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Intimate Publics: Intimacy and Politics of SNS in Manila

The Internet and its various forms of uptake are not only significant in their omnipresent shaping of contemporary life, they also provide insight into emerging parameters of the twenty-first century. No longer limited to developed and Anglophonic contexts, the Internet has grown to become a patchwork of diverse localities, communities and networks. Amongst the millions of Internet applications, sites, services and functions, one phenomenon is transforming modes of creativity, politics, collaboration and community like no other — Social Networking Systems (SNS).

Much of the literature to date has focus upon predominantly middle class youth in developed contexts, neglecting to explore the diverse ways in which intimacy and politics is being deployed in other locations. One such place is the Philippines. Known for its subversive and political usage of mobile technologies — from the jeepey to the mobile phone — Manila has been dubbed the texting (SMS, short messaging system) capital of the world. During the people power revolution of 1986 it was the mobile phone that helped coordinate and disseminate messages and actions leading to the demise of President Joseph Estrada. More recently, the Philippines has been dubbed ‘the social networking capital of the world,’ with 83 percent of Filipinos surveyed are members of a social network (Universal McCann report 2009). In addition, given the large diasporic community of Filipino female care workers abroad, the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has played a key role in maintaining contact with friends and family at home. With this in mind, what role can SNS play in extending older, and developing newer, forms of contact and connection? How is networked social media being deployed by Filipinos to maintain intimacy amongst friends and family? And how are SNS being used to develop political efficiency? Can we think of a personal as political in the context of the Philippines?

In this paper I focus upon a sample group of University of the Philippines (UP) students and their various usages of SNS in order to understand some of the ways in which SNS functions to maintain a sense of intimacy, community and politics in everyday life. This preliminary study is the beginning of a three-year cross-cultural research project that looks at the notion of ‘online communities’ in six locations in the Asia-Pacific region — Manila, Seoul, Singapore, Tokyo, Shanghai and Melbourne. This paper hopes to initiate research into the ways in which intimacy — and its various shades of publicness — and politics are married within the context of SNS usage in Manila. In short, a sample study of intimate publics.