued an open letter, saying that the computer operator who left Li Mengmeng's file in the drawer had been suspended from duty. On that same night, Li was informed by the Provincial Admissions Office that she had been accepted by the Henan University of Economics and Law. On 30 August, she received the official admission letter from the university, along with a RMB 6,000 grant offered by a local charity fund.

"I didn't expect the problem could be fixed so quickly," Li Mengmeng said in an interview. To be fair and just, Li herself is partly to blame — she failed to submit her application online and missed the deadline of submission, while the computer operator had no obligation to do that for her. The quick and satisfactory solution, to some extent, is a bigger surprise than the occurrence of the incident itself.

Micro-changing a society

In both the above cases, the role microbloggers have played in the swift turnaround of the situation, both of which involved government and traditional media, is evident. Microblogging has already grown into a unique social, political and communication platform, playing an increasingly important role in promoting mass participation in public affairs, redefining traditional means of communication and traditional media itself, and even changing the way of governing. In short, a kind of microblog politics has taken initial shape in China.

Microblogging has given rise to a whole new discourse that has empowered ordinary people. In the pre-microblogging days, online discussion forums and blogs served as the major channels for information exchange. However, these tools have some innate shortcomings. On the one hand, there are so many forums and blogs that it takes a relatively long time for anyone posting, to be noticed by a large number of netizens. On the other hand, with portal sites and the like acting as gatekeepers, the life or death of a posting relies almost entirely on the editors from the websites. Microblogging, by contrast, has overcome these obstacles. Thanks to the intertwined follower groups, the speed of information transmission is phenomenal. What is more, the retweet count of a message visually demonstrates how 'hot' it is, and as a result, the agenda-setting power is no longer in the exclusive hands of the traditional gatekeepers.

There is no denying that China's old and new media is still subject to strict censorship, and the free flow of information through microblogging is far from assured. Nevertheless, the availability of microblogging services has greatly empowered average netizens. Further, to avoid their entries from being automatically filtered out, savvy Chinese netizens have come up with many innovative ways such as: writing backwards, using homonyms, metaphors and analogies, omitting certain words, restructuring a phrase or breaking a phrase down into several parts, and, more directly, using proxy servers to access Twitter.

Seemingly disjointed and fragmented, short microblog entries have significantly lowered the 'barrier to entry', enabling average people and elites alike to speak out without, for example, having to craft a long piece of writing. The result is that, in the words of Lu Jianguo, an independent IT commentator, "Netizens have changed from silent bystanders to active speakers because they found out it is so easy to speak [through microblogging]". Therefore, the importance of microblogging far outweighs that of blogging or social networking sites in that it has greater capacity for the expression of opinions, for political communication, and for social mobilization.

Through microblogging, each and every individual can simultaneously act as a publisher, sharer and participant, arousing public attention in a short period of time. When people make a concerted effort to participate constructively with the new tool, microblogging can be used as a force for good. And indeed, the active and vibrant communication online now stands in stark contrast to the strict and deadening controls offline.

Microblogging has also challenged the authority and role of traditional media, and traditional means of communication. "China for the first time has a public sphere to discuss everything affecting Chinese citizens," explained Hu Yong, the scholar from Peking University. "Under traditional media, only elite people had a voice, but the Internet changed that." He added, "We now have a transnational media. It is the whole society talking, so people from various regions of China can discuss now when something happens in a remote village — and the news spreads everywhere." As China's information landscape is still closely controlled, which inevitably leads to a loss of credibility, microblogging has undermined the power of traditional media to publish news and established itself as an important, and in some cases, more trustworthy channel for news and information.

In response, China's traditional media are trying to leverage the power of microblogging. More and more reporters are beginning to seek news tips in the microblogsphere. Zhang Silai, a 33-year-old sports reporter who works for NetEase, explains why she now relies heavily on microblogs. "On a microblog I can find news stories which are impossible to find in the mainstream media," she said. "Without the censorship of traditional media and their conflicts of interest, more people are able to speak the truth on microblogs." In another instance, less than one hour after an explosion accident in Nanjing on 28 July 2010, CCTV ran a breaking story and used images from a microblog entry.

Traditional media organizations in China have also started microblogging themselves. In August 2010, 466 media organizations had Sina Weibo accounts, and in early November, the number climbed to 939 (including 241 newspapers, 451 magazines, 72 TV stations and 175 radio stations). Take the Guangzhou-based, *New Weekly*, the most popular microblog run by a traditional media organization, as an example. Its 757,840 followers far outnumber that of its

offline subscribers. Feng Xincheng, executive editor-in-chief of the magazine, admitted that the microblog hype has already boosted its hard copy sales. Besides, many magazines conduct reader surveys through microblogging and publish the findings in their hard copy editions. Apart from consolidating existing strengths, microblogging has also been conveniently used by regional or local media outlets to generate a greater nationwide.

While the Chinese government strictly monitors microblogging services, it also wants to stay on top of the new technology and use it for its own ends. A June government white paper on the Internet singled out microblogging as a useful communication tool and praised Internet users for “supervising” the government.

“The Chinese government learns very quickly and is very much at the forefront or ahead of the curve of what is on the Internet,” said Bill Bishop, co-founder of the news site, MarketWatch.com, and long time Beijing resident. “They are working very hard to effectively channel and manage public opinion. Weibo offers unprecedented challenges and opportunities for the government PR folks to deal with issues in near-real time.”

During the annual meetings of the National People’s Congress and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in 2010, for instance, scores of representatives opened their microblogging accounts and solicited public opinion on issues ranging from rising housing prices to healthcare reform, from education to rural elections, and from forced requisition of land to anti-corruption.

By November, 49 government agencies and 237 police bureaus across the country had set up Sina Weibo accounts in a bid to relate to the people, gauge public opinions and foster open governance. For instance, on 1 August, Beijing’s Public Security Bureau launched its official microblog named “Safe Beijing” on Sina Weibo. It has already been followed by over 185,000 people. Every day, it publishes entries offering anti-fraud, anti-theft and personal safety tips, as well as the latest police affairs’ news. When a reporter asked how the police would respond to sharp criticism from web users, and whether they would impose restrictions, an official responded, “We respect the expressions of web users. As to the question of ordinary public attention and critical opinions, we have prepared ourselves psychologically, and we will meet the questions of citizens head on, and actively reach out to web users, regularly connecting with opinion leaders from various walks of society, seeking understanding and support.”

The adoption of microblogging by celebrities and average netizens, and by traditional media organizations and government agencies alike proves that it has been recognized and embraced in China’s mainstream society already. However, manifestations of microblogging activism in China challenge the simplistic yet widespread assumption that social media can lead to swift social change. Rather, the different forms of social media, microblogging included, together with the

traditional media tend to promote more subtle social progress. When a common ground is forged among activists, public intellectuals and the general public; when the basic cells of society are organized and mobilized; and when discourse and action are linked — through microblogging — people’s mentality and expectations are going to change accordingly. These accumulated micro-changes will be able to boost China’s social movements in the long run and eventually improve the well-being of the society as a whole.

Chapter 11

Social outlet Twitter and its political impact in South Korea

Ji-hyun Cho

Ji-hyun Cho is a reporter for the business desk at The Korea Herald in South Korea. She covers the information and technology sector, including telecommunications, electronics and all other sections of IT, for the newspaper, which is the No. 1 English-language newspaper in South Korea.

The microblogging site, Twitter, has emerged as a major communication tool for politicians in South Korea, especially since the local elections in June 2010. Voter turnout recorded 54.5 per cent — up 2.9 points from that reached during the local elections in 2006. It was the highest rate recorded for a nationwide local election since the first local elections took place in 1995.

What was noted as the main contributor to the high voter turnout was the total number of young voters — mostly in their 20s to early 40s — who came out to the polls in the afternoon to use their voting rights. “Twitter transformed into a major meaningful communication tool that encouraged the participation of young voters,” said Rep. Won-woo Baek, a member of the major opposition Democratic Party.

A large group of young voters, many being more politically progressive, pushed others to take part in the voting process by publishing posts, which demanded people not give up the voting rights they were entitled to, and included photos of themselves standing at the polls with their voting papers in their hands. “I voted around 5 pm by sparing some time while on the job,” said Mi-jin Kim, a 28-year-old company worker living in the capital Seoul. “It would have slipped my mind if it wasn’t for Twitter.”

It was not only the particular group of young voters, but popular celebrity figures — such as famous novel writer, Oi-soo Lee — who continued to send the 140-word messages or ‘tweets’ to his followers on how important it was to have a say in the nationwide local elections, which only come once every four years. “Why would anyone throw away their own precious rights when they have to wait up to four years to practice it?” he questioned.

As a result, the ruling conservative Grand National Party (GNP) only secured six of the 16 mayoral and gubernatorial positions in the 2 June local elections while its liberal rival grabbed seven. The seven seats secured by the major opposition

party included metropolitan Incheon and South Gyeongsang Province, which has been the home turf of the ruling party.

Aftermath of the June local elections

The ruling GNP met reformative calls and completely restructured its leadership after its humiliating defeat in the local elections. Its chairman stepped down, partly due to demands from the party's younger legislators and the public. "Those responsible for the election loss should refrain from joining the party convention. It would be very best for the party's future", Tae-geun Chung, a first-term GNP lawmaker, said a few days after the election loss. "Junior lawmakers should not hesitate to run for party leadership." Chung was referring to the party convention, which reshaped its party leadership earlier in July.

Numerous factors were blamed for the election loss, including the government's authoritative attitude in pushing controversial policies and its firm stance on North Korea. What was mostly stressed, however, was the young voters' strong support for the liberal opposition party.

According to OikoLab, a data service and research firm which provides the number of Twitter users in South Korea on a daily basis, more than 1.68 million people are making use of the microblogging service as of mid-October. This is a high figure considering that South Korea's total population is projected to record 48.87 million this year, according to the National Statistics Office.

Considering that the younger generation is more familiar with computers, technology and especially smart phones, Twitter is definitely an easy way for this group to communicate.

Measures taken by political parties

As proven by the election results, a high number of politicians engaged themselves in microblogging, meeting with their so called 'followers' offline and replying to their messages whenever they had spare time. The ruling GNP even created a political party on Twitter, pledging to listen more closely to the people and be more open to them.

While live airing of the launching ceremony of an online political party on its website and on Twitter, the party leadership microblogged their congratulatory comments. The unveiled slogan for the new online political party was, "Together, Open, and People".

"We will listen what anyone has to say and reflect the voice on the decisions we make in a bid to establish a political party that goes hand in hand with the people we serve", said Ahn Sang-soo, a ruling party lawmaker who heads the 171 member GNP. The National Assembly of South Korea currently has a total of 298 members. Many politicians, on the other hand, are moving to win the hearts of the technology-savvy group on an individual level.

Among the most popular and influential politicians are former welfare minister, Si-min Ryu of the minor opposition People Participation Party, who has up to 117,728 followers, Hoi-chan Roh of the New Progressive Party (NPP), who has 84,722 followers, and former GNP Chairwoman, Geun-hye Park, with 48,713 followers, as of mid-October. "I can pick up different opinions about current issues at a fast pace (using Twitter)," said Ryu. "Twitter is also a private space [...] a place where I could speak out about what I have on my mind."

Roh, joint-leader of the NPP, which only has one representing member in the National Assembly, recalled a day when he messaged followers to join him for some free traditional rice wine called "makgeolli".

"Overriding my expectation, more than 70 people showed up and we ended up finishing the bottles of rice wine that was prepared for the event in about 15 minutes," he said. "We had no other choice but to order some more."

For the ruling party's potential presidential contender, Geun-hye Park, Twitter is an outlet for her to comment on the day's most interesting events — mostly non-political — showing a more genuine side of the most discussed politician. Park is the eldest daughter of former South Korean President, Chung-hee Park, who ruled the country for almost 16 years. "Because the windstorms were so strong this year, only one of the persimmon of the tree planted at my house survived it. I'm worried about the impact this windstorm would have had in the farming regions. I hope the situation will be better next year so that I would be able to give out some of the persimmons to you then," she said, while attaching a photo of the surviving persimmon.

Dong-young Chung, former unification minister and a legislator of the Democratic Party, published a book earlier this year titled, "Twitter is Just Like Makgeolli", praising how the social media links people to one another just like the Korean traditional rice wine.

Twitter is also used as a communication tool for President Myung-bak Lee on certain occasions. Although he does not have his own Twitter account, he leaves messages on the account of Cheong Wa Dae, or the Blue House. This is mostly done ahead of the nation's biggest holidays as a way of sending his greetings.

Why Twitter in particular?

According to a recent report released by the Korea Information Society Development Institute (KISDI), the number of people visiting the online microblogging site, Twitter, in South Korea has jumped 10 times from 780,000 in September 2009, to 6.4 million in September this year. The number of visitors to local social networking sites, such as Cyworld, has been on the decrease and other local websites like Me2day and Yozm have seen little change, whereas visitors to the foreign sites, Twitter and Facebook, have been continuously rising, it said.

"Twitter is an online communication tool that has incorporated the advantages of the existing blogs, a short message service, messengers and other online

communities and is also a media outlet that has given priority to users to pick the information they wish to see”, said Won-taek Lee, a research fellow at KIDSII. “It’s also closer to a real-time information network.”

Advocates of Twitter say they can see a fast reaction of what they have posted and the message can be ‘retweeted’, meaning ‘forwarded to others’, which enables them to reach out to a bigger group in a cost-efficient way. Politicians say the impact of the microblogging service is more than one could ever expect.

“The rate of delivering a message is faster than any other media outlets,” said Hyun-hee Jeon, a spokeswoman for the main opposition Democratic Party. “I have no doubts in that Twitter is a truly useful social media, which gets rid of the wall existing between politicians and the people that allow us to reflect their opinion in our legislative activities.”

Young-gil Kwon, a lawmaker affiliated with the minor opposition Democratic Labor Party, also said that he posted a request on his Twitter account for any questions that anyone had to ask the education minister before attending a parliamentary education committee meeting. “I ended up getting over 200 questions,” he said. “[Twitter] enables anyone to have interactive communication without considering the time or the location.”

Not only that, the service user could ‘unfollow’ certain users if they do not like the contents of the messages they are posting, allowing them to view only the messages that carry good or helpful information.

“In the June local elections, about 54.6 per cent of the messages involving the elections were written directly by the Twitter users, while 45.5 per cent of them were shared with others through clicking on the ‘retweet’ button”, said Won-taek Lee of KISDI. Lee also added that those using Twitter tend to have a bigger say in politics compared to other people using different social networking services. “People active on Twitter respond sensitively to political agendas and make striving efforts to set the type of political tasks as well as work on forming a public opinion,” Lee said. Lee projected that Twitter is likely to become a more influential communication tool for the 2012 presidential election as more people online are showing an intention to get involved with politics.

At this point one could ask, “but why is Twitter gaining popularity all of a sudden in South Korea?” The main reason would be the increasing number of smart phone owners. With the introduction of the Apple’s iPhone in November of last year, hardware manufacturers have joined the fierce smart phone competition. Well-known electronic giant, Samsung Electronics, quickly made moves to release its flagship smart phone, the Galaxy series, and its rival LG Electronics has also launched the Optimus series, although it is a step behind.

Another factor that forced South Korean politicians to join the Twitter craze was the fact that United States President, Barack Obama, utilized social media websites like Twitter and Facebook during his election campaign, to reach out to

young voters. With the number of smart phone users reaching some six million in South Korea, the number of people visiting online social networking websites has reached 25 million as of July 2010. This is a 57 per cent increase from the same period last year, said a United States-based marketing research firm, comScore, in September.

The increase ranked second among major countries, following Russia which recorded 35 million SMS users — a 74 per cent increase from the previous year. South Korea was also followed by Germany and Brazil, which both showed a 47 per cent increase during the same period.

Controversy surrounding Twitter regulations

Early in February, the National Election Commission sparked debate by announcing the boundaries of Twitter-use in election campaigns. The commission said that no one other than the potential candidate could express his or her support for a certain political party or politician, on the microblogging site, before the official campaigning period started.

The government branch responsible for the nationwide elections also stated that the election information sent by the potential candidate of a political party could not be forwarded, or retweeted, by the follower who received the message. The measure was met with strong opposition because it was against freedom of expression and limited the participation of potential voters, said the opponents.

The controversy reached a new level when NEC officials decided to send a letter of notification to painter, Ok-sang Lim, after the 2 June local elections, for violating the election law by giving out gifts. A day before the local elections took place across the country, Lim had written a post on his Twitter account, saying, "I will give out my paintings to the first 1,000 people in their 20s who take part in the votes".

With the participation of some celebrity figures, the event turned out to be a success, most likely adding to the increased number of young voters. However, Lim was given the notification letter and received a visit by the government authorities to be educated on the election rights. "There were news reports in the past that the participation level of young people in the voting process was rather low," he said. "That's why I decided to give something, a present perhaps, which may draw the young group to the voting posts."

Government authorities, in response, said the problem stemmed from the fact that it was a move made to encourage participation of a certain group and that it was physically giving out financially valued gifts. The debate surrounding the state regulations is still an ongoing one with many opponents, including lawmakers and social activists, claiming it should be scrapped.

Dangers of Twitter

It has already been noted that Twitter contributed greatly to the voter turnout in the past June local elections, but there are also side effects resulting from the popular social networking site. Won-tae Lee of KISDI points out that 24.9 per cent of the surveyed Twitter users said they were often confused with the distribution of wrong information. Another 20.4 per cent said many politicians were using the outlet to publicize themselves rather than focusing on the bold political issues. About 17.8 per cent said the level of conflict was deepening between the fans of different politicians in the communication process, according to Lee.

About 14.7 per cent said the social networking site often invaded their privacy, 11.3 per cent found it difficult to hold serious discussions due to the instant communication and 10.9 per cent said illegal political parties were becoming common through the service. The side effects partly resulted from the fact that the 140-word microblogging site does not require people to list the sources of the information they post online, unlike news reports which normally state their sources. People could also spread the information faster than any other social media outlet, just by clicking on 'retweet'.

What should be understood here is that those who are not following the particular information supplier could have access to the information if any followers forwarded the information to them. It may not only be wrong information but it also becomes an issue if someone makes a political or a controversial statement about a sensitive matter, on Twitter.

As an example, Young Chin, a ruling party lawmaker, was criticised online after he posted a comment about how hard it was to stay completely ethically clean in a world full of temptations. "Like one philosopher said, I would need to learn how not to live secularly in such a mundane world," he said. He was referring to the case of former foreign minister, Myung-hwan Yu, who was severely criticised for giving unwarranted favours to his daughter in an ill-advised attempt to hire her as a diplomat. Yu tendered his resignation on 3 September, after serving in his position for over two years. Immediate responses followed Chin's statement, demanding him to step down from his legislative seat. Chin apologized after the incident, using his Twitter account, explaining that he was not supporting Yu, but only trying to express the necessity for leaders of the nation to be better prepared ethically. "It's difficult to retrieve the messages sent and received through Twitter once they have been posted and it's also hard to guess the real meaning behind it," said Gi-young Noh, a mass communications professor at Hallym University. "The society as a whole should develop methods on how to put a stop to the distribution of wrong information."

Young Bae, a professor of the information sociology department at Soongsil University, also said that each individual should know how to take responsibility for their own postings, even if it is on social networking sites. He added that the

influence of social media is most likely to get bigger as more people in their 40s and 50s join the trend of using smart devices in the near future. "Depending on what kinds of postings are listed on the site, the politics and the culture of that country could either develop or go back a few steps," said Chang-hyun Lee, a professor at Kookmin University. "What always should be kept in mind is that the vision and the extent of what people could show on media outlets, like Twitter, are of utmost importance."

In the meantime, there are some people pretending to be well-known figures in South Korea by opening up accounts in the names of celebrities. Online imposters have been caught for abusing the name of Samsung Electronics chairman, Kun-hee Lee, earlier this year and the supreme court recently detected a private Twitter account that was representing itself as the court's official account.

This is part of the reason experts say the issue of privacy invasion must be addressed before social media gains more influence in the 2012 presidential election in South Korea. "A guideline that outlines how to protect the privacy of all social media users and the service providers should be in place as early as possible," said Lee of KISDI. "The individual users should learn how to responsibly self-manage the information they distribute, reconstructing the literacy education system that is designed for social media."

He also said that the service providers of social media should reinforce the privacy protection policies to individuals, so that the policies could deal with any privacy intruding issues which may occur in the future.

Chapter 12

Japan — The chattering nation

Martin Kölling

Martin Kölling is the East Asia Correspondent with the German financial daily, Financial Times Deutschland, covering corporate, financial and political news in Japan and the Koreas. He also contributes technology stories to other media, among them the German edition of the technology magazine, Technology Review and the German daily, Die Welt.

Japan is one of the most advanced broadband Internet nations, but the use of the Internet and social networking in politics in Japan, is contradictory. On the one hand, political leaders such as the former Prime Minister, Junichiro Koizumi, were among the global pioneers in using the Internet as a communication channel. On the other hand, due to legal restrictions in election campaigns, and the political culture and social norms, the Internet and social media do not yet play a significant role in the public discourse, or as tools of mobilization. Only recently, the situation has started to change as can be seen with the growth of Twitter.

From Internet backwater to global leadership

By the beginning of 2010, Japan was known as one of the leading Internet societies in the world. Not only is the coverage of broadband Internet services among the highest globally, but the price for bandwidth is among the lowest in the world. Furthermore, it is only in a few other countries that mobile Internet is as widely used for sharing information, entertainment, music downloads and shopping, as in Japan. But only ten years ago it was a completely different picture. At the turn of the millennium Japan was an Internet backwater by global standards. The history of the rapid race to catch up and overtake the former leaders in the world of the Internet, also shaped the usage of Internet for public purposes.

As in other developed countries, the growth of the Internet was driven by private investment and private providers. In many countries the American service provider, AOL, with its catch phrase, 'You've got mail', became an icon of the Internet. However, because vested interest slowed down the development of the Internet in Japan, its expansion significantly lagged behind that of other nations.

In 1998, less than one-tenth of the population had access to the Internet — far less than in Finland or the United States of America (USA). Japan's ranking in Internet density measured in terms of Internet host to gross domestic product, was also appalling. In a World Bank statistic of that year, Japan ranked only 38th out of 73 nations with a ratio of just 235.5 points, slightly ahead of France and Italy, but below South Korea (ranked 35th at 280.2 points), Malaysia (ranked 25th at 412.1 points), the other late starter Germany (ranked 22nd at 441.7 points), and Singapore (ranked 18th at 721.9 points). The contrast with the leading Internet nations was especially stark. Finland topped the ranking with 4278 point, followed by New Zealand with 3274 points and the USA with 2904.7 points.

It was only with the growth of the global IT bubble at the end of the 1990s that Japan shifted its priorities. Two events unleashed an unprecedented growth of PC-based and mobile Internet:

1. In 1999, Japan's leading mobile phone carrier, NTT Docomo, introduced its mobile Internet service, i-mode, that laid the foundations for early establishment of the first mobile Internet society in the world. In fact, Japan's head start was so strong, that only now, after the launch of the iPhone, has the rest of the world been able to catch up to the wealth of services that the Japanese have enjoyed for almost a decade.
2. In 2000, the government announced a program to make Japan into the leading Internet society of the world, with huge investments in the deployment of fiber-optical networks, and a massive push to bring all ministries online. And a few years later, the Japanese were enjoying transmission speeds of up to 100 Mbps, that today, Internet users in other countries still only dream of.

By accident, this two-pronged approach of private-led investment in the mobile Internet and government supported development of PC-based Internet, laid the groundwork for the first ubiquitous Internet society. Because NTT Docomo decided to base i-Mode on the Internet Protocol and e-mail and not on the Wireless Application Protocol (Wap) and Short Messaging Service (SMS), used by European carriers, the PC-based and mobile Internet were less separated than in other countries, thereby reinforcing each other's growth. Especially, the choice of e-mail over the very restricted SMS, had a tremendous impact, because it allowed the users not only to send longer messages, but also to effortlessly send and receive e-mails, to and from computers. The early merger of the world of PC-based Internet and mobile Internet meant that mobile phone users had the world wide web at their fingertips, and also, that the mobile phone with its smaller screen and keyboard rivalled the PC as the main gateway to the Internet from an early stage.

The use of the Internet as a political tool

The fast growth of Internet also expanded its use as a tool for official and private information sharing, but puzzlingly not as a forum for political discussion and mobilization. The fact is, that the amount and depth of public information available online in Japan, is bigger than in most countries. Ministries and local governments not only put key statistics, white books and reports online, but also meeting materials and transcripts of a wide range of even high-level council meetings, making previously hidden discussions very transparent to anyone who cares to check.

After the switch of attitude at the beginning of the 2000s, Japanese governments even became innovative pioneers. As one of the first heads of government, the reformist Prime Minister, Junichiro Koizumi, started a highly successful personal weekly newsletter in 2001 to communicate directly with the people and thereby garner support from the bureaucracy and the public for his fight with powerful vested interests in the party. "My name is Junichiro Koizumi, the Lion heart", became his catch phrase. This was followed by online video appearances, and news and features on the homepage of the Kantei, the prime minister's office website.

In an attempt to increase transparency even further, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), after taking power in September 2009, transmitted the meeting reports of its high level, cost-cutting tribunal of top bureaucrats, live on the Internet. But still the parties operated mainly in the Web 1.0 mode that sees the Internet as a one-way street to inform the public. They put articles, their political manifesto, videos or live video broadcasts of some events, online and offered subscriptions to newsletters.

The Internet is also very much alive in the private realm. According to the research company, Technorati, Japan had the most active blogosphere, with even more blogs in the Japanese language than in English. Social networking services (SNS) have grown equally important. Mixi, the Japanese equivalent of Facebook, surpassed ten million users a few years ago. And most of the users access Mixi by mobile phone.

However, despite all the chatter and information in the virtual public sphere, Internet and social media, until recently, did not play a big role in the space of political discourse and mobilization. Even Michael Anti, one of the leading Chinese bloggers, was puzzled by this situation after a three-month study trip to Japan. It was so radically different from his experience in the USA or China.

In the USA, he found the Internet to be a place where 'anti-mainstream' groups can, and do, vent their ideas. The Internet in China is the 'space of the civil society', where the people discuss relatively openly, controversial topics that are taboo in the official media. A western diplomat acknowledges that he scouts the Internet successfully for discussions on the death penalty, Tibet, Aids and

other hot topics. But in Japan, the Internet, according to Michael Anti, seems to be a means for the grassroots level to exchange ideas with a close circle of friends.

One of the most prominent symbols of this situation is the failure of the South Korean news site, OhmyNews, to take root in Japan. OhmyNews was founded in South Korea in 2000 as a platform for citizen journalism and became one of the first world wide successes of Web 2.0, and the age of user-generated content. The site won fame by successfully influencing the outcome of the presidential election in 2002. In recognition of its contribution, the winner, the left leaning Roh Moo-hyun, gave his first interview to OhmyNews. In 2006, OhmyNews set up a service in Japan. However, although it enjoyed the support of Softbank, a famous Internet investor and now owner of the second largest mobile phone network in Japan, it failed miserably. Soon after the launch, it had to drop the citizen journalist role. Finally it closed down in 2008. Needless to say, Japan also has never seen an Internet campaign like the one created by the current USA President, Barack Obama, to collect donations and votes in the presidential elections.

Other empirical evidence and a few studies, also support the lack of appetite for political discussions by the Japanese public. Private blogs are often micro-blogs or online diaries, mostly written on the mobile phone. Also, the blogs of famous people and chief executive officers are in high demand. Some bloggers also gain fame as food or fashion critics. Companies also are using user-generated comments as marketing tools. But political blogs are few and far between.

In an opinion poll of the Internet community, MyVoice, from 2009, the topic 'news' ranked only 15th, with five per cent of bloggers wanting to write about it. Most people (68 per cent) used the blog as a diary. Other prominent topics were hobbies (30 per cent), eating out/cooking (17 per cent) and entertainment and introduction of products/services (both 15 per cent).

Another poll from Goo Ranking, from the same year, came up with similar results. Neither the male or female respondents ranked 'politics' among their top five blog topics. Ranked top again was the use of a blog as a diary (using 'what I did today' as a source), followed in slightly differing order by impressions of today's food, TV/movie/animation, products and services. Only male respondents showed at least some interest in writing on political, financial and sports news (ranked 6 to 8). Among females, this topic didn't even make it into the top 10.

The user patterns of SNS show another difference. Japanese avoid speaking out, using their own name. Hence, the Japanese have so far avoided SNS such as Facebook and LinkedIn, where people have to use their real names. Instead, they prefer Mixi, where they can pose under any fantasy name or abbreviation they want. In an opinion poll by Goo Research, 40 per cent of the respondents had used Mixi, but only five per cent used Facebook and less than one per cent used LinkedIn.

A comparative study between five countries by the public relations agency, Edelman, in 2007, shed some light on the differences in the motivation of bloggers and the political activities induced by blogs. Whereas 40 per cent of the English language bloggers in the poll wanted 'to raise visibility as an authority in my field', only five per cent of the Japanese said this. Furthermore, the Japanese were the least prone to act politically after reading blogs. In Japan, only 18 per cent of the wider population and 29 percent of the 'influencers' would act after reading a blog, compared to 18 and 41 per cent in South Korea, 28 and 48 percent in the United Kingdom (UK), 27 and 32 per cent in France, and 28 and 49 per cent in the USA.

At the same time, the Japanese were not only reading many more blogs than the populace in any other country (74 per cent of the Japanese compared to 43 per cent in South Korea, 27 per cent in the USA, 23 per cent in the UK and 22 percent in France), but were also reading more often (4.54 times per week in Japan, two times in South Korea, 0.9 times in the USA, 0.68 times in the UK and 0.62 times in France).

The results of polls show the following picture: The Japanese are the most active readers and producers of blogs, they also give their opinions, but they care less about politics than their peers, and are the least willing to take a position using their own name, or to act.

The well-informed, silent citizen

For Marco Koeder, the Japan-based co-author of the book, 'The Six Immutable Laws of Mobile Business', this result does not come as a surprise. "The digital world reflects the real world," he says. For one, the usage of the Internet for collecting donations or political purposes is hampered by an old legal framework. Japan is much less of a donation culture than the USA, mainly because donations generally are not tax deductible. And the election law forbids the change of printed or online content during election campaigns. Politicians and parties, therefore, have to stop using blogs and Twitter during the most crucial weeks of campaigning.

On the other hand, and maybe even more importantly, the situation mirrors the political culture. "The Japanese public seem to be world champions in absorbing information, but it is not translated into taking a position", says Koeder. In fact, in the analogue age the national dailies had a daily circulation of around 40 million copies in a population of 126 million. That means that even today many households subscribe to two newspapers. In addition they read magazines, weeklies, tabloids and books. But the size and strength of demonstrations has died down since the violent demonstrations of the 1960s and 1970s.

After years of education, Japanese citizens seem to have internalized the old proverb that 'the nail that sticks out, needs to be hammered in'. Only a few people are feeling comfortable enough to voice their political opinions publicly. "And if

they do, they focus on the micro-level, their own community or livelihood, or the meta-level, questions of national sovereignty, but not so much on the macro-level,” observes Koeder.

This explains the lack of political discussion that puzzles many foreign observers when looking at Japan. An Hegelian dialectic process of ‘thesis, anti-thesis, synthesis’ is less obvious in Japan. Instead, there is more of an expert democracy with a high reliance on the opinion of people considered important enough to sit on expert panels and government councils. In addition, the national dailies and TV stations (that often are part of one media group) set the agenda, form the space for public discussion, and massage public opinion. In effect, they often converge not only in the question of what is considered to be relevant, but in many cases also in their opinions on certain topics. Differentiation is far less a tool in the competition than in the west. In addition, morning TV shows repeat the main points, thereby forming a kind of majority opinion. Japan is what I call a ‘chattering society’. A lot of talk and no action.

However, the realm of civil society is limited, because the Internet and user-generated contents are generally looked down upon by the traditional media and are considered to be highly subjective and unreliable, says the Chinese blogger, Anti. Maybe this is the reason why Japanese media, until recently, treated their homepages almost like printed newspapers. In most cases, readers found it impossible to leave comments, even if they wanted to, because the newspapers didn’t provide a commentary function.

For Koeder and other experts, the only notable exception seems to be the Internet forum ‘2Channel’. In 2007, it received 2.5 million posts per day. With its policy of anonymous posting it seems to be particularly liked by many people for venting their positions. But it has gained a reputation as a virtual hang-out of real world ‘Otaku’ (people with strange hobbies) and right-wing activists, that are socially stigmatized as fringe elements of society. The mainstream media and populace, as well as established political parties, therefore consider it not worth mentioning and don’t touch it. The wild discussions on 2Channel do not really form part of the civil society.

Cracks in the system

However, the situation is starting to change. The most visible proof was the highly controversial leak of videos on Youtube, by a member of the coastguard that showed how a Chinese trawler rammed a coastguard ship in the waters off the Senkaku islands. But the system is actually cracking on all fronts. Political parties are about to revise the election law to allow some forms of Internet campaigning. “There is virtually no opposition to an amendment of the election law,” said an official of the ruling DPJ. Also the parties themselves are looking more actively at social media, because they not only feel the pressure from the public, but also see benefits like gaining unfiltered, real-time access to public opinion.

The former Prime Minister, Yukio Hatoyama, started the 'Hatocafé', an online blog-cum-Twitter feed, and real coffee table meetings with citizens in his residence, the Kantei, on 1 January 2010. This was a big event for social media in Japan, and Internet experts consider the endeavour a success, although it did not help Hatoyama much. A few months later he had to hand over the government to Naoto Kan, because of his plummeting popularity. Since then, Twitter has become increasingly the norm for Japanese politicians.

"The Internet is not only for one-way distribution of information, but requires an interactive discussion", explains the DPJ official, about the change in attitude. "In the future, it will become increasingly necessary to listen and respond to the opinion of the citizens, to use it for the execution of politics, and to show determination in exposing the process."

The New Komeito, the political arm of the Buddhist sect, Soka Gakkai, seems to have even more concrete plans. Having gone online with a homepage in 1995, it has added new features over time: a newsletter in 2000, video streaming in 2002, a blog in 2003, and a Youtube channel in 2007. But only with the launch of its Twitter channel in 2009 did the party started to embrace social media. In an e-mail, a party official said he also expects trends such as social media and Facebook to gain more traction. The party is also looking forward to using the Internet as a means for mobilizing donations — when electronic money and the use of credit cards for donations become more widespread.

And last but not least, netizens are not standing still either. "The situation is changing", says Hiroki Eda, from Digital Garage, which supports Twitter in Japan. After a slow start, Twitter now counts for around 10 million accounts. The number is still smaller than Mixi's, but after Youtube, Twitter has become the first foreign social media that has gained real traction in Japan — although it uses an alien concept.

Experts say that the Japanese do not like the idea of 'one-to-many-broadcasts', but prefer the more limited chat in controlled networks like Mixi. But 90 per cent of Twitter users don't use the privacy feature that Twitter offers. "People are getting used to express their opinions in public on the Internet", says Eda. The fact that they can still hide behind fantasy names might help them to display courage. Another factor is that Twitter's restriction of 140 characters per message is far less limiting in Japanese than in Western languages, because Japanese uses characters and syllabaries like Hiragana or Katakana. Japanese therefore runs shorter than alphabet-based writing systems, and allows the Japanese to squeeze more information into a tweet or re-tweet comments, than their peers in the west.

Despite these developments, a comparison with its neighbours suggests that Internet and social media will gain in importance as a space for public discussion, only at glacial speed. In China and in South Korea, political activists were looking

for ways to express their opinion publicly, and the Internet provided them with the means. The Japanese society has plenty of means, but no will, to use them. Without a major change in political education, the understanding of the media, and the deeply rooted belief that one cannot change anything anyway, changes will happen only slowly.

Chapter 13

Singapore, Politics, Freedom & New Media: A Personal Reflection

Kirpal Singh

Professor Kirpal Singh is the director of the Wee Kim Wee Centre at the Singapore Management University — a Centre he founded in 1999. He is an internationally respected creativity guru and futurist, focusing on new, cutting-edge ideas, believing that our young deserve more than they can find with the use of New Media. Professor Singh's book "Thinking Hats & Colored Turbans: Creativity Across Cultures" (2004) challenged traditional ways of looking at creativity and offered new perspectives on this theme. He has also authored/edited 25 other books.

Having been keen on following developments about my young island republic I agreed to write this short chapter on a topic which has now become so crucial, that not completing my task would be to not only renege on an agreement but also retreat in defeat! What follows is basically a personal reflection. Not being a scholar of politics or social sciences in the normal sense of the word, I desist all temptation to label what I offer here as anything more than a personal 'take' on this significant topic. The significance of the topic itself is what underlines my own engagement with its manifest and varied as well as numerous aspects — from the viewpoint of those in power to the position of those who have little else to do than frown and respond in silly ways!

Firstly, it is important to say a few words about Singapore itself. From the tiny position of being simply a little red dot, (thanks to the tantalizing description by the late Indonesian President) Singapore is nowadays seen by many to be a nation which not only inspires other nations to progress, grow and development, but as a key-player in the geopolitics of Southeast Asia. Indeed, many are convinced that the recent release by the military junta in Myanmar of the Nobel Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, was behind-the-scenes 'brokered' by the relentless efforts of top Singaporean officials acting as peace makers to help negotiate the sensitive and difficult issue.

On the financial front, little Singapore is seen by many to be a kind of pace-setter for global following: the manner with which our republic has handled finance and fiscal policies is seen to have set a very good example for the rest of the world, if not wholly, then at least in part. Although the 2008 crisis hit

Singapore, as it did every country, its effects have not been debilitating and life has carried on more or less as 'normal'. And in the arena of innovation, Singapore is fast gaining world-wide recognition, especially in that of biomedical research.

So, in discussing the impact of new media on Singapore's political landscape, it behooves us to keep the above points in mind because they saliently affect both the responses and checks and balances put in place by the authorities. At this point, I'd like to quote a brief statement by a colleague of mine, Eugene Tan, who has been thinking about, and observing the broad political scene in Singapore:

"New media is like the Gutenberg press of the masses — it will play a growing importance in public discourse in Singapore. In a sense, it empowers the ordinary citizen who can now have his sounding board even on the go.

Like it or not, while its impact can be tamed or moderated, new media is here to stay. As such, Singaporeans, their politicians and bureaucrats need to be aware of new media's potential, limitations and pitfalls.

The key here is to harness the benefits of new media but also being mindful that it is a double-edged sword. Too often, digital natives assume a different persona when using new media tools, and indulge in the anonymity that new media supposedly provides. But it's a veil that can be pierced — that in itself is not a bad thing.

Social responsibility is necessary if new media is not to be a tool of misinformation, falsehoods, panic and fear. New media can help strengthen the bonds between citizens, the rulers and the ruled.

Its egalitarian nature, the ease of making "citizen journalists" of us all can help to enhance understanding of the issues of the day, generate meaningful debates, and overcome gaps in discernment, power, and influence."

Several important points are being made here by Eugene Tan, a law professor at the Singapore Management University. Tan's cautionary, but also pointed, observations ring true and hold validity for many of us who are both concerned about the tremendous impact of New Media, and excited by its limitless potential to mould, fashion and shape the larger frames of references for the population at large. The long-term effects of New Media on the individual (and possibly group) sensibilities are anyone's guess but it is clear already just how powerful New Media is for helping Singaporeans articulate their personal opinions and views as well as make subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) comments about what they perceive to be important platforms for public concern. Tan's caution about using New Media responsibly, is telling, for we frequently learn from other nations caught in this same dilemma of exercising 'freedoms' without due respect to 'responsibilities'. The results of this non-alignment have been dramatic, often indeed, tragic — as witnessed by the suicide, for instance of the brilliant young

musician in an American university and also of those arrested in the Iranian post-election sagas. These are only two of myriad illustrations that we can all cite to demonstrate the power of New Media and its devastating consequences.

There has been robust debate and discussion about New Media's impact on Singapore and Singaporean political sensibilities. One has only to look at any of the hundreds of websites where discussion takes place. For instance, theonlinecitizen.com is one platform which almost aggressively raises serious questions and invites public responses to them. Reading some of the responses convinces us that Singaporeans are exercising their right to free expression. It cannot be denied there has been, in recent years, a very clear and obvious articulation of views of all descriptions by thousands of Singaporeans — the kind of views which were largely absent before New Media made immediate, instantaneous, and anonymous articulations possible. Apart from, theonlinecitizen.com, there are many other sites which are equally robust — see for example, singabloodypore.com or singapore2025.wordpress.com.

The authorities are, of course, very preoccupied with all kinds of questions: Should New Media be controlled? If so, how and to what extent? Very recently, the government has said that it is not only 'open' to discussion but is also not likely to take action against dissenting views, so long as these are not expressed in ways which may be a concern to national security; that is, discussions on race, language or religion. Who ought to monitor new media? Should it be an independent body? There are many more questions and complex issues that I think are going to be potentially hazardous and also almost impossible for the government to decide on, which would satisfy all the parties involved. It is my belief that educating the Singaporean public about New Media — its methods, manners, styles, avenues, channels, codes, modes, etiquette, and so on — is about the only realistic way forward. Maturity is important, because one of the major concerns when we read and watch New Media is not always knowing how to validate and verify it.

Of course, those who claim that it does not matter whether a New Media report or documentary is accurate, or blatantly false, should accept that it does matter for some people. New Media can be a vicious and harmful tool with 'evil' intentions (sex, prostitution, pornography, crime, etc) and also be used by those who are politically motivated by nothing more than a perverse desire to see governments destabilized. We live in a world which is increasingly vying for winners in the race to claim, "We are the freest nation on earth insofar as New Media is concerned". This is, and can be, a very dangerous race if not handled carefully. This is not simply a 'defensive' statement as I am concerned about where the irresponsible postings on New Media are going to take us.

Besides consulting Professor Eugene Tan, I thought it might be useful to also consult another colleague, Professor Bridget Welsh, a political scientist. She has a

watchful eye for detail and an insightful perspective on broad patterns of changing political scenarios. Below is her succinct response to the question of “impact of New Media on Singapore’s politics”. She bulleted three points:

- 1) Internet usage has increased the amount of engagement with government — e-government — and improved service demands, increasing access and rights.
- 2) Diversity of Voices: There has been an increase in ‘netcitizens’ — those that raise concerns on a variety of issues, often in criticism of the government. This has increased freedom of speech in Singapore, despite the strict controls that exist on the internet, and empowered ‘ordinary’ individuals.
- 3) Virtual Political Organization: The social network communities and networks have allowed for greater political organization and alternative forms of protest. This has helped level the playing field for alternative groups, including the political opposition.

All three points are valid and can be easily proven. For me, the great relevance is the constant refrain in Professor Welsh’s articulation, that, basically, New Media has given Singaporeans more freedom(s) and more room to ‘play politics’ if they so choose. With the Internet and the rise of forceful social networking platforms with some very sophisticated technologies (and technologies which are changing by the hour) — there is now abundant evidence to suggest that not only in Singapore but also places like China, governments and political authorities are sitting up and asking: “Where is this going to stop?” Implicit in this may be a new way of dealing with criticism and political dissent. In some ways, all of this is a kind of ‘cat-and-mouse’ game with the authorities devising new forms of controls and constraints, and the Netizens devising new avenues for expression and demonstrations.

Most readers of this book will know, of course, that Singapore prides itself on being an extremely advanced society insofar as usage of the latest IT technologies is concerned. Scholars looking at New Media’s ‘penetration’ confirm that Singapore’s record is one of the more dramatic in Asia, perhaps even globally. Studies by scholars such as Arun Mahizhnan, Tan Tarn How, Cherian George and others, point to the widespread use of the Internet, including all its different tools considered to be New Media.

The current discussion on whether Singapore’s next general election will be an ‘Internet’ election was put paid to by the prime minister recently when he said that in his view Singapore was not, perhaps, quite ready for one. The critical point to note, though, is that a lot of people are talking about politics and freedom in Singapore from the point of New Media impact and utilization. From the succinct messages via Twitter, to the more elaborate commentaries on blogs and

personal websites, to the short films and videos available on different New Media platforms, Singaporeans are now looking at New Media as a 'godsend', allowing them to strategize and target governmental and other authorities in ways never before even contemplated. Naturally, some who use New Media inappropriately, get caught and are apprehended or punished, but it is also becoming obvious that actions on the part of the authorities are receiving a backlash and that the authorities have to re-think the measures needed to prevent what is seen as 'abusive' use of New Media.

If we leave aside the directly political observations in Professor Welsh's three points, I feel it is important to consider her first point a little more expansively. For too long everyone has lamented the lack of engagement by both the government and the governed and have been stating that real engagement is needed. Professor Welsh states that this statement is not necessary because the Internet and New Media now provide ample avenues for everyone to engage with government and each other. This can only be for the eventual good of all. Notwithstanding the somewhat tenuous beginnings of such engagements, I am confident that very soon most people living in Singapore will be happily 'engaging' with almost everyone and be contributing to a harmonious community. Politics will be transcended, and through mature exchanges there will be improvements in all aspects of Singaporean life and living. This promises optimism, even in the political arena where, for the most part, New Media has only succeeded in demonstrating conflict! A new found sense of freedom leads to confounding articulations by those who feel urgency and a strong passionate desire to vent their frustrations and non-realized sense of selves. Given time and maturity a good balance normally tends to find itself with the net result of exchanges becoming more civil and more intellectually provocative (in the good sense).

In closing, I want to make a couple of observations which, hopefully, will stimulate some further discussion on this vexed and vexing theme. First, with cyberspace fast becoming the space for interpersonal communications, it is necessary for both leaders and the led to centre themselves in it. Singapore's foreign minister, Mr. George Yeo, publicly admitted that although he enjoyed Facebook his energies were 'fast depleting' (I am taking liberties and paraphrasing his rather more subtle position) and a couple of other Singaporeans in top positions have given up social networking. I believe that for those below 35 years of age, remaining outside of the dominant cyberspace environment is going to prove detrimental and the sooner these individuals get savvy the better.

My second observation is that while Singapore schools are doing what is in their purview to educate students about the pros and cons of New Media, the universities are not. I say this with some temerity and welcome further comment. From my experience, most of our universities still focus on old-fashioned content while the new technologies for effective education are either neglected or ignored, leaving students to grapple with these on their own. It will be a pity

if our universities continue to let New Media carry on its furious march forward without due and diligent scrutiny. After all, it is in the universities where the more long-lasting ramifications of innovative and imaginative processes take root and move forward.

New Media is here to stay, and to aggravate and challenge. The young everywhere are desperately discovering and seeking to find newer realms for what they essentially perceive as 'play'. For those who have lived for a few decades and seen changes happen and things fall apart we know the centre has not long to stick. New Media can invite, irritate and manoeuvre but it cannot on its own make things happen. But its power is frightening, its lure scintillating and its style captivating. Few will be able to resist its charms and its distractions. Volatility often energizes youth. We need to be mindful.

I end with a few lines I composed when first invited to contribute this short piece:

Politics, Freedom & New Media

i have just been asked to write
new media is the focus
politics and freedom the axis
new technologies make light work
transcend values and strike
deep where it matters or can
so i reflect in a personal way
multitude perspectives
zeroing, inundating, overwhelming
as new media becomes my self

Social Media and Politics is a compilation of 13 essays and studies that show the role social networking is playing in political communication in Asia. Each of the 13 chapters describes how various online social communities and networks such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs, are being used as tools in general political communication in Asian countries — both in an active and passive way. This book talks about presidents, prime ministers and politicians, and their first steps with Facebook and Twitter, and about the politically motivated bloggers who take personal risks to expose their opinions to a wider audience. On the other hand, *Social Media and Politics* shows the impact that politics can have on social network users and how social media has become the information source of choice for journalists and voters. Social media is here to stay. The facts and figures in the essays show evidence for this across a broad perspective. We are moving from citizens to netizens. With the rapid development of media technology and devices such as smart phones, social media and its impacts are everywhere.

With contributions by: *Anisha Bhaduri, Max Lane, Kirpal Singh, Ky Soklim, Zhai Zheng, Justine Espina-Letargo, Stephen Quinn, Taseer Dhuddi, Alastair Carthew, Martin Kölling, Ji-hyun Cho, PA Fama and CM Tam.*

From the content:

- How Facebook has become an emerging political campaigning tool
- Twitter: information source and medium of mobilisation
- Do political blogs and microblogs really make a change?
- Asia vs. Asia: Where Internet is the medium of choice and where its political benefits are still far off

The editor, Philip Behnke, is a Public Relations and Communications consultant with a range of experience in the field of social media. Based in Southeast Asia, he is currently involved in a variety of projects, both in the private and public sector.