Chapter 18

Alternative Tweeting:
A Comparison of Frames in Twitter’s Political Discourse and Mainstream Newspaper Coverage of the Singapore General Election of 2011

Sabrina Mercy Anthony
National University of Singapore, Singapore

Weiyu Zhang
National University of Singapore, Singapore

ABSTRACT

The 2011 Singapore General Election was a watershed election that saw an unprecedented amount of political discourse on social media. It also marked the first time Twitter was used on a large-scale for political communication in Singapore. Interestingly, political discourse on Twitter was found to be different from other online media. This study drew upon framing theories to investigate the alternative frames in Twitter’s public discourse about the elections. Using framing analysis a comparative study was carried out between the framing of the general elections in Twitter’s public discourse and Singapore’s government-regulated mainstream newspaper, The Straits Times. Consistent with previous findings, the study found that election coverage in both Twitter and the mainstream newspaper used game metaframing. However, Twitter and the mainstream newspaper used different subframes, where subframes in Twitter provided an alternative narrative to the official rhetoric in the mainstream newspaper.

INTRODUCTION

The 2011 General Election in Singapore produced startling results that signaled a turning point in Singapore’s political history, giving “the strongest signal yet of a loosening of Singapore’s tightly controlled political system” (Chun, Venkat & Barta, 2011, para. 1). Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (2011) called it “a watershed general election”, where for the first time since 1972, nearly all the seats in the parlia-
ment were contested — 82 out of 87 seats. Prime Minister Lee (2011) also acknowledged that it was “a very different world in 2011 compared to 2006”, where social media had an impact “much bigger than in previous elections”. This was attributed to the large number of first time voters in 2011, over a fifth of the population, most of who were below 30 (Zhang, 2013). Though the ruling party remained in control of parliament having won 81 of 87 seats, the People’s Action Party (PAP) received only 60.1% of the votes — its lowest share of the vote since Singapore’s independence in 1965 (Chun et al., 2011). The Opposition also won its first group representation constituency (GRC) Aljunied, a bloc of five seats representing a single constituency, bumping two cabinet ministers — Foreign Affairs Minister George Yeo and Lim Hwee Hua, minister in the prime minister’s office and second minister for finance and transport (Chun et al., 2011).

Some observers (e.g., Au, 2011) cited the government’s inevitable liberalization of regulations on the use of the Internet for political campaigning as the reason. In the previous 2006 election, the government imposed a ban on election advertising, excluding those by political parties (Au, 2011). However in 2011, the government only ruled out “distortion and misrepresentation”, allowing opposition parties to exploit the medium for campaigning (Au, 2011). Au (2011) underlined the broader impact on Singaporeans getting political information online, where “political content in Singapore’s digital space is strongly pro-opposition, in marked contrast to mainstream media where the tone is one of deference to the PAP and the government” (para. 4). Some even touted the watershed General Election 2011 the “Internet Election” or “Facebook Election” because of the unprecedented amount of political discussion by the public from the use of online communication channels (Chua, 2011).

However, a national post-election study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) revealed that the May General Election was not an Internet Election (Ang, Mahizhan & Tan, 2011). The study found that 30% of the 2,000 Singaporeans polled relied mainly on Facebook and blogs for election information. The remaining 70% mainly used the mainstream media — newspapers, television and radio. Of the 30% who got political information from alternative online media, 95% of them also read, watched and listened to the mainstream media. Despite these findings, Ang et al. (2011) emphasized that the Internet had a significant ‘soft’ impact on voters by establishing a sense of community among the politically like-minded and providing sources of political satire. This changed the electoral experience of the General Election 2011 that was evident in the way Singaporeans felt more empowered and engaged with the election process (Ang et al., 2011).

However, it is possible that the survey did not capture the complex and far-ranging Internet effects sufficiently. Wu, Tan, and Soon (2011) identified agenda setting by new media channels for topics on the Singapore Election through mining both mainstream and alternative online media sites. They found a significant correlation between the topics discussed in both realms and overall agenda setting effect occurred in both directions between online mainstream media and new media (Tan et al., 2011). However, classical inter-correlation tests to examine the cases of specific issues showed Twitter to be less reflective of other media types (Tan et al., 2011), suggesting that Twitter may play a distinctive role in shaping political discourse alternative to the mainstream one.

So what exactly is being said on Twitter that is different to produce no significant inter-correlation with the other online media platforms? Thus, the goal of the present study is to identify alternative framing of election issues in Twitter’s public discourse. This exploratory study will focus on framing of the Singapore General Elections 2011 on Twitter or in short, the ‘election tweets’. The public discourse on Twitter constitutes the corpus of tweets produced by Twitter users who are distinct from political parties and their candidates, government institutions and businesses, and mainstream media. This study will