The weakness of weak ties: personal media and social leadership in a Malaysian suburb

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**ABSTRACT**

This article draws from fieldwork in a Malaysian suburb to investigate whether personal media (email, laptops, blogs, mobile phones, etc.) are making any significant difference to local leadership practices. I argue that residential politics does not provide fertile ground for the growth of ‘networked individualism’ – the claim that contemporary social relations are being reconfigured around individuals (Wellman, Castells). Instead of egocentrism, leaders’ personal media practices sustain a sociocentric field of residential politics around ‘community’ issues such as waste disposal and petty crime. Leaders exploit the affordances of personal media (portability, ubiquity, personalisation, etc.) to derive strength from their weak ties (Granovetter) and further their public careers. Yet when operating within the field of residential politics they must align their personal media practices with the field’s egalitarian doxa and communitarian media.

**KEYWORDS** personal media, local leadership, networked individualism, field theory, Malaysia, suburbia

The proliferation of personal media (email, homepages, personal blogs, online profiles, mobile phones, iPods, netbooks, etc.) has attracted a great deal of journalistic and scholarly interest, most recently in connection to Barack Obama’s reported fondness for his BlackBerry¹. A number of scholars have linked the diffusion of personal media to the rise of the ‘network society’, and more specifically to the rise of ‘networked individualism’, i.e. the reconfiguration of modern sociality away from the place-based collectives that were dominant in previous eras (families, communities, associations) and towards a new pattern of sociality built around increasingly autonomous individuals (Castells 2001, Wellman 2001, 2002, Wellman et al 2003, Wesch 2008). The influential social theorist Manuel Castells writes:

> From very different perspectives, social scientists, such as Giddens, Putnam, Wellman, Beck, Carnoy, and myself, have emphasized the emergence of a new system of social relationships centered on the individual. After the transition from the predominance of primary relationships (embodied in families and communities) to secondary relationships (embodied in associations), the new, dominant pattern seems to be built on what could be called tertiary relationships, or what Wellman calls “personalized communities”, embodied in me-centered networks. It represents the privatization of sociability...The new pattern of sociability in our societies is characterized by networked individualism (Castells 2001: 128-129).

For Wellman (2002) personal media such as mobile phones allow individuals to communicate directly with other individuals regardless of location, thereby overcoming the constraints of earlier forms of place-to-place communication, namely landlines. Mobile phones, says Cameron (2006), have evolved rapidly from being...
mere telephony devices to becoming ‘portable, personal media hub[s]’ that enable a growing range of ‘personalised and customised communication, entertainment, relationship management and service functions’. Wellman et al (2003: 16) suggest that new digital technologies contribute to the rise of networked individualism through their ‘personalisation, wireless portability and ubiquitous connectivity’. More dramatically, Saffo (2007) claims that we are in the midst of a personal media ‘revolution’ analogous to the TV-centric mass media revolution of the 1950s. If watching television was a living room practice in which families consumed the products of a few major ‘players’, personal media practices are carried out everywhere by countless small players creating their own contents.

Other scholars, many of them anthropologists, are sceptical of these claims that new media technologies herald the advent of a global era of networked individualism (e.g. Agar et al 2002, Amit 2007, Green et al 2005, Hogan 2009, Horst 2008, Horst and Miller 2006, Knox et al 2006, Postill 2008, Riles 2000). Thus the communication scholar Marika Lüders (2008: 696), whilst conceding that the widespread adoption of personal media is bound to have important social and political consequences, argues that it is ‘naïve’ to seek to ‘identify any profound transformative message of personal media’. On the basis of empirical research in Norway she rejects any sharp distinction between personal and mass media. For example, Norwegians use email not only for interpersonal but also for mass communication, e.g. emailed newsletters. Moreover, adds Lüders, collaborative and group media such as group blogs or wikis are neither strictly personal nor mass media (2008: 698-699). Personal media can only be understood, therefore, as part of an increasingly complex and shifting communicative landscape. Laying a similar stress on complexity, the anthropologists Heather Horst and Daniel Miller follow Harper (2003) in rejecting the ‘fairly unreconstructed Durkheimian lament’ about the loss of ‘social capital’ that networked individualism theorists claim accompanies the reported rise of egocentric networking. Following ethnographic research on mobile phones in Jamaica, these authors call for more cross-cultural research that will show ‘how much more subtle the relationship between individuals and wider networks can be today and how much more complex their relationship has been in the past’ (Horst and Miller 2006: 81, see also Downey 2008, Horst 2008).

Along similar lines, Vered Amit (2007) encourages anthropologists not to jump on the network society ‘bandwagon’ and to reclaim instead the original 1950s promise of the notion of network as a device that allows researchers to follow individuals across enduring sets of social relations (groups, associations, organisations, etc.) (see also Knox et al 2006). Amit undertook research among Montreal-based consultants who frequently travel to developing countries. Borrowing Granovetter’s (1973) classic principle of ‘the strength of weak ties’ (the notion that friends of friends are more useful than close friends or family for certain goals such as finding a job or a partner), she argues that these professionals’ occupational networks are shaped through the dispersal of reputations and ‘episodic mobilisation of instrumental and frequently transient relationships’, i.e. through the mobilisation of weak ties (Amit 2007: 57). This author advocates an exploratory approach to networks that will not peg them to any particular methodology (Hannerz 1980) or a priori categories (e.g. ‘diaspora’), but stressing that conceptual clarity is essential (Amit 2002). For example, we should not conflate the notions of ‘personal network’ and ‘social group’:
Personal networks are not simply the means for the creation of organized communities. Such networks operate in their own right and on distinctive terms. They are ego-based, that is to say they arise through particular individuals’ efforts, experiences and history…This…is a framework of social linkage that requires perhaps the most intensive, self-conscious and constant efforts from its key protagonists, but which is also the most structurally ephemeral.

This is a very different form of organization than more enduring social groups whose basis for mobilization is institutional or communal. Such groups do not rely for their rationale or configuration on any one individual. They can thus survive, to a greater or lesser degree, shifts in personnel (Amit 2002: 22-23).

In this article, my main aim is to contribute to the present anthropological rethinking of networks under conditions of swift technological change. I do so through case studies of the personal media practices of local leaders in the Kuala Lumpur suburb of Subang Jaya (Malaysia). Like Horst, Miller, Amit and other anthropologists, I am sceptical of claims that we are moving towards a new global order built around the egocentred networks and personal media of individuals. If anything, the available evidence suggests that personal media are contributing, together with other media, to the ongoing diversification of sociocentric formations around the globe (online game worlds, peer groups, youth gangs, political cliques, professional fields, fan clubs, urban subcultures, activist networks, and so on) – not to the replacement of one single ‘dominant pattern of sociability’ by another (Castells 2001: 128-129). This is certainly the case in Subang Jaya, a suburb where personal media have coexisted with, and co-shaped, a myriad of sociocentric formations since the early 1990s. Building on field concepts from Bourdieu (1993, 1996) and the Manchester School of anthropology (Epstein 1958, Evens and Handelman 2006, Postill 2007, Turner 1974), I track the public trajectories and personal media practices of three local leaders as they operate across a number of social fields. This hybrid field/network analysis (cf. Nooy 2003, Moeran 2002, 2005) shows that local leaders’ personal media are often put to collectivist not individualist uses. It also supports Lüders’ contention (2008 and above) that personal media cannot be considered in isolation from either collective media or mass media. Far from promoting egocentrism in the suburb, personal media have been central to the emergence of a staunchly communitarian field of residential politics in which exhibiting the strength of one’s weak ties in public is actively discouraged.

The second aim of this article is more empirical: to add to the ethnographic record on digital media and local-level leadership, a question about which we still know very little (Coleman 2005). This is an area of research ripe for collaboration between two anthropological subfields that have yet to acknowledge their mutual existence, namely political anthropology and media anthropology. Anthropologists have long been fascinated by local leaders and their varied entanglements with media technologies and institutions as charismatic leaders, indigenous activists or media entrepreneurs (see Außerheide 1995, Barber 2006, Bernard 1974, Bilu and Ben-Ari 1992. Bob 2005, Bräuchler 2005, Dickey 1993, Gewertz and Errington 20nn, Goody 1987, Hinkelbein 2008, Hughes-Freeiland 2007, Johnson 2001, Landsman1987, Peterson, D.R. 2004, Peterson, M.A. 2003, Postill 2006, Reis 2008, Scherer 1988, Schulz 2006, Smith, 2006, Strauss 2007, Turner 2003, van de Port 2006, Warner 1959). However, most existing studies were undertaken before the proliferation of personal media and have not engaged with the debate around networked individualism that occupies us here.

Subang Jaya and USJ

Subang Jaya and its twin township, USJ, make up a largely middle-class, ethnic Chinese suburb of Kuala Lumpur, in Malaysia. Most residents arrived in this award-winning suburb in the 1990s hoping to find a green and safe environment in which to raise their nuclear families. Their plans were soon complicated, however, by a series of regional, national and local crises. In 1997 the collapse of Southeast Asia’s financial markets caused a sharp economic downturn in Malaysia after long years of robust growth. A deep political crisis ensued when the then deputy and finance minister, Anwar Ibrahim, was imprisoned without trial. This led to an explosion of pro-Anwar websites that Mahathir’s government was unable to defuse, having guaranteed foreign investors that the internet would remain free from governmental meddling.

It was precisely in 1997 that Subang Jaya’s municipal council (MPSJ) was established. Two years later, in 1999, the new council faced the first in a long series of challenges from residents’ groups when it raised local taxes by 240%. Jeff Ooi, one of the leading internet activists profiled below, described the conflict in these terms:

We were furious. But before we could take up the matter with the council, we needed to gather and compile supporting evidence. Using the Internet, we set up a residential database to compile data according to the type of houses, the assessment rates residents were paying, their contact numbers and so forth. Within two weeks, 50% of the community responded. The collective effort yielded a 20% reduction across the board. That was one of the milestones that proved how effective the Internet was.

This episode exemplifies the kind of ‘banal activism’ that has predominated in Subang Jaya and USJ ever since – an activism led by internet-savvy residents who use the rhetoric of ‘community’ to campaign on issues such as taxation, traffic congestion, waste disposal, school provision and local crime. These are issues that would seem mundane to the urban intelligentsia in Kuala Lumpur or to the young anti-globalisation activists in Barcelona studied by Juris (2008) but they are of crucial importance to suburban parents embarked on family-building projects (for other suburban examples, see Arnold et al 2008, Durington 2007, Hampton 2003, Hampton and Wellman 2003, Mesch and Levanon 2003).

The field of residential politics

Before profiling the three Subang Jaya leaders, I will sketch out a model of local politics and personal media. In the conclusion I suggest that this model could be used to study analogous processes of technological appropriation in similar suburbs around the globe. I have coined the phrase ‘field of residential politics’ to refer to that ‘total
field of social relations’ (Epstein 1958) in which various kinds of agents (politicians, councillors, businesspeople, journalists, residents, etc.) and social formations (parties, lobbies, cliques, factions, residents’ groups, mosques, etc.) compete and cooperate over matters of concern to local residents through a range of practices, ideals, and technologies.

As is typical of many modern localities, Subang Jaya’s field of residential politics is L-shaped, with the vertical axis representing the three-tiered system of government (local, state, and federal) and the horizontal axis representing the non-governmental sector of the field, a sector led by prominent residents and marked by the non-hierarchical, egalitarian ideology of ‘community’. These two sectors can be regarded as subfields with their own characteristic logics and dynamics, with leading residents struggling to assert their autonomy from the governmental subfield and elected politicians striving to demonstrate their tireless dedication to resolving local issues. Furthermore, each subfield has its own ‘fundamental law’ (Bourdieu 1993). That of the governmental subfield in Subang Jaya is the law of turun padang – a Malay phrase meaning ‘to go down to the ground’ that is frequently used to either praise or criticise the behaviour of politicians and councillors. A regular presence ‘on the ground’ is regarded by residents not as an end in itself but as the necessary precondition for understanding and solving local issues. For its part, the non-governmental subfield abides by the law of selfless volunteerism. To be well regarded within this horizontal subfield, local residents are expected to freely volunteer their time and labour in exchange for symbolic not financial rewards. No local leader, however charismatic, well-connected (Turner 1974) or technologically sophisticated, is above the laws of the field of residential politics.

It is solely by examining these dynamic relations and contrasting field logics, I propose, that we can understand the personal media practices of local leaders. From a field-theoretical perspective, local leaders are best described as leading practitioners within the field of residential politics (Postill forthcoming). This means that they need to demonstrate their skilled embodied abilities both in the field’s ‘stations’ (Giddens 1984) – the ‘stopping places’ where field agents interact on a regular basis – and in the field’s more volatile and irregular ‘arenas’, those field sites in which political actors are obliged to state publicly and unambiguously where they stand on an unresolved dispute (Turner 1974). In the present era both stations and arenas are becoming increasingly mediated through digital technologies, including personal media such as email, blogs, and mobile phones. In the technophilic and collectivist world of Subang Jaya’s residential politics, a leader who makes public use of the latest personal media will be well regarded but only if they can demonstrate that they are using their ‘digital personalia’ (cf. Gell 1986) to serve the common good.

To flesh out this model I turn now to the personal media practices of three Subang Jaya leaders, all three early adopters of technological innovations (see Rogers 1995). The first is the elected politician Lee Hwa Beng who uses his personal website, email, digital cameras and other personal media to document his indefatigable service to local residents in tandem with the pro-government press. The second is the earlier mentioned Jeff Ooi who started as a local internet activist but went on to achieve renown as a political blogger, international speaker and Member of Parliament, and yet must still abide by the law of selfless volunteerism when operating within Subang Jaya’s field of residential politics. Finally, the third profiled leader is Raymond Tan, a
neighbourhood watch activist whose personal media practices are again shaped by the
field’s communitarian ethos, as seen by his efforts to disassociate his business
activities from his ‘community’ work.

The proof of the padang

Lee Hwa Beng was born in 1954 and raised on an estate near Malacca where his
father worked as a rubber tapper. Money was scarce and Lee had to cycle to school
because his family could not afford the forty sen bus fare. Yet he persevered with his
studies and eventually earned professional qualifications as an accountant, setting up
his own accounting firm in Kelana Jaya, a district that borders Subang Jaya4. Lee rose
to local notoriety in the 1990s for leading a vigorous campaign to rid Subang Jaya of
rats – a campaign that earned him the friendly sobriquet of ‘Ratman’. In 1995 he
was elected state assemblyman for Subang Jaya with MCA, the ethnic Chinese
component of Barisan Nasional (BN), the country’s ruling coalition since
independence in 1957. An affable person with a reputation for being hardworking and
dedicated to his constituents, he was re-elected in 1999 and 2004 but lost his seat in
2008 to a young female opposition candidate amidst a nationwide wave of discontent
with BN that saw the ruling coalition lose its two-thirds majority and control of five
state assemblies (Singh 2009).

PHOTO 1 HERE (Lee Hwa Beng with the author)

Personal media technologies have been integral to Lee’s political practice from the
outset. In October 1995, when the World Wide Web was still a novelty even in the
global North, he launched his own personal website so as to ‘further enhance my
service to the community’, noting that this was ‘a revolutionary step’ to take for a
state assemblyman. Throughout his 13-year tenure Lee used his website both to
publicise his achievements and to interact with constituents and other field agents,
even allowing for dissenting voices. Thus, in January 2002 he posted an email from a
resident who chided him for not delivering on his promise of a Chinese school for
Subang Jaya. Thanking his constituent for his ‘kind words’, Lee explained that far
from having been idle, he had in fact held lengthy meetings with high-ranking
officials and politicians.

Therefore, everything is under control. It is better for me to show action than talk.
Residents like you will judge me by my actions and deeds and not by my words.

Thanks again.
Yours In Service,

Lee Hwa Beng
ADUN5 Subang Jaya

Lee made this very point again during a fundraising dinner organised by the USJ
Residents’ Association that I attended in December 2003, but adding on this occasion
a reference to residents’ own duties. Having thanked his hosts for a splendid meal, he
then entreated local residents to join his newly created volunteer police force. In effect, he was saying that the proof of the *padang* is not in the eating but in the doing.

Another personal medium recruited to Lee’s political groundwork was the digital camera. During his tenure Lee regularly used digital photography to document and publicise his local troubleshooting. For example, in October 2003 he inaugurated a guardhouse in a small residential area of USJ. He spoke glowingly in Malay and English about the residents’ hard work over the previous three to four years. The results, both physical (the guardhouse) and non-physical (a strong community spirit) were plain for all to see – and for all to *photograph*, he may have added. He then proceeded to ceremonially cut the ribbon and to pose for the press cameras in front of the guardhouse, after which he was interviewed by a young reporter locally regarded as an MCA mouthpiece ‘who always follows him around’. The mediated practice of documenting Lee’s groundwork was not restricted, though, to friendly press photographers and reporters. At other times it also involved his aides, local residents and even this anthropologist. On at least one occasion he presented a resident with an expensive digital camera which came, as the resident put it, ‘with strings attached’ for it was to be used to photograph Lee as he went about solving local issues. An ostensibly ‘personal’ medium was being recruited into a traditional patron-client arrangement (see Gomez and Jomo 1997).

In all of these cases, Lee was exploiting the specific affordances of photography to serve the *turun padang* imperative, notably its indexicality, that is, the direct physical bond that links a photographic image with its object (Knappett 2002). With these photographs, and across a range of media supports, Lee was providing documentary evidence not only of his constant ‘being there’ (Geertz 1988) but also of working towards solving local problems.

**From local cyberactivist to Penang MP**

I turn now to the personal media practices of a leading USJ resident: Jeff Ooi. At first sight Jeff Ooi’s life trajectory bears a strong resemblance to that of Lee Hwa Beng. Like Lee, Jeff was born in the mid-1950s and raised in a provincial ethnic Chinese household of modest means (his father was a lorry driver in the northern Malaysian state of Kedah). Similarly, despite these humble beginnings Jeff, too, managed to attain professional qualifications and a private-sector career whilst becoming a local leader in Subang Jaya and USJ. In Jeff’s case, the qualification was an MBA in international management that led to a career as an ICT consultant for a transnational advertising firm.

Although both are personal trajectories of social mobility and migration typical of the ‘new middle classes’ around the developing world’, on closer inspection there are notable differences as well. Whilst Lee is generally regarded as an affable mediator
and peacemaker, Jeff is renowned for his confrontational political style. Moreover, as an MCA politician Lee has always represented the political establishment, whereas Jeff’s public persona is that of a proudly independent community activist and blogger who in 2008 became a Member of Parliament (MP) with the opposition’s Democratic Action Party (DAP). Despite being only two years Lee’s junior, in the oppositional imaginary Jeff belongs to a new ‘internet generation’ of young talented Malaysians whose mission is to lead the nation towards a democratic Knowledge Society and away from the ruling coalition’s bankrupt racial politics - a persona that Jeff himself has assiduously cultivated.

Jeff first caught the public eye in Subang Jaya and USJ in 1999 as a leading figure in the earlier mentioned campaign against a steep rise in local taxes. Following the success of this mobilisation, and having failed to set up a local e-business venture in the harsh post-1997 economic climate, he turned to local e-community building. This newfound interest materialised in the local web portal USJ.com.my, a lively online environment founded in 1999 that has continued to thrive to this day. The portal has two main areas: a local forum and a local news site. At the time of writing (March 2009) the forum boasts some 21,000 discussion threads, 325,000 posts and 26,000 registered members. Jeff had originally intended the forum to revolve around issues of local governance, but he finally accepted the majority view that ‘small talk’ should share pride of place with more weighty issues. As a result, local residents use the forum to discuss all manner of topics, from the pedestrian to the lofty, from local and national to world politics, from sports and travel to eating out. A hard core of enthusiasts even meet offline on a regular basis over a cup of teh tarik, a tea beverage popular in Peninsular Malaysia.

The portal’s news site (usjXpress) was another of Jeff’s local innovations. In theory it is run by an editorial team of volunteers trained in 1999 by a local Star journalist, the late Harpajan Singh, but in actual practice it has always been Jeff’s preserve. The investigative nature and critical – sometimes acerbic – tone of Jeff’s editorials did not endear him to the municipal president, Ahmad Fuad (1997-2003), who often found himself on the receiving end of Jeff’s sharp prose. When I first met Jeff in May 2003, he had just found a more prominent platform for his citizen journalism: political blogging on national rather than local issues. Four months earlier, in January 2003, he had launched the blog Screenshots under the motto “Thinking Aloud, Thinking Allowed”. Screenshots swiftly rose to national acclaim in reformist circles for its bold denouncing of poor governance and corruption in Malaysia’s corridors of corporate and governmental power. Locally, however, fellow activists were concerned that Jeff’s blogging would take time away from his grassroots work in the suburb. These fears were to prove well founded in subsequent years.

One key to the success of Screenshots was Jeff’s growing network of sources across a range of powerful fields (journalists, lawyers, politicians, internet activists, CEOs, etc.). These ‘little birds’, as Jeff calls them, leak him information on the foul play of the powerful that mainstream news media will not publish. Often the mainstream media themselves have come under Jeff’s scrutiny. For instance, in June 2004 a New Straits Times editor emailed Jeff to advise him that their editor-in-chief had blocked access to Screenshots from their premises. Jeff duly published extracts from this email taking care to protect the identity of his little bird, thus embarrassing the senior journalist in question.
Jeff’s blogging freedom was severely tried in October 2004 when an anonymous *Screenshots* poster made some remarks that were deemed by senior government and media figures to be insulting to Islam. Jeff was questioned by the police and there were concerns in pro-democracy circles that he could be arrested without trial under Malaysia’s draconian Internal Security Act (ISA). His case was taken up by the Paris-based organisation *Reporters sans frontières* who in 2005 gave *Screenshots* the Freedom Blog Award for Asia. With this international backing in place, Jeff continued to blog about highly sensitive issues, such as the April 2006 conflict that pitted Malaysia against Singapore over the causeway connecting the two countries (George 2007).

Jeff still reports on Subang Jaya via the USJ.com.my portal (see food court campaign below) but these interventions are now few and far between owing to his many other commitments. These include frequent engagements as an invited speaker on new media and citizen journalism at prestigious venues such as Reuters in London, the World Summit of the Information Society in Tunisia, and the Harvard Law School in Massachusetts. The marked contrast in how news of his Harvard invitation was received in the fields of political blogging and residential politics is instructive. Thus an admirer and fellow Malaysian blogger reported that at Harvard Jeff had ‘networked with some of the world’s leading bloggers’. He then quoted Jeff approvingly: “I do these international talks to cover my ass,” he says. "If I ever get detained or arrested, I know it’ll be on CNN”.

However, when Jeff mentioned his Harvard invitation on his own USJ.com.my forum he provoked the following reaction:

> usj.com.my is a community website (unless i am wrong). It is NOT a primary site as intellectual forum for show offs, wannabes and what nots. [...] I do not give a flying banana about mit, oxford or harvard talk. I have that already in the office and in any half decent pubs.

What are we to make of these diametrically opposed reactions to the same news? Is the second reaction merely an outburst of ‘flaming’ from an irate individual who is breaching the forum’s netiquette? This would be an unsatisfactory explanation. From a field-theoretical perspective, what is interesting about these contrasting reactions to Jeff’s Harvard talk is what they reveal about the contrasting logics of two different fields of practice – logics that social leaders ignore at their own peril. In Malaysia’s emergent field of political blogging, showing off one’s ‘strength of weak ties’ (Granovetter 1973), i.e. a robust personal portfolio of connections, is not only acceptable, in fact it is seen as offering some measure of protection against an authoritarian government averse to negative publicity. By contrast, such bragging is anathema in Subang Jaya’s field of residential politics where, as said earlier, a staunch egalitarianism pervades the public discourse.

In 2007 Jeff was courted by the opposition’s Democratic Action Party (DAP) and finally joined their ranks in June. Contesting in the 2008 general elections as a DAP candidate for a seat in Jelutong, in the northern state of Penang, he won by a majority margin and became a Member of Parliament. He was also DAP’s national e-campaign director in the run-up to the elections. Although he did not blog frequently during the campaign, it is safe to assume that his reputation as Malaysia’s top political blogger contributed to this electoral success.
I turn now to the third and final profile, that of Raymond Tan, a USJ neighbourhood watch activist whose personal media practices are as shaped by the collectivist logic of the field of residential politics as those of Lee Hwa Beng and Jeff Ooi.

The crimewatcher

Raymond Tan was born in 1960, the fourth of ten siblings and the only one to be schooled in English rather than Mandarin, a language that he hopes to learn on retiring so as to study his own faith, Taoism. With an engineering background, he worked in the oil and gas industry for 15 years. ‘Sick and tired’ of political intrigues in the corporate world, he left the industry in 2002. In recent years he has become involved in multilevel marketing (see below), a line of business that he regards as ‘a perfect platform to gain control of my own time if I am to be able to continuously participate effectively in community issues’ 14. He is married with two sons and lives in the leafy precinct of USJ 18.

Soon after arriving in USJ in 1997, Raymond had three pairs of shoes stolen within a single month. When his new neighbours pointed out that petty theft was common in the area, Raymond suggested that they set up a rukun tetangga, the Malaysian equivalent of a neighbourhood watch scheme. His ‘independent-minded’ neighbours were reluctant, though, to join a government scheme that is ‘often abused for political interests’. Moreover, the scheme had lain dormant for many years and was widely seen as ineffectual. So Raymond turned to the Web for inspiration and found neighbourhood watch schemes in Britain, America and Australia to emulate: 'Everything was the same as rukun tetangga but without the government. We just repackaged it'.

PHOTO 3 HERE. Raymond Tan

In 1999 Raymond formed a neighbourhood watch committee for USJ 18. Each committee member was entrusted with the task of organising night patrols for a single street in the precinct. In its early 2000s heyday, the scheme boasted 330 volunteer patrollers guarding the precinct's 536 houses. Patrollers walked the streets in pairs carrying batons and mobile phones and were instructed to report any suspicious activity to the police (Postill 2008). This regular surveillance practice was strengthened by a programme of local events led by Raymond and aimed at fostering good neighbourly relations.

In May 2001 Raymond's scheme received federal funding under the umbrella of DAGS, a programme designed to build new e-communities across Malaysia. The main aim of the generous seed grant of RM 1.124 million (circa US $ 300,000) was to enable Raymond and other volunteers to develop the internet aspects of the scheme, including a professionally built web portal and ICT training for local residents. This was all part of an ambitious pilot project named SJ2005 which sought to create a hi-
The sudden influx of substantial federal funds into a small corner of Subang Jaya's field of residential politics sent shockwaves across the field. Two parties felt particularly aggrieved: the then municipal president, Ahmad Fuad, who protested that public monies were being lavished on a small neighbourhood project rather than on the local council, and Jeff Ooi who had hoped that his local portal, USJ.com.my, would be an integral part of SJ2005 but now felt it had been sidelined. In addition, many activists thought that Raymond's acceptance of government monies had compromised his independence and made him, to quote an outside observer, 'a caged monkey'.

At any rate, Raymond became the founder and manager of Nwatch.net.my, a web portal devoted to issues of local crime and security. In February 2004 Raymond took me through his online surveillance routines, which at the time he carried out religiously from midnight till around 1 a.m. from his home computer. He started by running the anti-spam application Mailwasher, downloading email from his mailserver and updating his bird flu watch data. He then searched through Malaysia's online news media for crime news and advice, emailing himself a link on crime prevention from the *New Straits Times* for future reference. One of his regular tasks is to warn fellow residents of any urban legends, hoaxes and scams that may be circulating through local lists or web forums. Some extortionists 'groom you first [online] and then fly you over to Nigeria'. In addition to this surveillance practice, Raymond uses local mailing lists to send collective seasonal greetings to other local leaders and residents during major celebrations such as Christmas or Chinese New Year.

Raymond puts his personal media (his PC, software, email, mobile devices, etc.) to collective uses by aligning his internet practices with a central concern of local residents: the fear of crime. He achieves this alignment through skilled, embodied, 'seemingly effortless' practices (Moores 2005:23) of neighbourhood surveillance and conviviality, both onscreen and face-to-face. As Raymond is only too aware, crime is a 'galvanising issue' (Melucci 1996, Venkatesh 2003) that transcends divides of race, religion and ideology and can bring together otherwise very different people around a common cause. Alas these leadership activities require time and dedication, and by 2003 other volunteers were privately expressing their concern that Raymond’s growing business activities were hampering his grassroots work.

Perhaps to put paid to rumours about his wavering grassroots commitment, in 2004 Raymond led a successful campaign against the building of a food court on land earmarked for the construction of a police station. Mobilising his vast set of ties across the field of residential politics and using a range of internet and mobile technologies (email, listservs, web forums, mobile phones, etc.) he and his associates swiftly rallied local residents at the construction site in full view of Malaysia’s mass media. Following this mobilisation the residents were given official guarantees that a police station would be built on the site. The campaign was spearheaded not by that ghostly fiction known as ‘the community’ but rather by a small action committee.
drawn from Raymond’s set of local contacts. This ad-hoc committee can be described as an ‘action-set’, that is, a set of people who are mobilised to achieve a specified goal only to disperse as soon as this goal is attained or abandoned (Mayer 1966, Turner 1974). The work of the action-set was aided by Jeff Ooi’s citizen journalism which contributed to the campaign’s mass media visibility. Raymond emerged from the campaign not as the caged monkey of activist lore but rather as a formidable field broker with the ability to mobilise local residents at very short notice.

Despite these episodic efforts, by 2005 other crime-prevention leaders had emerged in Subang Jaya alongside Raymond. Thus in February 2005 it was other activists who pioneered the suburb’s new ‘community SMS alert service’18. It was during this period that Raymond became committed to multilevel marketing, described by Sparks and Schenk (2001: 849) as ‘networks of member distributors whose earnings come both from selling products and recruiting new members’. At present he is a distributor with USANA Health Sciences, a US-based company that sells personal care and nutritional products. In a 13 December 2008 personal blog entry, Raymond writes about a recent trip to the Philippines, a new market for USANA, and invites prospective business partners in that country to contact him via email. In addition to his personal blog and email, he also makes frequent use of websites, instant messaging, internet telephony (Skype) and mobile telephony for both business and leisure pursuits – a panoply of interpersonal technologies that he lists in his email signature so as to offer actual and potential contacts a range of options through which to reach him.

Raymond has taken pains to keep his multilevel marketing and residential activism strictly apart. Thus when he started recruiting distributors in Subang Jaya and USJ he was concerned that he may be seen as taking unfair advantage of his high profile as a grassroots leader for personal financial gain: ‘I don’t want to be seen to abuse my platform’, he told me. For this reason he is always careful not to entangle the two strands of practice when interacting with fellow residents either online or offline. We witness here again at work, as we saw in Jeff Ooi’s Harvard incident, the fundamental field law of selfless volunteerism: whilst pursuing one’s self-interest through a range of social ties and personal media is perfectly acceptable within the field of multilevel marketing (indeed it is the field’s very *raison d’etre*), the opposite is true in the ‘inverted economy’ (Bourdieu 1996) of the field of residential politics where one’s social and technological capital must serve the common good.

The weakness of weak ties

To recapitulate, all three leaders have exploited very effectively the technical affordances of personal media (interactivity, portability, personalisation, etc.) to pursue their public ambitions. Yet we cannot regard their personal media in isolation from collective and mass media (see Lüders 2008 and above). For instance, we saw how Raymond Tan sent himself an email with a newspaper article’s URL as an aide memoire. He did this with a view to sharing helpful information on crime prevention with fellow residents via collective outlets such as his own crimewatch portal or local mailing lists. Within a single, effortless routine action he enlisted three distinctive types of media – personal, collective and mass media – to a communitarian goal. Likewise, when the politician Lee Hwa Beng had his photograph taken by a loyal supporter during local events, the assumption was that the pictures may eventually
surface on any number of digital platforms along the personal-group-mass media continuum.

We also saw how all three leaders have used personal media to create, maintain and mobilise a range of weak ties across Subang Jaya’s field of residential politics and beyond. Weak ties were in fact essential to the restructuring of the field of residential politics from the late 1990s, when these leaders and a few others, along with an army of followers, pioneered a series of local innovations around pressing issues affecting residents, such as local taxation, crime, poor governance and ethnic relations. These innovations included news groups, web forums, neighbourhood watch schemes, residents’ committees and sports tournaments. Thus in 1999 Jeff Ooi used personal media such as email and mobile phones (as well as group and mass media) to mobilise the residents against the council over a steep rise in local taxes. This led to the creation of the local web portal USJ.com.my which soon became a key site of suburban sociality and residential politics. Subsequently, from 2003, Jeff gathered a flock of ‘little birds’ or sources (a special subset of weak ties) around his personal blog Screenshots and went on to become Malaysia’s leading political blogger.

Similarly, from 1999 Raymond Tan has used personal media to cultivate useful weak ties under the ecumenical theme of crime, ties that reach across specialist (sub)fields of practice such as residential politics, party politics, local government, policing and journalism. In 2004 he successfully mobilised these ties via personal and other media to campaign against the building of a food court on land reserved for a police station. Meanwhile he used personal media (email, mobile phones, instant messaging, internet telephony, etc.) to develop new weak ties in the field of multilevel marketing, both in Malaysia and abroad.

The hybrid field/network analysis also highlighted, however, a key characteristic of weak ties overlooked in previous studies which have emphasised, with Granovetter, the usefulness of such ties (e.g. when seeking employment or business partners). As we saw with Raymond’s multilevel marketing efforts and Jeff’s Harvard incident, certain kinds of weak ties in certain fields of practice must be handled with care lest they become a liability. The problem lies not so much with the weak ties in themselves but with their public management across social fields. As far as regular practitioners in the field of residential politics are concerned, local leaders are welcome to have as rich a set of weak ties as they please so long as they do not use them to the detriment of ‘the community’. In a media-rich locale such as Subang Jaya, leaders must learn how to manage the public (in)visibility of their weak ties, mobilising certain sets of weak ties for some purposes, demobilising them for others. This management often involves the deft articulation of personal, collective and mass media across social fields that exhibit very different logics, e.g. the fields of party politics, policing and local government. Seen from this perspective, the importance of cross-field issues such as crime becomes even more apparent. These galvanising issues allow leaders such as Raymond or Lee to align entire regions of their personal networks and a range of personal media with the enduring concerns of both specialist practitioners and ‘the general public’.

It will be recalled that Amit (2002) regards a personal network as that ‘framework of social linkage that requires perhaps the most intensive, self-conscious and constant efforts from its key protagonists, but which is also the most structurally ephemeral’.
Personal networks are far more vulnerable than social groups and organisations to the vagaries of the life course (illness, migration, employment, divorce, etc.) and to historical changes in the wider cultural space in which the agent’s life unfolds (e.g. regime changes, economic crises, civil strife). Although personal media can somewhat mitigate or cushion the effects of major life changes (e.g. by allowing a migrant to remain in contact with her family, but see Miller 2007) they cannot alter the irreversibility of biological time or make a personal network sustainable beyond ego’s biological death. The implications of these inherent constraints of personal networks for the study of personal media and local politics are clearly instantiated in the three profiles above. For a local leader, remaining in contact with local allies and supporters via personal media cannot be a substitute for being regularly co-present ‘on the ground’ tackling local issues (Coleman 2005). Thus Jeff Ooi’s new post as an MP in the northern state of Penang and Raymond’s commitment to opening up the Philippine market cannot but reduce their availability for leadership in Subang Jaya. Another example is the political earthquake that shook Malaysia in 2008 which benefitted Jeff the political candidate but not Jeff the local activist, while ousting Lee Hwa Beng despite his sustained groundwork over the years.

Conclusion

The combination of a field and network approach to the personal media practices of local leaders in Subang Jaya-USJ has revealed practices to be inextricable from the social fields in which they take place. Whilst personal media were integral to the restructuring of the field of residential politics in the suburb from the latter part of the 1990s, no individual leader (regardless of their personal charisma, social capital or technical sophistication) was ever above the sociocentric laws of the field – not even the remarkable political innovators profiled here. In sum, Subang Jaya’s field of residential politics is not fertile ground for the growth of networked individualism.

The analysis was framed not by a vaguely defined ‘local community’ but rather with reference to a dynamic field of residential politics. I define such a field as an L-shaped domain of practice in which variously positioned human agents compete and cooperate over local issues through a range of practices and technologies, including personal media. Along the vertical or governmental axis, elected leaders such as Lee Hwa Beng have no choice but to put their personal media at the service of their constituents by ceaselessly going ‘down to the ground’ (turun padang) in order to identify and resolve local issues. In stark contrast to Wellman’s and Castell’s ‘me-centred’ model of networked individualism, Lee’s political motto and personal media signature is ‘Yours in service’. Meanwhile, along the horizontal or non-governmental field axis, leaders such as Raymond or Jeff cannot but align their personal media practices with the prevailing collectivist doxa and communitarian media that they themselves were pivotal in creating. As Victor Turner (1974) argued for the failed Mexican revolutionary Miguel Hidalgo, whilst charismatic leaders can mobilise ties from the various fields of practice in which they are active (in Hidalgo’s case, across fields as disparate as indigenous cash-cropping, the Catholic church, the freemasons and the provincial intelligentsia), the resulting action-set cannot be sustained for long, for it will disperse as soon as the common goal is achieved or abandoned (here when Hidalgo was captured and put to death by the Spanish). In the contemporary world personal media can certainly contribute to the swift mobilisation and micro-coordination of weak ties for collective action – the ‘smart mobs’ phenomenon
Further comparative research into personal media and local leadership is needed to test and extend the ideas presented here. The following main propositions could be tested in other middle-class suburbs across Southeast Asia and elsewhere (e.g. Arnold et al 2008, Durington 2007, Hampton 2003, Hampton and Wellman 2003, Mesch and Levanon 2003). First, we can anticipate that councillors, politicians and leading residents will use personal media for banal activism in conjunction with collective media (e.g. mailing lists, web forums, intranets, group blogs, social network sites) and, less frequently, mass media. This form of activism springs from the universal middle-class imperative to collectively create and maintain a local environment conducive to family building. As the old proverb goes, ‘It takes a whole village to raise a child’. Both established and aspiring local leaders will put their personal media to work for the communitarian ‘interest in disinterestedness’ (Bourdieu 1996) that characterises suburban fields of residential politics. Second, local leaders can be regarded as leading practitioners within the field of residential politics; that is, practitioners who are skilled at putting their social ties, personal media and other resources to work both within the field’s regular stations (residents’ committees, MP surgeries, town hall meetings, web forum threads, Twitter updates) as well as its more volatile arenas – those sites in which the field’s contradictions and underlying tensions will at times surface in a dynamic assemblage of people, issues, and technologies. Third, all personal media practices, including those of local leaders, are shaped by the vagaries of the life course and collective history. Some field positions, however, are more prone to conflict and turbulence than others, particularly those in which a leader must reconcile the conflicting logics of the vertical and horizontal subfields (see Arnold et al 2008), e.g. a leading resident who is both a community activist and the loyal client of a political candidate.

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The weakness of weak ties – photos

Photo 1. The proof of the padang. The author with the Subang Jaya politician Lee Hwa Beng. He is holding a photograph that Lee has just printed of the two of them with his mini photo printer (a personal medium) during a youth basketball tournament launched by Lee to foster better ethnic relations in the suburb.
Photo 2. The local cyberactivist Jeff Ooi at a residents’ association dinner held in USJ in December 2003 (see above). He was already a leading political blogger in Malaysia, a practice he took up in January 2003.
Photo 3. The neighbourhood watch activist and multilevel marketing distributor, Raymond Tan, in a recent photograph. Source: courtesy of Raymond Tan.

Notes
1 See the Guardian Online, 21 January 2009 http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/21/barack-obama-blackberry-national-security
2 http://thestar.com.my/special/online/usjweb/default.htm#Mobilizing%20networks
3 Personal communication from Alexander T. Smith (22 May 2006) who independently coined the term ‘banal activism’ after anthropological fieldwork among Conservative Party activists in Scotland.
4 http://hwabeng.org.my/node/1176
5 ADUN (Ahli Dewan Undangan Negeri) is the Malay acronym for state assemblyman.
6 Lee used the Malay term kampong (village).
8 It is easy to forget that Jeff was an active member of the ruling coalition’s Gerakan party from 2000 to 2007, before joining the DAP in June 2007.
9 For a similar rhetoric in the Philippines, see Rafael (2003) http://parliament.jeffooi.com/?page_id=2
11 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeff_Ooi
12 Julian Hopkins (personal communication, 22 December 2007)
13 Personal communication (11 March 2009)
14 This is not the place for an evaluation of this project (for more information on SJ2005 see Postill in press).
15 The implicit (or doxic) assumption is that most local residents are law-abiding, middle-class homeowners, and that the threat to their wellbeing is likely to come from low-income outsiders, especially from foreign immigrants. When I asked another crimewatcher whether he thought the scheme may be helping to perpetuate social inequality, he seemed surprised at the question, but replied that they could not be expected to solve all social ills and that their remit was exclusively crime; there were already dedicated government agencies aimed at eradicating poverty.
17 Namely Robert Chan, Christopher “Orchi” Ng and PC Yeoh, see http://www.jeffooi.com/2006/10/crime_alerts_the_usjsubang_jay.php
18 Cf. Barendregt and Pertierra (2008) on how the dead in Indonesia and the Philippines may at times communicate with the living through mobile phones.