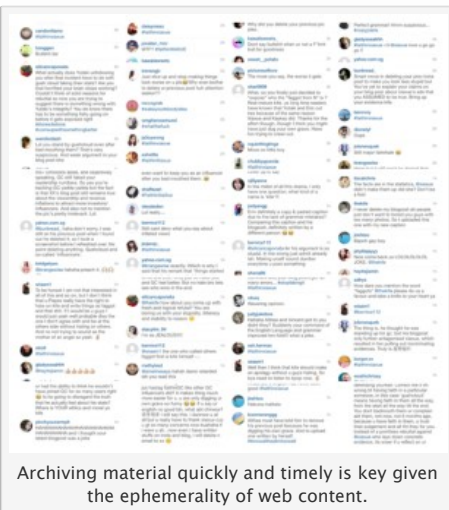


IT'S A BLOG EAT BLOG WORLD

Drama and disorder in the Singaporean webscape



Archiving material quickly and timely is key given the ephemerality of web content.

I spent all of Christmas 2014 and New Year 2015 conducting follow-up fieldwork, glued to my battery-malfunctioning iPhone 5 (b. 2013) and painfully slow MacBook Pro (b. 2010). Well, I should say I *stumbled back* into fieldwork. I was visiting Singapore to spend the holiday season with my sister, and definitely hadn't planned on devoting so many of my waking moments to compulsively taking screen shots, archiving blogposts, collecting press clippings, and holding conversations in spurts and spews at three in the morning.

But drama happens, and drama never waits. And among social media microcelebrities, it's a blog eat blog world.

Microcelebrities and numbers

Social media microcelebrities are Internet users who craft and conscientiously curate personas online, and grow intensely popular among a niche audience. In Singapore, the most successful of these are bloggers in the 'lifestyle' genre, who also post on other platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and AskFM, where they boast hundreds of thousands of followers internationally.

Many of them pursue blogging full-time, and earn the bulk of their revenue from personalized editorial-style advertisements (also known as 'advertorials') integrated into the personal narrative of their daily lives. It is an extremely enticing industry with top bloggers raking in hundreds of thousands of dollars in endorsements and advertorials, including sponsored weddings, sponsored vehicles, sponsored home renovations, and even years worth of sponsored baby products for their high profile younglings from birth.

It's simple math: the larger your viewership, the larger the pay rate you are able to command from clients. Given the industry's rapid professionalization and increasing lucrateness within the last decade, a rising

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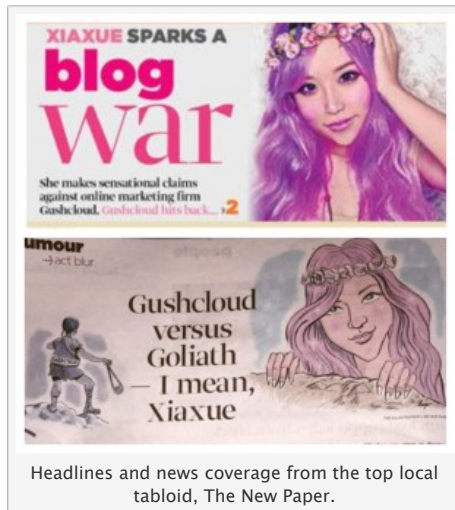
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number of young people, fresh out of school, are postponing careers in the more mainstream industries for full-time blogging. As competition grows stiff, several controversies have broken out or been orchestrated as a means to disrupt the equilibrium of blog viewership.

Manufacturing disorder: A case study



On 23rd December 2014, one of Asia Pacific's most (in)famous bloggers made some **allegations** against a rival social media advertising company in a fairly lengthy blogpost she termed an 'exposé'. Specifically, she accused the company of inflating earnings, of their bloggers masking ads, of inflating bloggers' stats, and of procuring fake YouTube views and subscribers. While she claimed to have spent a year gathering 'evidence' and 'research' to build her case, many netizens noted that she was also a shareholder of a competing social media advertising company, and thus had vested interests in taking down the competition.

Although the accused company has **since responded**, the saga resulted in several thousand weigh-ins from other social media advertising companies, web microcelebrities, mainstream media influencers, and everyday users. The commotion was exacerbated when a Whatsapp Groupchat involving several bloggers from the accused company was 'leaked' and published on a dedicated Tumblr site. The nation's most prominent citizen-run 'vigilante' Facebook group also began conducting their **own 'exposé'** on the prominent blogger who initiated the accusations.

The incident went viral rapidly, and received national attention via coverage by mainstream print and digital media outlets for a month, even gracing front-page news several times. In addition, citizen-run websites including contentious journalism, vigilante satire, and gossip forums have been providing extended coverage on the saga. But soon, the mob mentality kicked in.

Hundreds of thousands of comments and reactions emerged across popular social media platforms. This included many users behind 'throw away' (temporal, non-attributable, and one-use social media accounts set up specifically for the user to comment or spam anonymously) Instagram accounts, who began disseminating hate speech towards several high profile bloggers embroiled in the saga. NSFW (not safe for work) images of a couple of bloggers were also widely circulated on Instagram and cross-posted on other social media platforms.

Bloggers began temporarily restricting their social media feeds to selected groups, or by deleting their accounts all together. Some clients dropped engaged bloggers, while others put contracts on hold. Most everyday users organized themselves into two camps, solidified by the use of two distinct hashtags, each in support of the blogger who made the allegations and the accused company respectively. While the commotion continues to unfold, ethical, business, and legal guidelines for social media microcelebrities have been called into question.

A quick history of serial disorder



However, such prominent and engaging Internet–celebrity controversies are a staple in the Singaporean webscape. In fact, in the three years alone, at least five other high–profile scandals among various bloggers have occupied the national imaginary for days on end:

- August 2014: A blogger was called out for an Instagram image of her in a bikini that was sloppily photoshopped. It was reported in a citizen journalism tabloid that quickly went viral, and the blogger became embroiled in a ‘hate campaign’.
- July 2014: Two bloggers were engaged in heated status claims over the use of the title ‘celebrity blogger’. Several other bloggers organized themselves into two camps in support of the main parties. Passive aggressive comments from both camps were amplified on various social media feeds. Several mainstream news outlets covered the incident.
- December 2013: A blogger posted an Instagram image of herself sitting on the lap of her new boyfriend. She had only very recently broken up with her previous boyfriend, and the new boyfriend was allegedly very recently involved with her best friend. The best friend and several other bloggers began to speak out against her, with thousands of everyday users breaking out into a ‘hate’ campaign.
- December 2012: A blogger was called out for being a third party and breaking up an engagement. The abandoned bride–to–be detailed the incident with excruciating detail on a Facebook page that she maintained over months. The incident was reported on the mandarin newspapers.
- November 2012: A blogger staged and ‘leaked’ an amateur homemade video depicting her and an unidentified man engaging in sexual acts. While the camera angle and framing was strategically positioned throughout to omit any all the vital body parts, the 1:26 clip featured arousing audio throughout. The incident was reported on several news outlets, but was later revealed to be a publicity stunt by the blogger engaged to advertise condoms. She later received flak for being “distasteful”.

While many of these incidents appear mundane and trivial, they actually play a huge role in renegotiating viewer traffic among bloggers, thus impacting the overall commercial blog industry more saliently than commonly perceived.

Sparking controversy in the industry generates ‘hype’. This manufactured sense of ‘disorder’, in which the stasis of blogger hierarchy is disrupted, is frequently capitalized by other bloggers who compete to capture the attention of passers–by. For this reason, many peripheral bloggers attempt to produce side commentaries, personal editorials, or mini (sloppy) ‘exposés’ of their own promising “previously unseen” information from “behind the scenes” as “an insider”. This creates publicity for themselves and intensifies the exposure for their social media platforms through redirected click–throughs. Despite the apparent frivolity of things, these topics have the ability to command attention and attract (good and bad) publicity, and serve the function of appropriating drama and controversy for net gain.

Staying relevant

Are these bloggers concerned that all this controversy might be affecting their reputation? According to the bloggers I’ve spoken to throughout fieldwork, the verdict is mixed.

“It is very important to stay relevant,” a prominent blogger tells me. “You want to be talked about, you want to remain talked about... all publicity is good publicity, even bad publicity... yeah only if you know how to manage it.”

Engaging in blogwars, or responding to one if one happens to be dragged in, is not always a viable option. Some bloggers choose to stay away from drama, save for the occasional cryptic one–liners (ironically) signifying their disregard towards haters and disengagement with the commotion. Others are ambivalent and may comment only to refute allegations, but not to instigate any accusations.

Still others feel that blog-warring (or Tweet-warring for that matter) is an inevitable element of their industry and one undeniably oft used to chalk up viewership. While some bloggers appear more hesitant than others to speak up, almost all bloggers keep up with breaking news and new scandals around the clock.

But all scandals have an expiry date. Trends and fads change by the week. A top story today might be a mere hazy memory a month from now. While increasingly exposed to orchestrated scandals, readers grow desensitized to drama and no longer find controversy novel. Moral boundaries shift all the time to make way for lukewarm sentiment. New scandals and controversies are continuously unfolding and overshadowing old gossip.

Drama happens, and drama never waits. But drama also gets old, fast.

About the author



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Crystal is a 4th year PhD Candidate in Anthropology & Sociology, and Communication & Media Studies at the University of Western Australia, Perth. She is passionate about everything to do with gender and the Internet. In her spare time, Crystal incessantly ploughs through the interwebs reading up on deep sea creatures, urban legends, and mythical folklore. Crystal can be contacted at wishcrys.com.

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