

## The Cinnamon Scroll: A Look Back at the Discussion of Ideas in USP (2012-present)

The discussion of ideas and the asking of questions by, and about, a community is important. Firstly, it democratizes engagement by individuals in a wider process. This is because discussion provides a platform for individuals to engage with strangers who might share only one thing in common with them: their membership in the community. Secondly, discussion preserves history. When discussions are documented, they open a window for someone in the future to partially reconstruct the community's culture, ethos, and circumstances, and derive inspiration from them. A hyperbolic, but educational example of this, are the Baghdad manuscripts detailing discussion and debate amongst the schools of thought in Athens, and the Western world's sustained interest in Greek society and culture (following a renaissance or two) through the historical lens of the ideas that the Greeks represented.

For a community like USP, which considers curiosity to be one of its central pillars, the discussion of ideas is thus doubly important. "Because our ideas are neither static nor inert, they're alive, like a creature" – [here's a nod from the 2013 valedictorian speech](#) (3:34). In USP, discussing ideas can democratize participation (say, by empowering a nervous freshman to win over her seniors in a debate) and preserve history (say, when a CS student in #10-108 suffering from finals week finds respite in ancient USP his[tea]ry). This discussion takes place not ubiquitously, but often in "community spaces" like student publications, forums, and town halls.

Ofcourse, the discussion of ideas at a community level is *not* the DNA of USP, nor is it a defining element that every student must champion. A former USP director, the late Prof Richardson, believed that [there is no such defining element, and that USP students should simply be "independent thinkers ... who are critical of the system"](#). Implicit in his view, though, is the recognition that discussing ideas openly *is* an integral part of the USP community, and of a USP student.

However, I believe that there has been a decline of spaces in USP where the whole community discusses, shares, argues, and dwells on ideas that interest them. This includes ideas and critiques about USP. The spaces that have primarily witnessed a decline are *The Cinnamon Roll*, USP Life! & Battle Royale, and IGs / GUIs like USP polymath, and The Sessions.

I define these "community spaces" as digital or physical spaces which are open to all USP students and to all ideas, regardless of theme or content. The decline that I posit here starts from somewhere between 2015 and today, takes the form of reduced or no activity in these spaces, a general loss of vitality, and of history. To support my argument, I will introduce a brief history of each space I discuss, attempt to track its decline, and conclude with some speculation as to why the decline set in.

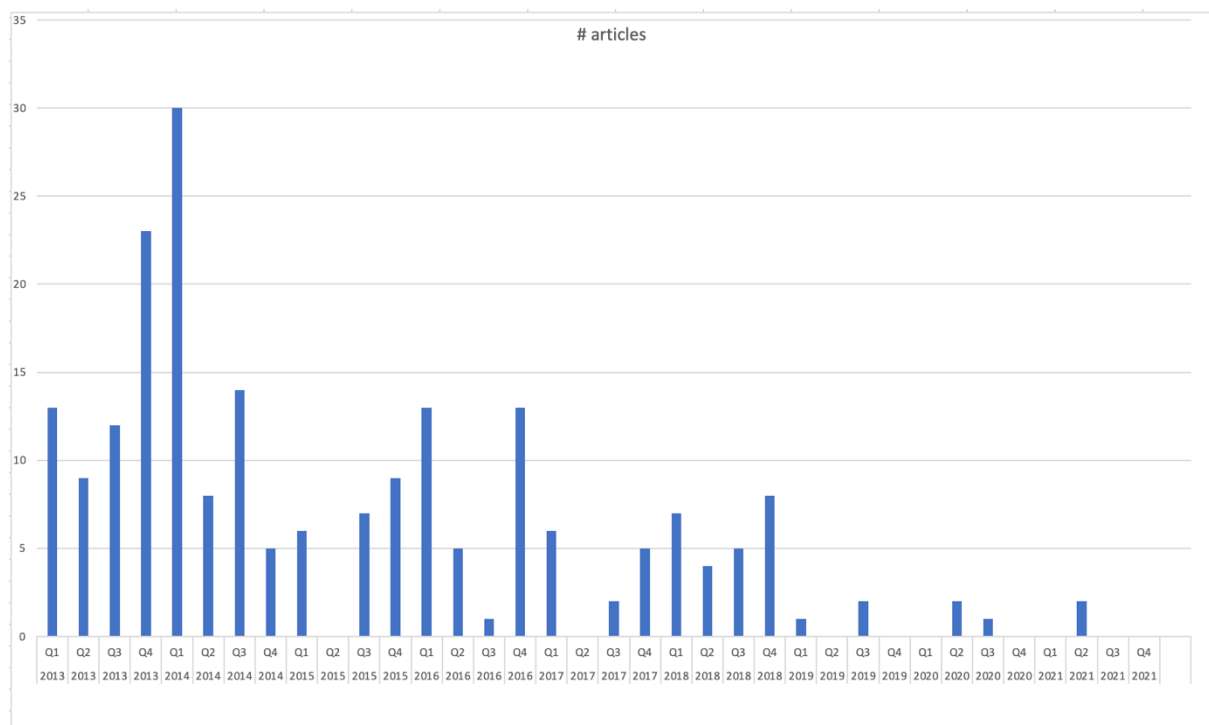
Before I start, let me clarify a few points. [Unlike this previous critique](#)<sup>1</sup> by Mark Goh, a USP alumni, I am *not* arguing about the character of USP students, although I'd be interested to hear what faculty and alumni have to say about this. Nor am I saying that USP is sterile. We do have rich forums for *thematic* discussion, such as *PLAYSET!* for literature, USCinematic for film critique, or Gender Collective for advocacy on gender issues. Nor am I saying that USP students do not discuss ideas around dining tables, in their personal capacities. What I

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<sup>1</sup> The password, if prompted, is "eclair"

am simply arguing about is that there has been a negative change in how we discuss as a community. *It is a cultural issue persisting and perhaps intensifying over years, not a character-centric one.*

First, [\*The Cinnamon Roll\*](#) (TCR), USP’s student magazine. Their online edition started in 2013 as a supplement to the paper edition. I couldn’t find any old copies of the paper edition (would love to see what it looked like), nor figure out when it started rolling. although I’d love to see how it looked like. The pages of TCR have seen [articles covering USP MC elections](#) back when there were 2 “parties” duking it out, [satire, town halls, letters on why the housing system shouldn’t have been amended, playlists about gentrification](#), and more. The articles used to be frequent, covered daily USP affairs, and gave me a window into life in USP in the previous decade. I’d go so far as to call it a real-world exhibition of the art of discussing ideas that students hone in WCT and their USP inquiries. Here’s a personal favourite: Samantha Nah advocating for kindness in the “bloodsport” that MC Q&As supposedly were ([Try a Little Kindness](#)), and an ex-MC candidate’s retort ([Try a Little Unkindness](#)). It seems USP students had a knack for provoking articles - [here’s then-USC president Koh Choon Hwee wondering whether USP would become a middle-upper socioeconomic cluster after mandating an expensive 2-year residential stay in 2011](#).



*Fig 1: Number of articles published per quarter in TCR, 2013-present. Data only includes articles published on the TCR website.*

However, the flow of *TCR*’s articles has dried up (see chart above). There’d be around an article roughly every two weeks until 2018. Barring the occasional article every 6 months, it no longer regularly carries conversations and ideas about USP. I’m certain the lack of a cadence in publishing has led to a lack of visibility too, and with it, a loss of “aha” moments like “[oh, there was an uproar about a lack of housing before too!](#)” or “so that’s how chatterbox and TRB looked like in 2014” (see figure 2 below).

*TCR* used to carry articles about conversations with faculty members (see above), interviews with [NUSSU candidates](#), and even [critiques of USProds plays](#): discussions that we simply haven't had over the last couple of years. There is also a notable loss of the spirit of self-criticism. Who wouldn't want to look back at Choon Hwee's (now Professor Koh!) article, and read a contemporary evaluation of whether USP has "transmogrif[ied] into that very super-elite ... monster that USP's own alumni would love to hate?"

To put it simply, *The Cinnamon Roll* used to be a place where students freely experimented with their funky ideas, and published them for the wider community to read, and over time, this space has lost its verve.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Fig 2: (a) & (b) Chatterbox and (c) Theme Room Red in 2014.

Second, *USP Life!* and *Battle Royale*. Created in 2012, [\*USP Life!\*](#) was branded as *the* official community group on Facebook, and still contains students, alumni, RFs, and faculty members. Living up to its name for a while, it served as an announcements channel for USP (like USChannel today), as well as an exclamatory forum for students to highlight an interesting article, video, or idea that caught their fancy. [Here's a good example](#) about waning intellectual diversity in universities. Or the [meltdown when Mark Goh published his article](#) (linked above). There's [many more if you scroll through](#), including a discussion in 2016 on moving to a new FB group since a significant number of people weren't happy with the discourse there.

Created in late 2018 by the 18<sup>th</sup> USC president, Jeremy Jee, Battle Royale was meant to be a successor of *USP! Life*. Based on the first few exchanges on BR, the migration was due to a decline in engagement on *USP! Life*, driven by declining interest of freshmen in using Facebook. The immediate trigger was a survey posted on USP Supper Jio, which sparked a discussion about creating a non-FB group for the USP community.

I claim that since its founding, BR has suffered a similar fate as *USP! Life*. In particular, it has experienced a decline in the number and frequency of discussions, brainstorming for new initiatives, or debates. Off the top of my head, there have been very few discussions on BR in the last year, barring a notable exchange about a community-contributed Chinese song being played during the USP graduation ceremony.

But that could just be me being suffering from recall bias. At the risk of being pedantic, I did a statistical analysis of all the 35, 494 messages sent on BR since its creation. (you can reach out to me for the code) Messages by bots, forwards, images, and stickers were omitted. I plotted two word clouds that showed the frequency of words in messages on BR, one each for the periods before and after 1 June 2020. There is no particular significance to this date, and it is merely a guesstimate at when I first felt a hollowing out of discussion. Here are the results:





Battle Royale was indeed more vibrant in the period between its creation, and the first half of 2020. Words like *point*, *question*, *discussion* and *community* show up much more frequently in this period. After June 2020, however, BR was dominated by exasperated souls gritting their teeth and, quite literally, doing other people's dirty laundry. Honourable mentions are packages moved from outside (bottom right), printers not "working" (middle) and lost matric cards (middle left). Rather interestingly, of the all-time longest 20 messages on BR, 19 were posted before 1 June 2020. While the words or lengths of messages themselves do not indicate lively debate, they do serve as a decent heuristic to measure the intensity and frequency of discussions, especially owing to the lop-sided skew to the former period.

The quality of discussion on BR has suffered. Take the case of the infamous housing crisis earlier this year. The best outlet we came up with for discussion was an anonymous Google Doc, which became a Wild West terrain of toxicity, rickrolls, and, arguably, doxxing, prompting remarks like "*Anyone you want to change your mind about USP being a civil community, open an anonymous feedback google doc,*" and was shut down at the behest of the USC President, Qiu Qing<sup>2</sup>. USP *can* be a civil community- It used to be. When the same issue of housing came up a couple years ago, the community discussed and organised itself in an objectively better fashion: they organised Town Halls, penned detailed policies in articles, started ISMs, and presented proposals to management. To quote BR's description, "that's how it works in civilized company."

BR has witnessed a decline in terms of the frequency of messages sent too. There were approximately 1440 versus 660 messages per month before and after Jun 2020 respectively. Seniors and Y2s would concur: discussions have been sporadic, barring the occasional USP witch hunt to classify cow milk. BR has also become less representative of the USP population – a significant number of incoming freshmen, Y2s and Y3s aren't on BR, and anecdotally, a huge chunk of BR members are Y4s or recently-graduated alumni. Further, unlike *USP Life!*, faculty members who aren't residential fellows aren't on Battle Royale.

Open conversations in Chatterbox have dried up too, per my experience. Ofcourse, COVID has played a significant role here, but I'll address that later. What's the last (or first) time you walked down to Chatter and joined in a random conversation? Chatterbox even looks much more study-oriented and formal compared to earlier (see Fig 2, again). [This argument isn't new](#): it was brought up by Imran (USP '18) earlier. Imran argued that:

"...alums, often afflicted by the Old-is-Gold syndrome, reminisce the old Chatterbox days while lamenting how quiet the new Chatterbox is. To which the response is that chatter happens also throughout the spaces around the building (floor lounges and in the dining hall) rather than concentrated in one place, as in the old Chatterbox."

Imran did not consider the loss of chatter in Chatterbox to be significant, since it came with the decentralization of chatter around Cinnamon. He treated it as an evolution of USP. I don't quite agree – I think that USP lost yet another discussive space meant for the community. Don't get me wrong – I love the lively discussions all around Cinnamon. But I do not see why USP and Cinnamon cannot have the cultural acoustics for chatter everywhere, whether it

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<sup>2</sup> She informs me that the only reason for shutting the doc down was that it was spiralling into cyberbullying.

is in Chatterbox with a community, or in dining tables and floor lounges with smaller groups and individuals.

Again, anecdotally, (and feel free to correct me on this), another space that has lost its vibrancy of discussion is the annual Q&A for USC elections. These Q&As serve as an accurate barometer of the interest, belief and stake that students have in the USC, student governance, and community life in general. They played host to lively discussions, intense questions, and had multiple parties campaigning and jockeying for power. [The controversy over Rag at the 2014 Q&A](#) is an example. It led to [USP's withdrawal](#) two years later. My all-time favourite is [this clip](#) (start at 4:40), where a senior asks an almost-philosophical question about the treatment of spaces in USP, with [its response](#) on *USP! Life*<sup>3</sup>. While you're at that - have a look at the size of the audience. I could bet you a couple DH coupons that the size of audiences has declined at USC election town halls in the last couple of years<sup>4</sup>.

What, or who, is the “culprit” behind this decline? I believe a major role here lies with the 13th MC, which wrought a fundamental change in USC's charter, and history. Under its tenure, the 13th USC MC amended the USC constitution to reduce the MC size by half. Look at the structure of the MC [before](#) & [after](#)). Crucially, the MC [removed the Community Pillars](#) from its responsibilities. The “Community Pillars,” and the Vice-President (Community Pillars), served to organise student life events, and gave the USC a mandate and responsibility to keep the community vibrant. However, the 13th MC felt that it'd be better to democratise student life, and promote individual members of USP in starting their own events. This is how GUIs were invented. In removing the community pillars and reducing its size, the USC took a backseat from being one of the nuclei of USP life, and opted for a facilitatory role in the community instead. The changes [did work](#), for a while. But in doing so, USP lost a group of students who'd always look to sustain old initiatives and start new ones. Call me a state-socialist, but I believe there's value in having a permanent, regularly elected, accountable body working toward desirable goals. I'd really look forward to having the community (and MC) revisit this change.

The loss of USC's core function points me to my next argument: USP has lost, and never quite recovered from, interest groups (IGs) and Ground-Up Initiatives (GUI) that dabbled in ideas.

There's USP polymath, which might have gone the way of the dodo. Despite its perhaps confusing name, this non-math IG promoted sessions where each speaker employed “Pecha Kucha, a 20x20 presentation on anything that you want to share with the NUS USP community.” In its heyday, Polymath saw decks on singing for dummies, a history of Rag & Flag, why the UN fails, and what gives us our names. It was [started in 2015](#), and became rather popular, to the point that we even used to have [Polymath sessions at end-of-sem dinners](#). We haven't had a Polymath session since Feb 2020, and the frequency of sessions was declining before that too.

Then there's Bite-Sized modules, a GUI which asked you to “do a summary on a module you love, and listen to a summary from your friends!” in a 20- or 40-minute per module affair. The appetizers on offer ranged from “Origins of the Modern World” (Global Studies major),

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<sup>3</sup> Bonus: turns out that the senior was actually [an ex-USC president, Seng Chiy, and that he ran on a campaign promise of reengaging faculty members with students, calling it a “cultural” problem that came up when USP shifted from Block ADM to UTown](#). Sound similar?

<sup>4</sup> the USC doesn't collect data on attendance at their town halls, so we don't have concrete evidence here.



“Governance and Politics of Singapore” (PolSci major), to “Introduction to Marketing” (Biz major). There was Confluence, USP’s annual research conference, and [USP Prism](#), an undergraduate journal that published research papers written by NUS students. Both ceased to exist from 2016 onwards. In my two years at USP, I haven’t come across a new IG / GUI of similar ilk.

USP’s beloved “The Sessions”, too, I feel, has experienced a rough patch of late. My experience at the discussion on interdisciplinary education in USP in late January this year comes to mind. The organizers put together a great panel of USP alumni, and four current students. The conversation and discussion was likewise, interesting, but what surprised one of my friends was the lack of enthusiasm amongst USP students. He’d signed up thinking that there’d be widespread interest in a discussion about something fundamental to USP. He was disappointed – the event had only 16 sign-ups (including Zoom and in-person). Of the 16, I could count only 8 students in attendance at the physical session (which had capacity for 25 pax), and a couple on Zoom. The Sessions has been averaging 17 sign-ups, and 14 attendees, at their regular events last semester (I’m indebted to The Sessions for aggregating and releasing this data). A cursory look through [photographs in The Cinnamon Roll](#) makes me believe that the number used to be significantly higher in the past.

At this point, I hope to have convinced you that there has been a non-trivial decline in the discussion of ideas in the USP community, or at the very least, if you’ve followed all the links, to have provided a partial reconstruction of what USP discussed, and did, in the past.

But I haven’t addressed two, big, fat, jumbo elephants in the room here – why the decline, and what about COVID? For the first, I have no concrete answer, and I hope what I have written here could spark a series of community discussions. I am purely, 100%, speculating here. Possible reasons might include the emergence of a toxic, elitist connotation to discussing ideas. While this has been a leitmotif since USP’s inception (see Choon Hwee’s article), the often toxic [discussion over Mark Goh’s article](#), and the article itself, bolsters this case. Another reason could be that Koh’s fears about a bourgeois elite bubble forming at USP have come true, although my friend says that since USP isn’t a scholarship (!), and dispirited inquiry doesn’t translate into dollars, USP will forever have a population skewed to the rich. Another reason is perhaps the dilution of USP’s appeal after 2011 on account of the creation of the other 3 RCs and Yale-NUS. I simply don’t know.

Further, I don’t think COVID is a factor that *caused* the posited decline. Instead, on the whole, it *catalysed and accelerated* this erosion in the culture of community based discussions. In other words, if we were to remove COVID from the equation, and revert to 1 Jan 2020, the problem of a weak and declining culture wouldn’t go away.

An outlier to my stance of COVID merely playing a catalyst, however, would be the lack of discussion of Battle Royale, where I believe COVID has indeed caused a fizzling out of discussion, albeit still enabled by a weakening culture. I think it’s incredibly hard for people to discuss and argue with strangers they have never met, especially when they’re starved of physical interaction. But since the posited declines of all other spaces precede COVID, and thus I maintain that COVID’s influence as a cause-and-effect mechanism is limited only to Battle Royale.

Notwithstanding the possible reasons I discussed earlier (the loss of Community pillars, socioeconomic bubble, toxic elitism, or intellectualism becoming an OB marker), I believe the newest obstacles to a healthy community culture of discussion are the recent housing changes. They'll greatly hamper the sustenance of the culture of discussing ideas.

First, due to an expansion in the freshman cohort, and COVID constraints, very few Y4s and Y3s will get to stay on campus. As I pointed out earlier, it's already led to a furore on Battle Royale. Further, fresh applications are now made on a semesterly-basis, rather than an annual basis, meaning that the few seniors who do stay, might end up leaving after 13 weeks in Cinnamon. Houses in USP already have a hard time involving seniors in their events. The lack of seniors in Cinnamon will discourage the involvement of seniors in USP IGs and GUIs, and almost certainly preclude them from starting new ones. An automatic renaissance post-COVID looks doubtful. In the absence of the Community Pillars and an MC accountable for student life, this will jeopardize the continuity of spaces like BR, TCR, and IGs / GUIs.

Furthermore, none of the freshman, Y2 or Y3 students have lived in non-COVID Cinnamon for more than six months. That's over 90% of Cinnamon residents, and 80% of USP students. The last two cohorts weren't able to attend a physical FOP. While their respective FOP teams did great to encourage bonding, it is nigh impossible to relay an already-declining ethos of discussing ideas over Zoom, especially if you haven't experienced it unadulterated yourself.

But I'm not one to despair. I want to highlight to the community, and to freshmen in particular, that there is value and tradition in sustaining a lively discussion of ideas in USP. What needs to follow are conversations about how we can set about doing this. We need to discuss the involvement of professors in community life, since they're permanent stakeholders in USP. We need to revisit the Community Pillars. We need to talk about revitalizing Battle Royale, *The Cinnamon Roll*, USP polymath, Bite-Sized Mods, and other IGs - but most importantly, revitalizing the discussion of ideas in USP. It's time to scroll to the past, and hit refresh.

*Mayank is a CS+USP student in year three.*

PS: I'm indebted to Qiu Qing and The Sessions for being so gracious in entertaining my nagging requests. Thanks a ton to everyone who vetted this article. I'm grateful in particular, to Michael Shen, for brainstorming ideas with me, suggesting that I analyze Battle Royale's data, and providing detailed feedback.

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