- ARTICLE –

# Facebook as a Platform for an Imagined Diasporic Community

## *Paula Ray*•

**Abstract**

Overcoming geographically determined territorial boundaries, Facebook as a communication platform offers an extension of Benedict Anderson's concept of the 'imagined community' (2006, xi), particularly in the form of groups formed around diasporic communities. These Facebook groups encourage civic engagement and are bound together by the use of a distinctive 'cyber-language' and set of expressions that contribute to a sense of shared identity. In this paper, I look at the 'cyber-dialogues' of three south Asian diasporic cultures in New Zealand, namely Indian, Malaysian and Filipino, to identify the most popular civic issues raised on this platform by each of them.

It is often noted that we can find it more convenient to reach out to a 'friend' in the virtual world than to a real person, physically present next to us. This is perhaps because it is much easier to learn about the disposition of the virtual contact, as expressed on his/ her online profile, than to ask the real person for his/ her character traits. Our identities in the 'imagined' world are often constructed or guided by the cyber language usage with which we are familiar. Mutual contacts and shared information among inhabitants establish familiarity, and this sharing of information is possible only through language. Our familiarity with certain forms of cyber language practice often helps us to assess the risk factors of forging a virtual friendship quite effortlessly, and we end up with a higher number of friends in the virtual world than in the real world. These 'friends' coexist in the virtual world as a community, referred back to in times of need. But what is it that binds them together? And, what kind(s) of information exchange do they engage in?

In this paper, I shall investigate these questions with regard to online communities formed by Facebook users. As a communication platform, Facebook overcomes geographically determined territorial boundaries, and offers to take Benedict Anderson's concept of the 'imagined community' (2006, xi) a step forward, particularly in the form of Facebook groups (FB groups) that encourage civic engagement. These groups are imagined, according to Anderson, because

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the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (Anderson 2006, 6)

Along the way, it is this 'fraternity' (Anderson 1991, 7) that facilitates the production of 'social capital' (Putnam 2000, 19) for the members of the community. Social capital is mediated via social networks, which make possible 'connections among individuals... [that are based on] the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (ibid.). This is very similar to how the Facebook platform functions for the members of a given online group. When a member raises an issue, everybody jumps in to comment, reciprocating a given feeling, or even doing something offline to alleviate it, thereby showing complete commitment to an issue raised.

'New and increasingly accessible modes of communication" have made these discussions and debates "increasingly global, so that even local disputes take on transnational dimensions' (Eickelman and Anderson 1999, 1). Through these discussions, actors create new values (or social capital) for themselves within their own community, and the resultant public space is 'discursive, performative, and participative, and not confined to formal institutions recognised by state authorities' (2). Thus, these new communication platforms have multiplied the possibilities to create networks for interaction, which dissolve traditional concepts of space and distance (3). At the same time, scholars like Papacharissi (2002) argue that there are several factors that curtail the potential of such virtual platforms: inequality in information access and new media literacy can limit the participation of members; the discussions on these platforms often fragment people politically, instead of bringing them together; and new technologies tend to adapt themselves to the existing political culture, limiting the possibilities for transforming this virtual space into a genuine public sphere. I argue that these interactions create the 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2007, 18) to a better future for the community, by developing 'systematic and generative relationships' (18) fuelled by cultural interconnections.

In the same way, Facebook groups act as a platform for imagined diasporic communities. Some members within a group may not participate actively, but they still benefit from the discussions and exchange of information taking place among the active members on the Facebook wall. In spite of their (merely) virtual existence to one another, members of the groups bond over their choice of language, which is culturally defined, irrespective of where they log onto Facebook from. The unique cyber linguistic formations engaged in by members ultimately forge their identity within these imagined diasporic communities and facilitate the flow of social capital. To test this hypothesis, the present study will address three South Asian diasporic communities and their interactions via FB groups, with a focus on a common theme found to run through each of these South Asian nations. These diasporic communities – Indian, Malaysian and Filipino – have some cultural similarities, in the sense that they have all been colonised by European powers; significant elements of their original culture are still evident in

their choice of language, in spite of the people travelling to western cultures and making them their homes. The history of their home country also determines the kind of information the communities prefer to exchange with other members, as manifested in the groups' FB discussions.

**'Indians Living in Auckland': A Diasporic Imagined Community**

'Indians living in Auckland' is a FB group that is coordinated by a non-resident Indian who has organised a community to discuss India-centric issues as well as local concerns. These include job searches, accommodation, and news that affect Indians, along with concert promotions. The group consists predominantly of Indians residing in Auckland and throughout New Zealand, but it also includes those who are intending to live in Auckland or New Zealand in the near future, and ex-residents who continue to enrich the discussions of those currently living in Auckland and throughout the country. As such, potential residents find this FB group a rich quarry of resources which they can mine for information they might require. In ways such as this, FB groups provide their members with a platform for social networking via the dissemination and exchange of information within the virtual 'imagined' community. Members of the 'Indians living in Auckland' group may have never met each other in person, but on this platform they can effortlessly strike up a conversation with someone who is a complete stranger, either by commenting on a post or via a personal message on a topic of mutual interest. Many a time, these virtual acquaintances turn into deep friendships, with members asking after each other's family's health, even though they never meet in person. They might as well be residing in two different nations, yet they are bound by a common identity.

As Anderson says, 'nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time' (2006, 3), but nation-ness can be experienced well beyond the nation. 'Indians living in Auckland' group members, for example, are brought together by their identification with India, even though they are not necessarily residing in India. In fact, not residing within the nation may empower them in ways otherwise impossible; indeed, it might enable these members to comment on issues that come with sanctions in their home country. The fundamental structure of diasporic FB groups is rooted in nation-ness and is designed to develop a sense of reciprocity among online users, who are scattered all around the world, often through activities that are apparently pointless and irrational: status updates, posting comments on each other's status, tagging photographs, and remediating information from news portals. Yet, as Donath argues, '[T]he wastefulness of some seemingly irrational behaviours is actually a cost that ensures the reliability of a communicative signal' (2007, n.p). These FB groups are thus communicative communities that are structured around what Anderson describes as 'deep, horizontal comradeship' (2006, 224). In other words, on this platform, every member has an equal right to comment and to access the social capital generated within the group by its active members. These active members keep the group alive by generating new posts which, in turn, lead to new discussions.

Perhaps it is this comradeship of online communities that forms the basis of internet platforms such as Facebook, which have been a popular topic of discussion over the past few years. However, the concept of 'platform' has become a site of confusion, given the many ways in which web services are programmed. Marc Andreessen defines '[a] 'platform' as a system that can be programmed and therefore customized by outside developers – users – and in that way, adapted to countless needs and niches that the platform's original developers could not have possibly contemplated, much less had time to accommodate' (2007, np). In this sense, a web-based platform like Facebook usually gives the users an opportunity to develop content as they wish, in order to draw other consumers or readers to the content. Often the content developers and consumers merge to become one and the same. Facebook, and more particularly FB groups in this context, operate on the same programme or platform service.

In the FB group 'Indians living in Auckland', the group coordinator posts content on the FB wall for the group members to read as well as comment on, while members are also able to make a new post; this keeps the user-generated platform active along with fostering horizontal comradeship. These posts could include anything from rooms available, to used phones or cars for sale, to concert promotions; there could even be a post on a local incident that involves a fellow Kiwi Indian. The interactions of FB group members on the virtual platform often render space relative, by facilitating communication across all time zones and uniting the dispersed users into collectives; for example, with regard to issues affecting their home country. The coordinator of the 'Indians living in Auckland' FB group is based in Auckland, while the members of the group reside all over New Zealand as well as in other countries, including India. Both the coordinator and the members engage in discussions and debate over issues, and often plan to meet in real-time to take these forward; this could be in the form of viewing a property that was listed on the group's FB wall, or attending a concert that was promoted through a FB post.

## Language and Cultural Specificity as Agent Binders

The exchange of information on the FB wall of the group is conducted in the manner of a casual conversation among members. For a conversation to be successful, it must be interactive, such that the concerned members participate actively. This makes the conversation-based platform participatory. Language plays a very important role in such interactions, by building up trust through participation. The bonding that the group members engage in via interactions is social, as opposed to professional networking, making it easier to share information and emotions. This bonding helps with the exchange of cultural norms, and also develops ties amongst people from different geographical locations (Donath 2007). The camaraderie thus gained through language usage flows through social networks, binding more people to the group. Within a community, language is used to keep members informed, but also to enact social cohesion, which is culturally constructed, thereby enriching the social capital for the members involved. In the case of 'Indians living in Auckland', new members are

often attracted to the group by the expressions used for communication within the group; existing members then continue to engage with posts and comments because they experience a sense of cultural familiarity with co-members via the language used.

Although hardly a theorist of linguistics, Habermas has referred to the 'conversation of intimate equals in the lifeworld' (Peters 1993, 564) as the perfect communication model. Whatever the subject, such a conversation is an affirmation of alliance. This is very similar to the exchange of comments or personal messages among members of a FB group; the actors bond through their communication, mediated by the specific usage of words in a culturally situated cyber-language. The constant analysis and reinterpretation of a mutually-arrived at decision brings actors to a level of intimacy and builds trust, which reaffirms the familiarity offered in the first instance by the cyber language, however petty the subject matter, however ugly the truth revealed. Online chats can therefore gratify actors and their interests by positioning them firmly within a community of shared linguistic usage.

Language is thus 'the vehicle of culture' (Silva-Fuenzalida 1949, 446), an 'index' of communication within a group sharing the same culture. Members understand each other mainly because they belong to the same culture, and are familiar with the norms and customs of that particular cultural community.

> [U]tterances are correctly understood only if they are symbols of cultural phenomena. ...[A] person speaking any language participates to some degree in the ways of life represented by that language. (Silva-Fuenzalida 1949, 446)

In this way, language comprises a series of symbols that signify a given culture, and which are socially acquired as with any other feature of a culture. Every culture has its own way of understanding and interpreting similar phenomena, which is often incomprehensible to another person who does not belong to the same culture: '[T]he enculturation of an individual to a foreign body of customs will only be possible as he learns to speak and understand the foreign language ...' (Silva-Fuenzalida 1949, 446). Similarly, in the case of cyber language, the string of symbols is culturally specific. It is only understood by a certain, culturally defined group. As such, for the most part, these exchanges among a given FB group's members are not legible to FB users outside of the group.

Not just the culturally specific language, but also the choice of words, even slang expressions within a dialect, make the conversation more particular to its members. The non-verbal communication cues of a phatic interaction are very successfully communicated via emoticons (Derks et al 2008) on the virtual platform. These emoticons, although universally available across all digital platforms, are used by members of particular age groups and cultural groups more often than others. For example, during my data collection, I came across Indian diaspora members who used these more frequently than Malaysians or Filipinos, perhaps because the Indian FB

users are more expressive (Kavanagh 2010). For their 'high context' (69) communication culture, mere words appear inadequate. Together, the interactions, via written texts and emoticons, determine the 'communicative ethics' (Dallmayr 1990) of what is acceptable within a FB community. Our values, after all, define our cultural preferences; they guide us with regard to what is ethically and morally acceptable within the culture or nation to which we belong.

## Methodology and Results

The methodology used for the gathering of data began with a questionnaire that was sent to 10 FB users from three nationalities of students who study at Ntec, Auckland, a consortium of four tertiary education providers, where I currently teach. The students are from different age-groups, spanning 18 to 35 years of age, and pursue different academic courses. They were asked to identify three elements: firstly, the most frequently used colloquial language on their FB newsfeed; secondly, which diasporic FB group they belong to; and lastly, what, in their opinion, is the most prominent civic issue they 'like' and participate in actively. Subsequently, I became a member of the FB groups identified by the respondents to understand what issues promote participation within each virtual community. It is important to note here that almost all of these FB groups are semi-public; they can be accessed by clicking the 'like' button on their group webpage, in response to which any of the existing members can admit the new member to the group. To understand the language usage in the FB posts of different diasporic communities, I interviewed a randomly selected cross-section of the respondents. In addition to providing information about specific linguistic usage, they helped me further understand the possible reasons for their choosing to participate in the civic issues they listed within each of the diasporic communities.

The questionnaire sent out to respondents from the three diasporic communities allowed me to compile a set of frequently used expressions. These linguistic usages act as what I refer to as agent binders – a cohesive force that binds each diaspora together. It was also revealed that almost all of these cyber linguistic expressions are affected by the linguistic forms of globalised social media, which is presumably in English. The Indian diasporic communities use predominantly acronyms and cyber colloquialism because they prefer to access FB through mobile phones on the go. It helps to shorten messages and keep the communication going. Some of the oft-used phrases in the Indian social media groups include:

supa lyk [super like]

m gudd [I'm good]

mk sum pln [Make some plan]

dis is tru [This is true]

hmm [mostly used as an affirmation]

wt dt gal [With that girl]

wch sux [...which sucks!]

nutn [Nothing]

hbd gbu [Happy birthday! God bless you.]

bcz [because]

clg [college]

XD [cheeky smile emoticon]

The Malaysian diasporic communities use a combination of Bahasa, the national language, along with English. The resultant language is almost legible to a native English speaker, except for the random intonation 'lah'. The respondents came up with the following as the most popular cyber linguistic expressions within their virtual communities:

Good morning lah!

What lah you. [What is wrong with you.]

Got Loh. [We have.]

Where got like this one? [There is no such thing.]

Like this can meh? Like this can ah? [Is this possible?]

You no brain one is it!! [You're dumb!!]

Even though their country used to be a Spanish colony, the Filipinos speak a combination of Tagalog and English. The English they speak originates from America, since the country was colonised by the US towards the end of the 19th century (Sonnenburg, 2003). The most popular usages in 'Tinglish', as the local population casually refers to their cyber-language, include:

pa-bebe [Acting like a baby]

pa-more [Emphasises the verb/ action]

where na you, andito na me [Where are you? I'm already here.]

i kaw na the best ka [You are right, you are the best.] (This is an expression
of giving up on an argument/ discussion.)

These expressions form the 'imaginary links' between members of a community, and 'a sense of social cohesion' is created by means of these linguistic usages (Luke et al 2011, 607). Just as newspaper reading in the morning previously developed into a practice or

a 'media ritual' (607), comparable to the ritual of morning prayers, so participating in FB groups via the use of cyber linguistic expressions has become a ritual among these diasporic communities. It makes them feel at home, even though they may be miles away from their homeland.

## Words at Play that Define Diasporic Identity

Linguistic rituals are culturally specific. Any study of cyber linguistics cannot be severed from the study of cultural linguistics, which involves 'a broad interest in language and culture, a concern with folk knowledge, and a reliance on both ethnographic and linguistic methods' (Palmer 1996, 36). How people talk about the world they live in is framed by their life experiences and the meanings they derive based on those experiences. It is these experiences that form the core of their choice of words to express themselves, just as the words cement a cultural identity which continues to operate in a diasporic context. The discussions these FB groups engage in within the 'diasporic public sphere' (Appadurai 1996, 22) encourage participation within the virtual community and develop also a virtual diasporic identity, regardless of where the users currently reside. What further prompts this identity formation is the use of distinctive cyber language and expressions that are unique to these communities. As their communication becomes increasingly interactive, their dialogues can only be understood through culturally situated contextual references. An example from the FB group formed by the Indian diaspora is outlined in the following paragraph.

A post on job vacancies asks interested candidates to send a personal message or 'pm'. In response, the comments are a series of 'pmu', or 'pmd u', which means they have sent a personal message to the member who posted the vacancy. Other responses include 'avb' (meaning that the respondent is 'available' to take up the job), 'pm your adresz pls' (meaning that the respondent is requesting the address of the job interviewer), and 'cntct me', followed by the phone number (meaning that the respondent is asking the interviewer to contact her/him). In reply to this latter, the interviewer asks: 'Wht tym i can call' (meaning: what time can I call?). In addition to the comprehensibility of these highly abbreviated forms in this virtual cultural context, it is important to note also that the FB group members share a certain level of trust. This prompts them to share their phone numbers publicly, without inhibition, within the virtual community.

Language constitutes 'the social life of the societies of the world' (Goodwin and Duranti 1992), because 'one of the most pervasive social activities that human beings engage in is talk' (3). When we learn to talk, it is not simply 'language acquisition' but 'language socialisation' (3). Our 'much-vaunted capacity for language' seems mainly to be used for exchanging information concerning social matters (Dunbar 1996). A post on the 'Indians living in Auckland' FB group wall reads thus:

> Hii guys … m looking for female flatmate. .. m living in Epsom
>
> One B/Rm flat power/water included $300.Wk

Cntct me [followed by a phone number]

In response, a member writes, 'Hw mch bond' [meaning: 'how much is the bond money?']. Another reply to some additional information posted by the property owner, reads thus: 'Okkkk. Gud. Thanksss' [meaning: 'Ok. Good. Thanks'.] Yet another comment says: 'Tq' [meaning: 'Thank you']. Usually abbreviated, the addition of extra letters to a word can perhaps be interpreted as an emphasis on what is being said. Either way, we find that although these FB posts read like a series of coded messages, the users understand each other and communicate with ease because they have learned the language of that particular mediated context. This diasporic community's language has evolved to fulfil the social needs of its members with minimum effort.

The comments on a FB post help the users exchange information and ideas, but in many cases they also help users navigate the relationship between the virtual and the real world, where the virtual community possesses cultural knowledge that is diluted or missing in the real-world context. For example, one of the female group members posted:

> Hey guys. Does anyone know where I can find jasmine seeds and tulsi seeds, or a plant that I can grow at home?
>
> I have tried the local temples, but nothing.
>
> Any and all help is appreciated.

This post attracted more than 14 comments, with all members guiding her to different supermarkets that sell tulsi – a form of basil – saplings. This is because the Indian basil is considered auspicious; it is the main purpose of growing a plant at home, a point evident to the members within her community which may not be as obvious to somebody who does not partake in the same cultural practices. But often we may find that along with the exchange of ideas, the context changes too. In the above example, some of the responses led to a discussion of how basil is different from tulsi, deviating from the core point of sourcing seeds to grow these plants.

Context is built through a historical process and 'requires knowledge about its social dimensions' (Goodwin and Duranti 1992, 4). This process may include diasporic, and now virtual, relations. By participating in these contexts, the members interact to create 'environments for each other' (5), which determine their behavioural patterns. FB group interactions are understood and participated in by not only the members of specific communities, but also by other communities within the same diaspora who exhibit a similar demography. The 'mutability of context' (5) is further fed by the fact that members of a given community, real or virtual, can glide rapidly from one contextual framework to another. Often this is daunting for a member outside of the community. In this way, people are divided into culturally and historically distinct worlds, brought into contiguity by inhabitants who operate in multiple contexts.

## Cyber Language and Communicative Ethics

Across all cultural divides, virtual interactions within FB groups come with their own sets of ethics. The Malaysian diasporic FB group 'Bersih 4.0 We Ready 400,000 Malaysian' strictly prohibits any public posts, restricting all discussions to Bersih 4.0, a political movement aimed at achieving a democratic government. On the other hand, 'Buhay Estudyante sa New Zealand', the Filipino diasporic FB group, is comparatively relaxed. They call their group type 'team', and add a disclaimer, 'The views and opinions expressed on this group are solely those of the original authors and other contributors. These views and opinions do not necessarily represent those of the admins, and/or any/all contributors to this group. "To Each His Own"'.

'Indians living in Auckland' is described as a 'support' group, and the coordinator has clearly laid out six guidelines for ethical behaviour, ending with an unusual seventh rule: only human names will be allowed in the group. The guiding principles are as follows:
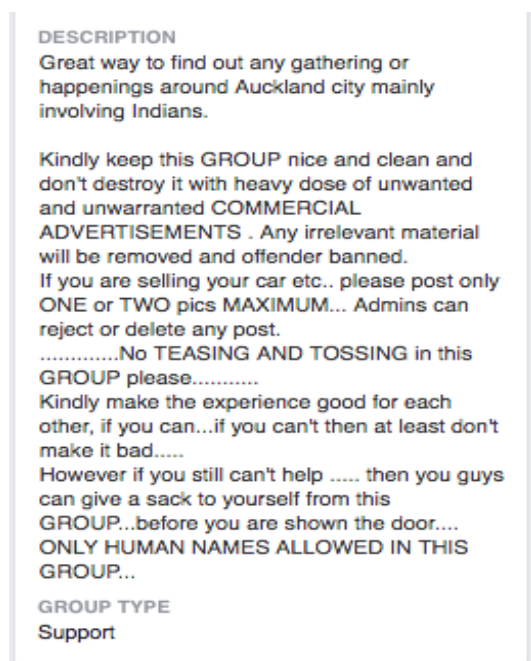


DESCRIPTION
Great way to find out any gathering or happenings around Auckland city mainly involving Indians.

Kindly keep this GROUP nice and clean and don't destroy it with heavy dose of unwanted and unwarranted COMMERCIAL ADVERTISEMENTS . Any irrelevant material will be removed and offender banned.
If you are selling your car etc.. please post only ONE or TWO pics MAXIMUM... Admins can reject or delete any post.
.............No TEASING AND TOSSING in this GROUP please...........
Kindly make the experience good for each other, if you can...if you can't then at least don't make it bad.....
However if you still can't help ..... then you guys can give a sack to yourself from this GROUP...before you are shown the door....
ONLY HUMAN NAMES ALLOWED IN THIS GROUP...

GROUP TYPE
Support

**Figure 1**

To indicate the ongoing validity of these guidelines, the coordinator posts on the wall, from time to time: 'Stop messing around'. Once, this was in reaction to a post on accommodation by Rati (all names changed to retain confidentiality) that led to an argument with Deepak, another member, who could not see Rati's message in his inbox and who assumed she was ignoring his query. Very soon, the post disappeared from the FB wall of the group. Such posts thus bring out communicative ethics. The concept of communicative ethics is not so much concerned with 'formulation of concrete norms and values as rather with the grounding of normativity itself' (Dalimyr 1990, 3). It looks for 'validation or justification of principles', seeking to determine how to appropriate

such validation procedures (3). The 'Buhay Estudyante sa New Zealand' group's description of their FB community's purpose reflects the changes in the societal values of these members along with a justification of their ethical values. Although they have come together as a 'team', each of the members is responsible for their own opinions and actions.

When human actions are bound by 'normative premises' (Dalimyr 1990, 3), the scope of such acts tends to be restricted, or confined by the rules set out. In this sense, the principle 'to each his own' requires the actors to discern their own values and be responsible for their validation. Every community comes together around civic issues, and discernibility and responsibility are the two pillars of any civil society. This discernibility is exhibited in the way the Malaysian diasporic FB group's members approach every government decision critically – they reinterpret what they read in the media as per the particularities of the given situation and, accordingly, arrive at a decision which may be contested by other members of the FB group, leading to a debate (refer to fig. 3). If the discussions take an unethical turn, the conversation is immediately terminated, as evident in fig. 3. This ensures that the members also act responsibly. It also shows that 'scientific-technological change enhances rather than decreases the importance of ethics and norms as yardsticks for judging the directions and consequences of progress' (5). By facilitating quick and easy access to information and conversation, the FB platform can make users agile and informed – with a capacity to identify and interpret the truth in any given situation. Challenging the truth, as presented virtually, and thereby communicating the facts with other members within the diasporic FB group, requires a refined level of critical discernment that can only be honed by repeated interactions. It is important to mention here that discursive articulations connect with how members of the diaspora live, what they do, and 'the larger world of the material existence that they inhabit' (Hacking 1998, 86).

## Critiquing Corruption, But Why?

As per the findings of the questionnaire, the most active diasporic FB groups the respondents belong to include 'Indians living in Auckland' (22,365 members, as on June 6, 2016), 'Buhay estudyante sa New Zealand' (5,489 members, as on June 6, 2016) and 'Bersih 4.0 we are ready 400,000 Malaysian' (17,008 members, as on June 6, 2016). Interestingly, the most popular civic issues that respondents from each diasporic community 'like' and actively participate in are linked to 'corruption'. Indeed, this came up as the most common issue of concern among all three communities, irrespective of their cultural and historical differences. Within their own FB group, members primarily exchange information on renting properties, buying/selling cars and furniture, and other questions relating to settling down in New Zealand. But on their individual newsfeeds, these virtual diasporic communities most actively participate in discussions related to issues of corruption. The specific issues of corruption that respondents from each of the diasporic communities actively critique can be broken down by cultural association.

The Indian diasporic community, in general, was mainly concerned with India Against Corruption (IAC), an anti-corruption movement in India that was prominent during 2011 and 2012. The main aim of the IAC movement was the introduction of the Jan Lokpal Bill (Citizen's Ombudsman Bill). A FB group was formed around the IAC movement in order to mobilise the masses to support the passing of the bill into constitutional law, with almost all Indian diasporic FB groups participating in the cause. However, the IAC 's core committee split up in late 2012, with Arvind Kejriwal forming the Aam Aadmi Party (People's Party), while Anna Hazare remained politically unaligned. A year later, in December 2013, Kejriwal was elected as the chief minister of Delhi. Within 49 days he resigned in February 2014 as leader of a minority government, when he realised the major political parties will not support the passing of the Jan Lokpal Bill.

In February 2015, the Aam Aadmi Party, with Keiriwal as the leader, came back into power at the Delhi Legislative Assembly election, winning 67 out of 70 seats. The political party in power at the Centre, BJP, won the remaining three seats. In December 2015, the Jan Lokpal Bill was passed by the Delhi Assembly, empowering it to investigate any allegation of corruption in the National Captial Territory of Delhi. Currently, the Indian diasporic community is busy debating Kejriwal's performance, alongside Prime Minister Narendra Modi's extremely flamboyant political tours to foreign lands, to meet with the world's most powerful leaders. Kejriwal is now not only head of the state government at Delhi, but also leader of the opposition party at the Centre. This has led to innumerable discussions within the diaspora over the effectiveness of a newly-formed political party leader heading the most important state government of the country. The respondents I spoke to from 'Indians living in Auckland' were uniform in their active participation as 'watchdogs of democracy' (Thomas, 2006).

The Filipino diasporic FB group, 'Buhay estudyante sa New Zealand', is most concerned about the 'Laglag Bala' scam at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA). In a series of incidents starting from September 2015, the airport staff allegedly slipped bullets into passengers' bags. When these were discovered on the passengers by security personnel, the airport staff tried to extort money from the passengers, targeting primarily those who were elderly or Filipinos living abroad. Members of the FB group 'Buhay estudyante sa New Zealand' regularly update each other on ways to avoid becoming victims of the scam, as well as sharing information on who to turn to for help at the airport, should they get caught up in this. Of course, these posts on the community's FB group wall are remediated from the members' individual newsfeeds.

Thank you Atty. ⊕ Bruce Villafuerte Rivera for sharing this post. This can be very helpful to anyone who is wary on stepping onto NAIA for fears of the Tanim-Bala gang.



**Figure 2**

This post has been shared by one of the members of the group, taken from somebody else's post on his personal newsfeed, to enlighten his diasporic community on what can be done if they are caught up in a situation like this.

The Malaysian diasporic FB group 'Bersih 4.0 we are ready 400000 Malaysian' is throbbing with discussions and criticisms on two related civic issues: Bersih 4.0 and GE14. The 1 Malaysian Berhad (1MDB) has led to an ongoing political scandal whereby the Malaysian Prime Minister Razak has been accused of channelling over USD 70 million from 1MDB, a government-run strategic development company, to his personal bank account/s. The Bersih movement was a series of rallies carried out in 2007, 2011, 2012 and 2015, with the objective of achieving transparent and honest governance in the country, while also strengthening the parliamentary democratic system. There have been four such initiatives, thus the current version is referred to as Bersih 4.0. GE14 refers to the 14th general election that will be held in 2018, which the diaspora expects will bring about the change they want to see in their home country. In keeping with this expectation, the FB group reacts critically to every media report and every decision made by the government. For example, the following is an excerpt of the members' debate over the Malaysian government's decision as to whether to implement the

controversial Islamic penal law, Hudud, for the Muslim community alone, or make it universally applicable to all citizens:



**Figure 3**

Here the members of the FB group discuss the pros and cons of the law, leading to ethical questions that may or may not divert from the core issue. Other members notice this shift and try to bring such aimless discussions to a close, in keeping with the philosophy of horizontal comradeship.

Corruption 'erodes public confidence in political institutions... it distorts the allocation of resources' (Quinones 2000, 23). Andreski, on the other hand, says that corruption is the practice of 'using the power of office for making private gain in breach of laws and regulations nominally in force' (1968, 92). This was widely evident from the posts and comments on the FB walls of these diasporic communities. For example, the analysis of

Huhud punishment in Malaysia led to discussions of how this can be misused by people in power. The post gathered mixed emotions – likes, laughter and anger.



**Figure 4**

Any act of corruption comes with moral and conceptual dilemmas, making it difficult to arrive at a conclusive decision. This dilemma has been expressed in fig.4 via the angry emoticon as well as the emoticon for hysterical laughter. In fact, Theobald (1990) has divided corruption into three categories: white, black and grey. Black is the worst form that is condemned by both elite and mass opinion, where both want to see the actor punished; grey is condemned by elite opinion, while the masses remain unclear in their verdict; and white is an act that is not condemned by either the elite or the masses, except for a few select elites. It is the last category that does not impact the people and so most often it is not considered an act of corruption. However, these acts gradually erode public confidence in national political institutions. In the following interactions, this feeling of distrust is amply exhibited.

*Paula Ray*



**Prince rains royal scorn on cancelled 'Nothing2Hide' forum featuring Najib**

KUALA LUMPUR, June 5 — In a scathing Facebook post, Johor's crown prince poured scorn on the highly-anticipated "Nothing2Hide" forum here that was...

THEMALAYMAILONLINE.COM

👍 Like 　 💬 Comment 　 ➤ Share

👍 4

Idzuwan Idris Eh...that is what always happen la...call someone who have a lot thing to hide, for sure he wont come lah...

**Figure 5**



**Witness: Act of tossing balloons rude, insult to country**

Investigating officer says the balloons tossed by Bilqis Hijjas could have contained hazardous materials.

FREEMALAYSIATODAY.COM

👍 Like 　 💬 Comment 　 ➤ Share

😢 1

Tan Ka Lock Stupid and moron witness!
Like · Reply · 4 June at 11:32

**Figure 6**

My P.L. Contacts
19 May at 19:45

Like Page

Could Najib be a PM for all Malaysians? Even if he sincerely wanted to?

This person says NO in the most emphatic way!

https://weehingthong.org/.../could-najib-be-a-pm-for-all-mal.../

Like     Comment     Share

2

KC Low From day one when Sapuman PM was MB of Pahang, I know this guy is a hopeless and useless, greedy and womanise. I deadly do not him to be my PM.
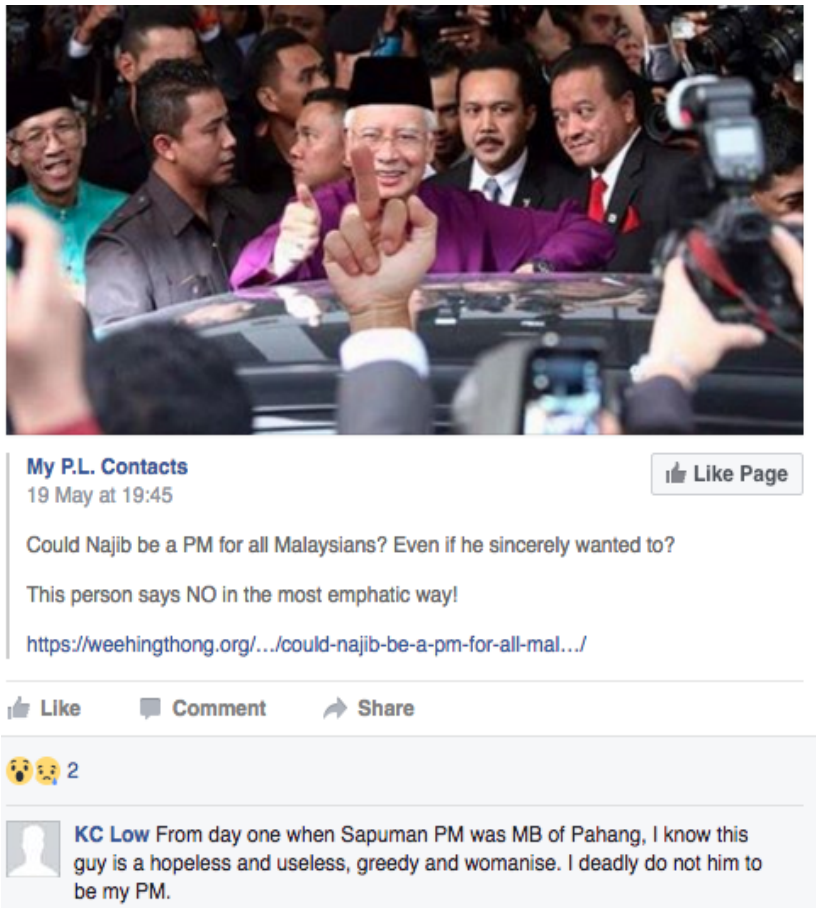
**Figure 7**

But corruption is often held responsible for slower socio-economic development, as expressed by the respondents. The prime motivation for the Malaysian diasporic FB group to promote the Bersih movement so ardently is the dream of having an honest government elected in the 14th General elections. 'Repressive states exhibit higher levels of corruption' (Farrales 2005), because the government officials in power make it difficult and expensive for the masses 'to interact with the state' and often demand extra payments to enforce law in their favour, thereby abusing power. This is precisely the situation that we currently see in Malaysia where the masses are fed up with the state institutions and are trying to bring about a change in society by raising civic awareness.

In order to locate a link between a political studies perspective and the perspective of this FB study, I asked the respondents why they would choose to discuss 'corruption' over other issues of public interest. Their response was that they found it easier to talk about such issues once they are outside of their home country, since there is no longer a fear of political or legal sanctions. In this sense, FB offers a level of protection that puts to rest debates on surveillance and privacy. Since the actors are outside of the nation and are discussing issues of national concern, the national sanctions do not bind them, making them somewhat fearless and vocal. Secondly, respondents also mentioned that it is sometimes easier to communicate with actors on SNS (social networking services) because the user's identity is not fully revealed. Within the 'wired suburb' (Wellman

2001, 236) or urban areas where wireless internet connections are enabled, there is no need to boot up the computer each time to connect, making cyberspace, and FB groups in particular, a convenient place to access updated information, even from one's mobile phone. In most cases, this is a much faster, and often more convenient, mode of information access than physically walking up to one's neighbour's door in a real-world suburb to share the same information. The virtual identity in the diasporic FB group offers a level of protection – both personal and political – that these members don't have when engaging in such debates in their home country. In this way, FB or any other SNS communication is making information more widely accessible and the interactivity of this technology has increased the speed of information flow as never before.

Over the years, this increasing accessibility and interactivity has resulted in an information revolution. The New Social Movement (NSM) activists have benefitted greatly from such dissemination of information. NSM activists consider 'identity as the means to transform society through cultural changes rather than specific kinds of legislation' (Langman 2013, 511). This is precisely how these FB-based diasporic communities are operating to bring about social change, by 'the transformation of identity [that] becomes the basis of subsequent social transformation' (510). Once people are given a basis for their political identity, which is very much defined by the culturally-situated cyber language used within FB groups, their awareness about a certain social issue is raised. This potentially equips them to become agents of socio-political change. In the case of diasporic FB groups, the language they speak – as listed under the Indian, Malaysian and Filipino diasporic FB groups – gives each group its identity, which subsequently encourages them to raise awareness of corrupt practices and bring about change in society. It is important to note here that social media's potential lies in bringing about real-life change over years and decades, and not immediate changes in policy decisions (Shirky 2011).

The FB group's efficiency in information delivery often makes it difficult to prevent information flows from reaching the people. The interactivity of this technology usually finds a way to ensure feedback. '[C]onnectivity is at the heart of' activism (Hawthorne and Klein 1999, 5) and through FB group discussions members feel empowered. The 'idle talk' they engage in acts as a social lubricant that binds like-minded users together. The subsequent formation of collectives can eventually become a political tool. The digital platforms help to pick up conversation threads and interweave them with similar voices engaged in ongoing interaction, at whatever time. This has eased the flow of information, making the tool accessible, giving a voice to all those who have access, and releasing users from the constrictions of a certain geographical space.

Scholars researching corruption 'allude to World Bank president Wolfensohn's "cancer of corruption" speech in 1996 as a defining moment in corruption studies' (Farrales 2005). International organisations like the World Bank and IMF found corruption to be a principal factor in 'sand[ing] the wheels of development', but this was not considered important enough to be dealt with on an urgent basis. Suddenly, however, with

Wolfensohn's very public statement that corruption was 'one of the greatest inhibiting forces to equitable development and to the combating of poverty', the issue of corruption was catapulted onto the world stage, with international organisations commissioning reports, both cross-national and country-specific, to investigate the causes and consequences of corruption – an effort that has been on-going but limited to elitist discussions until recently. I would argue that the advent of FB groups has made it easier for diasporic communities to voice grievances, and has extended the once-elitist deliberations to grassroots-level discussion, thus paving the way for inclusive development.

When we talk about what ails us, we use our culturally situated language. This is exactly what we see in these FB-based diasporic communities. 'Language makes us members of a community, providing us with the opportunity to share knowledge and experiences in a way no other species can' (Dunbar 1996). In this case, Dunbar talks about 'socio-linguistics', whereby the way we use words and pronounce them defines our social belonging. I argue for a socio-linguistic conception of cyber language as that which is used by each of these FB groups to facilitate interaction and camaraderie within the respective diasporic communities. Thus, the discussions of corruption were successfully raised at a grassroots level using a language every member, whether or not they were directly affected by an act of corruption, could relate to readily. The language these members use to communicate with each other not only determines the uniqueness of their community but also binds them together. Digital spaces such as FB groups can thus give birth to virtual communities that unite around civic responsibilities defined both by and beyond the nation.

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