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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# New media and new politics with old cemeteries and disused railways: advocacy goes digital in Singapore

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This article seeks to demonstrate the significance of new media in reconfiguring and expanding the politics of conservation in the rapidly urbanizing postcolonial city state of Singapore. The critical role of new media is examined, in providing new access and connectivity to the efforts of non-governmental organizations, particularly heritage groups in the republic in advocating for the conservation of lands around the former Malayan Railway line and Bukit Brown Cemetery in Singapore. In two case studies, activists and enthusiasts of all ages are seen to quickly build up and share an organic knowledge and memory base in cyberspace, through postings on Facebook and sharing of digital photographs and videos, recorded with digital cameras and smartphones. These actions are significant as collectively staking cultural ownerships of heritage sites about to be lost. As new media are promptly adopted as tools for social mobilization with the ability to circulate events, news and debates through Google+ to Twitter, new publics, new community leaders and new alliances begin to emerge in a scene once dominated by traditional and formal organizations. Like any other medium, new media possess affordances of its own and impact the meanings that are conserved and interpreted through heritage. With Singaporeans ranked in the world as the most frequent users of new media portals like Facebook, the authors explore the cultivation of a new form of citizenry via new media in pushing for the politics of memory, nature and heritage in the highly modernized cityscape.

**Keywords:** new media; cyberactivism; heritage conservation; Singapore; book conservationist/Facebook conservationist

## Introduction

From the increasingly accessible, mobile and networked Internet platforms and devices, new media have opened up new channels of communication for citizens and civil society organizations as political actors, engendering greater levels of democratic participation, civic engagement and social activism (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Tatarchevskiy, 2011). Lievrouw (2011) argues that new media have four distinctive qualities that set them apart from traditional media, all of which make new media particularly suited for alternative and activist expression:

> In terms of their design and use, [new media] are continuously recombinant and complexly and dynamically networked; in terms of their social consequences, people now take new media for granted as being pervasively ubiquitous and interactive (with

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> interactivity being a necessary condition for social, political, and cultural participation). (p. 15)

This article seeks to demonstrate the role and significance of new media in reconfiguring the politics of heritage and environmental conservation in the rapidly urbanizing postcolonial city state of Singapore where public acts of protests are tightly restricted by the extensive and watchful state apparatus. Considered to be peripheral to the stability, security and economy of the republic, heritage conservation often takes a low priority in the republic and in public consciousness. As such, the state has been more significantly more tolerant of public and media discussions and lobbying efforts through proposals and petitions by conservationists and activists derived mainly from the middle class of hobbyists and professional architectures, academics and botanists.

This modus operandi has taken a sharp turn in 2011 as a result of the confluence of politico-technological global forces. On the local front, with a wider range of Singaporeans seeking for a more intangible collective sense of belonging identified with places and patterns of life whose existence remain uncertain with the demands of the developmentalist state, a new politics of nostalgia is starting to take root in the republic. Two eco-heritage areas, namely, the former Malayan Railway line, and the Bukit Brown Cemetery, both with histories spanning about eight decades, have turned into sites of such identification. The former, now a defunct railroad, has been recently returned to Singapore in July 2011 after being managed by the Malaysian rail authorities, while the latter lies within a lush tropical scenic forest where uniquely carved gravestones mark many prominent historical personalities in the country. For close to a century, since they were established, the two sites were tucked comfortably away from the pressures of urbanization.

What has been deemed as the less politically contentious issues of conservation has taken significant public limelight as activists started utilizing social media to project the presence of civil society. Using the concerns raised by conservationists over two recent case studies of the future plans of a venerable railway route as well as a cemetery covered by the tropical undergrowth, this article seeks to conceptualize the role of the Internet and social media in changing trends of the politics of conservation in the republic. Focusing on areas pertaining to the formation, networking and the circulation of knowledge, information and relationships that are crucial to the maturation of an independent civil society, this article would demonstrate the impact of social media bringing about new forms of socio-political engagements in a digitalized landscape, thus rejuvenating and re-appropriating the neglected and forgotten natural and historical landscape of a previous industrial–mechanical era.

## Civic engagement in Singapore

Given the historical legacy of the 1950s and 1960s, when it had to contend with the perceived infiltration and politicization of community organizations by allegedly subversive leftist groups, the People's Action Party (PAP) government continues to be suspicious of civil society groups and their propensity in challenging the authority of the state. Hence, it has instead preferred to use the term 'civic society' to underscore its expectations that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and active

citizens should act as partners with the state in building a better nation (Chua, 2000). As Lee has noted:

> The trick is to keep citizens occupied in activities that are deemed civic, gracious and kind so that they would keep a safe distance away from real political activities such as political lobbying, protests, campaigning, or even politically induced violence. (2010, p. 85)

Not merely seen as an organizational space between the individual and the government that is critical for the exercise of citizenry, civil society groups in the city state are often politically weighted along their political leanings, mobilizing capabilities and organizational infrastructure. At one end of the spectrum are religious and cultural charities and community organizations that are considered to be generally depoliticized or minimally politicized entities seemingly only seen in complementing and supplementing public service provisions. At the other end are working-class grass roots bodies and trade unions, with potentially high levels of politicization and mobilization that would pose significant challenges to the ruling establishment. Here, these groups have been systematically brought under official supervision in what Hill and Lian (1995) describe as parapolitical structures (pp. 159–187) or 'symbiotic relationships', as in the case of the umbrella National Trade Union's Congress (NTUC) to which all labour associations have to be affiliated.

In this respect, special interest advocacy-based NGOs lie somewhere in the middle. Nonetheless, the government has consistently indicated that the emphasis of these NGOs should be geared towards the development of a non-confrontational 'civic society' (Hill & Lian, 1995, pp. 220–241). Collectively, these advocacy groups have been instrumental in deploying a mixture of expert knowledge and emotional pleas to illuminate the social and external costs of development in terms of exploitation of labour, abuse of animals and the destruction of cultural and ecological landscapes. Seen as generally idealistic concerns limited to a small section of the educated middle classes, the state has been comparatively less worried of the capabilities of these groups to mobilize entire masses to mount any significant political challenge against the system. Part of the reason may be that civil society in Singapore operates in a media environment that is highly commodified but at the same time highly regulated (Wong, 2001).[1] For the mainstream media, albeit being corporatized in the mid-1990s, government involvement is still highly visible through an explicit media regulatory regime and substantial ownership in these organizations dominated usually by former senior officials in the boardrooms (George, 2002). Public protests and demonstrations are not allowed in the republic, except in a state-designated space called Hong Lim Park, where speakers are required to apply for a police permit prior to the event, and to steer clear of 'racial and religious issues' in their speech. Institutionalized NGOs are formally registered with the government and have historically voiced their oppositional sentiments to public issues in more measured, polite methods with letters to the press (which are subject to editorial filtering), as well as closed-door meetings with the authorities. However, 'negotiations have a tendency to be carried out inequitably and with a strong bias towards the more powerful "partner"...To put it simply, civil society groups in Singapore are not sufficiently autonomous for debates to be deemed dialogic.' (Lee, 2010, p. 86).

Aside from ritually acknowledging their concerns, making minor concessions as well as reiterating the adequacies of the existing mechanisms in dealing with such matters, the ministries concerned would mainly appropriate some recommendations of issues raised by advocacy groups in state-initiated feedback sessions and focus group discussions. Such engagements reflect the desire of the authorities to show the public some indication of consultation and dialogue with the middle classes (Neo, 2010). While these groups are usually given the space to platform their causes in the mainstream media, they remained the less-desired players of the broader official definition of an active 'civic society' which favours more politically muted and polite voluntary organizations rather than the advocacy of questioning civil society.

At this point it is necessary to provide the context in which new media are working in the cases discussed here. Only five years after 1995, which marked the year the World Wide Web was adopted by the masses globally, Singapore attained the title of the 'intelligent island' (Lee, 2010, p. 107). It was achieved by an aggressive strategic master plan, which aimed to connect every household and organization to an island-wide cable network. Coupled with a population that was increasingly educated, the initiative resulted in Internet savvy users who were also highly articulate and explored using the Internet for a variety of social, political and commercial purposes. Internet users in Singapore have, over the years, pursued new forms of activism using new media. One example is the case of Mas Selamat bin Kastari (MSK), a suspect Islamist militant who escaped from a detention centre in Singapore. Stories of his escape, including rumours that he might have been murdered, political parodies depicting MSK as a political hero and the incompetence of the police, and 'infotaining play' – games focusing on the narratives of MSK's escape and the local police's efforts to capture him – were spread using new media (Cheong & Lundry, 2012). Such content fulfilled multiple purposes, such as raising public consciousness on the issue of national security, to critiquing the authorities (Cheong & Lundry, 2012). With the Internet it is evident that citizens are pursuing new forms of activism in their own ways. What remains unclear is whether or not such activism is having an effect.

It is in such a political context that this paper seeks to examine how new media expand the repertoire of action available for civil society groups in Singapore, particularly in the area of heritage conservation, with respect to the emergence of new social movements driven by ad hoc online communities that have developed and evolved outside of formally registered NGOs.

## Conservationism as civic participation: towards active citizenry

In the case of conservation politics, two NGOs, namely the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) and the Nature Society of Singapore (NSS) have been actively involved in raising public awareness of the republic's cultural and natural heritage. Although these two groups were officially registered in 1987 and 1991, respectively (Liew, 2004), conservationism has been active in the land since the early 1920s. The cause however became more urgent in the 1960s when the postcolonial PAP government embarked on an ambitious plan for industrialization and urbanization of the newly independent city state. The first generation of leaders under the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew sought to distinguish the country from its neighbours by consciously keeping the country's colonial heritage intact by not removing statues,

icons and road names associated with the British Empire. In addition, keen to be disassociated with the squalor of Third World cities, the government housed almost 85 per cent of the population in public housing projects all over the island, and consciously shaped the country into a garden city with extensive landscaping projects. The ambitious plans have resulted in the demolition and gentrification of many buildings with historical and architectural merit.

In contrast to the zoo-ethnographic interests of their colonial predecessors who were keener in preserving indigenous traditions, conservationists in post-1965 Singapore find a greater need in fostering a more sustainable pace of development and modernization. Initial concerns were raised mainly by academics and practising architects as well as hobbyists through sporadic journal publications as well as letters and articles to the newspapers from the early 1970s (Bishop, Philip, & Yeo, 2004, p.165). Meant to raise public awareness and consciousness rather than to mobilize angry crowds, the reach of the conservationists to the broader masses have been usually limited. Basically, these groups were reliant on the mainstream newspapers to project their activities as well discussions on conservation issues. In fact, such voices have been seen to be encouraging by the government as it indicates that 'Singaporeans are not rootless citizens living in a hotel with no sense of where they come from and who they are' (Chinatown Furore, 1999). The media have, in this respect, been generally more open in reporting on conservation issues, which are championed by relatively small special interest groups consisting of mainly English-educated middle-class architects, academics and botanists, who are not commonly associated with mass mobilization.

This limitation in turn has deprived the larger public of the necessary vocabularies to resist the more draconian plans of resettlement and redevelopment by the state crafted under the platitudes of progress and nation-building. As such, while conservationists drawing from the intelligentsia have been deemed to be 'idealistic', their subaltern counterparts have in turn been labelled generally as backward and reactionary when they protested over the mandatory exhumation of their relatives' graves or removal of organically surfaced community shrines for new infrastructural projects. There were, however, occasions where the conservationists managed to mobilize broader support for their causes in 1990s, for instance the campaign by NSS on the unique coastal wetlands of Chek Jawa and Lower Pierce Reservoir drew popular reception, compelling the government to backtrack on its plans (Francesch-Huidobro, 2006). On the built heritage front, plans for the gentrification of the historical ethnic Chinese district along the models of the Chinatowns of the West as well as the demolition of the National Library to make way for an underground road tunnel drew significant protests (Singapore Heritage Society [SHS], 2000). The symposiums and dialogue sessions organized by the SHS saw significant attendance by the concerned ordinary citizens. While the government's plans proceeded eventually, the vocal reservations were perhaps the genesis of a growing desire by the citizenry to pursue a more organic and autonomous narrative that goes beyond the contrived triumphant official versions of growth and development. It takes, however, the confluence of changing technological developments with socio-political trends that would bring heritage politics into the arena of cyberactivism more than a decade later.

**Cyberactivism: from difference to convergence**

Cyberactivism was a term coined by McCaughey and Ayers (2003), at the dawn of the mass adoption of the Internet – and along with that, came various incidents of online activism by different groups, such as citizen journalists in the form of Indymedia in 1999. Earlier writings about online activism (also known as Internet activism and cyberactivism) have defined it as 'a politically motivated movement relying on the Internet' (Vegh, 2003, p. 71). There are certain characteristics of cyberactivism that distinguish it from the traditional forms of activism in terms of organizational structures and mobilizational practices. Differing from the pre-Internet years where calls for action demand the presence of two or more individuals to form an aggregate group, any activities can be mobilized by individuals online. Moreover, cyberactivism does not only rely on new media – protest actions can take place in both online and offline environments, carried out by actors and organizations that operate in both contexts (Illia, 2003, p. 328). The highly dedicated spaces on the Internet make it easy for citizens to participate, unlike traditional activism where efforts would be necessary to understand the assumptions of each group and structural conditions of participation. On the Internet, there is an 'instant ethos' (Gurak & Logie, 2003, p. 31) where participants may join groups whose shared interests are immediately evident. Additionally, the Internet's flat structure and communication mechanisms make it possible for information to be widely disseminated, and citizens to interact directly with one another, thereby circumventing mainstream communicative structures and procedures.

Coming from a tightly controlled political landscape with strict legal and licencing regimes that monitor the formation of associations, the mobilization of resources and the circulation of knowledge in the public sphere, the understanding of cyberactivism in Singapore requires some degree of elucidation. A common observation of digital technology is that cyberspace creates new spaces for groups that are otherwise marginalized or obscured by the traditional media such as television stations and newspapers. This trend is generally applicable to Singapore where the Internet is now considered a semi-guerrilla space for individuals and groups whose contrarian perspectives would not normally pass through the gatekeepers in the politically conservative mainstream media.

Ironically, the emerging platforms for citizen participation and activism in cyberspace are an indirect outcome of the systematic state investment in expanding the information network to develop a technocapitalist, heterotopic 'intelligent island' vision. At the point of its inception in the early 1990s, it was meant to herald a more efficient, prosperous and democratic future (Lim, 2001, p. 187). Accompanying such information infrastructure projects was also concerted moves to improve the digital literacy of the populace to meet the demands of the new economy. Even as the government continues its tight grip on the mainstream institutionalized media where satellite broadcasting continues to be disallowed for the general public, it is also keen on regulating the Internet with a 'light-touch' framework,[2] to maintain its position as the region's premium trading and financial hub.

As homes and offices were increasingly wired to the World Wide Web, conservation groups in Singapore began to follow suit. Initial efforts were concerned with establishing an online presence and community aimed at circulation of relevant information that had previously been disseminated via hard-copy newsletters and

leaflets mailed to a small group of subscribing members. The vice-president of the SHS, Chua Ai Lin, started an email list in 2000 for those interested in heritage issues in Singapore, when she was a graduate student in the UK. The Singapore Heritage Mailing List marked the beginnings of an online community that circulated the latest updates in addition to discussions. At the same time, seeing the importance of the Internet, both NSS and SHS commenced on setting up their homepages to give the societies greater presence in the emerging cyberspace. However, in terms of advocacy and contestations, the impact of the new media became most visibly felt in 2011 when cyber activists called for conservation of lands around the Malayan Railway line and Bukit Brown Cemetery.

## The call for action

The year 2011 will perhaps be known for the unpredictability and spontaneity of radical changes globally that was brought about in part by the empowering effects of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, in pitting individuals against established gatekeepers. Even in the highly policed city state of Singapore, the global techno-cultural shifts have been felt by the ruling PAP government. Citizens' repressed dissatisfaction with the increasing cost of living managed to bypass the carefully orchestrated contrived institutional feedback mechanisms and was expressed in cyberspace, before translating into an unprecedented 6% drop for the incumbent governing party in the General Elections in that year.

Coincidentally, the events on the formal political stage had also crisscrossed coincidentally with conservation issues during the same year, which saw the cessation of operations of the Malayan Railway line in Singapore (also known as the KTM Railway) as well as announcements of plans for a highway across Bukit Brown Cemetery.

The former, a now-defunct railroad that used to carry goods and passengers from Malaysia to the city centre of Singapore, has been recently returned to the island republic after decades of being managed by the Malaysian rail authorities.[3] The latter was the first municipal cemetery established in 1922 for the Chinese community (the largest group in Singapore's multi-ethnic society), when Singapore was still under British colonial rule. Lying within a lush tropical forest, Bukit Brown Cemetery is believed to be the largest Chinese cemetery outside China, and houses many uniquely carved tombstones belonging to prominent historical personalities in the country (Lim, 2012b).

The two sites were both ecologically lush as well as historically and culturally significant places. In spite of the land pressures arising from urban development, these sites have been left largely intact. In 2010, a bilateral agreement was reached for the lands surrounding the Malaysian-owned KTM Railway to be transferred to Singapore, and for the railway tracks to be removed. Instead, the railway services from Malaysia to Singapore would terminate at a border station between the two countries (Ramesh, 2010). As for Bukit Brown Cemetery, there were distant plans for using the space for residential purposes, but the government announced plans in 2011 to build an eight-lane carriageway across the cemetery grounds to handle what it saw as an increasing traffic volume along the existing roads. More than 3700 graves will be affected by the road that is expected to run through the cemetery (Lim, 2012a).[4]

Before the announcements, conservationists have already identified the cultural and ecological value of these two areas where some preliminary documentation work was carried out by NSS and SHS. Discussions on these areas gained significant momentum with the impending cessation of rail operations and the sooner-than-expected plans to redevelop Bukit Brown Cemetery beginning with the planned road expansion. Through traditional media, public talks and tours, the two societies have initially sought to create greater awareness of the existence and significance of the two areas to the public. For the lands around the KTM Railway line, the NSS has even come up with a detailed proposal for an unbroken pedestrian and cycling corridor with minimal disruptions to the natural surroundings, once the rail operations end. However, it was the efforts of an individual, Eugene Tay, who had given the cause greater publicity by using Facebook to platform the issue and publicize public tours around the railway tracks.

Operating independently from NSS or SHS, Tay's Facebook Community page, called 'We Support the Green Corridor', facilitated the circulation of information, news, commentaries, personal memories and reflections on the rail experience in Singapore. Several months later, as the debates on Bukit Brown Cemetery became more prominent, about three related Facebook community webpages were also established for the same purpose. These are the 'Heritage Singapore – Bukit Brown Cemetery' Facebook Group, the 'Save Bukit Brown Cemetery – the roots of our nation' Facebook Group and the 'SOS Bukit Brown' Facebook Community page. With links to each other, the three social media platforms served in providing updates of discoveries of otherwise lost tombs of prominent historical personalities and community leaders, as well as news stories, personal essays, events and petitions. Collectively, these Facebook pages became associated with a new trend of advocacy and activism in the republic, one that is more intensively multi-textual, multi-media and multi-networked. As part of the multi-literacies generated from the Digital Turn (Mills, 2010), the multiplicity of platforms and the multiplication of attention and interests here became essential for the re-evaluation of the otherwise neglected sites, giving them history, presence, relevance and future. Although redevelopment plans for both the areas of the Malayan Railway line and Bukit Brown Cemetery are still going ahead, the state initiated a series of public consultations that would see the participation of key activists from both projects. In this light, even though activism using new media may not have changed redevelopment plans, they have influenced the spiral of engagement between the state and civil society groups.

## From the 'Book Conservationist' to the 'Facebook Conservationist': conservation politics in the era of new media

As its applications and uses diversify, the ubiquity of the Internet creates different levels of digital literacy among users, and such practices are in turn instrumental in crafting out different layers of social networking and interactions. Taken as a whole, this mix of mundane and specialized Internet tools play an important role in the recalibration of communicative norms in the public sphere (Van Dijck, 2012), and the mobilization of resources and people as part of the broader coproduction of citizenship (Nielsen, 2011). The changes are particularly important in terms of the organizational structures of activism, the establishment of knowledge bases and advocacy politics. Table 1 shows some of the changes that new media have

Table 1. The 'Book' Conservationist versus the Facebook Conservationist.

| The 'Book' Conservationist: active citizenry | Facebook Conservationist: public domain |
|---|---|
| *Organization* | *Community* |
| Hierarchy | Friend |
| Membership | Profile |
| Audiences | Likes/join |
| *Authorship* | *Posting* |
| Education | Memory |
| Archiving | Retrieval |
| Statement | Slogan-ing |
| *Advocacy* | *Slogan-ing* |
| Negotiation | Petitioning |
| Dialogue | Published conversation |
| Awareness | Share |
| *Publication* | *Narrowcasting* |
| Expert Viewpoint | User generated content |
| Analogue | Digital |
| Library | Cloud |

introduced in the area of conservation politics, marking the distinctions between the 'Book' Conservationist of the pre-Web 2.0 era and the Facebook Conservationist who is adept in using social media.

As a popular social media platform, Facebook is illustrative of these changes, because every day there are estimated half a million new Facebook users registered on an international basis. With a population of only about five million citizens, Singapore's Internet penetration rate of 77.2% is among the highest in Asia (the average rate is 24%), More importantly, over half of its population (26,613,360) are Facebook users (Internet World Statistics, 2012). Furthermore, at an average rate of 38 minutes a day, Singaporeans are calculated to have spent more time on Facebook than their American counterparts who use Facebook for about 21 minutes per day (Murphy, 2011). So ubiquitous is the use of Facebook in Singapore that its political leaders have communicated and discussed policies with citizens through their personal and public accounts. Based on Table 1, we will now discuss the differences between the 'Book' Conservationist and the Facebook Conservationist, to illuminate evolving trends of civil society in Singapore politics, in the light of changes in communicative technologies. The contrasts between the 'Book' Conservationist and the Facebook Conservationist are most significant in the dichotomies of Organization/Community, Authorship/Posting, Advocacy/Slogan-ing and Publication/Broadcasting, as we shall explain in detail below.

Based on the state's perception of civil society groups, conservation groups like SHS and NSS have been regarded with some peculiarity as partially 'cultural/hobbyist' special interest groups. As part of officially registered NGOs, they are required to establish formal and transparent hierarchical organizational arrangements between an elected administrative executive committee and ordinary subscribing members. To the state and public, these NGOs become recognized as possessing the expertise and knowledge to provide largely representative and authoritative insights and positions. In the cases of the Rail Corridor and Bukit

Brown Cemetery, their representatives are officially co-opted and consulted by the government. The involvement, if not endorsement of these groups on public policies has become politically crucial for the Singapore government, which is keen on being seen as consultative with civil society.

The conferment of such level of recognition and authority in some ways shapes the narrative trajectory of the agendas of NGOs. Their agendas are often characterized by reports and press statements that are carefully researched, deliberated and prepared before official release. Materials and information generated often place emphasis on the more intellectual and educational purposes of documentation and archival of content that is deemed to be credible and verifiable. Hence, aside from academic and semi-academic talks, workshops and conferences, both the SHS and NSS have also been involved in coming up with detailed written reports and recommendations to the government on sites and cultures that are considered worthy of conservation. Therefore it is logical that these 'Book' NGOs would structure their advocacy strategies carefully based on direct physical negotiations and correspondence with relevant government departments, complemented by articles and letters in the newspapers to raise greater awareness on the issues concerned to the reading public. From here, these groups would hope to be able to stake their hold on the related areas more visibly through tours and visits for usually small interested members. Related to their status and identities are the media platforms for these groups to project their influence. Apart from the fact that they are operating from the pre-Internet decades, institutionalized NGOs tend to rely on traditional, paper-based print media, particularly the production of books. Officially introduced in formal book launches and sold during public talks, these publications are plugged in a circulatory network that is often associated with a culturally literate segment of the populace.

This practice took a turn with the confluence of techno-cultural factors that serve in decentring the knowledge hierarchy of expert technocrats, in a digital era where users of information become producers capable of creating and disseminating their own content (Bruns, 2008). With the comparatively large public interest generated by the developments of events pertaining to the KTM Rail Corridor and Bukit Brown Cemetery, ordinary families and weekend photographers flocked to these two sites to take the last moments of the trains as well as the elaborately sculptured graves. In this respect, Facebook is becoming an important media in publicizing and contextualizing these tours and outings as well as talks organized initially by the two NGOs. Subsequently, the outreach and education efforts began to be initiated by the concerned activists and hobbyists outside the professional realm of architects, academics and natural scientists. Here, we see the beginnings of the cyber activist, one who need not be a card-carrying member of the NGO, but is devoting substantially greater attention to developing his/her Facebook account for broader and even multiple social causes.

In organizational terms, rather than that of formal memberships and executive committees, the casual ambiguity of the Internet creates a levelling social arrangement based on the loose amalgamation of individual relations of 'friends'. In terms of identity, adding on to the physical serialized membership cards of the formal NGO would be the use of the 'profile' and the 'profile picture' of the Facebook user, as a mark of his/her participation in the particular area. Whereas the traditional NGO concept measures the projection of its influence through the physical presence

of audiences in formal public arenas like lectures, talks and Annual General Meetings, the Facebook counterpart would be gauged by the number of 'likes' on postings and comments. The Facebook community page, 'We Support the Green Corridor', has about 7779 'likes', and the 'Heritage Singapore – Bukit Brown Cemetery' Facebook Group has attracted 2240 members (as at 5 March 2013). Another Facebook page with a more activist stance, 'SOS Bukit Brown', has 1033 'likes' (as at 5 March 2013). While one is uncertain of the level of responsibility and commitment from those who have 'liked' these community pages, what is apparent for activists and policymakers is the degree of attention that is being paid to this issue. In addition, if the level of activism of the traditional NGO can be gauged by the number of activities organized, these Facebook pages set up by activists may be evaluated by the rate of updates on postings and comments by participants. Facebook users can also pick and choose the causes they wish to be affiliated with in their profile pages, as the era of customized activism arrives in the republic.

Apart from the organizational aspect, social media have also given the lay person the ability to build, curate and disseminate his/her narrative and knowledge of a particular subject, which was once the privilege of the conservationists with expert knowledge. In terms of the scripting of campaign messages, the cyber activist follows an algorithmic pattern on Facebook that seems to be more diffused in participation with more emphasis placed on immediacy of the message that is linked closely with real-time activities. While the traditional NGOs are careful in conceptualizing and concretizing their statements, reports and other literature, Facebook users attempt to keep their community and personal pages alive and current with the acts of headlining through frequent updates and postings on the latest activities and news. Departing from the formal demands of authorship that marked the more official formal publications of NSS and SHS, Facebook-based cyber activists possess more control of the scripting and perspectivization through individualized acts of 'postings' and 'publishing'. This allows for a myriad of personal memories and reflections that do not undergo editorial filtering, unlike a book publication. Linked to the politics of memory is the trend in which digital technology has enabled the more casual retrieval and exhibition of both public and personal audio-visual archival materials that are critical in re-historicizing and re-narratizing spaces that are to make way for future development. Lastly, 'slogan-ing' becomes a more convenient tool in the accelerated temporal cyberspace that favours short and concise individual messages instead of the carefully scripted statements of NGOs.

On the areas of advocacy and agitation, the core components of activism, Facebook has engendered an instrument that, however different in approach, complements the existing practices of advocacy. To be grouped generally as 'Snowballing', activists would use the social media network to generate published conversations and discussions, dissemination of relevant articles, updates and news even on the official Facebook accounts of the relevant government ministry or the minister's Facebook Wall itself. While offline events like tours, talks and gatherings have been organized from these messages and postings, a hope for the conservationists would be to popularize their agendas by starting and sustaining a momentum of 'occupying Facebook Walls'. With political communication in Singapore being increasingly placed online where policies are even announced by ministers on their Facebook pages, such Internet buzz has the potential to sway public opinion, as well as the policies that accompany them.

Linked to the acts of snowballing would be the utilization of social media as a broadcasting tool. Here, instead of the lengthy and formalized expert views in books and articles, cyber activists tend to place more attention on shorter and linguistically more malleable user-generated content. This implies that instead of printed material with analogue photographic illustrations, the conservationists of the Rail Corridor and the Bukit Brown Cemetery have been relying on pixelated networked images to broadcast their messages and content throughout the digital landscape, a process that has been further disembodied and de-mechanized by the advent of virtual storage space such as iCloud and its variations. In such applications, data and information are disseminated not just from the smartphone, but can be pulled anywhere into selected computer devices. This becomes particularly convenient during visits to the railway tracks and the cemetery, where photographs of the railway stations or newly discovered graves can be instantaneously captured and distributed online to interested parties. The activists behind the SOS Bukit Brown Facebook page and website, for example, have not only initiated an online petition to save the cemetery, but have also created videos (capitalizing on widely accessible consumer-level video editing software) rallying for Singaporeans to sign the petition (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kZx9uFQb94). The videos come in both web and mobile formats that enable viewers to pass on the content easily to friends and family, so that the message can be spread in a viral manner. Although the number of views and actual signing of the petition were not high, the activists made use of social media to initiate a sustainable and living form of archive for themselves. In this respect, social media have engendered for conservationists a new culture of connectivity (Van Dijck, 2011) that is built on the older grid started by SHS and NSS. Especially in the case of Bukit Brown Cemetery, what is more essential for the Facebook community is the gradual build-up of a potential virtual community archive from the information collected and exhibited. Here, archiving becomes an important component of activism through the urge to historicize and maintain the presence of historical subjects from social and political oblivion (Flinn, 2010). However, this unofficial repository has yet to be organized and utilized as an archival resource, and the current trends are still geared towards posting rather than researching on these digital materials. With stories, photographic illustrations and oral accounts of the Rail Corridor and the Bukit Brown Cemetery, the online communities have been instrumental in leapfrogging above the formal organs of the state as well as the expertise of SHS and NSS in creating an organic and spontaneous memory project.

## Conclusion

Dahlberg (2011) has framed the concept of digital democracy along a spectrum that ranges from the liberal notions of consensual politics moulded by the state-corporate e-democracy projects to the more autonomous and alternative counter-publics and digital ‘commons network’ (pp. 857–864). In heritage too, the state’s tuning of its citizenry to plug into global neo-liberal capitalist flows has also given them the tools to retrieve and rediscover a new historical, socio-epistemological network that is rooted in place and history. Hence, the rise of a network society does not necessarily lead to the demise of place (Graham, 2002a). Taken together, cyber activists have created ‘micro-public spheres’ (Keane, 1995, p. 9) in cyberspace where heritage and

conservation issues can be debated and the dominant agenda of the government can be challenged, thereby re-territorizing the previous neglected and forbidden spaces of the railways and cemetery belonging to the pre-Internet era. If NGOs in post-1965 Singapore have been struggling to resuscitate the young republic's colonial vestiges from the bulldozer, they have been joined by the convergence of a loose network of Facebook users in their struggle to resurrect these spaces on the parallel universes of the online and offline worlds. As new media manifest its potential and promise especially for cyber activists, *technopopulism* – the conviction that the presence of more information can improve ordinary lives is strengthened (Graham, 2002b). Yet as Graham (2002b) cautioned, such technopopulism needs to be carefully examined, as the loudest voices get heard more, and may become dominant in shaping public policies.

## Notes

1. There is a thin line of difference between Singapore's notions of civic society and civil society. Civic society depicts a scenario where there are partnerships with the state, whereas civil society may be understood as voluntary actions that are not guided by the state (Edwards, 2004). In the context of the paper the differences between the two are heightened with the latter being manifested by citizens and activist groups using new media to spread awareness, and sometimes, call for actions to preserve heritage sites.
2. Under the regulatory framework for the Internet in Singapore, all persons who put up any form of content on the Web do not need to seek permission from the Media Development Authority, but is automatically deemed as an Internet content provider and falls under the Class Licence Scheme, and has to self-regulate the content based on an Internet Code of Practice (Lee, 2005).
3. Singapore joined Federation of Malaya, Sarawak and North Borneo (now Sabah) in 1963 to form Malaysia. In 1965, Singapore was separated from Malaysia and became an independent sovereign nation. However, the land in Singapore upon which the railway tracks run, including the terminal station of Tanjong Pagar in the city centre of Singapore, remained as Malaysian territory until the government of both countries reached a landmark agreement in 2010 for the Malaysian government to return the railway lands to Singapore, in exchange for joint development of a few land parcels in more developed areas near the city centre of Singapore (Ramesh, 2010).
4. Singapore is a land-scarce island republic. Since the 1960s, the government has progressively refined legislation, empowering the state to acquire burial spaces for redevelopment. For the past few decades, many cemeteries have been closed and graves exhumed, to make way for the construction of public housing estates. See Tan and Yeoh (2002) for a more detailed documentation and discussion of the contestation and negotiation between the government and the Chinese community organizations in the process of closing Chinese cemeteries, due to Chinese beliefs in geomancy for burial grounds and their aversion towards cremation.

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