

## Social Media and Elections in Singapore: Comparing 2011 and 2015

Weiyu Zhang\*

*National University of Singapore*

This paper applies a theoretical approach that focuses on the interaction between media, politicians, activists, and citizens to investigate the influence of social media during two recent general elections in Singapore. Taking into account the combination of authoritarian governance and popular elections in this city-state, this paper utilizes a mixed methods approach (i.e., a combination of statistics and virtual ethnography) to analyze four aspects of this influence. First, social media are used by the opposition parties because they are the only alternative to use in disseminating information and fostering dialogue. However, the ruling authorities use the same social media to counter the opposition. Second, social media empower the opposition by serving as efficient tools to mobilize, organize, and engage active citizens. However, compared to the traditional grassroots approach, online mobilization is not as effective as expected. Third, social media are able to change the perceptions of ordinary citizens regarding the opinion climate, which could be to either the advantage or the disadvantage of the opposition. Finally, the youngest age group (i.e., 21–30 years) was surveyed in both 2011 and 2015 to investigate their responses to these changes. Because of the complex influence of social media in Singapore, the citizens in this age group are particularly prone to being swing voters.

Keywords: electoral authoritarianism, elections, Singapore, social media, voters

On 7 May 2011, Singapore's ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP), received the lowest number of votes (60%) since the city-state's independence in 1963. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Long<sup>1</sup> (2011) acknowledged that it was "a very different world in 2011 compared to 2006" because social media exerted an influence that was "much bigger than in previous elections." This "watershed election" posed a substantial challenge to the ruling party's decades-long dominance in this country. The social media were credited by journalists, commentators, and politicians from both the ruling party and the opposition. Although many believed that this trend would continue, on 11 September 2015, in a general election in which for the first time since independence all constituencies were contested, the PAP won in landslide victory, gaining 70% of the votes and recapturing one parliament seat from the opposition. In the post-election press conference, Prime Minister Lee commented, "we also have gone into the social media. Since the election results, since 12 o'clock, I already had two Facebook posts."<sup>2</sup>

The intriguing role of social media in elections in particular and in politics in general has been a worldwide phenomenon. For instance, Obama's successful exploitation of social media in his campaign led to the coining of the term "the Facebook election" (Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010). Similarly, in the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East, the recent usage of Twitter in organizing protests and movements has led commentators to wonder whether such radical political changes could be called "the Twitter Revolution."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, in countries such as China, social media are censored and well controlled by the government.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that social media, which are the most recent development in new media, play an increasingly important role in politics. However, as many scholars have observed, the manner in which social media have become influential is conditioned by several factors, including who use them (e.g., political

parties), when they are used (e.g., election time), and whether the existing political system enables or constrains their usage (e.g., the mass media system).

This paper uses a theoretical approach that focuses on the interaction between the media, politicians, activists, and citizens (Voltmer, 2006) to investigate the influence of social media during two recent general elections in Singapore. These elections were held in the context of a particular type of hybrid political system: electoral authoritarianism. In this context, in which authoritarian governance is combined with popular elections, social media have unique effects that are not apparent in established democracies. This paper utilizes a mixed methods approach (i.e., a combination of statistics and virtual ethnography) to analyze four aspects of this influence. First, social media are used by the opposition to disseminate information and foster dialogue because of the close control of traditional mass media by the authorities. However, the latter can use the same social media to counter the opposition. Given their ample resources, the authorities sometimes are more successful than the opposition in using social media. Second, social media empower the opposition by serving as efficient tools to mobilize, organize, and engage active citizens. However, the effectiveness of such online mobilization compared to the traditional grassroots approach is not as strong as expected. Third, social media are able to change citizens' perceptions of the opinion climate, which could be to either the advantage or the disadvantage of the opposition. Finally, the youngest age group (i.e., 21–30 years) was surveyed in both 2011 and 2015 to investigate their responses to the above changes. Because the influence of social media is complex, the citizens in this age group are prone to being swing voters. The paper concludes that in the two elections, the use of social media shifted the political balance in Singapore's electoral authoritarian city-state. Among the potential problems in social media-based election politics in such systems, the most prominent concerns misperceptions of the opinion climate.

### **An Interactionist Approach to Political Communication via Social Media**

This paper follows the interactionist approach elaborated by Voltmer (2006) in her edited book, *Mass Media and Political Communication in New Democracies*. This approach emphasizes the interplay of macro-level conditions (e.g., election systems and media systems) and micro-level variables (e.g., the psychology and behavior of political actors such as politicians, journalists, activists, and citizens) in shaping political communication. Such interplay is involved in conflicts, disruptions, compromises, and cooperation. Because none of these components is independent of the influence of the other components, a high degree of mutual interdependence exists among them. This approach differs from the traditional approaches of political economy, which focuses on systemic factors, and psychology, which is primarily interested in individuals' attitudes, beliefs, values, and their influences on behaviors. The interactionist approach considers that the balance of political communication is subject to constant changes due to the interplay among these different components. Any change in one component of the model causes changes in the other components, which then must adapt to the new conditions by redefining their strategies. Because of its emphasis on change, this model seems particularly suited to the study of political communication processes in hybrid political systems.

Previous empirical research has applied this approach in conducting comparative analyses across countries. For instance, Voltmer and Schmitt-Beck (2006) examined the political effects of mass media in four countries that were transitioning from non-democratic to democratic regimes. Voltmer and Schmitt-Beck first positioned their examination of the role of media in the context of different political systems because Bulgaria and Hungary were under communist rule whereas Chile and Uruguay had emerged from military dictatorship. The influence of media

systems has to be understood in their context, which includes the state-media relationship, the ownership of media, the professional practice of journalists, and the media content. When these macro-level conditions were clarified, the effects of media on individual psychologies (e.g., democratic orientation) were shown to be context sensitive. This example illustrates that conclusions about the influence of the media are never absolute, and they should be contextualized in the dynamic interactions between multiple political factors.

This interactionist approach could also be used to examine elections, especially in the context of hybrid regimes. Schedler stated that in such regimes, elections can be seen “as ‘creative’ institutions that constitute a certain sets of actors (citizens, opposition actors, and ruling parties), endow them with certain sets of strategies, and push them into a conflictive ‘nested game’ in which the competition for votes within given rules takes place alongside the competitive struggle over the rules of the game” (2006, p. 2). Although Schedler used “dynamic” not “interactionist” to refer to this approach, the focus on the “strategic interplay” among “actors” to maintain or break certain power equilibrium is the same. The shared approach is also evident in previous empirical findings that the coalescence of the opposition camp is “not a cause of transition but rather a growing probability of transition” (van de Walle, 2006), and the usage of “skillful” or “clumsy” manipulation by the ruling parties would lead to different regime transitions (Case, 2006). Several exogenous factors, including state capacity, legislative strength, and international actors, are also capable of shifting the electoral balance.

New media should be examined by using this model of interactions. For instance, they not only empower activists and citizens to communicate efficiently with each other but also grant the authorities (e.g., ruling parties) an unprecedented surveillance. In order to understand how new media change the balance of political communication, we have to examine the interaction between new media and other components in the model, including politicians, mainstream mass media, activists, and citizens. Such interactions not only occur within the confines of an existing political system but also change the political system through re-negotiating the relationship between the components. Moreover, new media are not homogeneous. When new media interact with other components, they do not function in uni-directionally. We need to be aware of the various affordances and exploitation of different new media platforms. For instance, a party website interacts with the public differently than a political blog does.

Howard (2010) used a similar approach to examine how information technology redefines political communication in the Muslim world. Instead of offering a straightforward conclusion about whether information technology promotes democratization, Howard (2010) carefully examined the interaction between information technology and various components in the comprehensive model. Muslim governments were found to take advantage of information infrastructures to improve the capacity of the state. Political parties, however, are influenced by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to different extents: Ruling parties do not appear capable of exerting full control over the digital media despite their high investment in ICTs, whereas minor parties still do not benefit much from ICTs. Journalism has been changed significantly by ICTs: the number of citizen-journalists that are equipped with new media technologies is increasing. Civil groups find new members and connect to other groups in and outside their countries through ICTs. These findings have to be understood in combination rather than separately. For instance, in countries where the state is strong enough to control the development of ICTs, the democratization process largely depends on the progress made by citizen-journalists and civil groups. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the existing political

system, including the media system, before assessing the role of new media in political communications.

### **Electoral Authoritarianism in the Social Media Era**

According to Levitsky and Way (2002, p. 53), modern democratic regimes meet a minimum of four criteria: “1) Executives and legislatures are chosen through elections that are open, free, and fair; 2) virtually all adults possess the right to vote; 3) political rights and civil liberties, including freedom of the press, freedom of association, and freedom to criticize the government without reprisal, are broadly protected; and 4) elected authorities possess real authority to govern, in that they are not subject to the tutelary control of military or clerical leaders.” Singapore is distinguished from full-fledged democracy on one hand and authoritarianism on the other hand (Ortmann, 2011). The city-state holds regular elections to decide who constitutes the legislative body and the presidency. The elections have broad suffrage because almost every citizen has the right to vote. The voting procedure in Singapore is generally fair<sup>5</sup> and does not involve fraud. However, it is characterized by a single-party system in which the opposition parties have never overturned the ruling party. Singapore has held 12 general elections since its independence in 1965, and the PAP has continued to be returned to power with an overwhelming majority.

Between elections, the governance style in Singapore is authoritarian. The country maintains the colonial Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows the state to imprison anyone, including journalists, without trial. Defamation and sedition charges have been brought against bloggers and individual Internet users. A recent case was Amos Yee, a 17-year-old YouTuber who vulgarly criticized the former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. In 2015, he was arrested under the Singapore Penal Code. Singapore law includes the Newspaper and Printing Press Act (NPPA), which regulates most traditional mass media. This act gives the government either the management share of the press or ownership of it. Through controlling the top editors in the media, the government achieves consensus with the mainstream press regarding the role of journalism in Singapore. Foreign media that criticize local governments in other parts of world have been domesticated by the government. Singapore has been particularly successful in taming the foreign press through either economic measures or legal means. For example, the amendment of the NPPA in 1986 allowed for limiting the circulation of foreign publications that are deemed to interfere with local politics (George, 2007).

The robustness of electoral authoritarianism in Singapore is exceptional. Among the seven Asian authoritarian democracies established in the 1960s and 1970s, Singapore is one of the only two (Malaysia is the other) that have survived (George, 2006, p. 37). Instead of framing Singapore as a failed attempt to evolve into a liberal democracy, we need to understand the historical context that renders this robustness possible and, to some extent, necessary. After World War II (WWII) when the war-torn situation necessitated a strong style of governance, Singapore was a colony ruled by the British (Shamsul, 2000). The multiracial nature of the population further complicated the situation, which led the colonial government to establish authoritarian rule. The political structure founded in this historical era set the basic tone of governance by the local politicians after independence. When economic development became the main theme during the late 20th century, the tradition of top-down planning and operations was followed to maintain efficient governance. Slater (2012) concluded that the strong Singaporean state preceded the rise of the ruling party and empowered the government to forestall further democratization.

It is well recognized that Singapore has developed at a fast pace under its authoritarian rule. An example is the development of ICTs. Singapore was one of the earliest Asian countries to adopt a master plan for developing its information infrastructure. In 2009, the rate of computer ownership was 87%.<sup>6</sup> The Internet has penetrated 79%<sup>7</sup> of the population according to data compiled in 2014. These rates are higher than those in many other countries in this region. Social media recently became one of the fastest growing online platforms. For instance, Facebook is prominent among Internet users; in 2012, the penetration rate was 52%.<sup>8</sup> The statistics consistently show that new media, especially social media, are frequently used by a large percentage of the population. Thus, whether and how such active usage of social media has any connection with political activities have become intriguing questions.

Although new media are open to exploitation for political ends in any context, they are arguably more influential in authoritarian regimes than in liberal democracies (Ferdinand, 2000). Authoritarian governments promote ICT development for the sake of economic growth but are either unaware or incapable of controlling new media as they control mass media. In many such countries, new media function as the only alternative to the state-controlled information platforms (e.g., Makinen & Kuira, 2008; Zhang, 2005). When citizens have access to alternative facts and opinions, their perceptions and actions regarding politics are changed accordingly (e.g., Zhang, 2010). Elections can be considered a special period during which the political perceptions and actions of various actors are intensified and readily observed. Researchers have paid attention to the role of new media in elections since Howard Dean pioneered Internet-based fundraising and grassroots organization during the 2004 American presidential election campaign (Trippi, 2004). Since then, new media have become more and more influential in elections. As Panagopoulos (2005) pointed out, campaigners who are not tech-savvy risk being left behind. For instance, Harfoush (2009) argued that the critical factor in the Obama campaign was the successful usage of social media to persuade young voters. Previous studies also identified the wide adoption of online platforms by political parties to communicate directly with voters although the symbolic value of “riding the tide” seems more important than the actual value of using new media (Nixon, Ward & Gibson, 2004). With regard to social media in particular, Tsumasjan and colleagues (2010) found that tweets could reflect offline sentiment because the number of party mentions in tweets accurately corresponded to the results of the 2009 German federal election. The popular usage of Twitter in organizing protests in the Middle East (e.g., the 2009 Iranian presidential election) led to the term “Twitter Revolution.” Scholars (e.g., Burns & Eltham, 2009) pointed out that the importance of using Twitter in such protests is hard to determine because on the one hand, protesters can use Twitter to coordinate actions, and on the other hand, state police can identify, locate, and kill these protesters through monitoring their Twitter activities. This paper aims to identify the role of social media during two recent general elections in Singapore, where regular democratic elections exist along with authoritarian control.

## **Methods**

The data used in this paper were collected from two sources: electoral statistics and virtual ethnography. The Institute of Policy Studies at the National University of Singapore conducted election polls in 2011 and 2015, including two national representative samples of Singaporean citizens aged 21 years and older. The fieldwork for General Election 2011 (GE2011) was conducted from 24 May to 17 July 2011 via computer-aided telephone interviews (CATI). The majority of the calls were made in the evenings on weekdays and throughout the day on

weekends. The questionnaires were available in three languages: English, Mandarin, and Malay. The average interview length was approximately 35 minutes. To ensure data representativeness, quotas were set based on race and gender. Soft quotas were also set for age, housing type and education levels. The fieldwork for General Election 2015 (GE2015) followed a similar procedure, except that the panelists were interviewed online for the survey. From 15 September to 25 September 2015, an online survey panel was used to reach the respondents. The online questionnaire took about 20 minutes to complete. In addition to quota sampling, the 2015 study used weights to ensure the compatibility of the sample with the national population. Both polls included questions about demographics, political traits, traditional and new media usage, political participation during the election times, and the respondents' voting decisions.

In addition, a virtual ethnography was conducted to observe the social media activities during election time. The purpose of the virtual ethnography is not to provide a quantitative account of the activities observed. Rather, through a comprehensive understanding of the part of the Internet that is involved in the two elections, the author attempts to provide a holistic view regarding the complicated role of social media, in order to include the multiple components the interactionist framework suggests. Virtual ethnography refers to the process of conducting and constructing an ethnography with the virtual, online environment as the site of research (Evans, 2010). When the object of study becomes the Internet (Schneider & Foot, 2004), there are indeed challenges for doing ethnography research such as defining clearly the territory of the field site, the lack of rich social cues (Hine, 2000), and the difficulty in integrating and analyzing the heterogeneous data (Dominguez et al., 2007). Despite these challenges, online ethnography has been used to study political communication topics such as political discussions (Jankowski & Van Selm, 2008) and organizations (Howard, 2002).

Prior reviews of virtual ethnography recognized the broad range of methodological approaches grouped under the same title (Dominguez et al., 2007). Among the diverse options, the author chose to rely mainly on observation, without much participation, by closely following the activities in cyberspace during the elections. The objects or spaces of observation included political blogs by politicians or activists, Facebook pages and groups, Twitter accounts and YouTube channels related to parties and candidates, as well as websites (e.g., mainstream news websites, alternative news websites, party websites, etc.). A comprehensive list of these sources was compiled by a team of researchers for the purposes of this ethnographic study in addition to data archiving and content analysis (see Pang & Goh, 2015; Wu, Tan & Soon, 2015). These online sites were visited regularly (at least once a day) to keep abreast of updates. Close observations took place in the official durations of both elections, starting from the nomination day and ending on the polling day. Specifically, the 2011 observation lasted from April 27 to May 7, and the 2015 observation lasted from September 1 to September 11. During this process, numerous comments, pictures, videos, podcasts, discussions, and debates were observed. The observations were bracketed using the interactionist framework and analyzed through triangulating the various discourses and interpretations obtained from the sources. Face-to-face conversations with bloggers, commentators, political candidates, and researchers about both elections were used as a complementary means to ensure the rigor of my analysis and interpretation of the data.

In the following analyzes, virtual ethnography is the main source of evidence for the first three sections, which focus on, respectively, social media as alternative channels, mobilization tools, and opinion climate forgers. The online sources used in these analyzes were mainly sites where virtual ethnography was carried out. The survey data were occasionally mentioned in

these three sections when the analyses showed evidence about individual voters and their behaviors. The last section, which concerns social media and swing voters, uses primarily the survey data because it focuses on individual voters and their decisions.

### **Social Media as Alternative Channels**

In his thorough overview of Internet politics, Chadwick (2006) claimed that the Internet not only affects existing political institutions but also shapes new norms, rules, and procedures in politics. He reiterated that the Internet influences two factors that are relevant in election campaigns. The first is political competition where the opposition is denied easy access to mainstream media and social media allow “previously marginalized or even new parties to emerge and compete with established players” (Chadwick, 2006, p.148). Hence, social media become a powerful weapon used to gain publicity. Second is the potential redistribution of power whereby the egalitarian use of social media results in decentralized networks that redistribute power from ruling parties to opposition parties and social activists.

Social media may derive strength from acting as an alternative information source in a media-controlled society (Gomez, 2008). Grassroots publishing is often sufficient for opposition parties, many of which upload videos of their speeches and campaign activities on their Facebook, Twitter and YouTube channels. In addition, opposition party members are often willing to break news stories online in order to counter potentially unfavorable coverage by the mainstream media. For instance, in GE2015, a poison pen letter was sent to the mainstream media, accusing one new Workers’ Party candidate Daniel Goh, who was an associate professor working at the National University of Singapore, of having an affair with his former student. Daniel Goh published his response immediately on his Facebook page before the print press was able to circulate the news widely. When opposition members break a “big story” online and attract the attention of Internet users, traditional media (Bruns, 2005) are often pressured into publishing these popular public discussions.

The comparison with GE 2011 showed that traditional media were indeed forced by the online alternative media to revise their practices in order to appear more balanced and less biased. In a podcast discussion organized by the blog<sup>9</sup> [inconvenientquestions.org](http://inconvenientquestions.org) a former traditional media senior reporter pointed out that in GE2015, the coverage of the different parties clearly was more balanced. For example, the *Straits Times*, the leading mainstream newspaper, put a picture of the crowds at the Workers’ Party rally on its front page. In another example, a mainstream reporter, after publishing a story about the poison pen letter sent to Daniel Goh without verifying the accusations, apologized to Daniel, and the reporter's newspaper later published an interview with several leaders of the Workers’ Party. Moreover, the traditional media are no longer the main agenda setters on election issues. In GE2011, Pang and Goh (2011) found that blog posts were often linked to mainstream media stories but not vice versa. However, as they recently observed,<sup>10</sup> “the communication is dialogical, with bloggers and mainstream media increasingly dependent on each other for news and sentiments.”

In addition to candidates disseminating information via their online channels, the very notion of interaction between candidates and online readers encourages further information to be revealed and relayed. Conversations are seemingly direct and intimate because when a candidate, rather than a media or public relations representative, writes online, readers may feel a personal connection and compelled to respond. Our 2015 survey found that comments were by far the most popular means of candidate-voter interaction: 38% of respondents said that they had commented on a blog, YouTube post or Facebook status update regarding a candidate, political

party, election, and/or issue. This finding showed a clear increase over the results of our 2011 survey, where during GE2011, 13% of the respondents commented on a blog, Facebook page, or tweet. Although many comments were simply expressions of support or opposition to a view or a candidate, some respondents indicated that they went beyond taking sides to engage in socio-political discourse on these online sites.

Chadwick's second proposition of power redistribution was not fully realized in the Singapore case. Instead, according to Tan Tarn How,<sup>11</sup> there appeared to be a normalization of online alternative media. One significant change from 2011 to 2015 was the greatly improved online engagement by the ruling party. Almost all members of parliament now have a Facebook page, and the number of "likes" on their pages accurately reflect their offline popularity. For example, the most popular Singaporean politician on Facebook is Prime Minister Lee Hsien Long, who has more than 860,000 likes on his page. He often posts selfies and other pictures taken by himself rather than by campaign managers. News articles revealed that both social media consultants<sup>12</sup> and netizen volunteers<sup>13</sup> defended the ruling politicians and their policies. In addition, the excitement and novelty caused by the alternative channels faded over time. Traffic on the Online Citizen, a citizen journalism blog that was able to garner one million views per month during GE2011, was said to have dropped to one fifth of the flow during non-election time but increased to 50% during GE2015.<sup>14</sup> With regard to voices, the online sphere also became less pro-opposition and more balanced. The rising stars in GE2015 were relatively new blogs, such as mothership.sg, the Middle Ground, and inconvenientquestions.org. However, compared with those that were popular during GE2011, such as the Online Citizen, these new blogs appear to be more neutral, which is best indicated by the blog name, the Middle Ground. Negative coverage of opposition parties accompanied positive coverage of the ruling party. A telling example is the massive defeat of the National Solidary Party's Cheo Chai Chen, which was due to his criticism of the PAP candidate Tin Pei Ling, in which he stated that Tin's mothership status would weaken her ability to serve the interests of voters.

### **Social Media as Mobilization Tools**

In addition to functioning as information channels that are alternatives to the state-controlled mass media, social media were seen as used by various non-governmental forces to mobilize the support of voters. Chadwick (2006, p. 149) argued that "psychologically disempowered spectators will feel their political efficacy increase, not only by physically turning out to rallies and meetings but by contributing to and learning from a much richer online public debate." Previously, voter mobilization was severely limited by both formal and informal constraints. For instance, during the 2006 Singapore General Election, there was a ban on election advertising using social media, such as YouTube, by actors other than political parties (Au, 2011). However, in general, the control over social media is far less than that over mass media, which could be attributed to the open and decentralized features of the Internet that render such control futile. In GE2011, the Singapore government lifted the ban on non-party actors running online campaigns (Au, 2011), which was probably because of the unsuccessful control over such content during the 2006 election. The usage of social media to mobilize voters to lend public support is particularly interesting in Singapore. Street protests and large-scale social movements have been sporadic because of legal barriers and the political apathy of the citizens.

In Singapore, political parties initiated their presence online through building their own websites. In 1995, the oppositional National Solidarity Party (NSP) was the first to launch a website, and the ruling PAP followed by setting up a young PAP site (Kenyon & Marjoribanks,



2007). Almost all political parties established an online presence (e.g., websites, Twitter accounts, Facebook accounts) during the recent two elections. The numbers were significantly higher in GE2015 because of the increase in the number of opposition parties and the increased usage of social media by politicians. For instance, mobile applications were developed by the ruling party to function as another online method of disseminating information. The opposition party leaders were particularly attracted by the potential of social media. Secretary-general Chee Soon Juan of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party's (SDP) said, "For the SDP it will be crucial for us given the media in Singapore where everything is controlled by the ruling party" (quoted in Lim, 2011). In fact, in GE2015, Chee stood as a candidate, and his popularity surprisingly surged both online and offline. According to Twitter, Chee was the second most-mentioned politician during the first week of GE2015, ranking higher than the leaders of any other opposition parties.<sup>15</sup> Media reports included images of long queues of voters waiting for Chee to sign his book at SDP rallies.<sup>16</sup> Such popularity was at least partially the result of a documentary about Chee's family, which was released on YouTube shortly before the campaign and which helped to mend Chee's broken image as a dishonest and unpatriotic politician.

In addition to keeping the long-term opposition parties in the public consciousness, social media provided an enormous space for opposition candidates to rise from anonymity and be recognized by voters. The most successful in GE2011 was Nicole Seah, a 24-year old NSP candidate who "[had] gone from unknown advertising agency executive to the national spotlight" (Russell, 2011). She managed to gather an impressive amount of support on Facebook. The number of likes was second only to those accrued by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew during the 2011 election. An analysis of 77,912 unique tweets posted during the election period (Chan, 2011) found that Nicole Seah was the most-often discussed personality with 3,243 mentions in the Twitter sphere. When her team lost the election, various petition groups (e.g., Nicole Seah for Member of Parliament) were set up on Facebook fan pages. However, such novel approaches seemed less effective in GE2015. The NSP introduced another young and pretty woman, Kevryn Lim, as a candidate. In this round, although her background as a single mother has received attention, she has not generated much discussion. Moreover, such strategies have also been adopted by the ruling party. PAP managed to introduce quite a few new faces who are young females with pleasant public outlook, including Sun Xue Ling, a 36-year old director of investment who made a rally speech in Hokkien. The video clip widely circulated online and had at least six versions on YouTube, one of which is being titled "Touching Speech in Dialect."

There has been doubt regarding whether these online sentiments can translate to offline public support, and most importantly, votes. In the context of Singapore, participation in rallies held by opposition parties is one of the most visible means to lend support before the actual voting kicks in. In the case of GE2011, our post-election survey (Tan, 2011) found that compared to a 17% rally participation in 2006, 24% of voters attended one or more political rallies in 2011. It was reported that the Worker's Party, the opposition party that ultimately won seats in Parliament, "drew the biggest crowd, with an estimated 60,000 to 70,000 people turning up" (Palatino, 2011). Pictures and videos of these rallies flooded into the online sphere. A side-by-side picture of a WP and a PAP rally (showing the vast difference in audience turn out) posted by Mr. Brown, a local online opinion leader, was retweeted 185 times and made into the top five shared tweets during the election period (Chan, 2011). A call for volunteers as counting/polling agents made by the Singapore People's Party was the second most shared tweet.

GE2015 also showed huge crowds at opposition party rallies, making the voting result a surprise to both the ruling and opposition parties. Our 2015 survey data showed that 24% of

voters attended one or more political rallies, the same turnout as in 2011. However, if we look at the online trends closely, we see that the most popular shared tweet is a picture showing a homeless man sleeping on the street and calling PAP to “do something about this”<sup>17</sup>. The other widely shared tweets included several mocks of the inappropriate comments made by the opposition candidates and their lack of preparations. Therefore, two observations can be made here: firstly, the online sentiment during GE2105 was not that pro-opposition compared to GE2011; and secondly, the online high profile of the opposition became a short-term show and did not translate into many votes. In 2015, even rally participation was not a good indicator of votes, which urges us to think about the problems with online mobilization.

I argue that active online mobilization is only effective when there is no other mobilization going on. In the “nested game” of elections, the oppositions can only enjoy the benefit of online engagement when the ruling party has done little either online or offline. This was definitely not the case in 2015. PAP has been working hard to mobilize grassroots support and engage citizens since 2011. A nation-wide dialogue program, Our Singapore Conversation, was launched in 2012 and invited a large number of ordinary citizens to join face-to-face conversations about the country and its future. The regular meet-the-people sessions also provide many opportunities for the PAP members of parliament to communicate directly with the voters. The fiftieth anniversary of national independence kept reminding voters how much PAP has led the progress of the country. These offline mobilizations and day-to-day campaigning are not accessible to the opposition. With only six seats in parliament, the opposition politicians can only have direct contact with a limited number of residents. Their online mobilization was rivaled by the equally, if not more, active online engagement from the PAP side. Therefore, it is concluded that social media can function as mobilization tools, which are open to be exploited by both the ruling and the opposition parties; however, the effectiveness of online mobilization might not be as high as traditional grassroots mobilization.

### **Social Media as Opinion Climate Forgers**

Although it seems to be clear that social media can mobilize both online and offline support among engaged voters, this group of active citizens is still a minority compared to the public. Our post-election survey in 2011 (Tan, 2011) showed that only 30% of the voting population ever obtained election information from Facebook and/or blogs. According to our 2015 survey, 28% followed blogs or YouTube channels and 35% followed Social Networking Sites (SNSs) for election information. It remains a question mark whether social media, operated as alternative information channels and mobilization tools, are able to reach and even influence the generally less interested and more silent majority, especially considering that they are the mainstream at the ballot box. This section presents cases to illustrate the mechanism through which the mobilized minority and their standpoints may forge the perception about opinion climate, which eventually can shift votes both for and against the opposition side. Forging means that not only issues are brought up and frames are shaped by online voices but also estimations about the general voting result are made based on online sentiments.

During GE2011, quite a few issues emerged as popular topics both online and offline. In previous elections, the online sphere seemed to follow traditional mass media in terms of issues on the agenda, by rebutting or challenging the official discourse without significantly advancing its own agenda. Starting from 2011, the situation began to change. A content analysis of the blogosphere (Goh & Pang, 2011) found that bloggers prioritized issues such as governance, candidate’s quality, political system and hearing people’s voice over the bread and butter issues

(e.g., housing costs), which are often presented in mass media as hot topics that concern the voters. When it comes to issues first introduced in mass media, the online voices succeeded in framing the issues with their own interpretation. One of such issues was the discussion on the quality of one PAP candidate, Tin Pei Ling. Soon after PAP announced her as the youngest face in the team, this 27-year old female candidate and her qualifications were put under a magnifying glass by netizens. Whereas mass media tried to portray her as PAP's careful selection of next-generation leaders (e.g., Straits Time, 23 April 2011), the online sphere framed her through different lenses. A blogger (L. Tan, 2011) summarized that the storm of online criticism regarding her should be seen as reflecting concerns over the existing political system rather than her personal history. The netizens turned the debate over her qualification into questioning the Group Representation Constituencies (GRC) system, the selection process of candidates, as well as the excessive compensation for the part-time job of being a Member of Parliament (MP).

Four years after and a few days before the election, Tin Pei Ling became a mother and decided to stand in the campaign without doing her confinement, which Chinese culture believes is crucial to females' health. The confidence in Tin Pei Lin has also been high enough that her town council became a single member constituency, where she herself contested as the PAP candidate against two opposition candidates. She eventually won with a 66% of the support. Her popularity on the ground has to do with her continuous grassroots work over the last four years. The 2011 online attack against her seemed to shape a perception that most of Singaporeans dislike her. Through the day-to-day interaction with her, such a negative image did not hold, at least among the residents who live in her constituency. This contrast in impressions may motivate the voters to support her in order to show the country that Tin is actually not the person who has been depicted online. The sympathy towards her was best seen in the above-mentioned case, in which one opposition candidate called her mothership status a weakness.

Admitting that the Internet, particularly social media, can forge the perception of opinion climate does not mean that firstly, the perception is accurate, and secondly, the voters will conform to the perceived online majority. Using social media sentiments as indicators of general will, as mentioned before, could be very misleading. Nevertheless, such misled perceptions could still influence how voters make their decisions. The question shifts to how online opinions get spread if the number of people actively seeking election information on Facebook and blogs is not large. The missing link is interpersonal communication, carried out both online and offline. One important feature of social media is to replicate and reinforce offline connections. Social network sites such as Facebook expose users who are not actively seeking political news to such information through content shared by their social ties. The content most shared online, unsurprisingly, is those most available on the Internet. The disinterested and the silent majority may be influenced by online opinions through that one mechanism. Another mechanism that is often neglected in the new media era is the old medium of talk (Zhang, 2012). Our 2015 post-election survey (Zhang, 2015) showed that talking about the election was common among family members and friends. Furthermore, voters attributed higher importance and trustworthiness to interpersonal talk than those party sources and social media. One piece of anecdotal evidence was a quote from a PAP volunteer who helped with online campaigning, which said: "I tell my friends my first impressions of the candidate. Hopefully, they would have thought about it when they cast their votes."<sup>18</sup>

In GE2011, the online voices that were clearly pro-opposition shaped the perception that a significant number of people in Singapore were unhappy about the PAP. Those who had similar views but were not able to find such voices offline due to years of PAP dominance may have felt

that they were not alone, and encouraged to express their views and vote for the opposition. Again, according to our 2011 survey data, Zhang (2015) found that the supporters of the oppositions were more likely to talk about the election than the supporters of PAP were and interestingly, when supporters of PAP talked, they encountered more disagreement during GE2011. This situation was slightly different in GE2015: the opposition supporters still talked about the election more than the PAP supporters did. However, the amount of disagreement encountered was no longer different, probably because PAP supporters started to voice their views more often than before. In GE2015, the online voices were as loud about pro-opposition as they were in 2011 and shaped the perception that the opposition was winning, to the extent that PAP may not be able to form the government on itself. When there were no other channels to gauge the opinion climate (such as pre-election polls), those swing voters among the silent majority may have felt that they had to vote for PAP in order to keep the balance, making sure that the opposition parties would not become too powerful. Such swing voters and their perception of the opinion climate have heavy weights in closely contested elections. The next section tries to articulate one way to trace how people may swing between elections, with an emphasis on the younger voters who tend to be opposition supporters.

### **Social Media and Swing Voters**

There are many ways to estimate swing voters and one finding we identified from GE2011 was that younger voters, defined as those aged between 21 and 30 years old, attended political rallies more often than the older ones, and eventually, were more likely to vote for the opposition (Lin & Hong, 2011). In order to test whether this same age group swung in GE2015, we analyzed those aged between 25 and 34 years old in 2015. Interestingly, this age group showed no differences in terms of rally participation and support for the opposition in the 2015 poll. These findings reminded us of Prime Minister Lee's comment, "And in particular, it could not have been done without strong support from the young. That is a particularly important conclusion from this election because it shows the young people understand what is at stake, support what we are doing, really to secure a bright future for Singapore and for the young."<sup>19</sup>

In order to test whether younger users rely more on social media for information, t-tests were run to see whether on average, younger people use the Internet for election news more often than the others do. The series of t-tests using the GE2011 survey data showed that younger people spent significantly more time on Facebook as well as online-only alternative media than the others did. Meanwhile, there were no differences between the younger and older in terms of reading newspapers and watching TV for election news. The situation observed in the GE2015 survey was slightly different. The same age group still read online-only alternative media more than the older people but showed no difference in terms of using SNSs. There were still no differences in terms of reading newspapers and watching TV for election news.

In order to test whether younger people actively engaged with this information through new media more often than others, another series of t-tests was run on four online engagement measures in 2011. The measures included: (1) writing on one's blog, Facebook pages, or Twitter account; (2) writing on others' blog, Facebook pages or responding to a tweet; (3) taking part in online political or social issues forums; and (4) forwarding or sharing online content, which all are regarding election matters. All findings consistently show that younger users were significantly more involved in such online engagement compared to the older ones. Similar measures in 2015 included: (1) wrote a blog post or made a YouTube video; (2) commented on a blog post or a YouTube video; (3) started a thread on a discussion forum; (4) shared information

in a thread on a discussion forum; (5) wrote an SNS post, and (6) commented on an SNS page or post. The younger age group showed no difference from older voters in terms of participating in blogs and YouTube channels. They were still more active in terms of starting a thread on a forum and participating in SNSs.

Over the four years between the two elections, not only have that the online voices become more diverse by including both ruling and opposition parties' views, but also voters have evolved with firstly, more equalized usage of SNSs as information sources among different age groups, and secondly, more equalized participation in blogs, YouTube channels, and forums. I argue that the continuously increasing penetration of new media makes the online channels less youth-dominant than before; and therefore, the offline power balance starts to be replicated online with a concerted effort by incumbent politicians, mainstream media, and supporters of the ruling party. Younger voters thus become the most susceptible to swings because of their relative lack of experience with electoral politics as well as their heavier reliance on new media for information.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

This paper highlights the implications of social media for elections in Singapore. It argues that the story is multi-sided and continues to evolve. The 2011 election was an early stage of the process. New media were an instrumental, alternative source of information and dialogue, especially in the authoritarian Singapore state, which controls the mass media. Opposition politicians took advantage of the online channels to publicize themselves and their activities, organize public support, and amplify their support through disseminating information that was unavailable through the mass media (e.g., rally photos). Equipped with alternative information and opinions, active supporters of the opposition became mobilized to take action, such as joining party rallies and sharing the pro-opposition materials with their contacts, which amplified the influence of online voices and showed how a minority of vocal netizens could influence the silent majority through changing their perceptions of the opinion climate. The role played by social media in 2011 was particularly influential among young voters.

The story continued to evolve during the 2015 election when mainstream mass media caught up with social media by strengthening their online portals and attempting to provide balanced reporting of election campaigns. Members of the ruling party also became highly active on the Internet, continuously providing citizens with status updates, constantly interacting with their supporters to mobilize them, and swiftly responding to critiques on their social media channels. Some middle-ground online media became more popular than the pro-opposition online channels, and supporters of the ruling party became more vocal than before, thus making the online discourses appear less obviously pro-opposition. The young who had voted for the first time in 2011 had become used to the novelty effect of social media, especially online-only alternative media, and thus demonstrated less support for the opposition in 2015.

This paper argues that the four dimensions of social media—alternative channel, mobilization tool, opinion climate forger, and young voters' favorite space—explain the complicated role that social media play during elections. Moreover, the four dimensions of social media have to be understood following the interactionist approach. I do not attempt to argue that the dimensions would manifest equally strongly with the same effects in all contexts. Instead, the dimensions emerged from a framework in which both macro-level factors (e.g., the electoral authoritarian system) and micro-level factors (e.g., fear and apathy) were included and examined. The interactionist approach directs attention to a key property of the framework, that is, balance

or equilibrium. When all factors are highly dependent on each other, their balance, that is, the equilibrium among them, is constantly changing.

Hence, social media have emerged as alternative channels of information and dialogue, forcing mainstream mass media to catch up through more balanced and less biased reporting and compelling ruling politicians to be active on the Internet. In the two elections that this study examined, the alternative channels would not have demonstrated their influence to such an extent and at such speed if the countries had been completely authoritarian with no elections. The existing election system allows alternative discourses to be translated into oppositional actions such as votes, which is a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of the authoritarian governments. The responses by both mainstream media and ruling politicians would not be as quick and strong in the context of an authoritarian government that did not rely on popular elections. Historically, Singapore's party system lacks competitiveness for many reasons, such as the GRC system, the small size of the population (and therefore, the number of politicians), and the need for economic growth, which precedes any political objective. The lack of competence in Singapore's opposition parties limits the ability of social media to gain votes for them. Although opposition party candidates were able to gain recognition through exposure in social media, none was elected simply because of their online popularity. In Singapore, the relatively weak influence of social media on changing voters' decisions also can be explained by the psychology of Singaporean voters, most of whom are either content with the current situation, apathetic about politics, or still fearful of challenging the ruling power.

In the surveys of both elections, youth were paid special attention because of their intimate relationship with social media, which means that their minds were open to the influence of alternative discourses, and they were organized through online tools. Again, although this trend in the relation of youth to social media is apparent around the globe, its manifestation differs according to different macro-conditions. The digital divide in the city-state of Singapore is mainly a separation between the young and the old. In 2011, the old mainly relied on mass media for political information whereas the young primarily used social media. The divide between online vs. offline opinions led to the divide between the younger and the older sector of voters. In 2015, when Internet usage was equalized, no significant difference was found between the percentage of the young and the old who tended to support the opposition. This trend can be explained by the fact that not only the young grew older but also the social media landscape shifted.

The theoretical contribution of this paper thus lies in its interactionist approach to understanding the role of social media in elections. While social media continue to proliferate in terms of its reach among social members, it is important to consider further challenges to practicing this newfound power. For instance, credibility remains a pertinent issue because the sources and the authenticity of information found on social media are questionable. Bloggers seem willing to publish hearsay and gossip as long as the information caters to popular taste. Another potential problem arising from the use of social media is the tendency to oppose for the sake of opposition. Online discussions led by opposition members are often skewed against the government, provoking readers to further question existing political realities and show resistance (offline and online) to unfair governance. However, to what extent do social media embody the nations' response to censorship, repression and marginalization? If information flow is not completely free and transparent in offline channels, does it justify the irresponsible dissemination of lies? Does such dissemination help to improve the democratic situation? As in the case of young voters, there is the need to identify whether seeking information and building relationships

on social media extend beyond merely satisfying curiosities, whereby participation remains at a superficial level. The swing back to supporting the PAP in 2015 seemed to confirm that many voters were motivated by the notion of change rather than the reason and method for change to be implemented.

It is thus increasingly important to identify how social media, along with other actors such as politicians, traditional media, activists, and citizens, engage in the ever-evolving process of power balance. Therefore, future research in this area should pay attention to understanding the extent to which social media influence non-users of the Internet and those living in areas with limited access to technology, in order to identify the struggle of citizens to gain voice. Moreover, such research should be conducted in countries with different macro- and micro-level conditions in order to achieve a better understanding about how the various actors interact with each other. Nonetheless, because of the capacity of social media to interrupt or revise the political balance, at least in the case of Singapore, it should be the focus of future political communication studies. Instead of treating all social media as being the same, it is important for future research to recognize and analyze the high degree of diversity among social media channels. Because social media platforms continue to be developed, (re)produced, and (re)integrated into different parts of society throughout the globe, the study of the implications of social media for election results is a difficult but increasingly necessary task.

## Notes

1. <http://www.asiaone.com/print/News/Elections/Story/A1Story20110508-277699.html>
2. <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/specialreports/sgvotes2015/latest/good-result-for-pap-but/2121698.html>
3. [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/01/14/the\\_first\\_twitter\\_revolution](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/01/14/the_first_twitter_revolution)
4. <https://citizenlab.org/2015/07/tracking-censorship-on-wechat-public-accounts-platform/>
5. There are scholars who argue that electioneering is practiced to impede the opposition parties (see Tan, 2013)
6. [http://www.ida.gov.sg/doc/Publications/Publications\\_Level3/Survey2009/HH2009ES.pdf](http://www.ida.gov.sg/doc/Publications/Publications_Level3/Survey2009/HH2009ES.pdf)
7. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/top25.htm>
8. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#sg>
9. <http://inconvenientquestions.sg/Event/CwA/ge2015-exclusive-what-the-media-say#stq=&stp=0>
10. <http://www.ipscommons.sg/political-blogs-from-the-2011-to-the-coming-election/>
11. <http://www.ipscommons.sg/normalisation-of-new-media-since-the-2011-election/>
12. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/they-helped-six-mps-shine-online-in-ge2015>
13. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/volunteer-digital-advocate-tries-to-moderate-political-chatter-online>
14. <http://www.ipscommons.sg/battle-for-eyeballs-online-media-in-the-2015-election/>
15. <http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/ge2015-whos-the-most-discussed-politician-or-party-on-twitter-at-half-time>
16. <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/ge2015--5-most-memorable-moments-from-sdp-s-first-lunchtime-rally-100725400.html>
17. <http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/ge2015-whos-the-most-discussed-politician-or-party-on-twitter-at-half-time>
18. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/volunteer-digital-advocate-tries-to-moderate-political->

chatter-online

19. <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/specialreports/sgvotes2015/latest/good-result-for-pap-but/2121698.html>

### Notes on contributor

**Weiyu Zhang** is Associate Professor at the Department of Communications and New Media, National University of Singapore. Her research focuses on civic engagement and ICTs, with an emphasis on Asia. She is the author of the book *The Internet and New Social Formation in China: Fandom Publics in the Making*. Her current project is to develop and examine an online platform for citizen deliberation.

### References

- Burns, A., & Eltham, B. (2009). *Twitter free Iran: An evaluation of Twitter's role in public diplomacy and information operations in Iran's 2009 election crisis*. Paper presented to the Communications Policy & Research Forum 2009, Sydney. Retrieved from [http://www.networkinsight.org/verve/\\_resources/CPRF\\_2009\\_papers.pdf#page=322](http://www.networkinsight.org/verve/_resources/CPRF_2009_papers.pdf#page=322)
- Case, W. (2006). Manipulative skills: How do rulers control the electoral arena? In A. Shedler (Ed.), *Electoral authoritarianism: The dynamics of unfree competition* (pp. 95–112). Boulder and London: Lynne Rinner Publishers.
- Chadwick, A. (2006). *Internet politics: States, citizens, and new communication technologies*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Chan, C-L. (2011, 5 June). Social media insights from Singapore GE2011. Retrieved from <http://www.techgoondu.com/2011/06/05/social-media-insights-from-singapore-ge2011/>
- Collier, D., & Levitsky, S. (1997). Democracy with adjectives: Conceptual innovation in comparative research. *World Politics*, 49(3), 430–451.
- CMCF (2004). Content code. *Communications and Multimedia Content Forum of Malaysia (CMCF)*. Retrieved from [http://www.cmcf.org.my/HTML/cmcf\\_content\\_code\\_online\\_5.asp](http://www.cmcf.org.my/HTML/cmcf_content_code_online_5.asp)
- Crouch, H., & Morley, J. W. (1999). The dynamics of political change. In J. W. Morley (Ed.), *Driven by growth: Political change in the Asia-Pacific region* (pp. 313–354). Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
- Dominguez, D., Beaulieu, A., Estalella, A., Gomez, E., Schnettler, B., & Read, R. (2007). Virtual ethnography. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 8(3). Retrieved from <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0703E19>
- Evans, L. (2010). Authenticity online: Using webnography to address phenomenological concerns. *Inter-disciplinary.Net*. Retrieved from <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/evanspaper.pdf>
- George, C. (2006). *Contentious journalism and the Internet: Towards democratic discourse in Malaysia and Singapore*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- George, C. (2007). Framing the fight against terror: Order versus liberty in Singapore and Malaysia. In K. Sen & T. Lee (Eds.), *Political regimes and the media in Asia*, pp. 139–155. London and New York: Routledge.
- Gillmor, D. (2004). *We the media: Grassroots journalism for the people, by the people*. Sebastopol: CA: O'Reilly.



- Goh, D., & Pang, N. (2011, October). *Party websites and blogs: The good, the bad and the toxic*. Paper presented at the workshop Impact of new media on General Election 2011, 4 October, Singapore.
- Gomez, J. (2008). Online opposition in Singapore: Communications outreach without electoral gain. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 38(4), 591–612.
- Harfoush, R. (2009). *Yes we did: An inside look at how social media built the Obama brand*. Berkeley, CA: New Riders.
- Hine, C. (2000). *Virtual ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Howard, P. N. (2002). Network ethnography and the hypermedia organization: New media, new organizations, new methods. *New Media & Society*, 4(4), 550–574.
- Howard, P. N. (2010). *The digital origins of dictatorship and democracy: Information technology and political Islam*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Jankowski, N. W., & Van Selm, M. (2008). Internet-based political communication research: Illustrations, challenges & innovations. *Javnost-The Public*, 15(2), 5–16.
- Johnson, T. J., & Perlmutter, D. D. (2010). Introduction: The Facebook election. *Mass Communication & Society*, 13(5), 554–559.
- Kenyon, A. T., & Marjoribanks, T. (2007). Transforming media markets: The cases of Malaysia and Singapore. *Australian Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society*, 5(2), 103–118.
- Koh, A. (2011, April 30). Which election rally in Singapore attracted the Foursquare generation the most? Retrieved from <http://socialpr.blogspot.sg/2011/04/which-election-rally-in-singapore.html>
- Levitsky, S., & Way, L. (2002). The rise of competitive authoritarianism. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(2), 51–65.
- Lim, P. (2011, April 22). Social media open up Singapore political debate. Retrieved from <http://www.mysinchew.com/node/56550>
- Makinen, M., & Kuira, M. W. (2008). Social media and postelection crisis in Kenya. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 13(3), 328–335.
- Nixon, P., Ward, S., & Gibson, R. (2004). Conclusions: The net change. In R. Gibson, P. Nixon, & S. Ward (Eds.), *Political parties and the Internet: Net gain?* (pp. 234–243). London and New York: Routledge.
- Panagopoulos, C. (2005). *Politicking online: The transformation of election campaign communications*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Pang, N., & Goh, D. (2015). Pro, anti, neutral: Political blogs and their sentiments. In T. H. Tan, A. Mahizhnan, & P. H. Ang (Eds.), *Battle for hearts and minds: New media and elections in Singapore* (pp.73–94). Singapore: World Scientific.
- Ortmann, S. (2011). Singapore: Authoritarian but newly competitive. *Journal of Democracy*, 22(4), 153–164.
- Perlmutter, D. D. (2008). *Blogwars*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Russell, J. (2011, April 26). Singapore elections: Nicole Seah and the social media effect.. Retrieved from <https://asiancorrespondent.com/2011/04/singapore-elections-nicole-seah-and-the-social-media-effect/>
- Schedler, A. (2006). The logic of electoral authoritarianism. In A. Schedler (Ed.), *Electoral authoritarianism: The dynamics of unfree competition* (pp. 1–26). Boulder and London: Lynne Rinner Publishers.
- Schneider, S. M., & Foot, K. A. (2004). The web as an object of study. *New Media & Society*, 6(1), 114–122.

- Shamsul, A. B. (2000). Development and democracy in Malaysia: A comment on its socio-historical roots. In A. Hans & T-W. Ngo (Eds.), *The cultural construction of politics in Asia* (pp. 86–106). Surrey, UK: Curzon Press.
- Slater, D. (2012). Strong-state democratization in Malaysia and Singapore. *Journal of Democracy*, 23(2), 19–33.
- Steele, J. (2009). Professionalism online: How Malaysiakini challenges authoritarianism. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 14(1), 91–111.
- Tan, A. (2011, December 7). Tin Pei Ling, iPad 2 and Hong Kong top Singapore search terms. *techgoondu.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.techgoondu.com/2011/12/07/tin-pei-ling-ipad-2-and-hong-kong-top-singapore-search-terms/>
- Tan, J., & Zawawi, I. (2008). *Bloggng and democratization in Malaysia: A new civil society in the making*. Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.
- Tan, L. (2011, May 17). Why people should not hate Tan Pei Ling. *Singaporemind.blogspot.com*. Retrieved from <http://singaporemind.blogspot.sg/2011/05/why-people-dislike-tin-pei-ling.html>
- Tan, N. (2013). Manipulating electoral laws in Singapore. *Electoral Studies*, 32(4), 632–643.
- Tan, T. H. (2011, October). *Impact of new media on general election 2011*. Paper presented at the workshop “Impact of new media on General Election 2011,” Singapore.
- Tang, H. Y. (2006). Let a hundred flowers bloom: Digital speech in Malaysia. *Asian Journal of Comparative Law*, 1(1). Retrieved from <http://www.bepress.com/asjcl/vol1/iss1/art12>
- Trippi, J. (2004). *The revolution will not be televised*. USA: Regan Books.
- Tsumasjan, A., Sprenger, T. O., Sandner, P. G., & Welpel, I. M. (2010). Predicting elections with Twitter: What 140 characters reveal about political sentiment. *Proceedings of the Fourth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*. Retrieved from <http://www.aaai.org/ocs/index.php/ICWSM/ICWSM10/paper/viewFile/1441/1852>
- Van de Walle, N. (2006). Tipping games: When do opposition parties coalesce? In A. Shedler (Ed.), *Electoral authoritarianism: The dynamics of unfree competition* (pp.77–94). Boulder and London: Lynne Rinner Publishers.
- Voltmer, K. (2006). *Mass media and political communication in new democracies*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Weiss, M. L. (September 2011). *New media, new activism: Trends and trajectories in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*. Paper presented at the workshop “Asia’s Civil Spheres: New media, Urban public space, social movements,” Singapore.
- Wu, P. H-J, Kwang, R. T. G., & Soon, C. (2015). Who calls the shots? Agenda setting in mainstream and alternative media. In T. H. Tan, A. Mahizhnan, & P. H. Ang (Eds.), *Battle for hearts and minds: New media and elections in Singapore* (pp. 95–120). Singapore: World Scientific.
- Zhang, W. (2005). Are online discussions deliberate? A case study of a Chinese online discussion board. In P. Masip & J. Rom, (Eds.). *III International Conference on Communication and Reality. Digital Utopia in the Media: From Discourses to Facts. A Balance* (pp. 119–132). Barcelona: Blanquerna Tecnologia i Serveis.
- Zhang, W. (2012). The effects of political news use, political discussion and authoritarian orientation on political participation: Evidence from Singapore and Taiwan. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 22(5), 474–492.

Zhang, W. (2013). Redefining youth activism through digital technology in Singapore. *International Communication Gazette*, 75(3), 253–270.

Zhang, W. (2015). The silence of majority: Political talk during election time. In T. H. Tan & P. Ang (Eds.), *Battle for hearts and minds* (pp. 227–246). Singapore: ISEAS.