

A Study of Political Blogs in Singapore: Characteristics, Interactivity and Relational Maintenance

Trisha T. C. Lin*

Abstract

This study investigates characteristics, interactivity, and relational maintenance of political blogs in Singapore. Six popular political blogs were selected from three identified political blog categories (i.e., political caricature blogs, political commentary blogs, and party-affiliated political blogs) for content analysis. The findings show Singapore political bloggers usually offer personal opinions with quoted sources. National issues are discussed most by these political blogs and majority of comments is in favour of bloggers' viewpoints. Under the control of censorship, "political caricature blogs" appeal to lots of readers because the authors use satire and humorous ways to express their opinions indirectly.

Overall Singapore's political blogs emphasize navigational features. Highly popular "political caricature blogs" are the only type to make use of multimedia components. The content of "political commentary blogs" is professional, offering original perspectives with relevant links, but they have the lowest level of interactivity. Besides, the three categories of political blogs which employ different relational maintenance strategies

* Trisha T. C. Lin is the Assistant Professor Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information Nanyang Technological University, Singapore Email: trishalin@ntu.edu.sg

have a high level of openness towards readers for the purpose of maintaining credibility.

Keywords: Political weblog, interactivity, relational maintenance, content analysis, political caricature, political comment

1. Introduction

Weblogs, a genre of computer-mediated communication (CMC), have become a global phenomenon (Blood, 2002; Erickson & Herring, 2007; Schmidt, 2007) due to their low technical barriers and increasing internet penetration worldwide. A weblog is a web-based publication with dated entries in reverse chronological order published and maintained using a blog authoring tool (Kumar et al., 2004). Blogs dabbling in political discussions are termed as *political blogs* which largely comment on socio-political affairs in specific national contexts. Political blogs have evolved over time: some act as a political watchdog; some express opinions about certain political issues, events, and news; and others create grassroots awareness and encourage local activists to express community-related or policy issues. Some popular political blogs become news sources of the traditional media (Drezner & Farrell, 2004) and others affiliate themselves with mainstream media (Strupp, 2007).

Political bloggers provide expertise, filter information, and form networks but seldom mobilize readers to directly engage in political activities (McKenna, 2007). They often quote information from sources outside mainstream media and may pen subjective commentaries or opinions (Hamdy, 2009). The political blogs receive different responses: some are praised for insightful and alternative perspectives to mainstream media but others are criticized for their lack of credibility and objectivity in content. Various kinds of political blogs have become significant in developing online political discussions and civil engagement internationally.

Since the 2006 General Election in Singapore, political blogs have showed their influence in shaping the agenda of elections (Gomez, 2006; Rahim, 2006). As the majority regards Singapore's mass media as the

government's mouthpiece, political blogs and online political information serve as important sources of alternative election news and political viewpoints (Hong, Lin, & Ang, 2010). A study on the 2011 General Election shows young citizens tend to spend more time reading election news on websites and blogs than traditional media compared with their older counterparts (Lin & Hong, 2013). The rise of blogging and online political information has prompted the government to regulate political websites and popular news websites.

With the proliferation of political blogs, readers are spoilt for choices and bloggers must compete for readership through content, presentation, and improving interactivity of their blogs. Additionally, bloggers must pay attention to relational maintenance strategies to keep readers coming back. This study undertakes the analysis of characteristics, interactivity, and relational maintenance of Singapore's political blogs through content analysis on six prolific political blogs under three categories (i.e., political caricature blogs, political commentary blogs, and party-affiliated political blogs). The findings contribute to the understanding of political blogs genres and relational strategies in the tightly regulated political context.

2. Literature Review

Simplification of the web publishing process by online authoring companies has made it easier for anyone to join the blogosphere (Kim, 2007). Compared with other types of blogs, political blogs are personal in nature and not ethically bound to objective reporting (Hamdy, 2009). They come in a wide array of forms – they can be individual or party-affiliated, authored by single or multiple bloggers, to discuss or comment on socio-political affairs. Or they are simply aggregators with discussions on a broad range of issues or specific areas (e.g., policy) where bloggers

provide expertise, filter information, create awareness and form communities (McKenna, 2007). These blogs can not only become new sources of the traditional media (Drezner & Farrell), but also serve as local repositories of information where journalists can obtain knowledge and background information related to particular issues. They can also increase civil participation in political domains (Strupp, 2007).

2.1 Political Blogs in Singapore

2.1.1 Increasing Internet and Political Blog Use During Elections

In the late 1990s before the term “blogging” was coined, some local websites like the then-popular ThinkCentre ran into trouble with the Singapore government over licensing and website legality due to its highly controversial online political discussions (Hornik, 2001). The relevance of the Internet did not become pertinent until the 2001 General Election. The ruling party, the People’s Action Party (PAP), was the first to establish its party website, followed by the opposition parties. These sites provided a platform to showcase candidates’ profiles and party manifestos. Since then, opposition parties and individuals have utilized the Internet to produce and distribute alternative content on politics which would be otherwise unavailable as a result of the censorship of local mass media (Gomez, 2006).

The Internet played a prominent role in shaping the agenda of the 2006 elections (Rahim, 2006). This saw an upsurge of online political content, especially political blogs and citizen journalism sites (Gomez, 2006). Several opposition politicians’ blogs appeared, discussing pertinent hot-button issues during that election period. Since then, political blogs have become visible and influential in local politics. The contributing factors of their prevalence include increasing Internet

penetration, media context, and the rise of blogging culture although mass media still are the dominant sources of political news or electoral information.

A national survey right after the 2011 General Election showed Singaporeans spent increasingly more time on reading political and election news on websites and blogs. According to Lin and Hong (2013), as the young generation spent more than double the amount of time on blogs, websites and Facebook as well as viewed considerably more political and election news online, youths' voting behaviour was more affected by new media. Their study also found young Singaporeans regarded blogs and web-only sites as more important sources for election information and 28.2% of them even wrote about the 2011 election on blogs, Facebook, or Twitter.

After the 2006 and 2011 elections, Singapore politicians became more internet-savvy. As the opposition used the Internet as the dominant form of communication during the election period, the ruling party also paid more attention to online presence and virtual relationship maintenance with supporters (Lim, 2011). The number of independent blogs and websites has grown exponentially in Singapore, with hundreds of such blogs today. Hence, political blogging is a permanent and significant fixture in Singapore politics.

2.1.2 Political Blogs and Other New Media

The rise of the Internet undoubtedly includes not only blogs but also other platforms such as social networking sites (SNS), microblogging and Internet forums in Singapore politics. However, political blogs which attracted various party-affiliated and independent authors to frequently write about socio-political issues have shown to be the most active in

encouraging and engaging online political discussions. The 2006 General Election sparked the trend of citizens turning to blogs as mainstream sources of political information, bringing prominent bloggers like Alex Au into the spotlight for his newsworthy coverage of the elections (Lee & Kan, 2009). Since then, such bloggers have played an increasingly important role in Singapore politics, as shown by the growing readership numbers in a recent survey conducted by Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies (2011).

According to Heng, Banerjee, and Fu (2010), the appeal of political blogs perceived by Singaporeans lie in their ability to provide alternative viewpoints and depth. Skoric and Poor (2013) identified that SNS worked well as "information dissemination centers" (p. 195), rather than providing meaningful debates about political issues, a job more suited to political blogs. Besides, Sreekumar and Vadrevu's (2013) analysis of popular political Twitter users in Singapore revealed that most users posted links to blogs and alternative sites rather than use this platform to directly connect with their audience in political discussions. Although popular bloggers like mrbrown engages followers through re-tweets and mentions, his blog is the primary platform to display multimedia content and attract readers' interaction. Besides, the mobile platform (e.g., SMS and apps) is even less popular for distributing political information. Therefore, political blogs in Singapore are the most popular new media channels for elaborating political perspectives and encouraging two-way political discussions.

2.1.3 Political Blogs and Media Control

The important role that political blogs play in shaping Singapore's politics has not escaped the notice of the government, which Rodan (2003) described as having a reputation for refining media regulations to suit its political agenda. According to Rodan (2003), the government used a

structured approach, self-censorship, to develop civil society. Websites and blogs are automatically bound by an Internet Code of Practice, making it the site owners' duty to refrain from mentioning material that goes against "public interest, public morality, public order, public security, national harmony" (MDA, 1996). Due to the increasing significance and popularity of online political information, the government later required political websites and blogs to register and be monitored by the Media Development Authority (MDA)¹. The government justified this claiming unregulated online political debates could easily degenerate into unhealthy, unreliable, and dangerous discourse filled with rumours and distortions to mislead and confuse the public (Reuters, 2006).

Besides this, Singapore's Parliamentary Elections Act (PEA), which governs online campaigning and political content, prohibits anyone with the exception of election candidates, political parties, and election agents from doing any form of election advertising. Some relaxation of media control came in the form of liberalization of Internet election advertising laws in April 2010, which allowed the use of new media platforms for election advertising during elections and non-political websites' engagement in political discussions. However, MDA (2013) recently announced a regulation for online news sites with frequent news reporting and significant reach among readers under an individual license framework. Such online news sites have to obey detailed content regulations and are required to put up a performance bond. Some worry this might force shutdowns of community-run blogs if they cannot afford the bond and further restrict political reports of online news sites. Despite such stringent rules placed upon Internet websites, political blogs

¹MDA defined a political website as one that "engages in providing any programme for the propagation, promotion or discussion of political or religious issues relating to Singapore on the World Wide Web through the Internet." ("Broadcasting (Class Licence) Notification," MDA, 2001).

dedicated to “crusading journalism” remain an important source of alternative voices and flourish on the Internet.

2.2 Interactivity of Political Weblogs

Weblogs help people connect with one another and convey their thoughts and reflections online (Blood, 2002; Froomkin, 2004). The success of blogs lies not only in their content but also how the content is presented to the audience. Blogging differs from personal websites with various features that are considered unique to them, bringing about a form of interactivity not only between readers and bloggers but among readers as well (Blood, 2002). Williams, Rice, and Rogers (1988) define interactivity as “the degree to which participants in a communication process have control over, and can exchange roles in, their mutual discourse” (p. 10). Features of blogs such as allowing readers to post comments that can be published immediately provide readers with an interactive experience. Other interactive features (e.g., search, comment, and archive) were used by American political blogs, empowering readers to comment and discuss issues and thus actively promoting communication (Kim, 2007). Navigational functions (e.g., search and archive) let readers understand the order of events and bloggers’ perspectives, and in turn improve quality of discussions. Links, both on blogrolls and within blog entries, are said to enhance the quality of blogs and create a form of community (Blood, 2002; Kim, 2007). These features contribute to interactivity, helping authors engage readers both directly and indirectly (Kim, 2007).

According to Kim (2012), interactivity leads people to view blogs as credible sources of information because its bottom-up participatory process builds trust. Through this two-way communication, bloggers can better connect with readers than mass media and traditional websites

(Kelleher & Miller, 2006). The writing of blogging differs from conventional news reporting as it is a semi-casual form of communication with messages conveyed in a conversational style (Karpinski, 2003), which also increases personal connection between authors and readers. The nature of weblogs allows them to promote discussions and facilitate political participation (de Zúñiga, Bachmann, Hsu, & Brundidg, 2013). Thus, interactivity is a significant factor for the success of blogs in the political sphere.

2.3 Political Blogs and Relational Maintenance

i. Importance of Relationship Maintenance in Political Blogs

Stafford and Canary (1991) first studied the concept of relational maintenance in an interpersonal environment. It was later applied to the context of corporate blogs (Kelleher & Miller, 2006) where relational maintenance was used as a public relations tool, since it provided a mutually beneficial relationship which Grunig and Hunt (1984) postulated as being key to the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. Sanderson (2009) cited studies linking relational maintenance with qualities such as equal relationships and mutual control. Relational maintenance strategies that lead to two-way, equal, and mutually controlled communication can also be used to maintain interactivity. Strategies that have been successfully applied to corporate blogs can also be used to evaluate political blogs.

In addition, Cass, Munroe, and Turcotte (2005) have postulated that if corporate blogging is transparent and if the two-way communication between the writer (the corporation) and the readers (the customers) is taken seriously, the corporation will be able to reap the full public relational benefits. The same can be said for political blogs in their bid to

maintain rapport between the authors and their readers. It is important to be open and transparent to blog readers. If left unchecked, political blogs may be used for spreading biased information, defamatory remarks, or even incite undesirable actions.

ii. *Blogs' Relational Maintenance Strategies*

If political blogs aim to keep their readers and the blogosphere community thriving, it is essential for them to continually attract and retain their readers through relational maintenance strategies. Stafford and Canary's (1991) study measured relational maintenance strategies which included positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and sharing tasks. Hon and Grunig (1999) later translated the strategies to public relations research and added "access" to the original five relational maintenance strategies. Later on, Cho and Huh (2007) modified the framework to study the relational maintenance strategies of corporate blogs. They developed six measures of relational maintenance strategies for corporate blogs. Table 1 shows the definitions of the six strategies. Lin's (2010) study about Taiwanese TV station blogs reconfirmed the importance of the six strategies and the lack of some deteriorates the author-reader relationship. As explained, these relational maintenance strategies for corporate blogs can and will be appropriately applied to political blogs for the purpose of this study.

Table 1. *Relational Maintenance Strategies for Corporate Blogs (Cho & Huh, 2007)*

Strategy	Definition
Access	Provide public access to representatives of the company or to a decision making process

Positivity	Offer users an enjoyable interactive experience
Openness	Have two-way communication between the blog authors and visitors
Social network	Support networking with common friends and affiliations
Assurance	Issue messages which stress commitment to the blog community
Sharing task	Attempt to maintain relationships by performing shared duties

3. Method

This content analysis study aims to investigate the characteristics, presentation, and relational maintenance of political blogs. Its research questions include:

- (1) What are the characteristics of different categories of political blogs?
- (2) How interactive do political bloggers engage or respond to readers?
- (3) How do political bloggers maintain their relationship with readers?

In August 2009, the researcher and her assistant started to observe Singapore's political blogs. We monitored the traffic and amount of views of political blogs in Singapore and analyzed their themes and characteristics. After four months, we identified three distinct categories ("political caricature blogs," "party-affiliated political blogs," and "political commentary blogs") based on two criteria (author background and content type). Next, we selected the two most popular blogs from each category, based on the number of visitors and comments and then examined the total amount of posts, comments, and features of all six blogs.

3.1. Selected Political Blogs

3.1.1. Political caricature blogs:

Blogs authored by initially relatively unknown individuals who pursue a keen interest in discussing political issues. This study selected *mrbrown* and *Mr Wang Says So*, two widely read blogs. *mrbrown* gained considerable popularity after his series of persistently non-political podcasts were created and distributed through his podcast site during the 2006 General Election. The author of *Mr Wang Says So* is the noted local poet Gilbert Koh whose blog boasts a high level of user participation. As political blogs in Singapore are required to register with the MDA, most bloggers keep a good mix of personal entries with their political writings in order to bypass registration and avoid stricter content regulation.

3.1.2. Political commentary blogs:

Blogs that post serious commentaries on socio-political issues and current affairs. Their entries are characterized by topic-driven, lengthy discussions of socio-political issues with structured arguments. These blogs are written by current or former politicians, political analysts, or former government officials. Their content is less frequently updated and almost devoid of personal entries. This study selected two notable blogs belonging to two public figures, Gerald Giam, a Workers' Party (opposition political party) member, and Yoong Siew Wah, the former director of the Internal Security Department (ISD). As an opposition political party member, Giam's blog frequently criticizes the ruling party's policies and promotes opposing perspectives which attracts a high readership. Yoong started Singapore Recalcitrant in August 2008 and had made several critical commentaries on the government's administration.

His blog was linked by fellow bloggers, resulting in greater participation and conversation among netizens.

3.1.3. *Party-affiliated political blogs:*

Blogs written by groups of people related to political parties who are concerned about socio-political issues. These blogs focus on specific issues and entries feature political agenda and proper essay structures. They rarely publish personal posts. *P65* was originally a blog written by Members of the Parliament (MPs) of the ruling party, while *Hammersphere* is operated by the Workers' Party. After a revamp in September 2009, the contributors of *P65* consisted of younger members from the PAP. Contributors to *Hammersphere* include not only regular writers, but also guest entries from the chairperson Sylvia Lim and other party members. The two blogs are overtly political, and have their own salient political stand. They belong to different political spectrums and have frequent updates of content.

Table 2. *Selected Political Blogs*

Blog	Starting Date	No. of posts	No. of comments
<u>Political Caricature Blogs</u>			
Mrbrown www.mrbrown.com	Feb 2005	103	425
Mr Wang Says So www.mrwangsaysso.blogspot.com	Dec 2006	39	673

Commentary Blogs

Gerald Giam http://geraldgiam.sg/	Jun 2006	28	248
Singapore Recalcitrant (Yoong Siew Wah) http://singaporerecalcitrant.blogspot.com/2009/10/unconscionable-injustice.html	Jun 2008	7	59

Party-affiliated political Blogs

Hammersphere www.hammersphere.sg	Mar 2007	8	2
P65 www.p65.sg	Oct 2006*	8	361

Next, blog posts and comments published during January to February 2010 were selected for coding. In total, there were 35 political blog posts and 362 comments.

3.2 Content Analysis Measurements

This study modified Kim's (2007)'s measurements for blogs' content analysis and examined their content (entry content, topics, nature of discussions, comments), presentation (technical and interactive features, multimedia components) and interactivity (Appendix1). As for relational maintenance strategies, Cho and Huh's (2007) framework was adopted to code the selected blogs (Appendix 2).

3.2.1 Content Measurements

i. Entry content

The content of blog entries in selected political blogs was analyzed to examine the topics of discussion. First, the topics of entries is determined if the entry's main topic(s) are pertaining to: "politicians" (news surrounding a particular politician), "political parties" (news focused on a particular political party), "evaluation of current administration" (government action or policy discussions), "national issues" (domestic social, cultural, or economical issues), "international relations" (international relations pertaining to Singapore), and "global politics" (International relations not involving Singapore).

ii. Nature of entry

The nature of entry refers to what kind of information the blogger disseminates through the political blog: whether the information is a direct quote, with or without personal comments; or whether the content is purely personal opinion, with or without supporting factual information.

iii. Link

The numbers, types, and patterns of links in blog entries were counted in order to evaluate the blogging style and to determine sources of information.

iv. Comments

The comments on the political entries were analyzed to gauge the level of interactivity. Specifically, the number of comments in each entry and the nature of comments – whether the commenters agreed, disagreed, or neither agree nor disagree with the entry – were counted. The topics of entries with the highest and lowest number of comments were also analyzed.

3.2.2 *Interactivity Measurements*

i. Interactive features

Blogging is a highly interactive mode of CMC with various technical features. The interactive features coded include the comments, the presence of hyperlinks to third-party content, the use of trackbacks, the presence of blogrolls (a menu of links to other blogs/websites), social networking tools like Facebook, Twitter, and Google Follower, and sharing tools like ShareThis bar.

ii. Use of multimedia components

With the user-friendly publishing and production tools, many tech-savvy bloggers can upload images and audiovisual materials to websites to enrich content and increase popularity. The coded items here include entries containing video content, audio content, pictures, and direct links to multimedia content.

iii. Navigational features

Bloggers may utilize several different navigational features such as archives, calendar, and categorizations (or topical segmentation) to make their blog entries more searchable, readable, and organized. The navigational features coded here include archive features, a topical menu, a list of recent posts, availability of RSS feeds, a list of recommended entries, search functions, subscription services, and the use of permalinks in the entries.

3.2.3 *Relational Maintenance Measurements*

i. Access

Access is the provision of channels in which the readers of a political blog may contact the author(s). It is measured by the presence of contact

information, including the presence of a contact email address, a contact number, and an online feedback or contact form available on the blog. Unlike corporate blogs, the political blog is either a personal blog or party collaborative blogs. For privacy reasons, it is unlikely that a political blogger will publish his physical address. As such, the presence of physical addresses is not measured.

ii. Positivity

Positivity is measured by the provision of multimedia elements and navigational tools. Codes include specific navigational elements, such as Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds, access to archives, availability of a search function, categorization of blog posts, and multimedia elements such as podcasts, vodcasts, and video and audio files.

iii. Openness

Openness is the level of open communication between bloggers and readers. It is measured by the presence of communication function on the blogs, specifically, the presence of the comment function and the trackback function.

iv. Social network

Social network is the display that the blog is part of a community and display referrals to other similar elements within the community through the use of blogrolls. It is measured by the presence of blogrolls and the use of social networking sites on the blog.

v. Assurance

Assurance is the commitment by the blogger to reassure readers of its authenticity and credibility. Through the display of an “about us” page and policy statements, blogs should assure readers that their personal information and comments are appropriately handled.

vi. Sharing task

Sharing task is the fulfillment of one's responsibility in a partnership. As such, sharing task is measured by the blogger's commitment to frequently update the blog content.

For the testing of inter-coder reliability, three coders coded mrbrown's blog independently based on the relational maintenance measures. Krippendorff's alpha, which measures the level of agreement between multiple observers, was used for the inter-coder reliability test. Overall, the test showed a high reliability of $\alpha = 0.735$.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Characteristics of political blogs

Of the six blogs analyzed, a total of 61 entries were recorded. 57.4% are political commentaries. The remaining are mostly personal entries (21.3%) or non-political posts such as reviews, events, and others (21.3%). Political caricature blogs recorded the highest number of total entries (55.7%) but political commentary blogs had the highest number of socio-political entries (94.1%).

Later, we classified "topics of blog entry" in seven categories to understand the foci of political discussions in blogs. The key issues discussed were national issues (45.7%), followed by current administration (22.8%), political party (20%), and politician (14.2%). Different categories were found to focus on different aspects of national issues. Political caricature blogs usually wrote about social issues with a direct impact on the public. For example, *Mr Wang Says So* discussed education issues, job crunch, and foreign talents among other topics. In

contrast, political commentary blogs and party-affiliated political blogs talked more about policies, political parties, or politicians.

As for “nature of the entries,” most political bloggers (42.9%) offered personal opinions plus quoted sources often. Another 31% entries were personal opinions without any quoted source. 25% offered direct cut-and-paste information from other sources. Comparatively, political commentary blogs provided more original opinions and perspectives while political caricature blogs used more direct cut-and-paste sources. Party-affiliated political blogs tended to contain a good mix of both.

“Link” is more prevalent in political blogs than random blogs (Kim, 2007). Providing links in blog entries supports bloggers’ viewpoints as readers can easily pinpoint the source of information for the views expressed. The use of links has been criticized in regard to the bias of selecting links to support bloggers’ personal stands (Adamic & Glance, 2005). However, links also can also help introduce diverse perspectives (Blood, 2002). The numbers and sources of links were coded in all blog entries. Seventy-four of the blog entries display links with 2.11 links in each entry on average. Political blogs linked to related articles (59.5%), information sources (29.7%), or background (9.5%). To maintain blogs’ credibility the political commentary blogs have a much larger number of links (78.4%) – especially links to related articles (93.2%) – than the other two blog categories.

“Comment” is a key interactive feature in a blog’s presentation. A total of 362 comments were recorded for the 35 political entries, and comments of each entry ranged widely from 0 to 65 (Table 3). On average, 10.34 comments were recorded for each entry. About a third had no comments. Majority of the comments (41.7%) agreed with the viewpoint offered by the blogger within the entry. There were comments disagreeing with the author (16.3%) and comments ambivalent or neutral to the viewpoint (10.5%). It should be noted that a high percentage of irrelevant comments (31.5%)

showed long threads of comments where discussion had veered away from the topic discussed within the blog entry. Interestingly, political caricature blogs received the highest number of comments (both agreements and disagreements) as well as an exceptionally high number of comments per entry as compared to the other two kinds. Its number of irrelevant comments was much lower than other two types, signifying their visibility and participative readership.

Table 3. *Comments of Blog Entries*

Types of comments	No. of comments			Total (%)
	Political Caricature blogs (%)	Political Commentary blogs (%)	Political Collaborative blogs (%)	
Agreeing with blogger's views	86 (58.1%)	37 (28.9%)	28 (32.6%)	151 (41.7%)
Disagreeing with blogger's views	40 (27.0%)	18 (14.1%)	1(1.2%)	59 (16.3%)
Neutral or mixed opinions	15 (10.1%)	17 (13.3%)	6 (6.9%)	38 (10.5%)
Irrelevant comments ^a	7 (4.8%)	56 (43.7%)	51 (59.3%)	114 (31.5%)
Total (%)	148 (40.9%)	128 (35.4%)	86 (23.8%)	362 (100%)
Comments per entry	16.4	8.0	8.6	10.34

^a Irrelevant comments were marked when the comment treads branched off towards unrelated topics.

4.2 *Interactivity*

Interactive features built within blogs often help bloggers reach out and communicate with their readers (Kim, 2007). Across the six blogs we observed, bloggers have used many different interactive tools on their blogs. Blogs' interactive features such as comments allow for two-way communication between bloggers and readers or among readers themselves. Other forms of interactive tools such as social networking functions like Facebook and Google Follower let readers connect with the bloggers and like-minded people in various virtual communities. Referral tools like ShareThis allow readers to forward blog content to other media or platforms, empowering users to redistribute the content. In order to evaluate the selected six political blogs' interactivity, we measured their interactivity features (e.g., links, comments, social media), multimedia components (photos, audio, videos), and navigation tools (e.g. archive, RSS, email subscription).

Table 4 lists the presence of interactive features on political blogs. Political caricature blogs and party-affiliated political blogs used more interactive features than political commentary blogs. All of them used comments and only one blog did not use links. Half of the blogs used ShareThis which allows readers to share blog content on multiple platforms. This reflected the emphasis bloggers placed upon providing interactive user experience. However, social networking features were visibly absent from political commentary blogs, and only recommendation (such as blogroll) and conversational features (comments) were used.

Table 4. *Interactive Features in Political Blogs*

Type of feature	Political Caricature Blog		Political Commentary Blog		Political Collaborative Blog	
	mrbrown	Mr Wang Says So	Gerald Giam	Yoong Siew Wah	P65	Hammer-sphere
Comment	√	√	√	√	√	√
Link	√	√	√		√	√
Trackback	√					
Blogroll			√		√	
Twitter	√		√			
Facebook					√	
Google Follower		√				
ShareThis	√				√	√
Total no. of features recorded	6	3	4	1	5	3
Total no. of features in each blog category	9		5		8	

Using multimedia components on blogs is one key characteristic of Singapore's political blogs. The study showed that out of the 193 blog entries² across all blogs studied, 138 posts (71.5%) contained multimedia content or contained links to multimedia content such as podcasts,

²Blog entries here included all posts during the data collection time on the six weblogs. The topics included socio-political issues and personal posts.

vodcasts, videos, and others. Still photographs and static images were most commonly used, accounting for 54.3% of entries. However, it is noted that images often play an accompanying role, with photo essays or photo-centric entries being a minority. Political caricature blogs used multimedia the most extensively (77.5%) across all blogs, most probably as part of their humorous style and to increase their entertainment value to appeal to laymen.

Table 5. *Multimedia Component in Political Blogs*

Type of content	No. of posts			Total (%)
	Political Caricature blogs	Political Commentary blogs	Party-affiliated political blogs	
Photographs/ images	66 (61.7%)	1(5.3%)	8(66.7%)	75 (54.3%)
Videos	30 (28.0%)	3 (15.8%)	2 (16.7%)	35 (25.4%)
Audio	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Direct links to multimedia (YouTube, podcasts, etc)	11 (10.3%)	15 (78.9%)	2 (16.7%)	28 (20.3%)
Total (%)	107 (77.5%)	19 (13.8%)	12 (8.7%)	138 (100%)

Navigational functions are essential to the blogs as they allow readers to orientate themselves with relative ease. Features such as

archives, search functions, and trackbacks let readers browse old and new entries to further understand bloggers' viewpoints and writing styles (Cho & Huh, 2007). Other navigational functions like topical listings and tag clouds let readers look up blog entries by categories, making it easier to search for topic-related entries.

In Table 6, party-affiliated political blogs were found to have the highest number of navigational features, followed by political caricature blogs, and commentary blogs. As archives and search functions are the fundamental tools of navigation, all six blogs had them. Categorizations of entries or tag clouds were moderately used (four blogs), followed by a list of recent entries (three blogs), and a RSS feed (three blogs).

Table 6. *Navigation Features in Political Blogs*

Types of navigational features	Political Caricature Blogs		Commentary Blogs		Party-affiliated political blogs	
	mrbrown	Mr. Wang Says So	Gerald Giam	Yoong Siew Wah	P65	Hammer-sphere
Archives	√	√	√	√	√	√
Search function	√	√	√	√	√	√
Topical	√	√	√			
Categorization/Tag clouds						√
Recent posts list	√				√	√
RSS feed		√			√	√
Recommendation list					√	
Subscription email						√

Total no. of features recorded	4	4	3	2	5	6
Total in category	8		5		11	

4.3 Relational Maintenance

According to Cho and Huh (2007), relational maintenance strategies included access, positivity, openness, social networks, assurance, and sharing task. They could be measured by analyzing blog features and content items. Table 7 shows the performance of relational maintenance in the six noted political blogs.

Access

Five blogs (83%) only provided email address for contact without feedback forms or contact numbers. This result showed low access was a common feature.

Positivity

The blogs commonly used various navigational features (e.g., search, archives, tag clouds, RSS, and link). However, multimedia components were limited in use with only half or less of the blogs using such features. The results are similar to Cho and Huh’s findings on corporate blogs. While political blogs can be said to deploy a high level of positivity strategy, they tend to focus on navigational ease rather than entertainment via multimedia components.

Openness

All blogs had a comment function, while only two had a trackback function. Three blogs stated that they reserved the right to delete unsuitable or inappropriate comments, and only one blog stated upfront

its policy of screening comments. Most of the blogs had a fairly open attitude toward discussions and comments.

Social network

Out of the six blogs, only two blogs contained a blogroll leading to other political blogs or related content. Some comments were made by other blog authors, showing a high level of social networking in the blogosphere. However, bloggers utilized very few links to profiles on other social media.

Assurance

All blogs have a form of “about us” page where bloggers post a write-up about themselves and the blog they write. Some were elaborate and cover detailed terms of use while others were short and vague descriptions. Only two included moderation rules on comments.

Sharing task

The updating of content varied from daily to a few times monthly. Out of the six blogs, two updated almost daily, two updated about two to three times a week, and the remaining updated only two to three times a month.

Table 7 Relational Maintenance and Blog Features

	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Access</i>		
Email address	5	83
Contact No.	0	0
Feedback form	0	0
<i>Positivity</i>		

RSS	3	50
Monthly archive	6	100
Link within post	3	50
Search function	6	100
Categories/tag cloud	4	67
Calendar	1	17
Audio	0	0
Podcast	2	33
Video	3	50
Vodcast	2	33
Openness		
Comment	5	83
Trackback	2	33
Social Network		
Blogroll	2	33
Social network site	1	17
Google Follower	1	17
Assurance		
“About Us” page	6	100
Blog use policy	2	33
Sharing Task		
Frequency of posting:		
- Twice or more daily	0	0
- About once	2	33

daily		
- 2-3 times a	2	33
week		
- About once a	0	0
week		
- 2-3 times a	2	33
month		
- About once a	0	0
month		
- Less than once a	0	0
month		

To examine differences across political blog categories, we evaluated the levels of relational maintenance strategies deployed by each blog by giving 0 (low), 1 (medium) or 2 (high). Table 8 show relational maintenance scores in three categories, with political caricature blogs scoring slightly higher than the other two. The blog that displayed the best relational maintenance strategies was Gerald Giam's political commentary blog with a score of 10, followed by the political caricature blog *mrbrown* (9), and the party-affiliated political blog *P65* (7). Although comparing individual blogs' relational maintenance scores revealed little differences, they varied notably in social network, positivity, and sharing task strategies.

The results showed that even though Singapore political blogs had similar relational maintenance performance, they stressed different strategies. More specifically, political commentary blogs employed the social network strategy more than the other two groups, while political caricature blogs and party-affiliated political blogs used more positivity strategy than commentary blogs. Also, political caricature blogs particularly emphasized sharing task strategy. Moreover, the findings

showed that overall political blogs tended to have a high level of openness towards their audience in order to establish and maintain credibility.

Table 8. *Average Relational Maintenance Score for Each Category*

Strategy	Political		Commentary		Party-affiliated	
	Caricature Blog		Blog		political blog	
	mrbrown	Mr Wang Says So	Gerald Giam	Yoong Siew Wah	P65	Hammer-sphere
Access	1	1	1	0	1	1
Positivity	2	1	1	0	2	1
Openness	2	1	2	1	1	1
Social Network	0	0	2	0	0	1
Assurance	2	1	2	1	2	1
Sharing Task	2	1	2	0	1	0
Total	9	5	10	2	7	5
Average	7		6		6	

Note. 0 (low), 1 (medium), 2 (high)

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Political blogging is an important platform for Singaporeans because they can provide alternative perspectives about socio-political issues and complement the mainstream reports of partially state-owned media. With legal restrictions on free speech Singapore’s bloggers who are constantly conscious about the boundaries and boxes of thoughts are more careful in

their online expressions in order not to risk running afoul of the law by indulging in zealous political discussions.

The content and presentation vary in three categories of political blogs. “Political caricature blogs” focused on national social issues while “political commentary blogs” and “party-affiliated political blogs” concentrated policies or political issues. The study found that, in an effort to circumvent the need for registration, “political caricature bloggers” tried to balance their content in terms of personal posts, indirect comments on socio-political issues, and mocking of current affairs. Blogging about social issues is a grey area that allows the bloggers to participate indirectly in political discussions. Their entertaining and sarcastic style further dilutes their political agenda. Singapore’s political blog readers are attracted to social issues posted on “political caricature blogs” and leave many relevant comments. In contrast, “political commentary blogs” and “party-affiliated political blogs” address political-related issues in a serious and less conversational voice in order to create credible and professional perspectives rather than entertaining and cynical remarks. Comparatively, political commentary is more professional with relevant links and topics as well as original opinions and perspectives.

Political blogs use a wide range of features to make their blogs more accessible and interactive to the readers as compared to regular blogs (Kim, 2007). Kim postulated that political bloggers seek to help readers understand their perspectives better by using interactive features. Also, interactive features can improve the communication between bloggers and readers. The analyses reveal that Singapore’s political bloggers are concerned about their interactivity with the readers and the communities. Among the three categories, “political caricature blogs” were the only type to include lots of multimedia components to enhance their

entertainment value and attract readership while the rest publish largely text-only entries with some photos. This led to the increased popularity of “political caricature blogs” in Singapore, especially with the younger generation. As social network functionalities (Facebook, Twitter, ShareThis, Google Follower) have become popular only recently, they were less used in 2010, compared with basic interactive features such as comments and trackbacks.

According to Kim (2007), more than half of the comments usually engage in diverse conversational disagreement, deviating from the topics by introducing new lines of discussions. While this observation is true for “political commentary blogs” and “party-affiliated political blogs”, it is noted that the number of irrelevant comments is the lowest for “political caricature blogs.” It signifies the success of the content and presentation strategies in the selected “political caricature blogs” which keep readers focusing on the topics discussed within the entries and cultivate readers’ loyalty. One more important thing to note is that Singapore’s political blog authors tend not to respond to commenting and discussions enthusiastically. While the comment feature allows readers to exchange views with the blog authors and other readers, the authors seldom engage the readers actively but instead leave the readers to converse among themselves. Singapore’s political bloggers generally adopt an observational attitude towards comments. On the other hand, the anonymous system lets Singapore’s readers express their opinions more blatantly online but also causes some irrelevant comments or defamatory remarks.

In Singapore, political blogs have utilized relational maintenance strategies via interactive features enabling easy navigation (positivity), two-way communication (openness), blog policy and blogmaster (assurance), and connecting the readers to other blogs/sites/networks

(social network). Some bloggers who are keen to update posts and respond to comments (task sharing) maintain good relationships with readers which attracts commercial sponsorship. These functional strategies add value to the blogs, making these blogs enjoyable and empowering the readers to voice out on blogs (through the use of comments. Overall, Singapore's political blogs perform better in "openness," but worse in "access" which ought to be improved to boost readers' trust and the blogs' credibility. "Political caricature blogs" are found to have slightly better performance in relational maintenance than the other two. The three blog categories show more differences in "social network," "positivity," and "sharing task" strategies.

Moreover, Drezner and Farrell (2004) discussed how prominent bloggers have their roots in the media before the rise of their personal blogs, and their blogs subsequently shaped public discussions on mainstream media and even affected politics and policies as well. Comparatively, prominent Singapore political bloggers who express alternative views may not share similar mass media connections as their Western counterparts. However, authors of "party-affiliated political blogs" and "political commentary blogs" are often individuals involved with local politics at various levels. Nominal bloggers also rose to fame after their blogs came into the spotlight, and some popular bloggers even got involved in mainstream media. Hence, successful bloggers no longer are confined to their online territory, but may also voice out their perspectives across multiple platforms.

In sum, this study enhances the understanding of political weblogs' characteristics and contributes to the theoretical frameworks for examining weblogs' interactivity and relational maintenance strategies. The concepts and measures of the relational maintenance strategies that are modified from Cho and Huh's (2007) study on corporate blogs were

further developed and found appropriate for examining political blogs' author-reader relational maintenance. As for limitations, the small sample of the blogs for content analysis and the non-election timing of data collection influence the study's generalizability to some degree.

References

- Adamic, L.A., & Glance, N. (2005). *The political blogosphere and the 2004 US election: Divided they blog*. Retrieved from <http://www.blogpulse.com/papers/2005/AdamicGlanceBlogWWW.pdf>
- Blood, R. (2002). Introduction. In J. Rodzvilla (Ed.), *We've got blog: How weblogs are changing our culture* (pp. ix–xiii). Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- Cass, J., Munroe, K., & Turcotte, S. (2005). *Corporate blogging: Is it worth the hype?* Retrieved from <http://www.backbonemedia.com/blogsurvey/blogsurvey2005.pdf>
- Cho, S., & Huh, J. (2007). Corporate blogs as a public relations tool: A content analysis applying the relational maintenance framework. Paper presented at the 2007 International Communication Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA.
- de Zúñiga, H. G., Bachmann, I., Hsu, S. H., & Brundidg, J. (2013). Expressive versus consumptive blog use: Implications for interpersonal discussion and political participation. *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 1538–1559.

- Drezner, D., & Farrell, H. (2004). The power and politics of blogs. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.
- Erickson, T., & Herring, S.C. (2007). Language networks on LiveJournal. In *Proceedings of the 40th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (CD-ROM). Washington, DC: Computer Society Press.
- Froomkin, A. M. (2004). Technologies for democracy. In P. M. Shane (Ed.), *Democracy online: The prospects for political renewal through the Internet*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gomez, J. (2008). Democracy and elections: The impact of online politics in Singapore (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from http://www.academia.edu/195426/Democracy_and_Elections_The_Impact_of_Online_Politics_in_Singapore
- Gomez, J. (2006). "Citizen journalism": Bridging the discrepancy in Singapore's general elections news. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 6(1), 3–34.
- Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Hamdy, N. (2009). Arab citizen journalism in action: Challenging mainstream media authorities and media laws. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 6(1), 92–112.
- Heng, L., Banerjee, I., & Fu, W. (2010). Through the looking glass: Internet users' perceptions of sociopolitical blog credibility in Singapore. Paper presented at the 2010 International Communication Association Annual Meeting, Singapore.
- Hon, L. C., & Grunig, J. (1999). Guidelines for measuring relationships in public relations. Retrieved from http://www.aco.nato.int/resources/9/Conference%202011/Guidelines_Measuring_Relationships%5B1%5D.pdf

- Hong, Y. H., Lin, Trisha T. C., & Ang, P. H. (June, 2010). Political campaigning in cyberspace: Innovation resistance among Internet users in Singapore. Paper presented at the 19th Asian Media Information and Communication Centre Annual Meeting, Singapore.
- Hornik, R. (2001, June 1–8). Power erupts. *Asiaweek*, 38.
- Karpinski, R. (2003). Corporate blogs make personal connection. *B to B*, 88(4), 1.
- Kelleher, T., & Miller, B. (2006). Organizational blogs and the human voice: Relational strategies and relational outcomes. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2), 395–414.
- Kim, E. (2007). Are political blogs a different species? An examination of non-elite political blogs. Paper presented at the 2007 International Communication Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA.
- Kim, D. (2012). Interacting is believing? Examining bottom-up credibility of blogs among politically interested internet users. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17(4), 422–435.
- Kumar R., Novak, J., Raghavan, P., & Tomkins, A. (2004). Structure and evolution of blogspace. *Communications of the ACM*, 47(12), 35–39.
- Lee, T., & Kan, C. (2009). Blogospheric pressures in Singapore: Internet discourses and the 2006 general election. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 23(6), 871–886.
- Lim, L. (2011, September 26). Netizens set up Facebook page to defend PAP. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from http://www.straitstimes.com/BreakingNews/Singapore/Story/STIStory_713493.html
- Lin, T. T. C. (2010). TV blogging: A multiple case study of blog management in Taiwan. *Journal of Cyber Culture and Information Society*, 18(1), 275–306.

- Lin, T. T. C., & Hong, Y. H. (2013). *How did new media influence youth political participation and voting? Examining the 2011 Singapore General Election*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing.
- Mahtani, S. (2011). Poll questions social media's influence in Singapore politics. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://blogs.wsj.com/searealtime/2011/10/06/poll-questions-social-medias-influence-in-singapore-politics/>
- McKenna, L. (2007). "Getting the word out": Policy bloggers use their soap box to make change. *Review of Policy Research*, 24(3), 209–229.
- Media Development Authority (MDA). (1996). Internet Code of Practice. Retrieved from http://www.mda.gov.sg/Documents/PDF/licences/mobj.981.Internet_Code_of_Practice.pdf
- Media Development Authority (MDA). (2001). Broadcasting (Class License) Notification 2001. Retrieved from <http://www.mda.gov.sg/wms.file/mobj/mobj.1472.Class%20License.pdf>
- Media Development Authority (MDA). (2013). Fact Sheet – Online news sites on a more consistent licensing framework as traditional news platforms. Retrieved from <http://www.mda.gov.sg/NewsAndEvents/PressRelease/2013/Pages/28052013.aspx>
- Rahim, F. A. (2006). Bloggers, podcasts online may be subjected to Parliamentary Elections Act. Retrieved from http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/docs/media/yr2006/CNA_Bloggers%20podcasts%20online%20may%20be%20subject%20to%20Parliamentary%20Elections%20Act_190206.pdf

- Rodan, G. (2003). Embracing electronic media but suppressing civil society: Authoritarian consolidation in Singapore. *The Pacific Review*, 16(4), 503–524.
- Reuters. (2006, April 3). Singapore warns bloggers against political postings. *Singapore Window*. Retrieved from <http://www.singapore-window.org/sw06/060403r1.htm>
- Sanderson, J. (2009). “You are all loved so much”: Exploring relational maintenance within the context of parasocial relationships. *Journal of Media Psychology*, 21(4), 171–182.
- Schmidt, J. (2007). Blogging practices: An analytical framework. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4), 1409–1427.
- Skoric, M. M., & Poor, N. (2013). Youth engagement in Singapore: The interplay of social and traditional media. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 57(2), 187–204.
- Sreekum, T. T., & Vadrevu, S. (2013). Subpolitics and democracy: The role of new media in the 2011 general elections in Singapore. *Science, Technology and Society*, 18(2), 231–249.
- Williams, F., Rice, R. E., & Rogers, E. M. (1988). *Research methods and the new media*. New York: Macmillan.

Appendix 1: Measurements for political blogs' interactivity

Measurement	Items measured
Interactive Features	Presence of following features: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Comment (No. of entries with comments Average no. of comments per post) - Link - Trackback - Blogroll - Twitter - Facebook - ShareThis - Google Follower
Navigational features	Presence of following features: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Archive - Topical categorization - RSS feed - Recent post list - Recommendation list - Search function - Subscription function
Multimedia content	No of entries with multimedia content: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Audio content - Video content - Podcast - Vodcast - Photograph / image

Appendix 2: Measurements of political blogs' relational maintenance

Measurement	Items measured
Access	Email address Contact number Feedback form
Positivity	RSS feed Monthly archive Links within posts Search function Categories / tag clouds Calendar Audio files Podcasts Video files Vodcasts
Openness	Comment function Trackback
Social network	Blogroll Facebook links Google Follower
Assurance	'About Us' Page Blog Use policy statement
Sharing task	Frequency of update

新加坡政治部落格之研究：

探討媒體特徵、互動性和讀者關係維繫

林翠絹*

摘要

本研究調查新加坡政治部落格特質、互動性以及與讀者關係維繫表現。該國政治部落格主要可分為「政治諷刺」、「政治評論」和「黨團創作」三大類別。本研究選出六知名部落格進行內容分析後，發現大部分部落客提供個人觀點並附上引述來源，最常討論的主題為國家大事，而大多數讀者評論則傾向支持部落客發言立場。在媒體內容審查制度下，「政治諷刺」部落客以嘲弄幽默的方式，迂迴地表達政治意見，獲得較多讀者青睞。星國政治部落格在互動性方面普遍重視網頁導航功能。受到高度歡迎的「政治諷刺」部落格是唯一使用多媒體元素的類別，雖然「政論部落格」內容專業度高、具原創觀點和相關連結，但互動性卻最低。此外，三類政治部落格各採取不同的讀者維繫關係策略，但皆重視「開放性」，藉此維持可信度。

關鍵字：政治部落格 互動性 關係維繫 內容分析 政治諷刺
政治評論

* 林翠絹為南洋理工大學黃金輝傳播學院 廣播電視與電影學系助理教授。
Email: trishalin@ntu.edu.sg