Mobilising dissent in a digital age: The curious case of Amos Yee

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ABSTRACT
Political containers frame opinions. They play a formative role in establishing the terms of interpretation, in distinguishing between assent and dissent, and in determining the extent to which dissent is publicly tolerated. Whilst it is by now widely acknowledged that the power and influence of political containers have been relativised by interconnection, the effects of moving within and between containers – and thus mediating between different framings of opinion – are under-theorised. Also, the enabling role of digital media in disseminating dissent, and in bringing about disproportionate reach and impact, remains understudied. Addressing these lacunae, this paper explores the ways in which dissent can be reproduced, reframed, and thus mobilised in a digital age. It advances the concept of geopolitical arbitrage to explain how movement can lead to the reframing of the political containers of origin and destination, and of the object that moved. By drawing on the case of Amos Yee – a young Singaporean blogger who was imprisoned for engaging in anti-religious "hate speech" – I demonstrate how digital media enabled the mobilisation of dissent by giving his voice undue attention, and how his movement from Singapore to the US on the grounds of asylum enabled a reframing of himself, and of the political containers that he moved between.

Introduction

Opinions are a function of the political container in which they are formed and expressed; political containers frame opinions, and help to determine their (un)acceptability within the public domain. Through the rule of law, the mainstream media, the education system and public discourse, certain behaviours, attitudes and values are inculcated, conditioned and sanctioned by hierarchies of political power. As a resistant form of opinion, dissent challenges these framings, and, by extension, the hierarchies of power to which they are attributed. Dissent is an outcome of resistance; the extent to which an opinion changes from being resistant to being dissident relates to the extent to which it contravenes and challenges the limits of tolerance that are prescribed by a given political container. Some political containers are more

tolerant than others, just as some opinions are more extreme than others. That said, the role of movement in overcoming the exclusionary effects of geopolitical boundaries – and in reinterpreting political power by recasting it within a comparative framework of analysis – remains under-theorised. By engaging with the observation that 'the world is demanding more creative conceptual models to understand the geographies of power' (Mountz 2013, 831), this paper explores how the mobilisation of dissent in a digital age can cause power to be relativised. In this sense, "mobilisation" primarily captures the idea of movement between different scales of analysis, and between political containers. It also, secondarily, captures how these movements can have wide-ranging consequences that result in the mobilisation of socio-political groups in support of, or in opposition to, dissent.

Specifically, this paper advances the concept of geopolitical arbitrage to theorise the outcomes that arise from moving between different framings of opinion. By enabling 'sovereignty [to be] contested, undermined, evaded, called in question' (Mountz 2013, 832), movement can enable the repositioning of the individual, and the reframing of the political containers that they move within and between. As such, geopolitical arbitrage embraces the fact that 'our world is a world of 'territorial containers' but it is also 'interterritorial' (Newman and Paasi 1998, 197), and therefore helps to move the discourse of dissent away from 'the messy middle grounds where control and opposition, structure and agency, hegemony and counter-hegemonic action, are all variously mediated' (Sparke 2008, 423). Whilst Newman and Paasi speak of "territorial containers", I use "political containers" as a broader term that recognises that political frameworks may or may not overlap with the territory. A political container could, for example, refer to a state, a religious community, a school, a family, or any other identifiable group wherein the expression of power is hierarchical. Containers are not, therefore, mutually exclusive, but 'comprise instead complex and often contradictory social worlds inhabited and acted upon by people' (Massa 2018, 3). As a heuristic device, political containers help to overcome the "territorial trap" that has long limited more innovative understandings of the 'spatiality of sovereignty' (Mountz 2013, 831) in a world of transnational flows and global interconnectedness.

Whilst these flows and interconnections have posed considerable challenges to the hegemony of political containers in defining the terms of dissent, so too has the proliferation of digital media into ever-more walks of life. Digital media have caused the voicing of dissent to become more accessible and more democratic than ever before. Indeed, whilst the potential (Davies 2013; Mountz 2013) and limitations (Fenton 2012, 2016; Pickerill 2007) of digital media in bringing about new "public" spaces of resistance and new forms of radical politics have been well researched, they are often studied as strategic tools deployed by organised collectives that seek to bring about lasting forms of change. The potential of digital media for realising more spontaneous and arbitrary forms of dissent remain under-studied, even though such forms can yield new understandings of the inter-

relationships between state and citizens in a digital age (after Fenton 2008; Fenton and Barassi 2011). These dynamics are felt particularly strongly in the controlled political container of Singapore, where 'activist voices and critical opinions are louder online than on the street, and those who speak quietly in the café or in the park are less afraid to yell, scream and bang the drums in cyberspace' (Luger 2016, 13). As much as these "voices" and "opinions" have the potential to disrupt, so too is there a need to integrate them within the 'popular geopolitical corpus' (Dittmer and Dodds 2008, 445) if the ways in which they intersect with existing notions of power and hegemony are to be fully understood.

With these ideas in mind, this paper explores how the actions of Amos Yee – a young and outspoken Singaporean blogger – provide insight into the political framing of dissent, and the role of movement in subverting the hegemony of the state. Yee rose to prominence in 2015, when, at the age of 16, he was imprisoned for posting videos online that were critical of Christianity and Islam, and Singapore's recently deceased founder, Lee Kuan Yew. His actions were interpreted by the Singapore government as "hate speech" that was deleterious to religious and social harmony. After being imprisoned again in 2016 for a similar offence, he fled Singapore for the United States. In March 2017, he made international news headlines for being granted asylum based on his perceived persecution in Singapore. Combined, the crude and singular nature of Yee's opinions, their disproportionate impact, and the effects of his movement out of Singapore, renders this case study as curious as it is instructive. It highlights how dissent is framed by socio-political context, and how power can be subverted and (re)produced in spontaneous ways through digital media; it also reveals how movement can be a geopolitical act used to reframe political power. Whilst a recent and growing body of work has started to explore the contested development of civil society in Singapore (Hammett and Jackson 2017), more focussed consideration of the digitally enabled voicing of dissent within such a context is, with only a few recent exceptions (e.g. Luger 2016; Weiss 2014), lacking. By filling the lacuna, this paper explores how the interplay of digitally enabled resistance and interpolitical movement enabled the relativisation of state power in Singapore.

In the sections that follow, I first provide an overview of existing work on the political geography of dissent – focussing on the role of political containers in the framing of opinion, and the subversive power of digital media – and then expound the role of geopolitical arbitrage in mediating political containers. The subsequent empirical section draws on an analysis of media coverage (primarily from Singapore, but including some international sources as well) to explore how the political context of Singapore first served to frame Amos Yee, but subsequently how Yee's movement to the US served to (re)frame both Singapore and the US in a more relative light. I conclude by proposing avenues for further research.

The Political Geography of Dissent

How we think and behave is, to a large extent, influenced by the political container-(s) in which we are raised and in which we live. Some containers are more prescriptive than others, just as some individuals are more (com)pliant than others. Social, political and cultural norms overlay such containers, and help to define the differences between what is acceptable and what is not. At the country level, such definitions are imposed hierarchically from the top-down; from the state – through the mainstream media, education and legal systems, public discourse and debate – to citizens, creating a situation whereby the 'permeation of stateness into the everyday is evident in almost every area of social life… often in ways that are so taken for granted they are barely noticeable' (Painter 2006, 753). At a more granular level, such definitions are reproduced and challenged within families and identity-based communities (such as those pertaining to religion, ethnicity, language or sexuality), and through social and professional networks. These definitions are used to unite and divide; to provide a common framework of understanding for people that live within one political container, and a point of difference from those that live in others. Thus, the political geography of dissent is concerned with 'how certain political, social and physical geographies in turn enframe and incite certain conceptual, moral and/or aesthetic understandings of self and other' (Ó Tuathail and Dalby 1999, 4).

That said, as the world becomes more interconnected in more (different) ways, such understandings become more relativised constructs. Increasingly, relativisation reflects the fact that political elites do not have a monopoly of control over the shape and extent of such framings. Instead, they are liable to subversion by ideas that may contradict the prevailing orthodoxies of the political container within which an individual is situated. Whilst such ideas may originate from inside or outside a political container, they play an important role in undermining the ability of the state to 'enforc[e] their will over their own citizens' (Painter 2006, 752). Moreover, the diffusion of such ideas has been significantly enabled by the proliferation of digital media, with research starting to recognise the fact that 'cyber-spatial interaction and appropriation can be theorized as socially constructed and bounded within broader sociopolitical structures' (Woon 2011, 133). This section explores these ideas; first by providing an overview of the relativisation of political containers, followed by a discussion of the subversive power of digital media.

Boundaries, Scale and the Relativisation of Political Containers

Boundaries demarcate the extent of political control over people. Traditionally, the construction of boundaries has been an important tool of statecraft, as they are used to determine and exploit differences and distinctions – ideologically, symbolically and more practically as well – between the self and other. Yet, in a postmodern world of movement and interconnection, such differences and

distinctions have been weakened by the effects of comparison, relativisation and transgression. Thus, whilst boundaries evoke 'deep symbolic, cultural, historical and religious, often contested, meanings for social communities' (Newman and Paasi 1998, 187), interconnection provides an array of opportunities for communities, or members of communities, to challenge or reject such meanings. Interconnection contributes to a "multiperspectival" understanding of boundaries, which can help to undermine traditional hierarchies of power (Rumford 2012), and can contribute 'new theoretical insights about a whole range of general social processes present across a wide variety of apparently unrelated phenomena' (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 168). Occupying a position of marginality may, for example, no longer be associated with occupying a position of weakness, but can be a form of strength instead. In such cases, strength often emanates from outside political containers; it stems from both political interconnection (lateral connections between people and groups located in different political containers), and from territorial transcendence (connecting people and groups to the idea(l)s that transcend any given territory). As Marden (1997) put it over two decades ago:

> we are witnessing new political spaces outside the constructed boundaries of the state system. These spaces are composed of networks of economic, social and cultural relations, and occupied by the conscious association of actors, in separate locations, linking themselves through networks for specific political and social ends.

Connecting to outside sources of influence – both lateral and transcendent – enables different ways of being in the world. These "ways of being" are often sanctioned by different forms of authority and idea(l)s, and can, therefore, occur at different, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting scales. Mediating between these ways of being can result in a form of "dissident geopolitics" that 'transcend[s] the boundaries imposed by the state' and is validated by a 'higher level of authorization' instead (Woods 2012, 210). Whilst feminist scholarship, in particular, has made notable advances in approaching scale in a more transgressive way – by 'binding everyday experiences to wider networks of power and privilege' (Pain 2009, 475) and showing how 'meanings are alternately opened up and closed down by macro- and micro-scale structuring influences' (Dittmer 2008, 284) – there is still a tendency for political geography to be indentured to more fixed, and hierarchical, notions of scale. That said, the rescaling of discourse leads to the reframing of power, as the scale is 'not socially or politically neutral, but embodies and expresses power relationships' (Swynegdouw 1997, 140). In response to recent calls for the abandonment or reconfiguration of fixed political containers (Laine 2016; Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005; Moisio and Paasi 2013), I consider instead how the porosity and mediation of boundaries can advance new understandings of the relativisation and fracturing of power in the contemporary world.

No opinion is inherently dissident; rather, dissent is a function of the political container in which it is voiced and received. Complicating this is the fact that individuals are multiply located within various, and sometimes contradictory, political containers. This can create situations wherein the political containers within which an individual is located are non-interlocking – that is, they do not overlap – but may contradict each other instead. In such instances, the boundaries between different political containers have become 'mobile patterns that facilitate overlapping loyalties' (Beck 2000, 51–52), which in turn can cause the difference between assent and dissent to become blurred. Insiders can also be outsiders, the self can also be the other, and an opinion may be interpreted as assenting by some, but dissenting by others. This has always been the case, but my point is that the negotiation of difference has been transformed by the relativising effects of boundary-crossing (and boundary-eroding) technologies. Such technologies create situations where alterity – in all its many guises – is becoming easier to foment, and harder to suppress. Digital media, in particular, have changed the terms of engagement between different actors. In doing so, they enable the creation of new pathways of resistance that can challenge, mediate and disrupt the hierarchical power of political elites. Digital media cannot eradicate political power, but they can subvert and reproduce it.

The Subversive Power of Digital Media

In a digitally enabled world, the political geography of dissent is as much about the channels through which an opinion is transmitted as it is the opinion itself. Digital technologies enable individuals to build networks of hitherto unprecedented reach and impact, and have brought about a rebalancing of power in and of the media. Whilst the media have traditionally been analysed as an elite representation of the world, digital media have brought about both a democratisation of communication, representation and participation, and have created a free(r) marketplace in which ideas and knowledge can be exchanged. Once associated with 'dominant, privileged voices who adhere to the 'rules' of civility' (Hammett and Jackson 2017, 3), digital media have since led to an expansion and recalibration of the public domain (Crang 2010). With such shifts, there have been recent calls to explore and understand how blogs and other channels of digital dissemination differ from other, implicitly more traditional political spaces (Davies 2013). The net effect of such expansion and recalibration is one of disruption, as digital channels remain relatively unencumbered by the controlling influence of regulation and censorship, and have therefore become the predominant channel through which resistance to state control can be enacted. Digital media enable:

mediated activity that seeks to raise people's awareness, give a voice to those who do not have one, offer social empowerment, allow disparate people and causes to organize themselves and form alliances, and ultimately be used as a tool for social change (Woon 2011, 134).

In this sense, digital media can be seen to rebalance the relationship between the producers and consumers of media by removing the power differential between the two. Put differently, anyone can produce and disseminate digital content, as the barriers to entry have been reduced to a "smart" device and an internet connection. This has wide-ranging consequences for the political geography of dissent, as dissent has become easier to express, share and foment on the one hand, and harder to regulate, control and suppress on the other. Digital media enable 'spaces of action and debate to expand from local/national configurations and terrestrial media to 'global' counter-summits and the internet' (Fenton 2012, 15). They enable, in other words, scalar mobility. New forms of "digital scale" are therefore predicated on the currency of followers, views, comments, shares, clicks and likes. These digital currencies enable influence and impact to be scaled-up – and to, therefore, reach more people – with much greater speed and autonomy than other (non-digital) forms of content. In turn, popular content is mediated by algorithms and new politics of digital access and connectivity, which in turn leads to the creation of new power hierarchies that can amplify and distort opinion. Digital media are therefore imbued with the potential to shape the 'imaginative geographies at the heart of contemporary architectures of enmity' (Dalby 2010, 281), which, in turn, can lead to the construction of new, and contestation of old, hierarchies of power.

Despite the wide-ranging potential of digital media, scholarship has tended to focus on how the digital domain can augment or undermine the practices of activist groups operating in the real world. Debates have been framed within the context of social movements (Pickerill 2007), social mobilisation (Weiss 2014) or "activist coalitions" (Luger 2016). For example, Pickerill's (2007) study of "Indymedia" (i.e. alternative media) collectives in Australia is described as a project that 'attempt[s] to implement some of the ideals and principles of autonomous groups: collective, non-hierarchical, egalitarian, inclusive organising, and often based around practising consensus'. For such groups, virtual (or cyber/digital) space presents an arena within which radical politics can be built and practised. Complementing such scholarship is a more critical body of work that seeks to moderate the liberatory potential of digital media, and to thus caution against the danger of treating them in overly celebratory terms (Fenton 2012, 2016). Specifically, Fenton and Barassi (2011, 190) highlight three assumptions that underpin "techno-optimistic" perspectives, and which can undermine the political potential of digital media. To summarise, they are the tendency for digital media to reduce politics to the symbolic power of digital content, the tendency for digital media to 'focus our attentions on the personal politics of self-representation' (Fenton and Barassi 2011, 191), and the tendency for digital media to be divorced from the socio-political contexts in which they are deployed. In

light of these critiques, alternative understandings of the subversive power of digital media are needed. In response, Fenton and Barassi (2011, 194) go on to argue that:

> All creative human activity holds the potential for political transformative capacity but to understand how this potential can be translated into a reality requires an understanding of the enduring social and political structures that surround and preexist certain individuals and their relations with others.

The point here is that *individual* action – whether construed as dissenting or not – is both a reflection of, and is mediated by, the socio-political structures from which it originates. Echoing this sentiment, Fenton (2008) calls for a discursive shift from ideas of "resistance" to those of "political projects", the aim being to develop greater understandings of 'the means and meaning of being political' (Fenton 2016, 49), and how digital media may (dis)enable a 'collective consciousness [to] be developed and maintained' (Fenton 2008, 230). In response to these critiques and assertions, I consider below how digital media can enable autonomous and individualised forms of opinion and dissent to be expressed and circulated. Such forms can be spontaneous, capricious, and disconnected from any formal political agenda. Yet, they can be no less powerful than more organised forms of resistance, as autonomous voices are empowered to leverage digital scale and the idiosyncrasies of the socio-political context in order to yield disproportionate political effects through the digital domain. The mobilisation of dissent – or its movements within and between political containers – is integral to the realisation of such effects, and the relativisation of political power (after Fenton 2012, 2016). Movement can, therefore, contribute theoretical insight into the ways in which political containers are mediated, and their power relativised. These ideas are now considered using the concept of "geopolitical arbitrage".

Geopolitical Arbitrage and the Mediation of Political Containers

Geopolitical arbitrage theorises the effects of moving within and between political containers, and the subsequent (re)interpretation of such containers within a comparative analytical framework. As such, it accords with the recent trend towards geopolitical analyses 'displacing attention on borders to the crossers of borders themselves' (Hyndman 2012, 243). Whilst existing research has explored how boundaries help to create 'normative patterns that regulate and direct interactions between members of social groups, as well as the rules of exchange of people, goods and symbolic messages' and how such rules can, at times, be 'crossed and transgressed' (Newman and Paasi 1998, 194), relatively little is known about what happens when they are compared through movement. Building on feminist understandings of scale and nonfixity, geopolitical arbitrage 'employ[s] mobility as an analytic of geopolitical power and accountability'

(Hyndman 2001, 213), and deploys it to create new understandings of how power can be a cause, method *and* effect of mobility. In various ways, mobility *is* power; 'some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it' (Massey 1993, 61; see also Cresswell 2006; Delaney 2014). This perspective – which views power as being embedded within, and evolving throughout processes of (non-)movement – can lead to the reframing of political containers, and the objects that move within and between them, in a more relative light. In turn, the movement serves to both rebalance the power differential between context and agent, and broaden the scope of analysis beyond traditional, often territorially defined, framings of power (Laine 2016).

To date, arbitrage has been theorised by geographers exclusively in terms of migration. "Geoarbitrage" has been interpreted as a lifestyle strategy that involves moving to a country with a lower cost of living (e.g. Hayes 2014; Hayes and Pérez-Gañán 2017). Geopolitical arbitrage is a more specific interpretation of "geographical arbitrage". By treating "movement" in a polyvalent sense – as processes of boundary-crossing that could be physical (such as the crossing of borders between countries), discursive (such as converting from one religion, gender, sexuality or nationality to another) or scalar (such as lodging of opinion and dissent online) – it focusses analytically on how movement can bring about both a destabilisation, and rebalancing, of power. Important for such an analytical approach is the premise that boundaries are used to define political containers, but they may or may not overlap with the borders of a territorially defined nation-state (a political container could, for example, denote a religious or other community). In this sense, boundaries are deployed as resources for mobility, as they enable the (re)framing of the object that moved, and of the political containers it moves between. Through geopolitical arbitrage, the power of mediating between the distant and the proximate can be realised. If the distance is 'the space between us that establishe[s] difference and generates particular and local political concerns', and proximity 'the space that brings us together on common ground with universal concerns' (Fenton 2008, 240), then geopolitical arbitrage is a strategy through which these distinctions can be redefined. It enables individuals to realise situations whereby the distant becomes proximate, the proximate becomes distant, and the power associated with each position is relativised.

The value of the analytical framework of geopolitical arbitrage, therefore, is that it focusses attention on both the differences between the political container of origin and destination, and how these differences can trigger various processes of reframing. Building on the idea that boundaries are 'one of our most fertile thinking tools' because they 'capture a fundamental social process, that of relationality' (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 169), my argument is that movement is never apolitical; instead, it is a way of gaining some sort of leverage or advantage.

Geopolitical arbitrage, therefore, helps to reveal how dissent is a mobile phenomenon that 'overflows the political containers to which it has been materially and analytically confined' (West 2006, 283). Movement can change the risk profile of an individual, and can empower them to take action, to exert agency, and thus to forge new pathways of (and to) power (Massa 2018; Sparke 2008). Movement is a vehicle of power, a manifestation of the agency. As Cresswell (2006, 6–7) reminds us, 'movement is rarely just movement; it carries with it the burden of meaning and it is meaning that jumps scales'. With this in mind, the movement of bodies builds on feminist scholarship that explores the ways in which the body can become a site of resistance in and of itself, as 'differences are inscribed onto the body and reveal the operation of power through visibility' (Mountz 2004, 325). The ramifications of movement can be far-reaching, as it not only leads to a reframing of the object being moved, but also a more relativised interpretation of the points of departure and arrival.

Having explored the political geography of dissent, and introduced the conceptual framework of geopolitical arbitrage to explain how movement can enable new forms of power, I now validate the framework using the case of Amos Yee. In the section that follows, I show how Yee's movement from Singapore to the US and the subsequent granting of asylum is a case of geopolitical arbitrage in praxis. The analysis covers a two-year period (from May 2015 to April 2017), and, whilst it primarily draws on Singapore's foremost (and state-controlled) news outlet – *The Straits Times* – I also include international news sources where relevant.

Movement, Mediation and the Reframing of Amos Yee

An island city-state of approximately 720km^2, the political container of Singapore is defined by both its size and its authoritarian state. These two characteristics are mutually reinforcing, as the country's small size means that state power can easily be transferred to the population, whilst the authoritarian state wields a high degree of control over both its territory and its populace. The expression of dissent is relatively rare and often involves isolated cases, which reflects the fact that there is widespread acceptance of the 'hegemony of the state in framing collective goals and imposing its ideological narrative from the top' (Kong and Woods 2016, 109). With a multi-ethnic (comprising majority Chinese, and minority Malay, Indian and Other groups) and multi-religious (comprising Buddhist/Taoist, Christian/ Catholic, Muslim and Hindu groups) population, the state actively promotes racial and religious harmony on the one hand, and actively censors and blocks media that could negatively affect such harmony on the other. This has contributed to what Hammett and Jackson (2017, 4) describe as a 'paternalistic narrative of obedience to centrally-dictated national development agendas and strict regulation of political activities'. This "narrative of obedience" is enforced through the emplacement of clearly defined limits to the freedom of expression, the aim being to prevent "protest, criticism and expression culminat[ing] in nuisance or something even

more serious" (Chee Siok Chin v. Minister for Home Affairs, cited in Hammett and Jackson 2017, 5), and to safeguard inter-racial and inter-religious harmony.

Various restrictions have rendered Singapore's public domain one of strict regulation, control and censorship. The Sedition Act of 1985, the Public Entertainments and Meetings Act of 2001 and, most recently, the Public Order Act of 2012 restrict the possibility for group assembly and speech. Combined, they seek to control (and therefore restrict) the generation of loud noises in public places, and to regulate the times and places of public discussion. Thus, the fact that a police permit is required for any form of public assembly, combined with the state-controlled media network, serves to regulate the terms of discussion and debate in Singapore. Regulation is most stringent when it comes to political debate, or potentially divisive issues of political concern (Lee and Kan 2009). In 2000, a concession was granted when Speaker's Corner was established in Hong Lim Park (located in Singapore's Central Business District). Providing a point of assembly for citizens wishing to speak freely and protest about issues ranging from the recognition and rights of homosexuals (enshrined in the annual "Little Pink Dot" rally) to demands for political liberalisation, the impact it has had on opening up – or even altering – the terms of public debate remains limited. It remains a concession within a broader context of restriction and censorship; a context that is designed to suppress the possibility and potentiality of dissent. Over the years, this has proven to be a boon for the government and its policy regime, but has caused the terms of debate in Singapore's public domain to be prescribed, conservative and relatively docile.

The censoring of debate is most restrictive when it comes to issues of race and religion. Singapore's multi-ethnic and multi-religious population underpins the need for racial and religious harmony, which provides justification for state-enforced censorship of (potentially) destabilising content. Thus, dissent – especially that which pertains to religion – is strictly and publicly censored. The state typically errs on the side of caution when it comes to the potentially divisive effects of popular media. For example, it exercised its powers of censorship to ban Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*, and to withhold a public entertainment license for the play *Talaq* that explored the theme of domestic violence within a Muslim household (Tan 2008). Recently, the Sedition Act was amended to enhance the penalties for religiously- (and racially-) aggravated offences that involve 'promot[ing] feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes' (Tan 2008, 64). In 2005, three bloggers were convicted and sentenced under sedition laws (unexercised since 1966) for posting anti-Muslim content online. This highlights the intolerance of (religious) dissent, the role of digital media in providing channels through which such dissent can be voiced, and ultimately the 'recursive relationship between online and offline political spaces' (Woon 2011, 133). As this example suggests, blogging has enabled Singaporeans to experiment with the voicing of dissent, and can therefore be

interpreted as a "new public sphere" that is 'both a response to, as well as a result of, regulatory obstacles placed upon the media' (Lee and Kan 2009, 875). In other words, restrictions on the possibility of protest in the real-world have, over the past two decades or so, served to funnel the expression of dissent into the digital domain.

This funnelling is partly due to the inherent difficulty of regulating the digital domain, and partly due to the extremely high levels of internet penetration in Singapore. 4G networks now cover 99% of the island, and Singaporeans were recently reported to spend, on average, more than 12 hours per day using digital devices (The Straits Times 03.04.17). As Weiss (2014) points out, this creates an enduring irony in that 'Singapore has the most fettered media, but also the most wired and tech-savvy citizenry'. Cyberspace has, therefore, become an important site of resistance, wherein 'even the endemically marginalised [can] engage with policies' (Weiss 2014, 96) and create spaces of activism that resist and subvert the restrictiveness of the physical domain (Luger 2016). Since the late 1990s, such practices have become more commonplace, and build on initial attempts to sidestep censorship of the public domain and promote freedom of speech through the "new public sphere" (Crang 2010) of cyberspace. For example, since 1997 the US-hosted website, *Singapore Window*, has provided an 'alternative news portal on happenings in Singapore' (Crang 2010, 341), whilst sites like *The Online Citizen* and *Yawning Bread* have become well-established online forums for political activism and debate. That said, as much as the digital domain can be interpreted as a potentially destabilising channel of political communication, so too can it be a channel through which the principles underpinning democratic participation in civil society (or, more simply, "free speech") can be tested and abused. I return to these ideas below.

In response, the Singapore government has made various attempts to censor and control the digital domain. For example, in 1994 it pre-emptively scanned all Singaporean email accounts for subversive content, with the ensuing backlash against the invasion of privacy highlighting the 'maladroit steps of a state grappling with a new informational landscape' (Crang 2010, 339). Over time, the regulation of the digital domain has evolved in an attempt to mirror that of the physical domain, whereby 'virtually all offline rules aimed at managing social and political dissent in Singapore have been gradually extended to include the Internet' (Lee and Kan 2009, 874). Singapore's *Censorship Review Committee* maintains the right to restrict the content of any website that is hosted in Singapore, and since 2013 foreign media providers have had to apply for licences to distribute content (Luger 2016). High-profile enforcement of policies designed to limit dissent in and through the media, combined with the Media Development Authority's power to block or remove content deemed "objectionable", has fostered habits of online self-censorship (or, what Lee (2005) terms "auto-regulation") amongst many Singaporeans. For example, Weiss (2014) argues that 'media activism is whittling

away at, but has yet to undo, decades of socialisation toward self-censorship, particularly since 'out of bounds' markers remain ambiguous and malleable, and criminal crackdowns remain possible'. Thus, whilst the internet 'allows citizens to alter their relationship to the public sphere' and thus 'ascribes [them with] the powers of democratisation' (Fenton 2012, 165), they do not provide sufficient redress to the "penetration/participation paradox" that limits the realisation of a more politically engaged civil society in Singapore (George 2005; Lee and Kan 2009). Given such a restrictive socio-political context, however, digital channels can also enable dissident voices to attract undue attention, and to yield disproportionate effects. With this in mind, the case of Amos Yee reveals how dissent is shaped by the political container *in which*, and the medium *through which*, it is expressed.

Disseminating Dissent through the Digital Domain

In 2015, 16-year-old blogger Amos Yee made domestic news headlines and sparked a prolonged public debate in Singapore about the limits of free speech. On March 27th – four days after the death of Singapore's revered founding Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew – Yee uploaded an eight-minute-long video entitled "Lee Kuan Yew is finally dead!" onto YouTube. In the video, he compared Lee Kuan Yew to Jesus Christ before going on to condemn Christians for being:

> power hungry and malicious but deceive others into thinking that they are compassionate and kind. Their impact and legacy will ultimately not last as more and more people find out that they are full of bull... Similar to the Christian knowledge of the bible, and the work of a multitude of a priests [*sic*] (Yee, cited by the Ministry of Home Affairs 2017).

Later, he also uploaded an image of Lee Kuan Yew and former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, engaging in sexual intercourse. Within a month of posting, the video had been viewed more than 1,000,000 times, and had caused at least 20 people to file police reports against Yee (The Straits Times 09.05.15). Yee was subsequently arrested and charged with posting an obscene image online and insulting Christianity; charges to which he pleaded not guilty (The Straits Times 08.05.15). Upon being convicted, Yee removed the video as ordered, but reposted it (and the image) within two weeks, noting on his blog that "to the chagrin of numerous people, I have not 'learnt my lesson', nor do I see any 'lesson' that needs to be learnt" (cited in The Straits Times 03.06.15) – an act that the sentencing judge described as an indication of Yee's "contemptuous defiance" of Singapore's judicial system (cited in The Straits Times 02.08.15). His trial sparked widespread condemnation of his actions in the local media, which culminated in him being physically attacked by a member of the public on his way to court (the attacker was subsequently jailed). Yee spent 50 days in remand, including two weeks at the Institute of Mental Health, undergoing psychiatric

examination. During this time, human rights groups demanding freedom of speech and the release of Amos Yee staged physical protests in Hong Lim Park, Singapore (attracting approximately 500 people), and outside the Singapore Trade Office in Taipei (60 people) and the Singapore Consulate in Hong Kong (50 people) (The Straits Times 26.06.15; 05.07.15; 06.07.15). On July 6th, he was sentenced to four weeks' jail for his actions. He was released on the day he was sentenced, as the jail sentence was backdated to include his time in remand (The Straits Times 13.12.15).

Between November 2015 and April 2016, Yee uploaded another video attacking Muslims, followed by a blog post and photo, and two other videos attacking Muslims and one video attacking Christians. In the videos, he stated that:

> the Islamics [sic] seem to have lots of sand in their vaginas too… But don't mind them, they do after all follow a sky wizard and a pedophile prophet. What in the world is a 'moderate muslim' [sic]? A f*****g [sic] hypocrite that's what!.. With all due respect, Christians, you can shove that faith up your ass. Faith! Faith! I'd be damned at this retardation of humanity. F**k [sic] you, Christian shits (Yee, cited by the Ministry of Home Affairs 2017).

He was again arrested on account of eight charges; six for intending to wound the feelings of Christians and Muslims, and two for failing to report to the police for investigations (The Straits Times 19.08.16). Again, he was physically attacked by a teenager in a shopping centre shortly after being arrested (the teen was subsequently sentenced to nine months' probation and 100 hours of community service). Fifteen months after being sentenced for his original offences, on September 29th 2016, Yee was found guilty of all eight changes, and was sentenced to six weeks' jail and fined $2,000. The sentencing judge condemned Yee's "contemptuous and irreverent remarks" that were designed to undermine social harmony in Singapore (cited in The Straits Times 29.09.16). His opinions were latterly described by the Ministry of Home Affairs (2017) as "hate speech" that contravened the terms of acceptable speech defined by the political container of Singapore.

The public prosecution of Yee encourages reflection on the political framing of opinion and its praxis. Yee's case is idiosyncratic for at least two reasons. The first is the crude and deliberately provocative nature of his opinions. Yee's rhetoric is not a call for social activism in the face of injustice; instead, it is the provocative ranting of a teenager looking to draw attention to himself by pushing the boundaries of tolerance in a context where such boundaries are closely observed, strongly enforced and rarely crossed (Weiss 2014). Notwithstanding, Yee's opinions were amplified, distorted and given disproportionate influence due to the controlled environment in which they were voiced. The political container/s in which opinions are voiced and received can serve to amplify their reach and meaning, and must therefore be considered. Indeed, it is

the combination of (potentially unlimited – see the second reason, below) access to new audiences, plus the restrictions on dissent imposed by the political container of Singapore, that caused Yee's actions to be disproportionate in their impact. His voice is a singular one, but, as the protests in Singapore, Hong Kong and Taipei suggest, this combination of factors made his actions difficult to ignore. Indeed, despite contravening the principles of "free" speech through his crude and disrespectful rhetoric, Yee nonetheless attracted the sympathy of activist groups operating throughout the region.

Opinions – dissent – are cultural performances that are contingent upon the spaces within which they are enacted. The strict regulatory context of Singapore can be seen to produce an echo chamber that is hyper-sensitive to alterity. Ironically, this can cause the voicing of dissent to take on exaggerated meaning. There is nothing intrinsically powerful, impactful or dissident about opinion; instead, the power, impact and interpretation of opinion is a function of – and relative to – the political container within which it is voiced. The political container of Singapore can, therefore, be seen to play a central role in determining not just the *consequences*, but also the *effects* of Yee's speech (Crang 2010). Censorship can cause opinions to expand, taking on an inflated sense of meaning, and a poignancy that they may not otherwise have had if they were voiced in a less restrictive political environment. Compounding this is the fact that because digital media are 'usually non-hierarchical, with open protocols, open communication and self-generating information and identities', they enabled Yee's opinions to 'be based in, but [to] spread quickly beyond, [a] specific localit[y]' (Fenton 2012, 152). Yee's opinions caused outrage, as they overtly challenged the state's normative narrative of civility, and thus threatened to destabilise the role of civil society in transcending the racial and religious divisions within Singapore (Hammett and Jackson 2017). Yet, such outrage is as much a function of the political container of Singapore as it is the "hate speech" that was expressed. By pushing the boundaries of tolerance, Yee draws attention to them, causing them to become a point of debate, and of subversive power.

The second reason is related to the first, and concerns how digital media enable individuals to overcome the limiting effects of space and time in restricting the reach and perpetuation of dissent. Digital media enabled Yee to reach – and to offend – a wider audience, which in turn imbued his opinions with a sense of gravity that stemmed from their (potential) impact on Singapore society (Mountz 2004). They became, in other words, more mobile. From a regulatory perspective, the problem with the digital domain is that it causes dissent to become agnostic to the limitations of space and time. Thus, as much as digital media provided a channel through which Yee could easily circumvent restrictions on the voicing of dissent in Singapore's physical realm, so too did they enable his opinions to perpetuate in cyberspace. Digital media enable the perpetuation of dissent in ways that cannot be relegated to history, limited by reach, or reinvented and reinterpreted through the mass media. Instead, they become loaded with the potentiality

of digital scale, as they can potentially be accessed by anybody that is digitally engaged, and can easily become virulent if attention is drawn to their unique or subversive qualities. Digital media, therefore, relegate space and time to functional roles; roles that provide the contextual parameters that help to shape the interpretation of opinion, but not necessarily the ability to access it. Ironically, whilst the potentiality of access helps to explain the severity of his punishment, it also drew international attention to his actions, and to debates around the state of censorship in Singapore.

Geopolitical Arbitrage and the Reframing of the Situated Self

On 16th December 2016, Yee flew from Singapore to Chicago O'Hare airport in the US, seeking asylum. Upon arrival, he was detained, pending his asylum hearing on 7th March 2017. Whilst the US Department of Homeland Security initially opposed Yee's asylum application on the basis that he had been legitimately prosecuted, on 24th March Yee was granted asylum[1] after a US immigration judge claimed that the Singapore government "persecuted Yee on account of his political opinion" (cited in The Straits Times 25.03.17). In response to the US granting Yee's asylum request, Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs (2017) stated that 'the U.S. adopts a different standard, and allows some such [sic] hate speech under the rubric of freedom of speech'. Whilst Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs sought to explain why Yee's asylum application was accepted, other commentators adopted a more defensive stance. The Association of Criminal Lawyers of Singapore, and the Law Society of Singapore both released statements expressing "outrage" and "disagreement" at the view that Yee was persecuted by the Singapore government, which was believed to lead to the 'subsequent impugning of our criminal justice system in the American courts' (cited in The Straits Times 28.03.17a, b). The British publication, The Economist, also weighed in on the debate, publishing an article arguing that Yee was charged and jailed in Singapore for political dissent, rather than for the anti-religious "hate speech" claimed by the Ministry of Home Affairs (The Straits Times 14.04.17). Such assertions were strongly condemned by Singapore's ambassador to the UK, who, commenting on a related issue, stated that 'we will not allow our judiciary to be denigrated under the cover of free speech, nor will we protect hate or libellous speech' (cited in Yahoo News 17.03.17).

Yee's movement from Singapore to the US is a form of geopolitical arbitrage, whereby gain lies in drawing out the ideological comparison of two markedly different political containers. In this instance, Yee scaled-up the discourse by removing himself and his opinions from the confines of Singapore, and rebasing them in the US. Such removal and rebasing caused them to be reframed; his own positionality thus changed from antagonist to protagonist; from being prosecuted to being persecuted; from being seen as a promoter of "hate speech" to a symbol of

"free speech". By moving between the political containers of Singapore and the US, Yee mediated between two opposing framings of opinion, and two opposing treatments of dissent. His movement brought about a conceptual overlapping of territory, and a consequent comparison of the politico-legal climate of each (Massa 2018); it brought the restrictions associated with maintaining racial and religious harmony in Singapore into direct comparison with the freedom of speech constitutionally guaranteed by the First Amendment in the US. Indeed, the Immigration Judge that approved Yee's asylum request described him as a "young political dissident" whose 'prosecution, detention and general maltreatment at the hands of [the] Singapore authorities constitute persecution on account of Yee's political opinions' (cited in CNN News 27.09.17). Within Singapore, therefore, the justification for Yee's prosecution was that he voiced opinions – interpreted as "hate speech" – that could negatively affect inter-religious harmony. Outside the political container of Singapore, however, the basis for prosecution is nullified and called into question. Thus, whilst I agree that the 'state's allure has not faded, in spite of the fact that many contemporary social processes are clearly beyond its scope' (Laine 2016, 465–466), I contend that movement renders it liable to reframing, and to the negotiation of power that comes with relativisation. Indeed, by removing himself from the control of the political container in which he was prosecuted, movement enabled Yee to become a vehicle of power that resulted in an expansion of the terms of interpretation and debate regarding the place of dissent in Singapore.

Yee's movement not only led to a reframing of himself, but also served to connect Singapore as a place of imprisonment, and the US as one of asylum. Through movement, Yee, therefore, caused the terms of the debate to go beyond the actions of a dissident individual, and to implicate the responses of the political containers within which he was prosecuted and redeemed as well. On the one hand, it provoked outside commentators to criticise the intolerance of dissent by the Singapore state, the authoritarian control it continues to exert over the populace, and to reinterpret the terms of his prosecution by claiming that anti-religious "hate speech" was used as a pretext to silence political dissent[2]. The responses to such criticisms – those of "impugning our criminal justice system" and "denigrat[ing]... our judiciary" – reveal the wide-ranging effects of Yee's movement on the Singapore state, inter-state relations, and other, non-state actors as well. On the other hand, it provides an important – and easily overlooked – reminder of the fact that such criticisms ignore the need for careful management of Singapore's multi-religious population, which provides justification for the state's intolerance of (religious) dissent, and the rationale for its authoritarian control over the populace. In other words, they reveal how criticism of the censorship of dissent is often based on a universal assumption of the implicit value of "free" speech. Yet, such assumptions fail to recognise the fact that 'context makes a difference' (Moisio and Paasi 2013, 255), and that socio-historical contingencies can often reveal *why* every political container is unique

and autonomous in its framing of opinion. As much as Yee's movement provoked international criticism of the Singapore state, such criticisms can be (re)interpreted as acontextual, reductionist, and colonising in their gaze. Geopolitical arbitrage can enable not just the empowerment of the individual, but the reframing and relativisation of political power as well.

Conclusion

Whilst opinions are linked to individuals, the ways in which they are interpreted are usually a function of a more wide-ranging suite of factors. Often, these factors are defined by the political context – or the container – within which opinions are expressed, received and debated. Political containers play a central role in determining the extent to which attitudes and behaviours may be deemed acceptable or unacceptable. In recent decades, such containers have become more interconnected, whilst digital media have provided channels through which dissent can be expressed and fomented. Combined, these forces have caused the power of the state in determining the terms of dissent to become relativised. By developing and applying the concept of geopolitical arbitrage, I have shown how movement within and between political containers can lead to both the reframing, and the empowerment, of the individual. Geopolitical arbitrage heralds the agency associated with movement, and the associated crossing of boundaries. In turn, this reveals how individuals are able to not just reframe themselves through movement, but the political containers that they traverse and connect as well.

To advance the ideas introduced in this paper, I propose two, inter-related avenues for further research. The first relates to the regulation of dissent in a world where digital media have enabled anyone to have their opinions reach a potentially global audience. Digital media problematise existing regulatory frameworks, and foreground the need to fundamentally rethink the application of legal rules, relationships and strategies of governance within cyberspace. This is particularly important given that 'legal practices and cultures of legality are in relationships with spatial settings' (Bennett and Layard 2015, 411). Digital media can cause regulation to become a more democratic process, as it is less about restricting actions and censoring content, and more about the resonance of the opinion that is voiced. Thus, whilst political containers will continue to play a role in framing opinions, their ability to censor them is vastly diminished. This decoupling of the online and offline worlds problematises the view that 'daily lives do not encounter a great divide of offline and online worlds, but rather feed the one into the other in subtle and continuous interplay' (Crang 2010, 328). With decoupling, however, we can expect new forms of regulation to emerge that are less concerned with policing the channels of dissemination, and more about adjusting the framework of interpretation instead.

The second relates to an expansion of the concept of geopolitical arbitrage, specifically through a focus on understanding the effects of movement on pre-existing politico-legal structures of power. As such, geopolitical arbitrage provides a theoretical vehicle that can inform the ongoing development of the burgeoning subfield of legal geography. The rule of law 'draws lines, constructs insides and outsides, assigns legal meaning to lines, and attaches legal consequences to crossing them' and thus 'underpins spatial tactics such as confinement, exclusion, expulsion and coerced mobility' (Delaney 2014, 99). To the extent that geopolitical arbitrage is the act of moving within and between different political containers, it is a process that has clear, but also potentially unexpected, legal consequences. In other words, as much as acts of geopolitical arbitrage can involve escaping spatio-legal (in) justices, so too can they bring about a reimagination of the limits of the law (Delaney 2016). Specifically, whilst geopolitical arbitrage embraces the fact that the body is empowered to escape the inscriptions of the political container(s) by which it is framed, such escape often results in it being confronted with new mechanisms of biopolitical regulation and control (see Hyndman 2012; Rumford 2012). These relate to the lingering effects of the political container of origin on the individual, and the effects of political containers that are more self-constructed than imposed. Exploring these effects and constructions will help to reveal the various ways in which dissent is formed, framed and filtered in the contemporary world.

Notes

1. Whilst the American Department of Homeland Security appealed the decision, in September 2017 the immigration appeals board ruled in Yee's favour. He was subsequently freed from jail, where he had been kept since he arrived in the US (BBC News 27.09.17).
2. Indeed, in September 2017 the US immigration appeals board noted that Yee had a "well-founded fear of future persecution in Singapore" (cited in BBC News 27.09.17), the subtext being that he was "persecuted" for his criticism of the government.

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