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CULTURE, DISCOURSE, AND GAMEPLAY: NEW MEDIA CITIZENSHIP IN SINGAPORE

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Introduction and background

After becoming involuntarily independent from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore's "survival" became a term laden with political meaning as the security of the new government became intertwined with the survival, particularly economic survival, of the nation (Ortmann, 2009). The government has effectively maintained a discourse of threat to the nation's survival, wherein its own political and economic leadership is viewed as key to progress, which in turn serves as the de facto measure of the nation's health. Progress is understood as achievable only through the development of its people into the kind of citizens that will enhance the economic potential of the nation. New media investment is one component of survival in a world where communication technologies push the boundaries of the technology, engineering, medical, financial, and tourist industries, among others. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has made clear that Singapore must be competitive in the race for new media leadership:

"Interactive and digital media. What does that mean? It means computer games, it means making movies, animation, cartoons. Very competitive business but one where maybe we have a chance and we can't afford not to be there." [National Day Rally, 2006]

Investment in new media is visible through myriad discursive realms, with a common theme: whether corporate strategy or individual behavior, Singaporeans should utilize technology whenever and however possible to improve one's economic and cultural productivity, but only to the extent that such activities result in net gains for the State. As a result, Singaporeans are inundated by, and happily surround themselves with, the latest in new media technologies, using

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them in the realms of work, education, health, and leisure to name but a few. However, outcomes of new-media use are not always positive and there also exist discourses of “problematic usage.”

Description of the study and methods

In this presentation, we report on a study that seeks to connect (macro-level) public discourses on new media citizenship with (micro-level) interactional narratives about online gameplay. Combining qualitative media analysis and critical discourse analysis of public campaign resources and news products with in-depth interviews of massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) players, we consider the ambiguous and contested meanings associated with the leisurely consumption of new media technologies among a group of middle-class Singaporean youths.

We collected a representative sample from more than 1,500 news articles published between 1994 and 2011, as well as a purposive sample of additional news, public speeches and campaign materials, and academic publications on new media published between 2006 and 2011 in order to explore how new media citizenship was discursively constructed by the social elites or their agents (the Singaporean government maintains tight control over all traditional media outlets in the country, including newspapers, television, and radio, and has laws in place that outlaw criticism of its policies). These data were first coded inductively, and then subsequently compared with existing research on Singaporean “statal narratives” and other national discourses on citizenship (e.g., Wee & Bockhurst-Heng 2005; Neo & Chen 2007).

We also conducted 10 purposive interviews with players of a popular MMORPG. The point of these interviews was to discuss with Singaporean youths how they understood their own gameplay so that we could compare their talk with public discourse about new media citizenship. Coincidentally, one of us had recently conducted in-depth interviews with 17 participants of the same MMORPG for an unrelated study, and we analyzed the content of those interviews as well. As with the content of public discourse, we analyzed the interviews both inductively and subsequently in terms of the Singaporean citizenship literature.

Findings and analysis

The notion of citizenship achieves its discursive and ideological force through “statal narratives”— narratives created and disseminated by governments as a means of legitimizing specific policies (Wee & Bokhorst-Heng 205). Narratives do not by themselves contain discursive or ideological force. Rather, their force is instantiated through ways of acting and interacting around those narratives. This is why our study focuses on both institutional narratives as well as phenomenological narratives from interviews; to demonstrate how institutional-

level narratives are (re)presented at the phenomenological level of society.

Institutional narratives

Institutional narratives in Singapore were overwhelmingly instrumental. The government's perspective was delivered via key media channels with ideological intent. We identified three types of narratives through which citizenship was defined.

(1) being productive: new media technologies and new media users were constantly framed in terms of their potential for increasing material gains for the nation.

(2) being engaged: new media technologies were typically framed in terms of how they could help Singaporeans be(come) socially engaged citizens, while people were framed as ideally becoming more socially engaged through their new media use.

(3) being responsible: new media technologies were framed as neutral in and of themselves. Responsible citizens were described as using new media instrumentally; i.e., citizens should use new media only for improving productivity and engagement.

These narratives were often positively valenced, but not always. There were also stories about being unproductive, disengaged, or irresponsible. Institutional narratives thus not only pronounced the "right" ways to be citizens, but also exemplified how people and events could jeopardize the nation as well.

Phenomenological narratives

Individuals' new media usage was framed in terms of cultural and economic productivity, which aligned with public discourses aimed at cultivating state-defined new media habits. In general, we found that MMORPG players were often critical of their own gameplay habits, and even when they talked positively about them, tended to define "good" play in terms that aligned with being productive, with limiting their leisurely engagement, and with being responsible. For example, Ben, a 24 year-old air force pilot, described how he would tell friends he was "busy doing other stuff" instead of playing MMORPGs, while John, an undergraduate student, attributed his poor performance in the 'A'-levels examinations as being a result of MMORPG play. Other interviewees talked about wanting to "earn gold quickly" to buy things, or being frustrated with gameplay when they didn't "progress fast enough." These are a few examples of narratives that aligned with institutional level discourses.

Summary and significance

In sum, the similarities between institutional and phenomenological discourses were evident. We argue that these similarities have implications for understanding how young Singaporeans view their behaviors vis-à-vis new media citizenship, especially as more Singaporeans take to new media platforms for political expression and organization. This study comes amid moves by the government to tighten its control of citizen participation via online media. Analyzing macro and micro narratives surrounding new media, as well as the relations between them, is thus an important step toward evaluating how (and to what extent) new media citizens' ideas and practices may align with the interests of the political and social elite.

References

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