



Social Media and Socio-Political Change: An Asian Perspective

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Abstract: With the widespread adoption of social media in many Asian societies, these platforms are increasingly used in a variety of ways to promote civic and political aims. Such uses are shaped by various stakeholders and contexts of use. In this special issue, four papers on Japan, Singapore, Malaysia and China-Australia present highly contextualized assessments of the role of social media in civic and political life in Asia.

Keywords: Asia, social media, eDemocracy, blogosphere, political communication, crises

1. Introduction

The rapid rise of social media over the past decade has spurred numerous scholarly studies on its impact on social and political life, but the majority of papers have been limited to cultural contexts of the United States and Europe. Empirical studies assessing the impact of social media on social and political changes in Asia remain relatively scarce. In Asia, social media ecologies come in many different forms and operate in rather different socio-political contexts, including different languages, political systems, dominant cultures, etc. In China, for instance, social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat are developed and used widely in Chinese. Weibo comes in various versions by different telecommunications companies, and is a hybrid of microblogging (e.g., Twitter) and social networking (e.g., Facebook). WeChat on the other hand, is a hybrid of instant messaging and social networking. Line, which began in Japan, is a popular personal and group messaging application that also has social networking features and is widely used in Korea and Japan. In Singapore and Malaysia, the globally popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are also used, but these platforms have been appropriated to fit local blends of language and culture. It is not uncommon to find tweets, blog posts and Facebook posts in a variety of languages and cultural codes that are unique to each country. The political systems of Asia also come in different forms, with Singapore and Hong Kong being “partly free”, China being

“not free”, and societies like Japan and Taiwan being classified as “free” (Freedom House, n.d.). Even for Singapore and Hong Kong, the reasons for classified as “partly free” differ significantly.

These examples point to diversity in the features of social media platforms in Asia, as well as the social and political contexts in which they are used. Scholars studying the Internet have argued that research should focus on “the interactions between features of the Internet communication setting and the particular goals and needs of the communicators, as well as the social context of the interaction setting” (Bargh & McKenna, 2004, p. 578). Such approaches involve examining and paying attention to both attributes, structural features of social media platforms and the social and political context of use, including the goals of stakeholders and the cultural, social, or political systems in place. With the diversity of social media platforms and cultural, social, or political systems in Asia, there is an urgent need for more nuanced and contextualized approaches to examining social media’s role in social and political change.

This special issue aims to address this gap with four papers from Japan, Singapore, Malaysia and a comparative piece examining China and Australia. The manuscripts were selected from the papers presented at the International Conference for eDemocracy and Open Government (CeDEM Asia) 2014 which was hosted by City University of Hong Kong in December 2014. City University of Hong Kong, Danube University Krems, Nam Center for Korean Studies (University of Michigan), and Singapore Internet Research Centre (Nanyang Technological University) jointly organized the conference, with an aim of bringing together researchers, policy-makers, industry professionals, and civil society activists to discuss the role of social and mobile media in the future of citizenship and governance, and analyze current research, best practices, and emerging topics that are shaping the future of e-government, e-democracy and open government in Asia and around the world.

Two of the papers that had already been peer-reviewed for the conference did not go through the review process again; they were reviewed by guest editors and approved with some revisions. The other two papers were presented at a reflections panel at the conference and so had not already been peer-reviewed, therefore the authors were invited to submit full papers for this special issue which were then sent to at least two external reviewers as part of the peer review process of the journal.

The sections in this issue are divided into two parts comprising different research papers: The first section presents the four pieces selected for the Asian special issue as described. In the second part we publish three papers which were submitted to the journal throughout the year and made it through the double-blind review process (“Ongoing Submissions”). JeDEM publishes two issues per year, but takes submissions of research papers, project descriptions or reflections that are not in response to a specific call throughout the whole year. Communication in online contexts, intercultural aspects like language and a cross-cultural perspective are aspects of the papers of this second section, which thus attach very well to the scope of the special issue.

2. Special Issue

In Social Media for Enhancing Civil Society and Disaster Relief: Usage by Local Municipalities in Japan, Muneo Kaigo and Leslie Tkach-Kawasaki present a case study of social media use by civil society organizations in a municipality in Japan. In particular, they focus on the use of social media during and after the 2012 Tsukuba city tornado. The case revealed how social media address gaps in communication channels, and how social networking sites like Facebook help coordinate and drive relief and support activities during the disaster.

Carol Soon and Jui Liang Sim tackle a gap in researching Chinese bloggers in *Individualized and Depoliticized: A Study of Chinese Blogosphere in Singapore*, examining 201 Chinese-language blogs and the under-researched community of Singaporean Chinese bloggers. Their findings show that unlike many English bloggers, most Chinese bloggers in Singapore do not use blogs for political participation and mobilization. They are, according to the authors, “individualized and a-politicized”. They discuss possible reasons and implications, which also point to particular attributes of the Chinese community of bloggers.

On the other hand, Pauline Pooi Yin Leong discusses the function of social media in the political transformation and engagement in *Malaysia in Political Communication in Malaysia: A study on the Use of New Media in Politics*. Some of the themes discussed are the negotiation of power with the dominant political party, Barisan Nasional (BN), engagement and mobilisation of citizens, but also issues arising from the sparring of information between political parties on social media. Despite the pitfalls, she concludes that social media bring greater diversity of voices and political discourses which challenge the existing political hegemony.

Jing Zeng focuses on the informational use of social media during acute events in *How Information around Acute Events Comes into Being on Social Media: Using the concept of interpretive communities*, she discusses and compares the development of communities on micro-blogs during acute events in social, political, and technical contexts of Sina Weibo in China and Twitter in Australia.

Together, these papers provide insights on the diverse ways that social media are used and the communities that utilize them. Their roles in driving social and political changes, or how they are driven by larger factors are understood in terms of their recursive interactions between their structural features and diverse contexts of use in Asia.

3. Ongoing Submissions

In *Online Deliberation between the Weak and the Strong Public Sphere* Tanja Oblak Črnič and Jernej Amon Prodnik contribute to the discussion of deliberative communication in online contexts by presenting two empirical case studies of the Slovenian Internet. Specifically, they analyse a governmental and a citizen portal, which were both developed by proposals from citizens. They derive common denominators as well as significant differences between the institutional and weak public sphere related to the portals and relate them to the consequences for effectiveness of

deliberation. The study indicates that a combination of the analysed platforms would be a good start for encouraging deliberation within online contexts.

Teresa Scassa and Niki Singh examine a Canadian case in *Open Data and Official Language Regimes*. With the open data movement gaining more importance on the global level, its implications for transforming the relationship between governments, citizens and the private sector have been a popular focus of research. As one of the first studies of the challenges and potentials of open data within a multi-lingual state, this paper focuses on the Canadian federal government as a case study and determines the specific challenges in the bilingual context. The authors address issues of open data development like the under-inclusion of minority language communities in relation to the pace of open data implementation or the avoidance of governments to provide information tools in official languages due to information services taken over by the private sector.

Finally, we present a paper by Martin Fredriksson and James Arvanitakis on *Piracy, Property and the Crisis of Democracy*. Pirate parties can be seen as a global movement emphasising digital civil rights, campaigning against increased surveillance and defending citizen's right to privacy. Situating the movement within the characteristic challenges of contemporary politics (from the financial crisis to the war on terror), the article presents a qualitative study based on interviews with pirate party representatives in Europe and North America. Drawing on studies on the culture of copyright resistance and interviews with pirate party activists from Sweden, UK, Germany, Australia, USA and Canada, the authors successfully demonstrate the philosophical common ground of the political position expressed by various pirate parties. They conclude that such movements highlight conflicts of our society, and while their rise may not be a continuous phenomenon, their inherent politics are likely to take an alternative shape.

References

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