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BLOGGING AND DEMOCRACY: BLOGS IN MALAYSIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how socio-political blogs contribute to the development of democracy in Malaysia. It suggests that blogs perform three main functions, which help make a democracy more meaningful: *blogs as fifth estate*, *blogs as networks*, and *blogs as platform for expression*. First, blogs function as the *fifth estate* performing checks-and-balances over the government. This function is expressed by blogs' role in the dissemination of information, providing alternative perspectives that challenge the dominant frame, and setting of news agenda. The second function of *blogs* is that they perform *as networks*. This is linked to the social-networking aspect of the blogosphere both online and offline. Blogs also have the potential to act as mobilizing agents. The mobilizing capability of blogs facilitated the mass street protests, which took place in late-2007 and early-2008 in Malaysia. Thirdly, blogs function as a platform where users can *express* themselves. The significance of this function becomes more apparent in countries with strict media control such as Malaysia. Blogging allows users to directly publish their thoughts, unfiltered and uncensored, by circumventing conventional mechanisms of control. It is a platform that is nearly cost-free and easy-to-use. Blogs also act as a training ground for self-expression not just for the bloggers but for readers of the blogs as well. The three functions are not mutually exclusive but are merely viewed as having enough unique qualities to be differentiated from one another. Some features do overlap, for example, the mobilization of people to participate in mass rallies could not have happened without the dissemination of the news about the rallies, and readers would have very little to comment on if the information of the rallies was not posted by the bloggers after they had taken place. This study complements existing research on mass media and democratic movement.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACA	Anti Corruption Agency
ACCIM	Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry
Aliran	Aliran Kesedaran Negara
All-Blogs	National Alliance of Bloggers (also NAB)
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASLI	Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute
BERSIH	The Coalition for Clean and Fair Election
CAT	Committee of Chinese Organisations Against the MCA Takeover of Nanyang Press
CIJ	Centre for Independent Journalism
CPI	Centre for Policy Initiatives
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalist
DAP	Democratic Action Party
DEMA	Malaysia Youth and Students Democratic Movement
EWC	Energy, Water & Communication (Ministry)
FECAM	Federation of Chinese Associations in Malaysia
HAKAM	National Human Rights Society
HINDRAF	Hindu Rights Action Force
IAMD	Information Analysis & Management Division in the Ministry of Information
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISA	Internal Security Act
KeADILan	People's Justice Party
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MEASAT	Malaysia East Asia Satellite
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MOI	Ministry of Information
MRCB	Malaysian Resources Corporation Berhad
MSC	Multimedia Super Corridor
NAB	National Alliance of Bloggers (also *All-Blogs*)
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NSTP	New Straits Times Press
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Islamic Party of Malaysia)
PAP	People's Action Party
PPP	People's Progressive Party
PPPA	Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984
REFSA	Research for Social Advancement
RSF	Reporters Without Borders
RTM	Radio Televisyen Malaysia (Malaysian state broadcaster)
SIS	Sister in Islam
SUARAM	Suara Rakyat Malaysia

SUHAKAM	**Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Malaysia (Malaysia Human Rights Commission)**
SSIG	**South-south Information Gateway**
UMNO	**United Malays National Organisation**
WAMI	**Writer Alliance for Media Independence**

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INTRODUCTION

1.1.   8 March 2008: Malaysia's 12th General Election

8,162,320 Malaysians cast their votes on 8 March 2008 in the country's 12th General Election[1].

The ruling party, *Barisan Nasional* (BN)[2], a coalition of 14 largely ethnic-based political parties

was expected to win the election as the party had done in the past eleven general elections since

the country's independence in 1957. However, events on the ground were not stacking up in favor

of the BN[3]. First, the judiciary system came under intense scrutiny when the Opposition party[4]

revealed a grainy video clip of a senior lawyer, V.K. Lingam, allegedly trying to fix the

appointments of "friendly" judges (Anand, 2007, p. 1). This incident only further eroded the

public's confidence in the judiciary system which has already been criticized as being too aligned

with the ruling party. The public also witnessed a succession of massive street protests taking

place around the country —the likes of which had not been seen in the country since the late

1990s in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis and the sacking of popular Deputy Prime

Minister, Anwar Ibrahim. The street protests were organized by various groups with different

agendas. The largest of these, which took place on 10 November 2007 was organized by the

Coalition for Clean and Fair Election or *BERSIH* (meaning "clean"), a group calling for a fairer

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[1] Out of 10,740,228 eligible voters and excluding spoilt votes.
[2] *Barisan Nasional*, *Barisan* or BN are used interchangeably throughout this paper
[3] See Appendix A for a chronology of major socio-political events in the country from 2006 to 2009.
[4] The so-called *Lingam Tape* was revealed by *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR or People's Justice Party)
headed by former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim.

electoral process. The Opposition has consistently argued that the electoral process is rigged to favor the incumbent which has been one of the reasons for the BN's continuous electoral victory. The authorities fired tear gas and chemical-laced water cannons to disperse the 40,000 people who took part in the *BERSIH* Rally. Images of demonstrators with eyes reddened from the chemicals, coughing, screaming, and running for safety[5] flooded the Internet especially in the Malaysian blogosphere. It brought to light a side of the Government which the public had not seen in nearly a decade. Then Information Minister, Zainuddin Maidin went on an interview via telephone on *Al Jazeera English* channel to explain the Government's side of the story. However, the Information Minister's incoherent responses compounded by a bad telephone connection and his poor command of the English language, which became a target of ridicule in the blogosphere, only served to worsen the BN's image. All of these incidents were happening in addition to the deepening public dissatisfactions caused by the rising fuel prices in the country[6], high profile cases of clampdowns on vocal critics of the Government including several socio-political bloggers, and even a crass handling of an idiosyncratic *YouTube* video parody of the national anthem made by a student[7]. The cumulative effect of these actions have made the BN seemed out of touch with the people and simply doing anything it could to hold on to power.

Yet, despite all these negativities, the BN, with its deeply entrenched political machinery that is connected to every economic, education, welfare, and mass media system in the country was expected to win the election even by the Opposition party's estimate. And indeed the *Barisan*

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[5]Some of these images were captured and broadcasted by Al Jazeera English Network, the Qatar-based news network which has regional offices in Washington D.C, London, and Kuala Lumpur.

[6] Malaysia is a producer and net-exporter of petroleum and provides subsidies which make the domestic gas prices lower than its neighbors. Yet the global fuel price hike in 2007-08 had put tremendous financial burden on the Government to increase fuel prices to the dissatisfaction of ordinary Malaysians.

[7] A Chinese-Malaysian college student based in Taiwan made a parody of the national anthem which also poked fun at Islam and posted it on the video-sharing website, *YouTube*. The video-clip was initially not taken seriously by the local Chinese language media and the Chinese community until the matter was brought up in the Parliament by the Malay-based party, United Malays National Organization (UMNO).

Nasional did win the election and retain control of the Government. The leader of the coalition, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was sworn in, for his second term, the next day as the fifth Prime Minister of Malaysia at the *Istana Negara* (Royal Palace), by the King, Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin[8] with all the pomp and grandeur as in all the years past. Nevertheless, things were decidedly different this year and Badawi was sworn in under very different circumstances

While the BN did manage to retain power in the 12th General Election, it suffered an unprecedented setback. The BN had lost its long-held two-thirds super majority in the federal parliament. Indeed, "anything less than a two-thirds majority in the parliament is considered a debacle" (Weiss, 2008b) considering the tremendous influence the Barisan wields. At the very least, without the two-thirds majority, the BN could no longer amend the Federal Constitution without a proper debate, as it has done over 40 times since 1957 (Weiss, 2008b).This has only happened once before during the 1969 election. However that set-back was temporary for the *Barisan*. A bloody racial riot broke out following the election, resulting in a state of emergency being declared and the results of election nullified. The set-back this time was permanent.

The BN only won a total of 140 seats, while the Opposition won the other 82 out of 222 parliamentary seats—giving the BN a 63 percent simple majority (see Figure 1). This is a sharp contrast to the 2004 General Election, when the first-term Badawi swept the electoral map capturing 91 percent of the parliamentary seats. Back in 2004, Badawi was riding on a wave of optimism of a new administration after 22 years under former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad

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[8] The current King's full title is His Majesty *Seri Paduka Baginda Yang di-Pertuan Agong Sultan* Mizan Zainal Abidin. The office of the King itself is not hereditary and is rotated every five years amongst the nine hereditary Sultans. Malaysia practices a system of government based on Constitutional Monarchy and Parliamentary Democracy at two levels, Federal and State levels. At the Federal level the head of State is the King and the head of government is the Prime Minister. At the state level the head (Ruler) of State is the *Sultan*, *Raja*, or *Yang di-Pertuan Besar* and the *Yang di-Pertua Negeri* in the State where there are no Rulers: the Chief Ministers (*Menteri Besar/Ketua Menteri*) are the heads of state government.

and also on Badawi's image of "Mr. Clean". Badawi with his Islamic credentials and consultative approach was a welcomed change from the strong-willed and often combative Mahathir Mohamad. However, in 2008 those traits were turned against him when corruption scandals and charges of favoritism, especially in regards to his son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin, tarnished his "Mr.Clean" image and his consultative approach was viewed as being lethargic and indecisive. Photos of Badawi falling asleep in the parliament widely circulated in the blogosphere only reinforced that negative image. These photos from the Internet somehow even made it to the *kampung*s[9] where Internet connection is poor or non-existent.

Figure 1: Number of Parliamentary Seats Won by *Barisan Nasional* and the Opposition* (1995-2008)
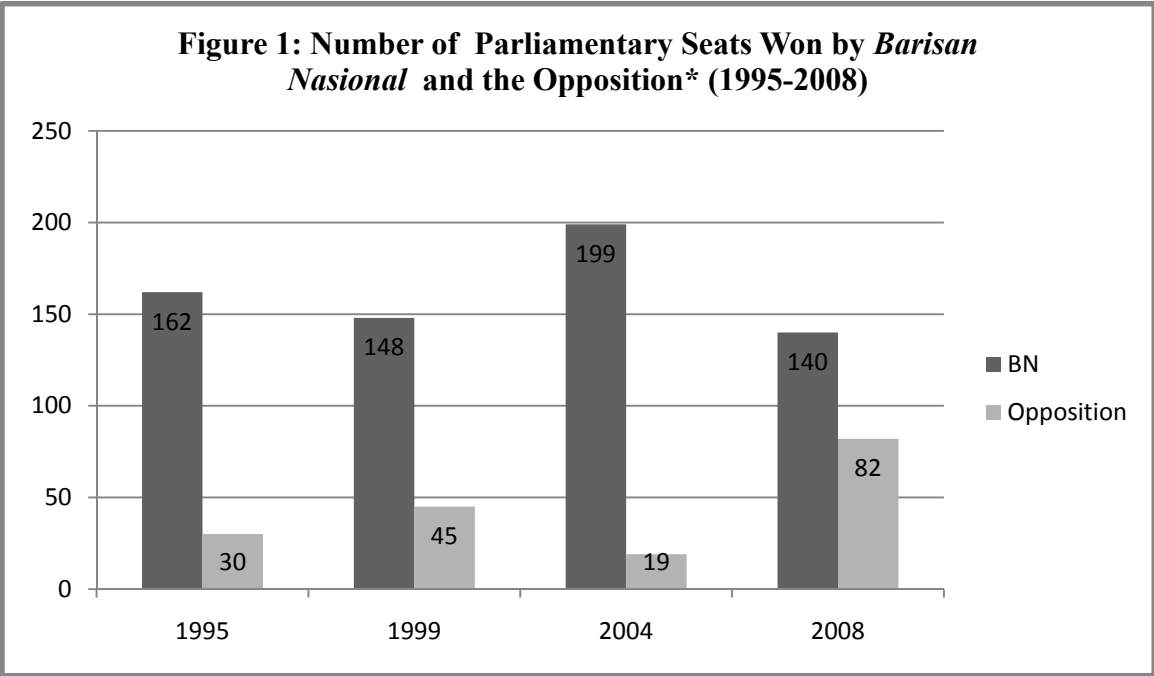
* The composition of the Opposition changes in different election years. See Table 1.

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[9] *Kampung* is the Malay word of village.

The 2008 Election was truly BN's worst performance. Not only did it lose the long-held two-thirds majority, five of the 13 state legislatures[10] fell into the control of the Opposition including the wealthy state Selangor where the BN's administrative capital *Putrajaya* is located. Even Pulau Pinang, the home state of the sitting Prime Minister was lost to the Opposition— something which has never happened. The BN also lost several prominent stalwarts of the coalition including two Chief Ministers, three full ministers including Zainuddin Maidin, the BN Information Minister who was interviewed by *Al Jazeera*, and several deputy ministers. One of BN's 14-member coalition parties, the *Progressive People's Party* (PPP) was completely wiped out in the election. Not even during the tumultuous 1999 Election did the *Barisan* do so poorly. In the 1999 Election, the then Mahathir-led BN lost control of two state legislatures but still managed to hold on to the coveted two-thirds majority. Conditions in 1999 Election were arguably more precarious than in 2008, as the country saw its wealth decimated by the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997-98 and much bigger and angrier street demonstrations took place to protest the sacking and subsequent jailing of popular Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim. At the time, *Barisan Nasional* was suffering from both external pressure and internal conflicts especially within the dominant Malay-based party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) to which both Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim had belonged. UMNO was dangerously close to hitting the breaking point. At the same time, various opposition parties— including the Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS), the Chinese-based, Democratic Action Party (DAP), and the party led by Anwar's wife, *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR or People's Justice Party)—coalesced around Anwar Ibrahim under the banner, *Barisan Alternatif* (Alternatif Front) to mount an offensive against the weakened BN. It was also the first attempt of cooperation by the Islamic fundamentalist party, PAS and the secular DAP. While many Malay-Muslim voters

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[10] The five states were Kedah, Perak, Pulau Pinang, Selangor, and Kelantan (in PAS's control since 1984)

including Anwar sympathizers threw their support behind PAS and PKR, the DAP partnership

with an Islamic party spooked enough Chinese swing voters to vote for the BN. The Chinese

community feared that the much stronger PAS would take control and implement Islamic laws if

Barisan Alternatif would to win the election. The BN basically retained power in the 1999

Election due to the swing votes from the Chinese community. In the latest general election on 8

March 2008, the three Opposition parties again formed a coalition called *Pakatan Rakyat*

(People's Alliance) and managed to drastically reduce the number of *Barisan Nasional'*s seats in

the Parliament. This time the power distribution amongst the three parties was perceived as more

even. The PAS was not as influential, PKR had embraced a multicultural image, and DAP was

enjoying renewed support from the grassroots partly by fielding younger candidates including

two prominent bloggers, Jeff Ooi and Tony Pua, both of whom won parliamentary seats in the

2008 Election.

Table1: Breakdown of Parliamentary Seats Won in General Elections According to Various Political Parties (1995-2008)

Election	BN	PAS	DAP	PKR*	PBS**	S46**	Total
1995	162	9	7	n/a	8	6	192
1999	148	27	10	5	3	n/a	193
2004	199	6	12	1	n/a	n/a	218
2008	140	23	28	31	n/a	n/a	222

Source: Election Commission Malaysia, *New Straits Times*
* PKR was established in 1999 as *KeADILan*, it was renamed after merging with another smaller party
**PBS joined BN in 2002
***S46 joined BN in 1996

How was 2008 different from other years especially in comparison to 1999 when conditions were just as ripe to prompt a change of Government? Political and economic dissatisfactions were an issue in both periods albeit in varying degrees. The mainstream media continued to be controlled directly or indirectly by the Government in 2008 as in 1999, offering little room for dissenting views on any of the major print or broadcast media. How then did it come to be that 2008 became the year which produced the unprecedented *Political Tsunami* (see Figure 2)? The precise and comprehensive examination of the causes would be too complex and unwieldy for this particular study. However, one of the factors that is unique to the 2008 Election—appears to be the significant presence of new media, especially user-generated content in the form of blogs, in the country's political discourse. The immediate impact of blogs could be felt from the short term changes of the socio-political landscape especially during the General Election on 8 March 2008. This study looks specifically at these user-generated content platforms otherwise known as Web 2.0, focusing on the role of blogs in the development of democratic discourse in Malaysia and using the 2008 Election as a point of reference. As with all technological development, it did not happen exogenous to the socio-political system—as an anomalous incident in a social vacuum.

Figure 2: The front page of local news daily, *The Star*, on the day after the 12th General Election which was held on 8 March 2008, declaring the outcome of latest election a *political tsunami*.

1.2.   Studying the Malaysian Blogosphere

Through a detailed examination of the historical development of the mass media and democratic practices in the country, coupled with careful analysis of news reports, both mainstream and alternative, speeches, official statements, communication policies, in-depth interviews with people who were part of the process including bloggers, media practitioners, scholars, and policy-makers—this study attempts to shed light on the following research questions:

1.   What is the nature of democracy in Malaysia? How if at all, has it been affected by the emergence of political blogging? What are the roles that blogs play in the political discourse in Malaysia especially with regard to the development of deliberative democracy?

2.   What are the responses from the Government and the mainstream media to the development of blogging in the country and to what extend did the responses differ before the 8 March 2008 General Election and after the election?

3.   To the extent that blogging played a part in the political discourse of the country and to the development of deliberative democracy, what lessons could be learned from the experiences in Malaysia?

In order to help us understand the role of the blogs in the development of democracy and political discourse in Malaysia, we will first review in **Chapter 2** the general theories of several models of democracy, namely the aggregative model, participatory model, and deliberative model. The deliberative model is uniquely suited for our discussion of blogs, the blogging community and democratic discourse. The discussion continues with the concept of democracy as applied and practiced in the country. We will discuss the different types of regimes that have been used to describe Malaysia: semi-democracy, pseudo-democracy, one-party democracy, statist democracy, soft-authoritarianism, competitive-authoritarianism, and authoritarian-capitalist. The chapter also

surveys the concept of "Information Society" which is of interest to our discussion because how the information society is conceptualized plays a vital role in shaping the policy that governs the related parts including the users and the technologies.

Chapter 3 discusses blogs, blogging, and bloggers. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the history of blogging, tracing its development from the first time the term "weblog" was coined by Jorn Barger in 1999. The chapter also puts into perspective the variety of research conducted by scholars on the topic. It shows how research on blogging, especially socio-political blogs could be broken down into at least two major themes. The first "wave" of research is interested in the legitimacy of bloggers as providers of information and more importantly whether they are "qualified" to be called journalists. The terms j-blogger, citizen-journalism, participatory-journalism became the standard vocabulary in this strand of research. The second "wave" of research builds on previous research and having been more acquainted with the medium of blog and the fact the number of active blogs has increased exponentially—in the decade since the term weblog was first introduced—provided enough empirical data for scholars to start developing ways to classify blogs and to create a typology of blogs which will enable a more systematic study of the medium. David Perlmutter's (2008) study of the political roles of blogs, Laura McKenna's (2007) work on policy bloggers, Jill Walker Rettberg's (2008) analysis of blogging as narratives, and Stephen Cooper's (2006) attempt to place the study of blogs within the more established communication framework of agenda-setting, framing and gate-keeping are examples of the second wave of blog research.

The research methodology of the study is laid out in **Chapter 4**. It details the process and the method used to collect data for the study. The research employs two main methods of data collection. The first method of data collection is through in-depth interviews with Malaysian bloggers, media practitioners, and academics. The selection of the participants is conducted using

the *Blog-roll Cross Referencing* (BCR) method designed for this study. The BCR method is a

variation of the standard snowballing method of data selection except that it is more systematic

and confined to the list of blogs known as blog-rolls located on most blog sites. The second main

sources of data are speeches, press statements, and newspaper reports. These data were collected

over the course of the study from a variety of sources including news websites, library archives,

and even whenever possible actual prints of the magazines, photographs, and newspapers (some

of these materials have been scanned and reproduced in this study). The results of the analysis of

the data in relation to the research questions are discussed in detail in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

In **Chapter 5,** we examine the history of media control in the country with paying closer

attention to the period from Independence to the General Election in 2008. It would appear that

the issue of the control of the mass media is as old as the history of mass media in the country.

The seeds of control were sown from the very beginning with the publication of the *Government*

Gazette—a British trade paper. We begin with a close examination of the various laws and

regulations that exist in the country and we look at the historical significance of these laws and

how they have been used recently. Then the study traces the development of media control in the

country through several significant events. First, the Racial Riots that happened on 13 may 1969.

The *May 13ᵗʰ Racial Riots* remained the bloodiest incident in the nation's 50 years history and

became as media scholar Zaharom Nain calls it "the turning point" of media policy in the

country. Next we examine the 1987, *Operasi Lalang* (Operation Weed), so called because of the

Government's effort to weed out anti-government individuals following a judicial crisis in the

country. We then examine the period of high economic growth in the early 1990s which

culminated with a very enlightened ICT policy best exemplified with the *Multimedia Super*

Corridor project initiated by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad with the goal to leap-

frog the country into the Information Age. The 1990s, which began with a roaring start, ended in

a troubled whimper when the Asian Financial Crisis hit the region with a sudden and devastating blow. The Crisis brought on the *Reformasi* movement and ushered in the era of web-based alternative media. The most significant of these nascent alternative media is *Malaysiakini.com*, the e-news portal. Unknowingly, these web-based alternative media were to become the templates for future socio-political bloggers, which played a role in the Election 2008. The chapter finishes with a detailed description of ownership of the current mainstream media. Who owns the largest media conglomerate in the country, which boasts a 50 percent TV viewership? Was there any resistance against concentration of media ownership in Malaysia?

Chapter 6 examines the responses by both the Malaysian and the mainstream media towards the development of blogging in the country. The treatment of a new medium by the establishment, both the political establishment and established mainstream media could offer much of insight into the inner workings of these institutions especially their willingness and ability to adapt to the ever-changing media environment. For example, the new Obama Administration, already one of the most technologically savvy administrations showed further openness to the technology when *The Huffington Post*[11] was invited to be part of the official White House press corps (Hefflinger, 2009). This chapter examines first, the government's response to the growing trend of blogging in the country And the distinct differences in the Government's response pre-election 2008 and post-election 2008. Pre-election, the Government started with insults and threats against the nascent blogging community, then it began a series of monitoring activities, employing the so-called cyber-troopers to keep an eye on the bloggers, finally the Government began to arrest the bloggers when threats and insults failed to keep them in line. Post-election, we begin to see some reversal of attitudes towards blogging. The

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[11] *The Huffington Post* is a website which aggregates various blogs, news sources and columnists founded by Arianna Huffington and Kenneth Lerer. The site covers a wide range of topics, including politics, entertainment, media, living, business, and the green movement. *It* was launched on 9 May 2005

mainstream media's response to blogging was also divided on the Pre/Post-election line. Prior to the election in March 2008, the mainstream media was generally cautious of citing bloggers and promoting bloggers, especially socio-political bloggers. One establishment newspaper even took two bloggers to court for defamation. After the election, contentious bloggers are featured as experts in mainstream news and there is even a program called *Blog*, on one of the state-run channels. This chapter also briefly discusses the 12th General Election in the country, which has been called a political tsunami and what bloggers thought of the role of blogs in influencing the election results.

Chapter 7 answers the question *"how do blogs contribute to the development of democracy in Malaysia?"* Based on the in-depth interviews conducted with prominent bloggers in the country, and also interviews given elsewhere by the bloggers, politicians and media practitioners, three functions of blogging in the development of democracy could be discerned. The first is the function of blogs as the *fifth estate*, the watcher of the watchdogs, the mainstream media, which in the case of Malaysia have become rather like the fourth branch of the government. Using as examples of the murder of Mongolian model Altanyuya, the V.K. Lingam video clip, and the National Heart Institute (IJN) deal with Sime Darby, the ability of blogs to function as the fifth estate by becoming an agenda–setter is illustrated. The second function is networking, where we see blogs contributing to the formations of networks of deliberation where deliberation could take place amongst the users. The section also talks about the National Alliance of Bloggers (NAB) or All-Blogs, which is the first association of the bloggers in the country. We also see the use of blogs as a mobilizing agent, using the mass street rallies that have happened in the country as examples. Thirdly, blogs are the platforms from which the people could express themselves and in fact serve as a training ground for expression for them. It also touches on the issue of censorship and moderation of users' comments.

Lastly, some observations from the fieldwork in Malaysia, further discussion on the limitation of the study and some suggestions for future studies are presented in **Chapter 8**. The *field notes* section details a meeting with a mid-management level government official, which exposes some of the fundamental issues faced by the Government, which contributed to its historic losses in the last general election in 2008 including the inability to see the power of user-generated applications. A section is devoted to connecting the phenomenon of blogging back to the theoretical understanding of deliberative democracy, especially how blogging complements the four characteristics of deliberative democracy as proposed by Gutmann and Thompson (2004). The chapter finishes with some lingering concerns on the issue of the development of blogging in Malaysia and a discussion of the Malaysian political landscape—one year after the 2008 Election.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEWING THE KEY CONCEPTS: DEMOCRACY AND INFORMATION SOCIETY

At the core of this study is the understanding of the relationship between a communication medium and the socio-political environment in which it is being used. The communication medium in question is the blog, which will be discussed further in the following chapter. The socio-political aspect in this context has a lot to do with the understanding of the nature of democracy and how it is being applied, expounded, or lived in a country. This chapter reviews several models of democracy, namely, the aggregative model, the participatory model, and the deliberative model. The deliberative model of democracy is viewed as the model that most closely parallels the development of socio-political blogging in the Malaysia. In addition, this chapter reviews some of the most frequently used "democracy with adjectives" terms which have been used by various scholars to describe the quality or reality of democracy in Malaysia. These include pseudo-democracy, authoritarian democracy, electoral authoritarianism, and others. Lastly, this chapter reviews some foundational understanding of concept of "Information Society" especially in regards to the multiple approaches to conceptualizing an information society. This is to help us contrast the particular approach the Malaysian government has chosen to define what an information society should be, which has repercussion on the way the government has reacted to the development of socio-political blogging in the country.

2.1.   Different Models of Democracy

2.1.1. Aggregative Democracy

The aggregative model of democracy is based on the assumption that individuals have varying

preferences about what they want and that they know that other people also have preferences,

which may or may not match their own. While the deliberative conception asks for justification

for the expressed preference, the aggregative conception takes the preferences as given, requiring

no justification. Individuals, interest groups, and public officials each may behave strategically,

adjusting the tactics according to their perception of the activities of competing preferences.

Assuming the process is open and fair, the outcome of both elections (voting) and legislative

decisions reflects the aggregation of the strongest or most widely held preferences in the

population.

Gutmann and Thompson (2004) place both aggregative democracy and deliberative

democracy in the category of second-order theories of democracies—theories that are "about

other theories in the sense that they provide ways of dealing with the claims of conflicting (first-

order) theories." (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 13) They also suggest that the aggregative

model of democracy is the chief rival to the deliberative model in the category of second-order

theories. Knight and Johnson (1994) write that scholars "regularly complain that aggregation is in

various ways inadequate to the task of producing normatively binding political outcomes." (1994,

p. 277) They argue that some scholars would even insist "that aggregation needs to be

supplemented and perhaps entirely supplanted by institutional arrangements that embody and

enhance democratic deliberation." (Knight & Johnson, 1994, p. 277)

However, the aggregative model does have its own advantages that are not insignificant.

The aggregative model has the ability to produce determinate outcomes and the model relies on

fairly uncontroversial procedures to resolve disagreement (see Gutmann & Thompson, 2004).

While results through the aggregative model may not have gone through rigorous deliberation, it does produce a definite decision. This is a significant advantage especially when dealing with issues that cannot be resolved by reasonable terms, such as disputes regarding religion, war, or morality. Secondly, the aggregative model usually takes people's preferences as a given and the methods it employs do not pass judgment on the preferences of citizens. However, as Young (2000) argues, the aggregative model is lacking in several aspects. First of all, there is no account of the origin of individual's preferences, only which preference is held in the greatest number and greatest intensity. Secondly, "it lacks any distinct idea of a public formed from interaction of democratic citizens and their motivation to reach some decisions"(2000, p. 20). Third, the aggregative model "carries a thin and individualistic form of rationality (as) each political actor may engage in instrumental or strategic reasoning about the best means of realizing their preferences but the aggregate outcome has no necessary rationality"(2000, p. 20), it can just as easily be irrational as rational. Lastly, "the model is skeptical about the possibility of normative and evaluative objectivity. It denies that people who make claims with reasons that are objective in the sense that they appeal to general principles beyond the subjective in preferences or interests of themselves or others." (2000, p. 21) Knight and Johnson (1994) call it as lacking in "moral resources required to generate and sustain legitimate collective solutions to politically contentious issues." (1994, p. 278) For example, a politically contentious issue would be whether the government should give priority to treating conditions that are not life-threatening conditions that affect a large number of people or to a life-threatening condition that affect only a small number of people (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004).

2.1.2. Participatory Democracy

The participatory model of democracy appears to share more similarities with the deliberative

model than with the aggregative model. Both perspectives usually contrast their justification and

understanding of what good democratic politics should be with "aggregative" or "pluralist"

models of democracy. While the aggregative method takes almost no interest other than the

"revealed preference" of the voters, both the participatory and the deliberative methods believe

that the citizens have more to contribute to democratic decision making with a more active

involvement. This may be due to the fundamental conception of the theory that "participatory

democracy is built around the central assertion that individuals and their institutions cannot be

considered in isolation from one another" (Pateman, 1970, p. 42). Furthermore, these

involvements will inevitably bring about the greater common good (although, what constitutes

the common good is highly debatable).

Nevertheless, both perspectives are different in many ways. One of the main differences

lies in the aim of the two methods. Participatory theorists aim for "social and political

transformation" while "deliberative theorists aspire to justify some reforms along with a new way

of understanding the legitimacy of representative democracy" (Hauptmann, 2001). The

participatory model has been criticized as failing to take into consideration the complexities of

modern society, being nostalgic of simpler times, and over confident of people's desire to

participate in politics (Hauptmann, 2001; Mark E. Warren, 1996; Young, 2000). Hauptmann

(2001) writes critically that participatory theories of democracy rely too heavily on the mistaken

notion that people generally enjoy participating in politics and "radical democrats almost without

exception hold that democratic participation is an attractive activity, one that people would

naturally choose if only they had the opportunity." (2001, p. 401) One is reminded of Iris

Young's description of her participation in the democratic process:

> *...the temperature hovered around 15 degrees Fahrenheit in the sun (but) I persisted in this self-punishment because I knew that scores of other people were spread over the city also collecting signatures…Using democratic process to promote legal, administrative, and social changes toward greater justice is hard work…* (Young, 2000, p.3-5)

In the face of this "hard work" reality, Warren (1996b) cautions about the over-estimation of people's willingness to participate in democratic processes and to "dispense with this romantic dogma" (M. E. Warren, 1996, p. 243) by the participatory theorists.

Participatory democracy works best under several assumptions. Carole Pateman (1970) argues that, for example, in a Rousseauian version of participatory democracy certain economic conditions were necessary for a participatory system. Rousseau's theory does not require absolute equality but rather that the differences that do exist should not lead to political inequality. As Pateman describes: it is "a situation where no citizen shall be rich enough to buy another and none so poor as to be forced to sell himself" and "the only policy that will be acceptable to all is the one where benefits and burdens are equally shared [and] the participatory process ensures that political equality is made effective in the decision making assembly" (Pateman, 1970, p. 23).

2.1.3. Deliberative Democracy

The deliberative conception of democracy is organized around an ideal of political justification, public reasoning and deliberation. Broadly defined, deliberative democracy is "any one of a family of views according to which the public deliberation of free and equal citizens is the core of legitimate political decision making and self-government" (Bohman, 1998, p. 401). Specifically, these ideals are institutionalized in a deliberative democracy, it has "a framework of social institutional conditions that facilitates free discussion…by providing favorable conditions for participation, association, and expression" and this "ties the authorization to exercise public power to such discussion, by establishing a framework ensuring the responsiveness and

accountability of political power to it through regular competitive elections, conditions of publicity, legislative oversight and so on." (Cohen, 1997b, p. 412). The citizens belonging to a deliberative democracy "share a commitment to the resolution of problems of collective choice though public reasoning, and regard their basic institutions as legitimate insofar as they establish the framework for free public deliberation" (Cohen, 1997a, p. 72).

Gutmann and Thompson (2004) using the analogy of the Iraq War, characterize that, first and foremost, at its most fundamental level "deliberative democracy affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives. Both are expected to justify the laws they would impose on one another" (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 3) in what the authors call the "reason-giving" requirement. The second characteristic of deliberative democracy is that "the reasons given in this process should be accessible to all the citizens to whom they are addressed" (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). In order to justify imposing their will on their fellow citizens, reasons that are comprehensible must be given to them. "If you seek to impose your will on them, you owe them no less." (2004, p.3) The third characteristic of deliberative democracy is that "its process aims at producing a decision that is binding for some period of time". The fourth characteristic of deliberative democracy is its dynamic process, that is, even though "deliberation aims at a justifiable decision, it does not presuppose that the decisions at hand will in fact be justified, let alone that a justification today will suffice for indefinite future" (2004, p. 6). Deliberation keeps the possibility of a continuing dialogue (even if not continuously), in order that "citizens can criticize previous decisions and move ahead on the basis of that criticism" (2004, p. 6).

According to Cohen (1997a), the main features of deliberative democracy could be understood as the model's strengths. First, the "deliberation is an ongoing and independent association, whose members expect it to continue into the indefinite future" (1997a, p. 72).

Secondly, while the member may not share the same view on matters to be deliberated, the members of this deliberative association "share a commitment to coordinating their activities within institutions that make deliberation possible"(1997a, p. 72). The members of such "associations are pluralistic with diverse preferences, convictions, and ideals concerning the conduct of their own lives" (1997a, p. 72). Although they would share a commitment to deliberation, it does not presuppose a particular set of preferences, convictions or ideals is mandatory. Institutions in which the "connections between deliberations and outcomes are evident" are preferred over to the ones in which the "connections are less clear" (1997a, p. 73)

Kim, Wyatt, and Katz (1999) argue that at the core of deliberative democracy is political conversation. According to the authors, "[t]he concept of deliberative democracy covers not only institutional procedures such as rule of majority but also the political culture of free discussion and voluntary participation"(Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999, p. 361). Kim et al. define political conversation as "all kinds of political talk, discussion, or argument as long as they are voluntarily carried out by free citizens without any specific purpose or predetermined agenda" (1999, p. 362). According to Dahlgren (2002), political conversations as deliberative democracy was first explored in-depth in Gabriel Tarde's studies of opinion formation. Tarde's inquiry gave way to a four-stage model –media exposure, talking about media output, opinion formation, and political participation (ibid). Dahlgren also adds that it is common sense that talk is a good thing except in specific cases and that talk has been associated with democracy and opinion formation. When people talk to each other, they "shape their opinions and thus generate the collective will" and "that then has come sort of impact on policy"(ibid, p. 6).

The discussion needs to also consider the line of thinking which "contends that casual and spontaneous conversation has little to with democracy" as argued by scholars including Schudson and Warren (see Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999, p. 362). At the heart of their argument is

the notion that conversation for social purposes is different from conversation for political

purposes which accordingly is "profoundly uncomfortable" (Schudson, 1997, p. 299). I concede

that not all conversations are of the same caliber, at least in the beginning, but believe that all

conversations are potentially democratic. The potential could be developed over time.

Furthermore, the idea that conversations could be fundamentally different appears exclusionary in

the discussion of deliberative democracy.

Deliberative democracy is centered on deliberation and deliberation presupposes

meaningful participation. In contrast, participatory democracy emphasizes participation of its

citizens and by virtue of participation "strengthens both public space and the process of collective

decision-making" (Vitale, 2006, p. 750). The objective is to transform a democracy restricted to

representatives (experts and professional politicians) to a democracy "to be exercised and enjoyed

by active citizens who can participate in arenas other than the voting booth" (Vitale, 2006, p.

750). What is less straightforward is whether the participatory model requires meaningful

deliberation to be considered effective or simply the action of participation is enough to bring

forth changes in the collective decision-making.

2.1.3.1 Deliberative Model of Democracy: A Critique

As James Bohman argues "any feasible ideal of democracy must face the unavoidable social fact

that the citizenry of a modern polity is heterogeneous along a number of intersecting dimensions,

including race, class, religion, and culture." (Bohman, 2003, p. 85) Deliberative democrats appear

to take into consideration this fact-of-life seriously in the conceptualization of the model.

However, as Bohman argues "if that ideal is also deliberative and thus requires that citizens

commit themselves to making decisions according to reasons they believe are public, then such

diversity raises the possibility of deep and potentially irresolvable conflicts." (Bohman, 2003, p.

85) The deliberative model is generally a superior model to others precisely because of its ability to conceive of the public as a complex network of groups of differences rather than as one huge, undifferentiated deliberative body. But how does a deliberative theorist deal with the difficulty of resolving irresolvable conflicts? Mark Warren in his paper, *Deliberative Democracy and Authority (1996),* argues that deliberative democrats need a concept of authoritative decision making precisely because of the inevitability of facing irresolvable conflicts (Mark E. Warren, 1996). Since realistic constraints such as time, energy, and cost exist on top of irresolvable (albeit reasonable) differences, it would seem "reasonable" to subscribe to some kind of decision-making mechanism.

Secondly, one of the most problematic issues of deliberative democracy is also one of the model's strengths. In order for deliberative democracy to work, the model requires citizens to go "beyond the self interest typical in preference aggregation and orient themselves to the common good" (Bohman, 1998, p. 402). However, without the procedural safeguards to ensure that the unreasonable, selfish, and freeloaders do not take advantage of the system, could a deliberative model survive? Furthermore, a deliberative model assumes that citizens are prepared to "be moved by reasons that may conflict with their antecedent preferences and interests" (Cohen, 1997b, p. 413), and that having been "so moved may change those antecedent preferences and interests." (Cohen, 1997b, p. 413) Could it also not be argued that citizens are usually not "trained" in being "prepared to be moved by reasons" unless they have otherwise been taught or conditioned into that particular mode of political awareness? They have to be let known that they need to and even are encouraged to be prepared to be moved by reason, if indeed they are so convinced by those reasons. This must be the necessary step before the assumption in deliberative conception as Cohen (1997b) has pointed out could even be assumed. The question then becomes how to create this awareness among the citizen. Obvious answers will come to mind including

most importantly, education. Education in this sense takes many different forms and shapes. Ideally, it is a combination of parental guidance, formal schooling, and societal modeling.

Thirdly, Cohen (1997a) mentions sectarianism as one of the criticisms made against the deliberative model. The criticism of sectarianism alleges that deliberative democracy is objectionably sectarian because it depends (at all) on a particular conception of the good life. However Cohen counters this criticism by noting that "a political conception is objectionably sectarian only if its justification depends on a particular view of the human good, and not simply because its stability is contingent on widespread agreement on the value of certain activities and aspirations"(Cohen, 1997a, p. 81).

Lastly, another fundamental issue when discussing the effectiveness of deliberative democracy is the quality of the deliberation or the participation of its participants. It is critical to show that deliberative democracy does enable citizens of different associations and networks to participate on an equal basis and of *quality deliberation*, not only in the sense of them simply being present at the discussions—which would only be a very crude actualization of participatory democracy— but also in the sense of being able to articulate, being listened to and understood, and drive the debate into directions otherwise not possible. Young, (2000) in her book *Inclusion and Democracy* talks about the deliberative model of democracy as having four important concepts; i*nclusion, political equality, reasonableness*, and *publicity*. Cohen (1997b) also argues for *inclusion* and writes that "deliberative conception requires more than that the interests of others be given equal consideration; it demands, too, that we find politically acceptable reasons— reasons that are acceptable to others, given a back ground of differences of conscientious conviction." (Cohen, 1997b, p. 417). Cohen calls this requirement "the principle of deliberative inclusion". Bohman (1998) writes in tandem with this and states that

…the superiority of deliberative democracy over competitive pluralism was established precisely by developing the distinctive rationality of 'the forum' rather than 'the market'. Rather than simple compromise or bargaining equilibrium, the goal of deliberation was consensus, the agreement of all those affected by a decision…(Bohman, 1998, p. 400).

Reasonableness refers more to a set of dispositions that discussion participants have rather than the substance of people's contribution and the willingness to listen to others with the aim of reaching an agreement. This is important because only once they truly believe that they could reach some kind of agreement, could participants in good faith trust one another, to listen and aim to persuade one another (Young, 2000). To be effective, the deliberative democrats also need to ensure participants' *political equality* in the sense that none of them is in a position to coerce or threatens others (there are some similarities here with Pateman's conception of the Rousseauian model). Last but not least, the three conditions stated above "entails that the interaction among participants in a democratic decision-making process forms a public in which people hold one another accountable" (Young, 2000, p. 25).

2.2.   Malaysia's Democracy

"Is Malaysia a democracy"? This short question could be answered with a quick "*Yes*", a resounding "*No*" or more than likely a decidedly ambiguous "*Depends*". Of course, like many seemingly simple questions, this particular one requires a very long and complicated answer that varies tremendously depending on whom you ask. In the classic book, *Four Theories of the Press,* written by Fred Siebert, Theodor Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm in 1956, the authors proposed four theories: the authoritarian theory, the libertarian theory, the social responsibility theory, and the soviet-communist theory to explain the variations that exist in media systems in different countries. The *Four Theories of the Press* was an early attempt—perhaps the earliest—to figure out why media systems turn out differently in different countries. The book has since been

criticized for being theoretically inadequate and politically biased. Scholar John Nerone argues that the book is actually about "one theory with four examples"(Nerone, 1995). Nevertheless, the central tenet of the book—the *one theory* Nerone was referring to—remains relevant to our present discussion: "the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates" (Siebert, Schramm, & Peterson, 1963, p. 1). This chapter presents various perspectives on the state of democracy in Malaysia. By understanding how democracy is being viewed by different scholars and applying it to the Malaysian context, we help set the stage to better understand its media system and ultimately to shed light on the development of blogging the country.

The excerpt at the beginning of this chapter showed the exchanges between the former Information Minister, Zainuddin Maidin and a reporter from the *Al Jazeera Network* following a massive street demonstration in Kuala Lumpur in which 40,000 demonstrators took part. The Minister's answer actually exemplifies the response one would expect from a high ranking government official deeply entrenched in the system. The minister's strongest defense during the interview was that Malaysia is a democracy because elections are held regularly. This is of course a fact. General elections have been conducted in Malaysia on regular intervals since gaining independence in 1957 from the British. The 12th General Election was conducted on 8 March 2008. There is universal suffrage for all citizens over the age of 21 years[12] and Opposition parties have a legal existence and representation in the elected legislature. Political parties, even the powerfully entrenched *Barisan Nasional*, do need to win in an election to stay in power. Every five years about seventy percent (Loh, 2007, p. 116) of the voting populace will line up at voting stations and cast their ballots. The entire process is always conducted under the watchful eyes of

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[12] Malaysian law professor Shad Saleem Faruqi has commented the possible need to lower the voting age considering 52% of the population is less than 21 years old.

the Election Commission along with international observers. Until 2008, the ruling coalition,

Barisan Nasional (National Front) has always been returned to power with a two-third majority.

For the most part, Malaysian politicians and citizens alike are concerned with "clean and

fair elections". The 12th general election on 8 March 2008 saw for the first time in the nation's

history the casting of postal ballots observed by polling agents[13]. In addition to the extra security

for overseas postal ballots, there was also the introduction of indelible ink[14] and transparent ballot

boxes. All these new features are meant to ensure the "fairness and cleanliness" of the election

and ultimately to provide the seal of legitimacy to whomever gets the largest number of ballot

that day. The president of the second largest component party of the ruling coalition, MCA,

announced that 12th election will be his last at a tender political age of 51 years old ("My last

election", 2008). In a country where party presidents hold on to their position for as long as 20

years, his announcement to cap the presidency term for a maximum of nine years seemed to

suggest a willingness to project a new image that the ruling party is not about serving the status

quo, tolerating nepotism or cronyism. Perhaps this is part of the tactics to ensure the party

continues to stay relevant in the public eyes and contributes to back to the notion of legitimacy.

However, Francis Loh argues that Malaysians have a narrow definition of what constitute

being democratic, which is the "involvement in legally registered political parties and rejecting

participation in a multi-party elections conducted regularly and rejecting participation which

extends into the extra-electoral realms" (Loh, 2007, p. 117). This process is rather mechanistic in

the sense that democracy starts and stops at the ballot boxes. Election is only one aspect of

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[13] One polling agent will be allowed for each candidate in each seat to monitor the 221,000-plus postal votes that will be cast, mostly in police stations and army camps. From "transparency at the polls" http://www.nst.com.my/Current_News/NST/Friday/Columns/2164939/Article/index_html (retrieved Feb 21, 2008)

[14] The proposed use of indelible ink was scrapped four days before the 12th General Election. See (Netto, 2008)

democracy—albeit a very important one. Democracy involves more than an election and there is more to an election than just a clean and fair count of the ballot boxes. A government should not hide behind the legitimacy of the ballot box alone.

Daniel Bell (2006) writes that "a clean vote count on Election Day is not the same as a free and fair electoral process" (p. 177) and "the absence of election-day fraud doesn't mean that elections are genuinely competitive"[15](p. 177). Other factors could sway the voters even before election day—opposition candidates publicly humiliated, bankrupted, sacked from their jobs; elections called on a very short notice thus leaving the usually less prepared and financially less adequate opposition in a disadvantaged position, threatening to withhold federal funding to a constituency for not voting for the incumbents; and last but not least, excluding or not giving the opposition equal space on the mainstream media—all contribute to an uneven playing field.

Schedler (2002) cautions that "the idea of democracy has become so closely identified with elections that we are in danger of forgetting that the modern history of representative elections is a tale of authoritarian manipulations as much as it is a saga of democratic triumphs. Historically, in other words, elections have been an instrument of authoritarian control as well as a means of democratic governance" (Schedler, 2002, p. 36). Diamond (2007) notes that some countries occupy an ambiguous or disputed space between democracy and overt authoritarianism. Such countries have multiparty electoral systems, with significant opposition. These countries also have some space for civil society and intellectual dissent but individual and associational freedoms are under such mounting pressure, or elections are so riddled with fraud, or the arenas of political opposition and competition are so constrained and intimidated by the domineering power of the incumbent, that it is difficult to call the systems democratic, even in the minimal

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[15] Bell creatively wrote this in his book East Meets West where a fictional Mr. Demo (a play of word on 'Mr. Democracy') conducts a fictional interview with another strongman of Asia, former Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew.

sense (Diamond, 2007, p.26). Diamond as well as Schedler make the distinctions between liberal democracy, electoral democracy, electoral authoritarianism, and closed authoritarianism. For Diamond and Schedler, Malaysia falls under the typology of *electoral authoritarianism*. In addition, Diamond also calls Malaysia along with Singapore, the "two most successful and self-confident pseudo-democracies" (Diamond, 2007, p.212). Schedler observes that "while liberal democracies go beyond the electoral minimum, electoral democracies do not" (Schedler, 2002, p. 37). The electoral authoritarians manage "to get elections right but fail to institutionalize other vital dimensions of democratic constitutionalism, such as the rule of law, political accountability, bureaucratic integrity, and public deliberation"(Schedler, 2002, p. 37) . Schedler talks about "a hard-to-specify but real threshold of openness and competitiveness" (2002, p. 38) that some elections will cross. When that happens, the elections will tend to take on a life of their own. Malaysian elections has long crossed that threshold and elections results confers on the winners tremendous power and mandate—enough "to compel both rulers and opposition forces 'genuinely to care' about them" (Schedler, 2002, p. 38).

Another term that had been used to describe Malaysia is *statist democracy* (Jesudason, 1999), that is, a country that has 1) identifiable democratic features in the political system, 2) there are identifiable non-democratic features, 3) the system does not employ a high degree of coercion and can be seen as broadly legitimate, and 4) civil society is constrained in posing alternatives to the regime. Jesudason characterizes Malaysia as a statist democracy because of the visible role of the state in structuring politics, allowing the incumbent regime to entrench itself in the society and secondly, it captures a historical process which has led to the highly interventionist role of state in the economy. Jesudason argues that terms such as "quasi- and semi-democracy" do not capture the longevity and distinctiveness of Malaysia's political configuration.

William Case considers Malaysia[16] to be the best example of a semi-democracy in Southeast Asia. Semi-democracies "are usually presented as a subset of democracy, deviating in some measure from the category's spirit but distinguishable from the 'pseudodemocracies' and vacuous 'electoralism' that shade into authoritarianism."(Case, 1996, p. 438) They are also "presented as 'half-way houses', straddling uncomfortably the democratic and authoritarian categories that tug them in contrary directions". While semi-democracies "regularly hold elections, thus offering a snapshot of propriety on voting day, they have limited civil liberties beforehand."(Case, 2002, p. 6) Opposition is hindered and cannot contest effectively especially in terms of reaching out to wider audiences as most media outlets are owned by the government and are "restricted in circulating their own party publications"(Case, 2002, p. 7).

Malaysia has also been called authoritarian-capitalist along with countries including Brazil, Mexico and Thailand. Looking specifically at the advertising industry in Malaysia, Frith describes authoritarian-capitalist states as the ones who often "impose a tight grip on how the industry should conduct itself to conform to the sociocultural and political order in the country" (Frith, 2003). Weiss comments that "in some ways, Malaysia's democracy is the most solidly institutionalized in the region, but that is not saying much" (2008a, p. 98) because even though "Malaysia has strong political parties…their strength rests on firmly rooted clientelism and particularistic objectives" (Weiss, 2008a, p. 38). Furthermore, civil society in the country is "less clearly institutionalized on a macro level: civil liberties and political space far from secure"(Weiss, 2008a, p. 38)

Malaysian politicians such as the former Minister of Information, Zainuddin Maidin, steadfastly argue that Malaysia is a democracy but not of the liberal kind. The "liberal" kind is of course in reference to the so-called "decadent western lifestyle". By becoming liberal, this

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[16] and Singapore.

position purports perhaps the state risks destroying the tradition, contaminating young minds with

sex, drugs, and diseases, and ultimately preparing the way for social anarchy. Similar views have

been expressed by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi who argued that no country in the world

actually allows for complete freedom (McIntrye, 2006) and that Malaysia is actually doing well

in comparison to more tyrannical states. These arguments are tired and old—narrowly defined

cases purposefully chosen to present the worst case scenario and to accentuate the positive

aspects of the current Malaysian condition. Furthermore, as Francis Loh puts it, "since no other

party has ever ruled Malaysia, many ordinary Malaysians, including the middle classes, cannot

imagine that political stability can be maintained in multi-ethnic Malaysia without BN rule"

(2007, p.117).

2.3.   Information Society

Schement and Curtis (1994) credit Marc Porat and his work, *The Information Economy* for

popularizing "the idea of an Information Society built on information economy" (1994, p. 22).

Porat had built his discussion largely on Fritz Machlup's earlier work, *The Production and*

Distribution of Knowledge in The United States (1962*), in which he used the term "knowledge

industry". Alistair Duff (2000, p. 3) credits the *American Society for Information Science* (ASIS)

as the first to have formally used the term "information society" in an American context during its

annual meeting in 1970. This was followed by Daniel Bell's 1973 book *The Coming of Post-*

Industrial Society where the term was suggested but was not adopted and even initially resisted

by him[17] in favor of another term, "post-industrial society". Bell writes:

> …the question has been asked why I have called this speculative concept the 'post-
> industrial society', rather than the knowledge society, or the information society, or the

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[17] See also Schement and Curtis, 1997: 24

professional society, all of which are somewhat apt in describing salient aspects of what is emerging… (Bell as cited in Duff, 2000, p. 3)

Duff also disputes A.E. Cawkell's claim that a joint paper by Edwin Parker and Marc Porat presented in an *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD) conference represented the first instance where the phrase 'information society' was used. Tracing the origin of the term further back, Duff identifies that the term was actually first coined in Japan. The term first appeared in the media periodical, *Asahi Hoso* (Rising Sun Broadcasting) in November 1964 in the article titled "*Sociology in Information Societies*". The article itself was written by Jiro Kamishima under the original title of "*information industrial society*". Therefore according to Duff, the ubiquitous term first came into existence by the editorial decision at the Asahi Hoso in 1964. Regardless of the place of origin of the phrase, the term information society has taken off, perhaps beyond the imagination of any person who could lay claim as the term's progenitor. As the phrase enters popular discourse, more intriguing to our discussion are the various conceptualizations the term has acquired over its four decades or so of existence.

It is important to remember, that "all societies entail some measure and flow of information and communication of information, even some form of 'information technology'" (Hearn, 2004, p. xi) and information like knowledge is not new to any society. The phenomenon which is being addressed here as "information society" has been described by others at different venues using varying approaches including post-industrialism (Bell in 1973), advanced capitalism (Schiller in 1976), network society (Castells in 1996) and many others. What exactly makes a society an 'information society'? Hearn writes:

> …in an information society, information is not only about information in the general sense…nor is it strictly about the use of knowledge, research and technical expertise within the production process. Rather, it is also about the complex and increasing infiltration of those forms of organized knowing beyond production in other areas of social life… (Hearn, 2004, p. xi)

Frank Webster (1995) identifies the five most common definitions of information society. Each defines an information society from a different perspective: 1) technological, 2) economic, 3) occupational, 4) spatial, and 5) cultural.

The most common definition of the 'information society'—perhaps because it is also the easiest to observe and to quantify— is the technological definition which *lays emphasis upon spectacular technological innovation* (Webster, 1995, p. 7). Webster explains that "because it is now economical and feasible to put computers in typewriters, in cars, cookers, watches, factory machines, television, kids' toys…it follows that we are certain to experience social upheaval of such magnitude that we shall enter a new era". While scholars such as Alvin Toffler and James Martin[18] dispute the technological emphasis of the information society, Webster argues that it is "commonsensical" that the technological aspect plays a decidedly crucial part in the emergence of the information society. Certainly one cannot be a fully integrated part of a global or even of the domestic information society if information is still being produced by scribes with crude writing tools or the relay of information still depends on wind-powered sea-vessels. "After all, if it is possible to see a series of inventions as the key characteristics of the industrial society, then why not accept the virtuoso developments in IT as evidence of a new type of society" (Webster, 1995, p. 15). As it is, even with the advent of mass production of information, whether in the forms of books, newspapers, or audiovisual recordings, the matter of distribution and dissemination still presents itself as an obstacle to the development of an information society. Only with the popularization of computers and the Internet could the foundation of a truly networked-information society be materialized. This point seems to coalesce with Van Audenhove et. al (1999) who pointed out that "communication networks and interactive

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[18] See (Webster, 1995).

multimedia applications are therefore thought to provide the foundation for the transformation of existing social and economic relationships in an Information Society." (1999, p. 388) Computers and the Internet revolutionized not only the distribution and dissemination problem but simultaneously solved the information production or information generation problem as well. It is not enough for a participant of an information society to be a mere consumer or critic of information but he or she must be active in the contribution of information. The most visible example of this statement is the phenomenon of user-generated content over the Internet using new networking software easily available at nominal or no cost to the users.

REVIEWING THE KEY CONCEPTS: BLOGGING

"No. it's not the way you feel in the morning after drinking too much tequila the night before. And no, it's not one of the creatures found in Dr. Seuss's zoo"
(A CNN correspondent explaining blog to the viewers in 2000[19])

"Blogging is the most important development in the media in the last 50 years, at least more important than arrival of the television in terms of changing the world. I say that because it is about creating new democratic discussion about reality and one that transcend the mass media propagation of narrow collection of cadre of editors and intellectuals ideas about the way the world is or the way the world should be and instead it is applying a lot a lot of minds to the fundamental human imperative to understand the world"
(Louis Rosetto, Co-founder of Wired)

3.1. Blogging as Political Resistance around the World

On 20 April 2003, Iranian blogger, Sina Motallebi was asked to report to the Operation Office of

the Judiciary department in Iran. There he was interrogated for the entries posted on his blog and

for his interviews with foreign radio including Radio Free Europe and French International Radio.

The officers had print-outs from his blog with writings on the side noting which entry is against

national security. Motallebi had been interrogated before; five times in fact, but this time was

different. On his last blog entry, the day before, he wrote he felt he would be arrested this time.

His prediction came true. Motallebi was arrested by the Iranian Government on that Sunday,

making him the first known case of a blogger in the world to be arrested and Iran became the first

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[19] As cited in David Perlmutter's book *Blogwars* (2008, p.11)

country in the world to arrest a person based on something which was published on a blog in 2003 (Posted by, "Bloggers unite to fight").

Weblogs or blogs and other new media collectively known as Web 2.0 including video-sharing sites, *YouTube* and social-networking sites such as *Facebook* and *Friendster* have become a cultural phenomenon in many parts of the world. Many of these blogs are filled with fun, light-hearted or whimsical jottings of everyday life. But many have been used for socio-political commentaries, to break news that big media could not break, to disseminate contentious messages and to mobilize the grassroots to demonstrate in the streets. Some governments have taken a very confrontational stance against these bloggers for their dissensions and contentious writings. The Paris-based group, *Reporters San Frontieres* (RSF) observed in their 2007 *Annual Worldwide Press Freedom Index* that "more and more governments have realised that the Internet can play a key role in the fight for democracy and they are establishing new methods of censoring it" and "the governments of repressive countries are now targeting bloggers and online journalists as forcefully as journalists in the traditional media."("Press freedom", 2007). Events from around the world including Malaysia offer tantalizing examples of how dissidents/citizens in these countries have embraced these new media to promote their cause.

Sina Motallebi, the Iranian blogger, political science graduate and social-political columnist for local newspaper was arrested by the Iranian and put into solitary confinement for twenty three days. Following his arrest, the newspaper Motallebi worked for, Hayat-E Nou, was closed down along with more than 100 other publications (Alavi, 2006, p. 3). Sina Motallebi was eventually released (Glasner, 2004) and moved to the Netherlands soon after that with his wife and son. According to *Reporters sans Frontières*, the authorities arrested his father in September 2004 in the continued attempt to silence the now-exiled blogger (Alavi, 2006, p. 3). Motallebi's case was one of the first to highlight the potential of blogs as a tool for giving a voice to the

voiceless. Motallebi himself credits the blogosphere for his "quick" release from prison. During

an interview he retold the moments when he was being arrested by the authorities:

> …at the interrogation when they arrested me, they said 'nobody knows about your case.'
> And I said, 'No, I wrote something about that on my Web site.' It was the first time
> somebody had seen the reactions to his arrest, before he actually was arrested…(Glasner,
> 2004)

4000 signatures were gathered online to petition for the release of Motallebi. Unfortunately, the

case also foreshadowed how bloggers, especially political bloggers, would be treated not only by

the Iranian government but by repressive regimes around the world. Even being famous does not

protect a blogger from being arrested in Iran. The blogger nicknamed "Iranian Blogfather"

Hossein Derakhshan was arrested in late 2008 for allegedly spying for Israel (Theodoulou, 2008).

Derakhshan is widely credited for spawning the Iranian blogosphere by writing the first Persian-

language guide to set up a blog. The harsh reaction by the government is perhaps a combination

of strong adherence to a repressive political dogma and the fear of the revolutionary potential of

the Internet. As Babak Rahimi observed in Iran "the Internet, in particular the blogosphere, has

offered an alternative public discourse to the state-controlled media and Internet outlets. It has

served as a powerful supplement to political interaction and free communication, discouraged

under the conservative regime"(Rahimi, 2003, 2008, p. 37; Semati, 2008). This is significant

given that 70 percent of Iranians are under the age of thirty—a demographic that is most likely to

use the Internet as a tool for self-expression. Rahimi also argues that this group "poses one of the

most important threats against authoritarian hegemony in Iran" (Rahimi, 2008, p. 37). Perhaps

understanding the importance of connecting to this generation, and despite the initial wariness

against this technology, even Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has started his own blog

called "Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Personal Memo*"[20]*.

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[20] *Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Personal Memo* (http://www.ahmadinejad.ir)

According to the *OpenArab.net*[21], "bloggers are always kidnapped by non-uniformed security forces during [sic] covering or participating in certain activities or political demonstrations or during covering some tribunals" in Egypt ("Electronic press and blogs", 2007). There has been an increase in the arrests of various bloggers without a legal cause in Egypt. *OpenArab.net* estimated that "the number of bloggers who faced kidnapping or arresting was bigger" even than that of political activists and journalists and "they are targeted just for being bloggers". In February 2007, Appeal Court Judge Abdul Fattah Murad, demanded that the government ban 21 websites and blogs branding them as "terrorism websites". He alleged that they defame Egypt's reputation and that of the president. For example, a 24-year old named Abdel Kareem Nabil Suleiman, better known as blogger Kareem Amer was sentenced to four years in prison for blog posts criticizing President Hosni Mubarak and the Islamist control of the country's universities ("Two years for a blog", 2008). In another case, a female Egyptian blogger who writes on a blog called *Eman Republic*, was ordered to "willingly close down" her blog after she has written a critical piece about Col. Gaddafi of neighboring Libya[22]. As recently as 2009, two more Egyptian bloggers were arrested (Atef, 2009). One of the bloggers, Diaa Eddin Gad wrote in his blog, *Sawt Ghadib*[23] *(An Angry Voice)*, "pro-Gaza slogans and news and commentary on the Israeli war in Gaza strip, as well as strident denunciations of President Hosni Mubarak and the Egyptian security services" (Atef, 2009). Usually, Egyptians have been able to "voice out"

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[21] According to their official website at http://www.openarab.net/en/node/528, *Open Arab Internet* is an initiative by the *Arabic Network for Human Rights Information* (Anhri) to advocate the free use of the Internet without censorship, blocking or spying. In this context, the initiative seeks to provide international and Arab information and Internet related documents. The initiative also defends Internet users, web-designers, and writers by organizing legal and media campaigns and highlighting practices restricting Internet freedom.

[22] The blog, *Eman Republic* is no longer accessible to the public. Further information concerning *Eman Republic* could be read from another blog, *Egyptian Chronicles* (http://egyptianchronicles.blogspot.com/2007/05/fall-of-eman-republic.html)

[23] *Sawt Ghadib. Available from* http://soutgadeb.blogspot.com

their dissatisfactions against the Government as long as they are not acted out. Fahmy Howeidy, an Egyptian writer who has often criticized the government, calls it the "freedom to scream" because "you can say what you want but you cannot act"(Slackman, 2009). The authorities appear to be interpreting the publication of one's thoughts on a blog as an actual act against the Government which would explain the increasingly frequent arrests of bloggers.

In Southeast Asia, Burmese dissidents and its exiles used the power of blogs and video-sharing websites to let the world know what was happening in the country during the mass protests led by Buddhist monks in September of 2007. The protest that became known as the *Saffron Revolution* was the first mass protest by the people since 1988, which took the life of nearly 3000 Burmese (Mydans, 2007). It escalated into mass demonstrations calling for the restoration of democracy in the country and the release of pro-democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. For nine days, in that month of September, the world caught a glimpse of the life in the highly repressive military regime—photos and videos were sent surreptitiously from within the country through the Internet by anonymous bloggers. However, on the tenth day the transmission of the images trickled to a halt after the military junta decided to shut down the Internet via the country's only Internet Service Provider (ISP). The small amount of new footage that still managed to get through was possible by smuggling the physical storage devices across the border to Thailand. The reports done by dissidents included Burmese exiles and Diasporas was carried through the blogs and on *YouTube*, some of which were rebroadcast by major international media outlets such as CNN and *Al-Jazeera*. The messages circumvented the authority and provided the world with troubling and sometime iconic images of the protest. Pictures of monks in saffron color robes walking in the streets lined with tens of thousands of people was in a scale unseen before in the country. Burmese authorities, finding that these uncensored pictures were leaking through their tightly controlled borders, shut down the Internet altogether at the height of their

crackdown, which resulted in the detentions of more than 3,000 people and the deaths of at least 31 others("Myanmar Junta", 2007). The Burmese military government had since become ever more vigilant in its control of the flow of information in and out of their borders and sentencing vocal dissidents to absurd sentences as in the case of blogger, Nay Phone Latt. The blogger was arrested on 29 January 2008 and was sentenced to 20 years and six months in prison for possession of "subversive film" ("Petition launched", 2009). The Burmese case offers two lessons, first is that while the democratization power of the Internet does exist, it would cease to exist if the powers-that-be decide to literally shut down the Internet. Secondly, it also taught us that except in the extreme case of being literally cut off from the *World Wide Web,* the Internet provides a very real and powerful tool to disseminate information even from the powerful military government.

In neighboring Thailand, the military coup of 2006 has left a dent in the country's democracy. Thailand's military overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra while the premier was away in New York for the United Nations General Assembly. Overnight, the military tanks rolled into the capital and the state building, declared martial law and set up a military government. The very next day, tourists were taking photos with the soldiers in front of the tanks. In sharp contrast to the bloody and violent crackdown of the military junta in Burma, the military coup in Thailand was dubbed a "bloodless coup". Indeed, the whole incident acquired an almost carnival quality to it. The images of tanks and tourists were captured and circulated throughout the Internet offering yet another layer of political narrative. However, the peaceful image of the coup d'état belies the reality that the military government does not in actuality allow for dissension and contentious material to be freely circulated. In 2007, they blocked the video-sharing website *YouTube* because of a video clip caricaturizing the Thai monarch—who has openly given his blessing to the military coup d'état. Thailand's example

provides another striking example of the clashing of different ideologies—an archaic law meant

to protect a centuries old institution within the context of a modern thriving developing nation

that values freedom of expression. The well-respected (and protected) Thai monarchy is given

constitutional protection under the powerful *lèse majesté* law which prevents the defamation of

the monarchy. There have been arguments that the law has been abused to protect the powerful

especially the Thai military (Berthelsen, 2009). Indeed, the *lèse majesté* law has recently been

used a number of times against journalists and others where the exact reason behind the

invocation of the law has been unclear[24].

The island-state of Singapore provides yet another layer to the story of the use of

blogging (or rather the lack of) in political communications. Singapore could easily be identified

as one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world with a high Internet

penetration, computer ownership, and education level. Yet, it has one of the least vibrant online

political scenes. The restrictive legal environment in Singapore does not encourage vocal

criticism of the government even in cyberspace. Several high profile cases have been widely

reported in the local media to showcase Singaporeans who have been fined, jailed or given

warnings over what was published on their blogs. In 2005, two men, 27-year old Benjamin Koh

and 25-year old Nicholas Yew, that posted inflammatory racist remarks about Muslims and

Malays online were jailed and fined for their postings. In handing out the judgment, the judge

reminded the two that "that it is every Singaporean's duty to respect other races and religions"

(Chong, 2005).

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[24] BBC correspondent in Bangkok, Jonathan Head was charged under the *lèse majesté* law for reporting on the political situation in Thailand in 2008. In September 2008, Australian novelist Harry Nicolaides, 41, was arrested at Bangkok's airport on charges that he had defamed the royal family in a 2005 novel when he tried to fly out of Bangkok to Australia. He said he was unaware of the arrest warrant. He remains in jail despite four appeals. In 2009, Giles Ji Ungpakorn, a political science professor at Thailand's Chulalongkorn University was charged under the country's stiff *lèse majesté* laws for insulting the country's monarchy. Ungpakorn has since fled to the United Kingdom.

In another such case, blogger Gopalan Nair was charged in May 2008 ("Blogger gets 3 months", 2008) for posting insults against the Singaporean High Court Judge Belinda Ang Saw Ean on his blog. Nair who has become a US citizen at the time of the trial was subsequently sentenced to three months of prison under the Singaporean Miscellaneous Offences, Public Order and Nuisance Act[25]. Singaporean columnist Chiang-Nee Seah comments that the so-called political blogs in Singapore are "too boring and cautious, apparently phrased to support policies rather than give frank, independent views on problems facing Singapore"(Seah, 2008). Even the blogs and websites run by the ruling party, People's Action Party (PAP), are lacking *action*. This is surprising that despite its sophistication and vast resources, "is years behind others in using it to pursue its political goals". Seah observes that the people behind the blogs are "capable people" but wonders about the reason for their "mundane" writings. He speculates that the answer is probably the "fear of speaking out of line" The strict control of the blogosphere by the Singaporean authority simply adds on to the long history of legal prosecutions and control of the media in the island-state.

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[25] Chapter 184 Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order And Nuisance) Act.

Figure 3: Number of Arrested Bloggers by Countries (2003-2008)
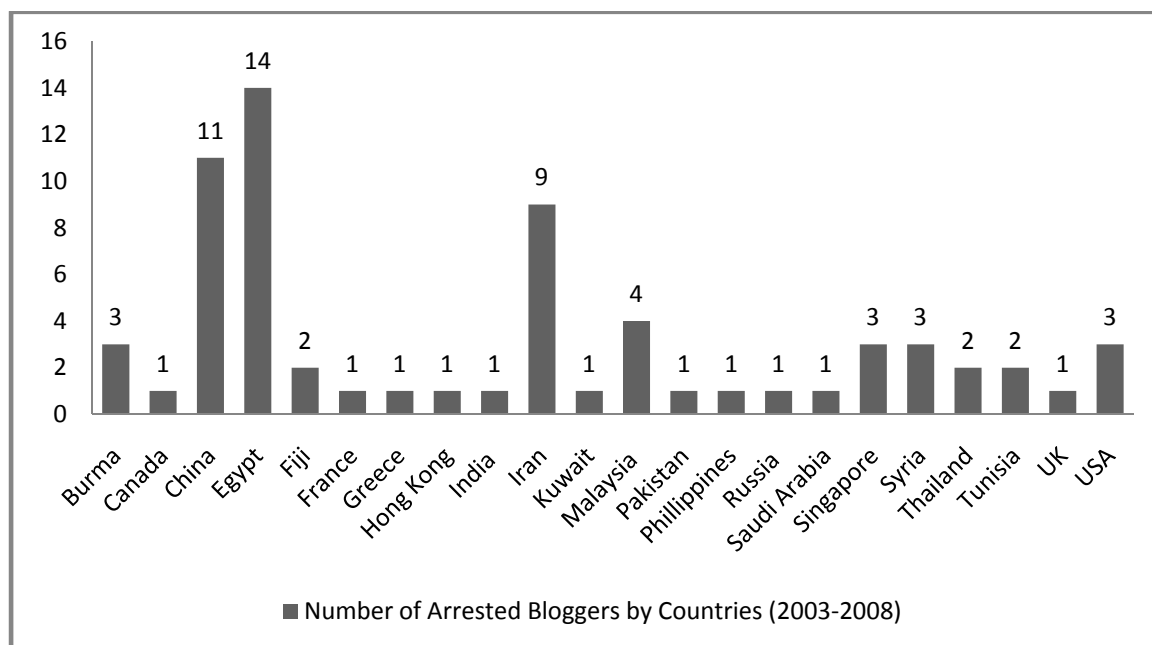
Adapted from WIA Report 2008

In different parts of the globe, we see examples of people getting into trouble with authority over what they have posted on the Internet, whether through a standard webpage, an online video clip or a blog. Based on the World Information Access (WIA) Report[26] from the University of Washington and other sources, at least 67 bloggers have been arrested for various reasons between 2003 and 2008. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)[27] at least 56 online journalists, including bloggers, are jailed worldwide surpassing the number of print journalists for the first time in 2008 ("CPJ's 2008 prison census", 2008). *Reporters sans*

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[26] The WIA Report derives its data from reported arrests of bloggers from various sources including *Global Voices Online, Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters sans Frontieres*, various news websites and individual bloggers. The figure provided here is based on WIA Report 2008 and other sources of information on Iran and Malaysia provided by the present author.

[27] According to CPJ, it does not apply a rigid definition of online journalism, but it carefully evaluates the work of bloggers and online writers to determine whether the content is journalistic in nature. In general, CPJ looks to see whether the content is reportorial or fact-based commentary. In a repressive society where the traditional media is restricted, CPJ takes an inclusive approach to work that is produced online.

Frontieres (RSF) annual report stated China had at least 50 cyber-dissidents in its prison in 2007

("Repression continues in China", 2008). The Paris-based RSF also reported six Vietnamese

cyber-dissidents were arrested in the space of one week in May 2007 and were charged with

dissemination of anti-government propaganda. The Saudi Arabia government arrested outspoken

Saudi blogger Fouad al-Farhan for "specific violations of non-security laws" in early 2008,

making him the first Saudi Arabian blogger to be arrested. Even in fairly liberal Western

countries such as the United States and United Kingdom, bloggers have been arrested for what

they have posted in their blogs. American blogger, Josh Wolf was sent to prison for nearly eight

months by the federal prosecutors for "refusing to hand over unpublished video he shot during an

anti-G8 Summit protest in San Francisco in July 2005, where one police officer was struck in the

head with a pipe" (Locke, 2007). The 24-year old became the first blogger to be targeted by the

US government for refusing to comply with a grand jury subpoena.

3.2.   Blog: A Brief Introduction

Louis Rosetto's quote, in the beginning of chapter, that "blogging is the most important

development in the media in the last 50 years" is interesting here. What about blogging could be

so compelling for Rosetto, the co-founder of *Wired Magazine,* to make such grand proclamation?

A blog is the shortened form of "web log" or "weblog"[28] and by all accounts it is an online diary

that allows for a higher degree of interactivity between its writer and the reader. Rebecca Blood

notes that "unlike almost everything else online, weblogs are not just a digital variation on an

established formula. Everything about them—their format, their reliance on links, their

immediacy, their connections to each other—is derived from the medium in which they were

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[28] The word 'blog' and 'weblog' are used interchangeably in this paper. Authors including Rebecca Blood
and Ann Notaro identify Jorn Barger as the person who first coined in the word "weblog" in 1999 on his
online journal (http://www.robotwisdom.com)

born. They are the Web itself."(Blood, 2002xi). Blood views blogs as "native" to the Web. Blogs

are "born" in and out of the Web and are not an extension or an "online version" of a more

traditional medium. The growth of blogs has been exponential. In 1999, the number of blogs was

estimated to be around fifty (Mead as cited in Drezner & Farrell, 2004). After surveying eight

blog-hosting services[29], the Perseus Development Corporation estimated that there were 4.12

million blogs in 2003 ("The blogging iceberg", 2003). At the end of 2006, *Technorati*[30], the blog-

tracking search engine put the number of blogs being tracked by its search engine at 57 million. A

year later in 2007, the number had exceeded 112 million with roughly 120,000 new blogs being

created every day ("State of the blogosphere ", 2007). The China Internet Network Information

Center (CINIC) reported that in China alone there are 72 million blog spaces ("CINIC Survey",

2007). Already in 2004, the Pew Internet and American Life Project called blogs "a key part of

online culture" ("The State of Blogging", 2005) . It is actually meaningless to quantify the

number of blogs for at least two reasons. The zero entry-cost and technical ease at which blogs

could be created allows for an almost unlimited creation of blog accounts.

If you can email, you can blog. Even the most basic of HMTL/JAVA website creation

would require a significant investment of time and energy into learning the various programs and

coding. Most people do not have the time or financial means to acquire such skills. User-

generated platforms have opened up cyberspace to people without significant computer skills to

not only be the end-users of information but also producers of information. Therefore, essentially,

opening a blog account is akin to opening an email account, that is, easily created and just as

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[29] The eight hosting services were *Blog-City, BlogSpot, Diaryland, LiveJournal, Pitas, TypePad, Weblogger and Xanga*.
[30] http://www.technorati.com keeps track of over 112 millions weblogs and compiled them in its list and rankings.

easily abandoned. What is more important than finding out the sheer number of blogs that are out there at any point in time is the question: *how are the blogs being used?*

Blogs are defined mainly by their format, which is a frequently updated webpage with dated entries, in reverse chronological order and *almost always* includes comments from readers and links to other sites[31]. In addition, most blog providers include tools and widgets to enable a certain degree of personalization of the blog. This may appear to be an extremely simplified definition of the technology but due to the existence of many other forms of similar technology widely available now, giving more detailed description of what a blog is, runs the risk of 'cross-contaminating' its defining characteristic as compared to other technologies such as list-serv, usenet, chat-rooms, etc. A blog is also better defined by its format rather than by its content due to the fact that a blog's contents are made up of a myriad of topics and styles particular to the administrator of the particular blog. A peculiarity of the blog is the issue of the number of readers or visitors to the site. The blog seems to stand on two opposite poles of the traditional understanding of mass media. A blog is at once a one-to-many or many-to-many mass medium but also simultaneously a one-to-one or even one-to-none medium. Some bloggers seem to thrive on its potential of disseminating information to hundreds of thousands of people and take steps to ensure the widest possible exposure the site could receive. They would add various widgets that could increase traffic to their blog including sites-counter, ad-banners, or links to other fellow bloggers or popular blog search-engines such as *Technorati.* On the other hand, some seem to be content with the ability to post one's thoughts on the Internet regardless of the number of actual readers. There may be some logical explanation for the latter group including the lack of necessary technical know-how, not able to devote extra time to the activity or perhaps the simple

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[31] I say 'almost always' because most of the functions could be turned on or off by the maintainer of the blog, although having readers commenting on your blog is almost always a desirable attribute.

act of writing is fulfillment enough for them— not unlike the traditional diary which are not
supposed to be read by others to begin with.

A functional and active blogger, even by the most rudimentary definition, must have at
least two attributes. The first attribute is the ability to use a computer with Internet capability in
order to blog. The second attribute is the ability to produce information to be blogged. A blog is
only as good as its content. A blog that has poor content or no content at all will soon find that the
only audience it has is the blogger who created it. This is especially true in the realm of political
blogging. The political blogger must not only be somewhat savvy with technology but also in
political matters. A more elegant way of understanding what a blogger is, may lie in Ethan
Zuckerman's suggestion that bloggers are the ones "between the journalists and the
diarists"(Zuckerman, 2008).

3.3. Research of the Blogosphere

A review of existing literature of the research on blogs, blogging and bloggers suggests that
research into blogging in general and specifically socio-political blogging is a young but a
growing field (Drezner & Farrell, 2008; Khiabany & Sreberny, 2007; Kulikova & Perlmutter,
2007; McKenna, 2007). Drezner and Farrell found that between 1995 and 1999, there were only
eleven academic articles, which mentioned "weblog". The figure slowly increased from 56 in
2000, to 128 in 2001, 272 in 2002, and 647 in 2003 (Drezner & Farrell, 2004, p. 5). Research
about blogs typically falls under several themes. The most common and perhaps one of the
earliest research on blogs tries to determine if bloggers are journalists or journalist-wannabes,
whether the blogosphere is going to supersede the conventional news agency or be subsumed by
it. Terms such as j-bloggers and citizen-journalists emerged as standard vocabulary in the field
out from this line of research. As the debate on whether bloggers can be considered real

journalists reached a level of saturation, a second type of research began to emerge. This "second wave" of blog research focuses on the nuances of blogging and on what makes one blogger different from another. The second wave of blog research aims to create a typology of blogs based on a variety of criteria including functionality, purpose, the readers, and even the kind of expertise provided by the bloggers.

3.3.1. Bloggers vs. Journalists Debate

When blogs first appeared in the mainstream news media, many thought of them as a funny thing with a funny name—something of a fad, on the periphery, something for the nerdy. David Perlmutter writes "Blogs got their undignified television introduction on *CNNdotCom* program on July 8, 2000" when one of the channel's correspondent introduced the "nerdword" with "No. it's not the way you feel in the morning after drinking too much tequila the night before. And no, it's not one of the creatures found in Dr. Seuss's zoo" (Perlmutter, 2008, p. 11). The ensuing debate about bloggers and journalism contains elements from one of the following permutations: can bloggers be considered journalists; what are the differences between a blogger and a journalist; are bloggers the future of journalism, will blogs replace news agencies.

In an attempt to identify the elements in a typical blog Papacharissi conducted a content analysis of 260 blogs in 2007 to answer two questions: (1) what are the descriptive elements of blogs? (2) how are the content, structure and design of blogs interrelated? The blogs were randomly drawn from the directory of *Blogger.com* which according to the author was "the primary host of blogs at the time the study was conducted and because it was the pioneer in providing blogging space and the services that facilitate the practice" (Papacharissi, 2007, p. 24). This study concludes that blogs resemble more of a diary format than an independent journalism

ideal that nevertheless provides an interesting diversion from the traditional diary due to the fact that "blogs are open for all to browse" (p.35)

Typical of the journalist-blogger debate is the argument put forward by *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist, Debra Saunders, who argues that having a camera and a website does not make someone a journalist "any more than shooting a criminal makes a vigilante a cop" (Saunders, 2007). Saunders criticizes newspapers (including the one she works for) that call video-blogger, Josh Wolf a journalist. Saunders has a valid point yet there are bloggers out there who are not employed by a news agency but who do excellent reporting such as the famed Baghdad blogger, Salam-Pax, a young Iraqi architect who "captivated readers around the world with his personal accounts in English of what it was like to live through the US invasion of Iraq" (Mackinnon, 2008, p. 245) and awakened the media world "to the global power of first-hand, personal accounts written by non-journalists."(Mackinnon, 2008, p. 245) Wall, in her content analysis of "war-blogs" such as the one by Salam-Pax, examines current events weblogs or blogs that were particularly active during the second US war with Iraq, in the spring of 2003. Wall suggests that blogs are a new genre of journalism that emphasizes "personalization, audience participation in content creation and story forms that are fragmented and interdependent with other websites" and argues that these characteristics suggest a shift away from a traditional journalism approach toward a new form of "journalism infused with postmodern sensibilities" (Wall, 2005, p. 153).

Bruns and Jacobs document and analyze commercial news production of another type of blog—news aggregator blogs such as *Indymedia* and, using the concept of gatekeeping, argue that users of news (the bloggers) can also be producers of news, that is, producer/users or "produsers" (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006) The authors propose that active *produsers* are utilizing the open access nature of the Internet to actively create news content as alternatives to corporate-dominated

online news content. Lasica (2003b) also uses a similar approach to Bruns and Jacobs where he identifies as participatory journalism, a process where bloggers and Internet users contribute to mainstream news sites, independent or noncommercial websites (2003b), participatory websites such as user-generated news-site *OhmyNews* and *Indymedia*, and *Slashdot.com*. However, another study on participatory journalism finds that the participatory journalism approach to news is gradually beginning to resemble traditional commercial news (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Journalist blogs, or J-blogs, are produced by journalists affiliated with commercial media organizations or by independent journalists.

Reese et al. analyzed six popular political and news blogs in order to determine their relationship to other Weblogs and traditional news media (Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, & Jeong, 2007). The authors conclude that blogs have a complementary and dependent relationship with traditional news and that blogs, while not radically journalistic in nature, often cross the boundaries between traditional journalism and online diaries. MacKinnon also writes that "bloggers have been described as 'feeding on news' that has been 'discarded' or overlooked by news organizations. The fact that these discarded subjects have on numerous occasions garnered widespread public interest has in turn challenged the long-held editorial assumptions and norms governing the work of news organizations, causing re-examination and adjustment by the profession as a whole." (Mackinnon, 2008, p. 244)

This "feeding on news" suggests a somewhat porous boundary between blogs and traditional media. Based on the analysis of seven bloggers, Matheson suggests that although J-blogs function as individuals, they still tend toward the conventions of news journalism (Matheson, 2004). Lowrey who uses a systems framework to map the journalism-blogging relationship from a sociological perspective argues that blogs represent a challenge to the occupational responsibilities of traditional journalists (Lowrey, 2006).Unlike individual blogs, J-

blogs "have an organizationally based occupation with a relatively long tradition, the resources, the division of labor, the formal structures of rewards and punishments, and the legal backing to maintain control over information work." (p. 491) Thus, J-blogs are, according to Robinson's analysis of blogs written by journalists, "the corporate answer to the Internet and to independent bloggers … a way for journalists to reclaim journalism—and its standards—online." (Robinson, 2006, p. 79) Singer reports that these political J-blogs use links extensively, but link primarily to other mainstream media sites (Singer, 2005). Singer's analysis concludes that J-blogs reflect traditional journalistic norms and practices. Independent journalists also produce political J-blogs in the form of community journalism, civic journalism, or watchdog journalism (Dueze, 2003). Deuze (2003) finds that independent media tend to take an oppositional approach to news coverage, providing perspectives not found in traditional news content.

As the research above indicates the line of research that tries to decide whether bloggers are journalists and what kind of a relationship bloggers have with journalism takes a back seat in the overall research of blogs, as a general consensus emerges, that while some blogging can be considered journalism, not all bloggers could automatically be considered as journalists. Nowadays, CNN no longer makes fun of the term blog or has any qualms about using blogs or any of the newer technologies such as *Twitter*[32], *Facebook*, or *MySpace* page—or all four of them. In fact, every news anchor of every major network has a blog and it has become a standard line during every single show to say "…and don't forget to go to our blog to tell us what you think about…We appreciate all out viewer's comments…" In addition, 24-hour news networks have fully embraced "citizen-journalism" and view bloggers as complimentary to what they do, exemplified by creating segments such as CNN's *iReport* or Fox News's *uReport* that incorporate

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[32] Twitter is an online text-based communication application which allows for the exchange of quick, frequent messages. People write short searchable updates, often called "tweets" of 140 characters or fewer.

video clips, sound bites or photographs submitted by their viewers into the regular news segments. There are definite merits to this form of news-gathering as shrinking allocation for full-time stringers becomes endemic in the business as well as the availability of multiple sources of first-hand accounts of the events as they happen especially in the case of accidents, natural disasters, and other spontaneous events. There is also a sense of nascent low-level participatory journalism with the (voluntary) sharing of news that are inherently democratic.

3.3.2. Moving On: "Second Wave" of Blog Research

As we get to know more and more about blogs, the main elements of the blog as we know it become clearer and more meaningful and not as "hazy to observers and participants at the dawn of the blog." (Perlmutter, 2008) Researchers who studied the connection or difference between blogging and journalism often concede that there is general agreement that bloggers and journalists "complement each other, intersect with each other, play off one another." (Lasica, 2003a) Media scholar and blogger Jay Rosen even proclaims that the debate of "bloggers vs. journalists is over" and adds that he does not think "anyone will mourn its passing"(Rosen, 2005) Rosen argues that ultimately the journalist versus blogger debate is misleading, given that blog content and traditional media content often overlap.

Building on a more mature and developed understanding of the new media, researchers seek to move beyond the earlier (but necessary) research questions. The second "wave" of research on blogs attempts to classify and categorize blogs as compared to the initial burst of research that was mainly concerned with the understanding of "what is a blog" and "who is a blogger." This second-wave of blog research is more interested in systematically deconstructing the functions of blogs and bloggers—looking at the subtleties and nuances—in creating a typology. In other words, they want to know "what do bloggers do?" and "in how many ways?"

This is seen as a natural progression in the study of a highly popular, widely accepted and widely used communication technology. As Stephen Cooper argues:

> …if blogs are evolving into a legitimate social institution then it will be helpful to have an analytical framework with which to weigh the value of the media criticism available in the blogosphere…to thoughtfully consider how that material relates to earlier forms of mass communication and earlier scholarly analysis of mass communication effects, with an eye toward its impact on the public sphere… (Cooper, 2006)

McKenna and Pole in their study of political bloggers describe four distinct activities engaged by political bloggers:1) informing readers, 2) checking the media, 3) engaging in political advocacy, and 4) gathering money for charitable causes (McKenna & Pole, 2008). Bloggers also *form networks*. Bloggers network with other bloggers through cross-linking and cross-referencing. Bloggers formalize relationships with other bloggers through a blogroll or a sidebar of hyperlinks to the bloggers' favorite blogs (McKenna, 2007, p. 219).

In his book, *Blogwars*, David Perlmutter (2008) describes nine functions that political bloggers perform: 1) Blogger as compiler of political information; 2) Blogger as informant in a political marketplace; 3) Blogger as collector and collator; 4) Blogger as reviser and extender of big media; 5) Blogger as investigative reporter; 6) Blogger as political analyst and critic; 7) Blogger as political watchdog; 8) Blogger as political educator, and 9) Blogs as *wisebots* of politics and policy. Bloggers could "serve the public as informants, investigators, collators and compilers, and revisers and extenders of political information." (Perlmutter, 2008, p.110) Blogs perform a very simple yet crucial function, that is, to tell people what is out there. Perlmutter argues that this simple "check this out" function should not be underestimated. In an era where there are billions of web pages in addition to traditional print and broadcasting, it is nearly impossible for any one individual to seek out, let alone process the enormous amount of data and information that is relevant to his or her life—"bloggers thus perform the service of providing

political content for journalists and government and political workers and the rest of us in several

dimensions" (p.111). Another way for bloggers to create new content is to revise and extend to

existing their endeavor and also but going where big media are otherwise too distracted to

venture. Perlmutter predicts that while current "investigative reporting on the blogs typically is

either Google driven or source based…we will no doubt see an increase in this subgenre of

blogging." (p.124) Perlmutter predicts that in the future, "there will be more blogs that *serve as*

political educators and more bit media coverage of that function." (p.139) In this capacity,

"bloggers speak to their own readers about the realities of politics and political communication."

(p. 139)

      Marc Lynch who writes about Arab political bloggers, highlights three principle activities

which they engage in: Activism, bridge-blogging, and public sphere engagement, (Lynch, 2007).

"*Activists* are directly involved in political movements, using blogs to coordinate political action,

spread information, and magnify the impact of contentious politics"(Lynch, 2007). The term

"bridge blog" was coined by Iranian blogger Hossein Derakhshan in 2004 to describe an

emerging group of bloggers whose blogs act as "bridges" between their home country and a

wider global audience (Mackinnon, 2008). Derakhshan himself started blogging in 2002 and is

dubbed the "Iranian Blogfather" because of his contribution of providing the first Persian-

language guide to set up a blog. The bridge-blogger concept was elaborated further by Ethan

Zukerman of *Global Voices Online*[33], who writes that bridge-bloggers "primarily address

Western audiences, usually writing in English with the intention of explaining their societies"

(Lynch, 2007) and that there are "tens of thousands of people around the world who have

emerged as bridge-bloggers" (Mackinnon, 2008, p. 245). The third function Lynch writes about is

[33] Global Voices is a non-profit global citizens' media project founded at Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, a research think-tank focused on the Internet's impact on society. Available from http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/

a common one found in previous descriptions of blogger's activities. *Public-sphere* engaging bloggers "tend to not be directly involved in a political movement, but are deeply engaged with public arguments about domestic (and often Arab or Islamic) politics".(Lynch, 2007, p. 11)

McKenna (2007), in another study, indentifies specialty bloggers, she calls policy bloggers. These are bloggers who are interested in making their opinion known in the blogosphere, sharing information and knowledge with the readers. As the blogosphere matures, we should also see more and more bloggers functioning as what McKenna has called "provider of expertise". Providing expertise requires vast knowledge of the certain topic and very often entails in-depth research on the matter and not just simply providing opinion and commentary. McKenna underscores that policy bloggers differ from the usual run of the mill bloggers and even the so-called A-list bloggers (McKenna, 2007). According to McKenna, policy bloggers are specialists dealing with one issue on their blogs whereas most bloggers are generalists. McKenna describes six activities of policy bloggers: 1) Filtering information; 2)Providing expertise; 3)Forming networks; 4)Gaining attention; 5)Framing arguments; and 6)Using windows of opportunity, (McKenna, 2007)

There are other types of research on blogging besides the ones mentioned above. Sundar et. al. examined 47 mental health blogs which dealt with a wide range of diseases (Sundar, Hatfield Edwards, Hu, & Stavrositu, 2007). The list of 47 blogs was randomly selected from two online mental health directories. The authors noted that among the consistent problem that arose in the selection of other directories was that most blogs listed did not actually deal directly with any particular mental health disease. However, for the purpose of this study, only blogging research that is related to democracy, politics, journalism, or freedom of expression has been examined.

3.4.   Taking the Malaysian Blogging Paradox Seriously

Blogging made enough of an impact in Malaysia, that it has prompted serious discussions of this new medium not only within the country but in its southern neighbor, Singapore which is known for its tight control over the media environment. The Institute of Public Policy in Singapore invited several prominent bloggers including Jeff Ooi, who was elected to Parliament in the 2008 General Election, Ahirudin Attan, the president for *All-Blogs*, Haris Ibrahim, who is a human rights lawyer and part of the defense team for Ahirudin Attan and Jeff Ooi in a defamation suit filed by the NSTP Group, and Nathaniel Tan, a member of the Opposition party who was arrested under the Official Secrets Act in 2007, as well as Steven Gan, the editor-in-chief of *Malaysiakini.com*, to a roundtable discussion called "Impact of ICTs on the Malaysian Elections—Lessons for Singapore"[34]. The interest Singapore has with the Malaysian blogosphere is understandable, as the two nations share a similar social and political heritage. To be sure, a Singaporean blogosphere does exists—there are government agency blogs, big media company blogs, youth organization blogs, and even an association for bloggers named *Tomorrow.sg* dedicated "to promoting, protecting and educating its members; supporting the development of blogging as new media"[35]. Yet these blogs are eerily devoid of political discussion, mostly entertainment or "fun" news. Political discussions in Singapore, whether they are hosted on a blog or on printed newspaper are firmly in the margins of the political periphery.

Therein lays a paradox: despite Singapore being technologically and economically superior, it is Malaysia, not Singapore that has become the site of contentious political blogging. Cherian George first made the curious observation in his book Contentious Journalism and the

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[34] See Institute of Public Policy's website. Available from
http://www.ips.org.sg/events/Roundtable/Roundtable_Malaysian%20Elections_090408/Synopsis_Roundtable%20on%20Malaysian%20Elections_090408.htm
[35] According to the *Tomorrow.sg* website. Retrieved Feb 2, 2009 from
http://tomorrow.sg/archives/2009/01/19/association_of_bloggers_singapor.html

Internet, comparing the use of the Internet for contentious writings in Singapore and Malaysia (George, 2006). He noticed that Singaporeans earned five times more than Malaysians on average, Singapore was ranked much higher on the World Economic Forum's "Networked Readiness Index"[36], and Singapore had more Internet users and personal computers per 100 inhabitants than Malaysia[37]. George argues that "Singapore's technological superiority over most of Asia is obvious and unambiguous." (2006, p. 176). Yet, according to George the paradox lies in the fact that "it is Malaysia, not Singapore that is home to more developed contentious online journalism" (2006, p. 176). Malaysia's main alternatives websites attracts more than 100,000 people whereas Singapore measures the visitors in the thousands, or hundreds. Malaysia has at least three alternative sites employing full-time staff including the online newspaper, *Malaysiakini.com* with original daily updates, but Singapore has none and a contentious Singaporean "website can consider itself on a roll if it adds a news article once a week." (George, 2006, p. 176).

Furthermore, when compared to other countries, where contentious blogging takes place, such as Iran and Egypt, Malaysian bloggers seem to be able to get away with more. So much so that at least five prominent pro-Opposition bloggers were elected into office in 2008 for the first time:

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[36] In the 2007-2008 *Networked Readiness Index,* Singapore was ranked at No.5 while Malaysia was ranked at No.26. Retrieved Feb 2, 2009 from http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gitr/2008/Rankings.pdf

[37] In 2000, Singapore had 32 Internet users and 48 personal computers per 100 inhabitants, while Malaysia had 17 and nine, respectively (as cited in George, 2006, p.176)

Bloggers Elected to Political Office in the 2008 General Election

Elected Blogger	Political Affiliation	District	Seat
Jeff Ooi	DAP	Jelutong	Parliamentary
Tony Pua	DAP	PJ Utara	Parliamentary
Sim Tze Tzin	PKR	Pantai Jerejak	State Assembly
Elizabeth Wong	PKR	Bukit Lanjan	State Assembly
Nik Nazmi	PKR	Seri Setia	State Assembly

In other words, against the background of a long history of media control as outlined in the preceding chapter and a Government that is taking on a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde persona—embracing the best and the latest in web technology, believing the Internet will be the next big driver of economic growth, but on the other hand, it is ambivalent and hostile towards blogging—we are witnessing the rise of the web-based, user-generated alternative platform for expression in the form of blogs in the country.

Blogs are definitely becoming an important nexus of dissension in the political arena. Political or critical blogs serve the dual platform of *content creation* as well as a platform for *political dissension* in a country with restrictive media policies. It is perhaps the only outlet currently beyond most governments' direct control and the ruling elites have become aware of its potential especially after the March 8th Election. The present government has thus far kept its promise in the 1996 Bill of Guarantees[38] which proclaims "no censorship of the Internet." Yet, the arrests, interrogations, and defamation suits against popular bloggers by the government and the government-linked media conglomerate in the country is worrying and could be seen as another perverted collaboration between the *four estates* to dumb down the fifth-estates.

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[38] The Bill of Guarantees is the cornerstone of the ambitious Multimedia Super Corridor project in Malaysia.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs several methods to address the research questions put forward. The main methods of data collection are in-depth interviews, textual analysis, policy analysis, and historical analysis. Qualitative in-depth interviews with socio-political bloggers were conducted in Malaysia between June and August 2008. To give more nuance and context to the research, a textual analysis of primary and secondary sources including blog-sites, newspaper articles, speeches, interviews, and other public documents made by politicians, media practitioners, and bloggers themselves was conducted. Again, to give another layer of detail to this study, a review of the various laws and policies has also been included. While this is not a historical study of the mass media in Malaysia, a study of this nature cannot exclude a fair amount of historical description of the development of mass media, especially in relation to media ownership and cases of suppression of freedom of expression in the country. To this end, mostly secondary sources were used to construct an overview of the media landscape in the country in which the story of the development of blogging could be accurately placed within the larger context.

4.1. Data from Qualitative and In-depth Interviewing

This study employs interviewing—specifically *qualitative* and *in-depth interviewing*—as the central methodological tool to gather information from socio-political bloggers in Malaysia. As Steinar Kvale succinctly asks "if you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk with them?"(Kvale, 1996, p. 1). According to Kvale, "qualitative research

interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations." (ibid, p. 6) Interviews could be understood as a "conversation that has structure and a purpose." (ibid) This is not the same as two friends having a chat for it goes "beyond the spontaneous exchange of views…and becomes a careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge." (ibid, p. 3) There is certainly a power difference in such a conversation because it is not "a conversation between equal partners…the researcher defines and controls the situation." (ibid)

"Qualitative interviewing is based in conversation with the emphasis on researchers asking questions and listening, and respondents answering. Interview participants are more likely to be viewed as meaning makers, not passive conduits for retrieving information from an existing vessel of answers"(Warren, 2001, p. 83). According to Warren, "the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to derive interpretations, not facts or laws, from respondent talk". This dynamic aspect of eliciting interpretations is an important part of this study. "When an interview is viewed as a dynamic, meaning-making occasion, however, different criteria apply, centered on how meaning is constructed, the circumstances of construction, and the meaningful linkages that are assembled for the occasion."(Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 9)

In-depth interviewing as the name implies, seeks 'deep' information and understanding. Johnson deconstructed the term and describes four goals that could be achieved through the technique. First, the interviewer seeks to achieve the same deep level of knowledge and understanding as the participants. This is especially relevant to researchers who are not "a current or a former member or participant in what is being investigated."(Johnson, 2002, p. 106) Secondly, while in-depth interviews begin with "commonsense perceptions, explanations, and understandings of some lived cultural experience" (2002, p. 106) They should aim "to explore the

contextual boundaries of that experience or perception, to uncover what is usually hidden from ordinary view or reflections." (2002, p. 106) Third, "deep understandings can reveal how commonsense assumptions, practices, and ways of talking partly constitute our self interests and how we understand them." (2002, pp. 106-107) Lastly, Johnson writes that "deep understandings allow us to grasp and articulate the multiple views of perspectives on, and meanings of some activity, event, place or cultural object." (2002, p. 107) Using his own study on multiple perspectives on the death penalty, Johnson argues that knowing whether an individual is 'for' or 'against' the death penalty tells us little about the complicated, multifaceted perspectives on and meanings of capital executions. Similarly, simply knowing whether an individual is "for" or "against" freedom of speech, democracy or an information society tells us very little about the complicated, multifaceted perspectives of these very complex issues.

We should also further delineate two common assumptions of the interviewer's role. Kvale (1996) used the metaphor of a miner and a travelling reporter to describe these two assumptions. In the miner metaphor, the interviewer is perceived as a miner in search for "real-meaning nuggets", that is to say, stored somewhere within the minds of participants are "some basic meanings waiting to be discovered, and uncovered uncontaminated, by the objective techniques of an interviewer." (p.225) The second assumption, also known as inter-relational conception, the "interviewer is a traveling reporter who reports stories in which meanings are created through conversational interactions"—to allow for an "unfolding, a differentiation, and an enrichment of the subjective." (p.226) The dynamic nature of the blogosphere and bloggers who inhibit the space tend to align research of the medium with metaphor of a travelling reporter.

4.1.1. A Note on In-depth Interviews

While in-depth interviews are excellent methodological tools for collecting "deeper information"

that a simple survey, informal interviews and focus group would not be able to obtain, there are

other concerns that must be recognized by the researcher who employs such method. Johnson

(2002) cautions in-depth interviewers of not hearing what their informants tell them, "but only

what their own intellectual and ethical development has prepared them to hear." (2002, p. 106)

Another kind of "not hearing" could be found in the example of the well-known study by

anthropologist Margaret Mead who lived in Samoan villages for several months observing and

interviewing Samoan female adolescents and produce one of the classics in the field, *Coming of

Age in Samoa* (1928). In a reexamination of Mead's research, Derek Freeman re-interviewed

many of the original respondents and concluded that Mead was misled by her female adolescent

respondents and they had only told Mead what they thought she wanted to hear (Johnson, 2002,

p. 104). Freeman's claim created a controversy in the field not only because it may tarnish the

intellectual integrity of a respected researcher but also just as significant because of the research

methodologies—including in-depth interviewing—that are widely used in academia.

4.1.2. Selecting Bloggers Using the Blogroll Cross-Referencing Method

Interviews with political bloggers in Malaysia form an integral part of the data collected.

Therefore a systematic approach to generate a list of bloggers to be interviewed was necessary.

With this in mind, a new method of selecting bloggers has been devised for this study—the

Blogroll Cross-Referencing (BCR) method.

The BCR method utilizes the blogrolls located on the *starter blogs* or *blog-seeds* to

generate a preliminary list of bloggers with similar interests to the initial blogs. This method was

developed for this study to complement existing methods of "sampling" the blogosphere such as

random sampling[39] or the *snow-balling* methods (Papacharissi, 2007) that are more suitable for a general study of blogs rather than for a study on a specific type of blog, that is, socio-political blogs. A more manageable and systematic way of identifying suitable blogs as research subjects specific to this study was needed and the BCR method fulfills that need.

4.1.3. What are Blogrolls?

Blogroll is a list of blogs usually located in the sidebar of a blog. All blog hosting services provide the user the capability to include a blogroll on their blog. The blogs on the blogroll contain hyperlinks to the respective blogs, so by clicking on the blogs located on the blogroll readers could easily bring up those blog sites. Bloggers include a blogroll on their own blog for a variety of reasons.

A blogger may decide to include a certain blog on its own blogroll purely because the writings or the topic of that particular blog is of interest to him or her. This would also serve to inform the blogger's own reader of his or her general area of interest. Another function of having a blogroll has more to do with the perceived camaraderie of the blogosphere. In the sense, the blogroll is one blogger's acknowledgement of another blogger's effort. A related but more practical way of looking at this is reciprocity—a blogger would add a certain blog onto his or her blogroll in the hope that the act would be reciprocated by the blogger. The effect of this is to enlarge the circle of influence, popularity and fame of a blogger. The more people who link to you the more connected and well known you are likely to become. Ranking websites such as Technorati[40] also pick up on these cross-hyperlinkings, which help raise the blog's ranking. Therefore it is a win-win situation for bloggers to add a blogroll on their blogs. McKenna (2007)

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[39] Papacharissi conducted a content analysis of 260 randomly selected blogs in her study of audiences as media producers.

[40] http://www.technorati.com

agrees on the importance of readers to a blogger. She argues that "bloggers care about readership. Every blogger uses a counter that measures unique visitors and the number of hits. These counters also tell the blogger the location of the readers and whether he or she reached the blog via a hyperlink. The wider the reach of a blog, the more respect they gain both with bloggers and non-bloggers alike." (McKenna, 2007, p. 223)

4.1.4. The Initial Selection: Identifying the Blog-seeds

Three blog sites were selected as the *starter blogs* or *blog-seeds*. These blog-seeds served as the basis for the BCR method. These three blog-seeds were Jeff Ooi's *Screenshot.com*, Ahiruddin Attan's *RockysBru.blogspot.com*, and Nathaniel Tan's *Jelas.info.com.* They were selected because each of them was directly involved in landmark cases that had important repercussions within the Malaysian blogosphere. *Screenshot.com* and *Rocky's Bru* were the first blogs in the country to have been charged with defamation for the contents on their blogs. Nathaniel Tan is the first blogger to be arrested under the Official Secrets Act and was detained for 4 days, again because of the content published on his blog. In other words, these were the extreme cases that could serve as a purposive sample in this study.

4.1.5. Finalizing the List of Interviewees

The URLs found on the blogrolls of the three blog-seeds were compiled and listed in their entirety to produce a preliminary list of 164 unique blogs URLs[41]. That process was repeated with the 164 blogs to generate a second list[42] containing 3726 items[43]. Next, each item on the second list was cross-referenced to determine the number of times a particular blog's URL appears on the

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[41] The list was generated on Microsoft Excel program. Dead links were removed.
[42] The same process could be repeated with the second list to generate an even bigger sample.
[43] These are not unique URLs but simply a compilation of all the URLs from the 164 unique blogs.

list of 164 bloggers. From this list of cross-referenced blogs, the top 50 blogs were selected as

potential interviewees for the study (after eliminating bloggers not residing in Malaysia). 50 email

invitations were sent individually to these bloggers either through their published emails or if the

email address is not available, a shorter invitation was posted on the comment section of their

blogs with my contact details. The invitations were sent out in April 2008. Out the 50 invitations,

26 responded positively. A second email to verify the date, time, and location for the interview

was sent. Follow-up and reminder emails were sent periodically. Four bloggers eventually

became unavailable including one whose father had suffered a stroke, five bloggers did not

respond to the follow-up emails and were dropped from the list. However, some flexibility with

the list of interviewees was permitted on a case-by-case basis. For example, in the case of blogger

Mahathir Mohamad who started blogging after the initial invitations had been sent out but has

since become the top blogger in the country and with Shankar Narayanan who was invited to

participate in the interview process by another blogger. By the conclusion of the fieldwork, 19

interviews with bloggers and three interviews with non-bloggers were successfully conducted.

The interviews took place between June-August 2008. All interviews were transcribed.

Figure 4: Blogroll Cross-Referencing (BCR) Method Flow

| Identify blogs appropriate to be used as blog-seeds according to the research theme | Generate a preliminary list of blogs from blogrolls obtained from the blog-seeds | Generate a second expanded list by listing all the blogs from the blogrolls from the preliminary list | Cross-reference each unique blog URLs in the expanded list. Note down the frequency | Generate a final shortlist of blogs based on the number of times they are cross-referenced. |

Table 2: List of Interviews Conducted for the Study (June-August 2008)

No.	Bloggers/Non-Bloggers Interviewees	Blog URLs	Interview Location
1	"Desiderata"	http://desiderata2000.blogspot.com	Kuala Lumpur
2	"Howsy"	http://howsy.blogspot.com	Kuala Lumpur
3	"Whatalulu"	http://www.whatalulu.blogspot.com	Petaling Jaya
4	"Zewt"	http://zewt.blogspot.com	Kuala Lumpur
5	Ahirudin Attan (Rocky)	http://rockybru.blogspot.com	Bangsar
6	Chris Chew	http://mob1900.blogspot.com	Petaling Jaya
7	Elviza Michelle	http://elviza.wordpress.com/	Bangsar
8	Jeff Ooi	http://www.jeffooi.com	Kuala Lumpur
9	Jun E Tan	http://junex2.blogspot.com/	Subang
10	Mahathir Mohamad	http://www.chedet.com	Kuala Lumpur
11	Malik Imtiaz Sarwar	http://malikimtiaz.blogspot.com	Kuala Lumpur
12	Marina Mahathir	http://www.rantingsbymm.blogspot.com	Bangsar
13	Nathaniel Tan	http://jelas.info	Petaling Jaya
14	Nuraina A. Samad	http://www.nursamad.blogspot.com	Bangsar
15	S.K. Thew	http://www.skthew.com	Puchong
16	Shankar Narayanan	http://donplaypuks.blogspot.com/	Kuala Lumpur
17	Sim Tze Tzin	http://www.simformalaysia.com	Kuala Lumpur
18	Tony Pua	http://tonypua.blogspot.com	Kuala Lumpur
19	Tony Yew	http://muststopthis.blogspot.com/	Petaling Jaya
20*	Azizuddin Sani	Assistant Professor of Law in Universiti Utara Malaysia	Kuala Lumpur
21*	Yow Foo Chuan	Senior TV Producer in ASTRO Broadcasting Center	Puchong
22*	Lim Kim Wah	Assistant Secretary at IAMD	Petaling Jaya

*these participants are non-bloggers

** full recordings of the interview on file with present author

4.1.6. Profiles of the Bloggers and Their Blogs

This section briefly describes the 19 bloggers interviewed in the study focusing on their political interest, education and professional background as well as a brief description of their respective blogs. Briefly, the bloggers interviewed here are all well-educated, some with multiple degrees and display strong interests in social issues. They consist mainly of socio-political (SoPo) bloggers. They have stable jobs and are all considered as white-collar professionals including lawyers, politicians, and lecturers. These attributes may have contributed to them being early adopters of the blogging technology.

"Desiderata" (http://desiderata2000.blogspot.com)

Desiderata (real name Chong Yen Long, in his mid-fifties) is a former journalist and free-lance writer. He has also self-published books on poetry which he had written. He travels between his home in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan and Kuala Lumpur. He also organized the first *Bloggers United Malaysia* (B.U.M) event in 2007, which is a social event which brings together bloggers around the country. His blog, *Desiderata*, is heavily focused on politics and extremely critical of the *Barisan Nasional.*

"Howsy" (http://howsy.blogspot.com)

Howsy (in his early thirties) holds a doctorate in chemical engineering from the US and is working as a lecturer in one of the private colleges in the country. He doesn't wish to be identified in the interview by his real name. His blog, *Sensintrovert*, is heavily focused on politics and is very critical of the *Barisan Nasional*. Any news of elections, including by-elections and of defections by politicians is bound to be blogged about on his blog.

"Whatalulu" (http://whatalulu.blogspot.com)

Whatalulu blogs in the third-person. This is rather unique in comparison to other bloggers. "Lulu" is the blog persona the blogger has taken for herself online. Although she does not hide the fact that she blogs, she notes that her colleagues do not know of her "double-identity" and had expressed her preference to be identified as her online persona in the interview. Her blog also does not contain any hints of her real-world entity. The self-identified "dumb blonde" blogger is in fact an upper-level management in a hypermarket chain in her thirties. However, she is candid about the fact that she is also the campaign manager for the blogger Tony Pua, who was elected to Parliament in the 2008 Election—a fact that was revealed during the interview. Her blog, *Whatalulu*, is a "third-person" commentary on the socio-political developments in the country especially those that are directly related to the Opposition but she does not overtly criticizes the ruling government.

"Zewt" (http://zewt.blogspot.com)

Zewt is in his early thirties and works as an account manager for a bank. He blogs at *As Zewt As It Gets*. The focus of his blog ranges from political issues to other more general topics including economy and lifestyle. The blog is not overtly supportive of any political parties but it does emphasize on news which are related to the Opposition.

Ahirudin Attan (http://rockybru.blogspot.com)

Ahirudin Attan or better known as *Rocky* is a former editor of the local English daily, *Malay Mail* (part of the NSTP Group). The NSTP group filed a defamation suit against him in January of 2007 along with another blogger Jeff Ooi. Currently, he is the advisor to the *National Press Club* and the president for the *National Alliance of Bloggers* (*All-Blogs*) which was founded in the

wake of the defamation charges and a series of arrests of bloggers in the country. Since then he

has appeared in numerous interviews locally and internationally for his involvement with the

promotion of bloggers' rights. The name of his blog, Rocky's Bru, is taken from a column which

he used to write when he was working for the Malay Mail. His blog focuses on the political

events in the country especially those related to freedom of expression and he is critical of the

current Government.

Chris Chew (http://mob1900.blogspot.com)

Chris Chew's (in his early thirties) or "Mob" blogging style is unique in the Malaysian

blogosphere. While most blog posts are text-based with the occasional photos or video clips,

almost all of Chris Chew's posts are graphic posters satirizing the current political development

in the country and critical of the *Barisan Nasional*. This is related to his profession as graphic

designer. Many of his artworks especially those in support of free speech causes are prominently

displayed on numerous blogs, giving Chris Chew a wide reach in the blogosphere. In addition, his

designs have been used as banners and logos on T-shirts worn by protesters in public

demonstrations.

Elviza Michelle Kamal (http://elviza.wordpress.com)

Elviza (in her early thirties) is a corporate lawyer who calls herself a "glorified debt-collector,"

received her law degree in the UK. Her blog, *Write Away*, is a mix of political and social

commentaries, personal lives especially of her family, and her passion for writing in general. She

does not include legal advices or opinion in her blog posts to avoid the possibilities of conflict of

interest. The blog takes a more "neutral" political position, focusing rather on the issues and not

the political party.

Jeff Ooi (http://www.jeffooi.com)

Jeff Ooi (in his mid-forties) is a pioneer of the Malaysian blogosphere. He was once called the "most influential blogger in the country" by the online news portal, *Malaysiakini.com*. Many of the current batch of bloggers, including many in this study, attributed their early influence and interest in blogging to Jeff Ooi. He and Ahirudin Attan were the first bloggers in the country to be sued for defamation by the NSTP Group. Jeff Ooi is also one of the two bloggers who was elected as Member of Parliament (MP) as the Democratic Action Party (DAP) member in the 2008 Election. Nowadays, his blog, *Screenshots*, is mostly about exposing wrong doings of the *Barisan Nasional*. He and Tony Pua, the other blogger elected as MP started live blogging from the Parliament sessions after they came into office.

June E Tan (http://junex2.blogspot.com)

June E (mid-twenties) is a doctoral student in the field of communication studies. She was one of the early members of All-blogs and was involved in the formulation of the association's charter. She also co-wrote a book on blogging and democracy in the country. Nowadays, her blog, June2x, focuses of more on her personal life than on socio-political matters.

Mahathir Mohamad (http://www.chedet.com)

Dr. Mahathir Mohamad is the former Prime Minister of Malaysia (1981-2003). He started his blog site on May 1, 2008 and has since then received more than 11 million hits (as of January 2009), making him the top blogger in the country. The name of his blog, *CheDet.com*, is an old pen-name which he had used prior to becoming the Prime Minister. His blog focuses heavily on his views of the political situation in the country. He has been a vocal critic of his successor, Abdullah Badawi, and uses his blog as a platform to criticize the Abdullah administration.

Mahathir Mohamad can be considered as the ultimate "outsider-insider" of UMNO politics, the dominant political party in the country. He has been instrumental in the party for a quarter century, yet he resigned from the party in 2008 and claimed to be treated as "pariah" within his own party.

Malik Imtiaz Sarwar (http://malikimtiaz.blogspot.com)

Malik Imtiaz (in his mid thirties) or Imtiaz is well-known lawyer in Malaysia. He has his own practice in the suburbs of Kuala Lumpur and takes up pro-bono cases every year. He is one of the lawyers defending Jeff Ooi and Ahirudin Attan in their defamation suit as well as for Raja Petra Kamarudin when he was charged under the Sedition Act and the ISA. Imtiaz had received death threats before from Islamic groups for his involvement in the case of Lina Joy, a Muslim-born woman who wanted to convert to Christianity. He is also the president of the National Human Rights Society (HAKAM). In addition he is a columnist for the English daily, *Malay Mail*, and the founder of the collaborative website *Project Malaysia* that aims to bring diverse opinions on topics concerning the country. His blog, *Disquiet*, features lengthy analyses on legal and constitutional matters as well as reproduction of articles which he writes for the *Malay Mail*.

Marina Mahathir (http://rantingsbymm.blogspot.com)

Marina Mahathir (in her fifties) is a writer for the column *Musings by Marina Mahathir* in the local English language daily, *The Star*. She has long been active in programs related to the education, prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS. She served as president of the Malaysian AIDS Council, an umbrella organization for 37 NGOs involved in HIV/AIDS-related programs. She was the treasurer for the National Association for Bloggers (*All-Blogs*). Marina also happens to be the eldest daughter of Malaysia's former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. Her blog,

RantingsbyMM focuses on social issues rather than on political issues per se. Among the issues which she blogs about are women's rights especially Muslim women and HIV/AIDS. She sometimes blogs about a personherl live as well as, for example she blogged about her father, Mahathir Mohamad, when he was hospitalized for seven weeks in the National Heart Institute.

Nathaniel Tan (http://jelad.info)

Nathaniel Tan (or Nat Tan, late-twenties) holds a degree from Harvard University and has edited/co-edited three books related to Malaysian politics. He is a member of the *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) and has worked as an aide to Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim. Nat Tan was the first blogger to be arrested under the Official Secrets Act in 2007 for information posted on his blog and comments left on his blog by an anonymous reader. His blog, *Jelas.info* (or *Clear.info*) is heavily focused on politics and highly critical of the ruling government.

Nuraina A. Samad (http://www.nursamad.blogspot.com) since January 2007

Nuraina Samad (mid-fifties) left the *New Straits Times* after 27 years as a journalist in March 2006. Currently, she is the Group Editor of a new magazine, *Tell*. Nuraina has also taken up the post of Honorary Secretary for All-Blogs and is a trustee for the *National Press Club*. She is the first female blogger to appear in *Blog*, a talk-show featuring (critical) bloggers on the state-run channel TV1. Her father, A. Samad Ismail, was a well known local journalist and former Internal Security Act detainee. On her blog, *3540 Jalan Sudin*, she started a popular section called "Tuesdays with Bapak" in which she wrote about the five years her father spent as an ISA detainee. It has since been published into a book. Nuraina also started the *NURIN Alert* on her blog which attempts to involve the blogging community to locate missing children.

S.K. Thew (http://www.skthew.com)

S.K. Thew (in his early thirties) is an executive for a multinational company which requires him to travel extensively in the Asia Pacific region. His blog, Mage's Lab, focuses heavily on socio-political issues including the elections, fuel prices, education policy, and other issues, with an emphasis on pro-Opposition news.

Shankar Narayanan (http://donplaypuks.blogspot.com)

Shankar (in his late fifties) is a UK trained accountant. He considers his blogging to be satirical in nature and tries not to be too similar to other "socio-political" bloggers. His writings are usually an indirect jab at the current Government and often replace well known names of places, institutions, politicians with satirical versions while satirizing them in the process.

Sim Tze Tzin (http://www.simformalaysia.com)

Sim (in his mid-thirties) was student activist while he was still in the university. The *Reformasi* period in the late 1990s prompted him to be aware of politics in the country. He later joined Anwar Ibrahim, the leader of the Opposition party in Malaysia. Sim ran for office in 2008 and succeeded in getting elected as the State Assemblyman of the state of Penang. His blog, *Sim For Malaysia*, has become a way for him to disseminate his political messages.

Tony Pua (http://tonypua.blogspot.com)

Tony Pua (in his late thirties) was an IT entrepreneur who sold his business in 2007 and devoted his time to blogging and politics. He was elected as a Member of Parliament in the 2008 Election as a member of the *Democratic Action Party* (DAP). He and Jeff Ooi blog live during the Parliament session. He had been arrested and charged, even after becoming an MP for

participating in illegal gatherings including his participation in the BERSIH Rally in 2007. His

blog, *Philosophy, Politics, and Economics*, focuses heavily on the socio-political issues in the

country.

Tony Yew (http://www.muststopthis.blogspot.com)

Tony Yew (in his mid-thirties) is a founding member of the blogger association, All-Blogs. He

and his wife worked as flight attendants for Malaysia Airlines for over ten years. He started

blogging partly because he wanted to let people know of what he viewed as his wife's wrongful

termination from the airlines because she gave birth to their third child which violated the

company's two-child policy. His blog, *Must Stop This,* is a commentary on the current political

system in the country and is critical of the ruling *Barisan Nasional*.

After the process of interviewing the bloggers had been completed, the audio recordings

were transcribed. At the same time, the transcription or *data* were grouped and sorted into

categories guided by the research questions. In addition, as new patterns emerged from the

interviews, they were evaluated and considered. Sometimes new categories were formed because

of these unplanned patterns. For example, the *maturation and development of the blog readers*

and their increasing ability to make their sound argument through comments had not been a

consideration during the questionnaire design phase but it was found to be a recurring theme in

the interviews and subsequently emerged as a category by itself. By letting the *participants'*

words speak for themselves and allowing patterns to emerge naturally, a more vivid and layered

analysis of blogging was achieved.

4.2.   Data from Newspapers, TV Interviews, Speeches, and Other Sources

The second largest source of information in this study are newspapers. Malaysian historian, Lee

Kam Hing (2005) argues that "newspapers remain an easily available source to help document

recent Malaysian history in a systematic and chronological manner." (2005, p. 166) Even though

as Lee adds, accounts by "journalists may lack the analytical depth and balance" and they often

"reflect the bias of the authorities or the papers' owners", they are at least "straightforward

chronicling of events"(Lee, 2005, p. 166). Regardless of their political affiliations and ownership

issues, the newspapers in Malaysia are at the very least, easily available and while most are pro-

establishment, what does get to be reported is usually fairly accurate and truthful. This study uses

a variety of newspapers (online and print format) as sources of information. Some of the most

frequently cited Malaysian newspapers in the study include:

- *The Star* (English language, published in Malaysia)
- *New Straits Times* (English language, published in Malaysia)
- *Utusan Malaysia* (Malay language, published in Malaysia)
- *Berita Harian* (Malay language, published in Malaysia)
- *Sinchew Jit Poh* (Chinese language, published in Malaysia)
- *Bernama National* News Agency (Malay, English language, published in Malaysia)
- *Malaysiakini.com* (English language, published in Malaysia)
- *Aliran.com* (English language, published in Malaysia)

In addition, non-Malaysian newspapers (online and print format) are also used including *Al-*

Jazeera English, *The New York Times*, and *International Herald Tribune*, *Australia Times*, and

several others. This study uses both print and online newspapers as primary sources of

information. There are some differences between the print version and the online version of the

news. The differences may have been due to the practice that online news and news for next day

print are usually handled by different people, and minor unintentional discrepancies may occur

from time to time. This kind of difference is infrequent, random and considered acceptable in the

present study. The other reason for difference is due to the way the technology is used. Unlike

print, many breaking news are constantly updated on newspaper's official website. That is to say

that as the story unfolds, the news agency would change or add on to the previous version of the

news on the website as more information becomes available. Sometimes these web versions of

the news carries suffixes such as "updated" or "update 2" to let the readers know that the

particular version has actually been altered from the previous versions. This frequency of

"updates" increases proportionately with the perceived newsworthiness of the story. The news of

the 2008 Election, the arrests of blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin, and the resignation of Law

Minister Zaid Ibrahim are just a few examples of news that received many updates throughout the

day as more information came to light. This study does not discriminate against such updates,

believing the constant updating reveals the news editors' underlying assumption of the stories'

newsworthiness. To differentiate between the various versions and to avoid confusion, this study

cites updates as different versions, that is, an "update 2" is cited differently from "update 3"

whenever possible. However, *e-papers*, the electronic newspapers that are made to look and read

like an actual printed newspaper, are treated the same as print. This is because as with print, there

is only one issue of e-newspaper per day. Two sources of e-newspapers in this study are from the

subscription based service by *News Strait Times* and the *Press Display* service[44], through which,

the e-paper version of *The Star* could be accessed.

All the Acts and legislations related to matters of Malaysian telecommunications,

broadcasting, or the Internet cited in this study could be obtained in their entirety from the official

website of the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission's (MCMC) at

http://www.skmm.gov.my. Other more general legislations such as the Official Secrets Act,

[44] During the course of this study, the Pennsylvania State University Library provides free access to the Press Display database for its students.

Sedition Act, Internal Security Act, and the Federal Constitution would be accessed from the

Digital Library Malaysia website at http://www.digitalibrary.my. The use of secondary sources is

mainly in the historical analyses of the development of the country's mass media and of specific

past events and incidents, which happened in the country. Primary sources of these natures,

including original news articles or published surveys or figures are expensive or difficult to obtain

and therefore using secondary sources such as other scholarly works is acceptable.

This chapter had described the various methods and sources of information, which are

used to set the stage for the core purpose of this research which is to accurately describe how

blogs played a part in the overall Malaysian political discourse in recent years. This study does

not rely on any single data collection methodology or source of information. For example, not

relying only on the interviews with bloggers, or only using newspaper reports. It also does not

rely only on qualitative interviews or only on textual analysis. Instead it uses at least three

different ways of collecting and analyzing data, from both primary and secondary sources. It also

uses information from both (pro)-governmental sources and pro-opposition sources as far as

possible to construct a more comprehensive perspective. The use of multiple sources and methods

increases the robustness of the data. This is in-line with the technique of triangulation which

encourages the collection of information from multiple sources but aimed at corroborating the

same fact or phenomenon (Warren & Karner, 2005; Yin, 1993).

Nevertheless, pro-Opposition sources have proven to be more accessible than

Governmental sources (see section on *Notes from the Field* in the Discussion Chapter).

Governmental red-tape and bureaucracy has frustrated my efforts in obtaining information from

public offices regarding the development of blogging in the country. While *Barisan Nasional*'s

politicians, especially those who have started blogging, were contacted several times for an

interview, no reply was received—including from the new Information Minister Ahmad Shabery

Cheek, former Chief Minister of Selangor turned blogger, Khir Toyo, and Khairy Jamaluddin who claimed to be one of the most maligned people in the blogosphere. Only two interviews out of 23 interviews conducted were with individuals explicitly affiliated with the ruling Government (Mahathir Mohamad and Lim Kim Wah). In contrast, many of the people who agreed to be interviewed are from the Opposition camp or at least sympathize with their cause, perhaps eager to tell their side of the story.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND MEDIA CONTROL IN MALAYSIA

Al Jazeera:
OK, let me return to my former question: why is the protest illegal?

Zainuddin Maidin:
… it is illegal. First is because…we have the election in Malaysia. No point of having a protest. We are allowing, we have an election every five years, never fail. We are not like Myanmar, not like other country…

[Excerpts from an interview between Al Jazeera and the Malaysian Minister of Information following the *BERSIH* mass demonstration in Kuala Lumpur on November 10, 2007]

5.1.   An Overview of Malaysia's Socio-political Landscape

Every history textbook of Malaysia describes how on 31 August 1957, the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, stood before capacity crowd at the brand new *Stadium Merdeka* (Independence Stadium) and declared the country's independence with the words "*Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!*" Locals and dignitaries from around globe witnessed the lowering of the British Union Jack for the last time in what was then known as Malaya and Tunku Abdul Rahman, a Malay prince from the northern state of Kedah, was soon sworn in as the first Prime Minister of the newly independent country. Six years later, in 1963, the eleven states in peninsular Malaya merged with the Borneo territories of Sabah and Sarawak to form modern Malaysia[45].

Malaysia is a plural society of Malays, Chinese, Indians, and various indigenous groups in the classic Furnivallian sense. This is the direct consequence of colonial British policy of

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[45] Singapore was briefly part of the 1963 alliance, but broke off from Malaysia on 9 August 1965

importing laborers from China and India to work in the highly lucrative tin mines and rubber

plantations. J.S. Furnivall, a former colonial public servant and scholar on colonialism defines

plural society as "different sections of the community living side by side but separately within the

same political unit" (cited in Lijphart, 1977) often only meeting in the market places. Furnivall

also writes that "each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, and its own

ideas and ways". And because each race will attempt to impose its own values over all the others,

"plural societies incline towards conflict" (cited in Rabushka, 1973). The British colonial policy

from the 1800s and early 1900s fundamentally altered the social fabric of old Malaya which has

repercussions till today.

　　　　According to the Population and Housing Census in 2000, ethnic Malays constitute the

majority of the population (53.4 percent), the Chinese is the next largest group (26 percent),

followed by the Indians (7.7 percent), the indigenous group (11.7 percent), and others.

Figure 5: Malaysia Population Demographic

Others 1%
Indigenous 12%
Indian 8%
Malay 53%
Chinese 26%
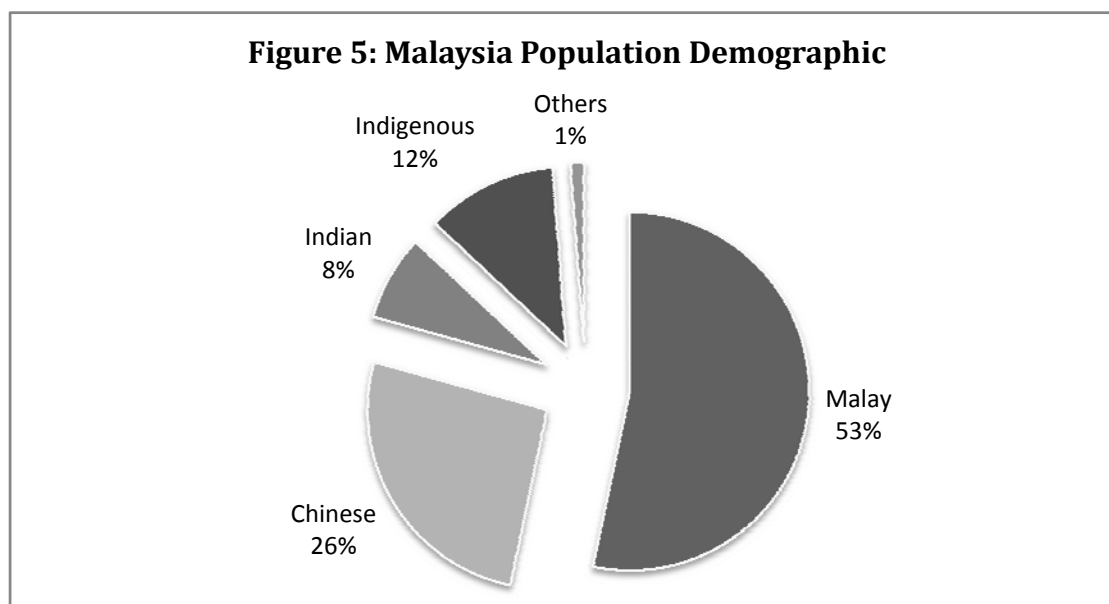
Source: Malaysia Population and Housing Census 2000

The Malays[46] and the indigenous people have usually been grouped together under the label "*Bumiputera*". *Bumiputera* literally translates to "princes of the soil" to denote the status as the original inhabitants of the land as opposed to the non-*Bumiputera*, the Chinese and the Indians, who are immigrants. Taken as a whole, the *Bumiputera* group constitutes more than 65 percent of the population—a much larger number than simply just the ethnic Malays. There is a fair amount of deliberate conflation of the figure for political reasons. Being part of a much larger *Bumiputera* group significantly expands the political base of Malay politicians. The false dichotomy of Bumiputera versus non-Bumiputera continues to plague all aspects of Malaysian life, influencing policy decisions on housing subsidies, student loan, university placing, and others. It is a false dichotomy because the

It would be an understatement to say that politics in Malaysia is highly divided along the racial line. The dominant political party in the country is the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) which is a Malay-based political party. The second largest party is the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) which represents the interests of the Chinese community; this is followed by the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) which represents the Indian community. These three parties were the founding members of the *Alliance Party* in 1957. In 1973, the Alliance Party became the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) when it took in other smaller parties[47], again most of which are ethnic-based parties. The *Barisan Nasional* has been the ruling

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[46] Malays are defined by Article 160 of the Federal Constitution as "a Malaysian citizen born to a Malaysian citizen who professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language, adheres to Malay customs, and is domiciled in Malaysia or Singapore". This strict interpretation of Malay has significant consequences to someone who converts out of Islam. They are no longer considered Malay under the law and therefore the Bumiputera privileges afforded to Malays and other indigenous people under Article 153 of the Constitution, the New Economic Policy (NEP), etc. are forfeit for such converts.

[47] They are the Malaysian People's Movement Party, People's Progressive Party, United Traditional Bumiputera Party, Sarawak United People's Party, Sabah United Party, Liberal Democratic Party, United Sabah People's Party, United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation, Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party, Sarawak People's Party, Sabah Progressive Party (withdrew from BN after the 12th General Election). These parties joined the BN at different times.

Government in the country since its independence in 1957 essentially creating a one-party system

in Malaysia.

Each of these political parties has a "younger" counterpart, the Youth divisions or Youth

wings for members between the ages of 18-40. Out of these Youth wings, the UMNO Youth is

the most prominent and controversial. UMNO Youth is the group responsible for filing most of

the charges against socio-political bloggers and have frequently staged public protests[48] in the

country. It is also the largest of any of the Youth divisions and is headed by well-connected

politicians. Currently, the head of UMNO Youth is Hishamuddin Onn, the son of Malaysia's third

Prime Minister, Hussein Onn and his deputy is Khairy Jamaluddin, the son-in-law of the current

Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi. Rivalry for the top positions in UMNO Youth is intense and

especially important for aspiring young Malay politicians because it is viewed as a stepping stone

to the site of real power, UMNO itself. Since Malaysia follows a parliamentary system, future

Prime Ministers are elected by the party that wins the election. In the case of Malaysia, it is the

14-member *Barisan Nasional* coalition. However, with UMNO being the largest in the coalition,

it had become an accepted practice that the President of UMNO would automatically be elected

as the Prime Minster of the nation. Therefore, one could say that to be part of UMNO Youth is to

have the chance to become the next Prime Minister of the Malaysia.

There are three main opposition parties in the country: the religious party, Pan-Malaysian

Islamic Party (PAS), the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP), and the *Parti Keadilan*

Rakyat (People's Justice Party or PKR). PKR was formed during the *Reformasi* movement in

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[48] The Opposition has argued that the police practice a double standard because the public demonstrations organized by UMNO Youth are usually given a free pass while those organized by the Opposition usually end up with arrests. In 2006, UMNO Youth deputy Chief, Khairy Jamaluddin led 2000 demonstrators to protest then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visit in Kuala Lumpur. The police did very little to stop the son-in-law of the Prime Minister.

1998/99 when then popular Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was sacked and jailed on corruption and sodomy charges which were believed to be trumped up.

The office of the Prime Minister in the country is extremely important. Cheah writes that the Malaysian Prime Minister "wields tremendous power, which is only circumscribed by communal interests…he oversees overall social and political development" (Cheah, 2002) Of the five Prime Ministers[49] who have administered the country including the incumbent Abdualah Ahmad Badawi, no one looms larger in the minds of the people than that of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. During a 22-year tenure as the premier, he transformed a backwater country whose income rests largely on the export of raw materials into a modern rapidly-developing nation of highways and skyscrapers with a diversified economy through "the sheer force of his convictions and his personality" (Elegant, 2003). Kessler writes that Dr. Mahathir "changed not just the face but also the soul of Malaysia" (Kessler, 2004) and Hwang argues that by the end of his 22-year tenure, "Mahathir became Malaysia's 'presidential premier', holding decisive control throughout the political system and in particular within his party" (Hwang, 2004). In addition, Malaysian Prime Ministers have at times held multiple powerful cabinet portfolios which only increase their power. For example, Dr. Mahathir and his successor, Abdullah Badawi, both had held the portfolios of Home Minister and Minister of Finance while holding the office of the Prime Minister—essentially controlling the highest political office in the land, the country's economy, and the domestic security forces including the police. It is a tremendous amount of power concentration by a single person. The political patronage is so well entrenched within the political system and in the social psyche that it almost seems like a logical progression that the media system would also be deeply connected to the political players in the country.

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[49] Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra (1957-70), Abdul Razak (1970-76), Hussein Onn (1976-81), Mahathir Mohammad (1981-2003), Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003-09).

5.2.   Freedom of Expression in Malaysia

"*Malaysia is a democracy. There is freedom of speech, but no freedom after speech…*"

<div align="right">Editor-in-chief of Malaysiakini.com, Steven Gan</div>

Edmund Burke, the eighteenth century British statesman and political philosopher is credited with using the term "fourth estate" when he purportedly said "there were three Estates in Parliament, but in the Reporters Gallery yonder, there sat a fourth Estate more important far than they all" in 1841 (Carlye, 1901). The first three estates refer to the three components of British parliament, the Lords Temporal, the Lords Spiritual and the House of Commons. Traditionally, the Lords Temporal and the Lords Spiritual formed the Upper House of the British Parliament and the House of Commons formed the Lower House. Yet, even though it was called the House of Commons, the people that made up of that section were hardly commoners; many of them were rich and well connected individuals. Therefore, it was supposed to be the duty of the reporters or the press to keep an eye on the happenings of the Upper and Lower Houses—to be the fourth estate that represents the true commoners or the masses. Over the years, the three estates have come to mean simply the government and the fourth estate is equivalent to the press or the so-called watchdog of the government. Yet, as the "watchdog" of the government became ever more entrenched in the system—from having a symbiotic relationship with the very system that they should be watching—they instead became more and more like the "fourth branch" of the government. In the extreme cases, the fourth estate functions as a mouthpiece of the ruling elites. That is the case for the mainstream media in Malaysia—they have become the mouthpiece of the *Barisan Nasional.*

Genuine deliberations cannot exist without corresponding levels of freedom of expression. Malaysia's record of freedom of expression and press freedom has always come under intense scrutiny particularly by media watchers in the West. The differing ideology of what constitutes press freedom and to what extent freedom of expression is allowed to be practiced have always created tension and friction between the Malaysian government and media watchers both local and foreign. Andrew Shapiro writes that governments are always resisting the new ability of individuals to control the flow of information and "astonishing as it may seem at the dawn of the twenty-first century, many heads of state still tremble at the prospect of unconstrained citizen dialogue" (Shapiro, 1999, p. 65). It because they know that "unfettered speech can shape and transform individuals' expectations, giving them a renewed sense of the possible" and "once people in isolation learn what life is like elsewhere, they may look more critically at the own circumstances"(Shapiro, 1999, p. 65).

John Lent (1978) used the term "guided media" to describe the Malaysian press system where the leaders of the country "admonish mass media, especially broadcasting, to be uncritical of government policies"(p. 72). Their rationale is that Malaysia, "being a newly emerging nation, needs time to get on its feet. The mass media, therefore, should provide this time by not touching on sensitive issues, by stressing positive and ignoring negative societal characteristics" (Lent, 1978, p. 72). Such belief in the power of the media to nation-building reflects the works of Benedict Anderson (1983) who defines nation as "an imagined political community" (p. 3). In these imagined communities, even members of the smallest of these communities will never know or meet or hear of most of their fellow members, yet each of them possesses an "image of their communion". The great challenge of policy makers in Malaysia is to create the elusive "*Bangsa Malaysia*" (Malaysian Race) without sacrificing the unique cultural heritage of each of the ethnic groups. However, even under the best of circumstances, the policy makers could

probably achieve no more than instilling an *imagined image of the Bangsa Malaysia communion*

in the minds of the members of the Malaysian community. And in order to achieve this sense of

shared identity, Atkins argues that it will require the "mobilization of mass media and educational

institutions to promote symbols of a common heritage" (Atkins, 2002, p. 19).

Policy makers have no qualms about "mobilizing the mass media" to achieve that

objective. But this also means the Government must be able to have significant control over the

media before any mobilization could take place. Indeed, those who presided over radio and

television broadcasting in the country never strayed far away from the idea that the Government

has the right to influence the mass media. This is evident in the words of a former Information

Minister, Khalil Yaakob who publicly and unapologetically declared:

> *…the Government pays for RTM's (Radio Television Malaysia) employees and the*
> *equipment used. So whoever is in the Government get to use RTM as their mouthpiece to*
> *air their manifesto and promises during a general election… RTM is not interested in*
> *inviting any opposition party for interviews over its channels. This has been our*
> *practice...*   (as cited in Chin, 2003, p. 129)

The "guided media" approach would ultimately confront the question: "guided by whom and with

what guidelines?"

A guided media or developmental approach breeds compliancy and blunts critical

thinking. In the long-run it may even caused the *non-acceptable* to be become acceptable and be

normalized. An example could be found in the case of the editor of a local English language

newspaper, *Malay Mail*[50] who said that "it is not censorship when the Prime Minister asks us to

write something, he lets us write it the way we want. We're not being guided or censored by

government; we are cooperating" (cited in Lent, 1978. p.14). Lent observes that the editor's

answer shows "more of a forced cooperation than anything else, a cooperation that is the result

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[50] *The Malay Mail* was first published in 1896. Currently, it is a subsidiary of *Media Prima* which also
owns the *New Straits Times, Berita Harian, TV3* and many other prominent media outlets.

when a gun is placed at the head" (p.14). Other more recent newspaper editors convey the same feeling but with phrases like "Malaysians should be thankful that the situation in our country is different"(Wong, 1999) or "maintaining race relations in Malaysia is not an easy job"(Wong, 2007)—apologist statements made to compliment and support the ruling party.

Former group editor of the *New Straits Times*, the oldest English language newspaper in the country, Kadir Jasin, gave another spin on the perspective. He argues that the younger media practitioners are simply unsure of the "true limits of their freedom"[51]. He added that press freedom in Malaysia was "determined by the business nature of the media industry, the multi-racial and multi-religious environment in which it operated". Furthermore, he argues that "given these constraints, it can be said that the Malaysian press is relatively free. Any sign that it is not free is due partly to the reluctance of the Press itself to extend the envelope of freedom" (as cited in Loo, 2000, p. 215). Kadir Jasin did try to extend the envelope in 2000 when he wrote an editorial that was highly critical of the Government. Soon after that, he was forced to step down after 14 years at the helm of the *New Straits Times Press* group ("Silencing the press", 2000) It is doubtful that the former group editor still holds the same view about press freedom after the incident.

To be sure, Malaysian officials have by and large publicly acknowledged the importance of freedom of expression in a democracy. The Malaysian Federal Constitution states "every citizen has the right to freedom of speech and expression"[52] and Malaysia is also one of the countries that took part in the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights ("Memorandum on OSA", 2004) that reaffirmed its full commitment to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights which includes the Article 19 which states that "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to

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[51] Kadir Jasin made this comment in 1996, prior to the *Reformasi* movement in 1999/2000.
[52] Article 10 (1). Federal Constitution of Malaysia 1957

seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of

frontiers"[53].Yet, government officials have always asserted their right to interpret the concept of

freedom of expression and press freedom according to what they perceive as beneficial to the

country.

On the other hand international media watchers have claimed that the government's

assurances and arguments are insincere at best and flat-out manipulative at worst. Indeed,

immediately following the Article 10 of the Federal Constitution, which guarantees the right to

free speech, are a set of qualifiers which give the Parliament the power to impose by law "such

restrictions as it deems necessary or expedient in the interest of the security of the Federation or

any part thereof, friendly relations with other countries, public order or morality"[54]. In imposing

such restrictions in the interest of the *security*, *public order* and even the problematic term of

morality, the Parliament "may pass laws prohibiting the questioning of any stipulated matter,

right, status, position, privilege, sovereignty or prerogative"("Reporting free expressions", 2005).

Freedom of the Press, an annual survey of 192 countries by the US-based *Freedom

House*[55] has consistently ranked Malaysia as "not free" over the years. *Freedom House*'s press

freedom ranking looks at a combination of "legal environment for the media, political pressures

that influence reporting", and "economic factors that affect access to information"("Freedom of

the press", 2008). Malaysia has also been on a general downward slide in the Reporters sans

Frontieres's (RSF) worldwide ranking[56] since the Paris-based agency first published the

Worldwide Press Freedom Index in 2002. In fact, in 2008 Malaysia recorded its worst RSF

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[53] United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights

[54] Article 10 (2). Federal Constitution of Malaysia 1957

[55] *Freedom House* was established in 1941, making the oldest of the press freedom indicators. *Freedom House* publishes two main indices annually; *Freedom in the World* (since 1972) and *Freedom of the Press* (since 1981)

[56] The Reporters sans Frontieres (RSF) ranks approximately 162 countries annual for their level of press freedom with number 1 being the freest and 162 being the least free country according to RSF's criteria.

ranking since the inception of the ranking system, dropping from 124 in the previous year to 132,

on par with Nigeria and Chad ("World Press Freedom Index", 2008). The non-profit agency

assesses the "extent to which legal and political environments, circumstances, and institutions

permit and promote media freedom and the ability of journalists to collect and disseminate

information unimpeded by physical, psychological, or legal attacks and harassment"(Becker,

2007).

Table 3: Malaysia Press Freedom Performance According to Global Freedom Indicators

Indicators	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Reporters sans Frontieres	110	104	122	113	92	124	132
Freedom House	71, Not Free	71, Not Free	69, Not Free	69, Not Free	65, Not Free	68, Not Free	65, Not Free
Corruption Perception Index	33	37	39	39	44	43	47

Writing in the late 1970s, John Lent already observed that some of the mass media in

Malaysia had already lost their earlier ideals from the founding years of the nation and

commitment to critical thinking or fighting what they believe is the just cause. Using the Malay

language press as an example, Lent writes:

> *...historically, the Malay press has been identified with fostering various causes of the Malays and of the Islamic faith. It has been a fighting press. Today's mass media in Malaysia has assumed new roles: they no longer fight causes, oppose government policies opting critical way; instead, they act as supporters—and even, apologies—for the officials…* (Lent, 1978, p. 59)

The media, as Lent had observed, were expected to be at the "forefront of the campaign to

propagate governmental programmes" (p.59). This expectation had continued from the late

seventies to the present, when we see the national presses toeing the government line without digression or objection. Lent concluded that the "mass media have been made into nothing more than extensions of the government" (p.59).

On the issue of web-based publications, Steven Gan, the editor-in-chief of *Malaysiakini.com,* notes that the "government has lost the complete monopoly on truth" and "is losing its ability to control the news agenda" which for a long time was possible by controlling the news agenda through mainstream media including television, radio and newspapers. The government expects any media (old or new) to behave in a similar fashion. It must have been quite difficult for some in the government to accept the idea that bloggers are not answerable to them. And that they can no more control the blogosphere than they could control the world oil prices. James Curran argues that "the introduction of new technologies of mass communication tended to undermine the prestige and influence of established mediating organization and groups. New media also posed a threat to the status quo since they could potentially bypass existing structures of control, and make available new ideas and information"(Curran, 2002, p. 69).

Ranking officials often profess support for press freedom when they are asked by reporters. However, upon closer inspection we will find that their notion of press freedom emerges as somewhat flawed. The newly installed Information Minister, Ahmad Shabery Cheek[57], claims that the government has always "encouraged the growth of online journalism and had invested some 3 billion ringgit (US$860,000) to develop infrastructure and support for information technology" ("Attacks on the press", 2008). According to the Minister's rhetoric, making multimillion dollars investments in information technology is equal to supporting development of online journalism. His statements typify the idea that had gotten a hold in the

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[57] Ahmad Shabery Cheek replaced Zainuddin Maidin as the new Minister of Information after the latter lost in the 8 March 2008 General Election. The Minister oversees the Ministry of Information which includes the two state-run channels, RTM1 and RTM2.

mind of policy makers in the country that hardware development equals human capacity building. Parallels of this line of thinking could be seen in construction of mega projects in the country. These mega projects have been hallmarks of the Malaysian Government for the past three decades—the world's tallest building in the Petronas Twin Towers, the region's largest hydro-electric dam in Bakun, a brand new stadium for the Commonwealth Games in 1998, the 600-miles North-South Expressway, the brand-new administrative capital in Putrajaya, and of course the ambitious *Multimedia Super Corridor*.

Secondly, the Minister also equates "no censorship of the Internet" with freedom of speech on the Internet. He argues that the flowering of blogs and online news in the country are the result of "government's policy of no censorship of the Internet" and that "Malaysia does not have any specific laws that control or curb bloggers and online news"("Attacks on the press", 2008). Again, the flaw in the Minister's argument is best exemplified by *Malaysiakini.com* editor-in-chief; Steven Gan's often quoted statement: "there is freedom of speech, but no freedom after speech." While Malaysia does not employ any known filtering technology that would constitute some kind of prior restraint of online publication, there are other ways in which the freedom in the media could be severely impaired. A closer look in the various control mechanisms employed by the state over the years should help illuminate some of the reasons why the mainstream mass media had became *nothing more than extensions of the government*.

5.3. An Overview of Malaysian Media Laws and Regulations

Numerous laws currently exist in Malaysia that severely curtail freedom of expression. Scholars of the Malaysian media system such as Zaharom Nain, Francis Loh, and Khoo Boo Teik have highlighted five pieces of legislations that are deemed to be the most detrimental to free speech in

the country: i) Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA); ii) Communication and Multimedia Act, iii) Sedition Act, iv) Official Secrets Act, and iv) Internal Security Act (ISA).

I. **The Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA)** is the law that governs the printing press in Malaysia that was introduced and passed in 1984. It provided the Home Affairs Minister, the "power to grant or withdraw a printing license or a publishing permit"(Loh & Khoo, 2002, p. 128). Under this law, a potential publisher needs a publishing license from the Ministry before one could start a newspaper or magazine. "This usually means that only well connected publishers succeed in their permit applications while independent or opposition publishers stand little chance of succeeding in their applications to publish a daily newspaper"("Reporting free expressions", 2005). The publisher must apply for a new license every year. This creates a climate of self-censorship among Malaysian editors and journalists especially those publishers who have much to lose in considering the high sunk-cost of traditional print media. The refusal of the Home Minister to grant *Malayiakini* a license was one of the main reasons the agency decided to become a fully web-based medium. In addition to the power to control the domestic print, the act also requires foreign publication sold in the country "to pay a large deposit which would be forfeited if the publishers did not appear in court to face charges of publishing materials prejudiced to the national interest"(Loh & Khoo, 2002, p. 128). The Act asserts enormous pressure on the press to conform to the ideology of the government. In the recent case involving a local English newspaper, *The Sarawak Tribune* was suspended indefinitely under the PPPA following a publication which carried the infamous caricature of Prophet Muhammad (Puah, 2006). The PPPA effectively keeps a tight leash over all printed media in the country; failure to comply with the conditions stipulated by the Home Ministry will result in the revoking of the

annual permit to enormous financial losses. Blogging and the Internet do not fall under the jurisdiction of the PPPA.

II.   The **Communication and Multimedia Act (CMA) of 1996**[58] encompasses all manner of broadcasting including the Internet. CMA replaced the Broadcasting Law which was introduced in 1988 to allow the government to regulate the private television station, TV3. The CMA gives the Minister of Energy, Water, and Communication (EWC) the power to approve, amend, or revoke broadcasting and other licenses. The CMA has some enlightened provisions which protect freedom of expression online, such as Section 3 (3) which states "Nothing in this act shall be construed as permitting the censorship of the Internet". However, the Minister has enormous discretionary power to take certain actions on against the users. The most recent example of the Minister's discretionary power is the blocking of the *MalaysiaToday.net* on 28 August 2008 through the *Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission* (MCMC). The EWC Minister claims the action was well within the jurisdiction of the Ministry and cites Section 263 of the Act which permits for certain actions for the "protection of the public revenue and preservation of national security". Malaysian *National Alliance of Bloggers* interim president Ahirudin Attan said it was the first time that MCMC had gone against the spirit of the promise that the Government had made. Ahiruddin argues that "the promise was made not only to Malaysians but to the world that there will be no censorship of the Internet in the country"(Cheah, Lee, & Sim, 2008).

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[58] Communications And Multimedia Act 1998

III. The **Sedition Act**[59] was created by the British colonial government in 1948. It was amended after the racial riots of 1969. The scope of the act is very broad and its definition very much open to interpretation. According to the act, sedition can be applied to or used in respect of any act, speech, words or publication and carries a 3-year jail term. Seditious publications would include all written or printed material. It would be considered a seditious tendency to question the provisions of the Constitution dealing with language, citizenship, the special privileges of the Malays and of the natives of Sabah and Sarawak. It is also considered to have seditious tendency to *bring into hatred or contempt the administration of justice in the country* or *to promote ill-will and hostility between races or classes*. The Sedition Act has been used to prevent media from publishing news that could create anger or "disharmonious relations between races in Malaysia" (Sani, 2005). For example, the Sedition Act was used in 1971 to prosecute an Opposition parliamentarian over an article entitled "Alliance Policy of Segregation: Evidence Galore". The article alleged that the "ruling coalition policy in the number of sectors were racially discriminatory"(Sani, 2005). The opposition parliamentarian was found guilty. There are safeguards in the Act to limit abuse. For example, a speech is not seditious if it is to point out errors or defects in the implementation or administration of government policies with a view to remedying the errors or defects[60]. However as Shad Saleem Faruqi and Ramanathan point out, "implantation of policies and existences of rights may not be so easy to distinguish"(Shad Saleem & Ramanathan, 1998, p. 51). As Faruqi had observed, the concept of sedition in Malaysia was much broader than in the United Kingdom, Ireland, India, and Australia. Sani adds therefore a Malaysian lawyer would be "unable to give a clear definition of what constitutes free speech and what

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[59] Sedition Act 1948

[60] See Shad Saleem and Ramanathan (1998).

constitutes sedition, was the consequent effect that this legal uncertainty is very much in favour of the prosecutor"(Sani, 2005). Because of the vague nature of the Sedition Act, it has allowed the authorities to use it against bloggers and their blogs.

IV.   The **Official Secrets Act** (OSA 1972)[61] is a piece of legislation "that hampered the working of journalists and dampened the development of investigative journalism" (Anuar, 2002, p. 151). A byproduct of the 1969 racial riots, it prohibits a person from getting information that is deemed an official secret by the government for the fear that it may fall into the hands of the enemy. According to human rights lawyer, Malik Imtiaz Sarwar, the OSA was originally enacted in order to allow the Federal and State governments "to take measures to ensure that highly sensitive information pertaining to matters of national security could be maintained confidential"(Sarwar, 2007). The Act's objective was to allow "those charged with the security of the country to keep such information away from those who would use this information adversely". For this reason, Sarwar argues, the OSA was originally drafted for the classification of a very "narrow class of documents pertaining to military installations, military prisons and other matters related to state security" and not the way it is being used nowadays. The legislation was further strengthened through an amendment in 1987 during the big political clampdown of the oppositions known as *Operasi Lalang*. Mustafa claims that subsequent amendments made to the original Act had the "effect of making almost all official documents 'official secrets' thus making it illegal for journalist to have access to them" (2002: 151). The strict enforcement of this act could be seen by the declassification of

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[61] Official Secrets Act 1972

documents pertaining to the "crooked bridge"[62] incident between Malaysia and

Singapore. *The Star* reports that it was only the second time in recent history that

information protected by the Official Secrets Act 1972 has been declassified and

approved for public consumption ("Declassified documents", 2006). Blogger Nathaniel

Tan was arrested under the Official Secrets Act on 13 July 2007.

V.   The **Internal Security Act** (ISA) 1948[63] is another remnant of the colonial

administration that has been conveniently retained by the government after independence.

The Act provides for arbitrary arrest and detention without trial for an indefinite period

based on mere suspicion that one "may be likely" to commit an act deemed dangerous to

national security. A detainee is, therefore, presumed guilty without trial. It further allows

a detainee to be held under solitary confinement for 60 days without legal counsel. The

Home Minister has the power to extend the detention for another two years. The original

purpose of the ISA was to counter in the Communist insurgency in the founding years of

Malaysia, however the Federal Court proclaimed that "the purpose of the ISA is for all

forms of subversion but was more directed to communist activities which was prevailing

at the time the law was enacted" (Fritz & Flaherty, 2003). In 2003, Hishamuddin Rais, a

social activist, film maker and a regular columnist for *Malaysiakini.com* was detained

under the ISA[64]. However, officially the charges against him were in connection with his

involvement in a demonstration against the government rather than his work as a

columnist. This Act looms large over outspoken critics of the government because it

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[62] In late 1990s, former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad proposed the building of a new bridge to replace the 80 year-old causeway linking Malaysia and Singapore. The current Prime Minister announced the cancellation of the project which had already broke ground in early 2006 citing legal reasons and protection of sovereignty. It was called the "crooked bridge" because Singapore did not agree to the project on its side and the bridge was redesigned with a distinctive curve and hence the term "crooked bridge".

[63] Internal Security Act 1948. Amended 1971.

[64] Hishamuddin Rais has since been released after more than two years of detention without trial.

allows for indefinite detention without trial. The de-facto Law Minister Nazri Abdul Aziz

has warned that the government was drafting new laws to control bloggers and would not

hesitate to use existing laws such as the Internal Security Act against bloggers who insult

Islam or stir sensitive topics("blogger crackdown", 2007).

5.4. The Early Years of Malaysian Mass Media

The first newspaper was published in Malaya on 1 March. It was the English language

Government Gazette, later renamed the *Prince of Wales Island Gazette* (PWIG) (see Lent, 1978;

Loh & Khoo, 2002). The *Government Gazette* was a merchant paper and like most colonial

newspapers it served "as a house organ for the foreigners, advertising their wares, printing

government notice and keeping them abreast of happenings back in England" (Lent, 1978, p. 1).

And like most publications at the time, the *Government Gazette* had to abide by the East India

Company's rule: "no gossip, no criticism of the government, individuals or policies, and

submission of proof sheets before final publications" (Lent, 1978, p. 1). The printer's failure to do

so would likely cost him the monthly subsidies, the government loans, and of course the printing

license.

    Radio Broadcasting came late to Malaya because of "bureaucratic foot-dragging and the

lack of movement toward the construction of a formal broadcasting system" (McDaniel, 2002).

The first non-amateur radio broadcasting organization, *British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation*

(BMBC) eventually began its broadcasts on 1 March 1937. World War II probably was the most

significant catalyst for the development of public broadcasting in Malaya. Nineteen days after the

Japanese had surrendered on 15 August 1945, the British returned to Malaya and restored

broadcasting operations in the country under the *British Military Administration* (BMA)[65]. After

seven months of lackluster operation, it was replaced by a new civilian administration called the

Pan-Malayan Department of Broadcasting but it was simply referred to as *Radio Malaya. Radio*

Malaya served as Malaya's de facto broadcasting agency for the next eleven years until its

independence from the British. *Radio Malaya* continued its broadcasting service throughout 1948

to 1960, a period known as the *Emergency*. The *Emergency* period was mainly caused by a

severely weakened post-WWII economy, corruption among the British administrations and the

rise of Communist insurgents especially in the rural areas. Curbing the spread of Communism

became a matter of national security, and "broadcasting to rural peninsular Malaya became a

priority of the Malayan governments as a result of the *Emergency*" (McDaniel, 1994, p. 63). The

broadcasting industry scene would have evolved into a very different model had it not been for

the *Emergency* period. Kitley argues that the *Emergency* "had a major impact on both the

infrastructure and ideology of broadcasting in Malaysia" (Kitley, 2003, p. 80). Broadcasting

facilities were expanded and the idea of programming in multiple languages was introduced

during the period.

  Television broadcasting began on 23 December 1963, the year the *Federation of*

Malaysia came into being, with *Channel 1*. As with radio broadcasting, Malaysia joined the

television broadcasting game later than its neighboring countries. Thailand, the first in the region,

established television service in 1955. Indonesia introduced television in 1962 and Singapore's

service went on air on 15 February 1963 (Kitley, 2003, p. 49). In 1969, a second national channel,

Channel 2, began transmission. In the same year, *Radio Malaya* officially changed its name to

Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) incorporating both radio and television into one broadcasting

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[65] The Secretary of State for the [British] Colonies had begun preparing plans as early as 1944 (more than a year before the Japanese officially surrendered) to reinstitute broadcasting when Britain regained control in Malaya. (see McDaniel, 1994, 60)

entity. *Channel 2* was created to provide programs in languages other than the Malay language, clearly in an effort to integrate different races using the new medium of television. There were a variety of motivations as to why the Malaysian government decided to introduce television service. Philip Kitley suggests that for Malaysia, "establishing a national television service was a way of keeping up with its neighbors and representing itself as a modern developing nation" (Kitley, 2003, p. 49). Television was also understood as "a key element in the government's nation-building and anti-Communist effort which was all-consuming over the period of the Emergency" (2003, p.49). Regardless of the reason and motivation for introducing television broadcasting into the nation, one thing was certain the government had always regarded the medium to be part of the government. Kitley argues that this could be reason for the utter lack of regulation and attention over the new medium. The government simply assumed that it will have total control and ownership over the new medium. This was perhaps a lingering effect of the *Emergency* period which officially ended in 1960. Kitley argues that during that period, "government control and direction of media developments were naturalised and taken as normative" (2003, p. 81). It was not until the private commercial television channel, *TV3* which became so successful and started eroding the viewership of the first two channels, that the Broadcasting Law of 1988 was introduced by the Cabinet. Yet, it is ironic that a Broadcasting Law was introduced to regulate TV3 since the private station was originally created to counteract the video-cassette threat in the early 1980s.

The development of home use **video-cassette player** in the early 1980s revolutionized the way people watched television. As McDaniel argues "it is difficult to exaggerate the enthusiasm that accompanied the video's arrival in the Southeast Asia" (2002, p. 49). These videos provided common Malaysians with entertainment that was a "dramatic departure" from that being transmitted by the two government-run television stations, TV1 and TV2. For this

reason the new medium cut sharply into viewership for the two free-to-air channels. The policy

makers were also concerned that ethnic division might be reinforced by watching Hindi and

Cantonese shows produced in Bollywood and Hong Kong. At the time, the Chinese community

in Malaysia predominantly spoke one of the dozen or so Chinese dialects at home. Television

dramas and movies produced in Hong Kong were in Cantonese, one of the major Chinese dialect

groups spoken in Malaysia. The concern was that the language and cultural gap might grow wider

in an already very plural society and eventually destroy the aim of building a *Bangsa Malaysia*

(Malaysian Race). Similar concerns were raised with the Indian community watching only

movies produced in Bollywood.

As part of the effort to curb the rising popularity of these hard-to-control and impossible-

to-censor video-cassettes, the Government announced the plan to create a new privately-owned

television station, TV3, as the third free-to-air channel in the country. TV3 was designed to be

different from TV1 or TV2 and included Hong Kong and Bollywood productions as part of its

programming. Of course the shows that were aired on TV3 were all pre-screened. Only family-

friendly programs that are in sync with the national identity were shown. But the viewers readily

switched to the free-to-air channel, while they may not get all the shows as they would from the

videos, they get many of them and at no cost. The whole process actually played out as an

interesting unwritten social contract between the people and the Government—the Government

relinquishes some of its control and allows some access to the people and the people give up

some of their desires and in return gain access to free and "legal" sources of entertainment. The

move to use TV3 to counter the popularity of illegal video-cassettes was a success. McDaniel

(2002) reports that the following year, the number of video rentals and sales dropped

precipitously and TV3 became the most popular TV station in the country.

The history of the Malaysian Government's involvement in the development of the media includes implementations of what appears at first to be an enlightened media reform policy. But scratch the surface and one would find that there is more to it than simply a desire to reform, or a reaction to market pressure. An example would be the policy shift in regards to **satellite broadcasting**, in the early nineties. At the time, the Government was actively trying to eliminate private satellite dishes capable of receiving unregulated broadcast. The government's action was, according to William Atkins, due to the "deep insecurity over the robustness of Malaysian society and significant misunderstanding of the technicalities of the medium"(2002, p. 74). In trying to dissuade people from using satellites to receive foreign programs, the Information Minister at that time reportedly said "a lot of bad will come out of it" and the content could "be used to spread the communist ideology" (2002, p.74). It is not entirely clear what was the objective of connecting the 1990s satellite technology with the communism movement of the 1950s, which by all accounts has been firmly relegated into the pages of Malaysian history textbooks. Atkins again offers a plausible explanation: "insofar that the Chinese minority constitute the bulk of the satellite dishes owners, the Information Minister was attempting to link satellite ownership to disloyalty to the country"(Atkins, 2002, p. 75). The veiled threats against satellite dish owners by the Information Minister were soon followed by actual monetary fines and jail terms for users who refused to dismantle their satellite dishes. The exception to the rule was given to hotels. Despite, the official position on satellite dishes being illegal; the Ministry of Information approved the use of satellites for international programs including CNN in hotels. The hotel industry claimed that the ban on satellite dishes would deter foreign tourists (Atkins, 2002, p. 76). Yet, despite all the veiled threats and penalties, the country launched its MEASAT[66] in 1996, in a

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[66] The Malaysia East Asia Satellite project or MEASAT is part of the larger Vision 2020 plan by the Mahathir Administration. The effort culminated in the launch in 1996 of the MEASAT-1 and MEASAT-2 communications satellites from Europe's Spaceport in Kourou, French Guiana. The two high-powered

complete reversal of the previous rejection of satellite broadcasting. Subsequently, *Astro*, a satellite TV broadcaster was established, providing ordinary citizens with "legal" satellite programming. Parallels could be drawn between *Astro*, the first private satellite TV broadcaster and *TV3*, the first private terrestrial TV broadcaster. In both instances, the Government "relinquishes" control of a mass media outlet to the hands of private owners, a counterintuitive move according to the "guided media" philosophy. In both cases, there was the prior existence of media content circulating in the public which the Government would rather the public not have the access to. And lastly, while the Government tries to control, block, and manage that media control on its own—it fails. When the influx of video-cassettes with foreign media content in 1980s proved too difficult for the Government to control through legislation or otherwise it created TV3 to siphon the audience away from the illegal (and uncontrollable) VHS to the legal (and controllable) private station. Similarly, when the mushrooming for private satellite dishes proved too much trouble, the Government "relinquished" some control and allowed for a single private satellite company which it can control by-proxy.

5.5. Contemporary Media Landscape in Malaysia

5.5.1. Print Media

The print media is well established in Malaysia. Traditionally the newspapers are divided by languages reflecting the multi-ethnic demographic of the country with each community being served by the newspapers of the respective languages. This continues to be the case especially with Tamil and Chinese newspapers but less so with Malay and English newspapers. Logistically,

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Boeing 376HP communications satellites provided regional C-Band coverage and pioneered the use of Ku-Band in the high rain fall South East Asia region. Operated from a purposed built satellite control facility located 915m above sea level in Gunung Raya, Langkawi, the MEASAT-1 and MEASAT-2 satellites started providing satellite service across South East Asia from 1996. (source: MEASAT official website)

the print market is geographically divided between Peninsular Malaysia (or West Malaysia) and Sabah and Sarawak (or East Malaysia). While most of the major newspapers in the Peninsular are available nation-wide, the popular newspapers in East Malaysia are confined to the region. However within Sabah and Sarawak, these regional newspapers usually out-sell the newspapers from the Peninsular.

There are 31 newspapers being published in Malaysia as of 2008, consisting of nine English newspapers (four in East Malaysia), five Malay newspapers (one in East Malaysia), 14 Chinese newspapers (eight in East Malaysia), and 3 Tamil (South Indian language) newspapers. Together, the daily circulation is about 3.1 million newspapers on weekdays and on Sundays, the figure increases roughly by another half million copies. The main English newspapers are *The Star, New Straits Times, The Malay Mail, the Business Edge*, and the free paper *The Sun*. *New Straits Times* (NST) is the oldest newspaper in the country going back to 1845. NST's sales have been steadily declining over the years and in an attempt to revive sales, it changed its broadsheet format to a "compact" format in 2004. *The Star* is the highest circulating English newspaper in the country. It also takes in more revenue from advertising than all other newspapers in the country put together (Quinn & Busch, 2008, p. 39). *The Sun* and *The Malay Mail* are popular only in the urban areas. Among the Malay language newspapers, the *Utusan Malaysia* (Malaysia Herald) and the *Berita Harian* (Daily News) are the most widely read. The Sunday version of *Utusan Malaysia*, the *Mingguan Malaysia* (Malaysian Weekly) is the highest circulating newspaper in the country with up to 450,000 copies. Chinese language newspapers have the highest overall readership on weekdays. Unique among the languages, the Chinese newspapers still put out an evening or "nightly" edition in addition to their morning edition. Only three newspapers, *Tamil Nesan* (Tamil News), *Malaysia Nanban* (Malaysia's Friend), and *Makkal Osai* (People's Voice) service the Tamil-Indian community in the country.

Table 4: Average Weekday Newspaper Circulation in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak between 1 July 2007-30 June 2008

	Newspaper Titles	Circulation	Total
	Malay Language		
1	Harian Metro (Daily Metro)	323,593	
2	Berita Harian (Daily News)	192,982	
3	Utusan Malaysia (Malaysia Herald)	186,994	
4	Kosmo	113,346	
5	Utusan Sarawak (Sarawak Herald) (Sarawak)	36,300	**853,215**
	English Language		
6	The Star	304,904	
7	The Sun (free newspaper)	270,506	
8	New Straits Times	136,530	
9	Borneo Post (Sarawak)*	51,598	
10	Daily Express (Sabah)	30,557	
11	The (Business) Edge	25,041	
12	New Sabah Times (Sabah)*	23,655	
13	The Malay Mail*	21,804	
14	Borneo Post Sabah (Sabah)	21,522	**886,117**
	Chinese Language		
15	Sin Chew Jit Poh (incl. Night Sales)	383,775	
16	China Press (incl. Night Sales)	240,798	
17	Guang Ming Daily (incl. Night Sales)	130,564	
18	Nanyang Siang Pau (incl.Night Sales)	124,282	
19	Oriental Daily News	100,505	
20	See Hua Daily News (Sabah & Sarawak)	75,987	
21	Kwong Wah Yit Poh / Penang Sin Poe	70,172	
22	Sin Chew Daily (Sarawak)	51,278	
23	United Daily News (Sarawak)	45,353	
24	International Times (Sarawak)	22,575	
25	Asia Times (Sabah)	19,460	
26	Overseas Chinese Daily News (Sabah)*	17,981	
27	Morning Post (Sabah)*	9,275	
28	Merdeka Daily News (Sabah)	6,957	**1,298,962**
	Tamil Language		
29	Malaysian Nanban (Malaysia's Friend)	58,000	
30	Makkal Osai (People's Voices)	52,000	
31	Tamil Nesan (Tamil News)	n/a	**110,000**
	Total Average Weekday Circulation		**3,148,294**

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations and *The Star*
*Latest figure not available, the figure shown are from earlier audit period
** All figures unless otherwise indicated are based on circulation in Peninsular Malaysia

There is also an array of locally published magazines available in the country. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations in 2008, there are at least18 Malay language magazines, six in the Chinese language, and 22 in English language ranging from business to lifestyle and travel to entertainment (see Appendix C for a detailed listing). Foreign publications are available domestically but as with newspapers, they are subject to stringent censorship under the *Printing Presses and Publication Act* which covers both local and foreign printed materials.

5.5.2. Broadcast Media

Currently, there are six free-to-air television stations in the country. The first two, RTM1 and RTM2 are the oldest stations in the country[67]. They are the state-run channels which fall under directly purview of the Ministry of Information. RTM1 broadcasts mostly news, educational, and religious programs, which cater predominantly to the less urban Malay-speakers. Most of its programs are locally produced and in the Malay language except for certain documentaries such as *National Geographic*. This preoccupation with using the Malay language is related to the official mandate of the RTM1 which is to promote Malay as the national language. RTM2 is a mixed channel with Malay, English, Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), and Tamil language programs. The programming is lighter and more entertainment-based and includes Hong Kong television dramas, Hollywood films, and Bollywood musicals. Four other private TV stations are TV3, NTV7, 8TV, and TV9.

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[67] RTM stands for *Radio Televisyen Malaysia*. RTM1 and RTM2 are also called TV1 and TV2. Both terms are used interchangeably in this study.

Table 5: Free-to-air TV Channels Available in Malaysia in 2008

Channels	Launch Date	Main Language	Coverage	Basic Ownership
RTM 1	23 December 1963	Malay	Nation-wide	State
RTM 2	17 November 1969	Malay, English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Tamil	Nation-wide	State
TV 3	1 June 1984	Malay, English, Mandarin, Cantonese	Nation-wide	Private
NTV 7	7 April 1998	English, Malay	Nation-wide	Private
8TV	8 January 2004	Mandarin, English, Cantonese	Nation-wide	Private
TV 9	22 April 2006	Malay, English	Peninsular Malaysia only	Private

TV3, established in 1984, was the first private television in the country. From the

beginning TV3 was meant to provide the people with programming not available on the either

RTM1 or RTM2. Since its inception, TV3 has consistently been one of the most popular channels

in the country. In 2007, TV3 dominated the nation's top 20 programs (Grabow & Rieck, 2008, p.

72). TV3 focuses heavily on entertainment programs including news-magazine shows, variety

shows, game shows and popular TV series, mostly locally produced and in Malay language

although not as prevalent as with RTM1. NTV 7 is a predominantly English language channel

with some Mandarin programs that caters to the English-speaking urban audience. Most of the

programs are imported from the United States, United Kingdom, Hong Kong and Japan,

especially Japanese animations. 8TV also caters to the urban audience but focuses instead on the

Chinese-speaking audience with celebrity-based shows, talent shows, and game shows. Again,

most of the programs are imported, usually from Taiwan and Singapore. The newest of the free-

to-air channels is TV9. Programming language is a mix of English or Malay and heavily skewed

towards family and children-friendly programs and some religious programs. More than half the

programming slots are filled with cartoons such as *SpongeBob Squarepants* and *Inspector Gadget.*

Complementing the six free-to-air channels is the subscription based satellite broadcaster, *Astro,* which began broadcasting in 1996. It provides up to 100-plus channels depending on the package, which can be as low as RM37.95 (US$10.00) to more than RM 172.75 (US$45.00) per month. Astro produces a fair amount of its own programming at their expansive hi-tech facility, *All Asia Broadcast Centre*, in Puchong, located approximately one hour south of Kuala Lumpur. Other programs are imported mainly from United States, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, India, United Kingdom, Singapore, Qatar, and Japan.

There are 35 radio stations in the country, 17 of which are state-owned stations and they comprise of both national and community stations (Grabow & Rieck, 2008, p. 73) and the rest are private radio stations including four, *Radio Wanita* (Women Radio), Fly Fm, Hot FM, and One FM, which are owned by the same company, *Media Prima*. The satellite broadcaster, *Astro*, operates eight more radio stations; three Malay stations (Era, XF, Sinar), three English stations (Mix FM, Hitz FM, Lite FM), one Chinese station (My FM) and one Tamil station (Thr FM). The majority of these stations cater to one language group with the occasional crossovers especially with the Malay and English stations.

5.5.3. Internet and Mobile Media

With approximately 15 million Internet users in the country in 2008, making up more than half the population of 27 million people, Malaysia has a relatively high degree of internet penetration (*Household use of Internet survey 2008*) in the region. Currently, the country has 21 mostly privately-owned internet service providers. However, in the case of the two largest ISPs, *TMnet and Jaring,* there is a strong link with the Government. The former is a subsidiary of the

privatized national phone company, *Telekom Malaysia*, and the latter is wholly owned by the

Ministry of Finance.

In addition to access from homes or offices, access to Internet is also easily available

through mobile phone telephony and cyber cafés located around the country. There are three

private mobile phone providers, Maxis Communications, Celcom, and Digi.com, each controlling

42 percent, 32 percent and 26 percent of the market share respectively (Kok, 2009). According to

the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), the national mobile

phone penetration rate was 94.4 percent in 2008 (see *Selected facts & figures*, 2008). Beginning

in 2007, all mobile phone users including roughly 18 million pre-paid users were required to be

registered[68] in an effort to decrease rumor-mongering activities via the short-messaging-services

(SMS) ("Deadline stays", 2006). This may be due to the increased importance of SMS in the

Malaysian political landscape especially in rural areas. The three mobile phone companies

reported a surge in SMS traffic during nomination day on 24 February 2008 and polling day on 8

March 2008 ("Surge in SMS", 2008) . In the first by-election of 2009 in Kuala Terengganu,

voters were able to check their electoral status using SMS up to the voting day ("Check status via

SMS", 2008).

While Malaysia boasts of being one of the early adopters of the Internet and has

pioneered some of the first ICT regulatory frameworks in the region, especially through the

Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project, online access remains very much an urban

phenomenon. A clear urban-rural gap exists with 85 percent of Internet users living in urban areas

(*Selected facts & figures*, 2008). Similarly, an urban-rural gap exists in mobile-phones usage;

only 22 percent of mobile users live in rural areas in comparison to 78 percent in urban areas

(*Handphone users survey 2007*). The cost to access the Internet is reasonable in Malaysia relative

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[68] Registration requirement for pre-paid cellular phone is quite common even in countries such as United
Kingdom. Nevertheless, it is fairly easy to obtain a prepaid number without registration in Malaysia.

to a gross national income (GNI) of US$6540 ("Country snapshot", 2009). A broadband

connection package (1Mbps/384kbps) offered by the largest ISP in the country cost the average

consumer around US$25.00 per month in 2008[69]. Any package slower than a broadband

connection is significantly cheaper. This parallels the survey conducted by the MCMC which

found that most home users spent between RM61 to RM70 (US$16.00-$19.00) a month on

Internet access (19.0 percent), followed by 16.1 percent of users who averaged RM71 to RM80

(US$19.00-$21.00) and 12.8 percent who spent RM81 to RM90 (US$21.00-$24.00) (*Household

use of Internet survey 2008*).User-generated content websites such as *YouTube*, *Facebook*, and

international blog-hosting services including *Blogspot.com* and *Wordpress.com* are freely

available.

Currently the Internet falls under the immediate purview of the MCMC. The MCMC

which answers to the Energy, Water, and Communication (EWC) Minister, is a regulatory body

responsible for the communications and multimedia industry in Malaysia which includes online

activities. Guiding both the MCMC and the Ministry is the Communication and Multimedia Act

(CMA) of 1998. The CMA gives the Minister a wide range of power including making regulation

pertaining to licensing. Under the Act, a license is required to own and operate a network facility.

There have not been any reported cases of refusing an application to become an Internet service

provider. Nevertheless, licensing could be a form of control. ISPs and mobile phones providers

are very much owned by the people connected to the government. The most striking example is

Maxis Communications, the largest mobile phone provider which was founded by Ananda

Krishnan, who also owns Astro, the largest satellite broadcaster in the country, and is widely

known to be well connected with the former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad.

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[69] According to the TMNet website.
http://www.streamyx.com.my/get_streamyx/get_streamyx.php?id=getstreamyx_package_standard

5.5.4. Media Ownership in Malaysia

In Malaysia, restrictions on media freedom are not only confined to the direct legal control

imposed through the many laws and regulations but also through indirect control mechanism in

the form of ownership. Any discussion of media freedom and freedom of expression in Malaysia

would be incomplete without at least an overview of the issue of media ownership in the country.

While the mass media in Malaysia has obviously grown significantly in the 200 plus-years since

the publication of the first newspaper, *Government Gazette*, in 1806, (the preceding section has

given an overview of the numerous media outlets available to ordinary Malaysians) we must be

cognizant that multiplicity of the media is not the same as diversity of media. As columnist, Anil

Netto writes:

> *…visitors to Malaysia would be bewildered by the wide variety of newspapers, TV*
> *channels and radio stations that cater to most of the country's several language groups.*
> *But as reality sinks in, it would become apparent that despite the deceptively wide range,*
> *mainstream media is becoming consolidated in the hands of a small number of privately*
> *owned conglomerates with close links to the political establishment…*(Netto, 2005)

 This is especially true when we consider that much of the mainstream media in the country are

owned directly or indirectly by entities linked to the ruling political party. With such complex

web cross-ownership (see Figure 6), there are bound to be conflicts of interest and it is hard to

imagine that the mass media could be truly independent and free from political influence.

Figure 6: Malaysia Media Ownership Chart
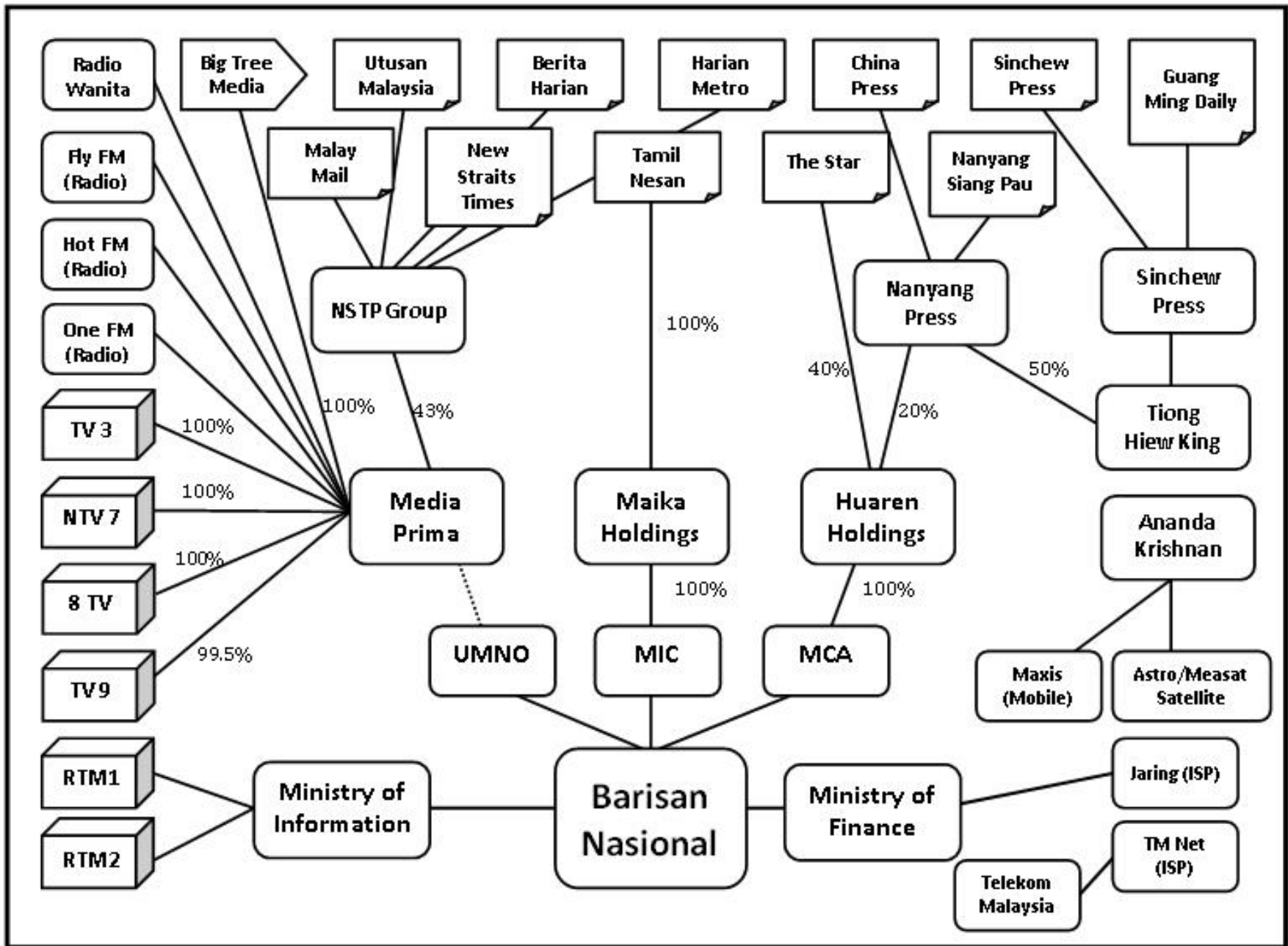
Media Prima is the largest media conglomerate in the country. It is a publicly traded company listed on the Main Board of the Malaysia Stock Exchange. *Media Prima* controls 43 percent of the *New Straits Times Press* (NSTP) Group. NSTP is Malaysia's oldest and largest publisher. Its three main newspapers, *New Straits Times, Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro*, have a combined circulation exceeding half a million copies per day (see Table 3). The NSTP Group is responsible for filing the landmark defamation suit against bloggers, Jeff Ooi and Ahirudin Attan in January 2007.

Media Prima also controls the private television broadcast sector in the country. It owns and operates four out of six of the free-to-air television channels, TV3, NTV 7, 8TV, and TV9. The other two, RTM 1 and RTM 2, are directly run by the Ministry of Information. According to *Media Prima's* press release, it commands 50 percent of TV viewership in the country as of March 2008 ("Fact sheet", 2009). Anti-monopoly laws against concentration of media ownership do not exist in Malaysia. This has allowed *Media Prima* to steadily acquire controlling stakes in most media outlets in the country over the years. *Media Prima* first gained control of TV3 in 1993. TV3 was considered the first private channel in the country. In 2005, *Media Prima* acquired both NTV 7 and TV9. Two years later, *Media Prima* acquired full control of *Merit Idea Sdn Bhd* (MISB), an investment firm which holds 99.5 per cent in *Metropolitan TV Sdn Bhd* (MTV) which in turn is the license owner and operator of 8TV ("Media Prima buys out 8TV", 2007).

The conglomerate also owns four radio stations, Fly FM, *Radio Wanita* (Women Radio), Hot FM, and One FM. According the NTSP's website, Fly FM is one of the fastest growing English language stations with an estimated listenership of 639,000 listeners ("Fact sheet", 2009). In addition, it owns a motion picture company (*Grand Brilliance*), a recording studio (*Ambang*

Klasik) and several advertising companies (*Gotcha, Uniteers, Right Channel, UPD, Big Tree Outdoor*)("Financial statement", 2007).

The influence of *Media Prima* extends to "out-of-home" advertising through the complete acquisition of Malaysia's leading outdoor advertising outfit, *Big Tree Outdoor Sdn Bhd* (BTO). *Media Prima*, which already owns 70 percent[70] of BTO's share assumed complete ownership of it by acquiring the remaining 30 percent stake from an Australian company for RM43.39 million in 2007. BTO owns and maintains thousands of giant outdoor billboards strategically positioned along the busy 600-miles long North-South Expressway, Penang Bridge and ELITE highway. These strategically located billboards are an important part of the *Barisan Nasional* propaganda machinery especially during the Independence Day celebration, major holidays, and also election season. As the hundreds of thousands of Malaysian commuters traverse the busy highways, they are reminded on a daily basis of the *Barisan*'s role in leading the nation to the road of prosperity and stability over the past decades by literally using the roads the *Barisan* built and reinforced visually from these giant billboards (see Figure 7 and Figure 8).

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[70] In November 2006, Media Prima acquired 70 percent of Big Tree for RM97.2 million, according to Prima Media's official website http://www.mediaprima.com.my/mc_news.asp?id=65

Figure 7: An outdoor billboard depicting all five of Malaysian Prime Ministers, all hailing from the UMNO Party in the *Barisan Nasional coalition.*

Figure 8: An outdoor billboard emphasizing the commitment to stability and security by the *Barisan Nasional* during election campaign season

The dominance of *Media Prima* in the industry is unambiguous. It has given the company

tremendous reach and influence. The problem with *Media Prima's* dominance is further

compounded when we consider how deeply the company is linked to the dominant political party

in the country, UMNO ("No decision on merger", 2007). Through its link with the media

conglomerate, UMNO has a disproportionate amount of influence in the major televisions,

newspapers, radios, and advertising in the country.

UMNO is certainly not the only political party to have benefited politically by being able

to control the mass media by-proxy through ownership. The *Malaysian Chinese Association*

(MCA) and *Malaysian Indian Congress* (MIC), the second and the third largest parties in the

Barisan coalition both own a piece of the mass media pie in the country. MCA through its

investment arm, *Huaren Holdings*[71] owns over 40 percent shares in *The Star* which is the most

profitable newspaper in the country[72]. The market value of the *Huaren*'s stake in *The Star* is

estimated to be worth one billion ringgit[73] in 2006 ("Ling tried to sell Star"). The MCA

investment arm also controls over 20 percent of the *Nanyang Press Group* which controls local

Chinese newspapers, the *China Press* and the *Nanyang Siang Pau*, one of the most established

Chinese-language newspapers in the country.

On 30 January 2007, Malaysia-based *Sinchew Media Corporation* announced its

intention to merge with the Hong Kong-based *Ming Pao Group* and invited *Nanyang Press*

Holdings to form a tri-partite venture ("Chinese media merger", 2007). The *Sinchew Group* owns

the lucrative Chinese language daily, *Sinchew Jit Poh* which is the highest circulating Chinese

language newspaper in the country. The merger would create the largest Chinese language

publication group outside of China and Taiwan. The merger would also place the control of all

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[71] *Huaren* translates literally to "Chinese person"

[72] see ("Statement to shareholders", 2008)

[73] 1 billion Malaysian ringgit is equivalent to US $272,600,000.00

three newspapers in the hands of a single Malaysian tycoon, Tiong Hiew King. Only a year

earlier, Tiong bought a 21.02 percent stake in *Nanyang Press* from *Huaren Holdings*[74]. Together

with previous holdings, the media tycoon owns 44.8 percent of *Nanyang Press* ("Chinese media

merger", 2007). The timber tycoon now has controlling stakes in four of the highest circulating

Chinese language newspapers in the country (Nanyang Siang Pau, Sinchew Jit Poh, China Press,

and Guang Ming Daily).

The Indian-based party, MIC's dealings with the mass media are conducted through its

investment arm, *Maika Holdings Berhad*. It was founded by the current President of MIC, M.

Samy Vellu who also serves as its Chairman. It currently owns the Tamil language newspaper

Tamil Nesan (Tamil News)—one of three Tamil language newspapers still in publication in the

country. *Maika Holdings* deals not only in the mass media but also in construction, insurance,

aviation, plantation, education, etc.[75]. However, the management of *Maika Holdings* itself had

been questionable. The performance of *Maika Holdings* has been so poor, "given the overall

corporate growth of that period that it led many to suspect improprieties" and "Samy Vellu

himself was investigated for suspicion of siphoning off shares for personal gain" (Willford, 2006,

p. 43). Many *Maika Holdings* shareholders were rubber plantation estate workers who had

pawned their family jewelry and withdrew their life savings to invest in the company.("Maika the

failed venture", 2007).

Non-terrestrial broadcasting in the country is largely provided by *Astro*, the satellite

owned by tycoon Ananda Krishnan who is the second richest man in the country and a close

associate of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Krishnan also has control over the

telecommunication company *Binariang Berhad* which owns two satellites *Measat-1*, *Measat-2,*

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[74] After the sale, *Huaren Holdings* was left with a 20 percent share of the Nanyang Press.
[75] *Maika Holdings* official website. Retrieved Nov 22, 2008 from
http://www.maika.com.my/subsidiaries.htm

the high-powered satellites carrying C-band and Ku-band transponders with a huge footprint

covering most of the Asia-Pacific region (Mahathir, 1998, p. 39). The reach of *Astro* is extensive

in the nation, even in the slums; one may see the ubiquitous *Astro* satellite dishes on the rooftops.

Astro also operates eight popular FM terrestrial radio stations in Malaysia. Krishnan, through his

privately owned company, *Usaha Tegas Sdn. Bhd*, also owns the largest mobile phone network,

Maxis Communications in the country with a 42 percent harmket share.

5.5.4.1. Criticism of Media Concentration

The issue of media ownership in the country has been subject to much criticism from various

quarters over the years. It has also been a source for debate amongst the political power players

since the country's independence albeit for political reasons and not because of their support for

media freedom. For example, John Lent reported in 1978, that MCA vice-president Lee Siok

Yew openly questioned the patriotism and loyalty of Chinese language newspapers in the country

because they were formed with foreign capital (Lent, 1978, p. 30). At that time, the (still

independently owned) Chinese newspapers were seen as the defender of the rights of the

community and had often questioned government implementations that were unfair to the

Chinese community. Now, with the ownership of the newspaper effectively in the hands of the

government or a few well-connected individuals, there is less motivation for the Chinese

newspaper as well as those of other languages to question the government.

      Civil society groups, NGOs, and media watchers have issued complaints and expressed

concerns but these have largely fallen on deaf ears. For example, The *Writers Alliance for Media*

Independence (WAMI)[76] had expressed its concern that such concentration of ownership will

reduce "diversity and competition in content, eventually harmful to both the media industry and

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[76] Founders of WAMI include 26 former journalists who resign from *Nanyang Siang Pau* as protest to the
MCA buy out of the newspaper.

public interest" (Beh, 2006b). In another example, the locally based *Centre for Independent*

Journalism (CIJ) ("Memorandum", 2004) recommended specific areas where the Government

needs to take action:

- All political parties must withdraw from media ownership
- Establishment of a Freedom of Information Act in place of the Official Secrets Act
- Outlaw media monopoly, to the effect that media ownership did not concentrate too heavily on certain business conglomerates.
- The demand of an explanation from the Ministry of Home Affairs as to the reasons why a number of Chinese language columnists have been banned from writing for the Chinese dailies in Malaysia.

Unsurprisingly, none of the recommendations and demands were acknowledged by the

authorities. However, there are instances where the political parties' plans to further consolidate

media ownership are thwarted by these groups. For example, when MCA announced their plans

to take over *Nanyang Siang Pau*, the decision was met with a great deal of resistance. First, the

Federation of Chinese Associations in Malaysia (FECAM), the Associated Chinese Chambers of

Commerce and Industry in Malaysia (ACCIM), and the Chinese-based education group, *Dong*

Jiao Zong, created the Committee of Chinese Organisations Against the MCA Takeover of

Nanyang Press (CAT) to fight off the proposed takeover of *Nanyang Siang Pau* by MCA (Loh,

2001). There was a surprising amount of support for the movement especially from the ACCIM

which is a business grouping. According to Loh (2001), the group had condemned the takeover

for "pushing through a scheme that runs counter to democratic principles and which spelled the

end of the independence and autonomy of Chinese dailies". CAT declared that "it is the

responsibility of every party to ensure the independence of the media from partisan control or

intervention" and "MCA as a member of the ruling coalition, *Barisan Nasional*…should not

directly or indirectly intervene in media operations"(Loh, 2001). In addition to CAT, the

Malaysian Chinese Newspaper Editors Association also urged MCA to reverse the takeover. As a

sign of protest, 90 columnists and contributors to four major dailies, *Nanyang Siang Pau, China*

Press, Sin Chew Jit Poh and *Guangming Daily*, stopped their writing. The journalists working for the Chinese language dailies had traditionally prided themselves for being more independent than the English, Malay and even Tamil-language newspaper.

5.6.   Watershed Moments in the Development of Malaysian Mass Media

Extraordinary events can change the trajectory of mass media development in a country. McCarthyism, *Watergate* and *9-11* changed the practices and perceptions of journalism in the United States; the fall of Communism fundamentally altered the mass media system in the Eastern Europe; and the1994 genocide in Rwanda sadly had cast a dark shadow over the role of the radio in the country (Thompson, 2007). This section highlights the various events that have become the "turning points" and "watershed moments" in the development of mass media in Malaysia.

5.6.1. May 13th Racial Riot

One particular incident that prompted the government to further tighten the control of the media were the racial riots on 13th May 1969, known locally as the "May 13th" incident. In 1969, the nation held its 3rd General Election, where the ten-year old ruling coalition tasted its first major defeat. It had lost control of three states—Kelantan, Penang, and Perak—and had to face with a humiliating tie in Selangor, the state in which nation's capital, Kuala Lumpur, is located ("Malaysian voters", 1969). The Chinese-based *Democratic Action Party* (DAP) and *Gerakan Party*[77] were able to gain more votes from the non-Malays voters than the *Malaysian Chinese Association* (MCA). This strain on the relationship between MCA and the Malay-based UMNO

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[77] Gerakan (or Movement) joined the ruling coalition in February 1972.

for the MCA was supposed to deliver the Chinese votes to the *Alliance Party*[78]. According to

official records, the May 13th riot was sparked off by inflammatory speeches made by both the

Alliance Party and Opposition parties (Nain & Wang, 2004). A day after the May 10, 1969

Election, thousands of Chinese supported of *DAP* and *Gerakan* marched through Kuala Lumpur,

parading through predominantly Malay areas hurling insults. Malay supporters of the ruling

coalition, held their own counter celebration. Conflicts ensued which led to more clashes and

finally a full-blown racial riot broke out. Then Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman made a

television and radio appeal for calm and expressed his preparedness for declaring a state of

emergency if the situation did not improve ("At least 20 killed", 1969). The situation in the

capital city did not improve despite the presence of 3000 policemen and a 24-hour curfew.

Overseas newspaper reported the following:

> *...in the capital tonight, riot police and soldiers were massed at street corners with
> orders to shoot curfew violators. A pall of tear gas hung in the still, hot air after the
> police had thrown gas canisters into alleys and behind buildings where groups of young
> rioters were seen moving about. In the Chinese communities, where most of last night's
> damage was caused, inhabitants have erected makeshift barricades draped with red
> flags. The red color is seen not as a Communist symbol but as a traditional Chinese color
> of solidarity and good luck. Two buildings were burning into the night and shouts and
> sounds of glass breaking could be beard from a distance...*("Malaysian premier suspends
> charter", 1969)

By the second day, the King, on the advice of the Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman,

suspended the Federal Constitution and the parliament, nullified the election results, and declared

a state of emergency in the country ("Premier suspends charter", 1969). The survival of the

nascent democracy became a cause of concern. A *Time* magazine article reported the following:

> *...Malaysia's proud experiment in constructing a multiracial society exploded in the
> streets of Kuala Lumpur last week. Malay mobs, wearing white headbands signifying an
> alliance with death, and brandishing swords and daggers, surged into Chinese areas in*

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[78] The *Alliance Party* was the coalition of mainly ethnic-based political parties headed by UMNO which
governed the country from independence in 1957 until 1973, when it changed to *Barisan Nasional*.

the capital, burning, looting and killing. In retaliation, Chinese, sometimes aided by Indians, armed themselves with pistols and shotguns and struck at Malay kampongs. Huge pillars of smoke rose skyward as houses, shops and autos burned…(cited in Vengadesan, 2008)

By the end of the riot, official figures reported more than 200 people had been killed although some estimates put the figure as high as a thousand deaths. In addition to the suspension of the parliament and the Constitution which was to last for 21 months[79], the Alliance decided to suspend the publication of all newspapers in order to curb further spread of the ethnic hatred. The editor-in-chief of the *New Straits Times* at the time appealed to the government to lift the blanket ban. After two days, the ban was finally lifted on the condition that the newspapers must refrain from reporting any news that could worsen the situation and that "the government had the right to censor items that were deemed dangerous to national security" (Nain & Wang, 2004, p. 125). Two months after the riots, *Time* magazine ran another article which painted a bleak future for the young nation:

…for the past two months, however, Kuala Lumpur's food stalls have closed early and the street crowds that usually mingled pleasantly now scatter for cover at any unusual sound. In the wake of bloody race riots that may have claimed 2,000 lives[80], Malaysia's peoples have broken little bread together; they have probably broken any hope for multiracial harmony for many years to come…("Preparing for a pogrom", 1969)

The repercussion from this singular event permeated all strata of Malaysian life and is still being felt today. It has also provided the ruling party with a tangible moment in history which they could always rely on to persuade the voters of the importance of continual support to the *Barisan Nasional* coalition.

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[79] A state of emergency was declared on 14th May 1969, suspending the Constitution and Parliament. The Parliament officially resumed on 20th February 1971.
[80]The actual number of people who were killed in the *May 13th Racial Riots* was never confirmed. Official report put the number at 196 (Funston, 1980).

Zaharom and Mustafa (2000) identify the *May 13th Racial Riots* as a major turning point for media policy in modern Malaysia. In the aftermath of the violent episode, more than 100 enactments including amendments to the Constitution were approved by Parliament to rectify "failings" exposed by the incident. In other words, more control over speech and expression especially in the media. For example, the Control of Imported Publications Act of 1958 (later replaced by the Printing Presses and Publication Act of 1984 was amended to give the Home Affairs Minister the power to ban any foreign publications that are deemed "detrimental to public order, national interest, morality, or security" (Means as cited in Loh & Khoo, 2002, p.126). Other legislations that were amended due to the racial riots, in order to strengthen the "preservation of intercommunal harmony", include the Internal Security Act, Sedition Act, University Act, etc (Hwang, 2003, p. 107). These amendments significantly curb freedom of speech and of press particularly in regards "to the issues of the rights of citizenship, Malay special rights, the status and powers of the Malay rulers, the status of Islam, and the status of Malay as the sole national language" (Loh & Khoo, 2002, p. 125). Loh and Khoo note that "it is often asserted that under certain trying circumstances the government had to issue emergency degrees"(2002, p. 125) in order to maintain the political stability of the country. However, it is evident that the incumbent government would use the "emergency situation" to its advantage and to consolidate its position and power. In short, the emergency may have been long gone but the amendments made during the emergency period are conveniently retained and the "emergency mentality" lingers on.

5.6.2. *Operasi Lalang* 1987

The year 1987 marks yet another watershed moment that severely undermined not only the ability for citizens to express freely but also the credibility of the judiciary. It also further narrowed the

gap between the political system and the mass media system in the country (Rodan, 2004, p. 26).

A nation-wide political clampdown, code-named *Operasi Lalang* (Operation Weed) was executed

on 27 October 1987, under former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. It occurred in the year

when UMNO was suffering from an internal power struggle which resulted in the party being

split into two factions, *Team A* and *Team B*. Veteran Opposition member, Lim Kit Siang, from

the *Democratic Action Party* (DAP) points out that 1987 was one of the worst during the "dark

years of oppression" under Mahathir (Lim, 2006). *Operasi Lalang* was done as a "purging" by

Mahathir Mohamad and his *Team A* faction in the UMNO. During *Operasi Lalang*, more than

100 people—including social activists, opposition politicians, academics, human rights activists

and social workers were detained[81]. Three newspapers, namely *The Star*, *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, and

Watan had their publishing licenses suspended (Nain & Wang, 2004, p. 255). *Operasi Lalang*'s

intimidation had a profound effect on some of the newspapers' journalistic model. Prior to the

clamp-down *The Star* was regarded as an oppositional newspaper in the country. In a private

meeting with Leonard Sussman[82], the editor of *The Star* told Sussman that he "comes to work

every day ready to go to prison. My bag is packed" (Sussman, 2004, p. 276). After the clamp-

down, *The Star* shifted from its politically oppositional style and rebranded itself as a "social" and

"business" newspaper, in the process becoming the most profitable newspaper in the country.

Nain and Wang (2004) criticize the rebranded *The Star* as "a pale copy of the original newspaper"

as it became much less critical and the columnists who used to be critical became more subdued.

In the aftermath of the *Operasi Lalang*, the Printing Presses and Publication Act was significantly

expanded and the Broadcasting Act was introduced for the first time.

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[81] See also Mustafa K. Anuar's Defining Democratic Discourses: The Mainstream Press (p.149). In F.
K.W, Loh & B.T, Khoo (Eds.) (2002). *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practic*e. Surrey: Curzon
Press.
[82] Sussman was the Managing Editor for the *Press Freedom Index* of *Freedom House*.

5.6.3. "And they want to leap-frog into the information society" (c.1996)

The Malaysian Government has been eager to embrace and to promote of the development

information technologies and communication infrastructures. This has been the case at least since

the inception of the *Multimedia Super Corridor* (MSC) project in 1996. This enthusiasm is

evidenced by the healthy allocation in the national budget to the development of the ICT in the

country. Phrases such as "ICT", "knowledge-based economy", and "information sector" have

been bandied around in the annual budget speeches given in the last decade or so. In the 2007

Budget speech, the Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi pledged significant amounts of

spending in further development of *Information and Communication Technology* (ICT) once

again showing the country's commitment to the development of information-related areas.

Specific plans listed in the budget include continued support of the MSC Grants Scheme and

introducing specialized trainings to IT graduates. All these are part of the government's objective

to generate "new sources of wealth in technology and knowledge-intensive sectors" (Malaysia

Budget Speech 2007) as part of the overall target of moving the "economy up the value chain"

and raising the "capacity for knowledge and innovation and nurturing the first class mentality".

There are also other innovative initiatives such as the Universal Service Provision (USP) Fund

which is funded by telecommunication companies to improve ICT infrastructure in rural areas

including broadband connections ("Malaysia Budget 2007"), that engages the private sector in

rural development projects without utilizing government dollars.

Table 6: Selected ICT-related Initiatives in Malaysia Budgets (2000-2008)

Year	Selected Initiatives
2000	200 million to finance high-tech projects.
2001	500 million ICT-related Venture Capital Fund
	10 million for the Total Hospital Information System (THIS), an integrated health information system
2002	112.7 million to implement the Electronic Government Flagship Project
	72.3 million for Smart Schools,
	20 million for Telemedicine
	86.3 million for Smart Card
	487.67 million to increase the computerization program in ministries and departments
	205.5 million for computerization of schools
2004	Telekom Malaysia announces a 50% discount on broadband Internet charges for industrial and corporate users and a 30% reduction for other consumers to promote broadband usage
2005	Tax rebate given to individual taxpayers for the purchase of personal computers be increased from RM400 to RM500
2006	868 million allocated under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation
	1.2 billion for ICT, curriculum development, hostels and teachers' quarters
2007	154 million allocated for MDeC to promote ICT-based entrepreneurs
	162 million allocated to MIMOS for various ICT programs
	25 million to finance ICT applications under the Content Industry Development Fund
	20 million to finance ICT-based R&D under the MSC Grant Scheme
2008	15 million for ICT education in rural areas
	45 million for the implementation of *SchoolNet* project to provide Internet services to schools

Source: Treasury Malaysia, Ministry of Finance Budget 2000-2008

*All amount in *Ringgit Malaysia* (RM)

There is little doubt that the Malaysian government is eager to embrace the information, communication, and technology (ICT) era, the concept of k-economy, the digitalization of information, and its other various permutations. In a speech for a conference about the progress of *MSC Malaysia* project in 2007, then Deputy Minister of Information, Chia Kwang Chye was keen on the promotion of digital media. He argues that "digital media can and should be used to

promote the opportunities available in the state. It is no longer confined and limited by the reach

of a conventional print media and…should welcome and embrace it with an open mind within the

ambits of a civil society"(Chia, 2007). Malaysia also ranks favorably in various global rankings

that deal directly or indirectly with the development of information technology, in comparison

with some other countries in the region (see Table 6).

Table 7: Malaysia's Ranking on Various ICT-Related Global Indicators

Indicators	Malaysia	Singapore	Indonesia	Thailand	South Korea	China	India	United States
Digital Opportunity Index [83]	57	5	116	82	1	77	124	20
Networked Readiness Index [84]	26	4	76	40	9	57	50	5
Globalization Index [85]	23	1	69	53	35	66	71	7
Global Peace Index [86]	38	29	68	118	32	67	107	97

In the Malaysian context, the powers-that-be appear to subscribe to the information technologies-

driven version of information society (Webster, 2006). In 2003, during a speech for the World

[83] *Digital Opportunity Index* 2007. Retrieved Jan 2, 2009 from http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/doi/material/WISR07-chapter3.pdf
[84] Networked Readiness Index 2007-2008. Retrieved Jan 2, 2009 from http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gitr/2008/Rankings.pdf
[85] Globalization Index 2007. Retrieved Jan 2, 2009 from http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4030#rankings
[86] Global Peace Index 2007. Retrieved Jan 2, 2009 from http://www.visionofhumanity.org/gpi/results/rankings/2008/

Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva, the Minister of Energy, Communications, and Multimedia stated:

> *…in shaping our visions and goals for an information society it is important that right at the beginning we recognize the fact that ICT is more than a tool, it provides a rich environment for the generation, dissemination and application of information and knowledge, enabling the maximum potential for socio-economic development…*
>
> (Moggie, 2003)

The statement and the rest of the speech by the Minister, show first and foremost, the integral part technology is perceived to play in the information society and secondly, that information society is the key to bringing about socio-economic development. The Malaysian *Third Outline Perspective* Plan 2001-2010 states that:

> *…as Malaysia enters the 21st century… the thrust of human resource development is to prepare a workforce that is capable of meeting the challenges of a knowledge-based economy, well equipped with technological skills and expertise, and high level of thinking skills…(Third Outline Perspective Plan, 2001-2010)*

The government-linked privatized national telecommunication company, *Telekom Malaysia* (TM Malaysia) undoubtably shares the government's aspiration as well. The CEO of TM Malaysia proudly proclaims: "we are heading for the digital home era where IPTV (Internet Protocol Television), VoIP (Voice-over-Internet Protocol) and home surveillance (via the Net) are necessities" ("Super fast Net", 2007). The same news report heralds that Malaysians will soon "join the ranks of privileged Internet users in other parts of the world who are already enjoying blazing fast broadband access."

The fact that the Malaysian government subscribes to the technological version of an information society is hardly surprising. Even the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) measures information society largely through the development of information-related

infrastructures. In the first phase of WSIS, the Digital Opportunity Index (DOI) was introduced. The DOI index is structured around three parts: Opportunity, Infrastructure, and Utilization ("WIS Report", 2006). *Opportunity* has to do with availability, affordability and issue of access, that is, "in order to participate in the Information Society, consumers must have accessibility to ICTs and must be able to afford them". *Infrastructure* deals with the proportion of households or such with fixed land-lines, cellular phones, Internet connection, and lastly the *Utilization* deals with the extent of ICT usage.

The choice by Malaysia to embrace this facet of the information society is understandable. Having only recently been promoted out of the developing world category and into the ranks of *Newly Industrializing Countries* (NIC), there is first and foremost a need to close-in the infrastructure gaps in terms of actual hardware—telephone lines, fiber-optic cables, satellites, etc. This sentiment regarding the importance of ICTs is shared by many others including Nobel Laureate, Muhammad Yunus who believes ICT can play an immediate role helping the poor in three major areas: 1) integrating the poor into the mainstream economy by expanding their market, eliminating the middlemen in their business and creating international job opportunities through service outsourcing; 2) bringing information, educational programs, skills training and healthcare services, etc., all in a very user-friendly way, even to the most remote villages; 3) empowering the poor, particularly poor women, with a stronger voice that can be heard behind the borders of their village, better access to information, and improvement in the democratic process (Yunus, 2006).

The second benefit of following the technological understanding of the information society is more psychological. The mere sight of more computers, more cellular phones, and even the thought of having one's own satellites up in the orbit serves as visual evidence of the tangible progress the country is making that everyone could easily relate to and is a source of national

pride. The Government is of course acutely aware of such acknowledgement and never fails to use it as an indisputable testament of good governance during election time. And the third benefit for the Government for following the technological perspective of information society is that it enables to promote or "to sell" the concept without touching on the democratizing potential inherent in the process of building an information society. By doing so, it avoids the need to answer potentially embarrassing questions such as the Government's position of free speech.

The path towards an information society in Malaysia is rather non-incremental. In the parlance of Schement and Curtis (1994), the development in Malaysia started from the macro level, and it is working its way down to the meso and micro level. The *Multimedia Super Corridor* or MSC project was announced by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in 1995. Located on a strip of land 15 by 50 kilometers wide, south of Kuala Lumpur, the MSC was to be the "government's first major investment in its technology-based future" (Jussawalla & Taylor, 2003, p. 97). It was a multi-billion ringgit investment incorporating a brand new administrative capital, Putrajaya, and the "smart city" *Cyberjaya*. Its aim was to become the Asian Silicon Valley, a gathering of "information age" companies such as the likes of Microsoft, IBM, and Sun Microsystems. In order to attract the foreign investors, the Government provided tax incentives, legal support, and pertaining to the discussion of Internet communication in the country, the MSC Bill of Guarantees. The ten-point Bill of Guarantees includes the clause "ensure no Internet censorship" which was meant to alleviate the fear of foreign investors of Government censorship of the technology. The Digital Review of Asia Pacific cites Malaysia, especially the MSC as a "prime example" of the strategy "to undertake clustering of ICT industries to enable learning from each other and develop regional linkages" ("Digital review of Asia Pacific 2007-2008", p. 7)

The MSC project obviously included provisions for local companies but overall it seems to be an effort in enticing multinational companies in order to bring in foreign investment. The

infrastructure, technology and other benefits from the endeavor was believed to reach the common people more due to the trickledown effect. It was an attempt to prove to the world that Malaysia is capable of First World enterprises. The former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad on more than one occasion boasted about the country's ability to build a world class infrastructure at third world cost. To be fair, the idea to appeal and get connected with the international crowd first rather than to build from ground up domestically, is not illogical. In 1996, the 'economy of information' was still in its infancy, there was much of local entrepreneurship to speak of. Therefore, inviting multinational conglomerates like Microsoft and Sun Microsystems would logically jumpstart the industry—to enable the country to *leap-frog* into the information age.

The drive to bring IT into the lives of average Malaysians, by the former premier, Mahathir Mohamad, has resulted in one unexpected consequence for the policy makers—the use of the World Wide Web for contentious political communications by the Opposition. It is also ironic that the man who has been called "draconian" and a "dictator" would be the same person who gave some semblance of freedom of expression on the Internet through the MSC Bill of Guarantees. The former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad who was instrumental in the IT drive in the early 1990s had put in place the guarantee of no censorship of the Internet. The guarantee could be considered as Mahathir Mohamad's greatest, albeit accidental, gift to the free speech movement in Malaysia. The former premier noted at the time (c.1995), he "didn't realize the kind of filth that can get on the Internet" (Interview with Mahathir Mohamad, 2008). Policy makers clearly did not realize the full extent of the potential of the Internet when they were laying down the foundation for IT development for the nation

This inadvertently helped create one of the last safe havens in Malaysia where alternative opinions could be voiced out and more importantly get heard is the Internet. In general, web-based publications certainly had received less scrutiny than print and broadcasting. However

several scholars (Zaharom, 2002; George, 2006) argue that the lenience and tolerance has more to do with the economic ramifications of enacting direct censorship of the Internet rather than with the government being open-minded. Indeed the pledge of non-censorship of the Internet made in the late 1990s as part of the Bill of Guarantees were made in order to woo foreign investor to the Multimedia Super Corridor[87], The development of a vibrant and vocal blogosphere could be considered as an unforeseen and unwanted externality of that legacy to transform the country into an information society.

5.6.4. Asian Financial Crisis and *Reformasi* Movement (1997-1999)

The years between 1997 and 1999 are known as the *Reformasi* in Malaysia. As the financial crisis wreaked havoc in Asia between 1997 and 1998, many Asian countries including Thailand, Indonesia, Korea, and the Philippines turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for financial assistance. Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad had blamed the currency speculators for the crisis. He infamously called fund manager George Soros a "moron" (Abdelal & Alfaro, 2003). Malaysia went against the crowd and opted not to not ask the IMF for assistance, choosing instead to unilaterally control capital flowing in and out of the country by freezing the out-flow of the Malaysian Ringgit into the international market on 1 September 1998. The move was unexpected and controversial and it was all the more a remarkable move "for a country that had embraced international capital markets as a central component of its development strategy"(Abdelal & Alfaro, 2003). It was also a move that was widely ridiculed by many Western economists as anti-market and a step backward for the country[88].

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[87] See *Bill of Guarantees* at http://www.msc.com.my/msc/whymsc.asp. See also Appendix
[88] Among the few leading economists who supported the move was 2008 Nobel Laureate economist Paul Krugman

The move caused a significant rift between the Prime Minister and his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim who wanted the IMF assistance despite the numerous conditions the country would have to abide by including further opening up the market and increasing the transparency of the banking institutions. These conditions would effectively destroy many domestic industries that have enjoyed state protection and relied on huge subsidies for the decades including Mahathir's "pet project"—the national car company, *Proton*—which had suffered losses since its inception in 1987. It would also force more transparency to the current banking system which may reveal embarrassing details of cronyism and nepotism transpiring between the political system and the financial system. Then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim sought to topple Mahathir to gain control of UMNO. It was a struggle for political survival between a consummate politician and his heir-apparent. On the one hand, Anwar was popular with the younger generation, charismatic, and had the support of the international market especially the United States, having been the face of Malaysia to the global market as the Finance Minister of the country since 1993. The *Wall Street Journal*, for example, had called him "Malaysia's calm voice of economic reason" during the Asian crisis (Abdelal & Alfaro, 2003). On the other hand, Mahathir was a shrewd politician who had outlasted two former deputies and even a political coup in 1987 which split the UMNO party in two[89]. Mahathir also had the support of the local elites who had much to lose if Anwar won.

Then within 24-hours of the announcement of the unprecedented capital-control, Mahathir sacked Anwar Ibrahim from all his government positions on 2 September 1998. Two days later, Anwar was expelled from UMNO. A couple of weeks later "the Malaysian media

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[89] In 1987, factions within the UMNO led by a Malay royalty, Tengku Razaleigh challenged the President of the party, Mahathir Mohammad. An internal fight ensued between Team A led by Mahathir (with Anwar Ibrahim and current Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi) and Team B. The bitter battle for control of the party eventually ended with the Supreme Court declaring UMNO an unlawful organization and the formation of UMNO *Baru* (New UMNO) which Mahathir retained control as party president.

went to town publishing and broadcasting the 'confessions' of Anwar's adopted brother and his speech writer that they had been sodomized by Anwar" (Nain & Anuar, 1998). This was shocking news to the Muslim community. Events were moving so quickly, it was felt that Anwar was not only fighting for his political survival but something more dire. Anwar tried to counter the charges by addressing about 50,000 of his supporters at the National Mosque, "professing his innocence and reiterating that there was a high level conspiracy in government to discredit and remove him". Later that Sunday night, the police stormed Anwar's house and arrested him under the Internal Security Act and later on charges of sodomy and corruption. While in custody, the once heir-apparent to the country's premiership suffered a bruised left-eye when he was beaten by the Chief of Police, Rahim Noor ("Black eye for justice", 2000). The "bruised eye" became the inspiration for the design of *Parti Keadilan Rakyat's* (PKR) logo and also a rallying symbol for the supporters of the *Reformasi* movement.
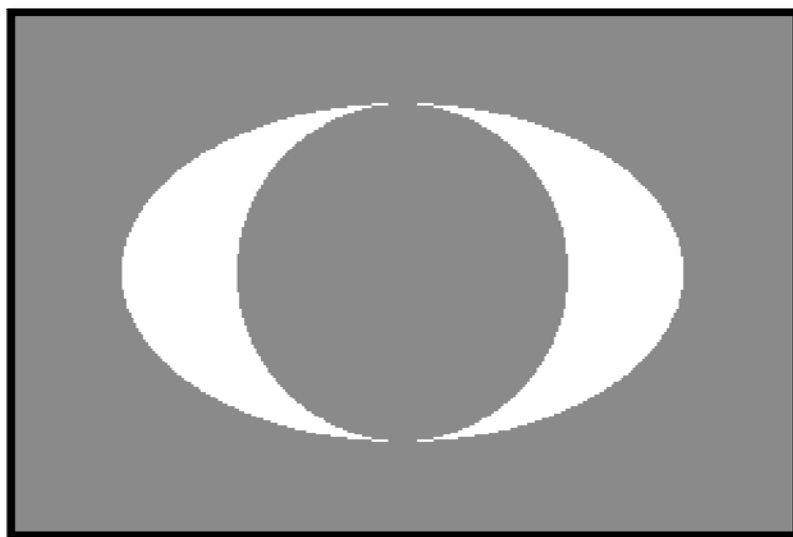

Figure 9: The *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (People's Justice Party) official logo inspired by the bruised eye suffered by Anwar Ibrahim while in police custody.

The entire incident was widely publicized and sensationalized in the mainstream media which are mostly pro-government. Those in the media who openly supported the fallen Deputy Prime Minister were removed as a political tactic to eliminate his access to the media and ultimately to the readers. Prior to Anwar's sacking and expulsion from UMNO the editors of the two largest Malay language newspapers in the country, Johan Jaafar (*Utusan Malaysia*) and Ahmad Nazri Abdullah, (*Berita Harian*), were forced to resign "under political pressure from the ruling party"("Editor resigns under pressure", 1998; Hwang, 2003). Their resignations were followed by that of the director of operations from the largest private television station, TV3. All three of these men were allied to Anwar Ibrahim. All three positions were later filled with pro-Mahathir individuals (Hwang, 2003).

People who played by the ruling party's rules in the mainstream media got rewarded. An example of this would be Azalina Othman and Khairy Jamaluddin. They were once the TV hosts for the talk show, *Dateline Malaysia* on the local private channel, NT7. In one particular episode during the height of the *Reformasi* hosted by Azalina Othman, the two guests were human rights activist, Dr. Chandra Muzaffar who was a *Reformasi* supporter and a *Barisan Nasional* politician. It was a rare thing to have pro-Opposition guests on the show. Othman started off as a neutral facilitator but as the interview progressed, it became clear that she was on the side of the establishment as she and the BN politician both started criticizing Muzaffar's support of the *Reformasi* movement. Both Khairy Jamaluddin and Azalina Othman went on to become the Deputy Chief of UMNO Youth and Minister of Tourism respectively.

On the print media side, even some of the local Chinese language newspapers also did not dare to publish official statements or views from Opposition parties during the Reformasi period. The Chinese-language dailies that have traditionally been slightly more vocal than either the English or the Malay language newspapers would not risk having their annual license revoked

for printing Opposition's views. Interestingly, this situation created a new space for an underground student movement. PKR State Assemblyman, Sim Tze Tzin, who was a student supporter of Anwar Ibrahim during *Reformasi* recalls writing press statements for the underground student organization, Malaysia Youth & Students Democratic Movement *(DEMA)*, to mainstream Chinese-language newspapers to express their views on the events happening in the country (Interview with Sim Tze Tzin). Since student activities, especially those related to politics are highly regulated in Malaysia, under the Universities and University Colleges Act (1971)[90] which was put in place after the Racial Riots of 1969 to prevent students from engaging in political activities. Such statements from an underground movement would usually not be given any space in the mainstream media, however in the case of *DEMA*, things were different. *DEMA* provided an alternative for these newspapers. As Sim explains it:

> ...the newspapers, they cannot publish the politicians views and so they carried the students views because we shared quite a similar views with the Opposition so it is good that that they have to play the game, walking the thin line, so that instead they published the student's statement and didn't publish the opposition's statement. So in that sense, we had the space to be part of the movement... (Interview with Sim Tze Tzin)

The *DEMA* example illustrated the 'cat and mouse game' that the mainstream media had to play with the *Barisan Nasional* government as they wanted to keep their printing license and to remain relevant to their readers at the same time, as Sim mentioned, "walking the thin line".

Finally, the *Reformasi* period created something else even more lasting that would have an influence in the development alternative media in the country. The seeds for using the Internet as an alternative platform to mainstream media were first sown during these final years of the twentieth century. It is during these crucial couple of years that three important policy and events converged: first was the ICT policy created by the Mahathir Administration in the early 1990s

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[90] See Universities and University Colleges Act 1971

which gave way to the ambitious Multimedia Super Corridor project, second the economic

sufferings caused by the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997-98, and lastly, the threat of socio-political

instability brought on by the sacking and jailing of a charismatic leader, Anwar Ibrahim. The

convergence of these policy and events culminated in the *forced birth* of web-based alternative

media in Malaysia.

5.6.5. Pioneering Alternative Media in Malaysia: Malaysiakini.com (1999~ present)

> "…*Malaysia is a very complex society. It is multiracial, multilingual, multi-religious ... multi-everything! The problems are so complex that I don't think we should allow the government alone to solve them. It is up to all Malaysians to come together, to come up with a solution. And to do that, they will need to keep talking to each other. We are providing that forum…*"
>
> (Steven Gan, in an interview with CNN)

The *Reformasi* movement shook the political foundation of the country. Ousted Deputy Prime

Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, was charismatic and popular with the younger Malay base. He became

the symbol for the Opposition, pulling in not only the Malays but the non-Malays as well. The

economic pie which had been expanding for the last decade shrunk tremendously in the aftermath

of the Asian Financial Crisis. The Kuala Lumpur Composite Index fell to a low of 262 points[91]

from a high of 1200 points. GDP growth for 1997 (pre-crisis) was positive 7.5 percent, the figure

contracted to a negative 7.5 percent a year later ("Outlook", 2000). This was significant because

for a long time, the *Barisan Nasional* had been able to keep its power partly due to the expanding

economy while the Opposition was not able to challenge the status quo on that front. It was truly

a time of crisis, both politically and economically, for the people of Malaysia. People hunger for

information in times of crisis yet the mainstream media were woefully inadequate to provide the

information needed. The mainstream media, even in times of crisis did not diverge from the

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[91] As of 1 September 1998.

official point of view. In the previous section we saw how reluctant the mainstream media were to publish alternative viewpoints and how the few who did go against the establishment—the newspaper editors of *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian* and the executive from TV3—were quickly replaced with pro-government individuals. It was against this turbulent political background and lack of alternative point of views that the online news portal, *Malaysiakini.com* (Malaysia Now) was founded. *Malaysiakini.com* challenged the conventional way journalism was practiced in the country.

 Malaysiakini.com was founded in 1999, after the Asian Financial Crisis, prior to the 10th Malaysia General Election, and in the midst of a major political turmoil. The sacked Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim had just been sentenced to a six-year jail term a few months earlier following a high-profile and politically-charged court case. The verdict triggered four days of demonstrations in the capital, which occasionally turned violent as riot police and paramilitary troops used truncheons, water cannons, and tear gas against protestors (Felker, 2000, p. 50). The pro-government mainstream media picked-and-chose the story to portray "the unrest as evidence that reform groups were bent on fomenting social mayhem"(Felker, 2000, p. 50).

 Malaysian writer, M. Nadarajah observes that the "reliability, honesty and fairness of the mainstream Malaysian media, both print and electronic" were suspect and "that they are not going to get the *truth* in their mainstream media but only what the government wanted them to read or to know" or rather "the government's rendering of the *truth* where the *other side* is almost always *demonised*"(Nadarajah, 2000). These sentiments are shared by media scholars Zaharom Nain and Mustafa Anuar who argue that "by and large and for a long, long time now, the Malaysian mainstream media have never aspired to be the guardians of freedom of speech" and in fact "the mainstream Malaysian media have been nothing more than government mouthpieces. The ongoing trial by media of the sacked Anwar is indicative of this" (Nain & Anuar, 1998).

Prior to starting *Malaysiakini.com*, Steven Gan already had a taste of mainstream media censorship. Gan had formerly worked for the English-language daily *The Sun*. In 1995, Gan and his colleagues had reported the deaths of 59 Bangladeshi migrant workers who died from malnutrition and typhoid in an illegal workers detention centre (Lewis, 2006, p. 67). But *The Sun* refused to print the story. Hoping that someone else could help highlight the plight of the migrants, Gan gave the story to *Tenaganita,* a non-governmental organization that helps female workers. The director of *Tenaganita*, Irene Fernandez, released a press statement of the story at a press conference in 1995. Little did she know at the time that she would be arrested for "malicious publication of false information" a few months later, in March 1996 (Gomez, 2008), under the Printing Presses and Publications Act. Fernandez's trial would become the longest trial in Malaysian judiciary history stretching over 13 years. On the day she was acquitted of all charges, Fernandez commented "I had no idea that just by issuing a press statement to highlight the abuses *Tenaganita* had uncovered that I would be subjecting myself to all that. All we wanted was for the Government to investigate the abuses" (Koshy, 2008a).

Therefore, Gan brought with him his experience as a journalist from mainstream newspapers and a modest start-up fund from *Media Development Loan Fund* (MDLF) which is connected to George Soros's Open Society Institute, and started the news portal "guerilla style" with three full time employees (Drew, 2007; George, 2006). At first, the Gan thought that advertising would provide most of the income for the start-up, however when *Malaysiakini.com* quickly acquired an "anti-government" image, advertisers stopped calling. More trouble followed when the mainstream newspaper, *News Straits Times*, highlighted the fact that the news portal was receiving funding from George Soros which at that time had been turned into public enemy No. 1 by Mahathir Mohamad when he blamed speculators such as Soros for bringing down the

economy. In 2002, *Malaysiakini.com* was forced to start charging subscription fees for access to

most of its features (George, 2006, p. 167).

Malaysiakini.com* is the only independent newspaper with a full-time staff in the country,

albeit an online newspaper. It also had to face a lot of intimidation from the authorities. On

January 20, 2003, the police raided the office of *Malaysiakini.com* and took away fifteen

computers and four servers that were the backbone of the operation ("website raid", 2003). The

police raid was immediately condemned by numerous organizations around the world including

Reporters sans Frontieres (RSF) and Southeast Asian Press Alliance *(SEAPA) ("RSF", 2003; ,*

"Police raid", 2003; , "WSIS Asia", 2003). According to the police, the reason for the raid was to

facilitate an investigation prompted by a report[92] lodged by the UMNO Youth. The fledgling

website was temporarily shut down as a result of the unannounced seizure. As the only

independent newspaper in the country, *Malaysiakini.com* could only exist on the World Wide

Web, not out of choice but out of necessity. All print media remain under strict control of the

Government and the Internet remains the only medium still largely free from direct governmental

control. "Diversity in the Malaysian media is strictly limited by both legislation that has curtailed

freedom of expression and information, and the concentration of media ownership in the hands of

ruling parties or those closely allied to them"[93].*Aliran.com*, an alternative news-magazine website

calls the raid "a systematic clampdown on media freedom"(Netto, 2003).

Ten years down the road, what had begun as a "guerilla style" operation with only three

journalists covering the 1999 General Election has become a somewhat respected media outlet

that boasts 100,000 unique visitors and up to one million page views daily (Drew, 2007; ,

"Freedom of expression", 2007). Financially, it has been profitable since 2005 ("Cyber-paper",

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[92] See for example http://www.seapabkk.org/news/malaysia/20030120-4.html
[93] See "Freedom of expression and the media in Malaysia: Part of a series of baseline studies in seven
Southeast Asian countries" (p.35). Retrieved August 20, 2006 from
http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/malaysia-baseline-study.pdf

2009). On 8 March 2008, *Malaysiakini.com* received three millions hits from readers all over the world who sought "blow by blow accounts of the polling results" (Gan, 2008).

Even the ruling government, albeit begrudgingly, has come to accept *Malaysiakini.com* as a legitimate news agency. During a press conference, the former Minister of Information, instead of simply dismissing the journalists from *Malaysiakini.com* as in the past, had opted to *advise* them not to be manipulated by the Opposition Party. This is considered an improvement and a sharp contrast with the previous treatment where the Minister would publicly scold the same journalists for telling lies. There is certainly a sense of acceptance that the online news portal is here to stay and therefore the only other way would be to "guide" them to the ways of "mainstream media". Another sign that *Malaysiakini.com* is being taken more seriously was when one of its harshest critics, the former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad gave an exclusive interview to the agency (Gan, 2006). The interview created a small debate in the mainstream media, questioning the true intentions of Mahathir. Around the time of the interview, the former Prime Minister had become very critical of the current Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi. During the interview, Mahathir revealed that he himself felt "shut out" by the mainstream media:

> *…I am the former party president yet they don't want me to talk to the members. I can't even meet them. Universities are barred from inviting me and newspapers are prevented from reporting about me…I am becoming a pariah in the party…*
> *("Mahathir on UMNO", 2006)*

Despite being the most powerful person in the country for 22 years, he felt marginalized by the system. It was ironic, because during his tenure, Mahathir has been mostly criticized for clamping down on freedom of speech during for example, the 1987 *Operasi Lalang* and the 1998 sacking of the Anwar Ibrahim.

5.6.6. Recent Examples of Media Restrictions

Even news items worthy of international attention are not considered fair-game and guaranteed

safe to be published in Malaysia. In February 2006, *Guangming Daily*, a local Chinese language

newspaper was suspended for two weeks following the publication of a photo containing the

Danish caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad (Beh, 2006a). The controversy erupted following

the publication of 12 caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad by a conservative Danish daily

(*Jyllands-Posten)* in September 2005. The suspension of the third most widely circulated local

Chinese daily was issued by the Internal Security Ministry under Section 6(2) of the Printing

Presses and Publications Act 1984 ("Guang Ming suspended", 2006) which gives the Minister the

power to "revoke or suspend a permit for any period he considers desirable". Another newspaper,

Sarawak Tribune, was less fortunate as its printing permit was permanently revoked for the

publication of the Prophet Muhammad caricatures (Thien, 2006). It is not just Islam that proved

to be too sensitive for print. On 24 August 2007, the Tamil language daily, *Makkal Osai*, was

suspended for 30 days for publishing an image of Jesus Christ holding a cigarette and a can of

beer ("Makkal Osai suspended", 2007). We could safely conclude that religion is considered a

sensitive issue in Malaysia and this incident simply adds yet another layer to the already complex

nature of promoting and protecting freedom of expression in Malaysia where religion and race are

almost always a taboo subject. Later the same year, a Chinese-Malaysian college student studying

in a Taiwanese university was castigated by BN politicians for posting a music video parody of

the national anthem on video sharing website YouTube. The music video featured a Chinese rap

song based on the national anthem performed by the student, Wee Meng Chee (also known as

Namewee), making fun of the Muslim prayer calls and the stereotypes of the Malay community.

Wee was chided for being insensitive to other races, unpatriotic and some called for him to be

stripped of his citizenship. Ironically, his controversial rap song was titled "I love my country".

Wee (and his parents) have apologized for the music video and removed it from *YouTube*, but not before it had been duplicated many times over by other users and some were even added with subtitles. The Cabinet, led by the Malay-based party, UMNO, formally rejected the apology ("Cabinet rejects apology", 2007). The MCMC launched an investigation and Wee was questioned by the MCMC's Cybercrime Unit for three hours when he came back to Malaysia (Hamid, 2008). There is an interesting racial dynamic with this particular case as the music video (without the subtitles) had already been circulating for a while within the Chinese-speaking community but most took it as harmless fun. The Chinese-based MCA, the second largest component party in the BN, even publicly suggested the Cabinet to stop pursuing the matter and that by harping on the issue, the authorities are adopting "double standards by not prosecuting UMNO leaders who make racially inflammatory remarks" (Beh, 2007). The "un-magnanimous" handling of the incident by the BN/UMNO-led Cabinet, which was still in the news months before the 2008 Election had a decidedly negative effect especially amongst the Chinese voters.

CHAPTER 6

THE RESPONSES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLOGGING

> "*Bloggers always want to confuse the people by reporting untruths, and their postings are usually inclined towards the Opposition. They hope to create panic and adverse affects on certain sectors*"
>
> UMNO Information Chief. Muhamad Taib Muhamad[94]

> "*The information is posted on the blogs by people with no authority. Why ...journalists have to quote a blog website as the source of your story and publish the news in the newspaper that has authority?*"
>
> Information Minister, Zainuddin Maidin[95]

> "*The Government was 'deeply troubled' by the growth of 'irresponsible' alternative media, adding that "in the name of freedom, these websites allow the broadcast of slander, lies and swearing, use of harsh, degrading language and racial slurs without regard for the reader or those concerned*"
>
> Deputy Prime Minister, Najib Abdul Razak[96]

This chapter focuses on the research question "What are the responses to the development of blogging in Malaysia?" and "Did Malaysian political actors change their behaviors due to the use and popularity of blogs? If so in what ways and with what effect?" Various responses towards blogging in the country were identified and presented in this chapter. Broadly, these responses are two-fold—the responses from government and the responses from the mainstream media. The responses are identified through the analysis of news reports, various press statements, public speeches, legal actions taken by law enforcement agencies such as the police, and interviews given by various ranking governmental officials including ranking Ministers specifically dealing

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[94] *("Hauled up for slander", 2007)*

[95] ("Don't quote blog", 2007)

[96] (Theophilus, 2008a)

with blogging-related developments. The responses are further divided between those that had taken place before the March 8th General Election and after the election.

6.1. Government's Pre-election Response to Blogging

The Malaysian government's general attitude towards the development of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) has always been incredibly positive as evidenced by the large amount of budget allocation and the various initiatives to promote greater computerization, creating a more media-literate society, and increasing connectivity to the Internet in rural areas. Nevertheless, it would be an understatement to say that the government has been harsh against using ICT, including blogging, as a platform to criticize the government. Prior to 8 March 2008, the Malaysian Government has responded to the development of blogging in very undemocratic ways. This section highlights three ways the Government has negatively responded to the development of blogging in the country, which included verbal threats; monitoring blogger's activities; and arresting bloggers.

6.1.1. Government's Response #1: Insults and Verbal Threats

The simplest way the government responded was with words of insults and threats against bloggers. It is also the most frequently used tactic by the *Barisan Nasional*'s members. For politicians in the establishment, words are effective because they are all but certain to be carried by the mainstream media which are linked to the government. The words they say would then be further disseminated by the alternative media including the blogs. This way, these words would in a very short period of time reach the entire intended target—mainstream media users and alternative media users. These words could range from simple dislike and annoyance to very insulting and threatening.

The UMNO Information Chief, Muhammad Muhd Taib has described writers of political blogs, whom he says looked brave in criticizing government leaders, as cowards. According to Muhammad Taib, the bloggers are cowards because they are afraid of using domestic webhosting services. The Information Chief even characterized these bloggers as "*pondan*", which is the derogatory Malay word for effeminate men ("Blog writers are cowards"). The son-in-law of the Prime Minister and Deputy Chief of the very vocal UMNO Youth, Khairy Jamaluddin, described the bloggers as "monkeys" following the "law of the jungle"("Bloggers who slander", 2007). The rising-star in UMNO politics made the comment the day a controversial blogger, Raja Petra Kamaruddin was arrested by the police for allegedly posting seditious comments on his blog. Another BN politician, Tourism Minister Tengku Adnan Mansor, found himself in a lot of trouble with women rights groups when he was reported in the media saying that "all bloggers are liars, they cheat people using all kinds of methods" and "out of 10,000 unemployed bloggers, 8,000 are women" ("Remarks on bloggers", 2007).

Information Minister, Zainuddin Maidin proposed labeling the bloggers and suggested that bloggers be officially categorized as "professionals" and "non-professionals" as a mechanism of control. According to the Minister, "there should be a mechanism to control this phenomenon, including classifying web bloggers as professionals and non-professionals" ("Labels for bloggers", 2007). The proposal by the Minister suggests a lack of understanding of the new media and how it functions. Label of professionals or non-professionals denotes a stable and long-term form of work as a full-time employee of a newspaper company. The Minister may also have been under the impression that bloggers only blog about certain issues—mostly likely socio-political. This may have convinced the Minister that you need certain credentials to write about such topics—again a false assumption on the part of the Minister who was a practicing journalist for many years.

Some verbal threats hinted at the actions that are likely to be taken by the Government in the near future. Threats issued by the Prime Minister almost always are taken more seriously than anyone else for the fact that the Prime Minister holds a tremendous amount of executive power in Malaysia. In 2006, the Prime Minister warned that "if information on blogs, websites and online portals were incorrect, bordered on slander, caused disturbance or compelled the public to lose faith in the nation's economic policies, their authors would be detained for investigation" (McIntrye, 2006). The Prime Minister argued that bloggers "say all kinds of things, make all kinds of dubious claims" and the Government cannot "allow them to abuse the freedom earned under the media" because "if left alone, they can say or pass on all kinds of things" (McIntrye, 2006). Again in mid-2007, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi warned bloggers that they "are as liable for defamation as publishers of printed materials" and that "it is wrong for bloggers to go overboard, especially if they post slanderous articles against the Yang di-Pertuan Agong[97] and Islam on the website"("Watch your blogs, warns PM", 2007).

6.1.2. Government's Response #2: Cyber-troopers

In mid-2007, the blogosphere was abuzz again with reports on the existence of a group of "cyber-troopers" dedicated to sabotaging high-profile bloggers who were critical of the government. These so-called cyber-troopers could be viewed as another of the attempts by the ruling Government to control information flow in the country. Realizing the impact of online media, the youth wing of UMNO, the dominant party in the BN coalition, set up a team of volunteers at the party headquarters in Kuala Lumpur scouring the Internet to counter what it sees as rumors and misinformation. In addition to these so-called cyber-troopers, some of the other BN parties have dispatched their own teams to keep track of popular sentiment in cyberspace. Abdul Rahman

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[97] Yang di-Pertuan Agong refers to the King.

Dahlan, secretary-general of UMNO Youth, said they decided it was important to fight rumours

after seeing increasing levels of "accusations and half-truths" being spread on the Internet and via

SMS. "We have decided to fight this cyber war head-on," he was quoted as saying to a local

English newspaper, the *New Straits Times*. The UMNO Youth representative claims to have

established a team of 30 volunteers to keep track of gossip on the Internet since 2003. Abdul

Rahman Dahlan also claims that they "monitor the contents of the websites and forward the

information to our members via SMS" (Theophilus, 2008b) from a database of about 4000

people. The "monitoring center" apparently sent up to 40,000 SMSs to those listed in the

database, a figure Abdul Rahman projects to increase to about half a million as the polling date

nears on March 8th 2008. The *Gerakan* party, which is the fourth biggest component in the

Barisan Nasional, also claims to have a team that "track blogs and gauge the sentiments of young

Internet users." (Theophilus, 2008b) According to the party's Youth Chief, Mah Siew Keong,

their "investigation shows that the Internet plays a major role in influencing people, especially

those living in urban and semi-urban areas," (Theophilus, 2008b).

6.1.3. Government's Response #3: Arresting Bloggers

The most feared response by the government is an arrest. The government first responded with

this method on 13 July 2007 with the arrest of blogger Nathaniel Tan (Nat Tan). Nat Tan, was a

special assistant to Opposition leader and former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Anwar

Ibrahim at the time. The arrest was triggered by an anonymous comment posted on Nat Tan's

blog, *jelas.info*, alleging the Deputy Internal Security Minister, Johari Baharum of accepting

bribes ("Do not act againts bloggers", 2007). The police's Special Branch and the Cyber Crime

Unit suspected the blogger of possessing secret documents on the alleged corruption, and

detained him under the Official Secrets Act (OSA). Nat Tan was released four days later. Nat Tan

himself felt that the arrest was partly the result of inadequate police investigation:

> *…I think basically what they did were shoddy police work, someone has reproduced content from another website as a comment on my blog which has two parts one of which was a general comment saying this that the Deputy Minister is corrupt, the second of which actually had very specific allegations with figures and things like that. I actually took trouble to delete the second part out, because even though I don't like the minister himself and there was no proof and the author didn't leave his name that so I deleted that section. And that somehow caused the police to think that I was the original author and that I have official secret documents to back this up which again is laughable, it shows that the police don't really understand what's going on. If this is the quality of investigation by the cyber crime unit I fear for my online bank account and the safety…*
>
> (Interview with Nathaniel Tan)

 The arrest was also almost certainly politically motivated as well because of the Nathaniel Tan's

connection with Anwar Ibrahim, the Opposition Leader. Furthermore, there is a conflict of

interest as the Deputy Minister, Johari Baharum, who issued the orders to investigate Nat Tan is

the person who is being alleged to have accepted bribes in Nat Tan's blog. The Deputy Minister

reportedly told the national news agency, *Bernama*, that he ordered the investigation because "all

kinds of slander about the nation's leaders are being spread through the Internet" and "the Police

must act to prevent them from tarnishing the image of the country"("Police investigates

websites", 2007).

When he was interviewed on the international news network, *Al Jazeera English*[98], which

has regional headquarters in the Kuala Lumpur, Nat Tan gave his perspective on what he thought

to be the reason the government has been negative about the development of blogs:

> *…I think what they have against it is that we got the truth for the first time in their 50 years history, information is not control completely by them. It is an entirely new experience…and the truth for the government tends to hurt… they are going about this in*

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[98] *Freedom of expression in Malaysia with Riz Khan*. Available from
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZ0UmH1nJM8&feature=PlayList&p=F0B5DAA3E545087E&index=1
2

a very threatening manner…they are trying to shutdown what they cannot control …it is a little bit like a caveman suddenly finding himself in the middle of Kuala Lumpur city you know and he doesn't really understand the language that is talking about, so instead of trying to engage and understand what is going on, learning the language, it is a bit like they are swinging their club blindly trying to hit anyone, you know, they're very threatened…("Freedom of expression in Malaysia", 2007)

In the same Al-Jazeera interview, Steven Gan, the editor-in-chief of *Malaysiakini.com* agreed that the "government has lost the complete monopoly on truth" and "is losing its ability to control the news agenda". Gan added that:

…if you have been following politics in Malaysia the people who have been raising racial sentiments, they are not the bloggers or the journalist but the politicians. Malaysia at best is an illiberal democracy. We have freedom of speech but not freedom after speech. Which is why the government is so threatened by…the democratic space which we have…("Freedom of expression in Malaysia", 2007)

Steven Gan likened the reaction of the Government arresting critical bloggers to a bad chemical reaction:

…I think the government is facing a reaction, an adverse reaction to the freedom that we have right now. And that is not surprising considering that they had almost complete control over the mainstream media and it is only until now that that they are not able to control the agenda even for the past few months it is actually the Internet website and the bloggers who are actually setting the news agenda, mostly on issues like corruption and I think the government is reacting to that, and even ministers like Kayveas[99] were threatening to use Internal Security Act which allows for detention without trial to go after bloggers and people like me…("Freedom of expression in Malaysia", 2007)

The Deputy Prime Minister, Najib Abdul Razak, during an interview with the same news network prior to the general election argued that the country is actually free and liberal, in fact, "too liberal" evidenced by fact that "the alternative media it is very active in the country"[100] and if one is to surf the Internet and browse through the various websites and blogs, it would be possible to

[99] M.Kayveas is the President of the People's Progressive Party (PPP), a Barisan Nasional component member that is predominantly ethnic Indian which lost all its seats in the March 8th General Election.
[100] Malaysian Elections Part 2. (2008). 101 East   Retrieved Oct 2, 2008, from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CwjR6Vujhs

find "an awful lot of the material there are very very critical of the government"[101] and it is to

"the government's credit they have been allowed" in addition to the political newspapers

published by Opposition parties including DAP, Keadilan, and PAS. When asked if it was the

government's position that bloggers are allowed to write whatever they wish, the Deputy Prime

Minister affirmed the Al Jazeera interviewer but quickly qualified his answer by saying that the

exceptions would be in the cases where the bloggers "break the laws of the country" and "if what

you write can be construed as seditious". The Deputy Prime Minister's argument is again a

version of the standard reply which most ranking officials in the government would give. The

problem lies with what "can be construed as seditious". The Deputy Prime Minister, did not

elaborate on the issue.

Others in the ruling government hold rather condescending views of the new medium.

The Minister of the Prime Minister Department, M. Kayveas made the following comment on *Al

Jazeera English* network:

> *...the level of defamation, it is something like completely beyond imagination, they create
> this imagination, they start this and people start replying and they add on to it, you know,
> without realizing. Actually if you look at them they are having fun, for them it is fun,
> inside the origin of blogging is supposed to be instant news and is supposed to be
> entertaining, fun and knowledgeable but it has now extended to personal attacks...*[102]

It is interesting to note that both M. Kayveas and the predominantly ethnic Indian party which he

is the president of, People's Progressive Party (PPP), were completely wiped-out in the March 8th

General Election. It was a clear rejection of the PPP by the Indian community of the country.

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[101] Ibid

[102] Riz Khan: Freedom of expression in Malaysia. (2007).   Retrieved Aug 10, 2007, from
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZ0UmH1nJM8&feature=PlayList&p=F0B5DAA3E545087E&index=1
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6.2. Government's Post-election Response to Blogging

After the 8 March 2008 Election, the much humbled *Barisan Nasional* tried to change its attitude

towards the blogging community and communication technology. Prime Minister Abdullah

Badawi admitted publicly that ignoring the Internet in the latest election was a mistake and

"serious misjudgment" on the part of the ruling coalition ("Malaysian leader admits mistake",

2008). Some *Barisan Nasional* members have taken up blogging post-election as a sign of

willingness to change and be open to the younger generation in the country. Even the highly

influential and conservative UMNO Youth have taken up blogging, launching an official blog

with a press conference. However, no reversal was more dramatic than that of UMNO stalwart,

Muhammad Muhd Taib who even filed charges against bloggers who he felt had insulted Islam

and the King. Muhammad Taib started blogging soon after the election.

6.2.1. Government's Response #4: "If you can't beat them join them"

Barisan Nasional politicians have taken up blogging—post-election. While these politicians are

greenhorns in the world of blogging, they are stalwarts and leaders in their respective parties and

carry honorific titles such as *Tan Sri*, *Datuk*, or at least *Yang Berhormat*[103].   They include

Senators, Chief Ministers, and Members of Parliaments. Perhaps no other reversal of position is

as dramatic as UMNO Information Chief, Muhammad Muhd Taib, one of the most vocal critics

of the blogosphere. He started blogging on 22 April 2008, roughly a month and a half after the

historic election. Muhammad Taib who had once lodged a police report against controversial

blogger, Raja Petra Kamaruddin for insulting the King and Islam, now blogs at

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[103] The symbolic head of states, usually the Sultan have the power to confer non-hereditary honorific titles
to deserving citizens as they see fit. The titles are similar to the English titles of *Sir* or *Dame*. In descending
order the titles (with small variations depending on the states) are Tun; Tan Sri; Datuk Seri; Datuk. Yang
Berhormat is an honorific pre-fix for all Members of the Parliament. Muhammad Muhd Taib carries the
title Tan Sri.

http://www.muhammadmuhdtaib.com. The former Senator, reportedly told newspaper reporters that "*unlike the press, the blog will be a two-way traffic. So my medium is better than yours*" and added "*if you can't fight them, join them!*" ("Info chief now a blogger", 2008).

Figure 10: The official blog for UMNO Information Chief Muhammad Muhd Taib who once called bloggers liars

Figure 11: The official blog for Chief Minister of Melaka, Mohd Ali Rustam

Ousted Barisan Nasional politician, former Chief Minister of the state of Selangor and currently

state opposition leader, Dr. Mohammad Khir Toyo started blogging at http://www.drkhir.com

soon after he lost his seat in the March 8th General Election and the state of Selangor fell into the

control of the opposition party for the first time in the history of the country. Another UMNO

veteran, Mohd Ali Rustam who is the Chief Minister of the state of Melaka, set up a blog as well

at http://www.mohdalirustam.com soon after the election. The blog in question even prompted

imitation blogs which were made to look exactly the same and even with similar URL but contain

postings not written by the Chief Minister ("False blog", 2008). Interestingly, Ali Rustam

decided in his first few blog-posts to criticize a pig-farming project in the neighboring state of

Selangor, formerly administered by fellow *Barisan Nasional* politician, Khir Toyo—calling it a

prize for the Opposition. The particular posting received hundreds of comments, many of them

highly critical of the Minister himself. Apparently, unable to stomach such direct verbal assault,

the Minister disabled the comment section on his blog one week after he started his blog (Hassan,

2008; Yeoh, 2008). In addition to individual politicians starting their own blog, the UMNO Youth

also decided to join in the *post-election fever blog-wagon*. The wing's media liaison chief, Sazmi

Miah officially launched the blog, *Saka Bangsa*[104] (Nation's Heritage) at a press conference

attended by 50 journalists and bloggers. At the press conference, Sazmi Miah acknowledged their

failure to engage with the younger constituencies and expressed their willingness "to change

because it seems the younger generation today can't relate to UMNO Youth." (Beh, 2008)

Earlier, the association was reported to have said that all UMNO Youth members need to become

bloggers if they were to win the next election. After much fanfare complete with an official

launching and press conference, the blog was officially closed down on 20 July 2008, barely a

month after its inception.

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[104] Available at http://sakabangsa.blogspot.com

Figure 12: UMNO Youth Wing's official blog which
officially closed a little over one month after its launch

6.3.   Mainstream Media's Pre-election Response to Blogging

The mainstream media's response to socio-political blogging in Malaysia has also been different

before and after the March 8th Election. The coverage of oppositional views from the blogosphere

was minimal in the local press prior to the elections. It was in fact the same situation for all kinds

of oppositional or dissenting views across the board. Prior to the elections result, opposition party

members hardly received any column space in the local mainstream newspapers. The local

newspapers most often carried only negative news items that disparaged the character and

highlighted the incompetency of the opposition parties and of their members. For example, the

local English daily, *The Star*, dedicated an entire page to tell voters why they should not vote for

the de-facto opposition leader, former deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim. One of the articles

quoted a veteran politician from the ruling party saying "[Anwar] change colors to suit the

crowd…He will make you feel *seronok* (good) and fall asleep. When you wake up, everything is

gone"("Anwar no saviour", 2008). On other times, the news would project a doomsday scenario

for the daily life of the average citizen if the Opposition were to become the ruling government.

This is most frequently accomplished by highlighting the fundamentalism of the largest Islamic

opposition party, PAS. For example, in a newspaper article prior to the general election, it

highlighted a frequent claim by the Islamic party, PAS's spiritual leader Nik Abdul Aziz Nik

Mat, which claims that "only PAS can guarantee heaven for people."(Rahman & Looi, 2008) It is

this kind of negative exposure that received actual column space on mainstream media prior to

the elections. Even moderate journalists temper their assessment of the new media with words of

caution. For example, Bunn Nagara, a prominent local political commentator who writes for the

English language daily *The Star* said:

> *…In a very mixed society like in Malaysia, we have many different groups based on*
> *religion and race so there is a need to be responsible not in a very narrow political sense*

and not to create unnecessary friction or problems like that in society…
(Bunn Nagara as appeared in, "Asian bloggers")

The direct access the *Barisan Nasional* has to the mainstream media makes it easy for the

incumbent to disseminate political messages and even propaganda. This fact becomes especially

visible during election season when we could see many advertisement spots in all major

newspapers bought out by the *Barisan Nasional* (see Figure 13 and Figure 14). At the same time,

not a single Opposition advertisement could be found in any of the mainstream newspapers.
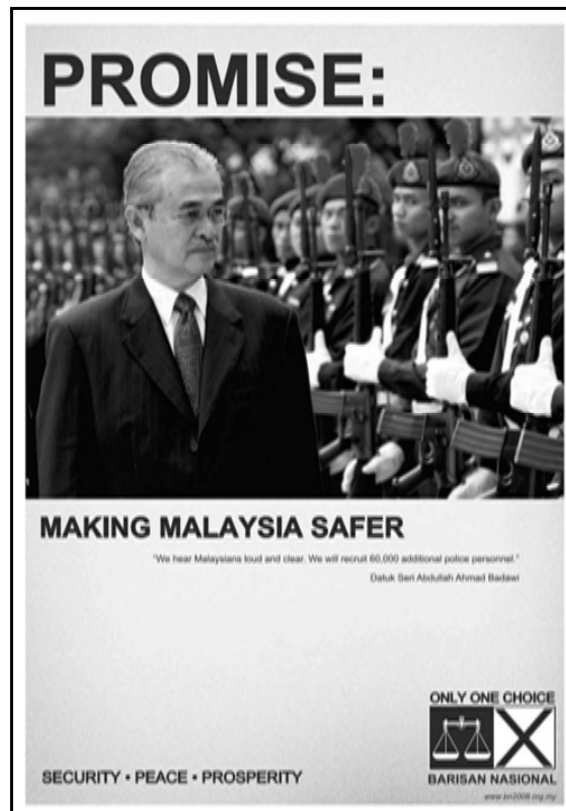
Figure 13: A *Barisan Nasional* pre-election ad on 6 March 2008,   portraying   the   Prime   Minister inspecting a group of police personnel—linking the *Barisan   Nasional*   with stability and safety in the country.

Figure 14: A *Barisan Nasional* component member, MCA's pre-election ad on 5 March 2008 emphasizing the contribution to the Chinese community

6.3.1 Mainstream Media's Response #1: Defamation Suits

On 4 January 2007, The NSTP Group which is the largest publishing group in the country filed a landmark lawsuit against two individual bloggers, Ahirudin Attan and Jeff Ooi for defamation and malicious falsehood. The NSTP Group owns four major newspapers, including the *New Straits Times, Utusan Malaysia, Berita Harian,* and a host other smaller publications and is controlled by the media conglomerate, *Media Prima*, which is linked to the UMNO party of the *Barisan Nasional* coalition. Jeff Ooi and Ahirudin Attan were sued by NTSP's deputy chairman and editorial adviser Datuk Kalimullah Masheerul Hassan, group editor-in-chief Datuk Hishamuddin Aun and former group editor Brenden John Pereira, and NSTP chief executive officer Datuk Syed Feisal Albar Syed A.R. Albar[105]. Ahirudin Attan was a former journalist and editor for the *Malay Mail* which is part of the NSTP Group.

Specifically, the four plaintiffs were suing them for 48 articles and users' comments posted on Ahirudin's blog *Rocky's Bru* and 13 articles posted on Jeff Ooi's blog, *Screenshots* ("NSTP, Ahirudin", 2007). The plaintiffs also obtained an ex-parte injunction against Jeff Ooi a week later compelling him to remove allegedly defamatory postings on *Screenshots* while Ahirudin Attan reached an agreement with the Group to stop publishing articles related to the case. Fellow bloggers including Malik Imitiaz Sarwar and Haris Ibrahim became part of their legal counsel for the case. Media watchers called the lawsuit, a David vs. Goliath situation because of the tremendous financial power of the group and past incidents of judges awarding plaintiffs tens of millions in damages, effectively bankrupting the defendants. Both bloggers have applied to strike out the defamations suits but were rejected by the courts.

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[105] Syed Feisal Albar in only involved in Ahirudin Attan suit.

The landmark case sparked a surge of interest in blogging in the nation and an outpouring of support for freedom of expression in the then nascent blogosphere. The Kuala Lumpur-based *Centre for Independent Journalism* (CIJ) and 30 other organizations endorsed a statement calling for the suits to be withdrawn (Tham, Lau, & Yusop, 2007). It created a lot of exposure for the medium. Many people in the country actually took up blogging as a response to the defamation suit and some of those who have been blogging for while shed their anonymity and revealed their identity:

> *...a lot of things came about after Jeff and Rocky got sued because everybody was like 'what?' and everybody wanted to be a blogger and even Zorro. Before, he was Zorro and nobody knew who he was and I think Rocky must have encouraged him show himself. So now he is Zorro-Unmasked[106]...* (Interview with Nuraina Samad)

> *...Haris Ibrahim never had a blog, he had a website, he took my cue and started blogging...* (Interview with Ahirudin Attan)

The NSTP vs. Jeff Ooi and Ahirudin Attan case also gave a tangible rallying point for uniting individual bloggers around the country. Inadvertently, the Government-linked NSTP Group has helped unify an otherwise scattered blogosphere around Ahirudin Attan and Jeff Ooi. Because of the defamation suit and other threats from BN politicians including one which calls for the registration of bloggers ("Bloggers may have to register", 2007), about 40 bloggers came together to form the National Alliance of Bloggers to provide support to individual bloggers who might suffer the same predicament in the future.

The NSTP vs. Jeff Ooi and Ahirudin Attan case, the first and currently the only case, also highlighted some other issues such as the extent of the liability of the bloggers in regards to comments posted on their blog sites by anonymous users. The case also increased the awareness

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[106] Bernard Khoo also known as blogger Zorro-Unmasked was on the list of the interviewees. However an interview was unable to be set up even after several attempts at rescheduling the appointments.

among bloggers to be more careful about the type of information (including user's comment) that could be published on their own blogs. In the case of Jeff Ooi and Ahirudin Attan, both of them included a statement of caution on their blogs warning the readers about the possibility of prosecution. For example, Jeff Ooi wrote:

> *…though there are provisions in the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 that say there is no censorship of the Internet, the fact is, Internet does not operate in a legal vacuum in Malaysia. So, before you start leaving your comments in this blog, bear in mind that whatever is illegal offline is illegal online in this country…Any comments posted on this blog that are obscene, blasphemous, racial or overtly threatening, including the use of partial words or phrases where the intent is clearly offensive, will be removed immediately by the host. Such comment could also render the person posting them liable to legal action or prosecution…*
>
> (Posted by Jeff Ooi on his blog *ScreenShots*)

The case is currently in a legal limbo of sorts, no action has been taken by the NSTP Group and some of the original plaintiffs have already left the Group. Only Hishamuddin Aun, the Group's editor-in-chief is still part of the company. Looking at the situation, Ahirudin himself said:

> *…well I was half-expecting them to drop the case, because I felt that they have no case what so ever. But they are still hanging on to it so I think they will try to stretch it for as long as they can until the material time when they have to actually turn up in court, I do not know what they will be doing at that time but I still think it would try to drop the charges…* (Interview with Ahirudin Attan)

Regardless of the outcome, *the NSTP vs. Bloggers* case is certainly a watershed moment in the development of blogging in the country.

6.4. Mainstream Media's Post-election Response to Blogging

The 2008 Election results have emboldened some of the mainstream media to ask for more press freedom. Editor-in-chief for the English language daily, *The Star*, Wong Chun Wai bluntly wrote:

"Malaysia can never be the same again after the March 8 political tsunami. The people have now realized the power that they have in their hands. They have spoken out loudly for the changes they want…The old ways of doing things have failed. Certainly, the old laws that tied down the press, too, have to go" (Wong, 2008). Wong is a shrewd newspaperman and certainly sees the benefit of lifting the shackles of archaic laws that have put the newspaper industry in a disadvantaged position in terms of pursuing sensitive news. Zainah Anwar from *Sister-in-Islam* (SIS) correctly identifies the dilemma that the mainstream media faces and the changes it must undertake in order to survive in the new media environment:

> …s*tung and rejected by the public, the mainstream newspapers are now making up with a daily dose of often incisive and critical writing on Malaysian politics. Reading the morning papers over breakfast could become a habit again. It takes March 8 for those in authority to realise that it is better to unleash mainstream journalism – once built on a tradition of fair, balanced, accurate, fact-checked reporting – to rebuild its reputation as a credible source of information or face the onslaught of unsubstantiated, unverified gossip and rumours turned into facts that pervade the new media…* (Anwar, 2008)

In an effort to change and to be more inclusive of the new medium, at least one local daily started a series called "*My Representative*" featuring many of the young opposition party members who were elected into the Parliament in the latest election. Interestingly, the first two questions asked of the Representatives were how much time do they spend on the computer and whether they blog[107].

6.4.1. Mainstream Media's Response #2: Bloggers Made into Headliners

After the election, some of the mainstream media began to show more openness towards blogging. For example, on 6 July 2008, the most profitable English language newspaper in the

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[107] See for example "*Young man on the move*" (Mar 27, 2008). Retrieved (April 14, 2008) from http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2008/3/27/myrepresentative/20760568&sec=myrepresentative

country, *The Star*, featured two prominent bloggers on the front page, not for vilification but to use them as opinion leaders (see Figure 15). The bloggers were Ahirudin Attan and Marina Mahathir (both are participants in this study's interviews). Ahirudin is an ex-journalist and the pro-tem president for the National Alliance of Bloggers (*All-Blogs*) and Marina Mahathir is a human rights activist and a columnist for *The Star*. Of the two bloggers featured on the front page, the presence of Ahirudin Attan is striking for two reasons. First, Ahirudin is critical of the *Barisan Nasional* and an Anwar Ibrahim sympathizer. Second, only about a year ago he was the target of a potential multi-million ringgit defamation suit by the English language daily, *New Straits Times*. Yet, he and Marina Mahathir were now solicited for their views on the state of politics in the country. This is a sharp contrast with the front page of the same newspaper almost exactly two years before with the headlines "Bloggers Beware", warning them of possible arrests (see Figure 16)

Figure 15: Socio-political bloggers, Ahirudin Attan and Marina Mahathir, featured on the front page of the local English daily, The Star (6 July 2008). Only a few months ago, bloggers were vilified and viewed as "liars".

Figure 16: The mainstream newspaper, *The Star*, reproducing Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's warnings against bloggers on 6 August 2006. It was one of the earliest verbal threats by the Government

6.4.2 Mainstream Media's Response #3: New Programs to keep up with the Times

The Ministry of Information went through a reshuffling process after the March 8th Election. The

incumbent Minister, Zainuddin Maidin, who infamously called bloggers "globok" (stupid) lost

the election and was replaced with a much younger Ahmad Shabery Cheek, who appears to be

more open to blogging and new media in general. In an effort to engage the blogging community,

the new Minister proposed a new program simply and aptly called "*Blog*"[108] on the state-run

channel, RTM1. The show "*Blog*" invites controversial and pro-opposition bloggers as well as

pro-establishment bloggers as guests.

The new Information Minister appeared to be sincere in the desire to truly engage the

blogging community. According to Ahirudin Attan, the Minister himself actively sought out well-

known bloggers to be part of the show, including himself. A close friend of Ahirudin, fellow

blogger Nuraina Samad, recalled the fact the Minister took the initiative to seek him out at the

National Press Club where Ahirudin is the advisor. She is of the opinion that Shabery Cheek

"genuinely wants to do this, because he see this as an opportunity to close the rift" (Interview

with Nuraina Samad). Ahirudin himself is willing to admit that the new Minister is doing a good

job "so far":

> *…if I were to be asked to give marks to [BN] politicians in the first 100 days since the*
> *General Election, he would be my top three. I think he walked the talk, he delivered, he*
> *said he wanted to do certain things and he did. And he did it in a very short span of time*
> *and what he did wasn't a small thing because he managed to get the whole government to*
> *turn around and say to have to eat the humble pie. You see everybody even the UMNO*
> *Youth guys are saying that "if you want to vie for a post in the next party election you*
> *must be a blogger" and that kind of things started happening in UMNO, you must credit*
> *Shabery for bringing that…*   (Interview with Ahirudin Attan)

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[108] The show *Blog* is an half hour long program which airs on Sundays at 8.30pm on the state-run channel
RTM1

Long time journalist and editor, Nuraina Samad also feels the new Information Minister is a

departure from the previous minister, Zainuddin Maidin. She retold the story of the attempt by the

new minister in trying to engage some of the bloggers:

> *…he is a politician but I think he genuinely wants to do this, because he sees this as an opportunity to close the rift. I think he is that kind of a guy, I don't think he is the Zainuddin Maidin kind, this kind knows that blogs is something to be reckon with the stark reality is that you got to engage these guys otherwise you are going to get out. He has his advantage because he knows Rocky, from way before. When he wanted to meet Rocky, Rocky said "wait, wait a minute, I can't see you yet. But he came to the Press Club to see Rocky. He actually came…even though Rocky said "no need to come, I will see you another time" …he came. He wanted to have it done. So I suppose…this guy was serious, he's really into it. On his part, I think he was really serious because he had it done. This thing was moving fast, before you know it there was a blog program…so as far as we were concerned he was really serious…*
>
> <div align="right">(Interview with Nuraina Samad)</div>

The new program is not without its critics. While the sincerity of the Minister is genuine, the

execution of the program has much more room for improvement. The 30-minute long "*Blog*" is

generally hosted by one of three rotating TV hosts. The selection of a host for this particular

program suggests a disconnection with the reality of the medium. The hosts Chamil Wariya,

Ahmad Abu Talib, Hashim Abu Hanifah are "distinguished" journalists in their own rights.

Chamil Wariya and Ahmad Abu Talib actually carry the honorific title of "Datuk. Comments on

the blogosphere are also less than encouraging about the quality of the show:

> "*it is an insult to us bloggers…RTM. One word – BORING. Come on…ask more intelligent questions instead of reducing Jeff Ooi to that level. It is a sign of how paranoid the antique RTM channel is*"
>
> <div align="right">(Posted 28 July 2008 on Obnoxiou5Xmom[109])</div>

> "*just finished watching the RTM Blog program. You said it well except that the interviewer took away half of the show and trying to lead you towards what he wanted*

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[109] Retrieved 10 Jan 2008 from http://www.chanlilian.net/2008/07/27/rtm-blog-interview-with-jeffooi-is-a-farce/

you to say, more than what's in your opinion that's to show how much RTM is government controlled"

(*kbguy*'s comment Posted 23 Nov 2008 on Writeaway[110])

"*it is becoming more and more apparent that TV1 (and likely the entire RTM) doesn't have a clue what blogs are all about. Not even after having done this 15-minute segment 3 times before…*"

(Posted on 12 May 2008 on MyAsylum[111])

"*RTM must have the absolute worst caliber of producers, with the kind of questions that they come up with. And Chamil Wariya…good grief...not exactly impressive (and that's being kind)*"

(Posted on 11 may 2008 on Rocky's Bru[112])

6.5. A Senior Television Producer's Perspective

While conducting the fieldwork in Malaysia, I managed to get in touch with a senior television producer in the popular satellite broadcasting station, *Astro*, Yow Foo Chuan[113]. Yow has 30 years of working experience in both print and broadcasting. Currently he is the producer of the highest rated news-magazine program in the station. According to him, Malaysian media has indeed become freer after the March 8th Election. Nowadays, there are more topics and materials he is allowed to produce for television broadcasting. As he described it "after the election, the box has gotten bigger." (Interview with Mr. Yow)

To illustrate the change in the media environment, he had previously contemplated an early retirement because he felt little more could be achieved under the "old ways". In sharp contrast, he now feels refreshed in the post-election environment and that he could continue until he is 70 years old. He gave the example of being dissuaded by the company's upper management from making programs about 'sensitive topics'. At the time, "sensitive topics" also included

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[110] Retrieved 10 Jan 2008 from http://elviza.wordpress.com/2008/11/21/rtm-blog-program/

[111] Retrieved 10 Jan 2008 from http://asylum60.blogspot.com/2008/05/another-goblog-15-minutes.html

[112] Retrieved 10 Jan 2008 from http://rockybru.com.my/2008/05/nuraina-samad-on-tv1s-blog.html

[113] I had worked as an intern for Mr. Yow in 2001.

blogging. However, after the March 8th Election, the upper management relaxed these unofficial bans.

Subsequently, the production team has been able to push the envelope a little bit more and has since explored issues that would have been considered too contentious prior to March 8th 2008. He has even produced a program featuring only opposition leaders, something unimaginable during the former media environment. The senior producer hopes that the environment would become freer still and more vibrant as they continue to produce programs with alternative viewpoints and styles.

Currently, his talk-show program, *Talking Issue*, is the highest rated news-magazine program on the network. While the senior producer appears to be surprised by the incredible ratings[114], the success of the talk-shows he produces highlights the audience's hunger for alternatives choices. Nevertheless, the senior producer claims that the show is only talking about issues that are already out there but presenting them in a way that is refreshing and taking them head-on rather than in a—beat—around—the—bush or sanitized way. This formula proved to be effective as seen in the few days after the March 8th Election when viewership skyrocketed to nearly 280,000 households[115] or more than double the show's regular ratings.

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[114] The talk-shows get about twice of the number of what is considered "a successful program". A successful regular program in the network typically reaches an average of 70000-80000 households.
[115] The network has about 440000 subscribers in that particular language group.

6.6.   Last words on Mainstream Media's Turnabout

Even with the *Barisan*'s shocking performance in the 2008 Election results and the Opposition

parties winning another two by-elections—first the *Permatang Pauh*[116] by-election which saw the

return of the former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim to active politics and the second by-

election at Kuala Terengganu—mainstream media in the country is still politically aligned with

the ruling party. In an editorial in the *New Straits Times* following the *Barisan Nasional's* loss at

the second by-election, the article which was meant to be a sobering piece of advice for the

incumbent included the same old warning of the possibility of the end of the country if the

Barisan is dismantled, the same kind of warnings the editorial used prior to the March 8th

Election:

> *…BN's consociation of the nation's largest ethnic parties had always provided the
> primary locus of national conflict management and resolution, enabling the united
> Malaysian national front enshrined in its name. For this reason, it was always a whole
> greater than the sum of its parts: divided, BN would fall, and with it the nation as we
> knew it…("Editorial", 2009)*

Steven Gan, the editor-in-chief for Malaysiakini.com, put forward the "marketplace of ideas"

argument when he offered the following advice:

> *…my advice to them is to embrace the Internet, join in the fun really, I think they would
> have to understand the fact that they can no longer stamp out dissenting viewpoints that
> there is would need to go in to the arena and argue their way through. And how fully they
> will be able to present their side of the viewpoint, and people will have to make a
> decision on that…*("Freedom of expression in Malaysia", 2007)

It is a piece of sound advice judging by some of the steps taken by the mainstream: featuring

blogs on front pages and having TV shows about blogs. The mainstream media appear to be less

---

[116] *Permatang Pauh* is the district held by the wife of Opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, who resigned
from the position to allow her husband to regain political office by running in the by-election. Anwar won
by a large margin.

cautious about incorporating socio-political bloggers either into their news writing or in their

programming. Nevertheless, as the example of RTM's show *Blog*, reveals, there are still room for

improvement in regards to how to better communicate the new medium to audiences of more

traditional media.

THE ROLE OF BLOGS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRACY IN MALAYSIA

Bloggers, stand your ground!

We are ALL for bloggers writing the truth. But what if they insist that the truth is a lie? The manner in which Nat was taken away was clearly meant to warn you, the so-called socio-political blogger, that you could be next.
<div align="right">(Posted on July 15, 2007 on Rocky'sBru by Ahirudin Attan[117])</div>

This chapter attempts to answer the question "To the extent that blogs contribute to the development of democracy, how do blogs contribute to the development of democracy in Malaysia?" Through the analysis of in-depth interviews with the bloggers and other data, three main categories emerged as possible classification on how blogging serves the democracy building purpose:

- **Blogs as the Fifth Estate**
- **Blogs as Networks**
- **Blogs as a Platform for Expression**

The three main categories above are not mutually exclusive but are merely viewed as having enough unique qualities to be differentiated from one another. Rather, they should be visualized as a Venn diagram of three interlocking spheres, each one influencing each of the others (see Figure 17). Each of these three categories includes sub-categories of functions. The fifth estate category includes the functions of blogs as news-breaker, as provider of information, as agenda-

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[117] Ahirudin Attan posted this in his blog, one day after the Deputy Internal Security Minister, Johari Baharum threatened to trace people who were spreading lies through websites. Available from http://rockybru.com.my/2007/07/bloggers-stand-your-ground.html

setters, and as opinion leaders. The network category considers the social aspect of blogging and includes the emerging networks of deliberations among the bloggers and the function of blogs as a mobilizing agent. The third category considers the more personal aspects of blogging, specifically that blogs allow users to have a platform to express themselves and for some it serves also as a training ground for expression.

Figure 17: Visual representation of the three main functions played by blogs in development of democracy
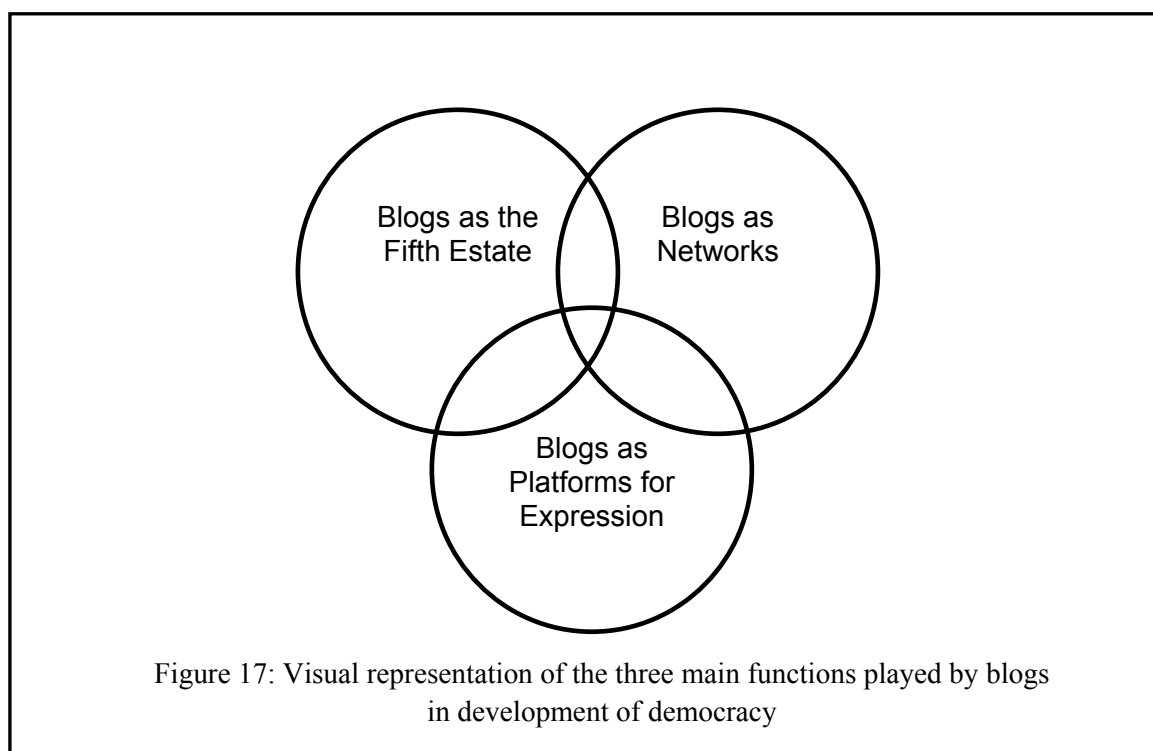
7.1.   Blogs as the Fifth Estate

Blog as an application based on user-generated content bypass conventional gatekeepers such as editors, advertisers, and official authorities. Kahn and Kellner (2004) argue that this feature enables blogs and the Internet in general to be part of a revolution which *"promotes and disseminates the capitalist consumer society, individualism and competition."* (p. 93) Broadly speaking, every person using a user-generated platform such as a blog has the potential to have

his or her voice heard directly and without being filtered. This in turn enables blogging to perform a function commonly referred to as the *fifth estate*.

Perlmutter argues that "if big media are not giving us the complete story or are getting the facts wrong too often" then blogs can "serve another important function in the political-media system: watchdogs of all the powers that be, including the press itself and of course, other blogs." (2008, p. 134) Bloggers can raise "a hue and cry over questionable actions and utterances by government or big media or any powers that might otherwise seem immune to constructive criticism." (Perlmutter, 2008) This is arguably one of the most prominent functions being performed by the Malaysian socio-political bloggers. Malaysian socio-political bloggers actively seek out discrepancies or deliberate omissions in mainstream media's reporting and highlight them on their own blog which in turn gets picked up by other bloggers who disseminate it throughout the blogosphere. "Old information monopoly had an enormous ability to decide where and when news would be 'news'. That gatekeeping function is gone, and blogs have rushed in to decide for themselves what matters" (Hewitt, 2005, p. 103). As Cooper argues the mainstream media "exercises no direct regulatory control of the social-political systems" (2006, p. 13), yet they have been traditionally perceived to act as the watchdog for the public interest because of their surveillance function of other institutions and the exposure of their operations to public scrutiny. Similarly, many socio-political bloggers monitor the mainstream media even though they lack direct control over the activities of the mainstream media. As described earlier, mainstream media in Malaysia have a highly complex relationship with the ruling government. The relationship could be financial with the major political parties owning stock in the particular media outlets as in the case of all the private television channels and most of the newspapers in the country or simply having the "connection factor" with the various power players augurs well for business, as in the case of the satellite broadcaster, Astro. The owner, Ananda Krishnan, has

always been known as a person who "enjoys a special relationship" with highest echelons of powers in the country. It could also be purely a relationship built on the fear of being shut down especially considering all major media formats including print and broadcasting require an annual renewal of licenses that is subject to the sole discretion of the minister in charge. This is in addition to the various other laws designed to keep the media on a tight leash.

Taking these factors into consideration, trusting the mainstream media to report critically about the ruling government may not be the most commonsensical thing to do. This situation creates a need for another point of view, *an alternative media*, and in the case of Malaysia, this alternative media arrived in the form of blogs. There are several ways bloggers serve as the fifth estate. Bloggers could break news, become the agenda setter, filter or provide information, frame stories, and highlight stories neglected by the mainstream media.

7.1.1. Bloggers as News-Breaker, Provider of Information, and Opinion Leaders

Journalism has sometimes been called the "first rough draft of history"[118], providing the first reporting of the events which are happening now and usually done on short deadlines. In a way, blogs could be the *bullet-points of that first rough draft of history*. The strength of blogs lies in their ability to provide information that big media reporters could not or at least do not as quickly. This is particularly true for first-person accounts. Bloggers excel in providing the bullet-points of history, which the journalists could use to complement their own reporting.

Most of the social political bloggers in Malaysia write "opinion pieces" on the issues which affect them. Much of what is written on these social-political blogs is a reflection of the information found in other sources, usually from the mainstream media and government sources

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[118] The phrase "first rough draft of history" is usually credited to former publisher of *Washington Post*, Phillip Graham.

such as annual budget reports, crime statistics, or new federal projects. But a good number of

them provide new information to the public or "break the news". Most notable of the

blogger/news-breaker is Ahirudin Attan who is a former editor of the English daily, *Malay Mail*.

Ahirudin who blogs everyday frequently tries to break news and relishes the fact that he could do

so:

> *…I still blog every day…I blog everyday and very rarely I miss a day, so it is a challenge*
> *to get fresh stories because I like to break stories and I like to get scoops and things like*
> *that , so that is the big challenge. But it pays off every time the newspapers call you and*
> *say "thanks for the story and can I get more of this?" and you know that sometimes when*
> *Straits Times has to do it* [break a story]*, but not through me and would get around me*
> *but still have the same story, and that's even more fun…*
>
> (Interview with Ahirudin Attan)

Far fewer though are bloggers who provide "expertise", similar to what Laura McKenna calls

"policy bloggers." Policy bloggers provide expert knowledge or well-researched information on

narrowly defined issues. Some policy bloggers provide in-depth analysis on alternative fuel

sources, endangered wildlife protection, etc. Such expertise is still considered as a minority in the

blogosphere in general. The same applies to the Malaysian blogosphere and most bloggers

identified for this study are opinion-based bloggers. However, some bloggers in the country do

provide expert opinion on their blogs. These expert opinions usually come about because of the

expertise the bloggers have in the professional life or after having done extensive research on the

topic. Malik Imtiaz who himself is a successful lawyer by training and profession frequently

provides expert analysis on matters pertaining to the law. For example, in the case of Nathaniel

Tan being arrested under the Official Secrets Act 1972, Malik Imtiaz wrote a lengthy analysis on

the original purpose of drafting the Official Secrets Act and the many reasons why it would be

unconstitutional to use the Act in the way the police have to justify the arrest:

> *…The OSA is unconstitutional. In its current form, it violates a range of fundamental*
> *liberties guaranteed by the Federal Constitution. Chief amongst these is the freedom of*

expression, and the associated freedom of information. Seen from the perspective of allowing arbitrary government, the OSA violates the equal protection and equal access to the law guarantees as well as undermining the fair and free elections underpinnings of our system of government…The move against Nathaniel Tan is particularly worrying in light of indications in the media that the investigations are being carried out in connection with concerns about matters published in blogs… (Sarwar, 2007)

To the extent that bloggers are contributing what they could, expert opinions or otherwise, they are serving a complementary role to the mainstream media in the flow of information. Bloggers fill the gaps in the flow of information between the producer and users. As Ahirudin Attan argues:

> *…blogs provide the channel not just for the common people, the laymen but for a professional like me to take up serious issues which are of concern to the population, the voting population, and in a way we are complementing the mainstream media…*
>
> (Ahiruddin Attan in "Asian bloggers", 2007)

The "gaps" in the flow of information will always exist because of imperfections in the system. First of all, it is simply logistically and financially impossible for a news agency to cover every event and there are bound to be news-worthy stories that slip through. Secondly, these gaps may be deliberate and exist because of the various control mechanisms in the media system including legal control as laid out in the previous chapters. Due to these imperfections in the system, gaps will always exist and for now bloggers are particularly efficient in finding these gaps.

The role of bloggers as information providers and opinion leaders is not geographically confined to an urban area with an Internet connection. In fact the influences of bloggers extend to rural area as well. Both the incumbents and the opposition party politicians initially thought the blogging phenomenon would be restricted to the urban areas but during the campaign period, anecdotal evidence suggests that *information on the blogs*, which is easily accessible in urban settings, *had flowed to the rural area where Internet connection is non-existent or not easily*

available. This appears to happen because of the so-called "*balik-kampung* crowd[119]" (the city folks who regularly return to their home towns during holidays) who would print out pages from blogs, bring these pages back to their home-town, photocopy these print-outs en masse and distribute them to the villagers. Tony Pua who was elected partially due to blogging had observed this phenomenon during the campaigning season:

> *…I think the impact [of blogs] wasn't felt just in the urban centers but also in pretty much in a lot of the other parts of the country. The reason was this: in the urban centers people have access directly to the internet…but in the rural area what happen is that there is the secondary point of influence. Secondary point of influence means two things, one people who are in the city migrating back to their home town to vote and convincing the people around them. And concerning the issue of the day… what blog does is increasing the information flow and people become more aware of what is happening and what is the issue about and they spread the word…*
>
> (Interview with Tony Pua)

This phenomenon parallels the general idea Elihu Katz and Paul Lazersfeld put forward in their book, *Personal Influence (2005; 1955)* called the "two-step flow of communication hypothesis". The two-step flow hypothesis argues that people usually obtain information through the mass media and in this "first step" of the information flow, the information is generally disseminated indiscriminately to a more or less homogenous masses. They are considered to be equipped with the same skill and intellectual level. They are assumed to be able to interpret and understand the same information. They are also assumed to have the same access to the information, that is, information producers do not make special provisions while producing the information for consumers in urban or rural areas. In the "second step", the opinion leaders in small group contexts mediate and interpret these mass messages consolidating the information. These opinion leaders are the ones who will "intercept, interpret, and diffuse what they see and hear to the

---

[119] *Balik kampung* (literally "back to village")

personal networks in which they are embedded." (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2005, p. xv) It appears that

blogs have given a classic communication theory a new media twist—*a two-step flow 2.0.*

This is an important observation because the incumbents from the ruling party, *Barisan*

Nasional, were counting on strong support from the rural base to preserve in the status-quo.

However, due to the blog and the print-outs from the blogs that were widely distributed in the

rural area the once solid support had eroded somewhat as evident by the election results. The

ruling party suffered their worst election result since the country's independence from Britain

including losing their long-held two-thirds majority as well as the control of five states including

Selangor[120], Pulau Pinang, Kelantan, Perak, and Kedah.

7.1.2. Bloggers as Agenda-Setters

Scholar Bernard Cohen (1963) famously commented that the mass media, specifically the press,

"may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think but it is stunningly

successful in telling its readers what to think about." (1963, p. 13) Professor Cohen's line of

thinking belongs to the school of thought that acknowledges the power that media has to shape

our thinking, or at the very least encourages us to actively think about certain issues or agendas.

This is generally called the agenda-setting function of the media. If the newspapers and the news

broadcasts highlight certain issues such as hunger or pollution, the audiences are likely to become

more aware of those issues and start to think more about them. On the other hand, if the media

ignore news on corruption or wrong-doings of politicians, most audiences most of the time would

be less likely to actively think about those issues. Therein lies the power of mass media in a

healthy democracy—to highlight issues that would best serve the need of the public. In order to

perform that function efficiently, the mass media is generally thought to need a "free"

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[120] Kuala Lumpur is located in the Selangor state but it is a Federal Territory and electorally autonomous from the state.

environment. One of the main activities of bloggers is monitoring the mainstream media and

criticizing the mainstream media's agenda setting or gatekeeping function. The main criticism

from the blogosphere is usually that the mainstream media are too aligned with the establishment

to be truly objective and too tightly-controlled to truly act in the public interest. The following

three cases demonstrate instances in which Malaysian bloggers were the agenda setters in the

unfolding of events. The first case involved the murder of a Mongolian woman that implicated

the Deputy Prime Minister, the second case was about a video clip which exposed the corruption

in the judiciary system, and the third case involved the deal to sell the National Heart Institute.

7.1.2.1. The Case of the Murdered Mongolian Model

The Altantuya murder case illustrates the ability of blogs to set the news agenda. Altantuya

Shaariibuu was a 28 year-old Mongolian woman working in Malaysia as a model and occasional

translator. She was brutally murdered on October 19, 2006 and her body was abandoned in a

patch of jungle near the suburban town of Shah Alam (one hour away from Kuala Lumpur) and

according to police, was shot twice and blown apart with hand grenades. The suspect of the

murder included Abdul Razak Baginda, a well-known political analyst, who was the head of

Malaysian Strategic Research Center and a close advisor to Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul

Razak, police Chief Inspector Azilah Hadri and a police constable, Sirul Azhar Umar.

The Deputy Prime Minister has repeatedly denied ever knowing Altantuya until rumor

surfaced in the blogosphere of a photograph depicting the Deputy Prime Minister having a meal

with Razak Baginda and the Mongolian model in a restaurant in France. Even the wife of the

Deputy Prime Minister was rumored to be implicated in the gruesome murder. The mainstream

media was understandably reluctant to connect the murder to the sitting Deputy Prime Minister.

Even when the newspapers reported on the case, they preferred to identify the Mongolian woman

as an *interpreter* rather than a *model* and play down the connection between the Deputy Prime

Minister and the murder. Firstly, this is because of the lack of hard evidence. The photo's

existence remains elusive except for the testimony by Altantuya's cousin who claimed to have

seen the photograph prior to the murder. Secondly, the case implicates Najib Abdul Razak, the

person who is likely to be the next Prime Minister of the country. The mainstream media treaded

carefully around the topic. In the blogosphere however, it was a red-letter event for the bloggers.

The controversial website *MalaysiaToday.net* had played a prominent part in the whole

investigation; it was the first website to link the Deputy Prime Minister to the victim. Its

administrator, Raja Petra Kamarudin even made a statutory declaration claiming that he had

knowledge of the people present when the body of the Mongolian woman was blown up (Jessy,

2008) and with "a wink and a smile" implicating the Deputy Prime Minister to the murder. Tian

Chua of the opposition party, *Parti Keadilan Rakyat*, even posted up a doctored picture with the

Deputy Prime Minister, Razak Baginda, and Altantuya Shaariibuu having dinner in a restaurant.

The photograph appeared on his blog *eContrario* (http://www.tianchua.net) on July 2, 2007. It

was clearly a digitally altered picture with the heads of the people involved superimposed onto

some random picture. The blogger, Tian Chua, who posted the fake photograph refused to

apologize for it arguing that it was a work of fantasy and that he had never stated that it was a real

photograph ("Tian Chua admits fake photo", 2007). Nevertheless, the digitally-altered photograph

was enough for the UMNO Youth to lodge a police report and a complaint to the *Malaysian

Communication and Multimedia Commission* (MCMC) against the blogger (Anis, 2007).

According to the same blog, the MCMC questioned Tian Chua on 20 August 2007, amongst

others, the ownership and maintenance of the blog in question, the ownership of photograph in

question, and its authenticity (the full list of questions asked by MCMC is reproduced in

Appendix F).

Blogger and newly elected State Assemblymen, Sim Tze Tzin believes that blogs helped disseminate the story of Altantuya's murder and ultimately helped weaken both the Deputy Prime Minister and the *Barisan Nasional*'s credibility in the eyes of the voters:

> *...this blog becomes such a hit and even spread to the kampung, it was so popular and scandalous and people like politics and scandals and sex, and this thing has the element of politics and sex in it , because Najib is alleged to be the secret lover of Altantuya, so this thing go wild, even when we visited the very remote areas, people are asking, where is the picture? So everyone has a picture in their heart, because of the this blog, so this add to the negative perceptions of Najib and Barisan National ...*
>
> (Interview with Sim Tze Tzin)

Figure 18: A doctored photograph of the murdered Mongolian model Altantuya with Deputy Prime Minister, Najib Abdul Razak appearing on a blog in 2007.

7.1.2.2. The Case of V.K. Lingam Video Clip

The former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim released a low quality video to the public in

September 2007 of a prominent lawyer, V.K.Lingam. The lawyer was caught on the video clip

allegedly fixing the appointment of 'friendly' senior judges with Chief Judge of Malaya Ahmad

Fairuz Abdul Halim (Aziz & Beh, 2007). Ahmad Fairuz was forced to retire as the Chief Justice

of the Federal Court in late 2007 after the scandal became the staple of everyday conversation in

the country. The incident spawned a cottage industry of T-shirts and other paraphernalia featuring

V.K. Lingam, which appeared on the streets and in the many air-conditioned shopping malls in

the country. "*Correct, correct, correct*"—a frequently used phrase by the lawyer in the video

clip—became the buzz-word of the year. Yet, the story-of-the-year almost did not make it to the

news in the beginning.

Blogger Sim Tze Tzin who was one of the first people to have seen the video clip spoke

about the exasperating process of trying to break the story through the mainstream media:

> *…once we decided to break the news, we gave them the CD, gave everyone a copy of the*
> *CD, and you know what? …every news agency in Malaysia had an emergency meeting*
> *with the editors, asking how we going to do this? But they dare not even publish it. They*
> *say that this is too big a piece and* [they] *might step on a landmine. The next day, I really*
> *thought they were going to go with it because this is huge news but eventually I found this*
> *case in the corner…hidden somewhere in a corner*   (Interview with Sim Tze Tzin)

The mainstream media was in effect trying to black out the story. The mainstream media was

very reluctant to go forward with the news which would implicate the Federal judges, well-

known lawyers, the former Prime Minister, high ranking Ministers and several well-connected

businessmen. In Sim's words, the mainstream media were reluctant because they felt they were

"stepping on landmines". The story was "too big" to break and too many toes would be stepped

on in the process. Keeping in mind also, this was prior to the series of massive street protests later

in the year and the historic election the following year, it was a telling sign of how subservient the

press had become.   Sim expressed his disappointment in the way the mainstream press had

handled the breaking news:

> *…I was quite disappointed, I expected that they might be worried but I didn't expect that*
> *they can do it that small. I didn't expect it to be so small. I expected maybe something on*
> *page 5 or page 7 and maybe a quarter page talking about it because there is so much*
> *content in that video…but it was so small, there was almost nothing reported. Then we*
> *realize that we have to give up the mainstream media and we have to go to the*
> *alternative. From there on, we use blogs, we use alternative media like Malaysiakini…*
>
> (Interview with Sim Tze Tzin)

A Royal Commission of Inquiry into the V.K. Lingam Video Clip was formed in late 2007 to

investigate an allegation of illegal intervention into the judicial appointment process of Malaysian

judges that purportedly occurred in 2002. The formation of the commission was a follow-up to a

recommendation by a three-man panel ,which was tasked to determine the authenticity of a video

clip of a telephone conversation that raised the allegation. The 5-person commission was chaired

by former Chief Judge of Malaya Haidar Mohamed Noor. The other four members were former

Chief Judge of Sabah and Sarawak Steve Shim Lip Kiong, former Solicitor-General Zaitun

Zawiyah Puteh, historian Dr. Khoo Kay Kim and retired Court of Appeal Judge Mahadev

Shankar.

The Royal Commission eventually published a four volume 2,889-page report detailing

the proceedings, statutory declarations and list of exhibits. The report which cost an equivalent of

US$150 was sold out in 30 minutes on the day it went on sale ("Video clip report", 2008). The

Commission concluded that the lawyer in question, V.K. Lingam, had with the assistance of his

close friends, tycoon Vincent Tan and Minister of Tourism, Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor,

actively involved themselves with the appointment of judges ("Commission decides on Lingam

video", 2008). The Commission, in essence identified loop-holes in the process of judicial

appointments that enable manipulation by the Executive branch of the Government and by private

citizens through the V.K. Lingam video clip incident which were ignored or played down by mainstream media but picked up by the blogosphere and were placed back into the top of the news agenda by the blogs and other alternative media.

This was not the first time an amateur digital video helped launch a Royal Commission Inquiry in the country. In November 2005, a video clip taken on a cellular phone brought to center stage the police's standard operating procedure when a digital video recording of a strip-down body search of a woman in a police detention center surfaced on the Internet. The one minute and eleven second video clip recorded on the multimedia messaging service (MMS) of a cellular phone[121] showed a female police officer apparently ordering a nude female detainee to perform ear-squats (Puah, 2005). The incident triggered a public investigation of the police standard operating procedure. The incident which has now been dubbed the "*nude ear-squat*" incident was brought to light by a female Member of Parliament (MP) of the opposition party during a regular session Cabinet meeting. The issue escalated when the media highlighted that the female detainee could be a Chinese national or a local of the Chinese Malaysian minority. The Mainland Chinese media quickly picked up the issue and highlighted the incident in local news. The domestic controversy suddenly became a potential international relations nightmare. In the weeks that followed the initial newspaper report on 24 November, 2005, it was revealed that the female detainee was in fact a local Malaysian woman of the ethnic majority group. Two newspaper editors resigned from a local Chinese language newspaper for allegedly reporting false information, and the female MP was charged by local conservative groups for displaying pornographic material in public (Puah, 2005). A 300-page *Royal Commission* report[122] came out

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[121] The cellular phone in question was a Nokia 7210 model. It has 1152 x 864 pixels resolution for still photos, 10 minutes video recording, and Internet enabled.

[122] "*Commission To Enquire Into The Standard Operating Procedure, Rules and Regulations In Relation To The Conduct Of Body Search In Respect of An Arrest And Detention By The Police.*"

on 16 January, 2006 detailing the entire incident and recommended improvements on police procedures.

7.1.2.3. The Case of the National Heart Institute (IJN) Deal

A recent case involving the Government's deal to sell 51 percent of the National Heart Institute (IJN) to a publicly listed company, *Sime Darby* created a flurry of activities in the blogosphere and illustrated how the social political bloggers in the country framed the same news in a different light and ultimately changed the news agenda.

The National Heart Institute was part of the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital until August 1992 when it was corporatized and established as a separate and specialist entity (Kamil, 2008) under the Mahathir Administration. It is 99.99 per cent owned by the government and it serves mainly the lower- to middle-income group and government servants. The fees charged by IJN are usually well below market rates for the lower income patients but it also receives full-paying patients. IJN is apparently a profitable company making about RM20 million a year (Kamil, 2008) and established itself as a premier hospital in the region, making it one of the few corporatized government entities that is both profitable and able to provide quality services to the people.

When the news first broke on 18 December 2008, the deal was presented in the mainstream media as matter-of-fact and likely to be quickly concluded. The Deputy Prime Minister, who also holds the Ministry of Finance portfolio which oversees the IJN, had announced that the Government has no objection to the deal (Rahman, 2008). The mainstream media did very little to contradict this frame. Yet, the blogosphere was abuzz with criticism of the deal, challenging the official frame:

> *…of course the Government has no objection to Sime Darby buying IJN. They're making money in this venture, and they're giving us silly assurances' expecting us to believe it.*

> *Come on, Sime Darby is a listed company who has a responsibility to their shareholders to make money. How long will it be before ppl who go to IJN for welfare are told to go to the government agencies? IJN was never meant to be profitable. Public healthcare is never about the RM and sen, but about the lives you safe. What a stupid greedy government we have…* (posted by Whatalulu, 2008)

One of the bloggers who also spoke out against the deal was Mahathir Mohamad who himself had

heart by-pass surgery at IJN before and had been one of the advocates for privatization:

> *…some of the major surgeries performed there are so costly that the IJN lost money on them. Will Sime Darby shoulder these losses?…There are far too many questions about this privatisation which need to be answered. Some I think cannot be answered…I seldom oppose privatisation but this is one instant when I feel privatisation is the wrong thing to do…Leave this institution as it is. It is our pride and it is doing a good job as it is…*
> (posted by Mahathir Mohamad, 2008)

Most of the bloggers in this study spoke out against the IJN-*Sime Darby* deal on their blogs.

While in this incident, the mainstream media did report on the deal unlike the near-black out of

the V.K. Lingam video clip incident, it really only started to report on the objections to the deal

later on. Perhaps, because of the mounting negativity in the blogosphere and the press or because

of the statement signed by 33 of the 35 IJN medical consultants, the Government decided to defer

the deal and to initiate an in-depth study into the deal. The IJN incident provides an interesting

case where bloggers-journalists-the affected party (IJN medical staff) mutually influenced the

outcome of the story ("IJN doctors", 2008). We see how the mainstream media first reported the

news, without much fanfare and in a matter-of-fact approach, the blogosphere picked it up and

addressed the "gaps" in the story, and the medical staff, buoyed by the media attention issued

official statements of disagreement and lastly the big players—the Government and *Sime*

Darby—found themselves going against the tide of public opinion and had to break off the multi-

million deal.

7.2. Blogs as Networks

The uniqueness of blogs comes not just from their *alternative* content. Indeed, what has been written or posted on blogs may well have been said or printed elsewhere decades or even centuries ago—one is reminded of the Samizdat activities in the Soviet-era. Blogging "represents an ancient impulse in anatomically modern human, the yearning for public political expression", and "they are not forcing all the old means and techniques of politics, policymaking, and campaigns and election to grind to a halt, to retool or to be abandoned." (Perlmutter, 2008, p. 9) However, blogs do indeed offer something revolutionary in the form of hyperlinks. These hyperlinks are usually found on the blogroll of a blog, the middle of a blogpost or at the end of the blogpost. The "hyperlinking structure creates the kind of nonlinear, endless jumping around, and instant feedback that previous technology from cave paintings to television, simply could not" (Perlmutter, 2008, p.10). Hyperlinking also facilitates the formation of networks in the blogosphere.

Blogs have enormous networking and deliberative potential. One of the main characteristics of blogs is the ability of readers to engage and participate in any given discussion through feedbacks. Readers leave comments and opinion on a certain topic of a blog post and this is joined by other readers. This *almost instantaneous* feedback capability has allowed for a *near real time deliberation*[123]. It is this participatory and deliberative nature of blogs that had intrigued democracy scholars the most. David Klein and his colleagues, speaking specifically of the American context, argue that *"it would be extremely shortsighted to disregard the enormous influence that bloggers are beginning to have upon the …political scene."* (Kline, Burstein, De Keijzer, & Berger, 2005, p. 5)

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[123] A near instantaneous or asynchronous deliberation is different from face-to-face or real time deliberation. The strengths and weaknesses of these two kinds of deliberation are further discussed in the *Discussion and Conclusion Chapter*.

The blogosphere is organized as a distributed network, there is no central hub but instead blogs link to a number of other individual blogs (Rettberg, 2008). However the network of blogs is not equally distributed. Aggregator sites such as Technorati or Digg (http://digg.com) would have more links to blogs and individual blogs also differ in their "power" (Shirky, 2003). More established blogs have more power simply due to the long tail of continuous exposure, a famous personality's popularity is likely to spill over to his or her blog and in the process increase the power of the blog. An excellent example is the case of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed who only started his blog on May 1, 2008 but has garnered an impressive 5 million hits in a matter of months. The former prime minister brings with him his prestige and fame to his blog (www.chedet.com) which created the initial buzz to attract readers. The provocative ideas that he continues to post on his blog, both sustain and provide the fodder to keep the public interest and coverage by the mainstream media in a feedback loop.

Blogging facilitates two forms of networking and deliberation. The first exist primarily online in the cyber world. The second is the offline networking which has allowed individual bloggers to meet one another in the real world and enable the forming of groups. The boundary between the online and offline worlds is usually blurred as crossovers happen frequently.

7.2.1. Emerging Networks of Deliberations

Among the active bloggers, *a community of deliberation* has emerged. Some of these networks are less formal and less structured while some are more organized with specific objectives in mind. The blogger association, *All-Blogs*, is a more formalized network which aims to assist bloggers in trouble and provides a certain level of security to the bloggers in the country who write on more controversial topics. The annual *Bloggers United Malaysia* (B.U.M) event created

by blogger *Desiderata*, is a less formal setting which aims to provide opportunities for the

bloggers to gather and meet each other in person. Even more informal is the *Mee Rebus Tuesday*

social meeting, where several bloggers would gather at the residence of one of the bloggers in a

very informal setting. All these real-world activities are in addition to all the activities and

deliberation already being carried out in the blogosphere.

7.2.1.1. National Alliance of Bloggers (All-Blogs)

When the NSTP Group, the largest publisher in the country sued two individual bloggers,

Ahirudin Attan and Jeff Ooi, it did something else that was probably not factored into their

planning—the lawsuit led to the establishment of the *National Alliance of Bloggers or All-Blogs*.

At the time of the lawsuit in January 2007, the blogging community was still nascent and most

bloggers were still blogging anonymously and most did not know each other. Ahiruddin Attan

himself described the period as being a very lonely time for him as he felt he had no one to turn to

for help or support (Interview with Ahirudin Attan). The lawsuit became the tangible rallying

point that united the bloggers and helped establish a formal association, *All-Blogs*, which could

provide the support for bloggers who might face similar problems in the future. Ahirudin Attan

explains the purpose of blogs:

> *…we have set two goals. One is to engage the rest of the world, bloggers vs. the rest of*
> *the world, government and corporations … we have engaged the government and we are*
> *engaging the corporations, we are not just sopo-bloggers[124] and personal bloggers. So in*
> *a loose affiliation we got these gathering. The other roles is to protect bloggers as a*
> *result of the suit against me and Jeff and since then, we got Nathaniel's case and RPK's*
> *case. We have always been there… we have always been the first to go to the police*
> *station to the Marina[125], or Nat family or girlfriend, some of us are known and it sort of*
> *assure people that we will try to protect you. It is no longer an individual without the*

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[124] Sopo-bloggers (Socio-political bloggers)
[125] Marina "Mabel" Abdullah is the wife of Raja Petra Kamarudin

protection from an institution. We provide that support… (Interview with Ahirudin Attan)

The pro-tem president of the All-Blogs emphasized the power of the group. Perhaps stemming from his own lonely experience of having to face the early days of a potentially multi-million ringgit lawsuit against a media Goliath, NSTP Group, Ahirudin feels the importance of making sure the bloggers in the country know that they are not alone. We could contrast this to the statement posted on Ahirudin's blog the week he was served with the papers by the NSTP Group:

> *…Unchartered waters. None of us have passed this way before, so I shall have to tread carefully. I'll need you to tread carefully, too, when you leave your comments. I have been served the papers. They dropped them on Tuesday evening, around 9.30 pm, at the National Press Club. They are applying for an injunction against Rocky's Bru, this blog. They are suing me for libel. [They have also served Jeff Ooi of Screenshots the papers]...*
> (Posted 18 January 2007 on Rocky's Bru by Ahirudin Attan)

Yet as with all groups, formal or informal*, All-Blogs* had to face the issue of identity. What is *All-Blogs?*, who should it represent?, and many other questions that needed to be addressed as the group grew and attracted more attention. It is one thing to be a social gathering such as the *Bloggers United Malaysia* (BUM) events where bloggers basically participate for the chance to meet the person behind the screen name, having a few drinks and laughs. But it is another beast altogether for a group with the aim to become recognized as the de facto big brother figure in the local blogging scene that seeks to play an active and regular part in the development of the political landscape of the country. Blogger *Whatalulu* expresses this ambiguity and unease with All-Blogs:

> *…I am a bit torn as in, if it stays as a social group and then it can exist, if they start regulating through NAB and so on, then I'm a bit cautious… like politicians with that bloggers should be like this or be like that, they cannot talk like that , they should be accredited and so on. So to regulate it… if they were to regulate it… chances are they would do it through the bloggers Alliance, so would that be the role of bloggers Alliance? I think not because we are all free spirits, you know there is my kind of blogging, and*

there is the Mahathir's kind of blogging, there is the MahaGuru's style of blogging, and… we answer I guess to our conscience and also if people think we're crap they would stop reading… because eventually either we really really write for own pleasure, writing even though no one is reading or we just stopped writing….

(Interview with Whatalulu)

Some of the founding members of *All-Blogs* appear to have the desire to shape the association into something with more influence. Ahiruddin Attan who is also *All-Blogs* pro-tem president provides some insights as to which direction he would steer *All-Blogs* in his desire to bring his own blogging to a much greater prominence:

…I'm thinking of …how to take my blogging to a higher plane, it can't be just here where getting some days 15 some days 30 thousands hits, how do I get to a bigger audience, how do I make my blog or my site more influential in the sense that how can I change the course of history, the course of the country? I doubt one blog, I don't even think that Chedet's blog[126], big as it is can do that, we need something that is at a different level, we need something more structured, more organized, maybe an aggregate of blogs…

(Interview with Ahiruddin Attan)

7.2.2. Blogs as Mobilizing Agents

Bloggers function as mobilizing agents that provide and share information on upcoming events. This is not the same as providing and sharing information on matters such as news of the corrupt activities of certain politicians or criticism of the bureaucracy. The latter would fall under the function of the fifth estate. As mobilizing agents, blogs provide the readers with information on upcoming events including protest rallies, political speeches, midnight vigils, gatherings of a more peaceful or social nature. Several major events took place between 2006 -2008 which benefited from the help of the blogosphere. At the time of writing, at least three major rallies and several smaller scale protests took place in the country including the *Lawyers March* at PutraJaya, *BERSIH* Rally around Kuala Lumpur, *HINDRAF* Rally*, PROTES* Rally at Kelana Jaya Stadium,

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[126] Mahathir Mohamad's blog is at http://www.chedet.com

and the midnight vigil for the release of Nathaniel Tan, the handing over of a memorandum to the

Parliament, and the *Press Freedom Walk* organized by the group called *BENAR*.

Table 8: Street Demonstrations in Malaysia in 2007

Date	The Protest	Location	Number of Participants*(Detained)
Sept 26, 2007	Lawyers March	Putrajaya	200 (0)
Nov 10, 2007	BERSIH Rally (Yellow March)	Kuala Lumpur City	40000 (245)
Nov 25, 2007	HINDRAF Rally	Kuala Lumpur City	10000 (230)
Dec 9, 2007	Human Rights Day March	Kuala Lumpur City	50 (8)
July 8, 2007	*Protes* Rally	Kelana Jaya Stadium	8000 (0)

*estimates

7.2.2.1 Blogs and the BERSIH Rally

One of the biggest and earliest of these public protests was the *BERSIH* Rally organized by the

Coalition for Fair and Clean Election or *BERSIH* on 10 November 2007. Information concerning

the *BERSIH* Rally was circulated on the blogosphere for several days prior to the actual event

which took place at several locations around the country's capital, Kuala Lumpur.

Demonstrations of this scale are rare in Malaysia. The last mass street protest was in 1998. The

event was considered illegal by the police and the government had issued warnings to the public

against participating in the event. Khairy Jamaluddin, the influential son-in-law of the Prime

Minister and the Deputy Chief of the UMNO Youth called the rally a hypocritical move by the

Opposition that is illegal and that the police should arrest the *BERSIH* organizers. He

characterized people who participate in the rally as "monkeys on the streets" ("Khairy wants

organizers arrested", 2007)

The *BERSIH* Rally went on as scheduled disregarding the warnings issued by the authorities. According to several figures from local mainstream newspaper and to eye-witness accounts on the blogosphere, place the number of people who participated in the event at around 40,000 people. The street demonstration is also known as the *Yellow March* because of the canary-yellow colored T-shirts that were worn by the majority of the participants. One blogger, *Polytikus*, gave a list of things to be aware of on the day of the rally itself including the wearing of a yellow T-shirt, be aware of "plants" from the government and not the least some practical advice including wearing comfortable shoes and bringing an umbrella in case of rain:

> *...for first timers: Wear comfortable shoes. Don't worry about arrests because police only target 'rioters'. If you clear the area when you hear the police warning (remember, they must do it clearly 3 times), no harm shall fall upon you. Please refrain from bringing sharp objects so no keris even if we're going to see the King. Bring cameras and video cameras - the whole event needs documentation, the more the merrier (especially so if you see flag burners or suspicious individuals setting a dustbins on fire). Umbrellas may come in handy, be prepared for rain or shine! Bring your friends. Share the momentous event of your first rally with others. When you hear cheers and chants, join in! And wear yellow! :) See you there! :)…*

(Polytikus, 2007 Posted by Polytikus)

Blogger, *Whatalulu* expressed similar excitement of participating in the *BERSIH* Rally.

> *…did you see the picture? It was amazing… because…as I was walking there, you can see kilometers of people ahead of you kilometers of people behind you…okay maybe one km, but you can see thousands of people there…*

(Interview with *Whatalulu*)

Polytikus it would seem was wrong in regards to her advice of "don't worry about arrests". By the end of the day, the police had detained or arrested an estimated 245 people. The *Special Forces* even fired tear gas and used chemical-laced water cannons to disperse the crowd. Blogger Elviza who blogged about the *BERSIH* Rally noted her disagreement on the use of force, water cannon, and pepper spray by the police in dispersing the crowd, saying "that's just no way to treat humans who are expressing their point of views." (Interview with Elviza Michelle)

The *BERSIH* rally was almost all but ignored by the mainstream media. On the day of the rally, the only local news agency seriously reporting on the event was *Malaysiakini.com*, the online newspaper often seen as critical to the ruling government. *Al-Jazeera,* which has a regional office in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, also reported the event. The *Malaysiakini.com* website had to divert its readers to a mirror site due to the huge number of visitors. The front page of the website was filled with live reports on the event complete with video clips. By the second day of the *BERSIH* rally, the *Malaysiakini.com* website had put together a *Special Report* webpage of the November 10th rally with 68 hyperlinks of individual reports and articles that were sub-divided into different categories including general news reports, photo gallery, videos, news from the day before the rally, news after the rally called the "aftermath" and a category for letters to the editors (Beh & Zahiid, 2007).

On the other end of the spectrum, the mainstream newspaper, *New Straits Times* featured five articles with a different side of the story on the *BERSIH* Rally. The first was concern with the demands of the leading Islamic opposition party, PAS; one which highlighted the economic loss of traders in the capital affected by the rally; a report of 18 children involved in the rally; one citing local human rights group claiming that the police did not resort to violence in the rally; and the fifth article cited the Prime Minister in saying that the opposition tried to drag the monarch into politics. None of the stories directly reported about the *BERSIH* Rally itself.

Figure 19: The mainstream English daily, *The Star*, the day after the *BERSIH* Rally. News of the rally was completely absent from the front page. As with other mainstream newspapers, news of the rally was in effect blacked out from the headlines

The other leading English daily, *The Star*, was equally bare in its coverage of the rally in the following days but it did report the use of water cannons and tear gas on the demonstrators as well as a short video clip of the event which it put up on its website. The front page of The Star, following the *BERSIH* Rally was about rising fuel prices, a worthy news item in a normal news day but certainly not when the country had just witnessed the largest mass protest since the *Reformasi* movement in 1998. Hints that the *BERSIH* Rally actually took place could be found in page eight in an article titled "Massive traffic congestion caused by the rally" and another piece with the deputy Prime Minister explaining the reason that a permit was not issued to the protest. Both newspapers used the term "illegal" when describing the rally. Based on the selection of news by *The Star* and the *New Straits Times* the focus was clearly to emphasize the economic burden and the legal persecution of such a large scale demonstration evident by news reports on the traffic congestion, the woes of small traders in the capital, and the number of people arrested. It also gave a lot of column space for the administration to explain its position. The *Malaysiakini.com* also reported on the traffic congestions and the people arrested as well as giving space to the Opposition's view of the protest.

The success of the *BERSIH* Rally despite all the police warnings and road-blocks on the day itself to prevent more participants from entering the city limits, could be attributed to the blogs and other alternative news portals such as *Malaysiakini.com*. As one blogger said:

> *…the Yellow March, all those marches, they were all inspired by blogs, they were all promoted by blogs and they got the attention and response because of the play-up in the blogs…*

(Interview with *Nuraina S. Samad*)

In a show of solidarity for the people that participating in the Rally, some bloggers changed the color of their blog pages to yellow (Interview with Marina Mahathir). Actual participation in these rallies requires a certain degree of courage in an environment with laws that criminalized

the gatherings of more than three people without a permit. It also calls for participation with

calculated risk as aptly described by blogger *Whatalulu*:

> *…sometimes when you do this kind of things you have to be a little bit more intelligent about it…Masjid Jamek, the National Mosque and SOGO and Central Market[127], so you I think think think…which one has the most people, which one has the most gwailo[128], where are they most unlikely to whack people up. And also where does the LRT[129] stops…Central Market. That turned out to be a good decision because I felt they were going to beat up people at the Masjid, but it turn out they beat people at the Masjid Jamek instead of the National Mosque…*
>
> (Interview with *Whatalulu*)

Another example of calculated participation is in the form of blogger and well-known lawyer

Malik Imtiaz's example. Although Malik Imtiaz blogged about the rallies he did not personally

participate in them and explains why he did not participate in the street rallies:

> *…I was one of the lawyers on call for the possible arrests… I think my presence there will be converted into a political all proceeds as a political involvement politicization of an issue and that acting would compromise is my value as an advocate in court… there are so few of us that we have to strategize see how we can provide the most value in these sort of things…* (Interview with Malik Imtiaz)

Malik Imtiaz who himself had received death threats in 2006 for his involvement with the

controversial case of Lina Joy, a Muslim women by birth who wanted to convert out from the

Islamic faith into Christianity (Muda, 2006), also talked about having mental preparedness to be a

social activist:

> *…I suppose when one embarks on a course into social activism in this country …expects the possibility of some state reprisal. I can't say I'm entirely comfortable with the idea that there will be reprisal, obviously it is something that none of us want. Not because we fear the reprisal but we fear the ambiguity around the reprisal…*
>
> *(Interview with Malik Imtiaz)*

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[127] *Masjid Jamek* (Jamek Mosque), SOGO Departmental Store, Central Market, and National Mosque in Putrajaya are prominent landmarks in the Kuala Lumpur.

[128] *Gwailo* is a local slang for foreigners usually referring to male Caucasians.

[129] Light Railway Transit (LRT) is one of the more popular public transportation systems.

For Malik Imitiaz and others like him, it is not reprisal which they fear most but the ambiguity of the conditions of the reprisal. Consider the fact that the Internal Security Act allows for indefinite detention without trial and the Sedition Act is so vaguely defined that it is open to all sorts of interpretation. Nevertheless, the human rights lawyer added:

> *…but as I came to realize very quickly and I have been doing this since 96, if you are going to be scared, there is no point doing the work but having said that it doesn't mean that you will be reckless, or you do things in a way that court risks. No doubt speaking out in this country means you're courting risks. But it comes to a point when we say that if you don't do anything nothing will change… we have to start mobilizing public opinion…"* (Interview with Malik Imtiaz)

Blogger Elviza Michelle noted that she decided not to participate in the BERSIH Rally because of the very real fear of being arrested by the police and having a young son in her care added to her worries about the possibility of being arrested if she participated in the mass rally:

> *..I didn't attend that one, because I feared of getting arrested. If I get arrested, I have a young son at home and there would be no one to care for him. I feel strongly about it but I didn't participate…* (Interview with Elviza Michelle)

Networking is not unique to the blogosphere; human beings are social animals that have been forming relationships for affection and protection since the dawn of time. Blogging is an extension of this human condition which also produced some interesting results to the advancement of democracy and free speech. Even though, the deliberation and participation are conducted in the virtual world, real connections are being formed. This is usually achieved through the use of blogrolls located on blogs. Bloggers have a tendency to cite, to hyperlink and to refer to each other—creating networks that are beneficial to their individual or collective causes. Even considering Cass Sunstein's prediction that this narrow-networking may only end up fragmenting the cyberspace by producing 'cocoons' of people with similar mind sets (Sunstein, 2001), the potential of networking through blogs and other user-generated platforms should not be dismissed. The mobilization of tens of thousands of people for the various street

rallies calling for fairer elections, minority rights, and lower oil prices, the formation of NAB to protect the legal rights of bloggers, as well as the social-events of *Mee Rebus Tuesday* and B.U.M where bloggers just have a good time, are all significant building blocks of a healthy democratic society.

7.3.   Blogs as Platforms for Expression

Blogging serves another important function in a healthy democracy. It provides ordinary people an avenue for expression. The bloggers interviewed for this study, regardless of their background—education or career—and fame, appreciated the control they appear to have over their own writings. Essentially, as a technology that allows self-expression in a manner that personal diaries do, they could write and publish what they want to say without having to deal with editors, company policies, shareholder's interests or many of the laws that govern the other mass media. Blogs encourage different types of commentary and empower the marginalized by providing them with tools to express themselves.

Even when the blogger happens to be a well-known personality such as the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad who has means of getting his word out through more traditional means of publication, the ability to have your words reproduced in their entirety is highly rewarding for them:

> *…it is to me very satisfying, that I am able at last to voice my opinion, my real opinion, not the abbreviated one that gets published in the papers, even those papers which are friendly towards me they cannot very well put down everything that I said, and a lot of time they would miss out on the important points but with a blog I can put down anything…*   (Interview with Mahathir Mohamad)

Marina Mahathir is a HIV/AIDS activist, eldest daughter of the former premier, and a newspaper

columnist in the highest circulating English language newspaper in the country. She also feels

that there is a difference between writing on her blog and writing for a newspaper:

> *…it is an interesting outlet; it is very different from writing my newspaper column. You do feel a sense of freedom then do like the idea that I could write a little bit or write a lot depending on what, you know and I think that is the beauty of the blog that you could just put the little comment on something you don't have to write a whole thesis, which is what something you have to do sometimes for another kind of forum…*
>
> <div align="right">(Interview with Marina Mahathir)</div>

Mahathir Mohamad and Marina Mahathir are well known figures in the country with an

established audience who would seek out their columns, speeches, and other writings. Yet, they

still feel the need to have a medium where they could express themselves unedited and

unabridged.

Others, such as Blogger Elviza Michelle who is a corporate lawyer by profession

expressed her frustration over the fact that the mainstream newspaper, in this case, the *New

Straits Times*, did not publish her commentary on the defamation suit filed by the same company

against Ahirudin Attan and Jeff Ooi. Elviza, who was encouraged by Ahirudin Attan himself to

start a blog, began blogging on *WriteAway.blogspot.com* to express her frustrations on the matter.

Some of the bloggers started their blogs simply to see what would come out of it. Blogger

Nathaniel Tan, who was remanded under the Official Secrets Act, noted that he started blogging

simply to articulate his thoughts and commentaries on the state of things. He confessed that he

found it "less fun" to only "just read all the time, taking things in and don't put things out". This

feeling of "putting things out" is his way of self-expression and for him "humans are extroverted

animals and they like to talk a lot" (Interview with Nathaniel Tan). He also noted that the

restrictive media environment in the country probably influenced the development of blogging:

…Blogging fills a special niche in Malaysia, and it is quite unique as compared to other places because we don't have our free media and things like that and it has come to fill up quite a gap and to some extent, we push the boundaries, we are at the cutting edge of blogging even globally because of things like that…

<div align="right">(Interview with Nathaniel Tan)</div>

7.3.1. Blogs as Training Grounds for Expression

One of the most interesting findings in the study is the observation by bloggers who reported on

the rise of quality of discussion in their blogs as reflected by the comments left by the readers.

The bloggers noted that in the early stages of their blogging, readers would leave comments using

less than cordial language but over time, with some action by the bloggers themselves including

telling the readers to respect other people's comments and to refrain from using expletives, the

civility of the comments improved. This is a significant observation especially considering the

running argument against freedom of expression by the ruling government and even mainstream

media is the fear that by letting people have the freedom to say whatever they want on the

Internet will result in chaos and possibly create racial riots and civil unrest. Editor-in-chief for

the English language daily, Wong Chun Wai commented in a panel discussion with leading

bloggers and politicians of the role of new media in Malaysian politics that:

…Malaysians are still grappling with the idea of speaking up because on one hand, there is this call for greater democratic space but if you look at the cyberspace people are still shouting, they shout, they are unable to discuss and can't dialogue well and use inflammatory remarks, they call people names, they make allegation when they can't substantiate and on the other hand you still have older politicians who are fearful of these opening up of expression …("Bloggers, politics and the elections", 2007a)

If civil society is the goal to be achieved through the various implementations of policy to build

an information society or a knowledge-based economy, then the need for a training ground for

expression should be a desired item. Blogging is an excellent platform as the training ground for

self-expression and free speech. Malik Imtiaz understood this very well:

> *…over the months, I see this evolution, and I actually said in , when Jeff and Rocky got sued I wrote a blog post about defamation on the blogger and I said that what the NST was doing was wrong because it was killing off a nascent effort to develop critical thinking…*   (Interview with Malik Imtiaz)

He adds that:

> *…in Malaysian society, because you have been muzzled for a long time you lose your sense of voice , you don't know when to speak softly, so people are shouting when there is no need to shout. It is a process that needs to be moderated and by itself over time would conform to a level which is acceptable. For people who didn't have the right to speak and now are having the right to speak, they want to say everything and they want to vent everything. And that is a process that we need to give space for and will inasmuch as we need to teach them through the blogs and so on. The suit by NST is actually killing off that possibility; I said that at that point…*
>   (Interview with Malik Imtiaz)

And he claims that even if the comments are critical of him, if they are properly written, he has

no problem with publishing those comments:

> *…I don't expect it to be structured like a literature review but if you can state it without saying "fuck this or that", fine do it I will publish it, even if it is critical of me…*
>   (Interview with Malik Imtiaz)

Tony Pua's answer alluded also to a certain degree of "trusting your readers to have the right

judgment" that bloggers themselves must somehow possess:

> *…people can call me whatever they want, I will publish it. What I won't publish is say, when someone comes in and accuses Pak Lah of having four mistresses, I would not publish that. But if you come in and say that I'm a MCA plant or I'm a BN in disguise or I'm a stupid useless…I would just publish . I think readers could judge for themselves whether those things are true or otherwise…*   (Interview with Tony Pua)

Part and parcel of deliberation in a democratic society is learning how to articulate one's thoughts

without resorting to vulgarities and racial slurs (at least not all the time). All the bloggers

interviewed in this study, moderate their blogs insofar as the readers' comments are concerned.

They also seem to follow some kind of self-prescribed guidelines about what kind of comments

are acceptable and what kind of comments should be deleted or only parts of the comments

should be deleted:

> *...some of them actually do have a very good argument but just that they use some crude languages and unfortunately I have to delete those, where as in some other systems they could just masked out the words, unfortunately I don't have that function. But also they are those that I delete because, one they make personal accusations which I am unable to proof or substantiate, I would not publish them. Or they make racist remarks, I would not publish them or use foul language, I would publish them and clear-cut out of topic ...meant to agitate of course these are grey lines...what does it mean to be out of topic or meant to agitate...then I would also not publish but it's my blog and I get to make the choice. But I dare say, 96% or 97% of the post all goes out to be published. So no censorship issues ...they are plenty...if they want to talk bad about me, I will publish...*
>
> (Interview with Tony Pua)

Marina Mahathir reveals another typical example of how bloggers justify moderation of the

comments on their blogs:

> *…I used to allow anonymous comments but a couple of months ago I decided to stop that why? It because I felt people are abusing it. They are just people who are commenting under anonymous cover and is basically bombing it and saying all sorts of things. Then after a while I thought "hey, this is my house" you can't coming here with paper bag over your head and shout abuse at me and then just go away. It's somewhat uneven, you know if you want to say anything say it openly. So I stopped the anonymous thing now. I think it's a more fair playing field, so to speak. They know who I am, so why shouldn't I know who they are, right? …* (Interview with Marina Mahathir)

S.K. Thew would actually explain to his readers why he deleted certain entries:

> *…Yes, I moderate the comments in the sense that when they disclose this kind of so called bad words, bad remarks rude words and then I will actually censor it and say "deleted by SK" and sometimes I will write the reasons…* (Interview with S.K. Thew)

As noted in the beginning of the chapter, the three main categories of functions—fifth estate, networks, and platforms for expression—are not mutually exclusive and should be understood as three interconnected spheres, each influencing and being influenced by the others. Some of the features do overlap. For example, part of the function as the fifth estate involves the bloggers providing information to their readers. This information could be about a corruption allegation towards a particular politician. The providing of information is clearly a "check and balance" function conventionally ascribed to the media. At the same time, using the blogs as a platform for speech, in this case the information on the corrupt politician could also be viewed as form of self-expression, which is another category in this analysis. Also, blogs could be used for political communication where people talk about political events, speeches, or street rallies. The same blog discussion could also be considered as networking agents that mobilize people to participate in the street rallies, which took place in the country during 2007.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

8.1. Notes from the field: A Glimpse into the Mindset of the Entrenched

The meeting with an assistant secretary in the Information Analysis & Management Division

(IAMD) in the Ministry of Information revealed a striking example of the type of mindset, which

resulted in the historic losses of the *Barisan Nasional*. It also reminds us of the difficulties of

changing the heart and the mind of the very entrenched even in the face of a great sea of change.

I visited the IAMD in the hope of finding usable data in July 2008. This particular department

apparently dealt with the development of blogging in the country and was recommended by

another contact in the department called the South-south Information Gateway (SSIG). Even

though the chances of obtaining substantial information from the IAMD were slim from the

beginning, the possibility of obtaining some information from a recommended department was a

possibility worth exploring nonetheless. The first step was to call the department and the contact

person by the name of Mohd. Fadil Sharif to set up a possible appointment date. Mr. Fadil was

one of the assistant secretaries—a mid-management position—at IAMD. What was supposed to

be a simple phone call turned into a lengthy exercise of figuring out what kind of information was

actually available at the IAMD and maneuvering around bureaucratic red tape. After establishing

who I was, the purpose of the phone call and of the research with Mr. Fadil, I attempted to

determine the type of information that is actually being collected and available at IAMD. This

basic inquiry was met with an enormous amount of resistance. Mr.Fadil repeatedly pointed out

that permission must be obtained from the higher-ups before I could be told of the nature of the

information—classic bureaucratic red-tape. Nevertheless, I relented to Mr.Fadil's logic and called the "higher-up", in this case the Under Secretary of IAMD, Mr. Hj. Ibrahim Abd. Rahman for approval. However, I was told by Mr. Hj Ibrahim's personal assistant that I must go through the *proper channels* before talking to the Under Secretary, that is, first to go through Mr. Fadil, the Assistant Secretary. It was a double *Catch-22* situation—I needed the permission from the higher-up to talk to mid-management whom I need to talk to first before I could actually talk to the higher-up for information that I have not been allowed to know if it existed or not.

After some verbal wrangling I managed to obtain another contact from Mr. Hj Ibrahim's personal assistant (who in all fairness was only following orders). This new contact was Mr. Lim Kim Wah who was also an Assistant Secretary in IAMD (I learned later that there are seven Assistant Secretaries in IAMD). Mr. Lim sounded enthusiastic over the phone. He asked me to meet him at his office the same day. There was a little joy in the fact that I could finally obtain some of the information that appeared to be so tightly guarded by others in the department. Unfortunately the joy was short-lived.

The 30-minute long conversation with Assistant Secretary Lim revealed a mindset incapable of accepting the changing political landscape or seeing the potential of communicative technology in the spreading of information. Mr. Lim's main responsibility was to monitor the Chinese language newspapers for news of blogging and write a summary report each month. At this point I realized that the "tightly guarded" information was no more than news clippings from readily purchasable newspapers. Mr. Lim was also convinced that blogging is only a fad in the country and did not play a part in the recent election result. The result of the election was caused by the worsening economy not because of blogs in his opinion. While Mr.Lim was correct in identifying the economy as one of the causes of the dissatisfaction of the people, he missed the important point which was how the information about the economy was disseminated—especially

sensitive information such as race-based economy policy which are not discussed in the newspapers. Overall, Mr. Lim who has worked all his adult life in the Barisan Nasional entrenched in the system appeared to be in denial about the changing nature of democracy in the country.

8.2.   A Million Conversations on the Blog

Several of the bloggers interviewed for this research reported five million or more[130] hits or visitors to their sites including Jeff Ooi, Rocky Bru and Mahathir Mohamad with many more reporting a million or more hits. Five million hits is a lot of visitors, not just for a blogger in Malaysia but for any blogger in any country. This accomplishment is even more interesting, given the fact that in Malaysia there are only about 15 million Internet subscribers[131] with ten percent of that figure broadband users ("Broadband subscriptions", 2008). Loosely translated, roughly half the country's Internet users may have visited these blogs which claim five million or more visitors. There is also a sense of pride in reaching the millionth-mark and to be inducted in to the so-called "millionaire-club". When a particular blog reaches its first million views, the blogging community would often leave congratulatory remarks in the comment section. It is a threshold many bloggers dream of crossing one day.

But what exactly does it means to have a million or five million hits or visitors to your blog site? Technically, each visit or *hit* is when someone connects to your blog's URL. Most blogs have a site-meter which enables the blogger to know how many hits they have received. This could happen in a variety of ways. First, someone could link to your blog site directly, that is, by typing the entire URL or by a referral from a search engine, an aggregator site, or other websites including other blogs that have a link to your page. Most site-counters or site-meters are

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[130] As of August 2008.
[131] According to Internet World Stats (http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/my.htm)

able to break down the visitor numbers further by location, date and time, duration spent on the site, etc. This information may be useful to bloggers who wish to know more about the reading habits of their readers and maybe even to make certain adjustments to attract more readers. However we must note that the numbers are likely to include repeat visitors as most site meters will consider a visitor as a "fresh count" if any of the following preceded the visit even by the same person; using a different Internet browser, the Internet cache had been cleaned, certain amount of time has elapsed since last visit, for example, 24 hours, accessing the Internet from different locations or IP address such as home and office, etc.

But leaving aside the technological limitation of site-meters and the technicality of a *hit*, what does it mean to have a million visits to a blog? One way to make sense of these visits is to conceptualize them as *a million attempts to begin a conversation*. In the case of political blogs, ***perhaps a million attempts to start a political conversation***? Scholars such as Elihu Katz, Peter Dahlgren, and Kim Wyatt argue that at the core of deliberative democracy is a political conversation that includes "all kinds of political talk, discussion, or argument as long as they are voluntarily carried out by free citizens without any specific purpose or predetermined agenda." When people talk to each other, they "shape their opinions and thus generate the collective will" and "that then has some sort of impact on policy."(Dahlgren, 2002, p. 6) Elihu Katz notes that the agora, the town meeting and even the cafes are metaphors of direct democracy and they are of little use when applied to modern, complex, large-scale societies. Perhaps the blogs and other user-generated and social-networking technologies are providing the early viable models of their idealized 'virtual town halls'. Blogging also appears to fit into Dahlgren's 4-stage model of deliberation. First, there was the exposure to the blogs, and that is followed by leaving comments and feedbacks, after the back and forth between the commentators certain opinions are likely to

emerge, and finally some will take things a bit further by organizing events and participating in them.

Blogs and their commenting function allow for free discussion with some minor exceptions. In the first instance, a blog allows the blogger to formulate and articulate his ideas and opinions. In the second instance, the comment or feedback section of a blog allows for others to participate in the formulation and articulation or re-formulation and re-articulation of these ideas and opinions. This is possible insofar the readers are able to freely comment on the blog. When we look at these comments, some are not well formulated, grammatically, logically or even commonsensical. While opinions, both from what the bloggers write and from what the readers comment may not start out as well thought-out or even coherent, they are nonetheless a conversation. More importantly, ideas and opinions from both the bloggers and the readers develop and mature over time. As blogger Malik Imtiaz Sarwar noted in the interview concerning the steady improvement of the quality of discussion and political conversation of the blogosphere:

> *...for me it was interesting that the blog has become a way for people to learn how to talk about politics and social issues, without beating each other up, without shouting, without getting abusive and you've seen that happened, you've seen the quality of the commentors and their comments in various blogs improved over the period of time...which is great...   .*   (Interview with Malik Imtiaz Sarwar)

Similarly, Nuraina Samad commented on the diverse background of the various bloggers she has met including the bloggers who gather during one of their regular gatherings called "*Mee Rebus Tuesday*":

> *….you know what, these bloggers are a mixed crowd…bloggers who on this side or the fence or that side of the fence, they are all there. We talked…we just talked. We put aside our differences and just talked and have nice mee rebus…*
>   (Interview with Nuraina Samad)

Another of the characteristics of blogs which facilitates this flowering of conversation is the ***simplicity of the technology***. Also known as push-button publishing, blogs offers an easy and nearly free way to express yourself. Many of the bloggers interviewed confessed that they are not technologically savvy people and many refer to themselves as being lazy, as in too lazy to learn how to write HTML programming for a proper website. Many of them confessed that they only use the most basic function offered by the blog hosting service such as *Blogspot.com* or *Wordpress.co*m. Some even have friends, more technologically savvy than themselves to modify their blog space for them such as adding new widgets or even changing the banner to help make the blog more attractive. Blogger, Sim Tze Tzin who was elected to the State Assembly during the recent election is an example:

> *…I have to be frank I'm not a very sophisticated blogger I just use simple tools, you know because I didn't have time to explore what other add-ons , so it is just a very simple blog. Sometimes my friend helps me to maintain that to add new features and things like that…*   (Interview with Sim Tze Tzin)

Yet despite only using the very basic of what the technology offers, these blogs are drawing literally millions of people to the site. Content is king in the blogosphere. The 83-year old former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad who is arguably the top blogger in the country, admits that he would first draft out his blog post in "long hand" on paper and has his staff put it up on his blog. He also added that he is "not very knowledgeable about how to design, so has somebody else to design" the blog. Therefore we get a sense that blogging in Malaysia is not a phenomenon dominated by the conventional notion of *early adopters* who are always on the lookout for the latest technology and the next big thing. Bloggers use blogs because they want to say something and want a platform to say it. At the same time it has to enable readers to find them easily and even allow for comments.

Yet, another point to consider with "*blog-versations*"[132] is that blogging is actually an

asynchronous communication, that is, the conversation does not happen in real-time or face-to-

face as with direct human talk, in chat rooms or in virtual reality games such as *Second Life*. This

asynchronous nature of communication via blogging does not take the deliberative power away. It

offers a different kind of deliberation. While real-time conversation allows for spontaneous

generation of ideas, blogging due to its archival capabilities allows for another type of

conversation. Jill Rettberg calls this slow conversation (Rettberg, 2008, p. 65). Slow conversation

or asynchronous conversation allows for thoughts to sink in and be "reformatted" which is

different from real-time conversation which requires the participant to be always present and

always have an immediate response. Yet, conversations on a blog are not so slow as to create

unnecessary inertia. Typically, a robust conversation on a blog post takes between a few days to a

few weeks before a new topic supersedes the previous topic. *Blogversations* are half way between

reading a book and having a face-to-face conversation.

8.3.   Blogs and the Political Tsunami: Election 2008

The potential of blogs in tipping the electoral support for the Opposition was played down prior

to the election. *Barisan Nasional* politicians would either dismiss the blogs and the Internet as

having no influence on the election or would claim that the influence if any, would be restricted

to a small group of urban dwellers. Khairy Jamaluddin, the son-in-law of the Prime Minister

claims that he is often victimized in the blogosphere and that if there is a top list of victims, he

would almost surely be on it:

> *...I'm not a participant or blogger per se, but if you have the "Top of the Pop," I'm*
> *probably No.1 almost every month or every week as far as the victims of blog are*

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[132]Blogversation: the form of conversations formed on blogs, between bloggers and their readers.

concerned. But I take it as fair game as this is an entirely new medium. The veracity or the credibility of information online and blogs is sometimes a suspect, so you have to take it with a pinch of salt…("Bloggers, politics and the elections", 2007b)

Yet, despite having been familiar with the power of the technology, the rising star of UMNO politics remains unconvinced of the influence of the blogs in the upcoming election:

…the Internet is having an impact but maybe not so for the coming election, whenever that is going to be, but it is certain going to be something to sway voters in the next three, four general elections perhaps…("Bloggers, politics and the elections", 2007b)

The Oxford-educated politician who once interned at *The Economist* predicted that the Internet will likely have an effect in 3-4 general elections away. In other words, 15 to 20 years down the road. The deputy Youth Chief reasoned that UMNO's power base is in the rural areas where the majority of the voters live and where there is "relatively low Internet penetration rate". And even though, he acknowledged the possibility of *"osmosis where the information seeps in from the online medium into traditional medium either through ceramah*[133]*, or through opposition newspapers or even through mainstream medium"* ("Bloggers, politics and the elections", 2007a) he believed that the Internet is likely to have only a limited effect in the election.

When asked if they thought "blogs played influence in the Election's result", the bloggers invariably answered yes. Former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad was certain that the blogs played a part in the latest election:

…Oh yes, I think it played a part. People do not trust the newspaper anymore. Actually there was a survey done by one university and they found that people were not reading the main stream papers they were not...they do not like to see the report on government TV and they don't believe what they hear or see or said in the government TV and the paper and they tend to look for some other source of information and when blog became popular they started to source information sourcing information and this influenced their thinking during the election and many of them decided not vote for the government…
(Interview with Mahathir Mohamad)

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[133] *Ceramah* is the Malay word for public lectures usually by a Muslim cleric, although it has become a political tool, used by both sides of the political divide from many years.

Nuraina Samad, who had been a journalist for 27 years with the NSTP Group, knows that the

blogs helped because of what she experienced in her daily life:

> *…I can say yes, but some people might think it did not. I am very sure we did because I can feel it…if you look at the papers, there are times when they touched on issues raised in the blogs, they were never raised by anyone or mainstream media or mainstream media organization. I happened to be sitting in a kenduri[134], and the makcik-makcik[135] were discussing things about Pak Lah[136] sleeping. You don't see Pak Lah sleeping in the newspapers or the TV, so how would they know about Pak Lah sleeping?...*
>
> <div align="right">(Interview with Nuraina Samad)</div>

Nuraina gave the examples of the issues raised by Jeff Ooi, Ahirudin Attan, and Raja Petra

Kamaruddin in their respective blogs that were not talked about in the mainstream media which

became issues raised during the campaign trail. Blogger Tony Pua, who was elected as a Member

of Parliament was one of the few who could be labeled as bloggers-turned-politicians, readily

admits that blogs hold more influence that he anticipated:

> *…Before the election, I would say that blogging has an influence. But I would put two things in to it. One it is pretty limited to urban area, so…there would be an impact but in mine constituency…but even in my constituency which is one of the most urban in the country…I would have to limit the impact to may be 15-20 percent…important enough to keep doing it but not the overwhelmingly important thing because the bulk of it is still the mainstream medium. Post election, I think the impact wasn't felt just in the urban centers but also in pretty much in a lot of the other parts of the country…*
>
> <div align="right">(Interview with Tony Pua)</div>

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[134] Kenduri (a traditional Malay party)
[135] Makcik (middle-aged women)
[136] Pak Lah is the nickname for Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi

Malik Imitiaz agrees with the assessment that blogs played a part in the election and gave several reasons why he thought so:

> …*Definitely, definitely, first in getting out the alternative perspective in the public domain, in getting out the message that "it is okay to think out of the box", in giving people a sense of their right to participate in critical analysis and to have a view point. And also helping them shape their own understanding, not to impose a viewpoint…*
>
> (Interview with Malik Imitiaz)

To the people who are directly involved in the use of blogs and other new media in the latest election, it is clear that blogs had a real influence on the election result. To the extent that mainstream media continues to only report on pro-Government news, they are undermining their own credibility and indirectly increasing the power of the alternative media.

8.4. Did Blogging Bring About a Better Deliberation?

At its most fundamental level, "deliberative democracy affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives. Both are expected to justify the laws they would impose on one another." (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 3) One aspect of socio-political blogging -- including those of the parliamentarian, Tony Pua, journalist, Ahirudin Attan and *Barisan Nasional*-critic, Raja Petra Kamarudin -- is the justification of a position or a decision. In other words, through their respective blogs, Tony Pua justifies the action of his political party, Ahirudin Attan justifies his decision to run certain stories, and Raja Petra justifies his position to be vehemently anti-*Barisan Nasional*. This is similar to any traditional form of argument. The difference lies in the immediacy and the potential reach of the blogging technology.

A second characteristic of deliberative democracy is that "the reasons given in this process should be accessible to all the citizens to whom they are addressed."(Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 6) This is another strength of blogging because as a medium that is

simultaneous a personal medium and a mass medium, blogging has the ability to transmit

information to the multitude, contingent almost only on overcoming the issue of accessibility,

specifically hardware and stable Internet connection. This is especially potent when we consider

that most blogs are available at almost no-cost to both the blogger and the readers[137]. The so-

called "Super A-list bloggers" such as Mahathir Mohamad and Ahirudin Attan who have readers

numbering in the tens of thousands every week are examples of the reach of blog. As comparison,

some of the smaller but well-established local newspapers including *The Malay Mail* and some of

the regional newspapers barely scratch the 20,000-mark in a normal weekday circulation (see

Table 4).

The third characteristic of deliberative democracy calls for "producing a decision that is

binding for some period of time." (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 6) Whether socio-political

blogs in this study are capable of achieving this important characteristic remains to be seen.

Perhaps the issue also has to do with the opaqueness of this characteristic. What exactly is *a*

binding decision and how long should *some period of time* be? The socio-political blogosphere in

Malaysia had indeed produced some decisions that were followed by many bloggers over some

period of time. For example, when several prominent bloggers, namely Marina Mahathir and

Ahirudin Attan, announced that they had grown weary of the nasty political bickering in the

country, they pledged not to blog for one day as form of protest. Many bloggers followed their

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[137] Mahathir Mohamad had to change the hosting service of his blog three times during the period of 1 May 2008-Dec 2008. This was partly due to the unusually high volume of traffic to his blog which prompted the host Blogspot.com, a subsidiary of Google, to shut it down thinking it was an automated spamming site. His blog, Chedet.com, was eventually hosted on his own private paying server to avoid reoccurrence of the incident. Raja Petra's site, MalaysiaToday.net has always been hosted on a paying server because it was designed to include much more (bandwidth consuming) features that are not supported by most free blog-host

lead and for one day the local blogosphere were a little quieter. Yet such decisions are random and do not seem to spark other reactions.

Finally, Gutmann and Thompson talk about the dynamic nature of deliberative democracy and that it is an ongoing and continuing dialogue. This is another characteristic in which blogging proves to be a remarkably suitable medium for promotion of deliberative democracy. Blogging is an asynchronous conversation that happens online. Being asynchronous allows for the fomenting of ideas that differs from face-to-face conversation and from passive reading. As argued earlier, the entire process of engaging in a *blogversation* is akin to half way between reading a book and having a face-to-face conversation. Readers have the option to think about the ideas, positions, and arguments put forward by the bloggers and respond immediately or later or not to respond at all. Arguments and counter-arguments build upon each other until a new topic takes over the momentum of the blog. A decision may or may not be reached at the point. But due to the archival properties of blogs, old topics could be revisited weeks, months, or even years later—making the continuation of the dialogue possible.

8.5.   Further Points to Consider

Despite the potential of blogs as a democratizing tool as highlighted in previous sections, namely blogs as the *fifth estate*, *blogs as networks*, and *blogs as platforms for expression* and despite the fact that Malaysia offers strong proof of what the technology could offer to the development of democracy, there are constraints to that potential. First, we need to keep in mind the "colonisation of the Internet and the blogosphere by the market." (Cammaerts, 2008, p. 18) As Cammaerts points out, "big media corporations, following a strategy of concentration and consolidation in the media industry, buy popular sites that host blogs". One of the more popular blog hosts, *Blogger.com*, is owned by the Internet giant, Google, which acquired the parent

company, *Pyra Lab* on February 14, 2003 (Kahney, 2003). While Google has always proclaimed "Don't be evil" to be their company motto, it would be impossible to be certain if a catch-phrase of a fledgling Internet-start up will continue to be meaningful now that it has become the eagle of the Internet.

In the earlier days of blogging—at the turn of the millennia—the question of whether a *blogger could be considered a journalist* was a hot topic. Big media, both print and broadcasting, were unable to stomach the idea that a blogger could honestly (and profitably) be called a journalist. There were fears of a total breakdown of the traditional journalism model—of newsrooms, of editors, of advertising. That fear is gone now, the turning point came most decisively when established media co-opted the new medium and joined the party, just as they did when the Internet started siphoning readership away from the more familiar medium. The Malaysian English daily, *The Star*, has incorporated blogs into their online site featuring several blogs. For example, there is "*Citizen Blog*" for local happenings, "*Parent Blog*" for parenting, "*Celeb Watch*" for celebrity news and several others. Nevertheless, we have to be aware that bloggers doing journalistic reporting are not the same as journalists who blog. The issue of content and "quality" aside, at the very least bloggers still lack the considerable financial and technical resources available to the traditional journalist.

There is also the concern of where the technology is heading. Ahirudin Attan, who has been at the forefront of the development of blogging in Malaysia, expressed his concerns:

> *...blogging in the current form...I think the potential is kind of limited, because of what is happening to the blogosphere as well right now we are looking at blogs being hijacked by politics as well as the possibility of blogs being eaten up by corporations and by business...*   (Interview with Ahirudin Attan)

Ahirudin is concerned about the proliferation of blogs that while being a positive trend is worrying at the same time because it may be contributing to "too much noise."

Specifically, being a "blogger" will no longer carry that image (or connotation, or stigma)

of being critical of the government and by extrapolation, present the alternative "truth."

With so many bloggers around, some from the BN, a blogger is just a blogger. He adds:

> *...if you look at what is happening now, there are a lot of blogs on both sides, now there are ...we have a very strong Opposition, Pakatan Rakyat. And we have a weakened government, The Barisan Nasional, and blog is now one of the main arenas for these politicians to launch offensive against one another so we have bloggers turn political activist or just shell for politicians. So when that happens, there are simply too many things happening and the result is that you see chaos in the blogosphere and readers will be confused. The reader will not know what to believe. Accusations thrown at one another, this politician throw it at that politician and using blogs and half-truths...*
>
> (Interview with Ahirudin Attan)

Nuraina Samad is more optimistic about the future of the Malaysian blogosphere:

> *…there is no turning back it is just going forward, I think they will be more bloggers, they will blog more, they will be braver, they will be testing the waters, they will be pushing the perimeters, I feel that they will do that…*
>
> (Interview with Nuraina Samad)

But again Ahirudin tempers the optimistic:

> *…I think it will settle down, but I don't see political blogging… I don't think will be as significant or influential as we were during the last general election. I think because the government has wisened up to it, there will be a lot of counter-blogging from the other side. If the old bloggers do not mend their ways, in the sense that they are not more balance, they may even loose out in terms of credibility to the new bloggers from Barisan Nasional, that is my take on it because at the end of the day it is your credibility, you can do it for a couple of years, and one day people decide that you are not being fair and you are not being truthful, people can just abandon you and say that I'm not going to read you anymore…*
>
> (Interview with Ahirudin Attan)

Is the 'ultimate free media'—blog—in danger of being co-opted by big powers and becoming a

tool of manipulation rather than of deliberation? Writer Nicholas Carr for Britainica.com

surmises that the blogosphere as we know it is dying. "Almost all of the popular blogs today are commercial ventures with teams of writers, aggressive ad-sales operations, bloated sites, and strategies of self-linking." (Carr, 2008) Some are good, some are boring, but to argue that they're part of a "blogosphere" that is distinguishable from the "mainstream media" seems more and more like an act of nostalgia, if not self-delusion. Technology certainly has a long history of being co-opted by government and big corporations. Perhaps we are seeing the beginning of this co-optation by the government. Will we see a scenario in the future where the official voice saturates and takes over the Malaysian blogosphere? I do not think so or at least hope it will not be the case. First of all, going back to the basic reason of what makes a blog popular is the content. As long as the content is relevant to the readers, a blog will survive and thrive. Secondly, the essence of blogging is how it conveys a sense of communication on a personal level—a personal touch—even though a blog posted could be read instantaneously by hundreds of thousands of readers. As David Perlmutter observes, "in an age when public distrust of institutional sources of information is the norm, blogging is a new opportunity for reinvigorating politics and political communication" (2008, p. 19). If, for example, a politician sets up a blog but it is written mostly by ghost-writers or someone else on the payroll, the whole point of blogging would be somewhat extinguished by it and would be unlikely to command a strong readership in the long run. Therefore, despite the fact that we are seeing a mushrooming of politicians starting a blog, it may not necessarily be any more than a case of changing the cover to an old book—same political double-speak but spoken via a new medium.

Iris Marion Young (2000) writes in her book, *Inclusion and Democracy*, about some of the limitations of deliberative democracy. First, there is the problem of *privileging argument*, by which Young means the formal and "orderly chain of reasoning from premises to conclusion" (Young, 2000, p. 37). Young cautions that "given the heterogeneity of human life and the

complexity of social structures and interaction" (2000. P.37), privileging certain arguments could result in that some form of arguments may be excluded from deliberation. Furthermore, there is the problem with "articulateness" of which deliberative democrats need to be aware, according to Young. Unlike the concept of reasonableness, which is simply "being open to listening to others and having them influence one's view," (2000, p.38) the concept of "articulateness" is culture-specific. The way one talks and makes an argument is different in different cultural settings. What is normative in one setting is not necessarily so in another setting. This inherently privileges some group over another group. Thirdly, Young argues that some norms of deliberation privilege speech, which is dispassionate and disembodied. This means a fiery speech with tears and shouts may be viewed as the lesser when compared to a calm collected oratory.

How do Young's cautions factor into deliberation in the blogosphere that is predominantly with the "written words"? To extrapolate on Young's concern: is there a danger that only the "long form" and "grammatically superior" blog posts be privileged in the market place of ideas? Lawyer and human rights activist, Malik Imtiaz Sarwar, commented that he sees an increase of quality in the comments posted by his readers over time. No doubt he must have meant the decrease of vulgarities and expletives. But what about blogs that favor the "less orthodox" uses of language. The kind that is likely to cause a frown on a grammar teacher's forehead yet is nevertheless rich in meanings in its own ways and more importantly a more organic use of the blog. Placing too high a premium on propriety of language and style may be inadvertently result in running counter to the natural evolution of user-generated Web 2.0.

8.6.   March 8th: A Year Later

In the 1990s, then Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad expounded the concept of *paradigm shifts*. The former Prime Minister peppered his speeches[138] with variations of the concept from Thomas Kuhn's classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn, 1962). The former premier was not talking about shifting the political boundary. He was in all likelihood more interested in shifting the country's manufacturing-based economy to an information-based economy. However a potentially paradigm shifting moment did arrive in the political landscape of Malaysia with the 2008 General Election. The historic election may potentially leave a lasting impact on a populace that has been led to believe than political change is not possible. In some ways, the mental boundary has been crossed.

After the 12th general election on 8 March 2008, the set of assumptions and practices that constitute the Malaysian way of viewing political reality in the country changed. First of all, the assumption that the ruling party, *Barisan Nasional*, will always retain its two-third supermajority in the parliament has been overturned. The notion that opposition parties are too fragmented to pose a real threat and that ethnic-divisions will favor the BN coalition, both of which the *Barisan Nasional* had relied on to bring them continuous victories have been undermined. Logistically, even the everyday running of the country will be different—with the loss of the supermajority status and a much louder Opposition voice in the parliament.

There are examples of reversal of the ruling government's attitude towards blogs. The secretary general of the UMNO party's youth wing, Abdul Rahman Dahlan, was reported to have said that "all those vying for national youth posts must have blogs to introduce themselves and their programs ahead of party elections… if not, they are not qualified to be leaders" ("Malaysia's

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[138] See for example "*Perspectives from the Past, Paradigms for the Future*" (March 6, 2002). Retrieved (April 14, 2008) from http://www.neac.gov.my/index.php?ch=27&pg=46&ac=1006

ruling party", 2008). This is indeed a surprising turnaround for the UMNO group that only a few months earlier was vilifying the socio-political bloggers. One of these new blogs belongs to Chief Minister of state of Melaka, Mohd Ali Rustam (http://mohdalirustam.blogspot.com). According to the profile available on the blog, the veteran politician started the blog in April 2008—a month after the General Election.[139] This is a complete reversal of the government's attitude compared to the years from 2006 to early 2008, where high-profile politicians had tried to discredit the blogosphere. The UMNO Youth wing's deputy chief and son-in-law of the current Prime Minister, Khairy Jamaluddin, once "compared bloggers to monkeys living by the law of the jungle" ("Malaysia's ruling party", 2008) and claimed that he is probably the most victimized person in the blogosphere ("Bloggers, politics and the elections", 2007c) . Khairy Jamaluddin also predicted in the same interview that the power of the Internet would likely have an "effect three to four elections in the future" , which is to say that the effect could only be felt 15 to 20 years later but not in the immediate future. That prediction has been proven to be rather inaccurate.

On the side of the mainstream media, there are examples showing how they are more willing to push the envelope a little bit more after the 2008 Election. Some of the newspapers that had given disparaging news coverage of the Opposition and of dissenting views have altered their modus operandi. This study highlighted the example of at least one major newspaper featuring prominent socio-political bloggers on the front page. While previously, opposition party members would receive very little column space in the local mainstream newspaper, following the election, at least one local daily, *The Star*, started featuring people critical of the BN in their news report including socio-political bloggers. It also started a series called "*My Representative*" featuring

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[139] Barely a month as a blogger, the veteran politician made headlines for his criticism of a major pig-farm project in another state which fell into the hands of the Opposition. Hundreds of comments including criticism of his writings were subsequent removed and the comment function disabled. See also "*M'cca CM flamed over blog-post on pig farm*" available from http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/81473

many of the young opposition party members who were elected into the Parliament in the latest

election. Interestingly, the first two questions asked of the elected Representatives are "how much

time to do you spend on the computer" and "if they blog" (Looi, 2008)—hinting a change of

perception about the importance of the Internet. Even the state-run channel, RTM1, has included

a new 30 minute talk-show called *Blog*, which invites bloggers, from both sides of the political

aisle—something almost unheard of in the state-run broadcaster. In the private broadcasting

sector, one producer from the subscription-based channel, *Astro*, revealed that it was only after

the election that they dared to produce programs which tried to push the boundary of what is

considered acceptable programming. One of *Astro*'s top talk shows is also one of the most

politically cynical shows currently available on television. Keeping in mind that not so long ago,

almost all socio-political bloggers were viewed in contempt by the ruling government and

featuring them or any Opposition party members in the news would be a career suicide for any

news editor, these are significant changes.

However, at the same time we are seeing snippets of change in attitude towards blogging,

we are witnessing examples of blatant acts of recalcitrance. On 27 August 2008, the Malaysian

Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) imposed a ban on a controversial

website, *MalaysiaToday.net*, by ordering all 21 ISPs in the country to block access to the site on

account "that some of the comments on the website were insensitive, bordering on

incitement."(Hamdan & Peng, 2008) The decision challenged one of the ten guarantees stated in

the *MSC Bill of Guarantees,* which states very simply "ensure no Internet censorship". MCMC's

action caused an uproar in the Parliament in which the Opposition have a louder voice. Even

some *Barisan Nasional* politicians were uneasy with the ban. Two weeks later, on September 11,

the Cabinet, in response to the uproar ordered the MCMC to reverse its ban on the

MalaysiaToday.net as well as all 127 websites that had been blocked previously under charges of

pornography, money scams, and illegal gambling. It appears that in the weakened party, internal

communication within the ruling party has suffered as well. This is made apparent by the explicit

dissent shown by ranking ministers amongst the component parties who spoke out against the

block, not the least among them the son-in-law of Prime Minister and Deputy UMNO Youth

Wing's Chief, Khairy Jamaluddin and former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. However, the

Energy, Water, & Communication (EWC) Minister Shaziman Abu Mansor also claimed that the

lifting of the block was made "because there were other harsher laws in the country which the

authorities could use to take action against the owners of blogs and websites, instead of blocking

them" (Sim & Samy, 2008).

The statement by the EWC Minister, foreshadowed the arrest of *MalaysiaToday*'s

webmaster and blogger Raja Petra Kamaruddin under the archaic Internal Security Act (ISA) the

day after the website was unblocked by the authorities ("RPK arrested", 2008). The controversial

blogger was arrested along with two other people, Opposition party member and Member of

Parliament, Teresa Kok and a local Chinese language newspaper reporter, Tan Hoon Cheng under

the same charge. The reporter and opposition party member have since been released. The

reporter, Tan, was released merely 16 hours after her arrest. Her arrest generated enormous

backlash from both sides of the political aisle because she was perceived as simply doing her job

as a journalist. Tan reported the seditious remark made by a ruling party member, Ahmad Ismail,

in a public speech over which he had refused to apologize.[140]

Another indication that freedom of expression and the road the democracy in the country

will continue to be long and winding could be discerned from the statement made by the Deputy

Inspector-General of Police (IGP) Ismail Omar who in 2009 said that the much dreaded Internal

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[140] Ahmad Ismail was subsequently suspended from all party position and privileges for three years
although never charged for the remarks he had made.

Security Act (ISA) which has been used to arrest contentious bloggers is still "an effective

preventive instrument" and "is needed to ensure that peace and stability prevailed in the country".

The Deputy IGP argues that if the ISA is abolished it would in fact be "a step behind when there

are so many other countries that are, in fact, reinforcing their preventive detention laws to curb

terrorism."(Mohamad, 2009) The ISA is one of the major legislations -- along with the Printing

Presses and Publication Act, the Sedition Act, and Official Secrets Act -- that seriously hinder

freedom of expression and democracy in the country. Few have dared to challenge these acts

from within the establishment. One of the few who did try, including former Law Minister Zaid

Ibrahim, was sacked from his own party, UMNO, for breaking ranks. Zaid Ibrahim was hand-

picked by the Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi to reform the judiciary system after the defeat in

the 12th General Election. In Zaid's view, one of the biggest stumbling blocks to the goal is the

ISA. He wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister asking for a repeal of the Act following a

series of high-profile arrests with which he publicly disagreed (Koshy, 2008b). He resigned from

the post of Law Minister and soon after that he was sacked from UMNO for attending a function

organized by the Opposition.

On 14 March 2009, almost exactly a year after the historic 2008 Election, the authorities

appeared to be clamping down on the blogosphere again. Six people were charged by the police

for posting insulting comments of the Perak Sultan Azlan Shah on blogs (Charles, 2009). They

were charged under section 233 of the Multimedia and Communications Act 1998 for "unwise

use of network or network services for making comments, demands, suggestions or

communication which are vulgar, false, threatening or disturbing" which carries a maximum fine

of RM50,000 or a maximum jail term of one year, or both. This was the first time that individuals

were arrested under this particular section of the Act (Yatim, 2009).

For the mainstream media too, which have become more open to more critical reporting, old habits die hard, and it is far too easy and comfortable for them to fall back to being uncritical of the government and regurgitate the official mantra rather than challenge it. On 7 March 2009, a street protest took place in Kuala Lumpur calling for a repeal on the use of English in teaching science and mathematics and to reaffirm the status of the Malay language as the national language. 8000 people took part in the protest, water cannons and tear gas were fired on the crowd, and the police arrested eight people (Tan, 2009). On the next day, *New Straits Times*, the oldest English language newspaper in the country, placed in the report in page nine with the title "Cops stop illegal march to Istana Negara" (Bendahara, 2009). It was similar to the treatment of the *BERSIH* Rally more than a year ago, where the report was also buried in the newspaper. On the front page, the casual reader could only find traces of the news in a plainly written text box saying "thousands march in protest against teaching of science and math in English". Instead, what was prominently displayed on the front page of the paper was a large photo of the Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi with the bold caption "Decide Quickly". The *New Straits Times* decided to play down the news and at the same time play up the reassuring image of the Prime Minister as the person who is still in charge.

Is the government only bidding its time, playing the wait-and-see game with the new technology? Or is there a sincere sense to try to engage the bloggers and the wider Internet community? In 2008, after the election, the Prime Minister admitted that not engaging the Internet community was a grave mistake by the *Barisan Nasional*. Yet, we still see arrests of bloggers whose crime is to speak their mind on the blogosphere and we see more and more use of the Communication and Multimedia Act against bloggers. Clearly, the friction between the free nature of the blogosphere and the need to control that freedom by the Government will continue to play out for many more years. Perhaps, the paradigm has shifted albeit minutely in Malaysia—

with the public being more aware of new media[141] and what they could do, with more openness in

the mainstream mass media, with more critical voices in the political arena and a few more

enlightened politicians in the establishment camp—but it may be more accurate to say that the

paradigm is *shifting* rather than *shifted* and the process is far from over.

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[141] According to the MCMC *Household Use of Internet Survey 2008*, 63.5 percent of respondents knew
what are blogs and 9.5 percent have a blog.

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Chronology of Major Socio-Political Events in Malaysia (2006-2009)

| Date	Event
Aug 2, 2006	The Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi issued a warning that those who spread untruths and slander on the Internet will face the law
Aug 3, 2006	The Minister of Energy, Water, and Communication Lim Keng Yaik was quoted in saying that there is no censorship of the Internet as promised in the Bill of Guarantee with the Multimedia Super Corridor "but if any bloggers go against the law of the country, they can be charged, whether under criminal law, sedition or whatever law it is"
Jan 4, 2007	NTSP filed landmark defamation suit against bloggers Ahirudin Attan aka Rocky and Jeff Ooi
Jan 25, 2007	Blogger Ahirudin Attan applied to strike out a defamation suit against him filed by the New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Bhd (NSTP) and four other individuals of the company
Jan 30, 2007	Blogger Ooi Chuan Aun aka Jeff Ooi applied to strike out the defamation suit filed against him by New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Bhd (NSTP) and three individuals
March 7, 2007	Tourism Minister Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor called all bloggers liars who dislike national unity and have a penchant for rumour-mongering. And in a rare demonstration of gender sensitivity, he claimed that out of 10,000 unemployed bloggers, 8,000 are women.
March 20, 2007	Information Minister Datuk Seri Zainuddin Maidin asked newspapers not to quote from blog websites when writing news stories as the source of the information cannot be considered authoritative
April 7, 2007	National Alliance of Bloggers or All-Blogs was established to help protect individual bloggers in the country. Ahirudin Attan is the Pro-tem President.
May 19, 2007	Informal gathering of bloggers called Bloggers United Malaysia (BUM) had its inaugural gathering at Lake Club, Kuala Lumpur
June 11, 2007	Media Prima Bhd (MPB) acquired full control of Merit Idea Sdn Bhd (MISB), an investment holding company which holds 99.5 per cent in Metropolitan TV Sdn Bhd (MTV) – the license owner and operator of 8TV.
July 13, 2007	Blogger Nathaniel Tan was arrested by the police under the Official Secrets Act for comments posted on his blog
July 14, 2007	Bernama reported that Deputy Internal Security Minister Datuk Mohd Johari Baharom wants the Police to initiate investigations to trace writers spreading lies through websites. He said that he had instructed the Police's Commercial

	Crimes Investigation Department (CCID) to undertake the investigations and bring the culprits to book.
July 23, 2007	UMNO Information Chief, Muhamad Muhd Taib lodged a police report against Raja Petra Kamaruddin, blogger and webmaster of MalaysiaToday.net over posting which alledgedly condemn the King and Islam
July 25, 2007	Blogger and webmaster of MalaysiaToday.net, Raja Petra Kamaruddin was brought to the police for an eight hour long questioning
Aug 14, 2007	Musician Wee Meng Chee aka Namewee apologized for the parody of the national anthem, Negaraku, which he had posted on YouTube
Aug 16, 2007	The Cabinet officially refused to accept the apology by musician NameWee over the video clip of the parody of the national anthem
Aug 18, 2007	Umno information chief Tan Sri Muhammad Mohammad Taib described writers of political blogs, whom he says looked brave in criticising government leaders, as cowards and pondan (effeminate men)
Aug 24, 2007	The publication permit of Tamil daily Makkal Osai has been suspended for one month. The Internal Security Ministry made the decision to punish the newspaper for publishing a picture of Jesus Christ holding a cigarette in one hand and a can of beer in the other on its front page.
Sept 3, 2007	Kuala Lumpur City Hall official, Muhammmad Sidek Khalid reported that the new application of cyber café license has been frozen since 19 Nov, 2003
Sept 17, 2007	The appearance of a YouTube videoclip which exposed what appeared to be a telephone conversation between senior lawyer VK Lingam and another person, allegedly fixing the appointment of senior judges
Sept 26, 2007	The Malaysian Bar Council organized a "Walk of Justice" at the country's administrative capital, Putrajaya to protest the corruption within the judiciary system. The Walk participated by over 1000 people ended with the submission of two memorandum to the Prime Minister's department
Nov 6, 2007	Umno Youth deputy chief Khairy Jamaluddin urged the authorities to come down hard on a planned mass rally calling for electoral reforms to be held in Kuala Lumpur on Nov 10, 2007
Nov 10, 2007	BERSIH held the first mass street demonstration in Kuala Lumpur since the Reformasi movement in 1998/99. It was participated by about 40,000 people. 23 people were subsequently arrest. More than 200 people were detained. Police used water cannon and tear gas to disperse the crowd
Nov 25, 2007	Several thousand people to part in the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) Rally around Kuala Lumpur. Police used water cannon and tear gas to disperse the crowd
Dec 9, 2007	Police on Sunday broke up a Human Rights Day March in Kuala Lumpur, staged by lawyers and arrested eight people
Dec 13, 2007	Five leaders of HINDRAF were arrested by the police this afternoon under the Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows detention without trial
March 8, 2008	Malaysia held its 12th General Election. Barisan Nasional lost its long-held

	two-thirds majority in the Parliament and five states.
March 25, 2008	Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi admitted ignoring Internet was a mistake in the 12ᵗʰ General Election
March 30, 2008	The country's telecommunications companies, Celcom Communications Bhd, Maxis Communications Bhd and DiGi Telecommunications Bhd, reports a surge in SMS traffic during nomination day, Feb 24 and polling day, March 8
April 20, 2008	State television, RTM1 started a 30 minute segment called "Blog" which featured one-on-one interviews with bloggers.
April 22, 2008	Umno information chief Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib set up his own blog at *http://www.muhammadmuhdtaib.com.* He reportedly said "Unlike the press, the blog will be a two-way traffic. So my medium is better than yours," and "If you can't fight them, join them!"
May 1, 2008	Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad started his blog www.chedet.com
May 3, 2008	MCA supports the Home Minister's suggestion to waive the provision for newspapers to renew their printing permits annually as the first step towards greater press freedom
May 8, 2008	MalaysiaToday.net webmaster and blogger Raja Petra Kamaruddin was arrested by the police under the Sedition Act over the article he published titled "Let's Send the Altantuya Murderers to Hell"
June 1 2008	Benar, a civil society initiative established to address the state of journalism in the country, organized the Press Freedom March
July 6, 2008	8000 people took part in Protes Rally in Stadium Kelana Jaya led . The rally was led by several NGOs and Pakatan Rakyat leaders
July, 8, 2008	All cyber cafes will have to close by midnight daily and operate only from the ground floor of buildings once the guidelines to control them are enforced
June 10, 2008	Umno Youth officially entered blogosphere today as part of its survival strategy. It launched its blog Saka Bangsa at a press meeting with 50 journalists and bloggers.
July 20, 2008	Umno Youth's blog posted its last blog post on its Saka Bangsa blog
July 22, 2008	Lt Col Abdul Aziz Buyong and Lt Col Norhayati Hassan filed a defamation suit against blogger Raja Petra Raja Kamaruddin today over his statutory declaration implicating them in the murder of Mongolian Altantuya Shaariibuu
Aug 19, 2008	Packet One Networks (P1) announced that it has launched its WiMAX services in Malaysia. The network infrastructure is provided by Alcatel-Lucent and covers several location in the Klang Valley region
Aug 28, 2008	The Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) ordered the 19 Internet service providers (ISPs) in the country to block the MalaysiaToday website run by Raja Petra Kamaruddin
Sept 12, 2008	Energy, Water and Communications Minister Datuk Shaziman Abu Mansor said MCMC has formed a monitoring committee comprising the police,

	officials from the Attorney-General's Chambers and the Home Ministry to monitor websites and blogs
Sept 11, 2008	Three newspapers - *Sin Chew Daily*, *The Sun* and *Suara Keadilan* - have been issued show-cause letters by the Home Ministry for reports on the alleged racist remarks made by former Umno division chief Datuk Ahmad Ismail
Sept12, 2008	Raja Petra Kamaruddin was arrested under the Internal Security Act by the police under Section 73 (1) of the Act
Sept 12, 2008	Sin Chew Jit Poh newspaper reporter Tan Hoon Cheng was arrested at her home in Taman Permai in Bukit Mertajam, Pulau Pinang at 8.40pm
Sept 12, 2008	Opposition Party MP, Teresa Kok was arrested at 11.20pm over a religious matter concerning a mosque.
Sept 12, 2008	The Cabinet has ordered the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) to reinstate access to all blocked websites, including *Malaysia Today*, with immediate effect
Sept 17, 2008	Blogger Syed Azidi Syed Aziz aka Sheih Kickdefella, was arrested under the Sedition Act
Sept 20, 2008	Blogger Syed Azidi Syed Aziz aka Sheih Kickdefella was released by the police
Nov 7, 2008	The Shah Alam High Court ruled that the detention of blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin under the ISA was illegal and ordered his immediate release. Judge Syed Ahmad Helmy Syed Ahmad said that Raja Petra's detention was unconstitutional
Nov 10, 2008	Petaling Jaya Sessions Court rejected the prosecution's application to make amendments to Malaysia Today editor Raja Petra's sedition charge
Dec 15, 2008	High Court Judge Su Geok Yiam allowed the prosecution's application to amend the sedition charge against blogger Raja Petra Raja Kamaruddin
Dec 22, 2008	Former Hulu Langat Umno division head Datuk Ahamad Kuris Mohd Nor was given a warning after being found guilty of campaigning for a party post in his web blog which violated the Umno Code of Ethics
Dec 28, 2008	A woman whose photograph and identity had been used in a blog containing insults against Prophet Muhammad has denied owning the Internet domain
Jan 1, 2009	A Catholic newspaper has been ordered by the government to cease its Malay language edition until courts resolve a ban on the paper's use of the word "Allah"
Jan 6, 2009	Malaysia is considering establishing a "cyber court" to deal with the increasing number of crimes related to the Internet and blogging
Jan 23, 2009	Authorities today charged 21 people at the Sessions Court here with of illegal assembly and defying a police order to disperse during an anti-ISA candlelight vigil in 2008
Jan 25, 2009	Bota assemblyperson Nasarudin Hashim quited Umno to join PKR, resulting in *Pakatan Rakyat* now controlling 32 state seats in Perak

APPENDIX B

Number of Eligible and Actual Voters in the 12th Malaysian General Election on 8 March 2008
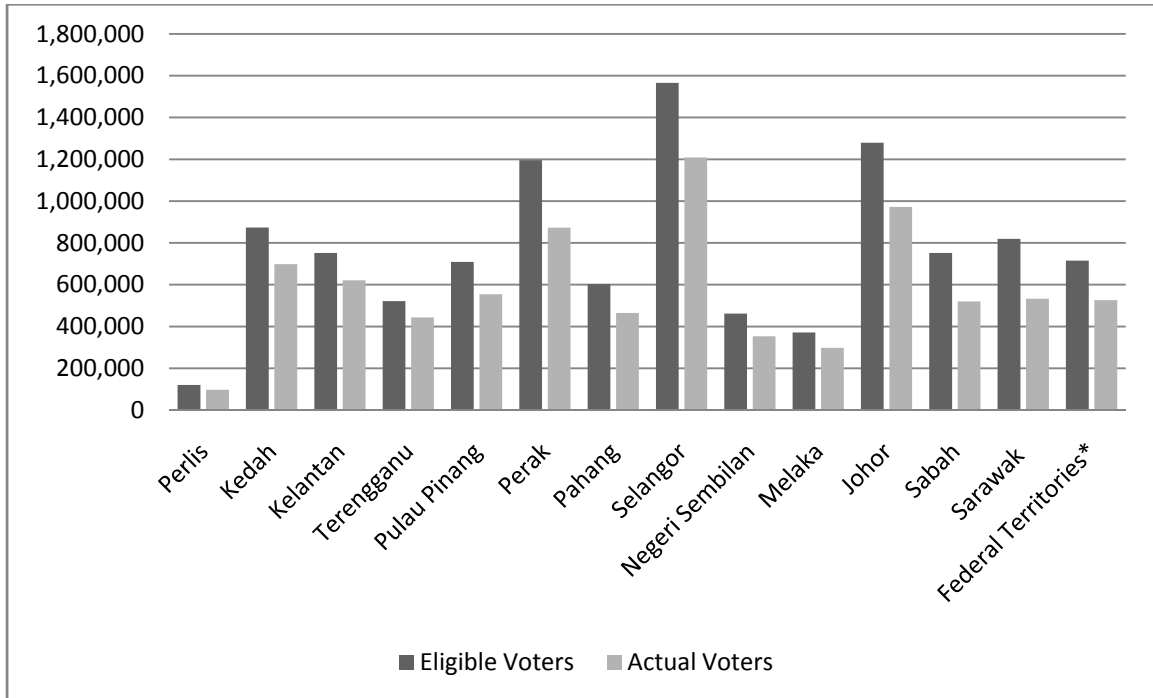
Source: Election Commission of Malaysia
*The Federal Territories include Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, and Labuan

APPENDIX C

Number of Eligible and Actual Voters According to States in the 12th Malaysian General Election on 8 March 2008

	State	Registered Voters	Actual Voters	Percentage of Votes
1	Perlis	120,081	97,532	81.22%
2	Kedah	873,674	698,118	79.91%
3	Kelantan	751,682	620,632	82.57%
4	Terengganu	521,597	443,205	84.97%
5	Pulau Pinang	709,323	554,677	78.20%
6	Perak	1,196,160	872,592	72.95%
7	Pahang	603,242	464,938	77.07%
8	Selangor	1,565,493	1,209,031	77.23%
9	Negeri Sembilan	462,015	353,021	76.41%
10	Melaka	371,594	297,450	80.05%
11	Johor	1,279,119	972,173	76.00%
12	Sabah	752,132	519,559	69.08%
13	Sarawak	819,274	533,155	65.08%
14	Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur	687,451	506,672	73.70%
15	F.T Putrajaya	6,608	5,416	81.96%
16	F.T Labuan	20,783	14,149	68.08%
	TOTAL	10,740,228	8,162,320	76.00%

Source: Election Commission of Malaysia

APPENDIX D

Magazines Published in Malaysia in 2008 According to Audit Bureau of Circulations

Genre	Malay Language	Chinese Language	English Language
Business		Shanghai	Smart Investor
			Tech Business Review
			Malaysia Tatler
			Asian Timber
			SMI Business Directory
			Personal Money
Children & Teenagers	Kawan		
	Kuntum		
	Remaja		
Food & Beverage	Saji		Hospitality Asia
	Rapi		
General Interest	Mastika		Health Today
	Keluarga		
Home Décor	Anjung Seri		
Lifestyle			KL Lifestyle
			The Peak
			Malaysia International Gourmet Festival
Special Interest			Infofish International
			Accountants Today
			Retail World
Sports & Motoring			Par Golf
TV & Entertainment	URTV	TV Times	Galaxie
	Mangga	Popclub Magazine	Vision Four Viewing Guide
	Hai	The One Weekly	Hot
Travel & Leisure			Visitor's Guide to Malaysia
Women's Fashion & Beauty	Wanita	ifeel	Cleo (Malaysia)
	Jelita	Apple Magazine	The Malaysian Women's Weekly
	MingguanWanita		
	Intrend		
Others	Gempak		Babycare Book (m)
	Utopia		
	Buku Ibu & Bayi		

APPENDIX E

Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about yourself, your upbringing, your education background, your career choices?
2. Why do you blog?
3. How effective do you think blogging is?
4. Do you think you are different from your parents' thinking /worldview/Malaysian view
5. Could you tell me a little bit about your blog? What is the main focus of your blog? What's the primary goal of you blog?
6. Do you blog about other topics?
7. Who is your intended audience (prompt: Political officials? Media? Academics? Average people?)
8. When did you start your blog? How did you get interesting in blogging?
9. Which came first, the political interest or the blog? Prior to starting the blog, did you try to get your word out in more traditional means, such as letter writing or op-ed writing?
10. Can you tell me a little bit more about political interest?
11. What problem do you see with society or Malaysian politics at this time? Do you have a particular political remedy?
12. How did you get interested in this topic? Were there any books or an event that influenced you?
13. What expertise or skills did you bring to the blog? What's your occupation? Any background in politics? Political Affiliation/Ideology?
14. How many hours do you spend blogging (including time responding to comments and other blog maintenance)?
15. How much money do you spend on the blog?
16. How often do you blog in a week? How many hours do you blog in a day?
17. What strategies do you use on your blog to attract more readers and to get more attention to your issue and writing?
18. Have you written a post pointing to a political post on another blog?
19. Have you written a post pointing to an article in a newspaper?
20. Have you written a post pointing to an upcoming vote in the *Dewan Negara*, state legislature, city council or the UN?
21. Do you urge readers to write their representative?
22. Do you urge readers to donate money to anyone?
23. Have you written a post pointing to an upcoming rally, protest or march?

24. Have you written a post pointing to the positions or activities of a candidate, political party, or interest group?
25. Have you written a post pointing to errors or omissions in the media?
26. Have you written a post pointing to the release of data or statistics not published in a newspaper?
27. Have you done your own research?
28. Have you formed alliances with other bloggers?
29. Do they also have an interest in your pet topic? Networking? Organized a blog conference?
30. What happens when there is a major news event that touches upon your issue? Do you respond right away? Example?
31. I understand that it is very difficult to measure a success of a blog, but would you say that your blog has been successful in getting the word out to people?
32. How many unique hits do you receive on a daily basis? How many comments do you receive on a daily basis?
33. Do you believe that you have been able to influence the media?
34. Have you been contacted:
    a. By the media?
    b. By political officials?
    c. By interest groups?
35. Have you gathered any advertising revenue?
36. Has the blog led to any professional advancement for you?
37. Why do you like blogging? What advantages does blogging have over other ways of communication?
38. Did the blog make you more aware of politics? Do you keep a closer eye on the news?
39. What has prevented you from doing more with your blog? (prompt—time, money)
40. What advice would you give other political bloggers?
41. What is your full-time job?
42. Do you think the government is justified in their actions against the four bloggers, BERSIH, HINDRAF, etc
43. Are you afraid that you might be called in one day by the authority for something that you have posted on your blog?
44. Have you tone-down your writings as compare to before the authorities started to be harsher on the public protesters?
45. Do you see yourself continue to blog in the foreseeable future?
46. What do you think of the Internal Security Act (ISA), Official Secrets Act (OSA), Sedition Act, Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA), etc?
47. Do you think there should be some kind of code of ethics for bloggers?
48. Do you think it is justifiable to have some kind of control of the Internet?
49. Do you think blogging is under threat? What do you think are the drawbacks of blogging?
50. What is most rewarding about blogging for you?
51. Do you look at other blogs? Do you post on other blogs?
52. What do you do to bring in new readers?

53. What is the source of inspiration for postings?
54. Do you consider bloggers journalists?
55. What do you think of the blogging world at large?
56. Do you consider yourself to be an early adapter of technology? Any examples?
57. From previous/current full-time occupation to actively blogging. Did you ever imagine you'd be doing anything like this?
58. What do you find to be the most challenging part of blogging?
59. Are you achieving what you set out to do with name of the blog?
60. How does blogging compare to writing for a newspaper articles? [Question for people working in the print media]
61. Do you meet with other bloggers (e.g. from your blogroll) in real life?
62. Now that the ruling government has realized the power of the Internet, what do you think will happen in the next couple of years?

APPENDIX F

**Questions asked by the Malaysian Communication & Multimedia Commission
concerning a photograph posted 2 July 2007 on http://www.tianchua.net
(*eContrario*)**

[The following questions are between MCMC personnel, Mazlan Othman and *eContrario*
administrator, Tian Chua took place on 20 August 2008 at the MCMC. Reproduced from
http://www.tianchua.net/en/2007/08/20/mcmc-investigation]

Q: Do you have your own web blog or web site currently in the Internet?
A: Yes.
Q: (print-outs of my blog shown to me) Does this web site belong to you?
A: Yes.
Q: What is the domain name of your web blog or web site?
A: tianchua.net
Q: When was your web blog established?
A: About a year ago, it used another domain name which was tian.keadilanrakyat.org. Later it
was changed to tianchua.net.
Q: How long this web blog tianchua.net has been operating?
A: Since early this year 2007…
Q: Who manage and maintain the web blog tianchua.net?
A: Myself.
Q: What types of articles or news are posted in the blog?
A: My view point in everything that I see.
Q: Who wrote the articles and news?
A: Myself.
Q: Who is responsible on the articles and news written in the blog tianchua.net?
A: I am responsible for all articles written by me.
Q: Tell me how the web blog is created in the Internet?
A: I registered it from a company which I cannot remember the name.
(Mazlan handed over a bundle of paper printed with the postings in my blog: French Dinner for 3,
Humour, Who's that man?, and Missing.)
Q: Can you confirm these are from your blog?
A: Yes I wrote the articles and posted them on to my web blog tianchua.net.
*Q: Referring to the article French Dinner for 3, 2 July 2007, did you write and posted the article
together with a photo in the web blog tianchua.net?*
A: Yes I did.

Q: From the photo, can you describe who are they in the picture?
A: My intention was to let the readers decide who these people were. I did not put down names in the caption.
Q: Does the photo posted in the web blog genuine?
A: The question does not arise and I would not answer the question.
Q: From whom did you get the photo?
A: I would not answer that question.
Q: Why you did not want to answer the question?
A: I am not obliged to answer the question.
Q: If the photo is a fake, how it was done for the 3 persons to be shown in the photo.
A: This is not an issue of a fake picture. In this case, I have answered questions regarding the authenticity of the picture. In my subsequent postings on 3 July, 7 July and 9 July, and several other articles in my web blog.
Q: When did you get the picture which shows the faces of two men and a woman in the photo?
A: I have answered this question in my articles on my blog and I need not elaborate.
Q: Did you send the photo to any other person?
A: All articles in my blog would be posted on my blog only and I am not responsible for any usage outside my own blog.
Q: Did this photo in tianchua.net is also shown in other people's web blogs?
A: I was told so by the media.
Q: Did you make any press statement regarding the photo in your blog?
A: I have made statement in response to Umno leaders' complaint of this photo, and their criticisms and attack on Parti Keadilan Rakyat and me.
Q: If you did, which newspaper?
A: I cannot remember.
Q: What was said in the press statements regarding the photo?
A: I did not make any statement directly regarding the photo. My response was against attack from Umno leaders.
Q: Did you at any time seek an apology from any parties because of the photo?
Q: What was your intention when you posted the photo which shows Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia in the French Dinner for 3?
A: I have said everything in my posts and it's up to the people to decide.
Q: *Do you wish to add or amend your statement?*
A: No
Q: Can you confirm nothing more you wish to add or amend?
A: Yes.
Q: Do you give this statement voluntarily without any promises, threat and inducement?
A: Yes, voluntarily.
End of the interrogation.

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