Online Political Memes and Youth Political Engagement in Singapore

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Abstract

This paper explores political actors' practice of posting static visual online memes on social media in Singapore to convey messages commenting on the ruling party and its policies. The paper presents a discussion based on semiotic analysis of selected memes, and interviews with Singaporeans aged 18-24 about their responses to memes, to understand how circulation of memes might influence quality of political engagement. Results suggest that while memes hold potential for enhancing political engagement among a citizenry that is often seen as depoliticised, youths' perceptions of the memes do not allow for deterministic conclusions about their efficacy in this regard. Rather, the popularity of memes in general as devices of humour, cultural resonance and identity representations suggests that the appropriation of cyberculture for localized political means does have potential for socialising citizens to become critical of the status quo as part of a wider network of political action.

Keywords

Singapore; youth; memes; political engagement; citizen participation

Introduction

The use of humour and satire as political commentary is well documented (Schutz 1977; Mascha 2008), and in Singapore, with its political system that has been described as soft authoritarian (George 2006), there is a history of persistent counter narratives in the guise of comedy (Lim 1997; Tju 2000; Lee 2005; Tan 2005; Lin & Tan 2010). This subculture seems to have surfaced as online memes in recent political campaigns in the US (Vernallis 2011; Sampson 2012). While the concept of memes harks back to Dawkins's (1976) analogy with genes, memes as artefacts of cyberculture have been viewed as a form of vernacular culture that is creatively constructed (Burgess 2008). The use of online memes in political discourse would seem to validate theories of convergence culture (Jenkins 2006) and cognitive surplus (Shirky 2011), whereby artefacts and discourses generated in the informal space of the virtual world get transformed into some sort of political capital, most notably among the young.

However there are sceptical voices about convergence culture (Jarrett 2008; Mosco 2008; Van Dijck 2009), digital natives (Selwyn 2004) and even about online memes (Morozov 2012). Apart from criticising the content of memes, Morozov also points to the role of non-human actors in influencing which memes become popular. These arguments suggest that a closer look needs to be taken at points of convergence between the rhetoric of digitally perceptive youth, cyberculture artefacts and political engagement. It has been shown that glorifying the technological aspects of political engagement risks marginalising those who do not have access to technology. But in technologically advanced societies such as Singapore, where access is not an issue (Lim 2009), can the confluence of the three discourses still be maintained? If indeed political memes tap on a history of satire and future of cultural convergence via artefacts of cyberspace, might they not have a powerful impact on politicising a generation that is always connected (Turkle 2008)?

The internet has been a powerful medium in Singapore for keeping space for political engagement open even while overtly political action is heavily controlled both online and off (George 2012). In line with this trend, political actors in Singapore have attempted to tap upon the satirical potential of online memes in efforts to critique the dominant narratives of the state. Yet the question remains as to

how this practice translates into the political space in the perceptions of citizens. In particular, young citizens who have just completed school and are at the point of adulthood are in a space of special interest. They are immersed in digital cultures and have completed at least 10 years of education in a school system that is aligned towards national narratives. Their views on the political significance of these online memes are indicators of the larger interaction between social media and political change in Singapore.

Methodology

A two-step study was conducted between January and June 2012. The first part of the study involved a semiotic analysis of selected memes posted by political actors on Facebook. Five Facebook pages were identified which carried such content. Among these, two were linked to socio-political websites that carried other content such as articles and reports[1]. Both were known for their role as alternative media to the state-controlled mainstream press. They posted multiple items on their Facebook pages daily, and most received many comments. The posts themselves were varied, ranging from the serious to the witty. The conversations surrounding each post were often polemical and informal. When memes were posted, therefore, they were not seen as incongruent. Memes that specifically dealt with political issues were selected based on their portrayal of people and issues related to the political sphere in Singapore[2]. A common start date of April 2011 was selected, which was when campaigning started for the 2011 May General Elections. It is also around this time that posts of a political nature began to proliferate on Facebook, even among ordinary citizens. From this small corpus of Singaporean online political memes, 3 were selected for a detailed semiotic analysis based on their appropriateness for offering insight into the manner in which they employed intertextuality to embed political messages into common meme formats and attempted to resonate with their audiences.

The second part of the study involved interviews with 20 young Singapore citizens between the ages of 18 and 24. Questions were asked about their general media use, their use of social media, their views on political engagement, and their specific perceptions relating to online memes. Participants were requested to log into their social media profiles during the interview so that they could talk about their perceptions and use habits with reference to actual posts and interactions. This 'interview-plus' technique helped to stimulate participants' memory, as well as contextualise the data for the researchers.

Findings and discussion

The potential for powerfully conveying messages in a visual format, combined with the privileging of visual content in cyberspace, points to the potential of online memes for bridging playful interpersonal practices on online social network sites with critical awareness of political issues. In order to interrogate this potential, three online memes were subjected to semiotic interpretations, selected purposively for the manner in which they embedded political statements within a widely recognised meme format. The analysis of the memes, which were posted on publicly available Facebook pages by Singaporean political actors, shows that the use of social media to activate a depoliticised citizenry, even with powerful memetic imaging, requires a larger context of social, political and cultural support. Memes have become important vehicles of expressing political views in Singapore, and there has been a surge of interest in using new media platforms for political engagement since mainstream media is seen as pro-establishment and conservative. Yet the interviews suggest the need for a more nuanced perspective. None of the participants was unaware of key political issues and popular memes, whether they chose to follow either avidly, or resolutely keep away. Ironically, while they would not consider

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[1] These two websites were *The Online Citizen* and *Temasek Review Emeritus*.

[2] From each page, the album entitled 'wall photos' was accessed, because this is common to all Facebook pages. The album contains photographs that have been posted on the page, rather than uploaded as part of another, specifically named, album.

production and transmission of memes as a 'serious' mode of engagement to circulate political ideas and would privilege longer blog posts over visual formats, their ambivalences in terms of the understanding of the political function that memes serve in illiberal democracies is particularly striking. With regard to gathering information that will inform their vote, they adopt a 'wait and see' attitude – when they feel it is relevant to them, they will find out what they need to know, possibly indicating an instrumental view of political engagement. Most consider memes in general as objects of humour, cultural resonance and personal identity representation, and engage in a range of sharing practices that point to the continued popularity of these artefacts. Viewed through the lenses of subpolitics (de Vries 2007) and subactivism (Bakardjieva 2009), the appropriation of cyberculture for localized political means does hold the potential for socialising citizens to become critical of the status quo as part of a wider network of social media and political acculturation (Sreekumar & Vadrevu 2013).

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