

‘We Shift the Channel when Mahathir Appears’: The Political Internet and Censorship in Malaysia

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ABSTRAK

Satu bentuk nasionalisme yang berpengaruh dan berteraskan etnik, digerakkan oleh parti politik yang dominan di Malaysia, iaitu United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), berhasrat menyertai globalisasi dengan memasarkan teknologi maklumat dan komunikasi (ICT), khususnya Internet. Internet telah membawa perubahan politik dan budaya yang drastik di Malaysia masa kini. Makalah ini membahaskan bahawa cara paling baik untuk meninjau aspek ‘politikal’ dalam Malaysia moden ialah dengan meninjau ruang hubung kait antara kepesonaan state dengan Internet, penapisan dan autoritarianisme pada satu pihak dan, pada satu pihak yang lain, penggunaan harian media dalam apa yang digelar oleh Michael Herzfeld sebagai ‘cultural intimacy’ dalam kalangan anggota kelas menengah yang baru. Dengan membincang bahan etnografi yang telah terkumpul daripada kediaman kelas menengah Melayu suburban pada tahun 2001-2002, penulis menunjukkan bagaimana golongan Melayu menengah ini memahami dan mewajarkan usaha Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) mempromosi dirinya sebagai sebuah parti yang moden lagi demokratik dengan melancarkan laman web HarakahDaily.net semasa dalam suasana politik dan agama yang tegang pasca 9/11. Penulis telah meletakkan etnografi sejarah ini dalam transformasi terkini politik Internet dan penapisan di Malaysia.

Kata kunci: Mahathir, Internet politik, penyisihan Malaysia, kelas menengah Melayu

ABSTRACT

A powerful form of ethnic state nationalism, driven by the dominant political party in Malaysia United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), aspires to partake in globalisation by marketing information and communications technology (ICT), and the Internet in particular. The Internet has effected drastic political and cultural changes in contemporary Malaysia. This article argues that ‘the political’ in modern Malaysia is best explored in the interfaces between the state’s Internet fascination, censorship and authoritarianism on the one hand and, on the other hand, everyday media consumption in what Michael Herzfeld has called ‘cultural intimacy’ among the emerging Malay middle

class. Discussing ethnographic material from suburban Malay middle-class homes collected in 2001-2002, I show how these Malays understand and appropriate the Islamic political party Parti Islam SeMalaysia's (PAS) bid to promote itself as a modern and democratic party by launching the website HarakahDaily.net in the tense political and religious atmosphere post-9/11. I situate this piece of historical ethnography in recent transformations of the political Internet and censorship in Malaysia.

Keywords: Mahathir, political Internet, censorship Malaysia, Malay middle class

INTRODUCTION

In June 1996, the Astro Company in Malaysia launched a direct broadcast satellite. In the national media, censored and in large part owned by the state, the launch was hyped as propelling Malaysia into the media-driven globalisation of the next millennium. This discourse was infused with a type of development optimism to be found in classic modernisation studies such as Daniel Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society* (Lerner 1958) in which the proliferation of the mass media marks the beginning of a novel era. In this new world the self is equipped with enhanced powers of empathy stretching far beyond the local context.

At the same time, Malaysia's outspoken Prime Minister from 1981 to 2003, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, leader of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant political party in Malaysia since independence from Britain in 1957, was concerned about the influx of Westernisation in the form of a multitude of TV and radio programmes.

I was in Kuala Lumpur in 2001-2002 to undertake my doctoral fieldwork, exploring the interfaces between class, consumption, market relations, Islam and the state among Malay middle-class families (Fischer 2008a). Here, I found that it was not so much the mediated Western other that figured most prominently in discourses of middle-class Malay families, but rather a powerful critique of state nationalist authoritarian political culture.

Discourses about the immorality of UMNO-driven state politics and censorship thrived in everyday life and on the Internet that, from 1998 onwards, developed into the main medium for 'contentious journalism' in Malaysia (George 2006). Websites such as *Malaysiakini.com* and *HarakahDaily.net* played crucial roles in this form of journalism and as opposition mouthpieces in Malaysia. *Harakah Daily* is the Internet version of the Islamic opposition party Parti Islam SeMalaysia's (PAS) newspaper *Harakah* (literally 'movement'). I will show how middle-class Malays' everyday Internet use with respect to *Harakah Daily* in particular reflects radical changes in religious, political as well as media landscapes in modern Malaysia.

The quotation that forms part of this article's title is from a Malay man, Mascud. When we were discussing the state of politics and media in his one-storey terraced house one day in my fieldwork site, Taman Tun Dr Ismail (TTDI), a suburb outside Kuala Lumpur, he exclaimed emotionally that 'We shift the channel when Mahathir appears.' This quotation is telling in several ways. In passionate support of the emerging *Laman Reformasi* reformist movement and the *Parti Keadilan Nasional* or in English the National Justice Party, Mascud embodies an ethos of resistance that emerged in connection with the trial of Anwar Ibrahim when Mahathir removed Anwar from his post as Deputy Prime Minister on 2 September 1998. The Anwar case not only caused many middle-class Malays to 'shift the channel', they also tended to shift from the censored mainstream media to the Internet for accessing what these Malays call 'un-biased' or 'balanced' information.

What is more, I explore ways in which 'the political' in Malaysia, played out in the moral register or in moral terms as struggles between 'right and 'wrong' (Mouffe 2005: 5), both conditions and is conditioned by understandings and practices of media consumption among middle-class Malays. Accessing 'the political' post-1998 had become inseparable from accessing domains of contentious journalism on the Internet.

Essentially, the ruling political coalition in Malaysia, Barisan Nasional (National Front or BN), is dominated by UMNO and a number of peripheral parties. Since its formation, UMNO within the BN alliance has strived to maintain government control, exercising combined 'repression, manipulation, and responsiveness to popular demands' (Crouch 1996: 246). Internet technology in Malaysia seems to revitalise tensions between, on the one hand, growing authoritarianism within the political system to preserve political stability since the 1970s and democratic aspirations on the other (Crouch 1996: 5).

In the 1970s, the state launched the New Economic Policy (NEP) to improve the economic and social situation of the Malays. The NEP entailed a number of benefits for the Malays and other indigenous groups such as increased ownership of production and preferential quotas in the educational system. The number and proportion of Malays engaged in the modern sector of the economy rose significantly as a product of these policies. Ideologically, the overall objective was to produce an educated, entrepreneurial and shareholding Malay middle class, which the state elite views as a necessary prerequisite for economic, national and social cohesion. What is more, Mahathir (1995:1) articulated the formation of modern and entrepreneurial New Malays (*Melayu Baru*). It is in the homes of this suburban-based New Malay middle class that I explore everyday consumption of contentious Internet journalism.

EXPLORING INTERNET USE IN CULTURAL INTIMACY

The nature of a Malaysian middle-class suburb such as TTDI is 'deep' in the sense that it is intimately private. TTDI can be said to have materialised as an archetypal middle-class invention, which is both monumental and intimately private. The suburb is a parameter of achievement, order, privileges and state/market entrepreneurial capitalism. When asked about self-definition in terms of class, all my informants without exception, but for different reasons, referred to themselves as 'middle class' (*kelas menengah*). To informants, the term 'middle' appeared to be a convenient way of signifying social mobility attained through consumption, education, occupation, and family background. The main reasons for selecting to locate this study in a middle-class suburb is, firstly, that Internet use is widespread here and, secondly, this Malay middle class has traditionally been active in formulating critiques of state power in Malaysia.

The methodologies employed in this study helped me explore Internet consumption in what Michael Herzfeld has called cultural intimacy. Cultural intimacy works as 'the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality' (Herzfeld 1997: 3). It is in the 'intimacy of a nation's secret spaces' we should look for the 'original models of official practice':

People recognize as familiar, everyday phenomena some of officialdom's most formal devices, and this generates active scepticism about official claims and motives (Herzfeld 1997: 4).

It is in the intimate sphere of the Malay middle-class home that the potential to escape and rework state power may arise and it will be clear how contentious journalism among middle-class Malays is an example of this. I explore 'the political' as a moral register in suburban micro-social spaces from a bottom-up approach inspired by what has been called 'political anthropology' (Balandier 1972; Nugent and Vincent 2004) in order to capture the 'deep play' (Geertz 1993) in connecting specific social actions in the ethnographic context to wider structural processes and transformations.

My fieldwork took place in a suburb that was located in a historical and spatial melting pot of institutions and discourses about religious, political and national identity; institutions and discourses that offered different and often conflicting forms of identity e.g. state nationalism, religious revivalism and *Reformasi*.

My informants in this complex setting were selected to obtain a good representative spread. The initial selection was made on the basis of a survey covering 241 households in TTDI designed to specify in particular the ethnic composition of the households, indicators such as family size, income, and consumer behaviour. Ten Malay families were then selected for interviewing and participant observation. Survey data showed that the average Malay family in

TTDI owned at least one computer. Informants would all use the Internet on a daily basis for different purposes. In 2001, there were about 2,009,000 Internet subscribers and 4,800,000 users in Malaysia. A large majority of subscribers live in and around Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, the state surrounding the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur (International Telecommunication Union 2002). A middle-class suburb such as TTDI is not only exposed to a wide range of political and religious discourses, but overwhelmingly its inhabitants are also 'hooked up' to the Internet. In a recent study of how the Internet is localised in two similar middle-class suburbs around Kuala Lumpur it is shown that such suburbs are prominent examples of ways in which 'people, technologies and other cultural artefacts are co-producing new forms of sociality in quite unpredictable ways.' (Postill 2008: 426).

My approach to an exploration of Internet use among the Malay middle class is an ethnographic one that focuses on how a controversial website such as *Harakah Daily* is domesticated and appropriated in everyday life. Most of all, I am inspired by Daniel Miller and Don Slater's (Miller & Slater 2000) ethnographic approach to exploring how the Internet in Trinidad is used by people in real-world locations. The authors argue that what people 'find on the Internet, what they make of it, how they can relate its possibilities to themselves and their futures will tell us a great deal about both the Internet and about Trinidad.' (Miller & Slater 2000:1). The Internet in Malaysia is examined as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces as well as in mundane social structures and relations (Miller & Slater 2000:5). In other words, an ethnography of everyday use of a website such as *Harakah Daily* sees it as part of a specific place that it also transforms (Miller & Slater 2000:21). At the same time this present study is a historical ethnography of what I call the political Internet and censorship in Malaysia i.e. how Internet understandings and practices in a particular historical setting 'reciprocally shape subjects and contexts, that allow certain things to be said and done.' (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992:31). However, this study is not merely a historical ethnography of the Internet in 2001-2002. In the conclusion I show that the political Internet and censorship play crucial roles in events leading up to the landslide general election held in Malaysia in March 2008 in which UMNO's dominance was seriously challenged. In fact, I argue that the most recent reconfigurations taking place in the tense Malaysian political climate are incomprehensible without tracing the impact of ICT in Malaysia.

BETWEEN CENSORSHIP AND INTERNET FASCINATION

In an article in *The Star* 6 May 2002, one of the most popular newspapers in English in Malaysia and among my informants, with the caption *There is Press Freedom in the Country*, the then Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Anwar's successor appointed by Mahathir, argued that:

Press freedom does exist in the country but it is never at the expense of responsibility and accountability (...) the Government believed there should be an appropriate time and place to raise and debate sensitive issues. (...) We need to curb our emotions, our actions, our speech and our writings because we do not want to jeopardise the good relations between the races.

As we shall see below, Badawi, who took office after Mahathir in 2003, was to become a key figure in the transformation of the political Internet and censorship in Malaysia. Following discussions spurred by World Press Freedom Day, designated by the UN to mark the importance of freedom of the press and governments' responsibility to uphold this, the Information Ministry parliamentary secretary Datuk Zainuddin Maidin in the same article contended that "... the discussions should focus on media imperialism by western countries rather than the problems faced by the local media such as freedom of the press..." In this way, the state nationalist discourse tries to redirect attention from the highly sensitive censorship issue.

State nationalist ideology is at work in newspapers, radio and television in Malaysia, and the Internet has emerged as a major source of alternative information and contentious journalism as I discuss in ethnographic detail below. Newspapers in Malaysia have been primary vehicles of UMNO political discourse and control as cultural texts in which the state and 'the public' are represented (Gupta 1995:377). With respect to major newspapers in Malaysia, these are all owned or dominated by UMNO and BN interest groups.

Statistically, I found that the English language papers *The Star* (27 %) and *New Straits Times* (NST) (20 %) were favourites with Malay informants, followed by *Utusan Malaysia* (18 %) and *Berita Harian* (14 %) in *Bahasa Malaysia*, the mother tongue of the Malays. Seven percent listed that they read the printed version of the PAS-supported *Harakah* newspaper on a regular basis. In general, informants were often sceptical about reading the state censored newspapers and a good deal of interpretation and reading between the lines was the order of the day. At the same time, Malay informants were far more hesitant about listing in the questionnaire that they read *Harakah* compared to informants discussed below. This point seems to indicate that supporting *Harakah* was a sensitive subject that could best be discussed when a certain level of confidence between informants and the researcher had been established. The credibility crisis animated most informants to read several newspapers in order to minutely compare how different issues were presented or misrepresented.

Similar to censorship of newspapers, there is a massive state presence in national television and among most of my informants this had a quite unintended side effect in the eyes of state nationalism:

a deep-rooted mistrust in the way in which the state stages and performs politics in the local media. Actually, the state's massive presence in the media has backfired so that the state itself becomes the object of critique in the Malay middle class.

National censorship was the major cause of critique of local television programming in the lives of informants. Mascud, for one, felt that restrictions in the media were so severe that even the selection on *Astro* was too narrow, repetitive and expensive. When *Astro* was first introduced, Mascud recollected, everybody was excited, but soon the family realised that *Astro* spoiled the children, who would be watching excessively. Nevertheless, the family had two television sets and two decoders and the times I visited the family the TV was on and the children were watching programmes such as MTV. In comparison with BBC and CNN, the local channels were seen as appalling: 'We shift the channel when Mahathir appears.' An example of how the state materialises in Malaysia was the almost phantasmic omnipresence of Mahathir unendingly hosting, attending, inaugurating, chairing, lecturing and moralising in the written and electronic media. Mascud's disgust with Mahathir, however, had to be contained in the home as Mascud was 'lobbying' for government jobs and pretended to be 'neutral'. Consequently, most of his opposition support could be expressed safely on-line in front of the family's computer in their suburban home.

'We Shift the Channel when Mahathir Appears' Censorship of the written and electronic media in Malaysia exists in the form of political control of technologies, organisations, audiences and content (George 2006). Government regulation of the media allows the state to impose restraints on publication as well as access to ownership and operation (George 2006:42). More specifically, the Sedition Act outlaws any tendency to hate or bringing the government into contempt. Sedition is defined as the promotion of ill will and hostility between the races or classes as was made clear in the newspaper article above. As we shall see below, the Chief Editor of *Harakah*, Zulkifli Sulong, was found guilty of sedition, but he got off with a fine.

Political leadership in Malaysia can 'count on editors to act in the interests of the nation, the state, the government and the party' (George 2006:49) and 'financially successful media were likely to align their interests with a state that promoted economic growth and political stability.' (George 2006:50). Conversely, Internet technology was aggressively promoted and introduced and the state largely refrained from any kind of censorship or blocking of sites such as *Harakah Daily*. From the mid-1990s the Internet was accessible to the public in Malaysia and it became the first medium that citizens were allowed to use for mass communication without securing a government license.

In 1991, Mahathir unveiled Vision 2020, imagining Malaysia as a fully developed nation by the year 2020. Mahathir and the political elite in Malaysia saw Internet technology as signifying an information revolution that was best left unregulated in order not to disturb its enormous business and globalising potential e.g. to attract multinationals to Malaysia in order to increase direct foreign investment.

In the broader perspective, network society and ICT have effected significant shifts in Malaysia's political and economic positioning from the 1990s onwards,

most notably in setting up a zone, the Multimedia Super Corridor or MSC in 1995. This zone stretches southwards from Kuala Lumpur for ‘high tech’ development to turn the nation’s main metropolitan area into a ‘node’ or ‘hub’ in transnational social and economic networks.’ (Bunnell 2004:144). TTDI is located not far from MSC.

State nationalism evoked the MSC and ICT as essentials in order to embed Malaysia in global networks inspired by Manuel Castells’s ideas about network society and hubs. In this type of theoretisation, the importance of ‘hubs’, cities such as Kuala Lumpur, is to produce the strategic functions of the network i.e. ... Some places are exchangers, communication hubs playing a role of coordination for the smooth interaction of all the elements integrated into the network... (Castells 2000:443).

Despite the fact that the state felt that the Internet was best left uncensored in order not to disturb what was seen as its vast scientific, economic, information and technology potential, authorities were well aware that it could be used for unwanted types of expression that were not tolerated in the mainstream media (George 2006:68). In reality, fascination with ICT and MSC prevented censorship and even during the *Reformasi* protests of 1998 the Internet escaped direct censorship. This exceptional no-censorship strategy can in large part be ascribed to the Internet’s prominent strategic position in achieving Vision 2020.

To sum up, the introduction of the Internet in Malaysia is inseparable from a kind of Malaysian nationalism that thrives in the economic realm as a financial nationalism that promises prosperity. Most of all:

... The power of the Malaysian state derives from its ability to define the Malaysian national body as something primarily economic and set in the future... (Williamson 2002:403).

So there is a kind of rationality in the bold non-censorship vision. Until very recently, the role and influence of the *Reformasi* movement and the possibility of radical political changes in Malaysia more generally had been dismissed by several observers writing from a political science position (Nair 2007). Other observers downplayed the role of the Internet’s transformative capabilities for democratisation (Abbott 2004). I show that the Internet from 2001-2002 had a crucial impact on ways in which the political was being transformed and that contemporary developments in Malaysia are best understood in a longer historical perspective starting in 1998.

THE ANWAR TRIAL AND *REFORMASI*

From 1974 to 1982, Anwar Ibrahim was leader of *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM or the Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia), the major Islamic revivalist or *dakwah* (literally meaning salvation) organisation that emerged in Malaysia

in the 1970s. In the 1970s, ABIM, together with PAS, critiqued policies of the government led by UMNO for being un-Islamic colonial traditions and secular practices separating religion from political, social and economic issues. When the PAS-ABIM relationship deteriorated in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Mahathir invited Anwar to become an UMNO member and on 29 March 1982 Anwar resigned as President of ABIM and joined UMNO. Anwar rapidly ascended within UMNO to become Minister of Finance in 1991 and Mahathir's Deputy Prime Minister in 1993. It came as a shock to most Malaysians when Mahathir removed Anwar from his post as Deputy Prime Minister on 2 September 1998, and Anwar's dismissal spurred one of the most severe political crises in the country's post-independence history.

A large number of Malaysians saw Anwar as Mahathir's natural heir, enjoying widespread popularity. Anwar was accused of sodomy, other sexual improprieties (adultery), bribery and corruption. This whole incident was politically motivated and staged (Peletz 2002:258-261). Particularly incriminating was the implications of immoderate and excessive misuse of power by an elected official such as Anwar. During the trial, extreme cultural transgressions in the form of connotations of sex slavery, group sex, and incest surfaced in the media in a manner hitherto unseen in Malaysia.

The Anwar trial that took place from November 1998 to April 1999 has mostly been analysed in popular accounts and interpretations focusing on demonstrations and court proceedings found in the local and international media. The Anwar case is sensational because of its 'moral dimension' that is inseparable from Malaysia's colonial and post-colonial history, the reconfiguration of domestic politics, Islamic revivalism and the state nationalist modernisation project (Shamsul 2000:232). There is a certain irony in the Internet's obvious importance as part of both state nationalist visions and as *Reformasi* mouthpiece.

In the wake of the political crisis incited by the Anwar case of 1998-99, a novel form of Malay vernacular political literature emerged. This type of *Reformasi* discourse attacked what it saw as the moral decline of politics, secular elites, religion and nation. This body of literature constantly feeds into and is fed by gossip and rumouring that maps the movements of political elite factions (Noor 2001). *Harakah* and *Harakah Daily* grew to supplement and reinforce this kind of literature.

FROM HARAKAH TO HARAKAH DAILY

PAS has retained strong support among Malays despite the fact that it cannot offer any of the material incentives that UMNO's control of the government provides. Despite UMNO's dominant role in the post-colonial political landscape and nation-building, PAS has formulated an ongoing critique of the UMNO-driven version of state nationalism since its foundation in 1951.

Harakah was established in 1987 and became one of PAS' main sources of income. In the mid-1990s, *Harakah's* circulation was about 75,000 copies a week and the Anwar case of 1998-1999 quadrupled this figure. The staff consists of about 30 reporters, photographers and layout artists. The website *HarakahDaily.net* was launched before the general elections held on 29 November 1999. The week before polling day its circulation hit 380,000 and soon after the elections the state demanded that *Harakah* as a party paper was not to be sold to non-members when the paper's publishing license expired in 2000. The new license established that *Harakah* was only to be published twice a month and not twice a week as previously.

In general, *Harakah's* coverage focuses on Islamic political activism in Malaysia i.e. commentaries and activities of PAS leaders and members, and a pervasive critique of the incompetence, immorality and authoritarianism of UMNO leadership in advocating a form of localised Islamic-democratic discourse. *Harakah Daily* does not have a link to PAS's website (www.pas.org.my) and in that way it tries to uphold a distinctive identity from PAS. At the same time, PAS turned out to be crucial for *Reformasi* efforts to forge a broad multi-ethnic alliance against BN.

I was discussing the mission of *Harakah* with its Chief Editor, Zulkifli Sulong, in November 2001, merely two months after 9/11 and he stressed that the newspaper was the 'party organ' of PAS. The Chief Editor's main concern was to portray PAS as a 'good', 'friendly' and 'sincere' party. It was essential to *Harakah's* mission to position itself as following the 'written law' of the Quran and the Sunna (the life, actions and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad) vis-à-vis UMNO's state nationalism. He explained that while PAS depends on Islam as its 'root of the movement', UMNO's Malay nationalism tries to compete 'building up brands' such as the International Islamic University as well as Islamic banking, insurance and controlling the media to avoid losing the confidence of the Malays.

The conflict between UMNO and PAS intensified during the Anwar Ibrahim trial and the Chief Editor acknowledged the increased tension this case had caused. Zulkifli Sulong was accused of sedition for publishing a paragraph that lay blame on the state prosecutor and the courts for acting as tools in Mahathir's conspiracy against Anwar and he was found guilty and sentenced to three years of imprisonment, but this sentence was later changed to a fine.

The aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center 11 September 2001 was felt strongly throughout Malaysia: here, as anywhere else, shock and speculations dominated the media completely. A few weeks later, when the US invaded Afghanistan during Ramadan in search of Osama bin Laden, this move was widely condemned in Malaysia and the Muslim world as an attack on Islam itself. PAS encouraged direct military support of the Taliban against the Americans whereas Mahathir claimed this was a counterproductive over-reaction. Zulkifli Sulong recognised PAS's call to support the Taliban.

Post-9/11, Mahathir justified and exercised the extensive use of the Internal Security Act (ISA), an emergency legislative measure of preventive detention, in arrests and accusations of extremism and terrorism. Interestingly, opposition websites still escaped direct censorship.

In October 2001, during his visit to Malaysia, the American Trade Representative Robert B. Zoellick thanked Malaysia for its support of President Bush. Playing on local fear of being drawn into the web of international 'Islamic Terror', the Malaysian political elite quickly staged a campaign to address what it saw as the danger of Malaysian economic and political isolation (Noor 2001: 18). Consequently, 9/11 had become a global concern reconfiguring domestic politics in Malaysia and consolidated the country's position as a moderate Islamic state (Shamsul 2001; Fischer 2007).

Comparing the censored mainstream media in Malaysia to alternative sources such as *Harakah Daily*, the latter adds diversity and fuel democratic aspirations among middle-class Malays in the context of censorship. The emergence of *Harakah Daily* following restrictions on the publication of *Harakah* signalled that PAS was a modern organisation capable of mastering the latest technology to communicate freely in the tense context of the Anwar Ibrahim case and post-9/11.

'HARAKAH IS MORE NEUTRAL'

In the suburb of TTDI there is a mini market where many of my informants would go for their everyday shopping. Outside, Islamic books, pamphlets and cassettes/CDs are on sale. This is also the place where *Harakah* is sold. The Mini Market is a place for shopping and socialising, but it is also overt in the sense that buying *Harakah* outside, for example, is subjected to the gaze and moral judgements of others and the state. As we shall see, the emergence of *Harakah Daily* reconfigured the relationship between public and private opposition practice.

From the ethnographic material three registers of Internet use among middle-class Malays appeared. Informants in each of these groups were selected to represent diverse understandings and use of *Harakah* and *Harakah Daily*, bearing in mind broader trends in media consumption. In other words, these informants are exemplars of a scale of strategies involved in everyday Internet consumption.

The heading of this section, a quotation from the informant Mascud, is symptomatic of sentiments towards state nationalism in this first group of informants. Mascud, who has already been introduced briefly above, is a man living in a modest one-storey terraced house in the respectable suburb of TTDI with his wife and four children. He was born in the district of Kuala Langat in the state of Selangor, educated in building construction and worked as a supervisor in a developer company. The family moved into the one-storey terraced house in

1999 to live with his mother-in-law. They plan to find a place of their own in the near future. Mascud's wife took a part-time secretary course, worked as a secretary in a company, but now she is at home taking care of the kids. Mascud was currently unemployed and the family could not afford any kind of luxuries.

Mascud, supporting the *Parti Keadilan Nasional*, the opposition party headed by Anwar Ibrahim's wife, felt that the state wrongly prioritised mega projects such as the MSC that he saw as the abuse of funds and as diverting attention away from authoritarianism, cronyism and censorship. He critiqued the lack of authenticity in Malaysian politics, UMNO, and Mahathir in particular. Among informants, the recurrent phrase 'It is just politics' signified shallowness so markedly different from the world of the private sphere. From a moral perspective, PAS is 'right' when critiquing the 'wrong' way in which UMNO and Mahathir acted towards Anwar. When I first met Mascud in TTDI, the family did not have access to the Internet, but that soon changed to open up new possibilities for bypassing censorship that to Mascud and his wife was a modern curse of the state in Malaysia. Mascud argued that if he were given the choice *Harakah* should be published on a daily basis. As long as Malaysia both claimed and desired to be recognised as a moderate and democratic Islamic nation (against what President Bush called the 'axis of evil' in his State of the Union Address on January 29, 2002 referring to governments in countries such as Iraq, Iran and North Korea), censorship should be abandoned altogether.

State censorship in TV, radio and newspapers, Mascud would complain, allowed the government to downplay and distort the Anwar case and Parti Keadilan's influence in the broader *Reformasi* movement. Parti Keadilan's paper *Berita Keadilan* was illegal and could not obtain a permit from the state. He acknowledged that while PAS was focused on the controversial topic of transforming Malaysia into an Islamic state, Parti Keadilan is more dedicated to the 'multiracial issue'. In the eyes of Mascud, these two parties enjoy a fruitful relationship and the main thing was opposing the authoritarian state personified by Mahathir.

Consequently, as *NST*, *Berita Harian* and *The Sun* are all 'government dominated' newspapers owned by state cronies 'Harakah is more neutral.' Mascud argued. *Harakah* and *Harakah Daily* constitute an indispensable and 'independent' counterbalance to state censorship. Most informants acknowledged that *Harakah* and *Harakah Daily* 'balance' their media consumption. Interestingly, *Harakah* was often discussed as 'independent' when compared to the mainstream media – the Internet provided you with an 'option' to 'differentiate' and bypass the conformity of the state nationalist 'mentality'. Reading *Harakah* and *Harakah Daily*, Mascud and his family avoided to 'shift the channel when Mahathir appears.' as it were.

Above, I discussed how the Chief Editor of *Harakah* critiqued the state nationalist endeavour to 'brand' and popularise Islamically proper education, media and finance in order to contest PAS and *dakwah* positions as true defenders

of the faith. Mascud put in plain words that the state nationalist quest to brand itself was matched by PAS's far more convincing position as an Islamic and sincere party that, like Mascud himself, at least rhetorically, would never invest in politicised and state-controlled banks and finance.

Mascud and his family accessed the Internet for 'un-biased' information on a daily basis in the cultural intimacy of the family's terraced house. His favourite websites were cnn.com, various *Laman Reformasi* websites, *Harakah Daily*, keadilanrakyat.org and al-jazeera.net. On local websites he would look for information and rumours about shady UMNO dealings such as appointments and financial transactions. Interestingly, Mascud still read the local papers because with the Internet it was now possible to compare the censored mainstream media to up-to-date Internet information on the one hand and opposition rumours in general on the other. Mascud was well aware that many of these websites were considered highly controversial by the state. When we discussed his children's use of the Internet he was very clear: 'My children are only allowed to use the Internet for education – I don't want them to abuse it.' Much the same can probably be said about how Mascud's Internet use would appear in the eyes of the state.

Basir was another informant, a 37-year-old man working as head of business development in his own IT company that was also involved in developing the MSC. Besides this business, he was a Secretary with a *dakwah* organisation based in TTDI. Basir lives with his wife and son in a condominium in TTDI. Compared to Mascud, Basir in many ways embodies a kind of Islamic modernity that tried to demonstrate how technology, Islam and opposition views were compatible in Malaysia.

Basir read *Utusan Malaysia* because this newspaper focused on religious issues, two pages each day are dedicated to articles and discussions on Islam, education, social aspects of race in Malaysia and the Malays trying to improve their economic status. Simultaneously, Basir described *The Star* as 'fifty-fifty' in terms of government bias whereas NST was 'biased' and 'supporting the government all the way.' Comparatively, *Harakah* and *Harakah Daily* were seen as far more 'political' and 'they voice their thoughts openly.' In the eyes of Basir, *Harakah Daily* was a natural and indispensable part of his everyday media consumption and the website had changed the media landscape in Malaysia:

They write what they think in it and use it to counter the accusations by the government, certain statements made by certain people, they want to make that right, to correct it. It tends to be very political at times.

There was a distinct need for *Harakah* and *Harakah Daily* to compete with government 'misinformation'. In the eyes of this informant, politics was an integral part of Islam and PAS in *Harakah* and *Harakah Daily* had found a constructive formula to combine the two. Basir recognised that PAS was forced to mix politics

and religion in the media because this was the party's distinctive 'voice' or profile in the context of censorship. Basir contended that PAS would rather spread their messages at sermons or religious lectures (*ceramah*) in mosques and elsewhere, but PAS was accused by the state of inspiring hatred at *ceramah*. In 2002, the state issued a ban on *ceramah* in parts of Malaysia arguing that PAS used these religious events for political anti-government propaganda. This conflict is reflected in two newspaper headings *Govt Stands Firm on Ceramahs*. *DPM: Our Aim is to Protect People's Right and Security*, *The Star* 20 February 2002, and *Whither the Malay Muslims*, *New Sunday Times* 17 February 2002. The latter article stated that:

The Government is adamant about enforcing the *ceramah* ban, citing security as the reason. PAS on its part, has openly declared it will not observe the ban on grounds that it is undemocratic. The rest of the nation awaits with bated breath for a potential collision.

Basir was not too sure that PAS's strategy to conquer Malaysia 'step by step' as he put was entirely successful because the 'image they are projecting is not the right one.' meaning that the party was still caught in a kind of political traditionalism that did not match the party's high-tech image promoted in *Harakah Daily*.

In sum, informants belonging to this group of middle-class Malays are not so much concerned about the ideology of PAS, *Harakah* or *Harakah Daily* as long as the party uses the media strategically against state nationalism. In other words, even though these Malays read both the printed version of *Harakah* as well as *Harakah Daily* they are not in themselves uncritical or clear-cut PAS supporters. In the eyes of Mascud, the more the opposition can unite against UMNO authoritarianism, the more this will 'balance' the media landscape in the context of censorship. Basir may be more pro-PAS, but he still felt that the party was caught in traditionalism that did not match or brand the party as a modern or serious competitor to UMNO. Interestingly, these middle-class Malays work hard to combine or juxtapose a wide range of media products in order to compare and assess degrees of 'bias' and 'balance'. At the same time, they are acutely aware of their moral responsibility to be anti-state nationalist and the Internet was their essential source and mouthpiece.

‘SOMETIMES I DON’T LIKE TO READ *HARAKAH* BECAUSE IT’S
QUITE CONSERVATIVE’

The quote is from a young Malay woman in her 20s, Siti. Siti can be said to belong to the largest group of Malay middle-class informants who all read *Harakah* and *Harakah Daily*, but for different reasons are apprehensive about PAS ideology and the morally problematic in supporting it. Siti comes from the northern and PAS-controlled state of Terengganu. She lived with relatives in a two-storey terraced house in a middle-class suburb outside Kuala Lumpur. Siti

held a Bachelor's Degree in English and linguistics and worked as a research assistant at Malaysia's largest university, University Malaya, before going to London to do her Masters degree (MA).

Siti's parents used to read *NST* and *Berita Harian* on a daily basis, but stopped in early 1999 because of the Anwar case. Similarly, Siti stopped reading *NST* and *Harakah* became the only newspaper she bought at a small local shop when it came out every two weeks. Even though Siti acknowledges that *NST* is her favourite newspaper in terms of its journalistic approach and a high-quality world section, the Anwar case changed her overall view of it. Similarly, *The Star* was 'thick' and one-sided in its coverage of the case. Siti made clear to me that around the time of the Anwar case *NST*:

started only to quote certain people, one side of the story. They were constantly justifying what the government is doing even though any person who doesn't have to study law would know that the case is not going on correctly. That's why I can't take it anymore. *Harakah* is more clear.

Siti remembered that in early 1999 *Harakah* was in such high demand that she had problems finding a copy. It was then convenient that she could access a wide range of 'underground circulation' including *Harakah Daily* when it was launched in 1999 as well as *Laman Reformasi* in which Siti was actively involved and she felt persecuted by the government for participating in these activities. Rumours had it that certain government agencies were trying to shut down websites disseminating underground circulation so 'independent people' always had to be alert. Besides these sources of underground circulation Siti would also access muslimnet.com for broader perspectives on Islam and Islamic practice.

The tendency we saw with the former group of informants to question PAS's ideology and image is far more pronounced and straightforward with this group of middle-class Malays. In the eyes of Siti, PAS's attempts to present itself as a pious and pure alternative to UMNO authoritarianism were quite unconvincing. Siti critiqued PAS and *Harakah* in the following way:

Sometimes I don't like to read *Harakah* because it's quite conservative. When they discuss an Islamic state they tend to rely on certain people, religious scholars. I reconsider PAS and *Harakah* a little bit more after that, but the thing I like about it is that people can write in, non-Malays as well, and they still print it if we disagree.

In this way, PAS and *Harakah* in a censorship context can be seen to embody types of democratic on-line aspirations. Even though Siti was very clear about her critique of what the majority of middle-class Malays see as a state nationalist conspiracy against Anwar, they were often not convinced that PAS had a serious alternative to offer. Rather, these informants try to navigate the complex and transforming media landscape meaningfully in order to find their own moral standpoint.

The next informant, Yusof, a 25-year-old man, was born in the state of Terengganu, in a small fishing village where he received his primary and secondary

education. He moved to Kuala Lumpur in 1992 to continue his studies and now lived in a suburban flat outside Kuala Lumpur. He held a Master's Degree in Southeast Asian Studies and an advanced Master's degree and worked as a researcher. When living in Terengganu, Yusof's parents were supporting UMNO and he still remembered how:

the PAS people treated my family there as government supporters. That's why I never agree with the way they behave in this country. When we invited *kampung* (village) people, they said we were non-Muslim and we should be more Muslim. They isolated you from the *kampung* like you didn't exist.

Unsurprisingly, Yusof was not supportive of PAS ideology or practice and stated that he did not really know about, follow or read *Harakah*. Normally he would access CNN or BBC on the Internet for information. Interestingly, during the Anwar trial Yusof 'sometimes' started reading *Harakah* and *Harakah Daily* because:

It was good, actually, gives you another perception of news. Different in the sense of content, how you are telling and elaborating the story. *Harakah* tells people an untold story. But sometimes I feel it's exaggerated. I can't be really objective because I'm supporting the government, but some rumours are good. Voting for the government doesn't mean you must read 100 per cent pro-government.

In fact, the majority of informants can be said to belong to this category of sceptical *Harakah* and *Harakah Daily* consumers. PAS controls the states of Terengganu and Kelantan and these states work as closely inspected laboratories for the practice of PAS discourse.

This group of Malays was quite sceptical about the ideological content in *Harakah* and *Harakah Daily*. One narrative permeates these accounts and the informant Yusof is a good example of this. PAS's version of the Anwar Ibrahim trial became essential knowledge for him in order to 'balance' what was seen as a heavy state bias. So, to have 'another opinion' or 'a broader view' became more and more significant as the trial unfolded. Moreover, post-9/11 when state nationalism in Malaysia clearly chose to present itself as the guardian of a moderate Islamic nation many informants accessed *Harakah Daily* and other opposition sites in order to show 'opposition against the regime' comprised of Malaysia and the US as one informant told me.

The fieldwork showed that the Anwar Ibrahim trial and 9/11 had 'mainstreamed' and legitimised the reading and buying of *Harakah* i.e. Malays in this group were not inclined to support PAS and *Harakah* before 1998. Several informants would go and buy *Harakah* in front of the mini market in TTDI and they felt that this was a gesture or practice that publicly expressed 'anti-regime' sentiments. *Harakah Daily* was always up-to-date, so accessing this site provided invaluable information about the latest developments in the tense context of Anwar's trial as well as post-9/11. At the same time, using the Internet gave these middle-class Malays the opportunity to 'hook up' to, firstly, a large

number of fellow Internet users, who shared similar views and, secondly, a feeling of supporting the opposition without openly risking repercussions.

'TO ME *HARAKAH* IS NONSENSE'

Altaf was the only informant who declared that *Harakah* and *Harakah Daily* were sheer nonsense and refused to read them. Altaf was in her 40s, married with one adult son, who was studying in Australia. The family had lived in their condominium flat since moving to TTDI from Ipoh town in Perak state in 1992. She was educated as a teacher. Altaf's husband held a senior position in a bank.

Compared to the previous two Malay middle-class groups, Altaf was cautious about using the Internet and preferred reading written material because, as she explained to me, the source was often unknown when it came to politics and religion. In the local mosque in TTDI she would read the newspapers to avoid Internet 'misinformation'. Especially *Harakah*, and PAS discourse in general, she saw as 'overly critical' of the government and as spreading lies. Altaf had a friend, who worked in Home Affairs and through this friend she realised that much of PAS's critique of the government and its supporters was untrue. She refused to support PAS through buying *Harakah* and she was uninterested in accessing *Harakah Daily* or any other oppositional websites. Altaf in many ways felt that *Laman Reformasi* discourse was exceedingly dominant and it exploited the Internet to proliferate underground critique and gossip uncritically. Her own use of the Internet was mainly sending E-mails to her son in Australia.

In sum, 'the political' to Altaf can be characterised as a morally right state representing the interests of the progressive Malaysian nation against a morally wrong opposition without legitimacy. For instance, Altaf argued that PAS' crusade against materialism and their refocus on the 'next world' or afterlife (akhirat) and prayer (Fischer 2008b) vis-à-vis the state nationalist call for modern Malay Muslims to be successful in this world appears to be fundamentally unconvincing and traditionalist. Of all my informants Altaf most clearly rejected the legitimacy of oppositional views most manifestly found on the Internet.

CONCLUSION

Firstly, I will sum up on my findings and, secondly, discuss this historical ethnography taking into account significant transformations in contemporary Malaysia. I have shown how *Harakah Daily* is domesticated and appropriated among suburban middle-class Malays. These Internet users' reception and consumption of mediated meaningful content is both conditioned by and conditions the wider world – being the transformed political and religious landscapes in the wake of the Anwar case and 9/11 on the one hand and the

tension between state nationalist media censorship and this state's fascination with internet technology on the other. The Anwar case not only caused many middle-class Malays to 'shift the channel', they also tended to drift towards the Internet for accessing 'un-biased' or 'balanced' information. Post-1998 accessing 'the political' was inseparable from accessing the Internet and a prominent element of resistance runs through the accounts of informants.

What is more, UMNO in the Mahathir era assumed the role as protector of the Malays and thus consolidated a particular form of political culture in which UMNO expects loyalty from Malays. The NEP can be seen as a Malaysianised form of social, economic and ethnic protection that is now being bypassed and subverted by a plethora of micro-social and 'unpatriotic' discourses that turn the state nationalist Internet fascination against that very same state. The Anwar case and 9/11 seemed to evoke a feeling among many middle-class Malays that UMNO had failed its traditional role as a kind of moral protector.

During fieldwork many informants commented that my inquiries were 'very political', but it seemed to me that their Internet use was mainstreaming some of these controversial issues. *Harakah Daily* can be explored in the cultural intimacy of the home and this is also the sphere in which you can benefit from *Harakah Daily*'s interactive features such as 'writing in' as the informant Siti welcomed. In general, the readings of *Harakah* and *Harakah Daily* were overwhelmingly 'politically' motivated i.e. the role of Islam played a limited role in this type of oppositional preference.

The advent of the Internet in urban Malaysia can be seen to have generated enhanced powers of empathy in its users, but this development does not in any way seem to match the ideal path set out by the state. As a consequence, neither state nationalism nor globalism in Malaysia has in any way erased other and competing forms of nationness or national identities. This cultural and historical type of nation is far more resilient and naturalised in its folk imagined version than any political nationalism. A clear tendency in the above discussion is that indirect articulation of loyalties through critique of the political is far more pronounced than expressing direct support of one party or ideology. To middle-class Malays, politics in Malaysia remains impure power struggles that strategically make reference to certain inauthentic models of patriotism or loyalty of Malays.

By now, the computer and Internet access have become standard equipment in the Malaysian middle-class home – in large part due to the state's Internet visions. The intimacy of these homes provides a safe context for accessing information that in official discourses is considered unpatriotic and subversive.

In the general elections held in 2004 Abdullah Badawi and BN secured a comfortable victory over PAS and other opposition parties. Interestingly, that same year Malaysia partially backed down from its no censorship guarantees. Abdullah Badawi stated that 'hate sites' would not be allowed on Malaysian servers (George 2008:142).

On 2 September 2004 Anwar Ibrahim was released from jail as Malaysia's highest court overturned his conviction for sodomy. Prior to Anwar's imprisonment in 1998 Internet technology was still in its infancy in Malaysia, but now Anwar, along with a large number of oppositional groups and individuals, was active writing his own blog that included news links and videos of his Keadilan party's activities. Hence, Anwar's release coincided with the development of not only blogs, but also SMS and YouTube. Badawi and the state heavily critique bloggers, who are accused of spreading lies and threatened by severe punishment and tighter controls on Internet use. Since my fieldwork PAS has upgraded HarakahDaily.net to feature six different online channels and original reporting on elections. In order to preempt growing online dissatisfaction, Abdullah Badawi and the state warned that it would use anti-terrorism laws and the ISA against what is claimed to be 'unpatriotic' and malevolent attacks. These warnings became more prominent in the prelude to the general election in 2008. In 2007, for example, an anti-government blogger went on trial on charges of sedition and he was detained under the ISA. The year 2007 marked a change towards state visions of the Internet as an unregulated medium for free expression as more and more dissenting voices found resonance online in the face of mainstream media censorship. The popularity of blogging in particular offering alternative views and information played a crucial role in the articulation of dissent.

Increasingly, Mahathir's promise to keep the Internet in Malaysia uncensored was compromised. Paradoxically, the Internet in Malaysia became an object of critique in itself, as it did not deliver the promised economic growth and free speech. At the same time the telecom industry seemed to slip behind other developing countries as it was dominated by government-linked companies. Indeed, the Internet had clearly become the primary medium for political dissent that was to change the political future of Malaysia.

In the run-up to the 2008 general election it was widely speculated that the opposition was to go online in an unprecedented way turning to blogs, SMS and YouTube. The election held on 8 March 2008 saw overwhelming voter support for the federal-level opposition parties in five out of 14 states. BN was reduced to 51 percent and the opposition gained greater representation in Parliament. This landslide victory emphasised demands for democratic media reform in Malaysia among other issues. For the first time since 1969 the BN coalition did not win a two-thirds majority in the Malaysian Parliament required to pass amendments to the Malaysian constitution. BN was able to form the next government, but without two-thirds majority.

In Kuala Lumpur and its surrounding suburbs the opposition won ten seats and BN only one. In this historical ethnography I have shown how the political Internet and media censorship gained momentum around 2001-2002 in cultural intimacy among the Malay middle class. Later developments show that these covert protests have now spilled over to also become overt in the form of mass

rallies and demonstrations that are most often organised by using websites, blogs, SMS and YouTube. Thus, the more modern communication technology proliferates without producing improved living conditions or economic growth, the more this technology is likely to become a medium for protest.

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