

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ASSISTING OPINION LEADERS TO DISSEMINATE POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: THE CASE OF MALAYSIA.

NUURRIANTI BINTI JALLI
OHIO UNIVERSITY
USA

Abstract

When the Internet started to be widely used by the people around the world in the 90s, this technology was seen as a promising alternative for the traditional media outlets, especially in the countries where the people in power (i.e: the government) control the media organs. By controlling major media organs, by logic, people in power can easily manipulating the information with agendas of their interests before providing them to the general public. Hence, the general public is fed with information that has been specifically altered, which, in the long run will have effects on the public's perceptions towards various thing especially their perceptions towards the people in power. In this paper, the researcher explores the effectiveness of the Internet, especially social media in assisting opinion leaders to disseminate political ideologies in Malaysia. Through examining the Malaysian media structure, an interview with 8 Malaysian opinion leaders, the researcher finds that although to a certain extent the Internet provides alternative for the people to voice their opinions, the effectiveness of Internet based platforms like social media actually depends on how one utilizes it. Through interviews with the Malaysian opinion leaders, the researcher also investigates how the current Malaysian laws (especially media related laws) affect how the general public voices their opinions online.

Keywords: *Traditional media, Internet, social media, opinion leaders, media law, Malaysia.*

KEBERKESANAN SOSIAL MEDIA DALAM MEMBANTU PEMIMPIN PENDAPAT MENYEBARKAN IDEOLOGI POLITIK DALAM NEGARA MEMBANGUN: KAJIAN DI MALAYSIA

Abstrak

Apabila Internet mula digunakan secara meluas oleh rakyat di seluruh dunia sekitar tahun 90-an, teknologi ini dilihat sebagai alternatif untuk media tradisional, khususnya di negara-negara di mana pihak yang berkuasa (iaitu: kerajaan) mengawal media. Secara logiknya, dengan mengawal media, pihak yang berkuasa dengan mudah boleh memanipulasi maklumat dengan agenda mereka sebelum disalurkan kepada orang ramai. Oleh itu rakyat disuap dengan maklumat yang telah diubah secara khusus oleh pihak yang berkuasa, dimana, dalam jangka masa panjang akan memberi kesan ke atas persepsi rakyat terhadap pihak berkuasa. Dalam kajian ini, penyelidik meneroka keberkesanan Internet, terutamanya media sosial dalam membantu pemimpin pendapat untuk menyebarkan ideologi politik di Malaysia. Melalui pemeriksaan struktur media Malaysia, dan temu bual dengan 8 pemimpin pendapat Malaysia, penyelidik mendapati bahawa walaupun Internet memberikan jalan alternatif untuk menyuarakan pendapat, keberkesanan platform Internet sebenarnya bergantung kepada cara penggunaan oleh penggunanya. Melalui temubual dengan pemimpin-pemimpin pendapat Malaysia, penyelidik juga menyiasat impak undang-

undang semasa Malaysia (terutama undang-undang berkaitan media) kepada bagaimana rakyat untuk menyuarakan pendapat mereka secara online.

Kata kunci: *Media tradisional, Internet, media sosial, pemimpin pendapat, undang-undang media, Malaysia.*

INTRODUCTION

Around the world, media ownership is limited to a few principal sources depending on the nature of political system and level of economic development in the country – as in many developing countries, the media system is often controlled by the political entity in power (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003). According to McDaniel (1986), media critics claim that third world governments usually manage and control the content of news to portray flattering publicity to political figures. By governing the media system, the government can justify their intrusion over mass media by invoking the need for national stability and security (Anuar, 2005). Developing countries are defined according to their Gross National Income (GNI) per capita per year. Countries with a GNI of US\$ 11,905 and less are defined as developing¹ as specified by the World Bank (ISI, 2014). According to Press Freedom Report 2014, the global press freedom fell down to the lowest level in over a decade in 2013 with most of the developing countries around the world have no press freedom, while some have considerable amount of freedom (Freedom House, 2014).

In Malaysia, mainstream media is controlled by the government or its affiliated companies which resulted in media monopoly and minimal media freedom (George, 2006; McDaniel, 2002; Magpanthong, & McDaniel, 2011; Kim, 2001; Mohd Sani, 2004; Iga, 2012; Willnat, Wong, Tamam & Aw, 2013). Agenda setting in Malaysian traditional mainstream

channels are synonym with positioning Barisan Nasional² (BN) in positive light while positioning other political parties in less favorable manners (Mohd Sani, 2014; Kim, 1998; Middleton, 2013; Houghton, 2013). According to Houghton (2013), television channels gave the most coverage to the BN coalition and its parties by a significant margin (64.35%), compared to that given to Pakatan Rakyat³ (PR) (26.1%) and other parties (9.5%) during Malaysian 13th general election in 2013. With over 60% positive coverage on mainstream television channels, BN has the advantage of influencing Malaysians to choose them instead of the opposition parties. Due to several factors such as uneven Internet penetration throughout the country, there are still large numbers of Malaysians who still solely rely on mainstream media channels as their primary news sources due to the absence of Internet services. During the 2008 general election, BN coalition won by a nose over the opposition parties just because majority votes came from rural areas in the country (Keong, 2008; Navarria, 2013). Undoubtedly, Malaysians living in more developed cities are much more well-informed about politics particularly from new media to assist them in making decision on which party to vote (Navarria, 2013). Media freedom in the country is also kept at minimum level through close media monitoring by the ruling government.

With several media laws⁴ specifically enacted to monitor broadcasting and printing press and also laws such as Official Secret Act 1972, Internal Security Act 1960⁵, Sedition Act 1948 and Defamation Act 1957 – forcing media producers to be extra careful in producing media content. Based on the report by Freedom House (2014), Malaysia has never had a free media sphere. Since its independence in 1957 from the British, media organs in Malaysia are always

restricted and controlled by the government. Although Malaysia has strict media laws and several cyber related laws⁶, none of these laws specifically focused on online-based social activities which we typically see on social media sites. Although one portion of Communication and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998 covered the social element to Internet activities, CMA 1998 is seen too arbitrary in nature and conflicting to certain extent (Hussein, 2000)⁷. One of the reasons to such conflict could be because of the issuance of Bill of Guarantees (BOGs) by the government circa 1996 aligned with the development of Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), which includes a pledge not to censor the Internet (MSC Malaysia, 1996; Akmal & Salman, 2015). Although online media provides more freedom as compared to mainstream media since no specific laws (except for a part of CMA 1998) dictate online activities in Malaysia, the “offline” laws have been used to charge Malaysians for their postings on the virtual sphere. Hence, this study aims to look into the influences that these “offline” laws⁸ could have on the development of critical-political communities on new media channels.

The development of the Internet technology also has given birth to numbers of opinion leaders all across the world. Opinion leaders today are not only restricted to those with good positions⁹ but anyone who is considered as influential by his or her followers. The definition of opinion leaders in this study is people who have active voice in their community, people who speak out about important issues and individual who is often referred to for advice by community members. It is also important that opinion leaders are people with credible personality and well respected by their followers. In Malaysia, opinion leaders have started to

use online platforms to express their opinions especially by the end of 1990s. Although the diffusion and the use of Internet in Malaysia started in the 1980s in some universities, most Malaysians began using the Internet widely in 1996, after the launch of the MSC Project (Iga, 2012). One of the earliest records on the emergence of critical-political opinion leaders in Malaysian virtual sphere was during late 1998, after the sacking of then Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim due to his overt criticism towards the government (Sanawi, 2014). With the presence of fairly good Internet technology in the country, websites like *Sang Kancil*, *Anwar*, *Voice of Freedom*, and *Where is Justice* sprang up by critical opinion leaders in the country who were mainly supporters of Anwar Ibrahim (Kim, 2001).

When it comes to issues related to politics, Internet is favored by younger generation as platform for them to express their opinions as Internet has made it a lot easier for them to share critical opinions and information to the public (Mohammad Rasul, A. Rahim & Salman, 2015). Even opinion leaders in Malaysia appeared to favor Internet platform especially social media due to its user-friendly interface as well as its prominent easy-sharing features. Social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and Youtube among others have been used by Malaysians to express their opinions on political issues. Events like the Bersih¹⁰ rallies were also made possible because of the wide use of social media. With the constant development of communication technologies, the numbers of critical political *netizens*¹¹ seems to be constantly increasing.

Although there were numbers of studies done to investigate the role of new media in shaping the future of political landscape in developing countries, minimal research has been done

to focus on the critical opinion leaders in these nations. Also, there are minimal studies on the possible limitations of new media in assisting political reforms. Hence, the aims of this research is not only to investigate the possible limitations of new media channels, especially the social media sites, but also to study the effectiveness of social media as a tool for opinion leaders to disseminate political ideologies in Malaysia. This research focuses on opinion leaders' standpoints on the role of new media particularly social media in assisting them to disseminate political information and opinions to the public. Despite the fact that there are numerous studies on media freedom in Malaysia, only small numbers of research have been done to study the significance of Malaysian laws in shaping the dynamic of Malaysian virtual spheres that we have today. Therefore, this research aims to investigate whether the existing media related laws in Malaysia affect the rise of critical opinion leaders on these platforms. Other than exploring the effect of media laws in Malaysia, the researcher also aims to investigate the informants' awareness on Malaysian cyber laws; to study whether the laws related to media and Internet will have impacts on the development (in term of the increment in number) of critical political leaders in Malaysian cyberspace; and to explore whether the existing laws influence how the opinion leaders deliver their contents (in term of style and tone of delivery) to the general public. Ultimately, the findings of this research are hoped to answer the specific research questions as listed below:

1. How are social media sites effective in helping opinion leaders disseminate political ideologies in Malaysia?
2. Are the existing laws in Malaysia affecting the rise of critical political opinion leaders in Malaysian virtual spheres?

METHOD

To approach this study, the researcher chose to use informant in-depth interviews in order to answer her research questions. According to Lindlof & Taylor (2010), informant interview is when the participants selected for the in-depth interview are of those whom are considered qualified, experienced and savvy in the scene (research topic), can articulate stories and can provide elaborated explanation that others would not, and are especially friendly and open to providing information. These 8 opinion leaders were purposely selected for this study with some of the informants being the opinion leaders that the researcher herself follows on social media sites, and some of the informants were selected after thorough online research. The selection criteria were predetermined by the researcher prior to the selection process, and listed as follow -

1. The participant is an active social media user.
2. The participant has active voice in his/her community and has people respond to his/her postings on social media sites.
3. Has strong credibility and represents strong organization/company/political party.
4. Has strong personal background (education, career, et. cet)

All the interviews were done through online based platforms, mainly Skype, Facetime and Facebook Messenger because all of the informants are based in Malaysia, while the researcher is based in Athens Ohio. It is also important to note that all the informants have agreed to be identified by their real names and positions in the final report of this study. Although all the informants have agreed to be identified, the researcher has decided to cloak their identities when deemed necessary.

Below are the lists of the informants that have agreed to participate in this study:

No	Name	Profession
1	Amir Muhammad	Film director, producer and writer. Used to write for News Straits Times (newspaper). Publisher at Matahari Books.
2	Zairil Khir Johari	Politician for Democratic Action Party (DAP) Member of Parliament, Bukit Bendera
3	Fazallah Pit	Ex-editor for Suara Keadilan (2010-2013) Chief writer for Selangor Kini Editor for Puisi Jadi Senjata Activist for Gerakan Media Marah (GERAMM)
4	Dina Zaman	Ex columnist for Malaysia Kini, The Sun and Malaysian Insider. Writer.
5	Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir	Socio-political activist for Sister in Islam Malaysia, and writer. Columnist for The Star (since 1989) Board Member of Sister in Islam, Board of Trustee for Asian University for Women Communications Convener for International Advisory Group at Mussawah
6	Rashidi Yahya	Chief Brainstorming Officer for Friendly Rabbit Media.
7	Rahman Hussain	UMNO Youth Exco Member. Member of Youth Parliament, Kuala Lumpur. Occasional writer.
8	Zulhabri Supian	Columnist for Malay Mail and The Malaysian Insider. Asian Public Intellectual Fellow (2013/2014)

ANALYZING DATA

For this study, the researcher used two different methods for analyzing transcribed verbatim from audio recordings which are 1) hermeneutic analysis and 2) thematic analysis. Hermeneutic analysis according to Bleicher (1980, pp. 1) can be defined as the theory of philosophy of the interpretation of meanings, and the main objective of hermeneutics is understanding human – understanding what people do and why people do what they do. As a

mode of analysis, hermeneutics is primarily concerned with understanding and interpreting the meaning of a text or text-analogue (Myers & Madison, 1997). Thematic analysis on the other hand, can be understood as a form of categorizing data for qualitative research – where researchers review data obtained, make notes and sort the data into categories (Given, 2008). This type of analysis helps the researchers to move their analysis from a broad range of data towards discovering patterns and developing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes are then typically developed to represent the identified themes (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). Coding according to Loftland & Loftland (1995) is the core activity of developing analysis. For this study, coding was done in two phases, 1) the first level coding, based on general themes, and 2) second level coding, to narrow down the general themes into much more focused and specific themes (Tracy, 2013). Based on the transcribed audio recordings, the researcher found several repetitive themes as tabulated below:

General Themes	Specific Themes	Notes
Restrictive Mainstream Media	Mainstream media should be free from government control Controlled media results in the shift to online based sites like social media.	Practice true democracy. Malaysians to look for additional information through various sources. Alternative media also tends to be one-sided. Resulting in political polarization.
Social media sites as dissemination tools	User friendly features of social media (easy to use, free of charge, and less monitored as compared to traditional media). As tools to propagate.	Facebook with large user database and user friendly features. The development of new communication technology.

		Online political campaigns should be complemented with grass root works. Digital divide plays a role.
Social media as double-edged sword	Ethics – postings on social media should be based on facts, not speculation. Media literacy.	Good and bad at the same time. The need to increase media literacy among Malaysians.
Everyone has opinions.	People have things to say and should be allowed to voice their opinions. Although opinions should be conveyed professionally.	The importance of education. The need for campaigns to educate Malaysians to be more responsible in posting contents online.
Malaysian laws and legislations as fear agents	Malaysian laws at minimal level should be reformed to allow constructive social development.	Law and legislations at minimal level should be reformed or to be repealed entirely. Suppressed democratic rights.

“Strict sangat lah!” : Restrictive mainstream media in Malaysia

As previously mentioned, Malaysian mainstream media organs are owned by the Malaysian government or its affiliated companies. As expected by the researcher, most of the informants showed concern on this issue. The limited space for critical opinions in mainstream media channels in Malaysia is seen as one of the reasons why Malaysians generally shift to voice their opinions online. With a lot more freedom in the virtual sphere, opinionated individuals including opinion leaders and leaders from opposition parties utilize these sites to share information and their opinions to the general public. The informants in this study who are also

opinion leaders themselves pointed that if their opinions are critical of the government, or different from what the government believes in, they have to look for other options to channel out their opinions – which now, can be easily provided by media sites like Facebook and Twitter. Marina Mahathir, who is one of the most renowned activists and columnists in Malaysia noted:

“I think we have no choice but to go to social media because we can’t get to the mainstream media because we think differently from the government. It’s really hard, unless you really have friends – I’m lucky I think I kind of neutral and moderate so I can work it both ways.”

The researcher found that this response is particularly interesting, since although Marina Mahathir is known for being critical of various issues, she considered herself as a neutral and moderate opinion leader. She also noted one (although obvious, but important) point, how having good networking with people in the mainstream media can help in getting air-time in the Malaysian mainstream media. However, several informants also pointed out that the same strong partisan sentiment (like in mainstream media) also could be found in most of the popular online news portals. “Even news on the Internet tend to be one sided”, said Dina Zaman. This is seen as one of the results of prolonged restrictive media environment in Malaysia, resulting in the emergence of angry writers – angry writers then, will not able to provide truly objective news reports and contents. The hostility towards government is seen as one of the many results of continuous restrictive media environment in the country, other than the controlled mainstream media leads to the creation of narrow minded Malaysians, and also contributes to increasing political polarization. Political polarization can be defined as the disparity of political attitudes to at least two different ideological extremes – it “constitutes a threat to the extent that it induces

alignment along multiple lines of potential conflict and organizes individuals and groups around exclusive identities, thus crystallizing interest into opposite factions” (Baldassarri, 2008, pp. 409). Consequently, if political polarization occurs in a system involving two dominant groups of political entities, such as in the case of Malaysia, where two major political coalitions, BN and PR, are dominating the Malaysian political scene (Weiss, 2013), moderate voices usually lose their influences and power (DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996; McCarty, Poole & Rosenthal, 2006; & Mann & Ornstein, 2013). Based on all the negative responses received from the informants on Malaysian mainstream media, the researcher asked for some suggestions on how to improve the media system in the country. Informants mainly responded by stressing on the principal of democracy; how Malaysians deserve to receive all the information regardless of their political messages, and decide for themselves on which party to support based on all the information received through national media channels. National mainstream media, particularly RTM1 & RTM2, is not subjected to any particular political party, but instead, to provide equal chance for Malaysians, regardless of political stands to voice and express their opinions. However, they also noted, although such system should be in practice, Malaysians should first learn to deliver opinions professionally and ethically in all sense. Then, public order and national harmony can be sustained and gradually improved. Most of the informants also stressed the importance of obtaining information from various sources, not depending solely on mainstream media organs. With the development of communication technologies, particularly the Internet, Malaysians are now able to search for information on various matters via online search engines. The initiative to look for extra information is seen as crucial in order for Malaysians to look at various issues through more objective lenses. On top of that, several informants also added that if

Malaysians continue to depend on mainstream media to provide them with politically biased contents, Malaysians would essentially continue to look at political issues through tunnel visions.

The sharing culture: Social media sites as dissemination tools

The popularity of social media in Malaysia, according to some of the informants started sometime in the mid-2000, when the Internet development in the country was at much better level as compared to when it first started in the 1990s. With new communication technologies in Malaysia at a satisfactory level, people in the country are now able to enjoy Internet based communication to interact with other people, shifting away from the traditional mode of communication (i.e: landline calls, postal letters, etc.) to the much faster communication medium. Also, with the global advancement in the communication technologies, a lot of telecommunication companies started to build up and emerge in response to the enormous demands from all over the world for Internet based devices. With a lot of competition in the market, this results in the availability of Internet gadgets at lower prices, making these devices affordable even for people of the lower incomes. With such gadgets in hand, and with the popularity of social media sites in Malaysia, people of various backgrounds started to use their gadgets to communicate with other people through these networking platforms. Social media sites are often associated with their easy-sharing features, making these platforms as ideal tools for disseminating information. Drawing from that popular perception on social media, this study also aims to explore how these sites are effective to assist Malaysian opinion leaders, not only to share information, but also to disseminate political ideologies to the public. The researcher found that throughout all the interview sessions with the informants – they like how social media sites are user-friendly, easy to master, free of charge and available to anyone as long as they have

connection to the Internet. Other than noting that the easy-sharing features¹² play an important role in assisting them to disseminate information, most of the informants also responded how social media sites able to provide them with space that mainstream media cannot provide – especially to voice their critical opinions on matters that are considered sensitive in Malaysia. Several informants gave examples, such as how they wish that the government would allow critical fora on sensitive issues especially on politics, race, religion and sexuality on national broadcasting channels, providing Malaysians with more critical contents, in order to groom Malaysians to become more open to various ideas and ideologies, beyond normal Asian and Islamic norms. This proposition is, however, not to be misunderstood as an encouragement to challenge Asian and Islamic values, but instead to be seen as one of the ways to expose and educate Malaysians on various perspectives that they might have never been exposed to before. Malaysian learning culture is also critiqued by numbers of the informants as old-fashioned and contained. Old-fashioned in the sense that, the learning process is typically one-way communication (i.e: from teacher to the students, from government to the citizens) unlike in Western countries, where two-way communications and being critical on issues are the normal practices. They asserted that, it is important to groom Malaysians to be more open to ideas and to learn to critically think about issues happening in the world. Being able to critically think and to critically (but professionally) discuss about issues is deemed to be one of the most important steps to develop Malaysia into knowledgeable society. Additionally, one of the informants also noted that, social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and weblogs allow users to reach more people beyond their circle and also enable targeted messaging. Quoting Rahman Hussain, one of the UMNO Youth Exco member, “I believe that the new media sites definitely help and they

assist greatly in term of disseminating political ideologies, simply because, number one, they increase the reach and number two, they allow targeted messaging.”

When discussing on preferred social media platforms, most of the informants said they use Facebook as their main social media platform, and at the same time using other social media sites like Twitter, LinkedIn, and also Instagram. Still, among all these mentioned social media platforms, the two main social media sites preferred by informants are namely Facebook and Twitter. “As far as Facebook is concerned, it has the biggest base in the country. Very simple, Malaysia, we have 17 million accounts for Facebook and counting. And it actually could be more, could be 18 million now” said Rashidi Yahya, the chief brainstorming officer of Friendly Rabbit Media. Friendly Rabbit Media is a Malaysian based consultant company that provides services including consulting on new media contents for companies and private individuals. With large user database, it is not surprising why Facebook is the top social media site all around the world with 1.15 billion users in 2013 (Ballve, 2013) and growing to 1.45 billion users as of March, 2015 (We Are Social & IAB Singapore (2015)). Also, since some of the informants are also important individuals in the Malaysian journalism industry, one noted that Facebook has become the ideal platform for journalists to disseminate news. The power to disseminate information and political ideologies are exclusive to opinion leaders, but also for anyone with propaganda and agendas, as long as they have followers and people willing to listen to what they have to say. “Facebook is also not just a place to disseminate news, but also one of the sources for journalists to get their news scoops. Whatever is considered as the *hype*¹³ in social media, some of them will eventually end up in local news reports”, said Fazallah Pit, chief writer of

Selangor Kini. This shows that the role of social media expands from merely a platform to share information, but also to obtain information.

Twitter on the other hand is seen to have great potential in assisting opinion leaders to upload quick updates on current events. One of the informants also noted how Twitter has introduced the usage of hashtags (#) as shortcut to access to tweets from all around the world that discuss the same issue. Based on definition provided by Twitter official website, hashtag is “used to mark keywords or topics in a tweet. It was created organically by Twitter users as a way to categorize messages” (Twitter.com, 2014).

“And as for Twitter, I think Malaysia currently has around 6 million accounts, and the adoption rate for Twitter is increasing in the country. Twitter is getting more and more followers.” – Rashidi Yahya.

In Malaysia, Twitter is no stranger to mobilizing online campaigns. A number of campaigns, including the most controversial public gatherings in Malaysia; Bersih¹⁴¹⁵ rallies organized by the Bersih movement used social media including Twitter as one of their main platforms to promote their campaigns and mobilizing Malaysians during the rallies. This was most prominent especially during Bersih 2.0 in 2011 and Bersih 3.0 in 2012. Like during the second Bersih rally in 2011 (or better known as Bersih 2.0), www.politweet.org tracked tweets on Twitter and the number of contents generated within the period of 9 June and 14 August 2011 were 263,228 tweets¹⁶ by 33,940 Twitter users (Yeoh, 2011). However, some of the informants like Dina Zaman and Marina Mahathir pointed that social media are only effective depending whether or not the person behind the social media account knows what he or she is doing, in the

sense of knowing the true potential of social media and how to generate quality contents. By being able to produce quality contents, opinion leaders will be able to get quality followers, and this increases the potential for possible social change in the future. Social media sites are also seen, as platforms to propagate agendas, at least according to some of the informants, like any other media organs that we have in today's world. Like in Malaysia, online media sites, including social media, have been used by Malaysians regardless of their political stands to propagate their political agenda, disseminating political ideologies in order to gain more supporters to their political beliefs. Zulhabri Supian, a columnist for two popular online news portals in Malaysia believes that social media is crucial in today's political campaign. According to him, "social media has to be a stand-alone division, like in a political organization, social media division, is as important as accreditation division, you see." Although many of the veteran politicians seem to be a little bit skeptical of the potential of social media sites, younger generation believes that social media sites have to be taken seriously as effective political tools.

Another interesting point found by the researcher is how some of the informants believe that although social media sites can be effective social media tools, grass root works and the traditional on ground campaigns are still the primary ways to execute political campaigns. Online campaigns especially of those done through social media like Facebook and Twitter are seen to work well for younger generation and Malaysians that live in the urban part of Malaysia while on ground campaigns work well to gain support from across generations, especially for older generation and for those living in the rural areas in Malaysia.

"I think *kan*, the thing is with us. I think this goes everywhere, but I just talked about *dalam* (in) Malaysia ni, *kita fikir* (we think) social media is the whole thing. Social media

campaigns whatever it is, online campaigns have to be complemented by grass root works. What about people in rural areas?” – Dina Zaman

Social media as double-edged sword

Other than to explore how social media can be effective as platforms for disseminating political ideologies, the researcher is also interested to explore the potential limitations of social media sites according to the informants. A few of the informants made a point about how social media can be a double-edged sword – it can be a good thing or bad thing. As much as good information can be disseminated easily because of easy sharing, bad information also can travel as fast. “The thing about social media is it is double edged. I mean it’s good and it’s bad. You could use that of course – it is the way of getting information across very quickly but then – it also bad in the sense that not only good stuff gets across very quickly but also the bad stuff”, said Zairil Khir Johari. Like Amir Muhammad, he said that social media sites are relatively natural tools. This means that the effects caused by social media sites can be safely concluded as results of how the users utilize their accounts. Even if social media can be a double-edged sword, the main cause to this is actually not because of the social media itself per se, but mainly because of the people behind the wheels. However, one possible limitation that the researcher found prevalent in most of the responses received from the informants is how social media allows anonymity, and this feature gives ways for people to post awful things on the Internet. Even if one to take action against any individual that posted inappropriate contents on social media (i.e: obtaining IP address, access to contents) in Facebook and Twitter, several legal documentations should be provided including subpoena issued by the court, and also search warrant (Facebook, 2015; Twitter, 2014). In continuation to the fact that most of the informants noted how social

media allows both good and bad information to spread from one person to another – they also talked about how it is important to be ethical on these sites. Users of social media sites are urged to practice good ethics, by providing only valid and verified information, communicating professionally with fellow social media users, and practicing mutual respect with whomever they encounter in the virtual world.

Semua orang ada pendapat! : Everybody has an opinion

Since there was never much freedom in media before the arrival of Internet technologies in Malaysia, Malaysians these days are seen to enjoy the opportunity to voice their opinions online. Everyone is seen to have opinions especially if they are in the virtual world. “Everyone has opinion, regardless whether it is correct or not”, according to Rashidi Yahya. In restrictive mainstream media channels, opinions are filtered, and those that are critical of the government or commenting on sensitive topics related to race, religion and Malay privileges among others, will be filtered out from the national mainstream media sphere.

“People have things to say, so let’s hear them out”, said Zairil Khir Johari. Giving people their rights to say what is on their mind, express their feelings and pay attention to what they have to say are the basic responsibilities of a people’s leader. Although at the same time, not all of the people will convey their opinions in a good way. Numbers of the informants stressed on the need to educate Malaysians to deliver their messages, convey what they have in mind in ethical manner and present only facts but not speculation. Some of the informants also shared with the researcher that they witnessed more than enough cases on social media sites where people post threats, use hateful words, and show disrespects to other fellow users. One of the informants also showed concern about how some people on the Internet easily post pictures of

other people and humiliate the person for fun. This brings back to the earlier point on how media literacy and education play important role on determining how Malaysians behave online. It is seen that, Malaysians with good educational background and high media literacy are likely to behave better than those who are not. Hence, some of the informants also suggest for organizations and authorities in Malaysia to think of solutions to this social problem – either by organizing nation-wide campaigns on media ethics, and also by implementing certain extent of regulations. Although regulations should not stop people from voicing their opinions, but to oversee unethical conducts on the Internet that can cause hatred between groups and individuals, any conducts that can jeopardize one’s safety, and such matter.

“The other side of the coin is of course, your readers. Unfortunately, I think because of the control of the mainstream media, there is no other outlet for our people to express their opinions, so they go on social media. But also they’re not trained in how to express themselves in proper way. It goes back to education. Sometimes you just *hentam-hentam* (just simply say anything) only lah. That’s a bit boring after a while and disruptive and all that. So it’s both sides of the coin la.” – Marina Mahathir.

It is also believed that there are a lot of opinion leaders in Malaysia. Although not all of opinion leaders in Malaysia are seen to be critical of current events, especially those who are popular on social media sites – Malaysia is seen to have quite a good number of critical opinion leaders. Based on some of the responses received from the informants, these opinion leaders including themselves are not necessarily aiming to influence their audiences with certain political ideologies. “I am not here to influence people, but to provide space for discussion,” said Marina Mahathir. Opinion leaders are not necessarily aiming to influence people to follow or believe in their principles or ideologies, but may also have other objectives, including initiating discussion

on issues with their audiences, to provide space to talk about various things, and even to educate their followers on diverse issues that might not be widely discussed in Malaysian settings.

Malaysian laws and legislations as fear agents

One portion of the in-depth interview, the researcher asked the informants about their awareness on any Malaysian laws that oversee Malaysian online activities. As expected, the informants are aware of the existence of CMA 1998 and MCMC Act 1998, although some of them claimed that these two Acts are contradicting to what was promised during the launch of MSC Project by Mahathir Mohammad. The MSC¹⁷ Project, as previously mentioned, is a project spearheaded by Mahathir Mohammad as an effort to develop Internet and information technologies in the country (George, 2006; McDaniel, 2008) and under this project, it was promised that Internet should be free – ensuring no censorship on the Internet (MSC Malaysia, 1996). However, although CMA 1998 and MCMC Act 1998 are in place to monitor online activities, most informants showed more concern on the application of the “offline” laws and legislations such as; SOSMA 2012, OSA 1972, Sedition Act 1948, and Defamation Act 1957. These laws are seen as fear agents – curtailing the development of literate Malaysian society. Based on the responses received from the informants, many asserted that Malaysians should be given the freedom to express their opinions and should not be charged for merely being critical of the ruling government, for this is seen for the betterment of Malaysia, or even when they discuss about what are considered as sensitive issues. Being a supposedly democratic country, Malaysian government should allow Malaysians to practice their democratic rights – including the liberty to express their opinions on various issues. Nevertheless, informants also

acknowledged that some sort of regulations is necessary, but should not be manipulated by the people who are enforcing them. Malaysians can only be charged if their offenses can result in hate sentiment among groups¹⁸ and lead to disruption of national harmony – and charging them, should be carried out by providing strong evidences and valid justifications. Numbers of informants suggested that the current Malaysian laws especially the aforementioned “offline” laws should be reformed at the very least or to be repealed entirely, and should not be used to serve certain individuals or organizations for their own personal or political interests. The researcher also asked the informants on their opinions about enacting new law to oversee online activities, particularly of those on social media sites. Most of the informants believe that the current laws are sufficient in overseeing Malaysian online activities, while some believe specific law is necessary, although the law should not taking away the freedom of expression.

“I think we need to enact specific law like specific for online activities especially of those opinions and expressions and related stuff on the Internet. But they have to work together that benefits the *rakyat*. They cannot blanket blank this and this. They need to understand, we are all kicking up from free speech. The Internet has allowed us to talk and air our grievances. You can’t take away that freedom.” - Dina Zaman

Malaysian laws, in the opinion of the informants – are currently perceived as fear agents. With numbers of people have been charged under both online and “offline” laws for what they shared or expressed online – merely for being critical, and voicing opinions that are seen to be against the national interests, a few of the informants raised their concerns about such practice. By continuing to charge Malaysians this way, it is afraid that the vision to develop well literate, open minded and progressive Malaysian community can be hindered. Open intellectual discussion on various things, including what are considered as sensitive issues in Malaysia,

should be allowed by the government – as this is seen as a step towards progressing to become a developed country.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, social media is believed to be just a tool without direct power as its effectiveness depends on how the users use it. In the context of opinion leaders and political ideologies, the effectiveness of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter is seen to depend on whether or not the opinion leaders know the real potentials of the medium, and whether or not they know how to convey and bring forth their view on issues effectively on these platforms. With easy sharing features in social media sites, allowing post reaching large number of audiences helps opinion leaders to disseminate political ideologies effectively. Plus, the ever developing new communication technologies in the country, is seen to be very promising for the future of online political discourses, although several factors including laws and legislations can somehow affect the dynamic of these discourses. But still, with the constant demand for advanced communication technologies – it is expected that online critical discourse will still continue to bloom in Malaysian setting.

Online-based platforms allow opinion leaders, especially of those critical on political issues to give their viewpoints, unlike in the mainstream media. The controlled nature of mainstream media resulting in Malaysians shifting to new media sites particularly social media to voice their opinions to the public. Opinion leaders also use these sites to disseminate political ideologies freely, without being thoroughly filtered by the government. Unlike in mainstream media, where political messages are positively biased towards BN, social media provides equal space for people with different political ideologies to convey their ideas and opinions on national

issues. This primary advantage of social media is then perceived as the key assisting element for opinion leaders to disseminate political ideologies.

In answering the second research question, the researcher found that Malaysian laws and legislations could curtail the development of critical opinion leaders in Malaysia. Seen as fear agents, Malaysians laws, especially what the researcher called as the “offline” laws affect whether or not Malaysians willing to voice their true opinion on national issues online and also affect how Malaysians deliver their media content (style & tone of delivery) on social media. As few cases have been recorded in Malaysia, including the recent arrest of a cartoonist Zunar¹⁹ for what he posted online via Twitter (Abc.net.au, 2015; Ahmed, 2015; theguardian.com, 2015) and charged under Sedition Act 1948, the development of critical opinion leaders in Malaysia can be hindered. Such laws and legislations based on the data obtained by the researcher have to be amended at the very least, or to be repealed entirely, to give ways to people to express themselves. By continuously enforcing what are considered as draconian laws in the modern world, would hinder the vision to create intellectual Malaysian society. This would also results in the worsening of political polarization in the country, as dissatisfied Malaysians cannot avoid hostility towards the government.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nuurrianti binti Jalli is a doctoral candidate in Ohio University, United States. Her research interests include new media, politics and race.
Email: nuurrianti.jalli@gmail.com

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NOTE

¹ List of developing countries as of 2014 – income classification set on 1 July 2014 remain in effect until 1 July 2015. More: <http://www.iawp.org/joiniawp/countrylist.htm>

² BN coalition, which is composed of three different parties (United Malay National Organization, Malaysian Chinese Association and Malaysian Indian Association) that representing three different major ethnic groups in Malaysia (Shriver, 2002) shape the type of information, shared through major media outlets in the country.

³ Coalition of three major opposition parties in Malaysia; People's Justice Party (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS).

⁴ See for example: Printing Presses and Publication (PPPA) 1984 and Broadcasting Act 1988.

⁵ Reformed to SOSMA 2012.

⁶ Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 and Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission Act 1998

⁷ Refer to section on CMA 1998.

⁸ Official Secret Act 1972, Internal Security Act 1960, Sedition Act 1948 and Defamation Act 1957.

⁹ The significant difference between today's opinion leaders and opinion leaders in the era before the Internet, opinion

leaders today are not restricted to those who are in power, those with good positions in organization, companies or communities.

¹⁰ Bersih, which means "clean" in Malay, is short for Gabungan Pilihan Raya Bersih dan Adil (Coalition for Free and Fair Elections), a coalition of NGOs seeking electoral reforms (Pasuni & Liow, 2012).

¹¹ Internet citizen.

¹² Easy to share status updates, share Internet links, fast uploading mechanisms for both video and photo, and also share friends' posts (i.e: Facebook via share button, Twitter via retweet button). They also noted that, how merely liking posts on Facebook could make the liked posts visible on their friends' timeline.

¹³ "Hype" in this context is the most viral posts on Facebook. Issues that people on Facebook talk most about.

¹⁴ Bersih (is the Malay word for clean) also known as "the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections" (GlobalBersih, 2015; Radue, 2012) is a coalition of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with aim to fight for clean and fair election in Malaysian general election.

¹⁵ Tweets were tracked using the Bersih hashtag (#bersih) (Yeoh, 2011)

¹⁶ More information on MSC can be found at <http://www.mscomalaysia.my/>

¹⁷ Race, religions and ideologies among others.

¹⁸ Read here: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-02-11/malaysia-cartoonist-arrested-for-criticising-anwar-ruling/6086034>