

# Prosumption, Transmediation, and Resistance: Terrorism and Man-Hunting in Southeast Asia

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## Abstract

Terrorism is a mounting global threat for national security, yet the rise of social media facilitates prosumption and the spread of alternative grassroots stories in response to civic militarization and state propaganda. This article discusses the structural and cultural conditions underlying the production and spread of online user-generated content as radical media tactics. By presenting a case study on the escape and man-hunting of a key terrorist in Southeast Asia, the article examines prosumption and transmediation practices whereby official stories of the terrorist escape are appropriated, remediated, and virally disseminated across different social media—blogs, vlogs, and digital games—to help clarify how new media supports critical citizen engagement. The identification of online activities exhibiting middle-ground resistance, including rumors, political parodies, and infotaining play, illustrates counter narrative responses to mainstream media representations. Findings have implications for the management of tensions in wired global insurgency and strategic communication performances.

## Keywords

Web 2.0, social media, terrorism, narratives, convergence culture, resistance tactics, transmediation, Asia

Terrorism is a growing global issue and has moved from the fringe into mainstream daily life in recent years as nation-states vie for strategic influence in kinetic and

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ideological conflict. Governments worldwide are turning to “smart power” (Nye, 2007) to prevail in the “battle of hearts and minds.” Considerable attention has been directed toward the symbolic and virtual dimensions in contemporary insurgencies and counterinsurgencies involving the creation and circulation of mediated narratives and the construction of public diplomacy and “nation branding” campaigns to improve strategic communication (Betz, 2008; Cheong & Halverson, 2010; Kirby & Zakem, 2009). Propaganda efforts by governments and extremist organizations are principally viewed as the top-down transmission of the most strategic messages to change public opinions (Payne, 2009). Yet the recent emergence and swift diffusion of social media and its attendant networked activism may threaten the stratagems of the state to control their communication outreach and corresponding symbolic battlefield of ideas.

Recent shifts toward prosumption, or the emergence of media consumers as media producers, under changing capitalism (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) and an increasingly mediated convergence culture (Deuze, 2007; Jenkins, 2006) raise fresh questions for the role of new media in information democratization, the changing nature of mediated terrorism, its audiences, and the interplay between local and global political concerns. As such, this article examines the evolutionary processes and artifacts of prosumption associated with one of the most important yet understudied aspects of the war on terror—finding and apprehending “persons of national interest” (Marks, Meer, & Nilson, 2007). Relying on a triangulated methodological approach and drawing upon a case study of key terrorist leader Mas Selamat bin Kastari (MSK) in Southeast Asia, we investigate the forms of radical communication behaviors following the outbreak of official news of his escape from a maximum security detention center in Singapore. In particular, our interests lie in examining the meaning of prosumption when lay producer and consumer roles combine to foster critical, independent media texts and memes to resist the influence of official and corporate news producers. In this vein, we argue that prosumption functions as middle ground resistance (Scott, 1985), creatively enacted by online participants embedded in highly regulated contexts to circumvent state policies that curtail public criticisms and outright protest.

Theoretically, our study brings up-to-date an understanding of how new and social media applications function as radical media (Downing, 2001) in contemporary wired contexts. We extend the conceptualization of everyday media “tactics” of resistance (DeCerteau, 1984) by exploring new practices of prosumption and the accompanying transmediation of these practices whereby official media narratives of terrorist man-hunting are appropriated, remediated (Bolter & Grusin, 2000), and virally disseminated (Rushkoff, 1996) across multiple media platforms. A contextual analysis of mediated resistance deepens our comprehension of the social and political implications of prosumption. In addition to case details, findings are instructive for understanding the wider significance of online prosumption practices to contest formal hierarchies of power as well as address some of its pragmatic limitations and constraints to effect social change.

### *Prosumption, Resistance, and Radical Media Communication*

The recent rise of the “Web 2.0” (O’Reilly, 2005) has been promoted as a paradigmatic shift from the static “read-only” Web to the participatory “read-write” Web as users of emerging media including blogs, vlogs, social networking, and interactive forums generate new ways of interaction and knowledge sharing. Practices of continuous development, recycling and extension of digital data include e-mail forwardables (Kibby, 2005), photoshops (Frank (2004), digital remixes and video mash-ups of samples without permission from original artists (Lessig, 2008). In the shift to user-generated content, the same people who consume what is on the Web increasingly produce it such that traditional mass communication distinctions between producers and consumers, authors and audience are blurred (Livingstone, 1999).

This shift has significant implications for information democratization. Goode (2009) argues that the democratic potential of social media is displayed in citizen journalism networks involving user generated and selected content to affect gate-keeping and agenda setting in corporate news production, though some other scholars argue for further examination of buzzwords like collaborative culture, mass creativity, and cocreation by utilizing historical and empirical perspectives to investigate social media appropriations (Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009). Given the potential of ubiquitous interactive media to support digital storytelling among the lay public (Hertzberg & Lundby, 2008), creation of digital content in the contemporary theater of terror now involves prosumers in communicating about terrorism and extremist related affairs.

Ritzer and Jurgenson salient reminder that “prosumption is not a new phenomenon” (2010) can be extended to the political dimension since varying forms of prosumption as resistance have historically been enacted by marginalized populations’ “backstage performances” to critique authority (Goffman, 1959), and entertaining “carnavalesque play” to satirize the social order (Bakhtin, 1993). Similarly, jokes and humorous texts have received attention from the field of folklore studies for their fecundity, including their roles in challenging official news and interpretations of national disasters (Oring, 2010) as well as serving to heighten social boundaries and build solidarity based on responses by different audiences (Smith, 2009). Mediated tactics “make do” by poaching and recombining popular culture products. They also highlight the potential of lay responses to navigate a space for themselves amidst national security strategies and the structures of power (Certeau, 1984).

As James Scott (1985) argues, civilian resistance via lay communication networks represent “weapons of the weak” under oppressive conditions of social change. Subordinate classes enact “middle ground” resistance because they rarely engage in open rebellion, yet fight back in prosaic and constant struggles to their minimum disadvantage. In contexts where open criticism is met with fines, arrests, and imprisonment, the average citizen is in a weak position vis-à-vis the ruling authority in the realm of political discourse. Thus, middle ground resistance practices help civilians articulate their critique of power, while enjoying impunity, as Scott (1990) notes:

Like prudent opposition newspaper editors under strict censorship, subordinate groups must find ways of getting their message across, while staying somehow within the law. This requires an experimental spirit and a capacity to test and exploit all the loopholes, ambiguities, silences and lapses available to them. It means somehow setting a course at the very perimeter of what the authorities are obliged to permit or unable to prevent (pp. 138–139).

Findings from Scott's ethnographic research in Malaysia highlighted various forms of quotidian resistance practiced by rice farmers when faced with new agricultural technologies and the "new green revolution" of double cropping that threatened their livelihood. Refusing to accept official definitions of power and their own marginalization in the class conflict with wealthy land owners, peasants engaged in practices including rumor mongering, character assassination, boycotts, false deference, and sabotage to contest social hierarchies and reclaim the symbolic balance of power. Strikingly, his analysis of the guises of peasant ideological struggle reveal certain features in common with contemporary prosumption, making middle ground resistance a compelling frame to analyze prosumption activities directed toward oppositional goals; they require little or no coordination or planning, make use of implicit understanding and informal networks, often represent a form of self-help, and typically avoid any direct clash with authority.

In our case, a close examination of the forms of middle ground resistance permits us to observe the emerging dimensions of online prosumption toward a terrorist escape and man-hunting crisis and the distinguishing marks of Web 2.0 capacity and limitations to help structure the breakdown of dominant national security ideology. As Harrison and Barthel (2009) argue, the "active audience" in social media is rooted in older forms of rebellious media use from community radio to participatory public art projects. Social media, however, extends the potential scope and impact of radical prosumption as "new media technologies now enable vastly more users to experiment with a wider and seemingly more varied range of collaborative creative activities" (p. 174). Thus, they charge future researchers to examine expressive and aesthetic dimensions of digital content creation directed to oppositional objectives.

Social construction of technology and media domestication theories (Silverstone, 1996) point out that new media is socially shaped, affording reinvention and creative appropriation in ways that embody critique and resistance (Cheong & Poon, 2009). Paradoxically, the increasing standardization of web platforms and software facilitates mass authorship of digital content (Neustadt & Kestnbaum, 2002). Inventive possibilities of social web practices are leading to different kinds of representations and constructions of truth (Meikle, 2008). As Cottle asserts (2006), "mediatized rituals" work to "open up productive spaces for social reflexivity and critique" and as such, "can be politically disruptive or even transformative in their reverberations within civil and wider society" (p. 411). New media use to construct satire, songs, and dance may be especially popular during times of political repression, censorship, and war as people speak truth to power behind the fair use shield of parody (Boler, 2008) and respond to

critiques of mainstream media who attempt to hold hegemonic regulators accountable (Downing, 2001). This raises the question of how online prosumption enacts forms of middle ground resistance and the circulation of alternative narratives to terrorism-related state propaganda.

Prosumption is significant for terrorism-related events particularly given that a much more dynamic account of terrorism and violence has become influential. "Banal terrorism" exists when multiple intersecting processes of everyday actions create and valorize the war on terror and national (in)security within the context of the threatened nation-state (Katz, 2007). In light of civic militarization practices in the private sphere (Flusty, Dittmer, Gilbert, & Kuus, 2008), media activist Roy (2008) comments, "I think my tactical media practice has therefore shifted, it has moved into the generation of micromedia. It has developed by harvesting or claiming resources, and it is not necessarily events but everyday life and embedded politics with which you dirty your hands and respond" (as cited in Boler, 2008, p. 25). Hence, we observe how civic militarization and banal terrorism contextually facilitate prosumption activities as online weapons of the weak.

### *Prosumption and Transmediation: The Creation and Spread of Digital Memes*

Online prosumption commonly involves fluid development of "unfinished" artifacts in the open information commons (Bruns, 2008). As Jenkins (2006) argues, the convergence of old and new media involves transmedia storytelling "as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (p. 3). Unlike traditional top-down dissemination, transmediation involves additive and iterative forms of consumption and integration of multiple media forms when audiences or fans engage with media and with each other to create new texts on varied media platforms.

Engagement of a media byte for purposes of political intervention involves multi-directional remediation, reappropriation, and circulation (Bolter & Grusin, 2000) of digital remixes that can become memes. Memes are compelling ideas, catchphrases, graphics, or stories that cultural dissemination generates virus-like imitations and reproductions that do not have to be exact to reinforce beliefs and spur thought contagion (Blackmore, 2000). Like mutating chain letters, the (re)circulation of alternative media stories may be conceived as media viral codes (Rushkoff, 1996) to influence a society's agenda or cultivate resistance to state propaganda, particularly among online participants who tend to connect to ideologically similar websites to reinforce their political beliefs (Sunstein, 2009). Under wartime fears and social anxieties, remix artifacts conceivably help some online participants protest against mainstream media representations and vent their dissent to national politics. In an exceptional article related to terrorism related prosumption and transmediation, Frank (2004) observed that the 9/11 attacks inspired the mass diffusion of photoshops expressing fantasies of humiliation targeted at Osama bin Laden or Afghanistan, and bewilderment of the fate

of perished victims. Hence, in light of vernacular prosumption over the expanding range of new media, it becomes important to understand the multiple transmediated (re)presentations of key conflict events, including how they unfold and connect overtime.

Applying perspectives of mediated tactics of middle ground resistance leads us to examine how prosumption works to construct radical content in a variety of transmediated artifacts and digital memes, and ask what appreciable political implications there are for new media to facilitate resistance in regulated contexts under threats of terrorism. As forms of resistance and cultural protest reflect the conditions and constraints under which they are generated, our inquiry is grounded in a case study as described in the next section.

## Background

This case study draws upon data that we have collected from a multiyear research project that is a multidisciplinary, transnational endeavor to investigate the spread of narratives related to terrorism across multiple communication platforms (U.S. Office of Naval Research, no. N00014-09-1-0872). Using a triangulated methodological approach (Yin, 1994), we conducted a detailed content analysis of multiple media materials (websites, flyers, TV and newspaper reports, and social media sites) that covered the terrorist escape and man hunting events. More than 100 hours of ethnographic observations of online textual, audio, and visual content was undertaken to reach data saturation. To understand how media stories around terrorist leader MSK spread, we inspected electronic records to restructure and develop a reliable picture of actual diffusion. Quantitative measures such as determining the most popular YouTube videos related to MSK were enabled through YouTube's sorting filter. Much of the data also came through following hyperlinks provided by our chronologically catalogued sources, reflecting the archival and web-like nature of electronic media. To obtain added contextual information, we also contacted six bloggers and YouTube video creators who were key agents of prosumption, as well as academics in regional think-tanks involved in strategic communication. The researchers, who are multilingual, analyzed content in English, Malay, and the local variant known as Singlish (English, Malay, Chinese, and Hokkien words spoken according to Chinese grammar rules). In presentation quotations below, we have reproduced the original language as closely as possible.

### *The Internet and the Southeast*

#### *Asian Context: Political Culture in Singapore*

Singapore presents an interesting social laboratory for the study of online prosumption as the country is one of the most wired nations in the world, where almost three-quarters of the population are online (Internet World Statistics, 2009), with 82% of households using broadband connections ((Infocomm Development Authority of

Singapore, 2011). In addition, the political environment provides a context whereby online participation plausibly serves as an outlet to resist state power and the strong, even authoritarian control of the press. The political landscape has been dominated by one-party rule and a communitarian ideology guided by economic pragmatism in the past four decades after Singapore gained its independence from British rule (Chua, 1995). Although new media regulation challenges exist amidst open economic growth and sophisticated technological developments (Warschauer, 2001), freedom of speech is regulated via multiple formal (e.g., laws, press publishing and broadcasting permits, licenses) and informal (e.g., legal and social pressures) methods (Tay, 2004).

In light of strong social engineering practices, Banerjee and Yeo (2003) note the resulting de-politicalization of the citizenry in Singapore. Yet a few researchers have found that Singapore based and related websites by mainstream segments and fringe groups functioned as "sites of resistance" (Ho, Baber, & Khondker, 2002), which raises interesting questions concerning the potential of social media practices in revitalizing critical debate and spurring grassroots activism. However, Willnat and Aw (2004), in their review of communication research in Asia, highlight that political communication research in Singapore is rare due to the restricted freedom to conduct this kind of research, compounded by the small research community and limited financial and institutional support. In particular, we note the dearth of research that critically examines the role of new and social media in the construction and dissemination of stories that parody or confront vested state interests that most recently have focused on national security and the war on terror.

### *Terrorism in Southeast Asia and the Escape of MSK*

Although some groups labeled as terrorist in Southeast Asia have parochial goals, the establishment of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in the early 1990s represented a change in strategy from national resistance to an international organization with connections to al Qaeda. JI is heir to the Darul Islam movement that emerged in Indonesia in the 1940s and actively fought the government through the 1950s with the goal of creating an Islamic state. Many high-profile members of JI received training in Afghanistan, including MSK (International Crisis Group, 2002). In the aftermath of the 9/11 attack on the United States, JI increased its activities in Southeast Asia. There have been several attacks in Indonesia, including the Bali bombing that killed more than 200 people in 2002. Prior to the July 2009 Jakarta bombings, Indonesia had won praise for its efforts to eradicate terrorism, including capturing and executing key terrorist suspects. Singapore had similarly won praise from the international community for its efforts to eradicate terror. In December 2001, it arrested 15 members of JI, and 21 more in 2002.

In the context of the crackdown following the Bali bombing, Indonesian authorities arrested MSK in February 2003 on immigration offenses, and he served 18 months in jail. He was arrested again in January 2006 in Java for using a fake identity card and extradited to Singapore the following month. MSK was held without charges under



Singapore's Internal Security Act for plotting to bomb foreign embassies and crash airliners into Singapore Changi International Airport. On February 27, 2008, MSK broke out of the maximum security Whitley Road Detention Center and avoided capture despite being hobbled by a leg broken in a previous escape attempt. The official version of events held that MSK slipped out of a window in a toilet stall after asking the guard for permission to change his clothes before a meeting with his family. The window had no bars, and he was able to squeeze through it. Eleven minutes elapsed before a guard kicked in the urinal door and discovered the escape.

Following the escape, Singapore tightened security in the city-state by mobilizing the military and the elite Gurkhas. A Navy and Coast Guard cordon ringed the island, and security on the bridge linking Singapore to Malaysia was increased, causing tremendous traffic problems. Singaporeans were also subjected to roadblocks and random vehicle searches. MSK fled Singapore and evaded arrest for over a year, even though a \$1 million cash reward (US\$717,000) was offered for information related to his capture. He was eventually arrested in Johor Baharu by Malaysian police on April 1, 2009 and held under Malaysia's Internal Security Act. On September 24, 2010, he was released to Singaporean authorities and returned to the Whitley Road Detention Center, where he is held under "red level," the most secure detention possible. Authorities at the Center have implemented new measures designed to make the facility more secure.

Engagement with transmediation practices emerged quickly in response to the escape. It took the Singaporean police 4 hours to make an official announcement. The classic format of the "wanted poster" appeared at street intersections, bus and train stations, and in traditional print and broadcast media. Singaporeans were exhorted to contact the police if they saw MSK and to be on the lookout for his presence; they were given information regarding his clothes, his limp, and disguises that he might adopt. Reflecting the region's ethno-linguistic mix, these messages were published in English, Chinese, Tamil, and Malay, and later in Thai, Bangladeshi, and Burmese, to appeal to migrant workers. Three days after his escape, all three telecommunications companies in Singapore sent multimedia messaging service messages to 5.5 million mobile phone users with a wanted picture of MSK (Nadarajan, 2008).

News of MSK's escape and the wanted poster was also distributed internationally. Indonesian and Malaysian authorities distributed wanted posters in bus terminals, airports, and ports. The day after his escape, Interpol (the International Criminal Police Organization) issued an Orange Notice (an urgent worldwide security alert) sent electronically to its 188 member countries with details of the escape; the alert was upgraded to red (arrest on sight, approved for extradition) on March 2 (Interpol, 2008).

In the days following the escape, most official local news such as the broadsheet *Straits Times* downplayed his escape details, but rather emphasized the story's background and the continuing search. The escape was portrayed as not only a threat to the city-state, but also to individuals. News coverage shifted the threat perception from the potential for MSK to perpetrate a large-scale act of terror, such as the bombing of international embassies, to individual acts of criminality. For example, television news



(and posted to YouTube) featured interviews with residents who expressed fear that MSK would break into their homes. Minister Lim Swee Say described the incident as a test in “inter-racial cohesion” that Singaporeans passed with an “A+” (Oon, 2008). Public calls for the resignation of Wong Kan Seng, the minister for home affairs and deputy prime minister, were muted or nonexistent in mainstream media. As cries for resignations of those responsible grew, Minister Mentor Lee Kwan Yew argued that complacency among security staff led to the escape, but that Singaporeans were all in a way culpable and could learn a lesson from the episode (Chia & Goh, 2008).

## **Grassroots Digital Prosumption and Transmediation Tactics**

Our analysis revealed that prosumption practices reflected the mixed responses and even the polarized state of public and private attitudes to terrorist-related phenomena. Online citizens were not simply passive consumers of information regarding the story but also active producers of online content that reflected critical attitudes. Given the vast amount of online data related to the emergent forms of middle ground resistance as manifest on Web 2.0, we aim for salience, not comprehensiveness in this report. Here, we specifically examine how prosumption and transmediation functions with accompanying artifacts to support three forms of resistance to achieve particular tactical communication goals (as summarized in Table 1).

### **Rumor**

The first key form of middle ground resistance observed was the production and spread of rumors regarding the reasons and motivations of the terrorist escape. Rumors refer to speculation, half-truths, outright lies, and misinformation in the form of brief stories or longer narratives that, to some contested populations, appear to be rational (Bernardi, Cheong, Lundry, & Ruston, in press; Sunstein, 2009). The escape of such a high profile detainee from a maximum security institute inspired a tremendous number of rumors, much of it created and reproduced via computer-mediated communication.

Online rumors posted on multiple blogs and social media sites included speculation that he was murdered and the escape was a cover-up, that he was allowed to escape so that he could be followed, that he was still in captivity and this was some kind of civil defense test, that Arab supporters of JI and al Qaeda had paid bribes to secure his release, and that he used some kind of “black magic” (*ilmu tinggi*) to escape. Other international news sources further fueled speculation by publishing their own rumors online. For example, *Kompas*, an Indonesian broadsheet, posted stories speculating that he was killed by Singaporean security before the news of his escape, that he had been secretly extradited to the United States (as his fellow JI member Hambali had following his arrest in Thailand), that he was selling noodles in the Riau Province near Singapore, and that he had reconnected with another terrorist Noordin Top, among others.

**Table 1.** Forms of Prosumption Resistance, Artefacts, and Tactical Communication

Type of online middle ground resistance	Subjects	Prosumption new media site and artefacts	Tactical communication goals
Rumors	MSK killed in custody MSK released in order to track down more JI members Inside job; someone helped him escape MSK not guilty of any crimes	Blogs discussing speculations of escape methods and reasons Social media “Wong Can’t Sing”—calls for resignation of Minister Wong Kompast online newspaper	To provide rational explanations in knowledge gaps To raise public consciousness about failed national security policies To contravene mainstream news representations
Political parody	MSK as political hero Politicians are corrupt Police and the military forces are incompetent	Photoshops of wanted poster, e.g., the terrorist spotter Photoshops of movie and television posters, e.g., toilet break poster YouTube remix videos dramatizing the escape and karaoke songs	To mock public authorities and undermine their influence To evade strict censorship rules by using humorous satire that can be interpreted in different ways but that do not violate the law
Infotaining play	MSK on the run escaping the authorities	Editable picture game, e.g., Where’s MSK? based on Where’s Waldo? Moddled digital game, e.g., “Pak Mat”—MSK game based on Pac Man where agents of the Singaporean government try to capture MSK	To re-create identity online To entertain and educate via participation in gaming processes

The spread of these rumors appeared to be undertaken by prosumers with the intent to undermine the official version of events, representing an implicit critique not only of the security lapse itself that allowed the escape, but also of the credibility of the government. In light of the paucity of information on mainstream media regarding the reasons of the escape and description of the jail break, the creation and spread of online rumors fill critical information gaps with what appears as plausible explanations (DiFonzo & Prashant, 2007) of his escape.

Rumors in this case also included attempts to construct demeaning allegations to tarnish the reputation of the state's agents, including the integrity of the Ministers of State. It appeared that the official story was difficult for many Singaporeans and others in the region to swallow as calls for the resignation of Minister Wong percolated on the Internet, beginning the day of the escape. Bloggers wrote much more critically than official media about the escape. Before the day had ended, the story was spreading virally, with commentators questioning the official version of events and countering it with their own versions, and calling for Wong's resignation due to his negligence and incompetence as the home affairs minister. For example, several bloggers agreed that leaving security up to the police, military, and the *gahmen* (government) was a mistake. Some commented that the escape was an "inside job" and MSK received help from the security forces, and others sarcastically volunteered to quit their jobs in lieu of the minister's million-dollar paycheck and look for MSK themselves. These rumors function as resistance tactics to character assassinate leaders in power (Scott, 1990) using exaggerated facts to defame public authorities and present an unflattering picture of the state.

### *Political Parody*

The second and most common form of online resistance observed in the MSK case was parody. Political parodies satirize social trends and events to comment on, ridicule or poke fun by means of humorous imitation and reworked compositions (Hutcheon, 1985). For instance, the official wanted poster with MSK's headshot was repeatedly modified and reproduced, resulting in graphic memes like the "terrorist spotter" poster that was rapidly circulated on a website ([www.talkingcock.com](http://www.talkingcock.com)) and then among local A-list bloggers. In this example of prosumption, the official mug shots showing potential disguises for MSK were doctored to show farcical images of MSK as a pirate; as Michael Jackson; as a woman; or as a man with an afro, mustache, and sunglasses.

Other prosumption practices involved recombinant and derivative content from popular culture artifacts like television and movie posters. Online stories mainly exploited the humor in which one of Southeast Asia's most dangerous prisoners managed an escape out of a toilet window. The most popular parody was based on the popular American Fox Television series "Prison Break," in which the protagonist commits a crime in order to get into prison so that he can help free his wrongly convicted brother. Two days after the escape, Singaporean blogger "DK" created an advertisement for the television show with MSK's face superimposed over the lead character's. Hours later, blogger "Simply Jean," changed the title of the online graphic poster to "Toilet Break," and the image began to spread virally to other blogs and social media. In a personal communication (April 14, 2010) she stated,

I didn't create the poster with a target in mind, although I did think that it would have appealed more to people who were already in touch with the use of social

media tools. I think the poster would have brought more awareness to MSK [MSK], but one with more details of his escape would have been more effective in spreading the message.

This example also shows the interactions among prosumer communities online as it was DK and Simply Jean's online friendship that allowed for the sharing and re-creating of the image, and the two communicated through the process, linking to each other's blogs. The viral dissemination of these political parodies were further facilitated by hyperlinks on existing blogger networks or automatically disseminated via RSS feeds or subscriptions from popular local blogs, such as the MrBrown.com blog, which receives 685 in links from other blogs in Singapore, Indonesia, United States, Australia and Malaysia (www.alexa.com) and up to 20,000 podcast downloads in a day. These prosumption and transmediation developments led to the voting of the MSK story as being the most blogged event in the 2008 Singapore Blog awards. Prominent stories, especially the "Toilet Break" meme, were circulated so widely on other local and regional websites and blogs that they were in turn covered by the mainstream media, including the *Straits Times* (Skadian, 2008).

Other bloggers created similar pastiche artifacts to expand the parody, using material from popular films such as *The Limping Man*, *V for Vendetta*, *The Transformers*, *Catch Me If You Can*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and *Escape From Alcatraz* as starting points. The appropriation of these movie posters functioned not only to ground the fugitive story in shared popular culture, but also implicitly linked MSK to the plots of these films featuring a righteous but persecuted protagonist. In *The Limping Man*, for example, Frank Pryor (Lloyd Bridges) is suspected of murder, questioned by Scotland Yard, and then subjected to surveillance while he tries to clear his name. In *V for Vendetta*, the protagonist commits acts of terror in the name of fomenting a revolt against tyranny. In these examples, prosumers consumed the news regarding MSK and linked it to popular films in order to produce original mash-ups that conveyed more meaning than the two sources standing on their own. The targets of these critiques were both the Singaporean state and MSK, and sometimes both at the same time. The "Toilet Break" image, for example, implicitly pokes fun of MSK's medium of escape, but also undeniably criticizes the Singaporean government for such a lapse in national security.

In addition to the blogosphere, YouTube, the popular video-sharing website, quickly became another hub for the prosumption and transmediation of the MSK story. On the day of his escape, the first television newscast was posted on YouTube. On the following day, more clips of newscasts were posted, and by March 1 streaming video creations including individual parodies of these news clips were created and disseminated. Table 2 presents a snapshot of the 10 most watched YouTube videos according to their content, the number of views, and comments by other viewers that illustrate information diffusion as well as cultural sentiments of this crisis. For instance, numerous videos were created by prosumer "Abelislove." His videos, also posted on his blog, portrayed MSK as disguising himself in multiple forms to escape: as toilet

paper, as a cat afraid of dogs, as a “street dancer,” as a gay man escaping to reunite with his lover, and as a snake dancer.

Some of Abelislove’s videos proved tremendously popular. His “MSK Kastari—Toilet Escape Video” is the most popular MSK video (over 160,000 views), and he has 6 of the top 10 most watched videos about MSK which play off of recognizable themes. Portraying MSK as a cat reflects Muslims’ disdain—and as reports about the U.S. detention center in Guantanamo Bay show, fear—of dogs. Portraying MSK as gay reflects conservative Islam’s proscription of homosexuality; MSK, therefore, is not a good Muslim. This second example is made more intriguing considering the homoerotic content of Abelislove’s blog. In a personal communication, he said that his target was primarily MSK and terrorists, but he also posted to “target . . . the media and capture some attention . . . (and) at the same time make fun of terrorist [*sic*]” (Abelislove, September 16, 2009).

Online prosumers also constructed innovative inquiry processes as the MSK story was retold through songs broadcast online. For example, the “MSK Song (Where Did You Go)” was posted 24 days after the escape as a YouTube remix karaoke video with original song lyrics that reflected current events and speculations, accompanied by official images of MSK. This remix was popular (over 14,000 views), but the comments for it reflected the spectrum of opinions voiced concerning MSK-themed YouTube videos, including broader criticism of the Singaporean government, insults directed at Singaporeans (then later flagged as spam and removed), thanks for spreading the word about the escape, insults directed at MSK, and rumors he had already been killed and that the escape was a government cover-up. More recent comments report on his capture. The process of commenting on video content already posted is another way in which participants produce additional content online.

In this case, online political parodies represented a popular form of middle ground resistance as they combine humor and criticism with text, audio, video, and the graphic arts to allow prosumers to vent and express their concerns through humor (Boskin, 1997). By modifying and recontextualizing MSK’s headshot within a vast range of television and movie posters for example, political parody draws upon established and identifiable characters in new settings to evoke symbolic and emotional meanings to create community among prosumers as well as interest-based learning that intentionally informs and entertains (Lessig, 2007).

### *Infotaining Play*

A third emergent form of prosumption resistance is what we term *infotaining play*. Infotaining play refers to the performative appropriation and participation in digital games with political themes, in other words, what Ian Bogost (2010) calls persuasive games that connect game play’s computational structure with political messages which support or disrupt existing ideology. Here, we observed infotaining play as a form of middle ground resistance in several instances of prosumption where online games are created based on the character of MSK.

**Table 2.** Top Ten YouTube Videos and Prosumption Artefacts related to Mas Selamat (as of December 2010)

Rank	Title	Creator	Date posted	Number of views	Number of comments	Theme
1	Mas Selamat Kastari—Toilet Escape Video	Abelislove	3/2/08	168,740	270	Humor: MSK target of parody
2	Mas Selamat Kastari—Street Dancer	Abelislove	3/2/08	64,987	123	Humor: MSK target of parody
3	The Mas Selamat Story	Singapore-democrats	3/21/08	48,007	100	Criticism: Opposition party mocks government
4	Mas Selamat Kastari—Confession of a Terrorist	Abelislove	3/1/08	41,950	137	Humor: MSK target of parody
5	Mas Selamat was last seen wearing this	Huaqing	3/4/08	31,982	82	Rebroadcast of Straits Times News
6	Manhunt Day 2—SAF join police to search for JI escapee	Huaqing	2/28/08	26,672	137	Rebroadcast of Straits Times News
7	Mas Selamat—How he hurt his leg	Abelislove	3/4/08	23,110	35	Humor: MSK target of parody
8	Escaped Singapore Terrorist by hot CNA Reporter	Foodmore	2/27/08	22,793	61	Rebroadcast of NewsAsia
9	Mas Selamat Kastari—Short video Taken by Inmate	Abelislove	3/2/08	21,921	20	Humor: MSK target of parody
10	Mas Selamat—Fear of dogs	Abelislove	3/2/08	19,295	64	Humor: MSK target of parody

For example, days after the escape, blogger “IZ Reloaded” posted a game based on the popular “Where’s Waldo?” puzzle where participants have to search for Waldo amidst a montage of other faces. This picture game was retitled “Where’s MSK?” and incorporated images of the spoof wanted posters showing various disguises. Computer game modification or “moddling” of digital game artifacts was also observed.

On March 18, a “Pak Mat” version of the arcade game Pac Man was created for online visitors to the website [talkingcock.com](http://talkingcock.com). The nomenclature revision is culturally significant as it reflects Singaporean slang. “Pak”—as Pac in the game’s title is pronounced—means “sir” or “father” in Malay, or to hit or strike in Singlish. “Mat” is a Singaporean Malay term for a ruffian. As of the time of writing, the site had received more than 16,000 hits. In the game, online participants are cast into the character of MSK and control his movements around a maze of rewards and obstacles as he tries to avoid capture by police, military personnel, Gurkhas, and Ministers of State. In a surprising twist, his disguises change with every level of the game to reflect rumors surrounding his disappearance, such as his supposed hiding as a noodle (*mee*) seller. Through these interactive rules, the search for MSK take on added layers of meaning via “cultural reproduction” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) as media prosumers are placed in a fugitive position, learn rules of the games that contain direct and oblique references to previously circulated rumors and have to make decisional moves within the constraints that the stimulated game imposes, for instance how to avoid roadblocks and the police. Prosumers accumulate points as they escape from authority figures and on the second level, every visit their character makes to the bathroom gains them more time to react to their captors. Although the goal of the game is to manipulate MSK to avoid arrest, and despite the comments that the government characters make that are similar to the game that it is based on (such as Minister Wong stating “We will form a committee!”) with each successive level of play the game gets more and more difficult, and in the end MSK is usually captured.

Here, infotaining play is an emergent form of online political presumption as players embody the terrorist fugitive and engage in political actions and judgments to play the game successfully. Entertaining games can help bridge prosumers to alternative worldviews (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). In playing the game, prosumers are afforded the expressive capability to navigate within rules of the game’s execution (Bogost, 2010) and gain a crucial vantage point to actively yet safely engage in a complex political issue.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Our study contributes to a broadened understanding of the social and political implications of presumption associated with strategic communication and social influence in the contemporary global war on terror. Changing Web 2.0 conditions are now such that strategic communication related to terrorism is not primarily just a struggle between nation-states managing their media and influence. Instead, our review of literature and empirical examination suggests that mediated conflicts can be further understood in terms of presumption and transmediation practices among hybrid producers, embedded in geopolitical vulnerabilities and dependencies. The case of MSK gives an account of the conflict between the political elites, official media representatives, and lay publics over the disputed developments and interpretations of the escape of a key terrorist in Southeast Asia. As the bulk of research on the mediatization of



war has largely represented views from “the West” (McQuail, 2006), our article contributes to studies on mediated culture and conflict from a non-Western perspective and we hope, points to future prosumption and computer-mediated communication research.

Specifically, our study extends the concept of middle ground resistance to online prosumption where instead of outright protest, prosumption activities involving rumors, political parodies and infotaining play facilitated the serious play of alternative texts which express critical communication and yet are officially within unobjectionable bounds. Amidst state strategies and civic militarization, these forms of resistance serve various tactical communication goals to mock public officials, raise public consciousness about the failed national security politics, entertain and persuade participants to alternative ideologies, and form community with other prosumers. In a context where lay public communication about terrorism is silenced or discouraged, digital remix practices allowed alternative texts to enter into sociopolitical discourse to open up possibilities for cultural understanding and transformation. Prior to the popularization of new and social media, this kind of humor and under similar conditions has been elucidated elsewhere. Gregor Benton describes jocularity as a means of “easing political tensions”:

Political jokes are the citizens’ response to the state’s efforts to standardize their thinking and to frighten them into withholding criticism and dissent. . . . The politically powerless use it as a tribunal through which to pass judgments on society where other ways of doing so are closed to them. . . They are a powerful transmitter of the popular mood in societies where this mood can find no officially sanctioned outlet. (Benton, 1988, p. 33)

Although Singapore’s government operates under an arguably softer or more paternal kind of authoritarianism than the cases that Benton cites—the Soviet Union and China—the rationale for this kind of humor practice and support remains the same. What has changed are the media for dissemination, and the more participatory, presumptive nature of spreading this humor through transmediation enabled by the Web. In this case, blogs that disseminated disguises of MSK were not just disruptive tactics but also a means of collective sense-making and coping given the limitations of mainstream media reports. The findings here highlight how in addition to news coverage, new media was utilized to fill information gaps and obliquely voice social critique.

Our study also extends the accompanying concept of transmediation more commonly associated with the merchandising and branding of reality television shows (Jenkins, 2006) to critical grassroots responses toward banal terrorism. Our study showed not only the methods by and through which terrorist related images and ideas are appropriated and subverted by lay commentators, but also revealed the chronological development and social conditions in which these messages gained traction. Whereas the full extent of transmediation practices was practically impossible to ascertain, these results suggest that computer-mediated communication can act as

unofficial “digital backchannels” (McCarthy & Boyd, 2005) in the information arena of terrorism. Their influence is apparent in a man-hunting event because social media interactions often leave digital traces that persist and diffuse in the public sphere.

A related implication of new media to generate critique is its potential for facilitating immediate as well as long-term social change. Prosumption outputs became inspiration for others in online social networks so that culturally reproduced narratives became more resistant to censorship attempts in media spaces that cannot be fully closed. Evidence of online collaboration among prosumers was found as lay users appropriated elements found on other sites. As such, dynamic production and reception processes aided the “spreadability of values” (Jenkins, 2006), to gain “greater resonance in the culture, taking on new meanings, finding new audiences, attracting new markets, and generating new values” (Burgess, 2008, p. 3). Because video remixes with political themes draw upon popular cultural referents, they can significantly alter the ways in which people perceive and remember public authorities (Lessig, 2008). In this way, the prosumption of terrorism related stories points to its possible impact among citizens of a nation state and its diasporic community. Beyond interviews with prosumers, future research could examine how the diffusion of memorable terrorism related bytes influences the larger public’s perception toward the credibility of the state agencies and leaders which should open more comprehensive ways of thinking about the imagined community (Anderson, 1983/1991) in the contemporary global war on terror. As a counterpoint, research could also investigate the offline implications of oppositional communication for prosumers and their networked friends to see if there are tangible spillover effects on other perceptibly more costly and sacrificial forms of social change, which arguably depend on strong interpersonal relationships not necessarily characteristic of loose ties online (Gladwell, 2010).

Apart from being expressions of resistance, online remixes have growing functional importance for strategic communication even as computer mediated communication has increased the complexity and informal nature of cross-cultural exchanges. Government supported agents seeking to understand public sentiment toward the nation-state could look to new media for feedback to enact cultural diplomacy and prescribe appropriate counterinsurgency solutions. New media provides a means to collect information of the man-hunting process and build a more complex fugitive profile to include names and aliases, picture and sketches to point investigators toward possible getaway scenarios, and the tracking of fugitive and sympathizer networks. Indeed, the MSK case appeared in various websites, including terrorist or Islamist media. Two days after the escape, Indonesian blogger Abu Bakr praised the escape as good news for “lovers of jihad” and called for prayers to aid in his escape from the “dogs of the Singaporean government.” Ar-Rahmah, whose owner is currently facing charges of funding the JI terrorists responsible for the 2009 Jakarta bombings, and whose father was a mentor to MSK, published a story 5 days after the escape noting the ridicule that Singapore faced, including the online parodies (Fadly, 2009). These examples show how grassroots remixes are given credence by terrorist sympathizers who framed the escape as a victory for their cause and a defeat for the unjust

Singaporean government and enemies of Islam. As prosumption practices are revealed and understood, it may give law enforcement and governments the ability to react and restore their credibility by countering these messages. For this reason, Marks et al. (2007) proposed that for successful man-hunting, government agencies should supplement their use of classified information with open source information online.

Future research can also examine ways in which prosumption practices may be co-opted by the state or rewarded by the creative industries. For instance, the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts of Singapore recently supported a new initiative for virtual world platforms and awarded a prize to a game created by students entitled *Ge.N.E.ration Z*, which featured the escape of MSK with prosumers positioned as Agent Neo, who is required to shoot down other terrorists while trying to find MSK (Sim, 2009). These new media developments draw attention to ways in which lay engagement in terrorism and state security issues, including the relationship between digital work and play are changing as a hybrid form of “playbour” (Kücklich, 2005) in the modding of digital gaming. Given the mounting concerns about online “slacktivism”, a portmanteau describing personally satisfying measures for a social cause with little practical effect or minimal effort ([www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com)), future research could examine the physical as well as emotional labor involved in prosumption resistance. In the case study here, prosumers who were engaged in critical resistance were rarely monetarily remunerated for their creative risk-taking. Their work, however, is not without compensation.

Prosumers were venting anger directed at the state as well as expressing their anxiety through humor and laughter, both arguably causing a feeling of satisfaction or catharsis (Boskin, 1997). There are also, however, tangible benefits from the attention that prosumers receive, from advertising revenue to event invitations and free access to electronic goods in the hopes of a review and publicity. In the case of Simply Jean, for example, her nomination for Insightful Blog of the Year in the Singapore Blog Awards brought her more benefits than simply fame. She receives blog advertising revenue from connecting to Nuffnang.com, Asia-Pacific’s first and leading blog advertising community with offices in Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, and Australia.

The multidimensional nature of prosumption behaviors should prompt further research in strategic influence and payoffs at the micro level as well as popular culture in everyday discourse to shape perceptions and credibility of nation states in the ideational struggles for hearts and minds. In an era of civic militarization, the personal is the political in mediated contexts that are themselves part of a wider reformulation of the relations between the public and the private, the global, regional and the local.

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