New media and old politics: The role of

blogging in the 2008 Malaysian general

election

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List of abbreviations of political parties

BN   Barisan Nasional (National Front)
DAP   Democratic Action Party
Gerakan   Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (People's Movement Party
            Malaysia)
MCA   Malaysian Chinese Association
MIC   Malaysian Indian Congress
PAS   Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Islamic Party of Malaysia)
PKR   Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party, formerly Parti
            Keadilan Nasional or National Justice Party and became PKR
            after merging with Parti Rakyat Malaysia or Malaysian
            Malaysian People's Party, formerly Parti Sosialis Rakyat
            Malaysia or Malaysian People's Socialist Party)
PR   Pakatan Rakyat (People's Coalition, an opposition coalition)
PSM   Parti Sosialis Malaysia (Party Socialist of Malaysia, formerly
            Parti Rakyat Malaysia or Malaysian People's Party)
UMNO   United Malays National Organisation

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Abstract

This thesis argues that blogging can open up a space for free speech and, at times, facilitate wider debate in the relatively authoritarian society of Malaysia. At the same time, blogging is heavily shaped by the prevailing elite groups and political culture in Malaysian politics. The thesis finds that blogging is able to facilitate the forming of a network of alternative or dissenting views but it can also be dominated by existing elite groups in society. The majority of bloggers are highly educated professionals and many of them are media and political elites. The use of blogging by some civil society and partisan bloggers, particularly pro-UMNO bloggers, to remove political rivals by staging a form of "psychological warfare" points to a dominance of factional politics within UMNO in the Malaysian blogosphere during the 2008 general election. Thus, blogging does provide a space for certain liberal democratic practices but it also reflects existing elite groups and political culture in the country.

This thesis also argues that blogging does bring about new ways of campaigning in electoral politics. The use of blogging as part of campaigning among opposition politicians is, however, influenced by the wider institutional and societal structures in society. The findings reveal that blogging can provide a space for mobilising political action. It also allows opposition politicians to disseminate information on campaign activities and promote electoral candidates but blogging loses its appeal

among politician-bloggers during the campaigning period. Blogging, thus, does not have a simple across-the-board function of promoting liberal democratic practices and transforming new ways of campaigning in electoral politics. This thesis concludes that an examination of blogging has to be situated within its particular social and political environment in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of its influence on democracy and political life.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Background of research

New information and communications technologies, particularly the internet and blogging, have been widely regarded as having the potential to further liberal democratic ideals, transform politics and encourage civic engagement in modern society. The new media are said to have the capabilities of bringing about new ways of campaigning in electoral politics (Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005; Williams et al, 2005; Kalstrup & Pedersen 2005; Albrecht et al, 2007; Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009). More recent examples on the use of online social media are evident in the presidential campaign of Barack Obama in the United States (Panagopoulos, 2009). Some of these claims are based on the characteristics of the new media itself, such as hyperlinking, digitality and interactivity. Some of these features have been regarded as making it possible for ordinary citizens to become news producers (Bruns, 2008) or broadcasters (Perlmutter, 2008) instead of mere consumers or receivers of information. Through blogging, the new media are also able to facilitate the voice of marginalised groups, thus providing an avenue for them to express their views on particular issues (Keren, 2006; Pole, 2009). Blogging is, thus, deemed to be a fascinating tool that can facilitate a new

form of political participation, thereby promoting democracy and enriching political life (Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009).

Such liberating aspects of new media can help spread democracy in repressive countries where public dissent is stifled or opposition views are actively quashed by pro-government forces (Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Kulikova & Perlmutter, 2007; Moyo, 2009). Blogging can become a rich source of information in countries ruled by authoritarian regimes that curb the free flow of information to citizens, thus sustaining democratisation in those nations (Kulikova & Perlmutter, 2007: 29). The two scholars reached the conclusion in their study of blogging in Kyrgyzstan where its president Askar Akayev fled the country after a series of public demonstrations in 2005 (Ibid). A similar conclusion was reached in a study of new media during the March 2008 Zimbabwean election (Moyo, 2009). Moyo (2009) argues that weblogs and mobile phone short messaging services (SMS) are a source of information for its delayed election results. Recent events that witnessed a widespread use of the internet and blogging, particularly the street protests in Egypt and the Arab World, brought about similar pronouncements that the new media can fulfil democratic ideals (Preston, 2011). The use of blogs, YouTube videos, and Facebook pages are said to have connected ordinary people with human rights advocates and created a new public space to discuss public outrage about the government.

The unprecedented results of the 12th Malaysian general election held on March 8, 2008, which saw a significant shift in public opinion away

from the ruling regime, witnessed the emergence of similar ideas about the democratising effects of the internet and blogging (Welsh, 2008; Abdul Rashid, 2009; Mohd Azizuddin & Zengeni, 2010). Described as a "political tsunami" (Gan, 2008; Ong, 2008), the election outcomes recorded a number of firsts in the country since its independence from Britain in 1957. For the first time, the Barisan Nasional (BN) ruling coalition suffered a massive defeat at the polls. The ruling regime's obsession for its usual two-thirds majority in parliament had finally been thwarted after 50 years. The opposition parties, for the first time in 2008, presented a united front by challenging the ruling regime to straight contests in Peninsula Malaysia (Nik Nazmi, 2010)[1]. The opposition's informal cooperation, involving the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) had, for the first time, been swept into power in four states; Selangor, Perak, Penang and Kedah (New Sunday Times, 2008a). PAS also retained its majority in Kelantan in the 2008 polls. The informal cooperation, called Pakatan Rakyat (PR), was formalised after the election to enable the opposition coalition to form the state governments of Selangor, Perak, Penang and Kedah. The opposition also increased its parliamentary seats from 20 in 2004 to 82 in 2008 (Financial Daily, 2008). Its widespread victory in urban

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[1] However, straight fights did not reach fruition in Sabah and Sarawak. This was partly because of the different dynamics of East Malaysian politics. In Sarawak, the BN won 30 out of 31 parliamentary seats while the ruling coalition won 24 out of the 25 constituencies it contested in Sabah (Loh, 2009: 14).

areas was evident from the opposition winning 10 out of 13 parliamentary constituencies in the Federal Territory, 11 of which are in Kuala Lumpur and one each in Putrajaya and Labuan (New Sunday Times, 2008b). The outcome of 2008 polls also heralded the successful election of more than 20 parliamentarians[2] who kept and maintained blogs during the election. In many ways, the 2008 election was a "watershed in the country's history" (Ooi, 2008b: 6).

The internet, blogging and mobile phone SMS began to receive widespread recognition as significant tools in providing leverage to the opposition during the 2008 election campaign (Welsh, 2008; Gan, 2008; Suhaini, 2008; Tan, 2008; Abdul Rashid, 2009). Such impacts of the new technologies were viewed within an environment of tight media control by the BN ruling coalition partners - the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) – coupled with the use of strict regulations governing the media industry (Loh & Mustafa, 1996; Zaharom, 2002). The use of new media was even listed as one of the top ten factors that led to the dismal performance of the ruling coalition (Welsh, 2008). The new technologies were deemed to have provided more advantageous campaigning methods for opposition political parties because they were

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[2] A list of successfully elected parliamentarians who kept and maintained a blog during the 2008 general election is available in Appendix 1. The list was generated from the content analysis conducted for this research to identify politicians who kept and maintained a blog when they contested in the 2008 election.

cheaper than hiring campaign workers (Ibid). The online platform enabled opposition political parties, which were getting little mainstream media coverage, to reach a wider audience, including young voters (Abdul Rashid, 2009). As political writer Suhaini Aznam (2008: 2) observes, the new voters in the 2008 general election, who are "younger, well-informed, IT literate with probing minds and no emotional ties to Merdeka (independence) - sealed the country's political fate." Even the then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi acknowledged the power of the weblogs after the BN ruling coalition suffered defeat in many of the constituencies it contested and lost its customary two-thirds majority (The Straits Times Singapore, 2008).

Other political analysts went further by declaring that online social media were important instruments for promoting democracy and could strengthen the democratisation process and public deliberation in Malaysia (Mohd Azizuddin & Zengeni, 2010: 13). This is particularly so in an environment where internet usage in the country is on the rise, thereby enabling a wider audience to participate in the democratic space. Statistics showed that internet usage grew from 15% in 2000 to 62.8% in 2008 (Internet World Stats, 2010). By 2009, it increased to 65.7% (Ibid). The rise in the usage of the internet contributed to the online platform becoming a channel for alternative views that received little coverage in the tightly controlled mainstream media. As such, Mohd Azizuddin and Zengeni (2010) argue that the use of the internet as a conduit for alternative

information can have a democratising effect by freeing up the flow of information, thereby increasing political transparency. The internet also opens up spaces for public deliberation in the marketplace of ideas (Ibid). Political analyst and blogger Khoo Kay Peng was quoted in a news article by Tan (2008) as saying that the internet heralded an era of liberalisation which could bring about a more level playing field for the opposition. The internet can even become a tool for the opposition to put forward alternative information which can turn opposition support into votes at the ballot boxes (Tan, 2008). Such observations inevitably led to the notion that the new information and communications technologies played a significant role in the country's politics.

However, optimistic claims about the democratising effects of new technologies are received with caution (Ooi, 2008a; Gan, 2008.) Although Gan (2008) is of the view that the 2008 election results may not have been possible without the internet, he feels that there is also the need for "all key ingredients to be in place" for changes to occur (p. 1). He observed that "unhappiness with the government was already simmering on the surface and the Internet brought it to a boil" (Gan, 2008: 1-2). Similarly, Ooi (2008a) was only willing to say that the internet played an indirect role in the election outcomes. Drawing on his own experience when he contested in the Jelutong parliamentary constituency in Penang in 2008, Ooi (2008a) pointed out that internet penetration was not relevant in his constituency which was made up of "people living around the poverty line" (p. 1). The

internet, thus, did not play a prominent role in his campaign. Instead, Ooi (2008a) noted that the Chinese-language print media "helped to impart our messages" (p. 2) to rebut attacks from the ruling coalition. These views seem to indicate a limitation in the democratic potentials of the internet and blogging.

Political analysts also attributed the dismal performance of the BN to the failing of the administration of then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his inability to fulfil promises pledged during the 2004 election. In-fighting amongst the BN coalition partners, and new patterns of opposition cooperation and activism, including several notable instances of opposition activity, were also highlighted as significant factors that shaped the election results (Ong, 2008; Welsh, 2008; Ooi, 2008b). Some of the incidents referred to were an increase in the number of street rallies in Kuala Lumpur in the run-up to the 2008 election. Among them were the mass protests against rising fuel prices, public assemblies to highlight the unfair treatment and economic backwardness of Indians in Malaysia led by a group of activists called the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) and demonstrations held to demand a free and fair election led by Bersih, a grouping of 64 non-governmental organisations and 5 political parties (Ooi, 2008b: 11; Aliran Online, 2008). Other sensitive issues confronting the different ethnic communities, such as religious conversion matters, involving burial rites of Muslim converts who had apparently renounced

Hinduism before they died were other points of contention in the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society (Ooi, 2008b: 9).

It is within a context of tight media control by a ruling coalition, which curtails the free flow of information that this research hopes to examine the role of blogging in an election. It assesses the ability of the internet and blogging to create democratic spaces that enrich political life by focusing not only on how individuals made use of blogging but also on the particular circumstances that shaped their purposes. As aptly pointed out by one of the participants of this research when discussing the impact of blogging on the 2008 election result:

> To say that the blog played no part is a little bit naïve. But to think that we were phenomenal I think is to overstate the case (Haris, 2010).

While accepting that characteristics of the new media can to a certain degree enhance democratic practices, this research also places emphasis on the particular environment and specific moments in electoral politics when blogging is used to realise those potentials. It is within this nuanced framework that this research hopes to understand the extent to which blogging can promote democracy, transform politics and ways of campaigning in electoral politics. This comprehensive approach can also help to prevent the pitfalls of a dichotomised or reductive approach on the role of blogging in encouraging liberal democratic ideals and enriching political life during an election. More importantly, a more comprehensive

approach can provide a better understanding of the particular circumstances in which blogging can promote or restrict those ideals. A more broad-based approach can also help identify the specific conditions in which blogging can be limited in realising those potentials.

Theoretical framework: An overview

There are generally two broad schools of thoughts regarding the influence of new technologies on modern societies. One branch of scholarship adopts the technological determinism approach, which is grounded in the idea that technology is the driving force of development in society. The basic assertion is that a new sort of social system emerges as a result of new technologies.

An alternative lens for analysing the influence of new information and communications technologies on modern societies is provided by scholars who adopt a more nuanced approach to study the impacts of new media (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002; May, 2002; Barney, 2004; Kumar, 2004; Webster, 2006; Cammaerts, 2008; Hindman, 2009). This school of thought considers the technological determinism approach as insufficient because it disregards the context in which the new technology is applied. They emphasise social, political and economic contexts that confirm existing patterns of relations instead of assuming their transformation into new ones. Webster (2006: 265) suggests adopting the political economy approach, with particular reference to the imperatives imposed by capitalism, the requisites of democratic practices and the question of power

relations to understand the implications of new technologies on the social world. The approach focuses on wider institutional and societal structures when understanding the impact of new media on modern society. Some of the broader issues deemed paramount to the political economy approach are media ownership and the distribution and utilisation of resources, including the role of the state and existing regulations governing the media industry. Concerns of class and social relations are also reflected in Habermas's notion of the public sphere which describes a space in which, ideally, all citizens are guaranteed access, in an unrestricted fashion, to be involved in forming public opinions on matters of general interest (Habermas, 2008). The argument is that the political economy approach, with its specific reference to media control and access to the use of media, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of technological outcomes in contemporary society (Webster, 2006).

Arguing for a framework that takes into consideration the dynamic intertwining of media devices, practices adopted by individuals who use the communication tool and organisational forms that emerge out of the instrument and practices, Lievrouw and Livingstone (2002) assert that the consequences of new media on society do not rest solely on new technology. The two scholars point to the significance of human action and effects that grow out of the use of the media technology. In the same vein, Barney (2004) proposes the need to adopt a composite view by examining the essence or spirit of technology, the technological design, situation and

use, when determining technological outcomes in contemporary society. The framework proposed by Lievrouw and Livingstone (2002) and Barney (2004) has relevance to understanding how individuals adopt the new media to share information and how the practices can remediate forms of social ties or ways of engaging in politics. Instead of merely focusing on technology as the cause of societal change, this thesis is guided by aspects of the political economy approach, Habermas's notion of the public sphere and the social determinism perspective in an examination of the extent to which blogging can enhance liberal democratic practices and enrich political life in Malaysia. Moreover, a more intricate understanding of the relationship between new media and political life can be achieved when the three frameworks of analysis are combined in a way that takes into account the many competing social and political forces shaping blogging and democratic politics.

Other scholars who argue for a more nuanced analysis of the internet and blogging on politics also emphasise the importance of the particular social, political and economic context (Buchstein, 1997; DiMaggio et al, 2001; Agre, 2002; Albrecht, 2006; Chadwick, 2007; Cammaerts, 2008). This broad-based approach places importance on wider institutional and political economic factors (Buchstein, 1997; DiMaggio et al, 2001; Cammaerts, 2008), social processes and cultural practices surrounding new media (Agre, 2002; Albrecht, 2006; Chadwick, 2007). This more multi-dimensional approach can provide a more comprehensive understanding

on the role of blogging, thus avoiding a dichotomous, simplistic and binary orientation.

Political economy approach on blogging and democratic ideals

There are some central concerns of the political economy approach that are relevant to this thesis. Firstly, it is the importance of locating the use of blogging within a particular social and political environment. Questions relating to control of the mainstream media and existing legislation that stifles public dissent and free speech provide the specific social and political context to understand how blogging can be viewed as having democratic potentials. For example, blogging is deemed to have democratising effects in relatively authoritarian societies ruled by regimes that suppress the free flow of information (Keren, 2006; Kulikova & Perlmutter, 2007; Moyo, 2009; Lim, 2009). The use of blogs to provide alternative information largely ignored by the mainstream media has also been described as facilitating free speech and promoting the voice of marginalised groups (Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009). At a macro level, blogging does hold certain democratic potentials by becoming an avenue for free expression.

The political economy approach that also provides closer examination on the question of media ownership and control by focusing on the actors involved in blogging is a key element relevant to this research. This is evident in the work of Allan (2006) who focuses on information crucial in understanding the development of citizen journalism within a particular

environment. A deeper assessment of the individual behind the blog, the individual's background, previous work experiences and political affiliation, the dominant discourse propagated on the blog, including the motivation in keeping a blog, can provide vital information on the particular section of society that is benefiting from the new media. This can indicate the possible dominance of new media by elites in society to promote a particular discourse in the blogosphere. This approach, thus, helps in giving a less superficial account on the role of blogging in promoting democratic practices and enriching political life.

Habermas's notion of the public sphere on blogging and liberal democratic principles

Certain aspects of Habermas's notion of the public sphere are useful in analysing the extent to which blogging can fulfil particular liberal democratic practices. Firstly, the central theme of Habermas's public sphere that is of great relevance to this thesis is concerning the ability of all citizens to take part in debates on matters of general interest in an unrestricted fashion (Habermas, 2008). This raises the question of digital divide in terms of the particular section of society that has better access to digital media. This can determine the level of participation in free speech and public deliberation and in creating new ways or fluid forms of engaging in political action. With information located at the core of the public sphere in a democratic society, the type of information generated in the blogosphere becomes relevant for assessing whether blogging can

improve the quality of public debates. This is tied with the process of the "refeudalization" of the public sphere.

As media undergo certain pressures in the 20th century, Habermas (2008) speaks of the process of "refeudalization." The process, referring to the manipulation of information by spin doctors or public relations experts as well as advertisers and corporate-controlled media, will hamper the citizens' ability to engage in rational debates and obstruct public reasoning (Habermas, 2008). Concerns of media manipulation can be understood in terms of how news slants can be propagated in the media by telling audiences not only what to think about an issue (Cohen, 1963) but also how to think about it (Entman, 1993; Kuypers, 2002). Here, a closer assessment of the dominant discourse flourishing on the Malaysian blogosphere can provide an indication on whether blogging has been used to sway public opinion or to provide democratic space for public discussion and debates.

Social determinism approach to blogging and democracy

This approach provides a dialectical dimension to an understanding of blogging and its impact on democratic practices by employing the idea of "social shaping and social consequences" of the new media (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002). It pays close attention to the dynamic relationships and interdependencies of the online platform, the practices adopted to pass on information through blogging and the social arrangements that emerge out of the practice. In this respect, it provides an understanding of the unique

moments in which blogging is used in particular ways to achieve a particular purpose, within which specific social ties can emerge.

This perspective can also be viewed as providing a sort of micro-level analysis to further understand blogging and its potential for enhancing democratic life. It places emphasis on the practice of blogging and its resulting social arrangements, thus complementing the political economy approach that touches on wider institutional and societal structures in understanding the impact of new media on contemporary society. Thus, the ability of the internet and blogging in creating democratic spaces that enrich political life is "the fruit not only of the application of the new technologies but also of the contribution of all those who must guarantee an active presence toward this end" (Bentivegna, 2002: 59).

Research objectives

Guided by the political economy approach, Habermas's notion of public sphere and the social determinism perspective, this research adopts a more broad-based approach to assess the extent to which blogging can promote liberal democratic practices and enrich political life in electoral politics. It is also an attempt to avoid a problem raised by Atton (2004) in his research on the internet and new social movements: "It would be mistaken to consider blogs as a homogenous phenomenon" (p. 55). The role of blogging during the 2008 general election in Malaysia is first examined within the context of a multi-cultural society ruled by a relatively repressive regime that has tight control over the mainstream media.

However, this research probes further by investigating the individuals who are actively blogging in an election. This involves an examination of the socio-economic background of the bloggers, their occupation, past work experiences and political affiliation and other information that can provide an indication of the section of society that bloggers are from.

This research also hopes to gain insight into the ways in which blogging is used to achieve particular objectives at various points in an election. This is realised by investigating the dominant discourse on the blogosphere, the kind of information available online, the pattern and motivation of blog use at particular moments in an election. An inquiry into the particularistic goal that the bloggers are targeting during electoral politics can indicate the distinct manners in which the online platform is used to achieve specific goals in an election. The various ways in which blogging is used at different moments in electoral politics can help identify the particular circumstances in which blogging can alter democratic practices.

Another aspect that is of interest in this research is the social ties or arrangements that emerge out of the use of blogging in an election. Such ties can demonstrate the ability of civic engagement to achieve a particular goal. This inquiry hopes to examine the specific circumstances in which fluid ties can be sustained to achieve a political goal at a particular moment in an election. It hopes to identify the social and political forces that can play a role in realising the democratic potentials of blogging.

As it is difficult to assess the effects of new media on democracy, this thesis hopes to broach the question by examining the extent to which blogging can promote liberal democratic practices and enrich political life. As such, the two broad questions for this thesis are the extent to which blogging is able to promote liberal democratic practices and the extent to which blogging can contribute to ways of campaigning in an election.

Research questions

Research question 1: How does blogging expand liberal democratic practices?

It must first be clarified here that liberal democratic practices in this thesis refer to the right to free speech and expression of ideas and thoughts; the right to take part in public debates and the right to free association and movement. Some may argue that these liberal democratic practices are based on western traditions but it must be acknowledged that they are also enshrined in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia. Moreover, many of the participants in this research articulated these rights as being afforded by the new media when they decided to set up a blog.

One aspect of Habermas's notion of the public sphere is related to the subject of deliberative democracy where blogging is potentially seen as having the capability to provide new spaces for open and free debates on political issues. This thesis hopes to provide some indication of whether blogging can generate public debates among its readers and whether the aim in setting up blogs is to generate public discussion in the blogosphere.

These questions can provide an indication of whether the web phenomenon can expand and improve the quality of debates in a public discussion.

Another aspect of public debates is information. A manipulation of information for propaganda purposes is another component of inquiry in this thesis to assess how blog contents can contribute to public debates. Attention is directed at how information is framed on the blogs, in accordance with the understanding of Entman (1993) who focuses on how contents are framed in order to direct readers on how to think about an issue. This thesis scrutinises blog contents to assess if they are framed in particular ways to sway public opinion. Another facet of manipulation is scandal politics, which is examined in this research to help assess the process of "refeudalization" that signifies a weakening of the public sphere. It can, in turn, give an idea on whether the blog information can improve the quality of debates, thus promoting public deliberation.

A further aspect of democracy relates to the use of blogs to express views, to push for political and policy reforms, mobilise readers for political action, such as protest rallies in November 2007, and to encourage readers to take part in the 2008 election as voters or volunteers and to raise funds for campaigning. These questions can provide an indication on whether blogging can promote political participation in an election.

Research question 2: How does blogging contribute to ways of campaigning in an election?

Previous research has shown that blogging, in the western tradition, is a common part of campaigning to raise funds, recruit volunteers and keep readers informed of campaign activities. Similar questions pertaining to the use of blog posts for those purposes will be addressed in this thesis to identify ways in which blogging can contribute to new ways of campaigning in a different kind of society.

The emergence of fluid or loose ties (Bimber, 1998; Chadwick, 2007) that develop out of the practice of blogging is examined to obtain an understanding on how blogging can contribute or change traditional methods of campaigning in electoral politics. It investigates ways of campaigning in an election, which includes the management of blog information through framing and the facilitation of loose ties to realise particular goals in electoral politics. These aspects can offer a deeper understanding on the precise moments of how, when and why political actors are using the new media to achieve particular political goals in an election.

Methodology

This thesis adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the role of blogging in promoting democratic practices and enhancing political life in electoral politics. The quantitative method is a content analysis of blog posts that discussed public interest and political issues in

2007 and 2008. The content analysis included an examination of blogs and reader comments to the blog posts selected for examination in this thesis. Simple frequencies and percentages were used in this exploratory study of the Malaysian blogosphere to identify the ways in which blogging was used during electoral politics. It identified the dominant discourse, the call for political action, the tone of blog posts, including the targets of blog posts containing positive and negative tone. The occupations of bloggers were compiled from an analysis of the blogs in order to obtain an indication of the background of those involved in the activity. Cross-tabulations were used to tease out the trend in blog use among electoral candidates and non-candidates.

In-depth interviews with 30 bloggers were conducted to obtain a closer examination of the social processes involved in blogging during electoral politics. Questions on when, how and why blogging was used, the political goal that bloggers hoped to achieve through blogging, were addressed during the interviews. The questions also touched on particular moments, such as before, during and after the election to examine similarities and differences in the pattern of blog use at specific points of the election cycle. The interviews also covered questions on the political affiliation, work experiences and motivation of bloggers. Analysis of the in-depth interviews involved identifying similarities and differences among the bloggers, such as their political affiliation, the goal they wanted to achieve through blogging, the manner in which blogging was employed at

particular moments in an election. The analysis saw the classification of bloggers into three relatively distinct groups – politician-bloggers, partisan bloggers and civil society bloggers. The politician-bloggers were individuals who contested the 2008 election and kept a blog at that time. Partisan bloggers were made up of individuals who were political party members and actively blogging in the 2008 election. Finally, the group of civil society bloggers consisted mainly of members of non-governmental organisations or non-political party members who were maintaining a blog in the election. The three groups of relatively distinct bloggers portrayed different patterns of blog use to reach a particular goal at defining moments during electoral politics.

Both the quantitative and qualitative methods of research are useful in providing a more comprehensive understanding to the research questions. The thesis provides a glimpse into how and when blogging can realise its democratic potentials for the partisan and civil society bloggers but at the same time is unable to create new ways of campaigning for the group of politician-bloggers. The particular social and political context confronting the bloggers and the defining moments in electoral politics are equally important in contributing to the democratising effects of the new technology.

Outline of thesis

Chapter Two highlights two opposing theoretical frameworks that discuss technological outcomes in contemporary societies. It briefly

explores a technological determinism approach in understanding the impact of new information and communication technologies on modern societies. Contrary to a technological deterministic approach, it explores more comprehensive perspectives in an attempt to understand the effects. It focuses on a framework which encompasses the political economy approach, Habermas's notion of public sphere and the social determinism perspective for a more nuanced understanding of new media on modern societies.

Chapter Three applies certain aspects of this more broad-based framework to a discussion of blogging and democracy in electoral politics. It examines optimistic and pessimistic viewpoints on blogging and democracy, its impact on professional journalism and ways of campaigning in electoral politics. It further explores the value of the political economy approach and Habermas's notion of public sphere and the process of 'refeudalization' in providing a more comprehensive understanding of blogging on democratic politics. The chapter also touches on the advantages that the social determinism approach can provide in the inquiry of blogging and democracy.

Chapter Four gives an account of the methods and principles that guide the empirical research. It discusses the content analysis of blogs, blog posts and reader comments to determine the patterns of blog use in the Malaysian blogosphere. This is followed by a discussion of the in-

depth interviews to provide further explanation on the use of blogging at particular moments in the 2008 election.

Chapter Five provides a social, political and economic background on Malaysia. It gives a description of how and why the country is considered a relatively authoritarian society under a ruling coalition that curtails the free flow of information. It examines some of the existing legislation pertaining to the control of media. This chapter also situates the internet and blogging within this restrictive environment and the dominant political culture. It also explores the development of blogging over the years, leading to the surprising results of the 2008 general election.

Chapter Six discusses results of the content analysis. It examines the type of contents published on the blogs as well as the use of blogs to mobilise readers for political action, to vote in the election, to recruit volunteers and raise funds. The blog posts are also assessed in terms of the tone and its targets. Individuals behind the blogs are examined in terms of their occupation, whether they are candidates or non-candidates of the 2008 election, A- or B-list bloggers, identified or pseudonymous bloggers. The reader comments are also scrutinised on the ability to generate public discussions.

Chapter Seven highlights findings of in-depth interviews conducted with the group of politician-bloggers. It examined the manners in which blogging was used by this group of bloggers in the lead-up to the general election, as well as during and afterwards. The chapter also discusses the

different ways that blogging was used at particular moments in electoral politics to demonstrate that blogging does not function uniformly across-the-board. Instead, the blogging activity is adapted to the specific social and political realities to achieve a particular goal in electoral politics.

Chapter Eight discusses the ways in which the group of partisan bloggers is using their blogs in a strategic manner to realise a particular goal in an election. They sought out influential bloggers, held private meetings and drew up a secret pact on how to manage blog information to change public perception. The analysis indicates that blogging can cross political boundaries to forge opportunistic ties to achieve a particular goal in electoral politics. At the same time, the discussion here shows a downside to public deliberation.

Chapter Nine explores the use of the online platform by the group of civil society bloggers in the 2008 election. Blogging was used to set up campaigns to try to influence election results. This chapter suggests that blogging can accommodate a multitude of views, aimed at making political demands and policy reforms during an election. The flexibility of blogging to form fluid ties with other bloggers to achieve a particular goal is also evident here.

The conclusion in Chapter Ten highlights a summary of the findings and a discussion of the theoretical contribution of this thesis. It explores the value of some of the approaches in the theoretical framework in understanding blogging and democracy. It also identifies the particular

circumstances that blogging can promote or restrict those democratic ideals. The future of blogging is also addressed in the conclusion as Malaysia prepares for the 13th general election in the near future.

Limitations of study

This study examined only blogs that were written in English and Malay. Chinese and Tamil-written blogs had been excluded in the content analysis because I am not fluent in the two languages. Secondly, this study had excluded websites run by political parties and online news websites although they were also regarded as important in the Malaysian blogosphere. This was because the practices, motivation and principles in running political party websites and online news portals could be different from the individual bloggers who kept and maintained a blog during the 2008 election.

In-depth interviews conducted with electoral candidates were all from opposition political parties. Efforts to interview ruling coalition candidates who maintained a blog during the election did not materialise. Moreover, there were more opposition candidates who were actively blogging during the 2008 election than those from the ruling coalition.

Despite these weaknesses, I am confident this research can still provide a deeper understanding of the role of blogging and its democratising effects in Malaysia because of several reasons. Firstly, an assessment of only English and Malay blogs is sufficient to provide an understanding of blogging and politics because political power in Malaysia

is dominated by the Malays, many of whom are fluent in both English and Malay. Moreover, many Chinese and Indian bloggers also understand English and Malay. Thus, investigating only English and Malay blogs can provide a closer assessment of the political culture of the Malaysian society. In-depth interviews that did not include ruling coalition candidates only reflected the situation of the Malaysian blogosphere during the 2008 general election. The blogosphere at that time was occupied mainly by opposition political candidates instead of ruling coalition candidates, who were ignoring the use of cyberspace for political purposes. However, in-depth interviews with partisan bloggers who were members of the ruling coalition helped to highlight the political landscape and interrelationship between divergent political forces in the use of blogs to achieve a particular goal in electoral politics. In-depth interviews with partisan bloggers who were aligned to UMNO were particularly fruitful in providing an understanding of how they were using their blogs and the particularistic goal they were trying to achieve at that time. Therefore, I am confident that the conclusion reached in this research is an analysis of information obtained from the different groups of bloggers who were actively blogging to realise an agenda during electoral politics.

Chapter 2

Theoretical framework on new media, democracy and political life

Introduction

Observations concerning the power of blogging can be traced to views that the new media have the potential to promote democratic ideals and practices, which is also the hallmark of a utopian belief that underlies the technological determinism approach. This approach is based on the contention that the internet can, to a certain extent, facilitate a free flow of information, provide a space for rational public discourse towards the process of decision-making and become a platform for citizen scrutiny of power (Kahn & Kellner, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002; Mitra, 2001). It also revolves around the idea that the internet can potentially offer a marketplace of ideas, where access and participation is unlimited and inclusive, collapsing the boundaries of space and time, and, possibly, loosening the control of information by old media. The assumption is that the new media, particularly the internet and the World Wide Web, are also transforming the practice of journalism by making the new media more democratic, through the practice of citizen journalism, thus, giving the people greater freedom to participate in open democratic debates (Pavlik, 2001; Bowman & Willis; 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Rosen, 2006).

However, the technological determinism approach has been rejected by many scholars, who are wary about such celebratory views of the new technology (May, 2002; Webster, 2006; Cammaerts, 2008; Hindman, 2009). Insisting that issues of power, resources and inequality are still significant questions in understanding the impact of technology on contemporary society, Webster (2006) suggests adopting the political economy approach and Habermas's notion of the public sphere to obtain a more comprehensive framework when investigating effects of new information and communication technology on modern society. This provides the particular social and political environment when examining the democratic potential of internet and blogging in the Malaysian context.

New media scholars have also expressed apprehension over the assumption that technological advancement and development occur separately from their social context. They argue that development of new media and society are mutually embedded (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002; Barney, 2004; van Dijk, 2006). It is the mutual influence of technology and society that leads to the nature of that relationship and its particular outcomes (Barney, 2004: 35). Lievrouw and Livingstone (2002) are explicit in their concern about this separation as they argue for a framework that "captures the rich interweaving of media technology, human action and social structure" (p. 7). The framework must focus on the dynamic relationships and interdependencies that emerge out of the device or instrument used to communicate information, the activities or

practices that people adopt to convey the information and the social arrangements or organisational forms that develop out of the devices and practices (Ibid).

With specific reference to the role of the internet and blogging on politics, several scholars argue for a more broad-based approach in understanding the complexities of new media on political life (Buchstein, 1997; DiMaggio et al, 2001; Agre, 2002; Albrecht, 2006; Chadwick, 2007; Cammaerts, 2008). This more nuanced approach also takes into consideration institutional and political economic factors that can shape internet use and behaviour (DiMaggio et al, 2001). They advocate the need to study social processes surrounding the new media (Agre, 2002: 315) or more specifically, processes within the context of existing democratic institutions (Buchstein, 1997). This approach also argues for an examination of cultural practices in understanding the impact of internet on politics (Albrecht, 2006). Instead of making or debunking claims about the potential of the internet and blogging, this group of scholars is advancing a more comprehensive manner of examining how new technologies are shaping and constraining political norms and behaviours within particular contexts.

This chapter will now begin with a discussion of the technological determinism approach and a critique of the perspective. It will then outline the significance of the political economy approach, Habermas's notion of

the public sphere and the social determinism perspective to highlight why certain aspects of the three approaches are useful in guiding this research.

Technological determinism approach

An underlying assumption of this perspective is that it regards technological innovation as inherently neutral, designed to achieve specific aims for the people. This contention is reflected in the debate of the information society which generally revolves around a dichotomous discourse that new information and communications technologies have brought about the emergence of a new kind of society. The basic assertion of advocates of an information society is that the driving force behind the development of society is the "production of information values and not material values" (Masuda, 2004: 15). Proponents of the information society argue that a new society has emerged from the old as a result of the new technologies, which see "quantitative changes in information bringing into being a qualitative new sort of social system" (Webster, 2006: 8). However opposing theorists, who emphasise 'continuity,' are quick to point out that the form and function of information are "subordinated to long-established principles and practices" (Ibid: 7).

A technological determinism approach is deemed insufficient in understanding the effects of new information and communications technologies on contemporary society for several reasons (May, 2002; Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002; Barney, 2004; Webster, 2006). One main contention is that the approach assumes that technology is the driving force

of social change, re-organising economic relations, transforming political practices and community life, and contributing to a decline in the nation state and its authority (May, 2002: 3; Webster, 2006: 44). It disregards the context in which new technology "is being applied within a political and economic framework that confirms and accentuates existing patterns, rather than giving rise to new ones" (Kumar, 2004: 116), thus maintaining and even magnifying existing social inequalities. Although the instruments and techniques may change, Kumar (2004) emphasises that the "overriding goals and purposes of capitalist industrial societies remain the same as before" (p. 117). Instead of merely focusing on technology, wider institutional and societal structures, including issues of ownership and social inequality can present a more compelling understanding on the impact of new technologies on contemporary society.

Critics also argue that technology and society are, in fact, mutually embedded and co-determining (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002; Barney, 2004). This is because technological outcomes in a contemporary society can be constructed as a result of the interaction between a particular technology and the social relations in which the technology is situated (Pinch & Bijker, 1990: 40-42; Barney, 2004: 40). An emphasis on social context reminds new media researchers of the need to be attentive to local differences in understanding technological outcomes (Barney, 2004: 43). Barney (2004) lists four factors – the essence or spirit of technology, technological design, situation and use – as significant when analysing

technological outcomes in modern society or a network society. This perspective is essential for gaining an insight into questions of social and technological questions of "power, access and control within networks" (Gane & Beer, 2008: 32). This is similar to the contention of Lievrouw & Livingstone (2002) for the need to incorporate social, political and economic factors in understanding new media[3], which is also a phrase used to mark a departure from 'old media' in terms of a shift in historical periods – a transition from modernity to postmodernity, or a change from an industrial age to a 'post-industrial' information age (Lister et al, 2003: 10).

Political economy approach to media and democracy

The political economy approach is useful in its focus on how wider institutional and societal structures can influence the way media and communication systems function in society, including how people experience media. It provides the particular social and political contexts, in which information is produced, distributed and consumed to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of media in promoting democratic ideals and practices. There are two key elements that are significant for this thesis: Firstly, the issue of ownership and control of the media, which relates to a concern about the commodification of information, the question of class inequalities and access to information;

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[3] Characteristics of the new media, such as digitality, interactivity, hypertextuality, dispersal and virtuality are some of the defining concepts that distinguish 'new media' from 'old media' (Lister et al, 2003: 13).

secondly, the role of the state, in terms of the laws and regulations governing the media industry, behaviour and content. It must be clarified here that the idea of class in the western context may not apply entirely to Malaysia where class is less an organising factor than other politico-socio-economic dividers, such as ethnicity, or urban and rural divide. The issue of media ownership and control in Malaysia is also closely related to the laws and regulations governing the industry, as discussed in Chapter Five.

The question of ownership and control of media and how information is treated as a commodity for private gains instead of a public good is pertinent to the broader philosophical concerns of democracy and press freedom (Herman & Chomsky, 2002; McChesney & Scott, 2004; Gans, 2004; Dahlberg, 2005; Webster, 2006; Fuchs, 2009). Analysing the functions of media through five filters[4], Herman & Chomsky (2002) conclude that the media, among others, serve the ends of the dominant elite which represents "powerful societal interests that control and finance them" (p. xi). The threat of media on broad societal concerns, such as democracy and press freedom from as early as the start of the 20th century, was highlighted in a compilation of articles about the media in the United

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[4] Ownership and control of the media, a dependence on advertising for financial funding, powerful sources for stories, negative responses from stories published and the inclination towards anti-communism beliefs as a "control mechanism" are the five filters in the propaganda model for understanding the state of the media in the United States (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Boyd-Barrett (2004) proposes a sixth filter that he calls the "buying out" of journalists or their publications by intelligence agencies. It refers to a move to covertly employ professional journalists or strike deals with owners of publications to print particular news in support of the state bureaucracies.

States between 1938 and 2003 (McChesney & Scott, 2004). The compilation addressed issues of the concentration of press ownership, the rise of media conglomerates, questions of ethical professional practices by journalists and editors, the publication of newspapers for commercial purposes instead of for public consumption (Russell, 2004; Sinclair, 2004; Rosten, 2004; Villard, 2004). By the 21st century, McChesney and Scott (2004) argue that the media in the United States follow the trend of "corporate concentration, conglomeration and hypercommercialism" (p. 60) which accelerates "a conglomeration of media ownership" (p. 63). This, they argue, can result in journalism's inability to function as a democratic force.

Raising similar apprehensions about the question of control, Gans (2004) asserts that the selection of stories in a news organisation is not within the control of the professional journalists or editors. He argues that elements, like journalistic efficiency and the power of sources used by journalists to obtain stories are some of the factors which determine the type of news that is published. Pressure from advertisers and even family, friends or neighbours can influence a journalist in deciding the type of stories they want to pursue and the kind of stories that make it to print (Gans, 2004). He further argues that news obtained by readers from the daily newspapers is stories that have received the green light by executives and top journalists of a media organisation (Ibid). These examples suggest

the significance of media ownership and control in having an impact on democratic ideals and press freedom.

It is important to note here that the concern of "corporate concentration, conglomeration and hypercommercialism" in the context of media in the United States may not apply entirely to Malaysia where ownership and control are in the hands of the ruling regime. As highlighted in Chapter Five, the tight control of the press in Malaysia occurs through a range of strict regulations governing the industry and a complex web of interlocking companies, held by trusted proxies of the ruling regime. This helps to provide the broader context for this thesis when examining the role of new media in enhancing democratic ideals and practices.

Applying the political economy approach to new media, concerns of commodification of information are evident through the "corporate colonization of online communication" (Dahlberg & Siapera, 2007: 6) and the appropriation of social networking sites by media conglomerates (Cammaerts, 2008; Fuchs, 2009). They point to the transformation of cyberspace into a shopping mall to the benefit of large corporations to market their contents and the reinforcement of hierarchical power relations. Among the corporations are Disney (with ABC), Microsoft, Time Warner (with AOL), Viacom (with CBS) and Yahoo! (Dahlberg, 2005: 163). Similarly, free access accorded to users of MySpace or Facebook can lead to an audience community being sold to advertisers (Fuchs, 2009: 81-82) to advance capital accumulation, instead of fulfilling a public good. Such

consumer culture and practices undermine the contribution of the internet towards a strong democratic culture (Dahlberg, 2005: 160). This is the strength of the political economy approach in understanding the possible threat to democratic practices posed by the internet.

The issue of access, or lack thereof, to new information and communication technologies constitutes another aspect of the political economy perspective in understanding the outcomes of new media in contemporary societies (Nicholas, 2003; van Dijk, 2006; Tsatsou, 2011). This is because the unequal distribution of resources causes unequal access to digital technologies, resulting in unequal citizen participation in society (van Dijk, 2006: 178-179). Nicholas (2003) argues that physical access can shape the capacity of citizens to access to modern communication networks. In an assessment of barriers to internet access among rural people, Nicholas (2003) identifies three factors - physical characteristics of a particular location, the actions of telecommunication companies and the actions of public policymakers – that can lead to an "absence of functional internet access" (p. 287).

Apart from physical considerations, van Dijk (2006) focuses on access to digital tools on social factors, such as motivation, skills and usage of the new communication device. He argues that citizens must feel motivated and acquire the necessary digital skills to actually use the new technologies to enhance their social, economic and political life. This is because the level of skills and practical usage of digital tools can turn into

"structural inequalities" (van Dijk, 2006: 40), which in the long-run can influence the process of decision-making. It suggests that the question of access to new media is more than just a question of physical access to computers and broadband connections. Hence, access to computers and broadband connections must also be understood within its political, social and economic context (Strover, 2003: 276).

An examination of whom or which segment of society has access to the internet and broadband facilities can also provide a larger picture of how the cyberspace can be appropriated by political and cultural elites to reinforce particular viewpoints (Cammaerts, 2008: 368). It can provide an indication that if a particular sector of society is dominating the public discourse through their blogs. The issue of digital divide in the Malaysian context is a concern among the group of politician-bloggers, as discussed in Chapter Seven. Further discussion on this growing gap between those connected to the internet and broadband facilities is also highlighted in Chapter Five.

Public sphere, the media and democracy

Habermas's notion of the public sphere, its subsequent decline and the emergence of multiple public spheres are of particular interest to this thesis when assessing whether blogging can promote public deliberation and the factors that can enhance or restrict the activity. The three elements that are of importance to this research are: the requisites of the public sphere; its "refeudalization"; and the idea of multiple public spheres that developed

out of criticisms of Habermas's unitary public sphere. They guide this thesis by identifying the dominant discourse on the blogosphere, the segment of society active on the blogs, and the diverse public spheres that emerge out of the use of the new media.

The main concern of Habermas's public sphere is the requisites for all citizens to take part in debates, with information being at the core of the public sphere in a democratic society. The notion presupposes that citizens can confer in an unrestricted manner, without interference from state or corporate power, to express and publish their views on matters of public interest (Habermas, 2008: 24). Out of the requisites, various questions become significant to this thesis. Firstly, the question of whether blogging can facilitate the expression of opinions and rational debates on matters of public interest. Secondly, the dominant discourse and whether the kind of information available on the blogs can encourage citizen participation in public debates. Coupled with the issue of digital divide is the question of the individuals who are dominating the blog discussions. These questions, arising from Habermas's notion of the public sphere, help to identify the range of forces that promote or restrict rational public debates.

As media undergo certain pressures in the 20th century, Habermas (2008) speaks of a process of "refeudalization." The outcome of "refeudalization" is a fabricated version of contemporary debate that will hamper the citizens' ability to engage in rational debates and obstruct public reasoning (Habermas, 2008). This refers to the interference and

manipulation by spin doctors, public relations experts and advertisers, including an increasing influence of the media as they are monopolised by capitalist or corporate organisations (Webster, 2006). The result is an immense potential for information to be manipulated and skewed for the benefit of political and economic forces (Ibid). Such observations are also evident in the works of McChesney and Scott (2004), who highlighted the emergence of media conglomerates controlling publications and broadcasts, while Herman and Chomsky (2002) point to the use of the media as a propaganda tool, as discussed earlier.

Examples of media manipulation are clear from the investigation of Thompson (2000) and Entman (2007). Thompson (2000) highlights the changing nature of communication media, resulting in a rise in mediated political scandal while Entman (2007) argues that news slants and biased views can be propagated in the media through agenda setting, framing and priming theories. The agenda setting function of the media refers to how the press is "stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Cohen, 1963: 13). It serves to focus public and government attention on a particular issue by providing it coverage which leads to "what is accepted as the public agenda" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972: 152). When the media move beyond the function of telling the public what to focus on and begin to tell the audience members how to think about an issue, with particular reference to the public assessment of political leaders, those functions are seen as framing and priming (Kuypers, 2002). Entman

(2007: 164) defines framing as "the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular connection." Framing works to condition and change the interpretations and preferences of audience members through priming. Priming refers to frames that raise the salience or apparent significance of particular ideas to activate schemas that push its target audiences into thinking, feeling and deciding in a certain way (Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Price et al, 1997). These theories on the functions of the media reflect scepticism over the media's role in providing information for public interest.

With reference to the formation of public opinion, social engineering in the media can be reflected through the lens of media agenda setting, priming and framing theories. As such, the framing of media text can lead to predictable priming and agenda setting effects on audiences (Entman, 2007: 163). This, he argues, can potentially turn priming and framing into "tools of power" in influencing public opinion within the larger implication for political power and democracy. The political communication scholar argues that the media can sway the distribution of power through news slants and bias. He concludes that officials favoured by the news slant can become more powerful without worrying about whether the voters may reject them while those who are not framed favourably will "become weaker, less free to do (or say) what they want" (Ibid: 170). It is of interest for this research to examine the extent to which blogs can also become a

tool to sway public opinion in the Malaysian context in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of new media on political life.

The seminal work of Thompson (2000) on the changing nature of communication media in his analysis of the rise of mediated political scandals reveals that information necessary for forming public opinion can be subverted for profits. The changing nature of communication media, in terms of their capacity in making individuals more visible and the blurring of public and private life, has been identified as one of the reasons for the rise of mediated scandals in the 20th century (Thompson, 2000). Individuals are finding it difficult to remove their public persona from their private life with increasing visibility afforded by communication media. Although the focus of these theories is on the mass media, it is not exclusively centred on the traditional media and questions arise as to how far cyberspace politics can be characterised in a similar fashion. This then raises the question of whether the focus of political scandals is also becoming a part of the new media system that can distort information to influence public opinion for particular political objectives.

One major criticism about Habermas's theory of the public sphere is an inability to theorise a "pluralist public sphere" (Garnham, 1994: 360), projecting reservations about the notion of a unified public sphere (Calhoun, 1994; Fraser, 1994; Keane, 2000). Among the factors that Habermas neglects are culture, religion and identity. Citing the gender

limitation in Habermas's analysis, Fraser (1994) suggests the term "subaltern counterpublics" (p. 123) to explain how marginalised groups can take part in counter discourses in order to formulate oppositional versions of their identities, interests and needs. With the use of new information and communications technologies, such as the internet, Keane (2000) argues that public life today is conducted in interconnected public spheres. Within cyberspace, Keane (2000) identifies the emergence of "a complex mosaic" (p. 76) of interconnected public spheres. Thus, he proposes three levels of public spheres – micro, meso and macro[5]. Regardless of the level or size of the public spheres within civil societies and states, Keane (2000) reminds readers that all public spheres are "stages of power and interest-bound action that display the essential characteristics of a public sphere" (p. 77). Keane's understanding provides an important analysis for this thesis to examine how socio-political blogs in Malaysia can contribute to the mosaic of public spaces where the individual actors can be linked in various ways. The idea of a complex mosaic of interconnected public spheres applies well to a discussion on the use of blogs by the group of partisan and civil society bloggers.

Despite the critique of Habermas's notion of the public sphere, the approach can be a useful analytical tool in understanding the impact of new

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[5] Micro-public spheres refer to political communication at the level of sub-nation state level; meso-public spheres are the interaction of disputants at the nation state level and macro-public spheres are the hundreds of millions of people involved in disputes at the supranational and global levels (Keane, 2000: 77).

media on democratic practices in this thesis. It examines the particular circumstances in which the new media can promote rational debates by assessing the individual actors or groups involved in public debates and the dominant discussion made available to citizens on the blogosphere to take part in public discussions. The blog information can be evaluated in terms of whether it can help to generate public discussion or whether it contains more sinister elements which can manipulate public opinion within a particular social and political environment. The specific circumstance can well influence the kind of public discourse being promoted in the blogosphere and how certain public discourse can become more dominant than others. It can also provide an indication of how multiple public spheres can take shape as a result of contestations that arise out of public discourse and democratic publics.

Social determinism approach to new media

The social determinism perspective provides the framework to assess how social relationships and experiences of individual actors can emerge out of the use of the new media. Sharing some commonality with the network society thesis, the social determinism approach focuses on the circumstances and manners in which social ties can be forged out of the use of the new media within a particular social and political context. More specifically, it investigates the dynamic relationships and interdependencies of the device or instrument used to communicate or pass on information, the actions that people adopt to convey the information and

the social arrangements or organisational forms that grow out of the device and actions (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002). The focus is on the three elements – device, practice and social arrangements – to understand the possibilities of the new media in transferring information, how individuals use the instrument or device as a resource to communicate or share information with others and act based on the shared information and meaning (Ibid). It addresses the mutual shaping of technologies, practices and social context by employing the idea of "social shaping and social consequences" of the new media (Ibid: 9). In other words, consequences of new information and communications technologies are also regarded as the result of human actions and decisions and not only caused by the technology itself. This is also the concern of the network society thesis.

Before discussing new media within the framework of network society, it is essential to provide some understanding of the term 'network'. The word 'network' has been used in a number of different academic disciplines, originating from computer science to the social sciences and new media studies (Gane & Beer, 2008). Initially used to describe the transfer of data between computer terminals, it has been used as a metaphor by Castells (1996) to represent a new type of "de-centred, flexible and individualized" capitalist society (Gane & Beer, 2008: 31). It later took on a social context when sociological research begins to focus on how "computer networks become social when they connect individuals" (Ibid: 27). The salient feature of social network analysis is that it places

emphasis on "patterns of relations between and among people" (Garton et al, 1999, cited in Gane & Beer, 2008: 27). However, this approach tends to disregard the social and technological forces that construct these forms of human connectivity. Thus, other researchers emphasise the need to trace the associations "between humans and non-human entities," which is described as the key feature of actor-network theory (Gane & Beer, 2008: 32). In this way, the social is analysed in terms of complex and dynamic connections so that network is recognised as a "set of connections that have to be actively made" (Ibid: 31) and not just to describe what is out there.

Networks have also been identified as consisting of three elements - nodes, ties and flows (Barney, 2004: 26). Ties connect one node to at least another node (or a person to their friend) while flows are the information or communication (for example, gossip, aid) that pass between and through them along the connection (or ties). This model of network, in terms of nodes, ties and flows helps to provide an understanding of network society (Ibid: 179). The word 'network' has also been used to describe the blogosphere in terms of how it can present itself as a "classic social network" (Tremayne, 2006: x-xii) or become a "networked phenomena" (Drezner & Farrell, 2004: 7) in which social ties or networks are established through blogrolls and hyperlinks. However, this perspective of network theory provides the understanding of connectivity emerging incidentally with the notion of a serendipitous network that are "not

consciously designed … unplanned uncoordinated" (Raab & Kenis, 2009: 199). The two scholars, instead, argue that western societies are evolving into a "society of networks," where networks are consciously formed to achieve a specific goal instead of unplanned and uncoordinated networks that do not have a particular objective. They assert that hierarchical organisational forms of the 20th century are moving towards "consciously created and goal directed networks of three and more organizations" (Ibid: 198). It is important then to examine the extent to which individual bloggers are incidentally connecting with each because of their blogs or whether other social and political forces are at responsible in uniting the Malaysian blogosphere, bringing about a more inclusive form of political participation.

The network society thesis advocates that social, political and economic practices, relationships and institutions in modern society are ordered around the network form, that is, "flows between nodes connected by ties" (Barney, 2004: 27). This connection underscores the relationship between social and media networks as the infrastructure in network society (van Dijk, 2006). The new media scholar defines network society as "a form of society increasingly organizing its relationships in media networks, which are gradually replacing or complementing the social networks of face-to-face communication" (Ibid: 240). He argues that "the social and media networks are shaping the prime mode of organization and the most important structures of modern society" (Ibid). Specifically, the social

networks of individuals, groups, organisations, societies and global communities are supported by media networks, particularly the internet, as it has blurred traditional forms of interpersonal relations or mass communication at all levels in contemporary society (Ibid: 28). This combination of social and media networks is characteristic of the network structure of modern societies and it changes the ways in which individuals, groups, organisations, societies and the global community relate to each other (Ibid).

The understanding of social shaping and social consequences as advocated by Lievrouw and Livingstone (2002) is also reflected in the work of Barney (2004). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Barney considers four factors - the essence or spirit of technology, the technological design, situation and use - in analysing technological outcomes in contemporary society (p. 43). Technology, in his view, is deemed not neutral and is not developed or used in a vacuum (Barney, 2004). This is evident in the fact that the basic design of the internet "determines what people can and cannot do" (Lessig, 1999: 59; cited in Barney, 2004: 51). The architecture of the internet is constructed with the use of 'code' whose choices are political (Barney, 2004: 51). The 'code,' according to Lessig (1999), supports the anonymity or identification of internet users and their activities, which raises debates involving issues like privacy, liberty, surveillance and regulation. In the early days of the internet, Lessig (1999: 30-42) explains that the code leans towards

openness, anonymity, liberty, access and non-control. Its design is now changing towards regulation and control for its commercial potential with the construction of security and protocol for authentication, as illustrated in a business arrangement between Yahoo! and China in 1999 (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006). Although the analysis focuses on the device itself, it also pays particular attention to the social, political and economic environment in which the technologies are developed and the ways they are utilised.

The discussion, thus far, has touched on the political economy approach, Habermas's notion of the public sphere and the social determinism perspective on understanding the impact of new media and contemporary society. It will now highlight some of the more multi-dimensional and broad-based approaches in understanding the internet effects on politics.

More nuanced approaches to internet and politics

The need for a more broad-based approach is also evident in research concerning the internet and politics among investigators who are cautious about making celebratory claims about the effects of the new medium on politics (Buchstein, 1997; DiMaggio et al, 2001; Agre, 2002; Albrecht, 2006; Cammaerts, 2008). Instead, they argue that consequences of internet effects on politics and democracy must be evaluated within the specific circumstances in society, such as the particular institutional, social, political and economic forces at play, including the cultural practices of technology usage. Highlighting the importance of "the forces at work in

the existing institutions" (p. 316) to examine the role of the internet on politics, Agre (2002) is of the view that "political activities on the Internet are embedded in larger social processes, and the Internet itself is only one element of an ecology of media" (p. 314). His assertion is based on the premises that "the Internet will not amplify all forces equally and not all of the forces will be headed in the same direction" (Ibid). As such, he concludes that each case of internet effects must be evaluated on its own terms, examining the "full range of interacting forces that might exert a long-term effect on the substance and process of politics" (p. 324). This is because "the Internet has its effect only in the ways that it is appropriated, and it is appropriated in so many different ways" (p. 316).

The need to consider particular circumstances in society, such as the institutional and political economic factors, to understand internet use, behaviours and outcomes in contemporary society is obvious in the work of DiMaggio and his colleagues (2001) and Albrecht (2006). The manner in which individual users behave on the internet must be analysed within wider institutional and political economic factors because they can influence internet behaviours (DiMaggio et al, 2001). Similarly, in an assessment of the effects of the internet on political debates, Albrecht (2006) proposes a culturalist perspective that takes into account the complexity of "the social practices of usage as well as its symbolic dimension" (p. 75). The approach also focuses on the interrelatedness of political participation and internet usage that can determine who

participates in online deliberation. Among the factors that can influence political participation are economic background, education, age and political interest while the determinants of internet usage are economic background, education, age, gender, online skills and value orientation (Ibid: 76).

In a similar emphasis on the interconnectedness between social structures and individuals in the study of the internet and its effects, Cammaerts (2008) identifies five areas where the blogosphere can be limited in achieving its potential as deliberative space. The five areas attempt to highlight that the internet is not an entity that is separate from the economic, political and cultural realities of the real world. Three of the five areas are identified as being at the structural level that can dampen the internet as a democratising force. The three areas are colonisation by the market, followed by censorship by states, organisations and industries and finally, appropriation by political, including cultural, elites (Ibid: 361). Social control by fellow citizens and the emergence of anti-democratic voices are the two factors that has identified at the individual level (Ibid: 361). This broad-based approach provides a macro analysis of the influence of blogging within a wider institutional, social and political context. This is complemented by a micro level of analysis of the behaviours and activity that emerge from the use of the new media.

Summary

Instead of taking an oversimplified and reductionist view, the three perspectives can guide this thesis into adopting a more comprehensive approach in an evaluation of the effects of new media on facilitating liberal democratic practices and enriching political life. The three perspectives, discussed above, can also help to identify the various social and political forces that may have an influence on how blogging can be employed in a particularistic[6] manner by relatively distinct groups of bloggers to achieve a specific goal at defining moments in electoral politics.

The political economy approach and Habermas's notion of the public sphere can help by providing the particular social and political context in which blogging can promote democracy. This can be achieved by assessing the role of blogging in relation to the tightly-controlled traditional media, the existing legislation that governs the media industry closely and regulations that curtail civil liberties in the country. The question of control of and access to the media is examined in terms of the individuals who are connected to the internet and broadband facilities, including particular bloggers who are active in the Malaysian blogosphere. It can also contribute to an analysis of the dominant discourse in the

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[6] The word 'particularistic' was used to understand current political crises faced by various countries after the end of the Cold War (Kaldor, 1999). Defining post-Cold War conflicts in former Yugoslavia and Africa as 'new wars', Kaldor (1999) attributes the occurrences to the processes of globalisation where a new wave of identity politics is based partly on a particularistic cultural identity (p. 8). Kaldor (1999) argues that particularistic identities may well be the expression of a "new post-modern cultural relativism" (p. 91).

blogosphere, providing an indication of the social inequalities that see louder voices emerging from certain sections of society. The social determinism approach can provide a multi-dimensional understanding to an inquiry of blogging and democracy. This can be achieved by investigating the ways in which blogging was used by individual bloggers to achieve a specific goal in an election.

The literature review will now turn to the topic of 'citizen journalism' and 'blogging.' It will explore the various discussions and previous research done surrounding the topic and its influence on journalistic practices, political life and democracy. The political economy approach, Habermas's notion of the public sphere and the social determinism perspective will be applied to an evaluation of blogging on politics to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the online platform in promoting liberal democratic practices and enriching political life in electoral politics.

Chapter 3

Blogging, democracy and political life

Introduction

This chapter discusses various perspectives on blogging and its impact on democratic practices and political life. It begins with debates surrounding the term 'citizen journalism,' blogging and their relationship with traditional journalism to understand the impact of new media on the old. This is not to say that there is a line separating new media from old media but an acknowledgement that the two concepts are interrelated. To demonstrate the close connection between blogging and traditional journalism, this chapter highlights both optimistic and pessimistic views on how blogging and the internet can change the practices of producing and distributing opinions. This can possibly challenge professional journalism and the traditional media. It also addresses existing views on how blogging can promote or restrict democracy.

A major section of the chapter highlights previous research that employed aspects of the political economy approach, Habermas's notion of the public sphere and the social determinism perspective to understand the influence of blogging on democratic ideals and political life. The approaches place emphasis on understanding the web activity within its particular social and political context. The works of Allan (2006) and Atton (2004) are examined to provide instances on how the political

economy approach can provide a more comprehensive understanding of blogging and democracy. The question of control and power is also assessed by studying individuals behind the blogs. This helps to track and identify the influence of power that certain bloggers may possess when engaging in online efforts to affect political change. This includes the question of existing power relations and the distribution of resources that can determine access to the new media. Previous research work that examined the capability of blogging in facilitating public deliberation will be highlighted to demonstrate the relevance of Habermas's notion of the public sphere in understanding the extent to which the new media can promote liberal democratic practices. Finally, components of the social determinism approach that focus on the practices and establishment of social ties or social arrangements will show the relevance of the perspective in an evaluation of new media and political life.

Another key debate examined in this chapter is the influence of blogging on campaigning in electoral politics. There are divergent views on whether blogging and the internet can contribute to new ways of campaigning in electoral politics. Optimistic views can be gleaned from past research, particularly in presidential campaigns in the United States where new digital technologies are recognised as having transformed and even added to new ways of campaigning. The uses of blogs to raise campaign funds, to recruit volunteers for the election and to keep readers informed are identified as some of the new media's successes. On the

contrary, other research projects that suggest a less optimistic view will also be discussed. Regardless of the optimistic or pessimistic approach, more importantly, this chapter demonstrates the need to evaluate the influence of blogging on political life through a more multi-dimensional lens instead of just focusing on the new media device.

Citizen journalism and blogging

The term 'citizen journalism'[7] generally refers to ordinary citizens getting involved in writing or commenting on current public affairs or matters that affect their ordinary lives (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004). Major events, such as the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States and the catastrophic tsunami on December 26, 2004, are regarded as incidents that have given rise to the growth of citizen journalism (Allan, 2006; Keren, 2006). Web or online reporting of such occurrences through the postings of photographs, videos or information by ordinary citizens provided different insights and perspectives when compared with the mainstream news media. Some of them even appeared as mainstream news items, leading to the analysis that "at the forefront of citizen journalism were weblogs or blogs, where individuals gathered whatever material they

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[7] A cornucopia of terms has emerged to differentiate the practice of citizen journalism from traditional journalists in news organisations. Some of the common terms used are 'new' journalism, participatory journalism, grassroots journalism, citizen reporting, amateur reporting, native reporting or networked journalism (Blood, 2003; Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Atton, 2004; Jarvis, 2006; Allan, 2006).

could and post it, along with their own interpretation of its significance"
(Allan, 2006: 7).

Weblogs or blogs are defined as personal postings or political writings
and commentaries, which are linked to other websites, weblogs or blogs
through hyperlinking (Blood, 2003; Drezner & Farrell, 2004; Allan, 2006;
Tremayne, 2006; Perlmutter, 2008). A weblog is an online journal that has
links and postings in reverse chronological order, meaning the most recent
posting appears at the top of the page (Blood, 2003; Bowman & Willis,
2003; Gillmor, 2004). The shorter version 'blog' was in vogue when a
user-friendly software for blogging was available for free in 1999
(Hindman, 2009: 106; Davis, 2009: 3). Previously, the setting up of
websites and web pages required online users to have certain skills.
However, the free user-friendly software for blogging has enabled ordinary
citizens to take up online writing and publishing with relative ease.
Postings on blogs capture the writings of ideas, thoughts and opinions of
bloggers in the form of text, images and videos. This structural feature
provides bloggers an 'authorial' position, because the postings validate
their subjective and positioned experience, thus affording a democratic
potential in the "delivery of autonomous yet connected subject" (Siapera,
2008: 51).

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, blogs are also described as a
"networked phenomena" that rely on hyperlinks (Drezner & Farrell, 2004:
7) to form a "classic social network" in which social ties are established

through blogrolls and hyperlinks (Tremayne, 2006: x-xii). This is based on the understanding that blogs and hyperlinks form a network where individual blogs are classified as 'nodes' and the links are treated as 'ties' (Drezner & Farrell, 2004: 8). The links take the forms of "blogrolls" and posts that contain hyperlinks to other sources of information, including other blogs (Ibid). "Blogrolls" are lists of blogs maintained and frequented by many bloggers and they usually have a permanent position on the home page of the blog. These permanent links can assist in increasing readership to particular blogs (Drezner & Farrell, 2004; Tremayne, 2006).

Blogging and professional journalism

An ongoing debate that revolves around citizen journalism since emerging in the media ecosystem in the late 1990s is the term 'citizen journalism' itself. This is particularly on the question of whether the term accurately represents 'weblogging' or 'blogging' and whether blogging constitutes journalism (Blood, 2003; Andrews, 2003; Safran, 2005; Jarvis, 2006). At the core of this debate are questions pertaining to the relationship between blogging and traditional journalism, with specific reference to the areas of conflict that the two practices occupy within the framework of the sociology of occupation (Lowrey, 2006). This framework stresses a variety of factors. Among them are the jurisdictional areas of the two occupations that shape the work processes, the relationships with clients or audiences and the organisational reasons, such as resources and division of labour (Ibid: 478). As such, the debate between blogging and journalism

addresses the routines of professional journalists in news organisations, the values of objective and unbiased reporting and the operations of news organisations, including the manner in which news organisations operate. These are some aspects surrounding the debate between blogging and traditional journalism, which led some researchers into taking an optimistic stance in the democratic potentials of the internet.

Blogs are touted as having the capacity to provide participants with multiple roles simultaneously - publisher, commentator, moderator, writer and documentarian (Bowman & Willis, 2003), blurring the boundaries between consumers and producers of news (Bruns, 2008) or between broadcasters and receivers (Perlmutter, 2008). Using the term "produsers" to refer to the phenomenon of citizen journalism or weblogs, Bruns (2008) argues that consumers of news can now become producers. This means that consumers can take a more active role in web reporting (Rosen, 2006). A blurring of boundaries between consumers and producers of news can also be interpreted as a result of the practice of blogging or citizen journalism, which adopts the bottom-up approach in news writing, gathering and publishing (Gillmor, 2004). With this bottom-up approach, the public, who traditionally have been a passive audience and mere consumers of news, can now play a participatory and engaging role in news reporting on the internet (Allan, 2006, Rosen, 2006; Bruns 2008). Instead of the traditional manner of "filter then publish", participatory journalism practises the approach of "publish then filter" (Bowman &

Willis, 2003: 21). This implies that the role of gatekeeping in traditional journalism no longer applies to the practice of citizen journalism.

A blurring of boundaries is also a central tenet of the network society thesis (Castells, 1996, cited in Barney, 2004; van Dijk, 2006). The new information and communication technologies are said to have the capacity to blur the boundaries on many different levels. One contention is the purported global or deterritorialised nature of the dynamics of time-space compression, in which distance no longer becomes a determining factor because of digital technologies (Barney, 2004: 62). As Castells (1996) notes: "Time is erased in the new communication system … The space of flows and timeless time are the material foundations of a new culture … the culture of real virtuality (p. 375)." The blurring of boundaries between communities at the local and global level also has ramifications on issues pertaining to new social movements, new identities, and virtual and real communities (Rheingold, 2000; Barney, 2004; Kahn & Kellner, 2004; van Dijk, 2006). Another key process is a blurring of the public and private sphere. This generates various discussions on how private thoughts become public in the realm of online communication, with particular reference to blogging as a form of political communication (Barney, 2004; van Dijk, 2006) or how the private life of individuals becomes public with the rise of mediated scandals (Thompson, 2000).

Another routine of blogging that differs from professional journalists in the United States is how bloggers question and challenge certain

assumptions made by traditional journalists (Andrews, 2003; Safran, 2005). Bloggers normally publish news that is personal or based on their own experiences and fact-checking is not a concern of citizen journalists who adopt the "publish then filter" model on their blogs. This is interpreted as the internet's capacity in empowering ordinary citizens to express unbridled views and opinions, challenging those in the mainstream media and encouraging dialogue (Andrews, 2003; Bruns 2008). Such challenges also contribute to the argument that blogs can serve as "a corrective mechanism for bad journalism" (Andrews, 2003: 63). This is made possible through the constant monitoring and discussion by bloggers on news that they read in the mainstream media. Optimistic views also focus on how bloggers in the United States know more about a particular subject when compared with traditional journalists. Thus, blogging witnesses the emergence of diverse views which can mount additional pressure on mainstream media to practise balanced reporting.

A key element of citizen journalism, afforded by the new media, is interactivity (Rosen, 2006; Bowman & Willis, 2003). The digital technology is deemed to have facilitated the ability of people to interact with online postings and give opinions on a particular socio-political issue, bringing about a diversity of views (Bowman & Willis, 2003). The implication here is that the internet and its accompanying software applications allow citizens to participate and engage in discussions on public affairs, thus contributing to the claim that blogging can challenge

the traditional media by giving voice to the voiceless and marginalised groups.

Instead of debating whether blogging is journalism or not, Lasica (2003) suggests that it is better to celebrate the weblog's place within the media ecosystem because weblogs and professional journalism complement each other. Weblogs in the United States are claimed to have contributed to making newsrooms more interactive while the conventions of journalistic practices, such as accurate and credible reporting can be adopted by bloggers (Lasica, 2003). This is partly because of the wide-ranging opinions and exchanges generated from blogging in the United States where a multitude of views can take journalism to the realm of why, instead of just the "who-what-where-when-how of journalism" (Andrews, 2003: 64). As such, the power of blogs is said to be able to transform the capacity of people for critical evaluation (Blood, 2000). Eyewitness reporting by ordinary citizens on the September 11 attacks in the United States can turn blogs into a catalyst to journalism by becoming "the best available source of eyewitness reporting" (Andrews, 2003: 64) and transforming ordinary citizens into a "vital complement" to mainstream journalism (Reich, 2008: 739).

Optimistic view on blogging and the mainstream media

By comparing the different routines and approaches that persist between blogging and traditional journalism, one prevailing argument is that the internet, through the practice of citizen journalism or blogging, will

give people greater freedom to participate in open democratic debates (Pavlik, 2001; Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Rosen, 2006). An underlying assumption of the view is that the new media are transforming the practice of journalism to promote democratic ideals in society. Pavlik (2001) argues that this transformation is in the form of more diverse opinions and information, resulting in a more informed citizenry. This assumption is, however, based on a 'romanticised' idea that journalism serves the public in a democracy and the new technologies are able to achieve the idea of a democratic utopia.

Highlighting examples of the active participation of former news audiences in reporting the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in the United States and citizen participation in South Korean-based OhmyNews.com, Bowman and Willis (2003: 47) conclude that "a democratized media challenges the notion of the institutional press as the exclusive, privileged, trusted, informed intermediary of the news." Readers are now able to contribute to a more informed citizenry, creating a "more robust democracy" (Ibid: 48). With powerful technologies and the citizen's new role as a news producer, Gillmor (2005) goes further to say bloggers have made mainstream news media more transparent because of their role as media watchdogs. This active role is required in a democracy that aims at bringing "justice ... honest government and liberty" (Ibid: 13). In the same vein, Bowman and Willis (2003) see the possibility of "we media" in threatening the "hegemony [of the journalism profession] as the

gatekeeper of news". This is seen as the ability of new technologies in upholding the qualities of objectivity, fairness and accuracy that are central to American journalism (Pavlik, 2001).

The view that citizen journalism or blogging has the potential to enhance democratic ideals is grounded in pessimistic views that those ideals have been 'elusive' in the traditional media (Keane, 1991; Gans, 2004; McChesney & Scott, 2004; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Boyd-Barrett, 2004). This is in particular reference to the possibility that blogging can challenge the practice of professional journalism and loosen the grip of conglomerate media through autonomous content creation. The work of Gans (2004), McChesney and Scott (2004), Herman and Chomsky (2002) and Boyd-Barrett (2004) shows how the function of journalism as a watchdog or fourth estate can be undermined. Pessimism about the mainstream media stems from a utopian vision of the free press that touches on modern ideals of liberty of the press (Keane, 1991). Keane (1991) argues that the control of state media and the demands of commercialism turn 'liberty of the press' into a paradox, hence the notion of "liberty of the press is self-contradictory" (p. 114). Instead, Keane (1991) proposes a mixed model of communication that encourages the "proliferation of a wide variety of countervailing media" (p. 165) which is guided by "a form of democratic scepticism" (p. 167), thus enabling the press to function as a public service. Underlying this proposed model is the need to acknowledge diversity and differences in various societies, and the

mechanisms through which citizens can be represented and state institutions held accountable to the wider civil society (Ibid). To achieve this goal, a genuine plurality of communication media is an important component to keep open the channels of communication between the state and civil society. Under such circumstances, the internet and blogging are regarded as having the potential to function both as "permanent thorns in the side of political power (helping to minimize political censorship) and serve as the primary means of communication for citizens living ... within a genuinely pluralist society" (Ibid: 150). Such pessimism about the mainstream media is the backdrop to the claim that citizen journalism or blogging has the potential to rebuild a weakened public sphere and to enhance democratic ideals in contemporary societies.

Blogs are, thus, believed to possess the ability to shape and constrain the larger political debate by focusing on issues that have been neglected by the mainstream media (Drezner & Farrell, 2004). Crediting the blogosphere in the United States for the resignation of Trent Lott in late 2002 from his position as Senate Majority Leader, Drezner and Farrell (2004) argue that mainstream media attention on certain issues can be attributed to blog postings. The two scholars are of the view that American blogs have the power to construct an agenda or build particular interpretive frames that can influence the attention of the mainstream media. They argue that blogs have the power to do so because they can affect "the content of media reportage and commentary about politics" (Ibid: 14).

Moreover, mainstream media elites, such as editors, publishers, journalists and columnists are consuming political blogs, indicating an overlap of mainstream media and the political blogosphere in the United States (Ibid: 14). In doing so, blogs can well shape political debates which are later highlighted in the mainstream media.

The power of blogging is further strengthened by its reputation as a credible source among readers when compared with traditional media (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). In a survey of weblog users regarding their view of the credibility of blogs when compared with traditional media and other online sources in America, Johnson and Kaye (2004) reveal that weblog users recognise that blogs are highly credible after demographic and political factors have been controlled in the research. Weblog users are also of the opinion that blogs can provide more depth and thoughtful analysis than the traditional media. However, weblog users do not think that blogs are fair in their writing and bias is seen as a virtue by the users (Ibid: 633).

Critical view on blogging and the mainstream media

Critics charge that blogging is still linked to certain journalistic practices of mainstream news organisations when questioning the utopian view of the democratic potentials of the internet. This is because blog contents often make use of information from the mainstream news media (Haas, 2005). This implies that many blog contents on current affairs are influenced by the print media (Andrews, 2003). Blood (2003) also points out that bloggers make use of news reported by journalists on their

weblogs as they "actively highlight and frame news reported by journalists on their weblogs" (p. 62). Thus, weblog writers generally do not get involved in news reporting and they depend on the mainstream news media for updates and information. Such reliance can result in weblog writers following the agenda set by the mainstream news media. Haas (2005), thus, concludes that weblog writers are helping to strengthen the discourses of the mainstream news media. This conclusion is supported by a study of 317 campaign blogs in the 2005 Bundestag general election in Germany (Albrecht et al, 2007). The researchers found that the blogosphere was dominated by the logic of mass media that mainly drew attention to prominent political actors. Such narrowing of opinions does not augur well for democracy and free speech that require a multiplicity of ideas (Sunstein, 2007).

Instead of setting the agenda for news media, Davis (2009) argues that blogs are, in fact, incorporating the agenda of traditional news media (p. 178). At best, blogs can give readers a new interpretation of the agenda of the news media. Political blogging, thus, often replicates or follows the agenda set by the traditional media. In his study of American political blogs, Davis (2009) concludes that political blogging has not reformed existing communications and political systems (p. 7). The political blogosphere mirrors the traditional media environment and has not 'revolutionised' politics. The researcher argues it is only through a "transactional relationship" with agenda seekers, such as politicians,

journalists and the audience that political blogs can affect politics (Ibid: 178). This connection, he argues, places bloggers in the mainstream of politics, possibly affording advantage of resources to certain individuals.

A collapse in mainstream editorial gatekeeping, hailed as an outcome that can promote democratic ideals, has failed to realise those principles (Hindman, 2009). Firstly, online information is filtered in traditional ways because of the prominent internet presence of traditional news media and broadcast corporations. Secondly, the infrastructure of the internet has caused inequality in the selection of information. He observes that "some sites consistently rise to the top of Yahoo!'s and Google's search results; some sites never get indexed by search engines at all" (Hindman, 2009: 15). The network protocols, used to create Web pages are silent about search engines, are now guiding the search behaviour of online users (Ibid). The infrastructure and architectural design of the internet also contribute to situations of tighter state control and monitoring of internet use and users (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006; Cammaerts, 2008). This also raises the argument that weblogs can become tools for the dominant elite of media conglomerates and the state to further reinforce their ideology on media consumers and society at large (Cammaerts, 2008: 361). It can, thus, undermine the so-called democratic appeals.

Optimistic perspective on blogging and democracy

Several characteristics of the new media, such as digitality, interactivity, hypertextuality and virtuality, have led to claims that

blogging and the internet can potentially transform politics and increase civic engagement in contemporary society (Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009). Describing hyperlinking as 'revolutionary' in blogging, Perlmutter (2008: 10) argues that it is able to facilitate "the kind of nonlinear, endless jumping about and instant feedback" which is not possible with previous technologies. This new element sees the emergence of ordinary people becoming broadcasters instead of mere receivers of information (Perlmutter, 2008). With the interactive function, blogging is deemed to have the ability to enhance participation of the people in public discourse (Ibid). This is particularly so when blogging improves the prospects of minority and underrepresented groups to participate in political discourse by expressing their views on particular issues (Pole, 2009). Thus, issues like race, gender, occupation or political ties do not pose as barriers to political blogging.

The new media with its interactive element can reinvigorate civic engagement as blogging provides the opportunity to individuals to use the platform as personal mass communication and cultivate voluntary association (Perlmutter, 2008). It is deemed worthy in terms of democracy when individuals have the right to "accrete their common knowledge, focus their activism, recruit others, and march, virtually toward a goal" (Ibid: 20). The 'revolution' afforded by the new technology is not only individualistic but interactive as well (Ibid). Thus, Pole (2009) argues that

political blogging is a new form of political participation, which can potentially transform politics and improve civic engagement.

Another characteristic of blogging and the internet is the ability of the medium to alter ways of mobilising the community by going beyond geographical boundaries with the establishment of global social movements (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Pole, 2009). One example is the emergence of the global movement against the World Trade Organisation, which has been popularly dubbed as the "Battle of Seattle" (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). The collapse has altered political mobilisation by eliminating the "politics of geography" (Pole, 2009: 15), thus uniting bloggers and their readers through loose networks. A coming together of like-minded individuals through online discussions can provide a sense of community that transcends geographical boundaries and time, turning blogs into a popular online forum.

Blogging has also been hailed as an instrument for promoting democracy in repressive countries (Kulikova & Perlmutter, 2007). The authors evaluated the impact of advocacy blog *Akaevu.net* on the 2005 'tulip revolution' in Kyrgyzstan, which was sliding towards a consolidated authoritarian regime. The researchers conclude that the blog is a rich information source not available locally, inciting or sustaining democratisation in countries ruled by authoritarian regimes that curb the free flow of information to citizens (p. 29). In this manner, the internet is seen as possessing liberating aspects by directing criticisms at repressive

regimes in countries where public dissent is being stifled (Margolis & Resnick, 2000: 211). In the Zimbabwean election of March 2008, weblogs and mobile phone short messaging services became a source of information by providing delayed election results (Moyo, 2009). The ability of the blogosphere to be a vehicle for ordinary citizens to express their views, which were formerly repressed, has also been described as a "mark of emancipation" (Keren, 2006: 11). It is important to note that Keren (2006: 11-15) points to a combination of emancipation and melancholy in his study of the blogosphere. Emancipation refers to the ability of previously marginalised voices to express their views on their blogs whilst melancholy refers to the deep sense of "withdrawal and rejection" (Ibid: 12). This is because blogging is unable to help bloggers achieve the political change being articulated on the blogs (Ibid).

Recent studies on the topic of blogging and democracy in Malaysia have also arrived at similar conclusions. Tan and Zawawi (2008) are of the opinion that blogs have potential democratisation roles in facilitating civil liberties, framing discourse and setting the agenda for public policy-making. They argue that socio-political bloggers want to influence and motivate others and blogs provide some space to enhance public discourse. The view that socio-political blogs can contribute to the development of democracy in Malaysia is also expressed by Lim (2009). Describing the function of blogs as a fifth estate, Lim (2009) concludes that socio-political blogs play the role of checking the government by providing alternative

information, building dominant frames and setting the news agenda. Another democratic role is in the way blogs link online and to the real world by mobilising citizens in the mass street protests of 2007 and 2008 (Ibid). By circumventing mechanisms of social control, blogs also fulfill their democratic function as they allow the publishing of uncensored and unfiltered thoughts (Ibid).

Despite the celebratory views of blogging as a democratic tool, some of the scholars are apprehensive about its potential. For example, Cammaerts (2008) raises the possibility that the blogosphere agenda can be appropriated by the elites. Moyo (2009) raises a similar concern by saying that the new space may not see "true citizen journalism" in Zimbabwe but a "staged form of citizen journalism" (p. 563) due to the agendas of some of the practitioners. Although Tan and Zawawi (2008) are positive about blogging and democracy in Malaysia, they also caution against taking an overly optimistic position about the role of internet in advancing democratic political discourse. They argue for the need to consider the wider political economy context to analyse blog contents for the dominant discourse to gain a deeper understanding of the role that blogs play in advancing democracy (Ibid). The reservations signal the need for more broad-based approaches to examine the relationship between blogging and democracy.

Pessimistic view on blogging and democracy

Some scholars are less optimistic about the potentials of blogging on democracy because inequality is being promoted as a result of the infrastructure and architecture of the new media (Hindman, 2009; van Dijk, 2006). Hindman (2009) argues that the infrastructure of the internet has caused inequality in the selection of information because some sites consistently surface to the top of search results of Yahoo! and Google while other sites are not indexed by the search engines. The search behaviour of online users is also guided by network protocols (Ibid). Describing the inequality as the "Matthew effect," network society scholar van Dijk (2006) asserts that social and media networks have an inherent quality of "drawing resources to the already more powerful" (p. 184). This raises the argument that weblogs can become tools for the dominant elite of media conglomerates and the state to further reinforce their ideology on new media consumers and society at large (Cammaerts, 2008: 361).

Posting political views online does not necessarily adopt egalitarian patterns because of the link structure of the web (Hindman, 2009: 40). Drawing on the concept of distribution of wealth by Vilfredo Pareto (1897), Hindman (2009) argues that the link structure of the Web follows the power law distribution which posits that 80% of the wealth is controlled by 20% of the population. This idea is also based on the power law distribution of blog links, first hypothesized by Shirky (2003) when he examined the links of 433 blogs. In his research of the link structure,

Hindman (2009) argues that it can estimate the visibility and traffic of political web sites where a small group of successful sites will receive most of the links. Describing the situation as "the politics of winners-take-all" (p. 56), Hindman (2009) concludes that the link structure can limit, rather than amplify, the voices of the voiceless.

Taking an ideology-critique approach regarding the character of social networking platforms, Fuchs (2009: 83) argues that the availability of more tools for easier ways of publicising opinions on the internet is merely legitimising existing patterns of domination and not a democratisation of the media. Although everybody can express their opinions, the act of decision-making is still in the hands of the elite and that social networking platforms are "legitimating existing modes of domination" (Ibid: 83). Thus, it is an illusory impression that Web 2.0 can make a difference because it "functions as repressive tolerance and marketing ideology for advancing capital accumulation by selling audiences as commodities" (Ibid: 84). Such commodification is not only a threat towards democratic potentials of the new media but it is also viewed as a normalisation of cyberspace where real world politics are transferred to the internet (Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Davis, 2009). The capability of new media to facilitate marginal movements and provide access to a new medium of mass communication has not resulted in major difference in the real world because "politics on the Internet is politics as usual" (Margolis & Resnick, 2000: vii).

This, then, takes us to the argument that the powerful, wealthy and privileged that exist in the real world are occupying cyberspace and taking full advantage of the new medium. Minor parties and marginalised voices entering the blogosphere have not seen "real-world shifts of power and resources" (Margolis & Resnick, 2000: 208) because dominant powerful elites in the real world are more adept at using cyberspace for political purposes. They argue that industrialised societies will not experience the 'empowerment' of cyberspace but the potential remains for societies ruled by repressive regimes that stifle public dissent (Ibid: 211). This highlights the importance of examining the role of this new and powerful medium within a particular social and political environment, instead of taking a normalised perspective that is uniform across-the-board. Similarly, Campbell (2009) in his study on the influence of blogs in three high-profile political events in the United States, namely the resignation of Trent Lott in 2002, Howard Dean's presidential campaign between 2003 and 2004, and the Connecticut primary challenge to Joe Lieberman in the 2006 Senate mid-term elections, concludes that the perception of blogs as a progressive, new force is overly-optimistic and over-simplified.

Political economy approach to blogging

An attempt to understand citizen journalism using the political economy approach is evident in the work of Allan (2006) when he examined the online phenomenon by locating it within a particular social and political environment. He also investigated crucial information like the

individuals behind the activity, a historical and contextual perspective of the online phenomenon and the sources of funding for a more comprehensive understanding of the web activity. For example, in his narrative on the emergence of IndyMedia, OhmyNews and Wikinews, Allan (2006) assessed the people behind those sites, adopted a historical and contextual view of how the different websites were created and developed and questioned the sources of funding. The perspective highlights some key characteristics of the political economy approach, such as the wider institutional and societal structures under which the practice of citizen journalism or blogging can flourish and the issue of ownership by investigating the individuals behind a blog, including the individuals' background and work experiences. Similarly, Allan's (2006) research on the Matt Drudge website saw how he was careful in detailing the creation and development of the blog within a particular environment, the person administering the blog, the blogger's background and previous work experiences. This approach helps to provide the particular social and political environment, including the question of power relations and control in an attempt at obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the influence of new media on political life.

The political economy approach to blogging is also reflected in the work of Atton (2004) who is inclined towards the cultural studies

approach[8]. Stressing on the significance of historical, economic, political, social or cultural aspects, Atton (2004) proposes the importance in "understanding specific features of a particular historical situation" (p. 2), with particular focus on "the use of alternative media by new social movements" (p. 3). He also suggests the need to recognise internet use as being embedded in everyday life and existing social practices instead of adopting a dichotomous perspective. Atton's (2004) research shows the significance of the political economy approach by placing emphasis on the context when subscribing a culturalist approach in an examination of outcomes of the online medium.

The approach taken by Allan (2006) and Atton (2004), who place emphasis on individuals behind the blogs, their background, past work experiences and forms of practice to understand blogging within a particular social and political context, specifically foregrounds the question of power and control. Several scholars propose the incorporation of Habermas's notion of the public sphere and a discursive understanding of power and control to the political economy approach for a more comprehensive examination of new media and communications (Mansell, 2004; Webster, 2006; Pereira, 2009). Mansell (2004) argues that it is

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[8] Dahlgren (2009) uses the term "culturalist approach" (p. 5) to describe the cultural studies approach. The culturalist approach focuses on themes like meaning, identity and practices to highlight the "idea of sense-making agents" (Ibid: 6). It turns its attention to the "subjective realities of citizenship, their processes of sense making in concrete settings, and how they may impact on participation and the modes of engagement" to understand the impact of media on democracy (Ibid).

pertinent to reveal a much deeper understanding of how the "articulations of power are shaping the new media landscape" (p. 97). This is because existing debates on the internet are "detached from the way power is embedded in and experienced through the new media" (Mansell 2004: 100). Similarly, Pereira (2009) argues that the political economy approach neglects the idea of value and power relations because "power is equally productive in essence" (Pereira, 2009: 328). It enables the creation of knowledge and production of discourse. Pereira (2009) contends that the relations of value and power circulate throughout social institutions and the interplay of "localized circuits of power" (p. 329) offer a substantial theoretical support to the political economy approach in examining the media and communications of today. Thus, this thesis places emphasis on the individuals behind the blogs, their past work experiences and connections with powerful elites to balance out the leanings of the political economy approach towards the material aspect. It can also provide an indication of how power is employed by different actors in the new media in a particular society (Andrejevic, 2008).

Blogging and the public sphere

The focus of discussion here is the question of access which relates to the issue of dominance of the new medium by advantaged individuals and existing power relations, including ways in which citizens can participate in public deliberation. It also addresses the process of "refeudalization" of the weakening public sphere in hindering public debates. The issue of the

emergence of multiple public spheres will be addressed in relation to the emergence of new social movements that transcend time and space. These are some aspects of Habermas's notion of the public sphere that are important to this thesis.

The issue of access can have an impact on whether citizens in a polity have equal opportunity without interference to participate in public discourse. This is based on the assumption that those who are systematically denied access to the new information and communications technologies or whose access is systematically limited to commodified contents are not only economically disadvantaged but have also been politically disenfranchised (Barney, 2004). Another pertinent factor refers to efforts to manipulate media content to sway public opinion, which can obstruct the process for rational public debates.

The discussion of social movements touches on the framework concerning the social ties of individuals or the organisation of groups into communities that have identities based on shared interests and not only on geographical boundaries. Questions on how social ties can be forged or changed with the use of new information and communication technologies and how civic engagement can be enhanced to realise particular goals are among the concerns of discussion here. The blurring of boundaries between the online and offline world that surrounds the issue of virtual versus traditional community also surfaces as a recurring theme.

Access to digital technologies

It has been theorised by those adopting the technological deterministic approach that an abundance of information and increased access to digital technologies can result in citizens being accorded equal access to information, thus enabling them to participate without interference in rational public discourse for the common good (Webster, 2006). This is based on an optimistic view that the new digital technology can generally lead to a situation where an abundance of information on the new communication platform, accompanied by a lowering of entry costs, increases levels of citizen engagement in political affairs. When the gap is reduced, the assumption is that citizens will be able to take part in public discourse by expressing and circulating their views for the common good.

The notion that a lowering of entry costs to the use of digital technologies can bridge the digital divide has come under attack by scholars who advocate an approach that incorporates social, political and economic factors (Gandy, 2002; Nicholas, 2003; Strover, 2003; Norris, 2004; van Dijk, 2006; Tsatsou, 2011). For example, Gandy (2002) discusses the notion of a "real digital divide" based on the concept of audience as consumers, replacing the meaning of citizens in the public sphere. This perspective is shared by Dahlberg (2005) and Fuchs (2009) who argue that information is evolving into a commodity or private good instead of critical consumption. Moreover, inequalities in access are

evident from existing economic, social, cultural and political inequalities in society (Norris, 2004).

The question of access, thus, raises issues of inequality in the blogosphere as being a reflection of disparity in society. Not only do bloggers originate from a segment of society that is more educated and drawing higher incomes, past research in the United States reveal that they are also overwhelmingly white and male (Perlmutter, 2008; Hindman, 2009). Other research on blogging also portrays a dominance of political elites on the blogosphere (Davis, 2009; Hindman, 2009). For example, Davis (2009) argues that instead of overthrowing politics, "blogs have become integrated into the political system" (p. 186). He points to evidence that certain individuals have an edge over resources and that influential bloggers are elite and well-educated individuals who are being incorporated into the mainstream. Political bloggers, as well as their readers, are typically those who already have a keen interest in politics. He concludes that the blogosphere reflects, and perhaps amplifies, current political cleavages but "has not altered it" (Ibid: 188). This has serious implications for claims of the democratic potentials of the new media and their ability to transform political practices. In his research on blogs, Hindman (2009) observes that the social and educational backgrounds of the most popular bloggers, who are mainly opinion journalists, are far more elite than the usual news reporter. Almost all the bloggers in his research are either "educational elites, business elites, technical elites, or

traditional journalists" (Ibid: 128). This clearly shows that the voices of only the higher brackets of society will continue to be heard, still leaving out many other marginalised voices.

It is, thus, essential to note that some pertinent questions that deserve closer examination concerning the political blogosphere in this thesis are who decides what frames to create, the circumstances that influence those frames, the goal they hope to achieve and the wider social and political context in which those frames are created. Another inquiry is the kind of connections that blogging have with the mainstream media in terms of whether blogging is an appealing tool to be used uniformly across-the-board or only at particular social and political junctures in electoral politics or whether bloggers are made up of media and political elites. These questions can point to deeper understanding of power relations in the Malaysian blogosphere.

Public deliberation and mobilisation

A significant dimension in the discussion of access or the digital divide is the subject of public deliberation. This is based on the concept of deliberative democracy which generally refers to the ideal that public decisions will be made after discussion and reasoning among equal citizens (Cohen, 1989). The assumption is that blogs can open up a new sort of public sphere by extending the way citizens and politicians interact and engage with each other in public discourse (Maynor, 2007). This implies

that the online communication forum can provide new spaces for political issues to be debated openly and freely.

As a form of "personal mass communication," Perlmutter (2008) argues that the new features afforded by blogs can enhance people's participation in discussions as they allow individuals to express their views on the blogs they have created or on other people's blogs. The comments can turn into discussions when individuals reply to points made by other individuals. This, he argues, enables interaction between individuals. These online activities are supported by the research of de Zuniga and colleagues (2009) who argue that there is a connection between blog use and a range of political behaviours online, such as discussion, campaigning, signing petitions and donating money. They conclude that there are positive effects of blog use on political behaviour, going beyond mere self-expression to enhancing political participation and engagement online (Ibid: 565). However, they were quick to caution that such political engagement online had yet to translate into the real world. The issue then remains whether online political behaviours are only confined to the cyberspace environment.

The potential for blogs to become forums for democratic deliberation is seen in a recent study of partisan political blogs in Canada (Koop & Jansen, 2009). Their research indicates the willingness of bloggers to engage others online. Their findings reveal that partisan bloggers, who are also citizens, are able to express their political views online. The

researchers show that bloggers are inclined to focus on substantive issues rather than party politics in their discussion, thus supporting the potential that blogging can become forums for democratic deliberation. Here, it must be acknowledged that although the research supports the idea that online discussion does indicate some deliberative characteristics, the question of domination and unequal relations is also detected in their study. They observe that the online discussions are often dominated by a small group of bloggers. This also relates to the question of access discussed above.

Not only are blogs seen as a forum for public deliberation and discourse, the new medium is also regarded as a platform for mobilising political action (Wallsten, 2007; Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009). In a content analysis on the use of political blogs in the 2004 US presidential election, Wallsten (2007) concludes that the blogs are used to express political opinions, mobilise political action, obtain readers' feedback and for passing along information. The study notes that political blogs are used to express political views far more than for mobilising political action, obtaining readers' feedback or for passing along information. It also reaffirms the use of blogs as a complex form of political expression.

Conversely, there are scholars who are less optimistic about the idealised potential of blogs in enhancing deliberative politics (Maynor, 2007; Wright, 2009). A recent study that explores the significance of blogging by politicians, who are councillors, on the 'Read My Day' platform in the United Kingdom shows that blogs of politicians provide

limited direct forms of interaction (Wright, 2009: 164). The findings also reveal that the blogs of politicians are generally not linked to other blogs, there is an apparent low readership of the councillors' blogs, the councillors' lack of readership of other blogs and the councillors are largely focused on local issues. Thus, it indicates that the blogs of politicians are unable to influence the blogosphere "with their spin" (Ibid: 165).

One way that blogging is seen as having failed in its attempt at promoting deliberative democracy is the possible fragmentation and polarisation of online communities (Maynor, 2007; Sunstein, 2007). Referring to specific criterion of the concept of deliberative democracy, Maynor (2007) is of the view that blogs tend to possess a "self-reinforcing function" (p. 13), by connecting like-minded users. These like-minded bloggers may be interested in only solidifying their preferential beliefs and values, thus isolating themselves from deliberations with others who hold different mindsets (Ibid). This may well polarise online communities, thus undermining the deliberative credentials of blogs which can turn out to be "more about monologue than discussion" (Ibid: 13).

New social movements and social ties

Early research conducted between 1995 and 2000 in the United States found that internet usage was associated with increased community and political involvement (Katz & Rice, 2002: 135). The interaction among members of a community is conducted across computer networks, not

bound to geographical location, and crossing national boundaries and even blurring the divide between virtual and traditional communities (Barney, 2004: 160)[9]. This interactivity is not only crossing geographical boundaries to facilitate public discourse but also has the capacity to mobilise people into political action (Pole, 2009). In other words, online social interactions are not only confined to cyberspace but are being translated into the real-world.

The internet has also been credited for creating new ways for public interest groups and political parties to establish more fluid forms of political engagement (Bimber, 1998; Chadwick, 2007). Digital technologies are said to be able to facilitate civic engagement by forming communities through the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). 'Thick' relationships are ties that are bound by "strong enduring multiplex ties and practices that define social roles, norms and identity and are not easily broken" (Barney, 2004: 157) while 'thin' relationships are ties that are voluntary, revocable and dynamic, based on shared interests and needs (Ibid). For Bimber (1998), the network communication can contribute to an "accelerated pluralism" in which "thin" communities can thrive but "thick"

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[9] Beniger (1987) uses the term 'pseudo-community' to refer to a transformation of traditional community into impersonal association. Beniger (1987) argues that the new information and communication technologies have blurred the boundaries between personal and mass communication, thus facilitating the enmeshing of interpersonal relations with mass messages. This leads to the growth of "pseudo-community." Rheingold (2000) uses the term 'virtual community' to refer to a community that exists entirely online. It is portrayed as "less hierarchical and less discriminatory, more egalitarian and inclusive than traditional communities" (Barney, 2004: 160).

communities will not be enhanced. Adopting the notion of "organizational hybridity," Chadwick (2007) argues that the internet enables public interest groups and political parties to establish "looser network forms characteristic of social movements" (p. 284) that bring together "online and offline efforts" (p. 286). Blogging can become a tool that unites individuals of shared interests and allows them to enter into loose alliances to achieve a common political goal at a particular point in time.

As discussed earlier, one example of this is the emergence of global social movements to counter the World Trade Organisation (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). Recent research also notes the use of political blogs to facilitate civic engagement and mobilise marginalised groups concerned with issues surrounding lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transsexuals (Pole, 2009). Bloggers can express themselves concerning those issues by engaging in political discussions with readers within a loosely bound community and reaching a larger group of individuals (Ibid). As such, blogging can reverse the trends of 'bowling alone' identified by Putnam (1995) who laments a decline in civic engagement in America in the 1960s. For Pole (2009: 2), political blogging is "a new form of political participation, which can potentially transform politics and lead to increased civic engagement."

This is where critics express concern that the internet will exaggerate the negative effects of pluralism by polarising groups of like-minded individuals into fragmented entities without engaging each other to achieve

common good (Sunstein, 2007). This is, in part, based on the notion of homophily that describes a basic organising principle where associations between and among individuals are linked to similar socio-demographic, behavioural and intrapersonal characteristics (McPherson et al, 2001: 416). Supporting the proverbial expression of 'birds of a feather flock together' is a recent research on the relationship between online and offline social ties in ethnically identified residential areas in Los Angeles (Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2001). The study reveals that online ties are established with individuals of the same ethnic group. This implies that pre-existing social and cultural relations of the real world can determine the way online social connections are forged and maintained.

When it comes to political views and positions, a similar trend is detected in several studies in the United States and Britain (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Stanyer, 2006; Sunstein, 2007; Hargittai et al, 2008, Davis, 2009). In a study to establish patterns and discussion topics of political bloggers in the 2004 US presidential election, Adamic and Glance (2005) observe a divided political blogosphere. Liberal and conservative bloggers are primarily linked to their separate communities and cross-linking is negligible. Other research on blogrolls has found that the vast majority of blogrolls are linked to sites that hold the same political positions and views of the political bloggers (Hargittai et al, 2008). The conservative blogs link to others that have the same conservative views and the same is seen in liberal blogs.

A similar trend is detected in the study of bloggers' partisanship during the 2005 British elections (Stanyer, 2006). A content analysis of more than 30 blogs and 1,300 posted messages revealed that the majority of the blogs displayed an overt ideological or partisan leaning, with most being left-wing (Ibid). It also found that the blogs were more likely to link to those with similar ideological or partisan view. It was particularly apparent among left-wing blogs and those belonging to members of parliament, candidates and councillors. This depicts the linking of 'like-minded' individuals, including the political positions they hold, leading to greater fragmentation of the blogosphere. The trend that bloggers and blog readers are individuals who already have a keen interest in politics is also reflected in the work of Davis (2009) who concludes that "partisan divisions in the blogosphere reflect current political cleavages" (p. 188). This implies that although the blogosphere is fragmented according to individuals who share the same interests and needs, the question remains whether it can still function as a tool to unite individuals seeking similar political goals at a particular point in time in electoral politics.

Blogging and political campaigning

The use of blogging and the internet to generate public opinion and policy, to facilitate new forms of campaigning bypassing established media practices and to become a source of information and space for political discussions during a general election has been widely recognised (Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005; Williams et al, 2005;

Kalstrup & Pedersen 2005; Albrecht et al, 2007; Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009). Hailed by some as an extreme form of political communication, blogs are described as having the potential to enrich political campaigns (Albrecht et al, 2007). Recognised as counteracting the negative effects of the old media, such as television, (Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Davis et al, 2009), blogs are increasingly regarded as an integral component of national elections (Lawson-Border & Kirk, 2005; Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009). Blogs are also accepted as a cheaper way for candidates and political parties to inform citizens, to mobilise voters by connecting supporters with the candidate and the campaign, and to raise funds for the campaign effort (Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009; Davis et al, 2009).

One of the most publicised campaigns that employed blogging to reach out to supporters was the Howard Dean campaign in the United States in 2003. Between 2003 and 2004, the Dean campaign moderated several blogs, such as "Dean Nation," "Change for America", "Howard Dean 2004 Call to Action Weblog" and "Blog for America" (Davis et al, 2009: 17). The success of the Howard Dean campaign is seen in its ability to raise funds and mobilise thousands of supporters (Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009). Through the use of blogs, the Dean campaign recorded a list of up to 600,000 registered voters and managed to collect over US$50 million (Perlmutter, 2008: 75). The upshot of it all was the rise of Dean from near obscurity to celebrity, resulting in thousands of stories being covered every month in the mainstream media about Dean and his blog

campaign since September 2003 (Ibid: 75). The use of online social media was also common among presidential hopefuls in the likes of Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama in 2008 when they announced their plans for a presidential run via the internet (Panagopoulos, 2009). Embracing the online social media is now a norm in presidential election campaigns in the United States (Ibid).

The move to turn blogs into tools of political marketing is also clear during the 2005 Danish election (Kalstrup & Pedersen, 2005). The empirical study conducted a content analysis of 52 blogs or diaries of politicians between the day the election was announced and shortly after the election. It also conducted a semi-qualitative survey, asking 28 politicians and their webmasters about their conception, use and reception of election blogs. After the election, phone interviews were conducted with 115 Danes regarding their use or reading of the blogs. Their findings suggest that the blogs are "primarily tools of political marketing" (Ibid: 8) for self-promotion rather than for dialogue. The Danish politicians used blogs as a tool to frame stories to appear more trustworthy, thank supporters and to appear interested in listening to the readers. The pair of researchers argue that such priming and framing in a blog context can present the politician as a "competent and reliable person" (Ibid: 8). It can well provide a spin in the kind of information that candidates provide to their supporters during crucial moments in a general election.

The strategy of blogging to keep people informed about the campaign is also reflected in a study of Republican president George W. Bush and Democrat senator John F. Kerry during the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign (Trammell, 2006). The research assessed the blogs of Bush and Kerry that were hosted on the official websites of the respective candidates. Evaluating the blogs and 1,190 blog posts by focusing on blog features, such as hyperlinks, blogroll and comments, the study found that the blog posts were designed to engage and interact with their readers and to allow their readers to identify other supporters (Ibid: 139). Trammell (2006) concludes that although the blogs are used in tactically different ways by the two candidates, the strategy is to inform people about the "campaign and the issues of the day" (p. 133).

Other studies on the use of campaign blogs also focus on specific elements of the blogs of candidates to show how blogs can be used strategically to influence public opinion and mobilise readers to be on side with the candidates in an election. Among them are the promotion of interactivity by using text and hyperlinks in blogs and websites of candidates vying to contest the presidential election in the United States in 2004 (Trammell et al, 2006), the use of hyperlinking practices on the websites and blogs of Bush and Kerry (Williams et al, 2005), and the use of frames to construct information conveyed on the official blogs of Bush and Kerry (Bichard, 2006). These studies indicate the influence of blogs on

readers as personalised mass communication, possibly promoting the visibility of the contesting candidates (Perlmutter, 2008).

In assessing the use of texts and hyperlinks to promote interactivity, an investigation of the websites and blogs of 10 Americans contesting the Democratic nomination in the 2004 United States presidential election reveals that the use of text in campaign blogs can foster a sense of interactivity by asking their readers to get involved in the election (Trammell et al, 2006). This spirit of interactivity is also enhanced because the blog posts are written in a personal and direct manner. In another study on the use of hyperlinks on the websites and weblogs of Bush and Kerry, the result suggests the practice of hyperlinking is likely to limit readers to the confines of the respective websites of the two candidates (Williams et al, 2005). The two studies indicate that the technical feature of hyperlinks and the use of texts can attract readers to get involved by donating money to the candidates.

Framing used to construct information in communication texts was the focus of a research on the official blog content of Bush and Kerry in the 2004 US presidential election (Bichard, 2006). The examination of 1,309 blog entries posted 64 days before the November election showed that the largest percentage of the blog entries focused on the individual. Opponent attack was most frequently used in the blog posts followed by an emphasis on the campaign trail. Kerry had more negative tone in his blog entries when compared with Bush. Kerry's site was also found to be significantly

more likely to feature candidate ideology and opponent attacks. The study suggests positive or negative images of one's opponent can be constructed through the information conveyed in the communication texts, photographs, or video forms in the blogs. Blogs can, thus, be a unique framing device as they can "glean good information from supporters and expose information in response to attacks while proactively positioning issues in their favor" (Ibid: 331).

Despite studies that portray the positive use of blogs and websites as a political campaign tool, other scholars question the significance of blogging on election outcomes. For example, Stanyer (2006) found that blogs in the 2005 British elections did not have an impact on campaign news agenda. The findings revealed that few bloggers were posting information about the campaign and few people visited blogs regularly. They contributed to the idea that blogging in the 2005 British general elections was "an electronic Speaker's Corner with very few speakers" (Ibid: 414). Another study on the use of blogs by political parties in the 2005 British election produced similar conclusions (Jackson, 2006). The findings show that blogs are not effective in starting conversations, promoting candidates or recruiting volunteers. Instead, they merely add "colour" to the party web sites (Ibid: 301).

Earlier research shows the only link between internet use and election campaigns is donating money (Bimber, 2001; Williams et al, 2005). In his research on informational availability and political engagement based on

data surveys from the National Election Studies in the US between 1996 and 1999, Bimber (2001) found that access to the internet and use of the internet for campaign information did not influence political participation during that period. The only connection is donating money during election campaigns (Bimber, 2001). This shows that the availability of information has no influence on political participation except for donating money. Moreover, the failure of Howard Dean in the election despite his success on his blog raises questions about the effectiveness of blog campaigning. The answers may well be embedded in the "practicalities of political campaign on the road" (Perlmutter, 2008: 85) and various complexities of politics in society (Ibid: 85-89).

Summary

This chapter has demonstrated the need for a more comprehensive understanding based on certain aspects of the political economy approach, Habermas's notion of the public sphere and the social determinism perspective to examine the extent to which blogging can promote democratic practices and enrich political life. For example, arguments that blogs enable citizens to express their views not found in the mainstream media may give the impression that the new platform is a democratic tool. In the context of Malaysia, blogging operates amidst a relatively authoritarian regime that curtails a free flow of information by having a tight control on the mainstream media. The use of blogging must be assessed in relation to the existing mediascape, the wider institutional and

societal structures. Moreover, questions concerning the role of the state, including existing laws and regulations can provide a deeper understanding of the influence of blogging.

Emphasis placed on individuals behind the blogs, their background, previous work experiences, political affiliation and connection with political elites can help to gain further insight into the web phenomenon. By examining those variables pertaining to individual bloggers and the dominant discourse in the Malaysian blogosphere, the dynamics of power and control in the Malaysian blogosphere can become clearer. The array of questions concerning individual bloggers and the dominant discourse can point to a contestation of power relations and provide a picture on whether the blogosphere agenda can be appropriated by powerful elites.

Guided by Habermas's notion of the public sphere, several questions can be formulated to gain deeper insight into the role of blogs in the Malaysian context. Firstly, the question of access to digital technologies helps to address the issue of those who have better opportunities and resources to take part in public deliberation through their blogs. Secondly, it puts forward the question of bloggers' motivation in setting up blogs, particularly whether the blogs are set up to facilitate and improve public discussion. More importantly, the process of "refeudalization" of the public sphere guides this research by examining the type of information that is available in the Malaysian blogosphere and the reasons for distributing them. This line of inquiry can help provide a more broad-based

understanding of the extent to which blogging can promote public discussion, thus providing space for public discourse.

An assessment of the social ties that emerge out of the practice of online devices can provide an indication on how loose associations can be established to achieve a political goal in electoral politics. It allows for a better understanding of how individual bloggers interact with each other, whether the connections are purely bound by nodes, ties and flows or bound by other social and political forces. The manner in which blogging can accommodate loose ties under different circumstances at particular junctures in a polity can provide a broader perspective on how it can create democratic spaces for voluntary association.

Chapter 4

Research Methodology

Introduction

Before discussing the methods of data collection and analysis used in this study, it is important to note that this research is guided by the political economy approach in an attempt to assess the role of socio-political blogging in Malaysia. The focus is on how the new platform can enhance democratic practices or contribute to the complexity of political life in a postmodern society. The political economy framework takes on a critical approach in understanding social realities, with particular emphasis on power imbalances and inequalities in society (Willis, 2007: 82). It also examines social occurrences within their specific social and political context in order to gain a better understanding of those realities. This is based on the understanding that different social phenomena happen at different points in time in a society. This Marxian-based critical tradition also emphasises the importance of looking back into history in order to understand current social phenomena, thus social realities are not seen in isolation or being separated from history[10].

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[10] The Marxian-based tradition is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx in his understanding of capitalism and its exploits of labour and capital, including inequalities in society (Benton & Craib, 2001). One of the key characteristics in this tradition is the importance of particular historical situations in order to gain a better understanding of social realities. An example is the research on citizen journalism as an alternative media form by Atton (2004).

One of the underlying tenets of the political economy approach is that social reality or in this case, socio-political blogging in Malaysia, is not taken at 'face value' or being 'out there,' but is a result of particular social and political inequalities. Thus, this study stresses the need to "look behind" the web phenomenon by examining the blogs, those who kept blogs, the background and life experiences of socio-political bloggers. It is similar manner to Allan's (2006) research on citizen journalism or blogs and their location within a wider social and political environment. As such, this study attempts to go beyond a simple equation of the rise of blogs at the same time as an election upset for the BN ruling regime. It looks deeper at whether socio-political blogs do systematically provide an expanded democratic space for political discussion and mobilisation in Malaysia. The general perception among political analysts and politicians is that socio-political blogs have provided an avenue to Malaysians to express themselves. However, there is a need to probe deeper into what the dominant discourses are, the manner in which the discourses are emphasised and who these bloggers are, in terms of their socio-economic background and their political leaning. This study, therefore, refrains from adopting a binary reductive approach[11]. It does not ask whether the socio-political blogs is able or unable to provide a new platform for democratic

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[11] A reductive binary approach only looks at the web phenomenon in a dichotomised manner. This can prevent a deeper understanding of the social reality. Its approach to understanding the web phenomenon is technologically deterministic and largely ignores the wider social and political context (May, 2002).

practices. Rather, it explores the blog discussions in an attempt to capture the pattern of blog use and probes the experiences of those involved in the public discourses to understand how, when and why the new media are able to promote and, at the same time, restrict democratic practices in a particular social and political context.

This exploratory study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to make sense of the web phenomenon. This is because this research is interested not only in the 'what' question, but also in 'how', 'when' and 'why' of socio-political bloggers take on a particular role and their own experiences in enriching political life through blogging. This project used content analysis as a quantitative research method to track the extent of blog use for particular political purposes. In addition to this, in-depth interviews were conducted with bloggers as a qualitative method to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of socio-political blogs in enhancing democratic practices in Malaysia. Here, I would like to note that the content analysis helped to provide an understanding of what the political blogs were discussing within the Malaysian context at a particular moment in time while the in-depth interviews enabled a 'deeper' analysis, aimed at answering the 'how' and 'why' questions that arose from the content analysis. The context of this study is the 2008 general election in Malaysia, thus helping to situate this research within a particular social and political context.

Parts of the research questions pertaining to democratic practices and enriching political life were examined through the content analysis of blog posts and comments of readers. For example, the content analysis could provide an indication on whether blogging was used to mobilise readers to take part in political action, such as mass protest rallies, like Hindraf and Bersih, whether the blogs were used to inform readers about election candidates and their campaigns, whether the web activity was used to raise funds and recruit volunteers in an election and whether the blog postings were critical or supportive of the ruling regime or the opposition parties. Another pertinent aspect of the content analysis was on whether blogging could generate public discussions. A quantitative analysis of the blog posts and comments could indicate a trend in blog use within the Malaysian cyberspace.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the in-depth interviews could provide a deeper understanding of blogging in the Malaysian context. The interviews could provide answers to questions relating to the processes and particular ways of blog use to achieve a specific goal, the social status of bloggers and their political affiliation, the enmeshing of online and offline experiences within a particular social and political environment, for example before, during and after the general election. The interview questions could provide an indication on the extent to which blogging could be significant to democratic practices and the enrichment of political life within the Malaysian context. The discussion will now turn to the

procedures, techniques and justifications for using the two methods of inquiry.

Content analysis

This method of inquiry, widely used in communication studies, is a research technique that is able to make "replicable and valid inferences from data to their context" (Krippendorff, 1980: 21). This means that the research technique must be reliable and replicable so that when other researchers apply the same technique to the same data at different points in time, it will produce comparable results. In effect, the tool serves not only to provide both knowledge and 'factual' representation, but it is also a practical and explicit guide that is applied equally to all units of analysis. This application of replicability must also include "the coding of content analysis data" (Krippendorff, 2004: 20). This is in reference to Berelson's (1971) utilisation of the phrase "manifest content" in his definition of content analysis.

Another important element of content analysis is that it requires "a context within which the available texts are examined" (Krippendorff, 2004: 24) so that the text makes sense and is able to provide reasonable interpretations of the results of the content analysis. By extension, the content analysis must be able to draw specific inferences by identifying particular features in a text in a systematic and objective manner (Ibid: 25). In short, the practical guide must be clear and explicit with the type of data to be analysed, how the data are defined, which population the data are

drawn from, the context in which the data are analysed, the context within which the inferences can be realised and the aim of the inferences.

Although the content analysis method has been known as a research technique to study the print and broadcast media, it is also a popular tool for new media research, such as the internet. More specifically, content analysis is used to study blogs in political communication research. Numerous political communication studies on political blogs have used content analysis as a research tool to assess various perspectives of the web phenomenon (Bichard, 2006; Kalstrup & Pedersen, 2005; Stanyer, 2006; Albrecht et al, 2007; Trammell, 2007; Wallsten, 2007; Hargittai et al, 2008; Koop & Jansen, 2009; Wright, 2009). These studies examined blog postings or press releases found on the blogs as the unit of analysis, which, in turn, described or identified the multiple roles of blogs in political communication. Similarly, this study attempts to analyse the contents or postings of the socio-political blogs to help in describing or identifying their role in providing democratic space for rational public discussion, for mobilising political action or keeping readers informed of electoral campaigns, using the 2008 general election as a case in point. The content analysis hopes to capture basic information about the blogs and bloggers authoring them, including the topics of blog discussion, the sources that bloggers use to create their blog posts and the tone that bloggers take when composing their blog postings. It also hopes to obtain information on the use of blogs to encourage readers to take part in political action, to recruit

volunteers, raise campaign funds and to promote particular candidates in the 2008 general election.

I initially conducted a pilot study of 10 socio-political blogs to test the suitability of the population, sample, timeframe, coding schedule and coding manual before commencing with the actual study. The processes taken to decide on the sampling, the timeframe of this research, the coding categories and coding manual are discussed in detail in the next section of this chapter. The decisions made are considered to be a sort of blueprint to ensure that the content analysis is replicable and is a valid representation of the socio-political blogs. The sampling and coding were changed, as detailed below, as a result of the pilot study.

Sampling

A crucial step that needs careful consideration before the content analysis can commence is to identify the relevant target group for the study. Selecting a suitable sample for the study is pertinent so that valid inferences can be made from the data collected (Krippendorff, 1980). The sample selected must be drawn from a population that is relevant to the study in order to provide insights into the research questions. If the sample is not drawn from a population relevant to the research, it can end up studying the wrong section of the population, thus providing a skewed understanding of the web phenomenon. Thus, there is a need to be explicit about the criteria on the relevant population in order to set the parameters for selecting the sample. Several criteria had been drawn up to distinguish

between relevant and irrelevant blogs for this research. After the population had been identified, it was examined to assess if it was too large, so a smaller group could be selected to represent the larger group in order to make generalisations from the results (Bertrand & Hughes, 2005: 65). To get a representative sample, each of the units in the relevant target group must have equal chances of being selected so that there is "no bias in the inclusion of units in a sample" (Krippendorff, 1980: 66).

The unit of analysis for this study is individual postings and comments that are contained in socio-political blogs during the 2008 general election in Malaysia[12]. Blogs or weblogs that are deemed appropriate for selection in this study are personal postings or political writings and commentaries, written in reverse chronological order, in which the most recent posting appears at the top of the page. They are also online journals that are linked to other websites, weblogs or blogs (Blood, 2003; Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Allan, 2006; Bruns, 2008). Socio-political blogs that were included for sampling were those that contained postings discussing public interest issues like human rights, corruption, the electoral system, political parties and scandals of political leaders. Some of the blog discussions included in this study were in the form of texts, cartoons, photographs and YouTube. Blogs that discussed

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[12] Malaysia is divided geographically into West Malaysia (also known as Peninsula Malaysia) and East Malaysia, consisting of Sabah and Sarawak. This study took into account political blogs produced and maintained by individuals located in both West and East Malaysia.

personal matters, such as shopping, hobbies, reviews of restaurants that offer delicious food, family events or family abroad, were excluded in this study.

The timeframe for this study is important to ensure that the data reflect the appropriate context in its analysis. As the study is on the role of socio-political blogs during the 2008 general election, the relevant blogs for analysis are those that contain postings during the official 13-day campaigning period[13] from February 24 and March 7, 2008. Instead of merely limiting the postings to that short 13-day spell, the content analysis extended its coverage to include contents of socio-political blogs posted from February 1 to March 31, 2008. The postings of the two months were analysed in order to capture the various political discussions just before the campaigning period and on the takeover of four state governments by the opposition[14] after the polls. Discussions over the month of February and March could be more reflective of the political scenario at that time which included the takeover of the four states by the opposition. As such, the cut-off date for blog posts to be considered appropriate for this study is April 2008.

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[13] Although it is common practice for political parties to campaign during non-election periods, this study uses the official election campaigning period between February 24 and March 7, 2008, as a criterion to select the sample for analysis.

[14] After the general election on March 8, 2008, four state governments – Selangor, Perak, Penang and Kedah – previously under the ruling BN regime came under opposition rule (New Sunday Times, 2008a). All except three of the 13 Federal Territory seats also fell into the hands of the opposition (New Sunday Times, 2008b).

Apart from those two months, contents of blogs posted in the month of November 2007 were included in this study. This is because November 2007 can present a different scenario on the role of socio-political blogs in the lead-up to the general elections. Moreover, two public rallies, deemed illegal by the Malaysian authorities, were held and attended by unexpectedly large crowds in November 2007. The two protests were the Bersih rally, calling for a free and fair election, which was held on November 10, 2007, and the Hindraf mass protest, urging for an improvement of Indian economic and cultural conditions was held on November 25, 2007, just two weeks apart from each other. Examining the contents of socio-political blogs in November 2007 can give a better understanding of the kind of discussions circulating in the blogosphere in the lead-up to the 2008 election. It can provide some sense of blog use at a time of social unrest.

The number of postings was initially not included as a criterion for considering the suitability of blogs when the pilot study was conducted. This was because postings on the 10 blogs selected for the pilot study had numerous discussions on public interest matters and the question of a minimum number of blog posts did not arise. However, the question arose when it came to blogs that were set up in March 2008. A check of the comprehensive Malaysia socio-political blog directory showed that 71

socio-political blogs were set up between January and March 2008[15]. Some of the socio-political blogs that were set up in March 2008 had only one posting (up to the date of analysis). To consider them as relevant blogs for analysis may quantitatively create a false impression of the blogosphere. For sampling purposes, only socio-political blogs that had at least three postings[16] on political matters within the timeframe were included in this study. This is because three political discussions on the blogs can generate sufficient data for analysis on their contribution to public discourse.

The comprehensive online directory of socio-political blogs[17] in Malaysia was used as a starting point to generate a population of the relevant socio-political blogs for the content analysis. After going through the directory containing blogs of society, politics and economy of Malaysia (available at http://sopo-sentral.blogspot.com/) and the blogrolls found in each of the blogs, a population of 746 socio-political blogs had been generated. After considering the three-month timeframe of November 2007 and February-March 2008 and the threshold of three political postings, 286 (or 38%) out of a total of 746 socio-political blogs were deemed relevant

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[15] An indication of when a blog is first set up is displayed in the archives of the individual blog.

[16] Using three postings as the cut-off point for including or excluding the socio-political blogs that are set up in March 2008 may be contestable but at least it provides an explicit guide for inclusion or exclusion. Here, the value of replicability, as noted by Krippendorff (1980), is a pertinent element in content analysis.

[17] The directory, started in 2007, is kept and maintained by a pseudonymous blogger who publishes under the name A-Voice.

for this study. The remaining 460 blogs (or 63%) were considered irrelevant[18]. As the volume of relevant socio-political blogs was too large, the next step was to randomly select a sample that was "large enough to contain sufficient information and small enough for analysis" (Krippendorff, 1980: 65).

Individual bloggers who kept and maintained blogs during the 2008 general election[19] consisted of those who became candidates in the national election and those who did not contest in the polls. The non-candidates were made up of members or supporters of the various political parties, civil society members who were expressing their views on socio-political matters and individuals who were not aligned to any political parties or non-governmental organisations but wanted to have a say on public interest issues. However, it was difficult to ascertain the affiliation or involvement of non-candidates in political parties or public interest groups because the information was not readily available on their blogs. Moreover, their political affiliation did not seem to line up with their blog content.

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[18] The irrelevant blogs were made up of those that started blogging from April 2008 onwards; had broken links and were no longer accessible; were only for invited readers; had been deleted; and the accounts were no longer active. Some of them were not political blogs but, instead, focused more on culture, arts and personal matters. They were listed in the directory because they were hyperlinked to political blogs. Some of them were aggregator of news and others were difficult to download. There were also some blogs that were infected with a malicious javascript virus embedded in the web pages.

[19] The federal and state elections were held simultaneously in 2008, except for the state of Sarawak where the election was only for parliamentary seats. There were 222 parliamentary seats and 503 state seats that were contested in the 12th Malaysian election on March 8, 2008 (Financial Daily, 2008).

Therefore, the blogs provided information only on whether the blogger was a candidate or non-candidate, popular A-list or less read B-list and identified or pseudonymous blog.

Out of a population of 286 blogs that were appropriate for this study, 35 election candidates were actively blogging during the official campaigning period between February 24 and March 8, 2008. The remaining 251 blogs were kept and maintained by non-candidates. Because of the two distinct subpopulations of candidates and non-candidates, the stratified sampling method was used to randomly select the sample for this study. Stratified sampling recognises "several distinct subpopulations within a population, called strata" (Krippendorff, 1980: 66). This method of sampling was used to ensure appropriate representation of the socio-political bloggers who were made up of candidates and non-candidates. This helps to ensure that the blog posts and comments of candidates contesting the 2008 general election have an equal chance of selection for this research. Similarly, stratified sampling was used to generate the sample of comments found in blog posts of candidates and non-candidates. A list of the candidate and non-candidate blogs deemed appropriate for this content analysis is available in Appendix 2.

The research gathered information from 286 blogs, encompassing 18,425 blog posts and 106,326 comments over the three-month study period (Table 1). The total number of postings of electoral candidates stood at 1,996 while blog posts of non-candidates came to a total of 16,429. As

for the number of comments, the postings of candidates received 30,504 comments from their readers while the blog posts of non-candidates received 75,822 responses. The ratio of candidate to non-candidate blog posts worked out to an estimate of 1:9 while the ratio of comments received by candidate and non-candidate blog posts came to approximately 1:3. Based on a 95% confidence level and 5% interval, the sample size generated was 376 blog posts. After taking into consideration the ratio of 1:9, the number of blog posts published on candidate blogs worked out to be 42 and those of non-candidates came to 334. As for the comments, the sample size calculator generated a sample of 383 comments, of which 127 were reader feedback found in blog posts of candidates and the remaining 256 comments were from postings of non-candidates. After the blog posts had been generated randomly, the sample was found to originate from 179 blogs, of which 19 were blogs of electoral candidates while the remaining 160 were from blogs of non-candidates (Table 2). The exercise was successful in ensuring that blogs kept by the electoral candidates were represented in the content analysis to provide a better understanding of how the contestants were using the blogs at that time[20]. Moreover, political power in Malaysia is dominated by the Malays, who are fluent in English and Malay. Thus, studying only English and Malay blogs can provide a

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[20] As explained in Chapter One, the content analysis examined only English and Malay language blogs but not Chinese and Tamil language blogs because I am not fluent in the latter two languages.

closer assessment of blogging and political dominance in the Malaysian

blogosphere.

Table 1: A population of blog posts and comments generated from blogs of
candidates and non-candidates

Blog type	Number of blogs	Number of blog posts	Number of comments
Candidates	35	1,996	30,504
Non-candidates	251	16,429	75,822
Total	**286**	**18,425**	**106,326**
Ratio of candidate to non-candidate		1:9	1:3

Note: The above ratio of candidate to non-candidate was used to generate a
sample of 376 blog posts (1:9) and 383 comments (1:3) for the full study.

Table 2: A breakdown of the sampled blog posts and comments according to the
ratio of candidates to non-candidates

Blog type	Number of blogs	Number of blog posts	Number of comments
Candidates	19	42	127
Non-candidates	160	334	256
Total	**179**	**376**	**383**

A former Malaysian journalist who understands and is aware of the political innuendoes found in the blog posts and comments was recruited as a reliability coder for the intercoder reliability test. The reliability coder coded 20 blogs, 38 blog posts and 38 comments, which worked out to be about 10% of the full sample. The coding of the reliability coder was compared with my coding of the same 10% subset sample. Discussions were held with the reliability coder to further improve the coding categories in the coding schedule and make the coding manual more explicit to prevent an overlapping of categories. An intercoder reliability test was conducted using ReCal, which is an online intercoder reliability Web service (Freelon, 2010). The variables were found to be consistently coded with an agreement of between 90% and 100%, with coefficients of between .80 and 1.0 on the Scott's Pi reliability test. I coded the full sample selected for the content analysis after the intercoder reliability test was completed.

It is essential to note here that a new variable has been added to the content analysis after the in-depth interviews with the research participants. This is following the disclosure of crucial information by the research participants, particularly on the reason for setting up their blogs. For example, some of the partisan bloggers indicated that their blogs were set up with the specific objective to remove the then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. As such, a new variable was added to examine if blog postings and comments containing a critical tone were specifically

targeting Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. This is an example of how the interviews are particularly useful in improving the content analysis. Instead of an intercoder reliability test for this new variable, I conducted an intracoder reliability test because I was unable to enlist the help of another coder. According to Wimmer and Dominick (2006: 169-170), intracoder reliability can be conducted in situations where a set of data is coded by the same individual twice at different times. I coded 20 blog posts and 20 comments, which worked out to about 10% of blog postings and feedback that contained a critical tone and two months later, I coded them again for comparison. Using ReCal, the intracoder reliability test detected an agreement of 97% and a coefficient of 0.84 on the Scott's Pi index.

Pilot study

A pilot study of 24 blog posts and 414 comments[21] contained in 10 blogs, which were selected because they fell within the criteria defined for sampling, had turned up useful lessons before coding of the full sample commenced. The pilot study, conducted in October 2009, was crucial for me to get a feel of the discussions in the blogosphere and to help draft the coding categories for the coding schedule and manual. The pilot study also helped to define the parameters for the sampling, particularly the timeframe and the minimum number of blog posts.

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[21] The 24 posts and 414 comments were not a subset of the full sample coded for the actual content analysis but they were a subset of the population generated for the stratified random sampling used in this study.

Firstly, the minimum number of 3 postings for blogs set up in March 2008 was decided upon after I came across them when preparing for the pilot study. Although there were many blogs that were set up in March 2008, some of them had only one post. As mentioned earlier in the sampling section, the minimum number of 3 blog posts became one of the criteria in identifying appropriate blogs for analysis.

Secondly, this study had initially wanted to investigate 'partisan connectivity' in the Malaysian blogosphere by examining the hyperlinks[22]. The idea is based on Stanyer's (2006) research on the role of blogging in the 2005 British general election. Stanyer (2006) examined the hyperlinks, contained in the blogroll normally displayed on the first page of a blog, to evaluate if the blogs were connected to those with the same ideological or partisan stance, in terms of their left or right-wing orientation. However, this pilot study encountered difficulties in determining the left or right-wing orientation of the hyperlinks in the blogroll because the information was not easily available on the blogs and many of the Malaysian blogs were found to be pseudonymous. A total of 71 (or 40%) out of the 179 blogs that were randomly selected for the content analysis were pseudonymous. Moreover, the "left or right" ideological leanings of political parties are not clearly defined because the dominant political parties in Malaysia are mainly race-based (Hua, 1983). Thus, the actual

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[22] The hyperlinks, a key feature of blogging to show interconnectivity among the blogs, are contained in posts found on different blogs and displayed prominently in a list of called blogroll (Stanyer, 2006: 406).

content analysis excluded an examination of whether the hyperlinks were connected to particular political parties. However, an effort to determine the 'partisan connectivity' of a blog can be established through in-depth interviews with the research participants.

The pilot study helped to refine and develop the coding schedule and coding manual for the full content analysis. For example, the pilot study pointed to the need to be more definitive on the tone of the blog posts, particularly with the use of the word 'sarcasm'. It was found that the word 'sarcasm' could convey ambiguity, thus there was a need to be more precise when coding the tone of the blog posts. The term 'sarcasm' was used in the pilot study to determine if the blog posts were implicitly critical towards the subject matter of the postings. In order to be more precise and accurate on the tone of the blog posts, the word 'sarcasm' was replaced in the full study with the word 'implicit/covert criticism' while the term 'hostile/aggressive' tone signifies 'explicit/overt criticism' of the blog postings. Another example is the topics of blog discussion for the pilot study. The initial large number of 30 topics for the pilot study was later categorised into 10 themes that were mutually exclusive and exhaustive so that there would be no overlaps, which could result in an inaccurate picture of the blog posts (Betts et al, 2001: 163). The necessary amendments were made to the coding schedule and coding manual upon completion of the pilot study and the intercoder reliability test. A coding manual that provided an explanation of each of the categories was prepared to ensure

that the content analysis was systematic, replicable and valid (Krippendorff, 1980).

An analysis of blogs, blog posts and comments was decided upon after the pilot study had been completed. The three levels of analysis can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of socio-political blogs. This is because focus on the bloggers can be examined through the blogs and a trend in blog use can be evaluated through the blog posts. An investigation into the comments can provide an indication of the response of blog readers towards the contents created by bloggers. Thus, the coding schedule and coding manual were designed to accommodate the three levels of analysis which were used in the full study.

Assessment of blogs for actual study

The home pages of the blogs were coded individually for the bloggers' name, their ethnicity and occupation, the language used to write the posts, whether the blogger was a candidate in the 2008 general election and the age of the blog. It was also coded for whether the home pages contained an electronic mail address, facebook account or telephone contact for readers to link up with the blogger in an offline environment. The blogs were also examined for whether the home pages specifically mentioned that readers were allowed to give their feedback and whether the comments were moderated. They were also assessed on whether the blogs were used to solicit donations and place advertisements.

The name of the blogger was coded for two reasons; firstly, to determine if the blog was pseudonymously produced and maintained and secondly, to help in contacting the bloggers for the in-depth interviews which were conducted upon completion of the full content analysis. The ethnicity of the blogger could be useful in gauging the language used to compose the blog writings and this could have an impact on the topics of discussion and the manner in which the discussions were written, particularly on whether they were sympathetic towards a particular racial or religious issue. The code on whether the blogger was a candidate or not in the 2008 general election was important for analysis because it could provide an insight into whether the pattern of blog use was hugely different from those who were not candidates. The blogs were also coded for the occupation of bloggers. This can give an idea of the socio-economic status and, by extension, can provide a picture of whether the bloggers are from a particular class in society. The age of the blogs was coded to obtain an indication of how long a particular blogger had been active in the blogosphere. The blogs were also examined on whether readers were allowed to give their feedback and whether the responses were moderated. This can suggest if the bloggers are allowing discussions to occur freely on their blog to promote public debates and discussions. An assessment of the blogs included whether they were used to solicit donations and to place advertisements. This can indicate the benefits that bloggers hope to gain

from their blogging activity. Copies of the coding schedule and coding manual of blogs are available in Appendix 3 and Appendix 4, respectively.

Investigation of blog posts

The contents of the individual blog posts were scrutinised for a pattern of blog use in the Malaysian blogosphere. Coding the blog posts for whether they were used to express views, give information, urge readers to take part in political action, such as protest rallies or to vote in the elections, or to provide information on election candidates and campaigns could provide an indication of the trend in blog use. The blog post was also coded for whether it was used to solicit donations or recruit volunteers for electoral campaigns. This can help give an assessment on whether blogging is able to alter the traditional mechanisms of electoral politics. The source of blog posts was also examined to determine if bloggers were hyperlinking with each other to establish some form of connectivity or 'loose coalition,' as discussed in Chapter Eight and Nine.

Returning to the phrase "manifest content" (Berelson, 1971), coding the individual blog post for the tone proved to be problematic because of the danger of having to interpret the content for latent meanings when assessing the tone. However, capturing the tone of the blog post can provide some insight into the possible nuances of a particular post. The idea of analysing the tone of the post is based on a study by Bichard (2006) who examined the use of framing to construct information posted on the websites of the presidential candidates in the 2004 US election. Thus, the

categories used in the full study to code the tone of the posts were adapted from Bichard's (2006) study and after a general reading of the Malaysian blogosphere. The categories used for coding the tone were made more explicit after the pilot study so that interpretation could be kept to a minimum.

It is not sufficient to just detect if the blog posts contained critical or supportive tone. As such, the critical versus supportive tone was further analysed to determine if the blogosphere was supportive of the ruling regime, the opposition or particular leaders. This can indicate whether the blog posts have been used to frame certain leaders in particular ways. Copies of the coding schedule and coding manual of blog posts are available in Appendix 5 and Appendix 6, respectively.

Examination of comments

An analysis of the comments or feedback from the readers is mainly aimed at evaluating if blogging is able to generate rational discussions, thus expanding the public sphere. As such, the comments were investigated for whether they discussed the blog posts, whether discussions were generated among the readers and whether the web activity sparked debates between the bloggers and readers. A copy of the coding schedule and coding manual for the comments is available in Appendix 7 and Appendix 8, respectively.

The various types of responses from the readers can further indicate a trend in the web phenomenon when taking into consideration the

audiences. This was examined with particular reference to whether the readers agreed with the blog posts, whether they discussed the blog posts or whether the comments provided additional information to the blog postings. It also explored the types of source used by readers when they responded to the blog posts. These aspects can provide an understanding into the kind of relationship the readers have with the bloggers and vice-versa.

The tone taken by readers when giving their reply was assessed to see if the readers were critical or supportive in their response to the blog posts. Similar to the examination of the targets of critical and supportive tone of the blog posts, the comments were analysed to determine the targets of critical or supportive tone taken by the readers. This helps to give an indication of whether the readers are also directing their critical or supportive tone to similar targets as the bloggers.

Quantitative analysis

The Excel Microsoft programme was used to code the data gathered from the relevant blogs, blog posts and comments. After the actual content analysis was completed in June 2010, charts, frequencies and percentages were generated to understand and identify the trend of blog use, such as the use of blogs to generate public discussions, to seek donation and volunteers for the electoral campaign, to mobilise readers for political action and to keep readers informed about electoral campaigns. The analysis also included the tone of the blog postings in an attempt to understand whether

the blogs were used to paint a particular image of the ruling regime or the opposition politicians. The sources of the blog posts became a focus of investigation because it could provide an indication on whether particular information was being highlighted in the blogosphere, suggesting that information flow was being managed by particular bloggers. Findings of the content analysis are discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

Cross-tabulations were conducted to distinguish the use of blogs by candidates and non-candidates of the 2008 general election. The cross-tabulations could also provide a pattern of blog use between A-list and B-list bloggers and between identified and pseudonymous ones. For this study, the number of comments received for a particular blog post was used to determine if a particular blogger was considered A-list or B-list because there was no popularity ranking of socio-political bloggers in Malaysia. A-list blogs were those that received an average of 10 comments and more per blog post written during the timeframe selected for the study. B-list blogs were those that received an average of less than 10 comments per blog post during that timeframe. The results showed that 73 blog posts (or 19%) originated from A-list blogs while the remaining 303 postings (or 81%) came from B-list blogs. Approximately 56% (or 209 blog posts) were from identified blogs and the remaining 44% (or 167 blog posts) were from pseudonymous blogs. A breakdown is available in Table 3.

Table 3: A breakdown of sampled blogs and blog posts published on candidate/non-candidate, A-list/B-list and identified/pseudonymous blogs

Blog type	Number of blogs (%)	Number of blog posts (%)
Candidate	19 (11.0)	42 (11.0)
Non-candidate	160 (89.0)	334 (89.0)
Total	**179 (100.0)**	**376(100.0)**
A-list	34 (19.0)	73 (19.0)
B-list	145 (89.0)	303 (89.0)
Total	**179 (100.0)**	**376(100.0)**
Identified	108 (60.0)	209 (56.0)
Pseudonymous	71 (40.0)	167 (44.0)
Total	**179 (100.0**	**376(100.0)**

It was difficult to code all the sampled blogs for the political leanings of bloggers because of the presence of pseudonymous blogs. This is one of the weaknesses of the content analysis which can possibly be overcome through the in-depth interviews. As mentioned earlier, the content analysis could provide a trend in blog use but was unable to provide explanations on why or how the bloggers were utilising the blogs in particular ways, such as why the candidates did not make use of their blogs to raise funds and recruit volunteers in their electoral campaigns or how and why some of the partisan bloggers were managing information flow on their blogs. Such details, however, could be realised through the in-depth interviews.

In-depth interviews

Despite being an ambiguous method of inquiry, interviewing is described as "one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow humans" (Fontana & Frey, 2005: 697-698). Thus, the in-depth interviews are aimed at obtaining a richer and deeper understanding of the political blogosphere in the country. A critical examination of the web activity can help to make sense of the extent to which blogging can contribute to public discourse and political life. This also helps in obtaining a meaningful understanding of the dynamic processes of the web phenomenon, instead of a binary account of blogging and political life. Thus, the interviews involved taking a closer examination of the research participants, in terms of their socio-economic background, their work and life experiences, including their political affiliations, the social ties that they forged through blogging, the dominant discourse on the blogosphere and the ways in which blogging was used to achieve a particular goal in electoral politics. The interviews also explored the question of 'power' and influence the individual bloggers wielded within the blogosphere.

The interviews, which took at least 90 minutes to complete, covered four separate sections, starting with basic information about their background, their political blogging activities in general, blogging activities during the 2008 general election and their relationship with their readers and other bloggers. The first section of the interview, available in

Appendix 9, contains close-ended questions regarding the background of the bloggers, such as age, ethnicity, religion, language, social or political affiliation, occupation, educational level, computing skills, number of blogs they set up, their involvement in political parties or non-governmental organisations, and reasons for blogging pseudonymously or otherwise.

The other three parts of the interview, also available in Appendix 9, are semi-structured, particularly open-ended questions, which require the bloggers to give their opinions about their activity. As noted by Fontana and Frey (2005), unstructured interviews provide "greater breadth" in an attempt at understanding "the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any prior categorization that may limit the field of inquiry" (p. 706). The semi-structured interview questions also act as a sort of checklist to ensure that the same areas are covered in the interviews with all the research participants. The second and third parts of the interview are aimed at obtaining the bloggers' perspective on their blogging activities in general and specifically during the campaign period. The questions here are also related to the content analysis of the respective blogs, particularly postings on the Hindraf and Bersih gathering in November 2007. The last part of the interview is an attempt at exploring the relationship of bloggers with their readers and other bloggers. This is to examine the dynamics between the bloggers and their readers and between the bloggers and other bloggers, including the possible spilling over of their offline tensions to

their online activity or an enmeshing of online and offline efforts by the bloggers.

Although the list of questions had been prepared in advance before the in-depth interviews were conducted, the line of inquiry had to be changed when the respondents provided unexpected information about their online activity. The ability to stray slightly away from the prepared list of questions allowed me to better understand the complex behaviour of the online community without imposing my own values during the interviews. Thus, additional questions had been incorporated following some of the unexpected information revealed during the interviews. Among the additional questions for the group of politician-bloggers are blog practices at particular moments, namely before, during and after the general election and restrictions in the use of blogs to discuss party matters or public interest issues. Some of the additional questions for the group of partisan bloggers are pertaining to the 'loose coalition' formed by some of the partisan bloggers to manage information flow on their blogs in order to change public perception towards particular national leaders and the meeting of influential Malay bloggers to organise the use of blogs to change public perception towards the ruling regime. Closer examination was also conducted into the manner in which some of the civil society bloggers were forging opportunistic ties with the some of the partisan bloggers in the 2008 election and the emergence of mercenary bloggers or cybertroopers in the Malaysian blogosphere. As such, the list of questions

prepared for the in-depth interviews changed according to the data or information gathered from the research participants. In-depth interviews with politician-bloggers, partisan and civil society bloggers are discussed in Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine, respectively.

Participants of in-depth interviews

The snowball sampling method was used to contact and obtain the consent of bloggers for an interview. This method of sampling is a non-probability sampling technique which is not representative of the population (Bertrand & Hughes, 2005). It is a method in which the researcher finds one person, who in turn directs the researcher to another person. The snowball sampling method is particularly useful for this research because many of the blogs are pseudonymously produced and maintained and, therefore, do not contain the contact details of bloggers. However, in the course of my 15-year stint as a journalist in an English press, I had the opportunity of establishing contact with some of the active bloggers and politicians, who kept a blog during the 2008 general election. Thus, I was able to get in touch with some of the politician-bloggers, partisan and civil society bloggers because of my previous work experience. I also had the opportunity to meet some of the partisan bloggers at a local telecommunication company's briefing of its new broadband deal for bloggers when I returned to Kuala Lumpur to conduct the in-depth interviews between February 25 and May 4, 2010. At the function, I managed to establish contact with some of the partisan bloggers

who were blogging pseudonymously. After establishing contact with some of the partisan bloggers, I managed to locate other bloggers who were actively blogging during the 2008 general election to take part in this study. Another event that was useful in establishing contact with some of the civil society bloggers was a political forum held by a church group. One of the civil society bloggers happened to be a speaker at the event and it proved to be easier to meet the blogger face-to-face first before I was able to enlist his participation for this research. These initial meetings were useful in helping me obtain the contacts of other bloggers. Thus, the snowball sampling method proves to be useful in obtaining and establishing contacts with the research participants.

Electronic mails were also sent out to some of the bloggers, particularly pseudonymous ones, seeking their agreement to take part in this research. However, it was not as productive when compared with meeting the bloggers face-to-face. Many of them who were contacted via electronic mail were not keen to be interviewed for various reasons. Some of them, who are academics serving at public universities, cited a fear of backlash from the authorities for their anti-establishment postings. They did not want to reveal their true identities to anyone, including me. Yet others did not mention any reason but politely declined to participate in this study.

Seeking the agreement of politician-bloggers, particularly opposition ones, proved to be easier than some of the partisan and civil society

bloggers, who wanted to remain anonymous for the interviews. Some of the partisan bloggers did not want to be identified for fear of existing laws, particularly the laws on defamation and other legislation that restricts civil liberties. During the course of my field research, one of the partisan bloggers did not turn up despite having made an appointment to be interviewed. No reason was given and repeated attempts to contact the blogger failed. Another partisan blogger was quite cautious when disclosing personal information about his blogging activities. On meeting some of the civil society bloggers, they disclosed concern about my real intention despite showing them letters from my supervisor and the university. Some of them revealed that my line of inquiry was similar with that of the Special Branch police and they feared that the information given would be used against them in future. However, they became more amenable after I produced my student card and other identification. Some of them also verified my identification with some of my contacts and acquaintances. It was not unusual for some of the civil society bloggers to be suspicious as many of them disclosed frightening experiences involving the authorities because of their blogging activities. There was even an incident in which a civil society blogger provided information about his blogging activities but after almost an hour into the interview, he admitted that he had not been giving me accurate information about himself. The blogger, who is a school teacher, later decided to be more open about his blogging activity and his connections with an opposition political party

after realising that we had a mutual friend in a non-governmental organisation. Although most of the civil society bloggers were open in sharing their blogging experiences, some of them wanted to remain anonymous for certain information they revealed during the in-depth interviews.

A key limitation to this study is the restricted space for public debate in the Malaysian society. Many of the partisan and civil society bloggers are of the view that freedom of speech in Malaysia is enshrined in the Federal Constitution but there is no freedom after speech. Some of them openly shared their frightening encounters with the authorities during the interviews. They also pointed out that the experiences of other bloggers who were prosecuted or jailed for their blog postings remained real for many of them. Under these circumstances, it is understandable that some of the bloggers decide not to participate in this research despite having made appointments to do so. However, I am grateful that the respondents had generally given open and genuine answers despite their fears. The fact that they registered such fears during the in-depth interviews was indicative of their desire to give a genuine response to the questions.

Within the group of politician-bloggers, I was able to obtain only the participation of opposition politicians and not politicians from the ruling regime. Most of the politicians who kept a blog during the 2008 election were from the opposition parties. The ruling regime did not think blogging was an important tool at that time and was relying on the traditional media

to promote its electoral campaign. Hence, there were only a handful of politicians from the ruling regime who kept blogs during the 2008 elections. One of them was former finance minister, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. However, efforts to contact the former minister failed. Efforts to interview Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who did not have a blog of his own at that time but was deemed active behind the blogosphere scene, fell through even after my three-month long fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur. Although none of the politician-blogger was from the ruling parties, five of the partisan bloggers interviewed were members of the ruling coalition. They provided insightful information on how they were using the blogs, the particular goal they wanted to achieve through blogging and the loose ties they forged in order to realise their goal. The interviews also suggest an interesting dimension to blogging which is discussed in detail in Chapter Eight.

The sample size for the in-depth interviews depended on the number of bloggers who were willing to take part in this research. During the three-month field research I managed to obtain the participation of 30 socio-political bloggers who were later divided into three groups of 10 each after an analysis of the interviews. The three groups were politician-bloggers, partisan bloggers and civil society bloggers. Of the 10 opposition politicians interviewed, six were from the DAP, three from PKR and the remaining one was from PAS. All of them agreed to be quoted with their identities made known but two of them requested that particular

information be quoted anonymously. Of the 10 partisan bloggers who took part in this study, four were from UMNO, three from PAS, two from PKR and one from Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan). Two of the bloggers from UMNO and all three from PAS wanted to remain anonymous for this research. Two out of the 10 civil society bloggers wanted to conceal their identities for this thesis while four others did not want certain information to be linked to them.

The in-depth interviews were conducted after obtaining clearance from the university's ethics research committee. All the bloggers, who took part in the interview, signed a document to declare that they had willingly participated in this research. I had taken steps to hide the identity of research participants who wanted to remain anonymous for the entire interview. For some of the bloggers who did not want certain information that they revealed during the interviews to be linked to them, I had taken the conservative step of not naming them at all when I used those information for analysis.

Qualitative analysis of interviews

The process of sensemaking by Weick (1995) was employed to flesh out a comprehensive understanding on the democratic role of socio-political blogs in Malaysia. According to Weick (1995) the central questions in sensemaking[23] are how individuals "construct what they

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[23] Central to sensemaking is "justification (my thoughts justify my earlier words), choice (I choose which words to focus on and which thoughts will explain them),

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construct, why and with what effects" (p. 4). Put simply, sensemaking is about "how do I know what to think till I see what I say" (Wallas, 1926, cited in Weick, 1995: 12). In short, sensemaking is about "the ways people generate what they interpret" (Weick, 1995: 13). To elaborate, the process of sensemaking consists of seven characteristics or properties that can become an important framework to help with the qualitative analysis of the data collected from the in-depth interviews with the socio-political bloggers. The seven elements are "identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused and extracted cues and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy" (Weick, 1995: 17). They form crucial pointers that guide the qualitative analysis of the interviews and also help in avoiding certain pitfalls and weaknesses. For example, it is crucial for me to be aware of my own identity, experience and social construction when making plausible explanations about the blogging phenomenon in Malaysia. Moreover, the process of sensemaking reminds researchers about the complexity of any social phenomena and the need to look at plausibility, instead of accuracy, in understanding how blogging can further democratic practices in the country.

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retrospective sensemaking (I look back at what I said earlier from a later point in time when the talking has stopped), discrepancies (I feel a need to see what I say when something doesn't make sense), social construction of justification (I invoke the thoughts I have been socialized to label as acceptable), and action as the occasion for sensemaking (my act of speaking starts the sensemaking process)" (Weick, 1995: 12).

To utilise the process of sensemaking effectively for this study, there is a need to be conscious of my own interest in this research project. As noted by Weick (1995) and Grbich (2007), it is essential for a researcher to be aware of his or her own identity construction in relation to a topic of interest. For example, at the start of this study, I believe that blogging or the internet can be a democratic tool particularly for a society that is under the control of a repressive regime where information is not made freely available to the people. That belief is strengthened by my own experience as a journalist in the mainstream media that are under the tight grip of the government. The mainstream media in Malaysia are a part of the government machinery and are generally unaccommodating of alternative views. When compared with the traditional media, the new platform seems to be more democratic as it allows the citizens to voice their opinions, promotes public debates and mobilises political action. Thus, it is imperative for me to be conscious and aware of my initial thoughts about the research topic when conducting and analysing the interviews. As Weick (1995) rightly pointed out, "sensemaking is never solitary because what a person does internally is contingent on others" (p. 40).

Another crucial aspect of the sensemaking process is the point about plausibility, instead of accuracy. It is important to note that this study is an attempt at understanding the new media phenomenon by holding disparate elements together, providing reasonable and coherent accounts that are "socially acceptable and credible" (Ibid: 61). It is not motivated by an

obsession with accuracy because in a postmodern world, blogging can well be enmeshed with conflicting interests of people with multiple and changing identities. Being accurate may well be a fallacy in a social investigation. The qualitative analysis in this study, thus, serves to highlight patterns that exist in the Malaysian blogosphere and to discuss new dimensions that arise from the in-depth interviews. In this process, the in-depth interviews were organised into units, for example, sentences, events or paragraphs, then categories were developed by associating similar units and identifying links between the categories. This helps to "develop broader theories that attempt to explain the way things are in that particular situation" (Willis, 2007: 307).

The interview materials were analysed by pinning down the key themes, thus drawing "a picture of the presuppositions and meanings that constitute the cultural world of which the textual material is a specimen" (Perakyla, 2005: 870). One key theme is the political affiliation of the research participants and this helps to first separate the 30 respondents into three relatively different groups of socio-political bloggers. For example, the politician-bloggers were candidates of the 2008 general election, the partisan bloggers were members of political parties and the civil society bloggers were not members of political parties. Most of the civil society bloggers were, instead, members of non-governmental organisations. Identifying the pattern of blog use, including the approaches adopted to realise their political goal at different moments in an election, was a key

feature in differentiating the three relatively distinct groups of bloggers. The agenda that each group of bloggers was hoping to reach through blogging was another important element in classifying them into the three different groups. The various social and political circumstances confronting the bloggers, such as the forging and collapse of fluid or loose ties, were also pertinent characteristics that helped to classify the bloggers into different groups. However, I must qualify that the three different groups of bloggers are not fixed. This is because the political affiliation and status of bloggers can change according to the various social and political circumstances. For example, some of the partisan bloggers became politician-bloggers when they contested in the 2008 general election. The pattern of blog use and the approaches can, thus, change according to the political goal they hope to achieve. This further supports the significance in examining the use of blogs at particular moments in an election to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the web phenomenon.

Summary

This study adopts a critical approach in an attempt to understand the role of blogging in Malaysia in promoting democratic practices and enriching political life. It takes a serious view on the importance of the social and political context in order to gain a better understanding of its role in the Malaysian environment. It uses both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis because the two different methods

serve different purposes and aims of this study. A content analysis of the blogs, blog posts and comments provides basic information on occurrences in the blogosphere in electoral politics while the interviews provide a richer account of the extent to which blogging can promote democratic space and enrich political life in a relatively authoritarian society.

Chapter 5

A socio-political and economic framework of Malaysia

Introduction

This chapter discusses the wider social, political and economic context of Malaysia in order to better understand the role of blogging and the internet during the 2008 election. It provides a brief historical account of the political and economic forces that contributed to the country's multi-ethnic and multi-cultural environment. It starts with a brief background of Malay society before it became a British colony, the struggle for independence in 1957 and the policies formulated after the race riot of the 1960s. This brief account provides an understanding of the dominance of the Malay community with UMNO holding political power as the dominant partner in the BN ruling coalition. It also provides an understanding of race-based politics and a culture of political patronage that exists until the present day. A closer examination of the dominant political culture is important for understanding its influence on the manner of blog use by the group of partisan bloggers, as discussed in detail in Chapter Eight. Moreover, Chapter Eight argues that the particular social and political circumstances can have an influence on blogging in electoral politics. This chapter, covering a range of existing legislation that regulates the media industry, also highlights the tight media control by the ruling coalition. This provides a backdrop for assessing the potential of blogging

in promoting democratic practices and enriching political life in a relatively authoritarian society.

One of the defining moments in Malaysia's recent history is the race riots of May 13, 1969, which occurred after the dismal performance of the ruling regime in that year's national election. A brief discussion is dedicated to this period and its aftermath, particularly the creation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) that has been in place since the early 1970s. Certain key elements of the policy will be highlighted to provide an indication of their impact on the country's economic and political system. Some social scientists and political analysts attribute the creation of the Malay middle-class to this policy while others consider it to be a form of racial discrimination in the Malaysian society. This is because the policy is seen as having an unequal impact on the people's way of life in areas, such as education, housing and employment, because preferential treatment is afforded to the *bumiputera* (sons of the soil or indigenous people or more commonly referred to the Malays). Other critical scholars argue that the policy has witnessed an emergence of political patronage where preferential treatment is not only given to the Malays in general but more so to *bumiputera* who are members of UMNO, the country's dominant political party (Ho, 1988; Gomez & Jomo, 1997). Tracing the links of those *bumiputera* businessmen who secured multimillion ringgit projects in the country to political elites in UMNO, the scholars asserted that it was a part of the culture of political patronage that grew out of the NEP.

Similarly, a discussion on how internet service providers obtain operating licences through their connections with powerful elites in the country suggests that political patronage runs deep within the Malaysian society.

A major input of this chapter is focused on the country's laws that impact heavily on the mainstream media, restricting their operation as a free press. Apart from the constraining legislation governing the media industry, it discusses ways in which the traditional media are controlled by media owners, who are mainly coalition partners of the ruling regime. It explores changes in key editorial positions which appear to be connected with leadership change in political parties that control the traditional media. In addition to the tightly controlled media, the chapter also highlights other existing pieces of legislation that curtail civil liberties in various facets of political life in the country. Under those circumstances, many scholars conclude that Malaysia is a relatively authoritarian society, with some describing the country as a semi-democracy (Case, 1993), a pseudo democracy (Tan & Zawawi, 2008) or an authoritarian populism state (Munro-Kua, 1996).

Embracing the internet as a foreign investment appeal in 1996, the government, under the then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, formulated regulations that guaranteed freedom of the internet (Mahathir, 1998: 53). This guarantee may be in line with free speech and association enshrined in the Federal Constitution but it can be challenged by other existing legislations that restrict those same civil liberties. Despite some of

the constraining legislations, the non-censorship guarantee contributed to notion that the new information and communications technologies could become an alternative platform for free speech and expression. One often cited example that the internet could fulfil its potential to provide alternative information is the *reformasi* (reformation) movement that emerged after the sacking of deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 (Sabri, 2000; Abbott, 2001). The internet was widely used to communicate with supporters of the *reformasi* movement and publish information to counter accusations against Anwar Ibrahim (Sabri, 2000). On the other hand, UMNO websites were also set up to counter information of Anwar Ibrahim's *reformasi* supporters in the blogosphere (MyKMU.net, 2007). The ruling regime also had the support of the mainstream media, which were generally not sympathetic to dissenting views from opposition politicians and non-governmental organisations. As such, the internet is interpreted as having the ability to promote certain democratic practices that are not possible with the old media.

Claims that blogging and the internet are a form of 'democratisation' for Malaysian society seem to have peaked with the 2008 general election (Tan & Zawawi, 2008; Welsh, 2008; Abdul Rashid, 2009; Mohd Azizuddin & Zengeni, 2010). The election saw the BN suffering a major defeat at the polls on March 8 while the opposition scored an overwhelming victory for the first time since 1957. The ruling coalition lost its customary two-thirds majority in parliament and its control on five

states to the opposition (Loh, 2009). A content analysis of the blogs of candidates who contested in the 2008 election showed that more than 20 elected parliamentarians were maintaining a blog during the election (See Appendix 1). The unprecedented results saw many political writers and analysts describing the new digital technologies as a significant force in the defeat of the ruling regime (Suhaini, 2008; Tan, 2008; The Straits Times Singapore, 2008). The internet was, thus, generally accepted as having played a significant role in Malaysia's 12th general election on March 8, 2008. It is within this relatively authoritarian environment that blogging is heralded as having the potential to promote liberal democratic practices and enrich political life.

Malaya in its early days and the struggle for independence

Before exploring modern day Malaysia, it is important to establish some of the defining characteristics of the Malay society and Malayan history. The traditional Malay society, which could be characterised as feudal, had its own set of social and political institutions before the Malay archipelago became a British colony (Hua, 1983). The traditional political system of the Malay society had the *Sultan* (ruler) of the state at the top of the hierarchy and he appointed chiefs who were also of the aristocrat class (Means, 1970; Hua, 1983). The chiefs, on behalf of the *Sultan*, collected produce tax from the peasants. Due to the political subjugation of the peasants to the *Sultan*, the chiefs also demanded free labour from the peasants under a corvee system known as *kerah* (Hua, 1983). The social

set-up has the Malay peasantry centred in a *kampung* (village), which has its own headman, mosques and mosque officials, located within a district (Means, 1970; Hua, 1983). Such distinct features of the Malay villages are still in existence today.

Another important feature of Malaya before the British colonial rule is the spread of Islam in the 15th century. It was after the Malacca *Sultan's* conversion to Islam that the religion began to spread to other states in the peninsula. Under the influence of the Melaka Sultanate, the *Sultans* in Pahang, Terengganu, Kedah and Johor embraced the Muslim religion (Hua, 1983). Since then, Islam has become an integral part of Malay society to the extent that the religion gives Malays the bonds of communal identity, which are as strong as those developed by social or political institutions (Means, 1970: 17). However, the spread of Islam had little effect on the relationship between local Malays and Chinese traders, who had assimilated to a large extent by this point (Hua, 1983: 19).

The colonial power had preserved the social and political formation of Malay society throughout the 19th and 20th century. The British even co-opted the traditional Malay ruling class into the state after fierce resistance by the Malay peasantry against British rule (Hua, 1983: 20). The Malay peasants were left to continue with their subsistence mode of production in their villages while at the same time, growing demand for tin and rubber had resulted in massive immigration of Chinese and Indians into the country (Hua, 1983; Jesudason, 1989). By the early 20th century, British

Malaya became one of the world's biggest suppliers of tin and rubber. The massive influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants had also changed the entire social structure of Malaya by the 1930s (Hua, 1983). Chinese immigrants were recruited for tin mining while Indians were employed in rubber plantations. According to the 1939 population records, the number of Chinese and Indians in Malaya had increased more than two-fold between 1911 and 1938. Although the influx of immigrants saw a growing working class, a group of rich Chinese merchants who were favoured by the British administration also emerged. Some of them were co-opted to be unofficial administrators of the Chinese community or '*Kapitan China*', also known as Justices of the Peace (Hua, 1983). The Indian community also had a group of merchants in the banking, money lending and textile industries, who were generally of higher caste than the Indian labourers (Ibid: 56).

After the Japanese were defeated in 1945, the British proposed the formation of Malayan Union for the entire Malay Peninsula, excluding Singapore. However, the proposal was met with strong resistance from the Malay community, including the rulers. Among the objections were the issuance of automatic citizenships to non-Malays and access to some of the civil service positions to non-Malays (Milne & Mauzy, 1978: 27). UMNO established after a Pan-Malayan Malay Congress in 1946 began protesting against the Malayan Union. In response, the British were forced to come up with another agreement, known as the Federation of Malaya Agreement

1948. A working committee representing all parties, including the government, local rulers and UMNO, together with the non-Malay representatives, was set up to work out the 1948 agreement (Means, 1970: 56-57). The agreement drew up a centralised structure of governance at the federal and state level, the position of rulers in the state, the provision for a conference of rulers and a stricter citizenship provision for non-Malays (Milne & Mauzy, 1978: 29-31).

However, another problem emerged when members of the Malayan Communist Party resorted to armed violence to wrest power from the British. The colonialists decided, in 1948, to impose a State of Emergency that lasted for 12 years. To counter the Communist insurgency, the British established new villages, largely inhabited by the Chinese, to cut off food supply to the Communists. About half a million people, including a fifth of the Chinese population, were moved into more than 550 new villages (Ibid: 33), resulting in further separation of the Chinese from the rest of Malayan society.

After the threat of Communists had been successfully contained, the call for independence began with the introduction of national elections. Starting with the 1952 municipal election in Kuala Lumpur, the UMNO and MCA, which was formed by conservative Chinese and the Chinese Chambers of Commerce in 1949, set up an ad-hoc alliance which won nine out of the 12 seats contested in the elections (Hua, 1983: 102). The election result was an indication of the political forces at the time and the successful

formula of an Alliance was replicated, institutionalising the arrangement (Ibid). By 1955, the Alliance included the MIC. The Alliance formula was deemed successful because communal divisions in Malaya were deep (Milne & Mauzy, 1978: 35). Hua (1983) also pointed out that the federal election campaign in 1955 had a full taste of the communalist politics that was to be a feature in years to come (p. 105). The Alliance (made up of UMNO, MCA and MIC) had a landslide victory in 1955 and two years later, the Federation of Malaya obtained its independence. Tunku Abdul Rahman, brother of the *Sultan* of Kedah, became the first prime minister. Made up of the three main ethnic-based political parties, the Alliance articulated the concerns of their respective ethnic community as membership into each of the three political parties was accepted based on the ethnicity of a person. In 1974, the Alliance changed its name to the Barisan Nasional (BN) or National Front which is now a coalition of 14 political parties, including those from Sabah and Sarawak. This is not to say that there are no political parties in the country that attempt to transcend racial lines. Several did base their struggle on class inequalities. For example, the now defunct Labour Party and Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM), which had undergone some changes over the years, were more sympathetic towards concerns of the working class.

New Economic Policy, rights of *bumiputera* and political links to businesses

Described by Milne and Mauzy (1978: 36) as the result of a bargain over the positions of Malays and non-Malays, the Federal Constitution came into force on 31 August 1957. Among the provisions enshrined in the Constitution are the fundamental liberties of freedom of movement, speech, assembly and association; citizenship status; Malay as the national language; the special position of the Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak; the position and power of the rulers; Islam as the official religion; the composition and the election of a national parliament; federalism and the powers of the state (Means, 1970: 175-189; Milne & Mauzy, 1978: 36-43; Federal Constitution, 2008). There are 13 states in the Federation of Malaysia, nine of which are headed by a *Sultan*. The Constitution also provides for the position of the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (King) who continues to symbolise Malay dominance (Crouch, 1996: 142) and the protector of Malay rights (Federal Constitution, 2008).

While the Constitution provides for freedom of religion, the same cannot be said for the Malays. In Malaysia, a Malay, by constitutional and legal definition, is and must be a Muslim (Means, 1970; Federal Constitution, 2008). Abandoning Islam can mean the act of renouncing the Malay way of life. Article 160 (2) of the Federal Constitution reads: "A Malay is a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay customs." This further

sharpens the division between the Malays and non-Malays. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2009: 11), the Malaysian population is made up of 66.2% Malays and other *bumiputera* (indigenous groups), 25% Chinese, 7.5% Indians and 1.3% other ethnic groups. The Chinese and Indians are not as homogenous as the Malays, with regards to matters concerning religion. The other two ethnic groups are free to subscribe to any religion, with some professing to be Muslims, Christians, Buddhist and Hindu. They also speak various Chinese and Indian dialects, which are generally not understood by the majority of Malays. Misunderstandings in matters of religion, education and language can potentially become contentious among the various ethnic groups.

With this set-up of race-based political parties and policies to protect the special position of a particular community, it is common for some scholars to describe the Malayan society as divided along ethnic lines, including religion and language. Means (1970: 399) describes the configuration of the Malayan society as being based on communal and economic divisions. Milne and Mauzy (1978: 4) are more direct when they argue that considerations of racial arithmetic dominate everything political or economic in Malaysia. The racial arithmetic becomes a crucial calculation at the ballot boxes because of the general appeal of the ethnic-based political parties to the multi-ethnic voters. Giving a class perspective to communalism, Hua (1983: 2) contends that the ruling class political domination has been established through communalism and this is to

prevent the masses from coming together to be a unified political force. With the formation of Malaysia in 1963, which includes Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore[24] (expelled in 1965), the society continues to be divided according to ethnicity, religion and language.

When racial tensions flared up into several riots in 1967 and 1969, communal solutions had been drawn up to address the matter. The New Economic Policy (NEP) was formulated in 1970 to eradicate poverty and to restructure the Malaysian society in a way that would correct the economic imbalance between Malays and the non-Malays (Jesudasan, 1988; Hua, 1983). The NEP was designed to facilitate special privileges of the Malays as provided for under the Constitution, making it the Malaysian version of an Affirmative Action Plan (Mehmet, 1986: 8). Analysing the NEP from the perspective of communalism and class struggle, Hua (1983) argues that the policy is an attempt by the state to institutionalise communalism and thereby maintain its domination.

Although the main beneficiaries of the NEP were *bumiputera*, the policy had also contributed to a consolidation of political and economic resources in the hands of *bumiputera* politico-business elites (Ho, 1988; Gomez, 1990). This was in reference to the position of UMNO, which had

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[24] Singapore became a part of Malaysia from 1963 to 1965 (Baker, 2008:291). Ethnicity was a pertinent aspect in the proposal to include Sabah and Sarawak in the formation of Malaysia because the two states had a large population of indigenous people that would "offset Singapore's Chinese majority" (Ibid: 292). Similarly, Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia in 1965 was seen as a form of racial arithmetic as the exit saw a decrease in Chinese population in Malaysia (Ibid).

gained hugely from the government's privatisation policy in the 1980s under the premiership of Mahathir Mohamad. One case in point was the country's biggest road construction project, the RM3.4 billion North-South Highway, which was awarded to an UMNO-owned company, United Engineers (M) Berhad (Ho, 1988). In 1985, the company was awarded the contract to build the 1,000km stretch of highway although it presented a higher bid than five other companies (Gomez, 1990). *Bumiputera* businessmen, such as Tajudin Ramli, Wan Azmi Wan Hamzah, Halim Saad and Mohd Razali Mohd Rahman were among some of the close associates of Daim Zainuddin, a former finance minister and close ally of the then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad (Ho, 1988; Gomez & Jomo, 1997). Even close associates of sacked deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim had been awarded lucrative contracts. For instance, Nasaruddin Jalil, a former political secretary of Anwar Ibrahim, was a director of Diversified Resources Berhad which obtained a monopoly of the privatised minibus services in Kuala Lumpur in 1993. The company also received a lucrative commercial vehicle inspection concession (Gomez & Jomo, 1997). Ho (1988), thus, concludes that there is a complex web of connection between *bumiputera* politicians, businessmen, senior bureaucrats and the aristocracy in the Malaysian political system (p. 248).

This complex web of connection does not involve only UMNO politicians (Gomez & Jomo, 1997). The scholars argue that the new rich or upper class includes elites of the Chinese and Indian communities who

have close ties with the UMNO leaders. Gomez and Jomo (1997) identify non-Malay businessmen, such as Vincent Tan Chee Yioun, Ting Pik Khiing, Eric Chia, Quek Leng Chan and T. Ananda Krishnan as beneficiaries of various trading licences and government contracts due to their close ties with UMNO leaders. Instances of such connections are evident from the issuance of numerous licences for Malaysian cellular phones and satellite services to Tajudin Ramli's Celcom Sendirian Berhad, T. Ananda Krishnan's Binariang Sendirian Berhad (Maxis) and companies controlled by Shamsuddin Kadir's Sapura Holdings Berhad, and Vincent Tan Chee Yioun's Berjaya Group (Ibid: 82). Licences for 3G spectrum mobile digital communications were also awarded to Celcom, Maxis and MiTV Networks Sendirian Berhad (co-owned by Vincent Tan Chee Yioun who had a 40% stake in the company). MiTV Networks Sendirian Berhad later changed its name to U Mobile Sendirian Berhad in 2007 (Energy, Water and Telecommunication Ministry website, 2007; Daily Express Online, 2004). Licences in the telecommunications industry were also awarded to those close to UMNO leaders like Daim Zainuddin (former finance minister) and Mahathir Mohamad. These examples led many scholars to argue that political patronage (Gomez & Jomo, 1997) or patronage distribution (Crouch, 1996) was becoming a culture among those who wielded political power in the Malaysian society. Crouch (1996) also argues that this culture of political patronage is perpetuated, firstly, through a non-ideological "patronage-dispensing nature" and secondly,

ideologically through UMNO in terms of Malay special privileges and domination (p. 43).

The business connections extended beyond the political circle and encompassed aristocrats of Malaysian society (Ho, 1988, Crouch, 1996). According to Crouch (1996), many of the state royal families were involved in businesses and they needed the support of the federal and state governments to facilitate their commercial ventures, such as land grants and timber concessions. The royal families of Negeri Sembilan and Pahang are among the aristocrats who have business ventures. For example, Antah Biwater, a joint venture company between Antah Holdings owned by the Negeri Sembilan royalty and Biwater of England, obtained a RM1.4 billion water supply contract from the government without having to tender for it (Gomez, 1990). However, not all the commercial ventures of the royal households were successful. Some of the *Sultans* needed the state government to bail them out (Crouch, 1996). One of them had to be bailed out several times because of huge gambling debts while most of the others were extravagant with their spending (Ibid: 144). Tension between the royal households and UMNO surfaced on several occasions and former premier Mahathir Mohamad introduced several Constitutional amendments to clip the powers of the King and *Sultans* in 1983 and 1993. Although the powers of the royal households have been restricted, the *Sultans* continue to symbolise Malay political dominance (Ibid: 147).

Dominance of Malay politics

The political environment in Malaysia also reflects a dominance of Malay politics. Due to the multi-ethnic make-up of the Malaysian society, the ruling coalition led by the three major ethnic-based parties - UMNO, MCA and MIC – exhibits a form of cooperation among the three races, or a version of consociationalism (Milne & Mauzy, 1978: 354) where cooperation is based on equality. However, scholars argue that the Malaysian polity is best understood as hegemony of the *bumiputera* elites because of the Malay political dominance of UMNO (Ho, 1988). This is because the ruling coalition, led by the UMNO, does not see the MCA and MIC as equal partners. The formation of the Alliance (and later BN) is due to political convenience and not a deep commitment to communal compromise between the Malay and Chinese leadership (Ibid: 68). Moreover, incidents of tensions between Malays and non-Malays are likely to be resolved in ways that predominantly favour the *bumiputera* (Ibid).

With UMNO at the helm of political power, history suggests that the country's political landscape can be shaped by contestations for power among the party's top leadership. Previous incidents of intense power struggle in UMNO appeared to have an impact on the performance of the ruling coalition in the national election, particularly among the Malay electorate. For example, the general election of 1990 and 1999 held after a serious split in UMNO saw the Malay opposition party, PAS, performing well. In 1987, former finance minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah left the

party and formed splinter party *Semangat 46* (the Spirit of '46, the year UMNO was formed to oppose the Malayan Union) after he failed to topple then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad as UMNO president (Khoo, 1999: 16). *Semangat 46* teamed up with PAS to fight the ruling coalition in the 1990 election. The result saw the now disbanded *Semangat 46* winning only eight out of the 61 seats it contested while PAS re-captured the state of Kelantan which it lost to the ruling coalition in 1978 (Ibid: 17). The 1999 election was held after the then deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim had been unceremoniously removed by Mahathir Mohamad in 1998. Anwar Ibrahim set up Parti Keadilan Nasional (now Parti Keadilan Rakyat or PKR) to challenge the ruling coalition. The 1999 election saw PAS performing remarkably well. It retained the state of Kelantan and wrested control of Terengganu state from the ruling coalition. It was able to win over the Malay votes (Zakaria, 1999: 5-6). Parti Keadilan Nasional, established by Anwar Ibrahim after he was removed from UMNO, won five parliamentary seats under the stewardship of his wife Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (Ibid).

The 2008 election also witnessed a contestation for power between the then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his predecessor Mahathir Mohamad. Just like previous power struggles in UMNO, the infighting was played out through proxy fights of *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet or shadow play) amid an intense production and circulation of *surat layang* (flying letters). The terms *wayang kulit* and *surat layang* have

commonly been used to describe the political culture of UMNO (Chin, 1997; Hilley, 2001; Wain, 2009; Raja Petra Kamarudin, 2009). Translated as shadow puppet or shadow play, *wayang kulit* refers to a kind of political manoeuvrings or politics of deception among political elites, where the real target of political attacks and the actual person behind those attacks are not made known openly (Chin, 1997: 182; Wain 2009: 281). For example, the disclosure of a tape recording of Malaysian lawyer V.K. Lingam, who spoke about his influence in brokering judicial appointments, became an issue in the 2008 election. It was interpreted as an attack on Mahathir Mohamad by his successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi because the infamous incident occurred during the former's premiership (Raja Petra Kamarudin, 2009). The distribution of *surat layang* is generally referred to a form of whispering campaign to discredit rival politicians, known only to UMNO members (Raja Petra Kamarudin, 2009). Directly translated as flying letters or poison-pen letters, *surat layang* refers to anonymously written letters containing allegations of various wrongdoings of rival politicians, particularly more intense during the party election of UMNO (Raja Petra Kamarudin, 2009; Wain, 2009). An example was the circulation of poison-pen letters by enemies of Anwar Ibrahim in August 1997 to discredit the politician (Hilley, 2001; Raja Petra Kamarudin, 2009; Wain, 2009). According to Raja Petra Kamarudin (2009), *surat layang* aimed at Abdullah Ahmad Badawi were being circulated within UMNO in the lead-up to the 2008 election. This demonstrates how political scandals are

produced and circulated in the form of leaflets to damage the reputation of rival politicians. The underlying hostility created by this culture of patronage in UMNO provided fertile ground for political scandals.

The move to produce and circulate *surat layang* does not seem to be confined only to UMNO. The practice was also evident in PAS, which used similar methods to create and spread leaflets to attack the personality of leaders in an election. For example, two days before the 1969 general election, the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP), now known as PAS, had distributed 50,000 photographs of the then education minister Khir Johari and his wife dressed in Chinese traditional costumes in Kedah to put doubts in the minds of the people about his allegiance to the Malay community (von Vorys, 1975: 285). Another picture was of first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman eating with chopsticks amidst a roast suckling pig in the middle of the table to project the image that the leader was too friendly towards the Chinese and non-Muslim community (Ibid). Letters attacking the first prime minister for being engrossed with playing poker with his Chinese friends during the May 13 race riot were circulated in a move to pressure Tunku Abdul Rahman to resign as prime minister and UMNO leader (Ibid: 372-374). The letter questioning the morals and conduct of Tunku Abdul Rahman, which was ostensibly written and signed by Mahathir Mohamad, had been widely distributed. However, Mahathir Mohamad denied any involvement in circulating the letter (Ibid: 377). The political culture discussed here appeared to reflect the manner of blog use

by partisan bloggers who staged a blog campaign to tarnish the image of rival politicians in the 2008 election, as highlighted in Chapter Eight.

Democratic and authoritarian traits

In a perennial debate on whether multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Malaysia has a democratic or authoritarian government, many scholars are quick to describe the ruling coalition as authoritarian while others are more nuanced in their description of the regime. Gomez and Jomo (1997) assert that Malaysia is ruled by an authoritarian regime while Tan and Zawawi (2008) describe the country as a pseudo-democracy or flawed democracy. Giving a slightly more nuanced analysis, Munro-Kua (1996) describes Malaysia as authoritarian populism which sees the ruling regime employing a strategy to promote populist appeal (such as policies that favour the *bumiputera*) and at the same time to maintain a stable system through authoritarian means. In his portrayal of Malaysia as a semi-democracy, Case (1993) argues that the UMNO government has interwoven aspects of "soft" dictatorship and "hard" democracy to remain in power (p. 186). The government tolerates opposition parties and interest groups but closes off their channels to state power, as in a "soft" dictatorship. On the other hand, it follows democratic procedures by holding regular federal and state elections while preventing opposition elements from organising effectively in an election against the government (Ibid). Focusing on the particular characteristics of Malaysian society, Crouch (1996) argues that it is more meaningful to analyse the way the

government adopts a repressive-responsive approach when dealing with particular crises. He argues that it is more precise to study the interrelationship between their democratic and authoritarian traits, instead of understanding the Malaysian society as a kind of midpoint along a continuum between democracy and totalitarianism (Ibid: 5). As such, the Malaysian government will continue to respond to certain pressures from the electorate while repressing others in the process.

While the general debate on democracy in Malaysia reflects many western assumptions, former premier Mahathir Mohamad argues that 'Asian values' must be considered before imposing those liberal western ideals on Malaysia. Even his former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, spoke of the need for a more 'particularised' democracy that took into account the cultural and value systems and the religious beliefs of the people, and not just the western liberal model (Hilley, 2001). As such, Hilley (2001) argues that the notion of a 'different form of democracy' for a 'different set of cultural values' reflects the interplay of indigenous values and a constructed anti-western ideology. Thus, any criticism against Mahathir Mohamad by foreign politicians or the western media can be turned into an attack on the entire nation (Ibid: 42). Nonetheless, developments in electoral rules and stringent controls on the media, through ownership and regulations governing the industry, including legislation that curtails civil liberties, point to a relatively authoritarian society.

Election rules favouring the ruling regime

The regular federal and state elections held in Malaysia have commonly been used to denote the country as a democratic nation (Case, 1993; Crouch, 1996; Loh, 2009). However, election rules that work in favour of the ruling coalition have contributed to arguments that the electoral system in Malaysia has not been fair in the way power is allocated in society (Means, 1970; Case, 1993; Loh, 2009). One often cited argument is the practice of gerrymandering which does not take into consideration certain safeguards in the delineation exercise of political boundaries (Means, 1970; Lim, 2003). Means (1970) argues that the "rules of the game" (p. 415) are changed by shifting political boundaries or tampering with the Federal Constitution. This led to arguments that amendments to the Federal Constitution had essentially favoured the ruling regime (Lim, 2003). In his research on the redelineation exercise conducted over the years by the BN ruling coalition, Lim (2003) argues that the amendments are, in essence, a gerrymandering exercise because important safeguards regarding electoral fairness have been removed from the Federal Constitution. An example was the 1973 amendments which saw the removal of the limit on weightage in the rural areas, where the majority were Malay residents. The constitutional amendment resulted in more constituencies representing fewer Malays in the rural areas when compared with fewer constituencies representing a much higher number of non-Malays in the urban areas (Lim, 2003: 33). As such, the exercise had

given additional advantage to Malay political power in the national election that adopted the simple majority or "first past the post" system (Ibid: 25).

Further amendments to the country's election rules, namely Election Act 1958, also favour the ruling regime, resulting in an unlevel playing field for the opposition (Loh, 2009: 92-95). Describing three amendments made to the Election Act 1958 as being "particularly insidious" (p. 93), Loh (2009) argues that the amended sections do not encourage the electoral process to be free and fair, thus infringing the principles of democracy. For example, section 9 (A) of the Act states that the electoral rolls are "final and shall not be questioned or appealed against or reviewed, quashed or set aside by any court." This, Loh (2009) argues, can result in a denial in a citizen's "right to question" the state of the electoral rolls (p. 94). Various protests have been held to call for free and fair elections, for example the Bersih gathering in November, 2007, but the electoral rules remain unchanged and continue to favour the ruling coalition. Despite the unfair electoral rules, high voter turnout of over 70% in the 2008 polls and in previous elections suggests that an engaged and politically aware electorate exists in Malaysia (Ibid: 73).

Government-controlled media and laws curtailing civil liberties

The state of the media in Malaysia suggests an industry that faces strict regulations, practises responsible development journalism and is tightly controlled by the BN ruling coalition parties - UMNO, MCA and

MIC (Loh & Mustafa, 1996; Zaharom, 2002). The country's Press Freedom Index ranking, published by the website of Reporters Without Border, shows a heavily regulated press. For example, Malaysia's ranking was at 132nd out of 173 countries in 2008 (Reporters Without Borders, 2008). The country moved up one spot to 131st position out of 175 countries in the 2009 index (Ibid, 2009) but dropped to 141st placing in 2010 (Ibid, 2010). Among the restrictive laws that have an impact on the running of the media are the Printing Presses and Publications Act (1984), the Communications and Multimedia Act (1998), the Internal Security Act (1960), the Sedition Act (1948) and the Official Secrets Act (1972). These regulations serve to suppress the freedom of expression among mainstream media in the country (Zaharom, 2002). As for media ownership, a tight control of the media in the country is through state ownership, political patronage or trusted proxies (Hilley, 2001: 121). This reflects an earlier discussion on the culture of political patronage in which the UMNO leaders select business elites within their close circle to run media companies for them, thus keeping a tight rein on the media. According to Hilley (2001), ownership and control of the press occurs through a complex web of interlocking companies. The three main partners of the BN - UMNO, MCA and MIC - have stakes in major newspapers that publish in multi-lingual Malaysia, thus capturing the English, Malay, Chinese or Tamil readers. The control includes private and government-

controlled television broadcasting and radio stations in the country (Zaharom, 2002).

The way the ruling elite invokes 'responsible development journalism' among the mainstream press in a developing young nation like Malaysia goes further to show how control becomes pronounced in the routine context of news filtering. News filtering is particularly clear when the country goes to the polls (Hilley, 2001; Mustafa, 2002; Zaharom, 2002). The mainstream press and television broadcasting stations, including radio, are pivotal in framing opinions, glossing over news, spinning information, promoting BN coalition candidates and demonising opposition politicians through images and visions of ethnic harmony and nation-building (Hilley, 2001). Such observations are supported by research on the coverage of mainstream media in the 2008 general election which shows the publication of more reports that favour the BN over opposition parties (Sankaran, 2008). The conclusion was reached after a content analysis of 775 stories selected from five newspapers in four languages published between February 26 and March 11, 2008. The analysis showed that 61% of the coverage was pro-BN, 19% pro-opposition and 20% of stories were neutral (Ibid). The instruments of press control - stringent legislation, media ownership and responsible development journalism – also bring to mind the propaganda model of Herman and Chomsky (2002) in understanding the role of the media.

The state of the mainstream media in Malaysia seems to fit the understanding of propaganda model, proposed by Herman and Chomsky (2002), in an examination of the highly commercialised media ecosystem in the United States. The two media scholars argue that the model is more noticeable as a framework to understand the media in countries where control is in the hands of the ruling regime. As such, the framework allows for a deeper understanding of the state of the Malaysian media, which are in the tight control of the ruling coalition parties. With control in the hands of the ruling regime, high-ranking editors or high-ranking positions, like the chief executive officer are usually handpicked and endorsed by the president of the ruling parties that own the media. A regime change in Malaysia often means editorial changes in UMNO-owned media companies (The Malaysian Insider, 2009). For example, a change in the UMNO leadership also sees a change in editors in the UMNO-linked New Straits Times Press (NSTP). This was apparent after the sudden dismissal of Anwar Ibrahim as deputy prime minister in 1998. Two editors, Johan Jaafar, editor-in-chief of Malay daily Utusan Malaysia, and Nazri Abdullah, group editor of Berita Harian, who were described as closely aligned to Anwar Ibrahim, were removed soon after the dismissal of the then deputy prime minister (Mustafa, 2002). Subsequent editorial changes in the NSTP in 2004 occurred after Abdullah Ahmad Badawi took over from Mahathir Mohamad as prime minister and UMNO president. Kalimullah Masheerul Hassan was made group editor-in-chief and director

of NSTP while veteran journalist Hardev Kaur took over from Ahmad Talib as group editor of NST Sendirian Berhad. Changes in high-ranking editorial positions also occurred after Najib Razak took over from Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as prime minister in April 2009 (The Malaysian Insider, 2009). Similar editorial changes occurred at the MCA-owned English daily *The Star*. After the MCA election in August 2008, newly elected president Ong Tee Keat handpicked Clement Hii, who is the founder of education group SEG International Berhad, to take over from Steven Tan as executive deputy chairman of Star Publications (Siow & Fong, 2009). The concentration of media ownership in Malaysia in the hands of the ruling coalition seems to reflect the understanding of Herman and Chomsky (2002) that the media serve the ends of the dominant elite, which represents powerful societal interests that control and finance them (p. xi).

Stringent legislation to ensure the mainstream media abide by instructions to publish positive news about the state is available if the media do not toe the government's line. One such law is the Printing Presses and Publications Act (1984), further revised in 1988 (Mustafa, 2002; Brown, 2005). It requires all newspapers and regular publications to obtain an annual licence for their publications (Mustafa, 2002). The legislation also gives power to the home affairs minister to reject or approve an application for a licence, which can be revoked or suspended at any time if it is approved. Section 13(A) of the act provides the minister

with wide discretionary powers to suspend the operating licence of a print news organisation and the minister's decision cannot be questioned in any court of law on any ground whatsoever. Licences can be revoked if the minister is satisfied that the contents of a newspaper may threaten public order or national security. Incidents of licences being suspended have occurred in recent years. Three mainstream newspapers – English daily *The Star*, Chinese-language daily *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and Malay-language newspaper *Watan* – were suspended for several months in 1987 (Ibid). It is argued that *The Star*, which was seen as having exerted some form of independence in its editorial content, did not regain its "old critical stance" after the suspension was lifted several months later (Ibid: 149). The Act has essentially been potent in keeping a tight rein on the daily operations of the media.

Government control extended beyond print news organisations. Broadcasting stations are also regulated in a strict manner under the Communications and Multimedia Act (1998) which replaces the Broadcasting Act (1988). The new act which takes into account new services like cable and satellite television, including the multimedia industry, sees tighter government control on signals reception instead of an open-sky policy (Zaharom, 2002). The information and communication minister is given wide-ranging powers to modify, vary or revoke broadcasting licences and other licences granted under this act at any time (Lim, 2009). The act also empowers the Malaysian Communications and

Multimedia Commission (MCMC) to investigate any matter if the minister directs it to do so or if the MCMC has grounds to believe that a civil or criminal offence under this act was, is or will be committed. A recent example is the blocking of popular blog *Malaysia Today* on August 2008 through the commission. The information, communication and culture minister cited Section 263 of the Act which provides for certain action for the "protection of public revenue and preservation of national security" (Ibid: 93). Despite the initial freedom guarantee on the internet, the new act allows the government to have control over internet users.

Other pieces of legislation that can impede on freedom of expression are the Official Secrets Act (1972), the Internal Security Act (1960) and the Sedition Act (1948). They also have huge effects on stifling the media as the regulations provide the government with wide discretionary powers to determine the meaning of "official secrets" and to decide if any individuals or the media have acted in a manner prejudicial to the country's security (Mustafa, 2002). The Official Secrets Act (1972), for instance, provides a minister with sweeping powers to stamp government documents as "official secrets," making it illegal for journalists to have access to almost all official documents. This can deter the role of investigative journalists in the mainstream media (Mustafa, 2002). The Internal Security Act (1960) provides for detention without trial against any individuals whom a minister deems as having acted in any manner prejudicial to the security of the country. According to the act, any individuals can be detained for an

initial 60 days without appearing in a court of law and a further two years if a minister is satisfied that the detainees have acted on those grounds. The act provides for arbitrary detention based on mere suspicion that an individual may have acted in a manner that may compromise the security of the country (Lim, 2009). The most significant case of the government using the Internal Security Act was on October 27, 1987, when more than 100 people, including opposition leaders, social activists and academics, were arrested (Mustafa, 2002). More recent use of the Internal Security Act was in September, 2008, with the arrests of blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin, opposition politician Teresa Kok and journalist Tan Hoon Cheng (The Star Online, 2008a). The Sedition Act (1948) gives a wide interpretation to the meaning of seditious words, acts or publications. Publications that are deemed to have seditious tendencies are those that question any matter pertaining to language, special position of the Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak, and the powers and prerogatives of the Rulers and the Ruling Chiefs of Negeri Sembilan (Lim, 2009; Federal Constitution, 2008). In May 2008, blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin, who runs the popular blog *Malaysia Today*, was investigated under the Sedition Act (1948) for his blog content (The Star Online, 2008b). These three existing pieces of legislation, coupled with an environment that does not have a Freedom of Information Act, further hamper the workings of a free press and curtail civil liberties in Malaysia.

Despite a predominantly regime-oriented mainstream media and the use of restrictive laws on the industry, the traditional media are not monolithic and do offer "sites of resistance and weakness" (Brown, 2005: 40). The sites of contestation exist due to challenges posed by the internet and internal contradictions emerging between partners of the BN regime and the corporate control it has on the media, thereby limiting state control (Ibid). Brown (2005) argues that "differing interests and political rivalry" among the BN component partners, and at times within the parties, contribute to a "highly factional" regime (p. 50). Highlighting several incidents of intra-BN party disputes in early 2000s, Brown (2005) concludes that they are reflected in the coverage of the mainstream media. For example, a government policy to introduce the use of English to teach mathematics and science in all national schools in 2002 was met with strong opposition from Chinese educationists, including Chinese BN partners Gerakan and the MCA. The UMNO-linked Malay daily *Utusan Melayu* and English daily *New Straits Times* were critical of the Chinese parties while MCA-controlled English daily *The Star* was more restrained in its coverage, presenting a moderate image of the MCA (Ibid: 51). Despite controls of the mainstream media, the contentious events suggest that the industry does provide "spaces for negotiation and contestation" (Ibid: 55).

New media

Set against a relatively authoritarian government with a policy of non-censorship of the internet, the online platform has been heralded as an alternative medium by those who want their voices heard (Tang, 2006; Abbott, 2001; Brown, 2005; Tan & Zawawi, 2008). It provided an avenue for communication among supporters of Anwar Ibrahim during the early days of the *reformasi* movement in 1998 (Sabri, 2000; Abbott, 2001). Describing the emergence of *reformasi* websites together with the use of e-mails and other online forums as "dissident cyber-networks" (Khoo, 2010b: 3-4), the internet was used to provide Anwar Ibrahim's supporters with information on his trial, activities and road shows. According to Abbott (2001), over 50 pro-Anwar Ibrahim websites emerged a few months after the sacked deputy prime minister's arrest. His supporters were distributing Anwar Ibrahim's letters from prison, including eyewitness accounts of protests held to show their anger over the leader's removal from office. At that time, *reformasi* websites were deemed more popular than government's political websites and those of mainstream press like the UMNO-controlled Malay daily *Utusan Malaysia* and *New Straits Times* (Tan & Zawawi, 2008). The internet was not strictly controlled by the government and it provided *reformasi* supporters with a political space for negotiation (Brown, 2005: 46).

Alongside pro-Anwar Ibrahim websites, other online news sites began to emerge in cyberspace. Online news sites did not require an operating

licence because of the non-censorship policy on the internet (Steele, 2009). One of them was online news site *Malaysiakini* which was launched in November 1999, almost a year after Anwar Ibrahim's dismissal from office. *Malaysiakini* also provided alternative news that was not carried in the mainstream media, particularly coverage of the 1999 general election when the news website first started (Ibid). The internet news website, which is perceived to be pro-opposition, is another avenue for readers to compare the different perspectives and diverse opinions, which have been largely ignored by the mainstream media. Malay internet news website *Agenda Daily*, made up of former *Utusan Malaysia* journalists, was launched two years later in July 2001 (AgendaDaily.com, 2011). Chinese language news portal *Merdeka Review* also made its presence felt online during the 2008 general election. Online news sites, such as *The Malaysian Insider* and *Nutgraph* were the two latest English language additions to the online news scene that provided extensive coverage of the 2008 election. All the online news sites were set up by former journalists and editors of the mainstream news media organisations, marking a shift from the 'old' to the 'new' media.

Anwar Ibrahim's *reformasi* team was not the only group using the internet to promote its cause. According to *MyKMU.net* (2007), UMNO also had three groups active on the internet to counter pro-Anwar Ibrahim websites during the *reformasi* days. One of the groups of UMNO cybertroopers, considered by UMNO bloggers as being more effective than

the other two, had set up pseudonymous websites to counter Anwar Ibrahim's *reformasi* internet pages in 1999. The term UMNO cybertroopers surfaced publicly in July 2007 when the then youth and sports minister Azalina Othman, who was also UMNO supreme council member at that time, announced that the party was getting cyber writers to counter slanderous internet postings about the party (Chow, 2007). During the 2008 general election, pro-UMNO bloggers used the term UMNO cybertroopers to refer to bloggers who were paid to write favourably for the then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (Ruhanie, 2010). At that time, there was intense friction between two UMNO political giants, namely Mahathir Mohamad and his successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The split then was also reflected in the Malaysian blogosphere. An account on how the pro-UMNO bloggers became united against Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is discussed in Chapter Eight.

The more effective group of UMNO cybertroopers that countered Anwar Ibrahim's *reformasi* movement was rumoured to have had a closed door meeting with Mahathir Mohamad in 2000. This group of cybertroopers went on to set up *Kelab Maya UMNO* (UMNO Virtual Club) and started the *MyKMU.net.my* website. This new UMNO website continued to provide information about UMNO and the ruling coalition between 2000 and 2004 (MyKMU.net, 2007). However after the 2004 general election, the efforts of the 2,000-odd UMNO cyber boys were apparently not recognised by Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who had led a

successful victory at the polls (Ibid). The domain name of the UMNO cybertroopers was later changed to *MyKMU.net* and this website was later described in an interview for this study by pro-UMNO blogger Ruhanie Ahmad as "Mahathir's blog". This scenario points to the possibility that Mahathir Mohamad is familiar with the use of the blogs to counter political rivals, including the effort by pro-UMNO bloggers in the lead-up to the 12th general election in 2008. It also offers an explanation on the perception that Mahathir Mohamad is the powerful elite figure behind the strategic use of blogs to criticise his successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi at that time. The campaign strategies on the blogs against Abdullah Ahmad Badawi may well be a repeat of some of the efforts of UMNO to counter pro-Anwar Ibrahim websites at the peak of the *reformasi* movement in 1999. As discussed in Chapter Eight, it indicates the strategic use of pro-UMNO bloggers aligned with Mahathir Mohamad to change public perception in electoral politics.

The country's opposition parties also resorted to the internet to express their views although some of them produced their own newspapers. For example, the DAP produces and distributes *The Rocket* newspaper while PAS has the *Harakah* (Brown, 2005). However, PAS went further by launching its Web TV and its party newspaper *Harakah* online (Tan & Zawawi, 2008). DAP leaders were also prompt in setting up blogs to post their views online. Party leader and veteran, Lim Kit Siang, was one of the DAP stalwarts who started blogging in 1997. A host of

other DAP leaders also took up the online activity to stay in touch with their supporters. More recently, many party leaders have begun disseminating information through the online social media network, facebook, rather than just through their blogs. Similarly, PKR leaders have been adept at blogging and the use of the internet to spread their messages and information on the party's activities.

Not only was blogging able to provide diverse views and perspectives, some of the bloggers had taken up the role of citizen journalists (George, 2007). Some of them provided coverage on demonstrations against the fuel price hike in 2006 because they were expecting the mainstream press to ignore the event as a news item. Blogger Jeff Ooi of popular blog, *Screenshots*, posted a 'raw version' of what happened at the peaceful demonstration (Ibid). The practice of grassroots journalism spread rapidly during a Hindraf rally on November 25, 2007, in Kuala Lumpur to protest against the unfair treatment and economic backwardness of the Indian community in Malaysia (Waytha Moorthy, 2009). Socio-political blogs took centre stage to highlight the police action against demonstrators who turned out in full force at the Kuala Lumpur City Centre in their call for a free and fair election on November 10, 2007. Another example was a blow-by-blow account of the demonstration, which was posted by blogger Haris Ibrahim on the well-read blog *The People's Parliament* (Haris, 2007). The blog, which also posted dramatic photographs of the protestors and the huge crowd that supported the rally, contained details of the use of

water cannons and teargas against some of the protestors by the police force (Ibid). Videos and thousands of photographs of the demonstration posted online indicated the vibrant web activity by individual bloggers and public interest groups.

During the campaigning period of the 2008 general election, photographs and videos of political rallies that recorded turnouts of tens of thousands of people were posted online to show a huge support for the opposition parties. In all those demonstrations and political rallies, the mainstream media had limited coverage because they were afraid of antagonising the ruling coalition. These are examples of the burgeoning practice of grassroots journalism in a country where the ruling regime has a tight control on media and civil liberties. Bloggers turned to giving eyewitness accounts of those incidents and events that the mainstream press was not covering. The practice taken up by bloggers in Malaysia can be analysed using the arguments of Pavlik (2001), Bowman and Willis (2003), Gillmor (2004) and Rosen (2006) pertaining to the online phenomenon of citizen journalism or participatory journalism, where media consumers are now playing an active role in reporting about an event. Although the analyses of Pavlik (2001), Bowman and Willis (2003), Gillmor (2004) and Rosen (2006) are based on the United States' experience, which sees a much freer press, the use of the internet to blog about particular events has been similar. The democratic potentials provided by the new technologies are perhaps more 'obvious' in Malaysia

when juxtaposed against a state-controlled mainstream media and a tight rein on civil liberties by the ruling coalition. In the case of Malaysia, most of the views and news posted on the socio-political blogs are largely ignored by the state-controlled mainstream media.

Blogging during Abdullah Ahmad Badawi rule

As bloggers took to the internet to publish views alternative to the mainstream media, they quickly became a thorn in the side of the government. On July 13, 2007, blogger Nathaniel Tan, who was political aide to Anwar, was taken into custody under the Official Secrets Act (1972) for a comment left by an anonymous visitor to his blog. The comment was in reference to allegations of corruption involving the then internal security deputy minister Johari Bahrom (Tan & Zawawi, 2008: 69). About 10 days later, Raja Petra Kamaruddin of the blog *Malaysia Today* was charged with insulting the King and Islam in a blog posting on July 11, 2007. The Penal Code, Sedition Act 1948 and the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 were used against Raja Petra Kamaruddin (Ibid: 69). The Internal Security Act was also used against Raja Petra Kamaruddin in September, 2008, for allegedly being a threat to security, peace and public order (The Star Online, 2008a; 2008b).

Apart from using the above-mentioned penal laws to restrict the civil liberties of bloggers, the government was also perceived as reneging on its initial promise of guaranteed online freedom. This was when two other bloggers, Jeff Ooi of *Screenshots* and Ahirudin Attan of *Rocky's Bru*, were

taken to court for defamation by the *New Straits Times* in 2007. Jeff Ooi,
who was then a member of Gerakan (a coalition partner of the BN) was
sued for 13 articles that appeared on his blog *Screenshots* while Ahirudin
Attan, who was then a former mainstream media editor, was charged with
defamation for 48 articles that appeared on his blog *Rocky's Bru* (The Star
Online, 2007a). The suit was seen as an indirect crackdown by the
government on the two bloggers for their online criticisms against the
administration of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (Tan & Zawawi, 2008). The
government was seen as reneging on its initial promise of guaranteed
online freedom during the launch of the Multimedia Super Corridor
(MSC), thus earning the wrath of bloggers (Lim, 2009).

Despite government efforts to control the cyberspace, the 2008 polls
ended with the opposition significantly reducing the ruling coalition's two-
thirds majority by winning 82 parliamentary seats out of a total of 222, a
marked improvement from the 20 parliamentary seats that the opposition
won in 2004 (Financial Daily, 2008). The opposition also retained the state
seat of Kelantan and won four other states in 2008. The four are Selangor,
Perak, Penang and Kedah (New Sunday Times, 2008a). The opposition
also won 10 out of the 13 parliamentary constituencies in the Federal
Territory, which is made up of 11 constituencies in Kuala Lumpur and one
each in Putrajaya and Labuan (New Sunday Times, 2008b). At least 20
candidates who kept and maintained a blog then were successfully elected
to parliament (see Appendix 1). Moreover, there were more opposition

politicians who took up blogging during the 2008 election when compared with candidates from the ruling coalition. However, it did not take long for politicians of the ruling coalition to take up blogging after the 2008 election as the then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi openly attributed the BN's major electoral setback to its neglect of information published on the blogs (The Straits Times Singapore, 2008; The New York Times, 2008).

Blogging and democratic practices

When set against a tightly controlled mainstream news media by a relatively repressive regime, it is not difficult to understand why many political writers and observers are quick to conclude that the internet and blogging have a significant role in defeating the ruling coalition in the 2008 election. The new information and communications technologies are regarded as an important tool for the opposition in overcoming little coverage in the mainstream media, thus enabling opposition political parties to reach a wider audience (Welsh, 2008; Tan, 2008; Abdul Rashid, 2009; Mohd Azizuddin & Zengeni, 2010). The online social media, coupled with a free cyberspace policy, have been touted as having a huge potential to contribute to a democratisation process in Malaysia (Mohd Azizuddin & Zengeni, 2010).

Contrasting the new media against a relatively authoritarian regime also contributes to the perception that the internet and blogging can provide avenues for the people to exercise their civil liberties, particularly freedom

of expression and freedom to information, including mobilising citizen participation (Tang, 2006; Tan & Zawawi, 2008; Lim, 2009). Blogging serves to facilitate civil liberties, help frame public discourse and set the agenda for making public policies (Tan & Zawawi, 2008). Because of the country's strict legislation and tight control of the ruling elite on the mainstream media, Tang (2006) argues that socio-political blogs in Malaysia are promoting a democratic culture with the ability to overcome some of the restrictive laws, which inhibit free speech, freedom of assembly and association (p. 21). Examining the function of socio-political blogs as a watchdog in Malaysia, Lim (2009) asserts that they play the role of checking the government by providing alternative information, building dominant frames and setting the news agenda. Blogging was also used to mobilise citizens to take part in street protests in 2007 and 2008 (Ibid). These arguments are similar to the analysis of Bowman and Willis (2003), Gillmor (2004) and Rosen (2006) in that the socio-political blogs, termed as either citizen journalism or participatory journalism, have the potential to enhance the ideals of democracy. The two main proponents of Asian values against western liberal democratic ideals - former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad and sacked deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim - are now among some of the active bloggers in the country, posting critical views of the government. Mahathir Mohamad's blog, set up after the 2008 election, received one million hits within the first month of starting his blog. Out of power now, Mahathir Mohamad is denouncing the tightly

controlled mainstream media as the reason for turning to the uncensored cyberspace to air his views (Malaysiakini, 2006).

Amidst grand ideas of the democratising effects of blogging and the internet, Tan and Zawawi (2008) are quick to point out that there are limits to how the new information and communications technologies can fulfil the potential to democratise the Malaysian society. Several factors, such as the unequal access of Malaysians to broadband connections, the government's resolve to regulate bloggers and the continued racialisation of core issues and policies can restrict those potentials (Ibid). The possibility of developing a more inclusive and, thus, more democratic discourse can be restricted because of the 'deeply embedded' ethnicised or racialised view of the Malaysian society. As such, Tan and Zawawi (2008) argue that perceptions posted on the blogs are replicated instead of challenged because of this essentialised ethnic discourse (p. 79).

A closer examination into the digital divide in Malaysia suggests that it can be an obstacle for the democratisation of Malaysian society if it depends only on the internet to achieve that. Internet usage in Malaysia stood at 62.8% in 2008 and increased to 65.7% in 2009 but decreased slightly to 64.6% in 2010 (Internet World Stats, 2010). The country's household broadband penetration rate was estimated at just over 21% (or roughly 1.3 million subscribers) by end of 2008 (The Edge Malaysia, 2009). Malaysia is also lagging far behind when compared with neighbouring countries, such as Singapore, which has a broadband

coverage rate of 100% (Ibid). As for households using dial-up internet, a 2008 survey by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission shows that about 1.9 million household internet users are on dial-up connections and each household account is shared by 2.26 persons. The survey also shows that the household internet users are concentrated in urban areas, which account for 85% of the users. The remaining 15% are users in the rural areas. The statistics indicate an unequal representation of voices on the internet because of a disparity in digital access. The digital gap can contribute to underrepresented groups whose rights to free speech and information can be marginalised (Tan & Zawawi, 2008: 77).

Summary

Given the tight media control by a relatively authoritarian regime that curtails the free flow of information, blogging can potentially overcome those constraints to promote democracy and enrich political life in electoral politics. However, the existing social structures and political culture of the country must be taken into account before such conclusions can be made in a meaningful manner. Firstly, it is imperative to evaluate the extent to which blogging reflects the existing political culture in Malaysia, the dominance of UMNO politics and factional politics within UMNO. This can provide an indication on the question of power and control on the blogosphere, in particular the possible control of the blogosphere discourse. A blogosphere that reflects a dominance of UMNO politics implies that blogging is used to advance the agenda of the dominant

political party in the country and the cyberspace discourse can be appropriated by particular political elites. This means that although blogging does facilitate the expression of alternative views ignored by the mainstream media, political elites continue to dominate the blogosphere. Thus, this thesis investigates the individual bloggers by assessing their political affiliation, the objective in setting up a blog and the patterns of blog use in order to realise the goal. It also assesses the ways in which blog contents are framed, the possible ties that the bloggers establish in order to reach a political goal and the prevailing political environment that contributes to the significance or insignificance of blog use at particular moments in an election. A detailed discussion on these aspects of blogging is available in Chapter Eight and parts of Chapter Six.

Despite the tight control on mainstream media by the ruling coalition, the media industry in Malaysia can present spaces of contestation in situations when the government's grip becomes less firm due to factional politics. This raises the question of whether moments of looser control in the mainstream media have the potential for blogging to mediate the election differently. An analysis on the way blogging is used at various points in an election by the different groups of bloggers can give an indication on the extent to which blogging can transform ways of campaigning. An account on ways of campaigning and looser control is highlighted in Chapter Seven and parts of Chapter Six. An analysis on the use of blogs by politician-bloggers includes taking into consideration the

wider political economy of the media and the societal structures, in particular the digital gap between urban and rural dwellers. This can also suggest whether access to the digital media has an influence on the role of blogging in mediating the election campaign.

The ruling coalition provides a guarantee of non-censorship on the internet, which can only promote free speech and not curb it. However, existing legislation that curtails civil liberties can limit its democratic potentials. This brings us to the question of whether the stringent regulations are the only form of power in society that bloggers are confronted with when they resort to the online platform to promote liberal democratic practices and to realise a political goal in an election. These aspects are addressed in parts of Chapter Six, Chapter Eight and Chapter Nine. It is, thus, within these wider institutional and societal structures, including existing social and political culture that this thesis hopes to examine the extent to which blogging can enrich and promote liberal democratic practices and political life. It aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of blogging and democracy, instead of making a simplistic and reductive conclusion about the complex nature of the web phenomenon.

Chapter 6

Content analysis of blogs, blog posts and comments

Introduction

This chapter discusses findings of the content analysis to evaluate the extent to which blogging is able to promote liberal democratic practices and enrich political life in electoral politics. It evaluates blog posts for patterns of blog use, with particular focus on some aspects of blogging identified as potentially liberating, such as expressing opinions, passing on information to readers and mobilising readers to take part in public rallies and to vote in the 2008 general election. It also highlights more specific uses of blogging as an election campaign tool, such as passing on information about campaign activities, information on electoral candidates, raising election funds and recruiting volunteers. The chapter also discusses findings to examine the extent to which the blog posts and comments are able to accommodate alternative or dissenting views and generate public discussion. The socio-economic background of the people behind the blogs is also highlighted in this chapter in an attempt to understand whether blogging is a reflection of the social and ideological structures of society.

There are four major results found in the content analysis. Firstly, the findings revealed the pattern of blog use among politician-bloggers when compared with non-candidate bloggers in the general election. Secondly, the content analysis indicated that blogging was more commonly used to

express opinions and dissenting views but limited in facilitating public discussion. Thirdly, the Malaysian blogosphere was, expectedly, more sympathetic towards the opposition than the ruling coalition, given the tight control of the mainstream media by the ruling regime. More importantly, the results suggest that blogging can be a tool used to sway public opinion in an election. At that time, it was used to specifically tarnish the reputation of the then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The considerable use of pseudonymous blogs to frame the former premier in a negative light and the use of other blogs as external sources to create blog contents suggested some attempt at managing the information flows in the Malaysian blogosphere. Finally, the analysis revealed a blogosphere dominated by elites in the society. This further indicates the possibility that the blogosphere agenda can be appropriated by existing elites in the country.

Raising funds and recruiting volunteers did not seem to be the main goal of blogging among politician-bloggers during the 2008 election. The content analysis revealed that blogging was rarely used by politician-bloggers, who had a direct stake at the election, for those purposes. However, the politician-bloggers did make use of their blogs to disseminate information on campaign activities and to promote electoral candidates more so than the other groups of bloggers examined. The use of blogs by politician-bloggers to mobilise political action was considerable when it came to encouraging readers to take part in protest rallies in 2007

and to vote in the 2008 general election. Thus, blogging can facilitate ways of campaigning among politician-bloggers in terms of keeping readers informed of election campaign activities and candidates. However, unlike in the United States, blogging is minimally used to collect election funds and recruit volunteers by politician-bloggers in Malaysia.

An ongoing debate regarding blogs is the ability to provide spaces for public discussion. The potential of blogging to generate public discussion has been described as a form of 'democratisation' of the Malaysian society (Tang, 2006; Tan & Zawawi, 2008). To obtain an understanding of the extent to which blogging could promote public debates, the comments of readers were examined. They were evaluated on whether they discussed the blog posts, whether the bloggers replied to points raised by their readers and whether the comments discussed points raised by other readers. The analysis suggests that blogging does not appear to have generated discussion or engaged readers extensively on public discourse, which are important functions of deliberative democracy. Almost half of the total 383 comments analysed did not discuss the blog posts. The bloggers only occasionally responded to the readers and discussions among readers were rather limited, indicating a lack of focused discussion on the blogs. Analysing the comments gave some indication on the role of blogs in facilitating discussion but in-depth interviews with the research participants, discussed in the next three chapters, provided a clearer picture on the subject.

In an environment of tight media control by a ruling regime that stifles dissenting opinions, blogging has been deemed as a platform for free speech, including the promotion of alternative or opposition views (Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Kulikova & Perlmutter, 2007; Abdul Rashid, 2009; Mohd Azizuddin & Zengeni, 2010). The analysis suggests a Malaysian blogosphere that overwhelmingly supports the opposition, with a particular emphasis on personality politics. The content analysis demonstrates that the blog views are highly supportive of the opposition but critical of the ruling coalition and the former premier. Blog posts that contained a supportive tone were more frequently directed at the opposition than the ruling coalition. Blog posts urging readers to vote and those containing information on campaign activities and candidates in the election were focused on the opposition, rather than the ruling coalition. Conversely, blog posts that contained a critical tone were primarily targeting the ruling regime, including the then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and government departments and agencies. The focus on framing the personality of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in a negative light suggests the occurrence of mediated scandals in the blogosphere that is happening not only in the realm of traditional communication media, as documented by Thompson (2000). It is also occurring in the realm of the new communication media. This was supported by interviews with partisan bloggers, discussed in Chapter Eight, who revealed the use of

blogs to sway public opinion[25] by framing the national leadership in a negative light. This indicates that blogging is able to promote dissenting opinions in the Malaysian blogosphere.

The use of external sources to create blog contents suggests an effort to highlight each other's postings to change public opinion towards the national leadership. The content analysis found that the mainstream media were the most common source used to create blog contents. More importantly, the use of online social media, particularly other blogs, was the second highest external source used to publish blog contents. This showed that some of the bloggers were highlighting each other's contents in an attempt to change public opinion towards the national leadership. The finding wass supported by interviews with some of the partisan bloggers, who indicated that there were collaborative efforts to manage information flow to sway public perception on particular leaders in the lead-up to the 2008 general election. A discussion on the matter is available in Chapter Eight.

In an effort to understand the possibility of dominance on the blogosphere, in particular the question of power and control, the content analysis investigated the people behind the blogs. For this, the individuals behind the blogs were examined in terms of their ethnicity, occupation and

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[25] This follows the understanding that the concept of framing and priming can provide an insight into how the mainstream news media can be a form of political communication to sway public opinion (Entman, 2007), as discussed in Chapter Two. Blogs, as an online platform for political communication, can be used in the same manner, as highlighted in Chapter Three.

whether they disclosed or hid their identities on their blogs. The ethnicity of bloggers reflects a broad representation of the various ethnic groups in the Malaysian society but the analysis also suggests a dominance of media and political elites. A high presence of pseudonymous bloggers can indicate a fear of the laws that curb freedom of expression in the country. On the other hand, the pseudonymous blogs could have been set up for purposes of propaganda, as revealed by the partisan bloggers in Chapter Eight. An analysis of the individuals behind the blogs demonstrates a dominance of media and political elites in the Malaysian blogosphere.

This chapter will now set out to detail the findings of the content analysis. It will first discuss the extent to which blogging can change ways of campaigning and mobilise readers for political action. It proceeds with an evaluation of readers' feedback to assess the extent to which blogging can generate public discussion. The next set of discussion highlights a strong partisan element in the Malaysian blogosphere which is overwhelmingly dominated by support for opposition politics instead of the ruling coalition. It then addresses findings on the common use of social online media to create blog contents. Finally, it highlights findings to demonstrate a dominance of media and political elites in the blogosphere, an indication that the blogosphere mirrors existing social and ideological structures of Malaysian society.

Results of content analysis

From the outset, I would like to note that all electoral candidate bloggers analysed for this thesis revealed their identities on their blogs (Table 4). Half of the politician-bloggers (or 21 out of the 42) whose postings were randomly selected for this study were popular A-list bloggers while the other half were less read B-list bloggers[26]. Out of the 73 A-list bloggers whose postings were randomly chosen for analysis, 21 of them (or 30%) were politician-bloggers. The 42 politician-bloggers made up 20% of the total number of 209 identified bloggers, whose blog posts were selected for analysis (Table 4). As for the A-list bloggers, the majority of them disclosed their identities on their blogs (Table 5). However, only 60 out of 209 (or 30%) of the identified bloggers were A-list ones and only 13 out of 167 pseudonymous blogs (or 8%) were A-list bloggers (Table 5). Thus, any results for identified bloggers will also be true of politician-bloggers and likely to hold for A-list bloggers. It is less obvious for the non-candidate blogs as half of them disclosed their identities and the other half blogged pseudonymously. However, there were many more non-candidate blogs that were B-list than A-list (Table 4).

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[26] As noted in Chapter Four, A-list blogs were those that received an average of 10 comments and more per blog post written during the timeframe of analysis. B-list blogs were those that received an average of less than 10 comments per blog post during the three-month period selected for this study.

Table 4: A cross-tabulation of candidate and non-candidate blogs with A-list/B-list and identified/pseudonymous blogs

Blog type	A-list (%)	B-list (%)	Total (%)	Identified (%)	Pseudonymous (%)	Total (%)
Candidates	21 (29.0)	21 (7.0)	**42 (11.0)**	42 (20.0)	0 (0.0)	**42 (11.0)**
Non-candidates	52 (71.0)	282 (93.0)	**334 (89.0)**	167 (80.0)	167 (100.0)	**334 (89.0)**
Total	**73 (100.0)**	**303 (100.0)**	**376 (100.0)**	**209 (100.0)**	**167 (100.0)**	**376 (100.0)**

Table 5: A cross-tabulation of A-list and B-list blogs with identified and pseudonymous blogs

Blog type	Identified (%)	Pseudonymous (%)	Total (%)
A-list	60 (82.0)	13 (18.0)	**73 (100.0)**
B-list	149 (50.0)	154 (50.0)	**303 (100.0)**
Total	**209 (56.0)**	**167 (44.0)**	**376 (100.0)**

Finding 1: Little use of blogs by politician-bloggers to raise funds

My content analysis of the 376 blog posts shows that, unlike in the United States, blogging is not widely used to gain monetary contributions from readers. Of the 376 blog posts analysed, only 3 postings contained requests to collect donations from their readers. The three blog posts were found in blogs of A-list, identified politician-bloggers. This shows that the use of blogs to seek monetary contribution from readers is uncommon among politician-bloggers in Malaysia. A similar trend is detected in the top-level analysis of the 179 blogs. The analysis revealed only 17 blogs (or

9%) asked for a donation on their home page. Among the 19 politician-blogs randomly selected for analysis, only three asked for donations on their home pages. Only one candidate asked for donation to his election fund while two other politician-bloggers' requests for donation were for charitable causes (Table 6). As for the group of non-candidate bloggers, none of them asked for donations to election funds. However, four non-candidate blogs did seek donations for their political parties. A further 10 non-candidate blogs asked for monetary support for themselves and other charitable causes (Table 6). The findings suggest an overall lack of use of blogs to raise funds for the election in the Malaysian blogosphere.

Table 6: A breakdown of the reasons and the number of blogs that asked for donation on their home page
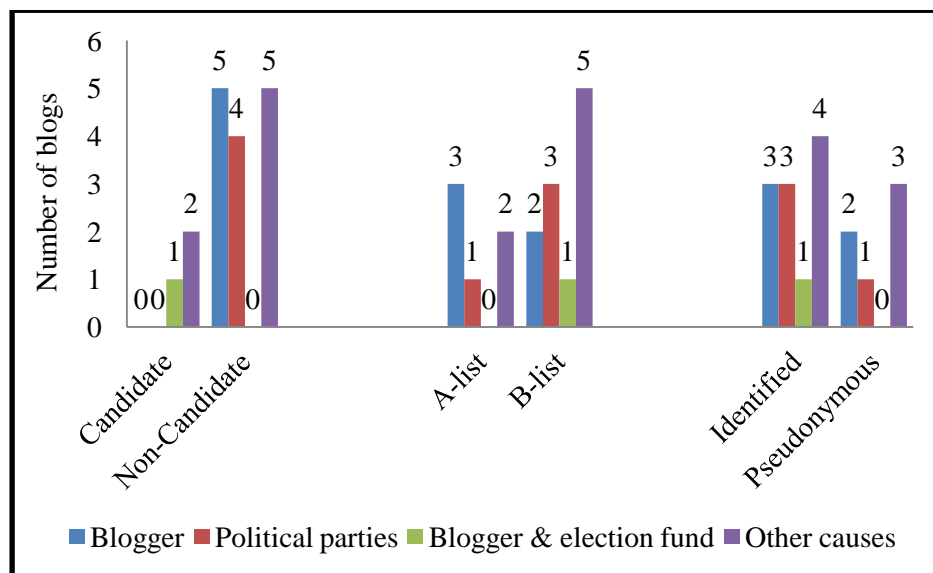
Note: The total number of home pages came from 179 blogs, which were identified after the blog posts had been randomly selected for the content analysis of this study.

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The lack of blog use to raise funds among candidates of the Malaysian general election is unlike candidates contesting in the 2004 presidential elections in the United States where the use of blogs is a common web activity (Bimber, 2001; Williams et al, 2005; Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009; Davis et al, 2009). The minimal use of blogs to raise funds by politician-bloggers shows that blogging may not be an important platform for electoral candidates to achieve the purpose during the campaigning period. Interviews with politician-bloggers, as disclosed in the next chapter, revealed that they were more preoccupied with meeting their voters face-to-face during the short 13-day campaigning period.

Finding 2: Little use of blogs by politician-bloggers to recruit volunteers

An aspect of online campaigning that has been much touted in the American tradition is the use of blogs for recruiting volunteers to help in the election campaign, as demonstrated by the Howard Dean presidential campaign (Perlmutter, 2008; Davis et al, 2009). However, an examination of the 376 blog posts discovered only one posting had asked volunteers to help in the election campaign. That sole posting came from a politician-blogger. This again highlights that blogging in Malaysia is not widely used to recruit volunteers by those contesting the election. The content analysis is unable to provide an explanation on a lack of blog use for those purposes among politician-bloggers during the election campaign. However, interviews conducted with the politician-bloggers indicated that the

particularities of the social and political environment in Malaysia were significant factors that influenced the way blogging was used during the 2008 general election. As discussed in the next chapter, the politician-bloggers largely continued with the practice of traditional politics during the campaigning period.

Finding 3: Some use of blogs by politician-bloggers to keep readers informed of campaign activities and electoral candidates

Increasing campaign funds and recruiting volunteers through blog requests were not found to be significant for politician-bloggers during the 2008 election. However, the analysis showed that blogging was used to disseminate information on campaign activities and electoral candidates. There were more blog posts highlighting information on campaign activities and candidates than postings appealing for donation and volunteers. Overall, the use of blogs to publish information on campaign activities and candidates was detected in 6% of the total blog posts analysed. Of the total 376 blog posts, 6% (or 21 blog posts) contained information on the election campaign while 23 postings (also 6%) had information on the candidates contesting at that time (Table 7).

Table 7: The number of blog posts containing campaign and candidate information

	Number of blog posts
Has campaign information	21
No campaign information	355
Has candidate information	23
No candidate information	353
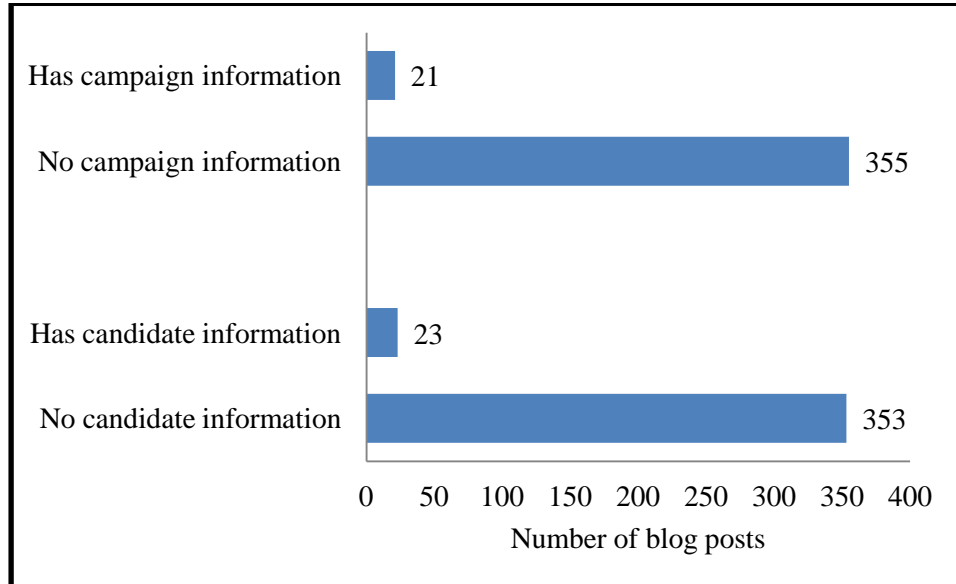
Note: The total number of blog posts analysed was 376.

When Table 7 is broken down further, it becomes clear that a disproportionate amount of this information comes from the candidates themselves. Out of the 42 blog posts published by politician-bloggers, 20% (or 8 blog posts) contained information on campaign activities (Table 8). Although the groups of identified and popular A-list bloggers were second highest in using their blogs to convey campaign activities to readers, they recorded a relatively lower percentage of 7% when compared with the politician-bloggers (Table 8). This suggests that the politician-bloggers are using their blogs to spread information on electoral campaign activities to overcome the little coverage they receive in the mainstream media.

Table 8: The number of blog posts giving campaign information, published by the various types of blogs analysed

Blog type	Has campaign information (%)	No campaign information (%)	Total (%)
Candidates	8 (20.0)	34 (80.0)	42 (100.0)
Non-candidates	13 (4.0)	321 (96.0)	334 (100.0)
Total	**21 (6.0)**	**355 (94.0)**	**376 (100.0)**
A-list	5 (7.0)	68 (93.0)	73 (100.0)
B-list	16 (5.0)	287 (95.0)	303 (100.0)
Total	**21 (6.0)**	**355 (94.0)**	**376 (100.0)**
Identified	15 (7.0)	194 (93.0)	209 (100.0)
Pseudonymous	6 (4.0)	161 (96.0)	167 (100.0)
Total	**21 (6.0)**	**355 (94.0)**	**376 (100.0)**

A similar trend is evident from blog posts that promote electoral candidates (Table 9). Promotional material on electoral candidates is most frequently found among the group of politician-bloggers. Approximately 12% (or 5 blog posts) published by the politician-bloggers were promoting candidates of the general election (Table 9). When the results are broken down further, the identified bloggers are more likely to promote electoral candidates than the pseudonymous bloggers. The higher percentage of identified bloggers posting promotional material on electoral candidates (8%) is partly explained by the inclusion of all the politician-bloggers (Table 9). Conversely, an effort to disseminate information on electoral candidates is considerably lower among the other categories of bloggers, such as the A-list and B-list bloggers, pseudonymous bloggers and non-

candidates. The percentage of blog posts promoting electoral candidates was between 4% and 6% of total postings in the respective categories (Table 9). The overall findings suggest that blogging is not widely used to promote the electoral campaigns and candidates, except among the politician-bloggers. This indicates that minimal coverage on politician-bloggers in the mainstream media may have encouraged this group of bloggers to promote their electoral campaign and candidates on their blogs, a point explored further in the next chapter.

Table 9: The number of blog posts passing on candidate information, published by the various groups of blogs analysed

Blog type	Has candidate information (%)	No candidate information (%)	Total (%)
Candidates	5 (12.0)	37 (88.0)	42 (100.0)
Non-candidates	18 (5.0)	316 (95.0)	334 (100.0)
Total	**23 (6.0)**	**353 (94.0)**	**376 (100.0)**
A-list	4 (5.0)	69 (95.0)	73 (100.0)
B-list	19 (6.0)	284 (94.0)	303 (100.0)
Total	**23 (6.0)**	**353 (94.0)**	**376 (100.0)**
Identified	17 (8.0)	192 (92.0)	209 (100.0)
Pseudonymous	6 (4.0)	161 (96.0)	167 (100.0)
Total	**23 (6.0)**	**353 (94.0)**	**376 (100.0)**

Finding 4: Considerable use of blogs to mobilise political action

The use of blogs to generate political action, particularly in encouraging readers to attend the protest rallies of Hindraf and Bersih held in November 2007 and to cast their votes in the 2008 general election, was significant in the Malaysian blogosphere. Out of the 376 blog posts analysed, 68 blog posts (or 18%) were encouraging readers to take part in political action over the three-month period of analysis[27] while the remaining 308 blog posts (or 82%) were focused on other matters. The use of blogs to mobilise political action was significant across-the-board for all categories of bloggers. However, the group of politician-bloggers recorded the highest use of blog posts to mobilise political action among the readers. About 31% (or 13 blog posts) published by the politician-bloggers were calls to readers to participate in protest marches and to vote in the election (Table 10). The next two highest groups of bloggers who mobilised political action were the identified and A-list bloggers. The analysis showed about 21% of postings by the identified bloggers and 20% of total blog posts by the A-list bloggers were aimed at generating political participation (Table 10). Conversely, the pseudonymous bloggers were least inclined to mobilise readers for political action (Table 10). The popular A-list and less read B- list bloggers were using their blogs in almost the same frequency when it came to mobilising for political action

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[27] As noted in Chapter Four, the three-month period of analysis relevant to this thesis is November, 2007 and February to March, 2008.

(Table 10). The findings suggest a considerable use of blogging in the Malaysian context to encourage political participation.

Table 10: The number of blog posts asking readers to take part in political action, published by the various types of blogs analysed

Blog type	Calls for political action (%)	No call for political action (%)	Total (%)
Candidates	13 (31.0)	29 (69.0)	42 (100.0)
Non-candidates	55 (16.0)	279 (84.0)	334 (100.0)
Total	**68 (18.0)**	**308 (82.0)**	**376 (100.0)**
A-list	14 (20.0)	59 (80.0)	73 (100.0)
B-list	54 (18.0)	249 (82.0)	303 (100.0)
Total	**68 (18.0)**	**308 (82.0)**	**376 (100.0)**
Identified	45 (21.0)	164 (79.0)	209 (100.0)
Pseudonymous	23 (14.0)	144 (86.0)	167 (100.0)
Total	**68 (18.0)**	**308 (82.0)**	**376 (100.0)**

The same picture emerges when the subset of calls to readers to vote in the 2008 general election is analysed. The 39 blog posts which specifically urged readers to vote in the election represented a considerable 10% of the total sample analysed. The use of blogs to ask readers to vote in the election was highest among the politician-bloggers (Table 11). Out of the 42 blog posts published by the politician-bloggers, 14% of the postings (or 6 blog posts) urged readers to vote in the election. Identified bloggers

were also the second highest group of bloggers (12% of their blog posts) who attempted to mobilise readers to take part in the polls (Table 11). The high percentage of identified blogs can partly be attributed to the politician-bloggers. This shows that the politician-bloggers are more inclined to mobilise political action among their readers. It also suggests that the bloggers are using their identity to persuade readers to vote in the election. The groups of non-candidates, A-list and B-list bloggers recorded the same frequency in the use of blogs to mobilise political action (Table 11). The percentage of blog posts by the non-candidates, A-list and B-list bloggers was the same as the overall 10% of blog postings that contained calls to readers to vote in the 2008 election. This suggests that the effort to

Table 11: The number of blog posts asking readers to vote in the 2008 election, published by the various types of blogs analysed

Blog type	Calls to vote in election (%)	No call to vote in election (%)	Total (%)
Candidates	6 (14.0)	36 (86.0)	42 (100.0)
Non-candidates	33 (10.0)	301 (90.0)	334 (100.0)
Total	**39 (10.0)**	**337 (90.0)**	**376 (100.0)**
A-list	7 (10.0)	66 (90.0)	73 (100.0)
B-list	32 (10.0)	271 (90.0)	303 (100.0)
Total	**39 (10.0)**	**337 (90.0)**	**376 (100.0)**
Identified	25 (12.0)	184 (88.0)	209 (100.0)
Pseudonymous	14 (8.0)	153 (92.0)	167 (100.0)
Total	**39 (10.0)**	**337 (90.0)**	**376 (100.0)**

get readers to vote in the election may be evenly spread out between the A-list and less popular B-list politician-bloggers. The group of pseudonymous bloggers, again, recorded the least use of blogging to urge readers to take part in the election.

The findings, thus far, have shown that blogging can be considered as an alternative platform for opposition politicians marginalised by the mainstream media to generate political action, spread information on campaign activities and electoral candidates to readers. This supports the argument that blogging is an online platform for opposition politicians to overcome constraints of coverage in the mainstream media (Welsh, 2008; Abdul Rashid, 2009; Mohd Azizuddin & Zengeni, 2010). However, the use of blogs for those purposes is not extensively detected among the blogs of non-candidates, A-list and B-list bloggers, including pseudonymous bloggers. This raises the question of the manners in which the group of non-candidates is using their blogs as a political communication tool in an election. An analysis on blog use by the non-candidates, particularly the partisan and civil society bloggers indicates a different fashion that is not predicted before. It is not detected by way of content analysis but in-depth interviews, as detailed in Chapters Eight and Nine, can provide a different dimension to the manners in which blogging is used to achieve a particular goal at various junctures in an election.

Finding 5: Use of blogs to express opinions

An aspect of blogs widely hailed as liberating is the potential for free expression. An analysis of blog posts supports the argument that the online platform can be an avenue for bloggers to express their views. The majority of blog posts analysed were used to express the opinions of bloggers based on information obtained from external sources, a trend common in blogging practice worldwide. It accounted for 172 blog posts (or 46%) out of the total sample analysed (Table 12). Expressing views based on the bloggers' own experience or knowledge was the second most frequent use of blogs, as detected in 119 blog posts (or 32%) out of the total sample analysed (Table 12). Passing on information to readers was the least common use of blogs, accounting for 20% (or 76) of blog posts. This pattern of blog use is similar among all the different groups of bloggers, except the politician-bloggers (Table 13).

The findings, as seen in Table 13, show that the politician-bloggers are more inclined to pass on information to readers when compared with the other groups of bloggers. The activity of conveying information to readers by politician-bloggers is as common as the use of blogs to express their opinions. This suggests that politician-bloggers stand out in using blogs as an information platform and not as a tool for raising campaign funds or recruiting volunteers. Nonetheless, the overall analysis suggests a prominent use of blogs to express opinions based on external sources and bloggers' own experience and knowledge. The prominent use of blogs for

Table 12: An overwhelming use of blogs for expressing opinions
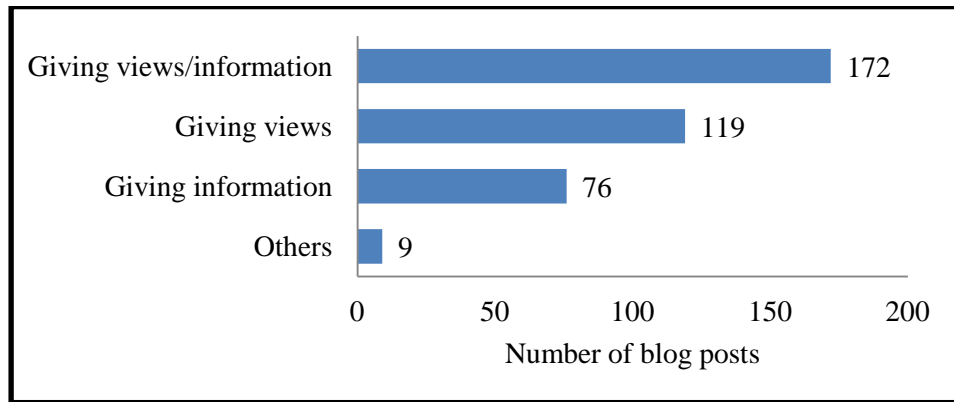
Table 13: Use of blogs for expressing opinions and providing information on the different types of blogs examined in this study
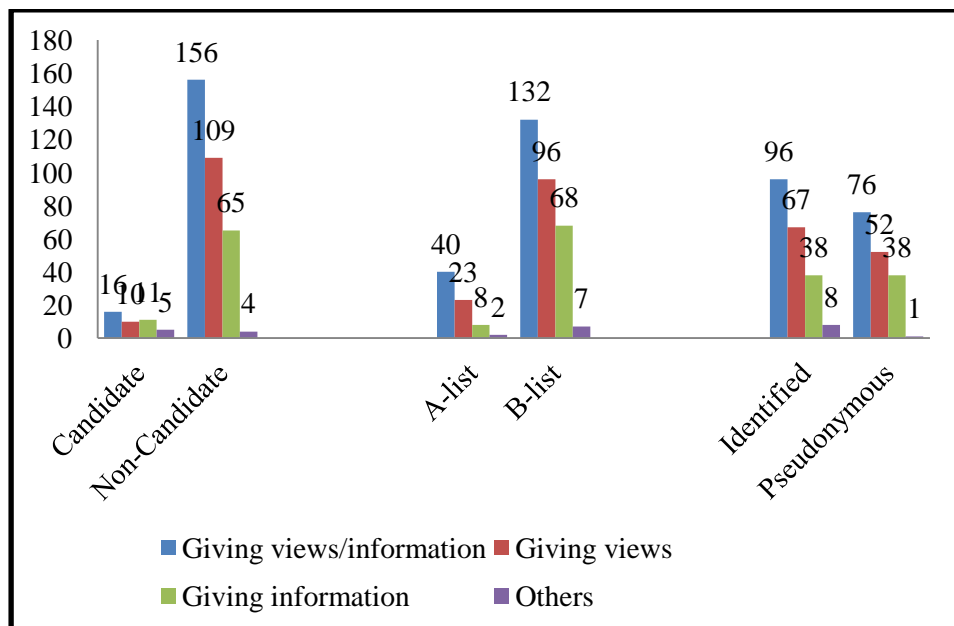
Note: Total number of blog posts examined was 376.

free expression supports the argument of many scholars who contend that the online platform is an avenue for audiences to express their views (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Wallsten, 2007; Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009). The ability of blogs to capture the writings, ideas and opinions has also been described as providing bloggers an 'authorial' position (Siapera, 2008).

The analysis also indicates that the use of blogs to express opinions is far more common than for other purposes, such as mobilising political action, conveying information or funding campaigns. This finding supports the conclusion of Wallsten (2007) in his study on the trend of political blog use during the 2004 presidential election in the United States. Wallsten (2007) concludes that the use of political blogs to express views is far more than for mobilising political action, for getting readers' feedback or for passing along information. The next finding looks at whether blogging in the Malaysian context can generate public debates among readers.

Finding 6: Discussion is not extensively generated on the blogs

In order to assess how far public debate, as envisaged in Habermasian theory, was being fostered in these blogs, I designed a number of categories about the use of discussions. An analysis of the comments suggests that blogs are not widely used for public discussion. They are also rarely used to express opinions crossing political divisions and the feedback does not encourage extended public debate. Out of the total 383 comments analysed, half of the feedback (178 comments or 49%) did not

discuss the blog posts (Table 14). Of the remaining 205 comments that

discussed the blog postings, most of the feedback (82 comments or 40%)

did not indicate agreement or disagreement with the blog posts while 80

comments (or 39%) agreed with the blog posts and only 43 comments (or

21%) disagreed with the postings (Table 15).

Table 14: Patterns that emerged from the feedback of readers to the blog contents
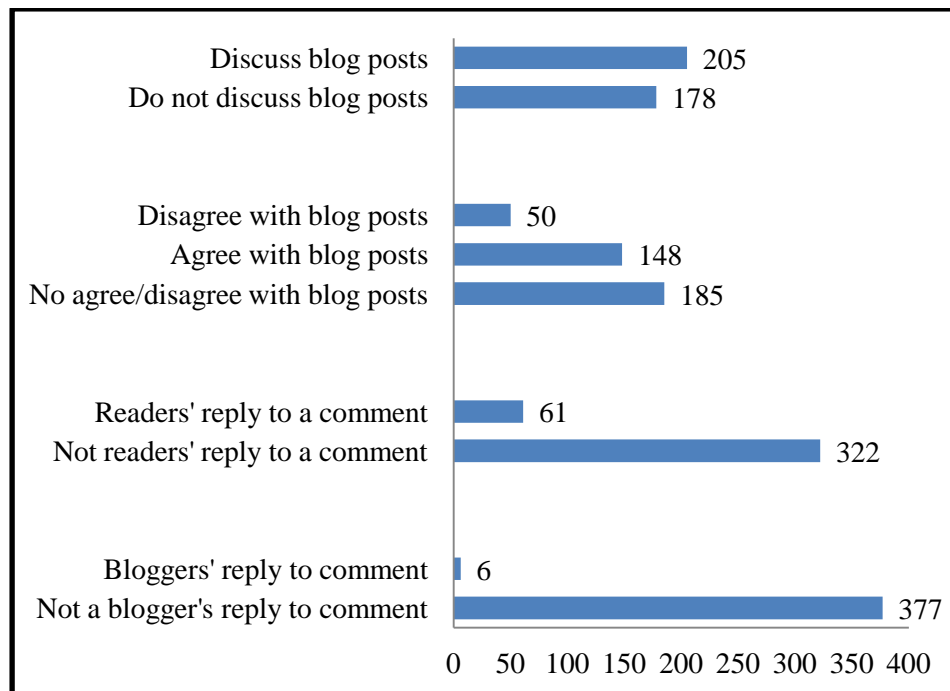
Note: The total number of comments examined was 383.

Table 15: An examination of whether comments that discussed blog posts indicated agreement or disagreement in the discussion
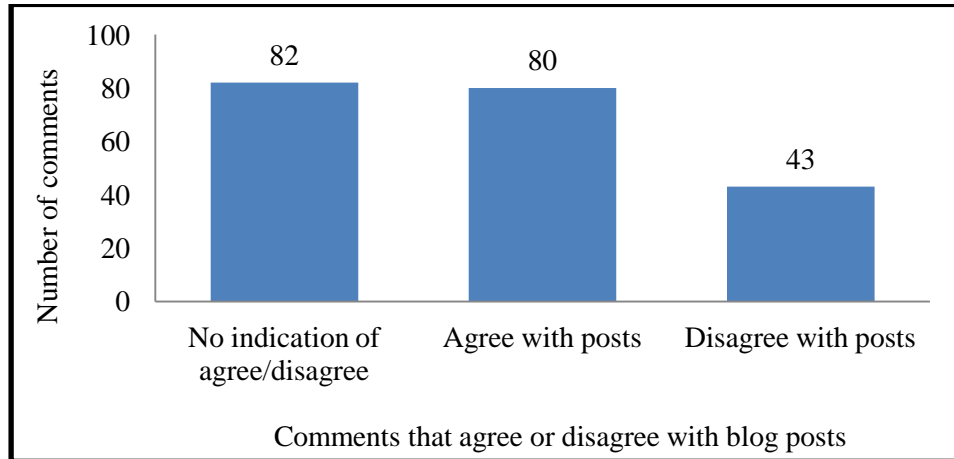
Note: The total number of comments that discussed the blog contents was 205.

The trend suggests a higher degree of readers agreeing with the bloggers than those who do not. This gives some indication that blogs may not have been widely used to express opinions crossing political divisions. Out of the 383 comments analysed, 148 comments (or 39%) agreed with the blog postings and only 50 comments (or 13%) disagreed with the blog posts (Table 14). The remaining 185 comments (or 48%) did not explicitly say whether they agreed or disagreed with the blog posts. This indicates that blogging may be attracting readers who are of the same mind, as observed by some scholars (McPherson et al, 2001; Sunstein, 2007). However, disagreements in readers' responses to the blog posts may also reflect an emergence of "subaltern counterpublics" (Fraser, 1994: 123).

The analysis also reveals a lack of interactivity among readers and between blog writers and their readers, indicating that they are rarely used for extended public debate. Although a considerable number of comments (61 responses out of 383 or 16%) were replies to earlier comments by other readers, a closer examination showed that half of them did not discuss the blog posts (Table 16). This indicates a lack of focused discussion among the blog readers. As for interaction between blog authors and their readers, there were even fewer comments. Only 6 comments (or 2%) out of the total sample were responses of blog writers to their readers (Table 14). This indicates that the improved interactivity and openness of blogging is limited in expanding the public sphere or contributing to public discussion in the Malaysian blogosphere. This is unlike the optimism touted by many scholars that the new platform can be a more interactive medium (Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009; Koop & Jansen, 2009). On the other hand, this limited analysis of the comments has yielded little information on the subject of blog discussion. The subject can be better understood through the in-depth interviews which can provide a clearer explanation on the use of blogs to generate public discourse. Further discussion on this subject is highlighted in the next three chapters.

Table 16: A lack of discussion of blog posts detected in comments that responded
to another reader
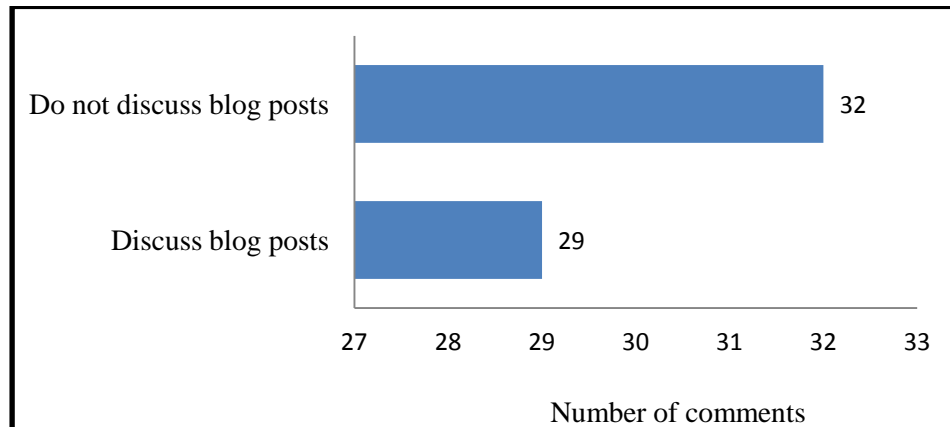
Note: The total number of comments that responded to another reader was 61.

**Finding 7: A blogosphere more supportive of the opposition than the
ruling coalition**

The content analysis reveals a Malaysian blogosphere that appears to
be more supportive of the opposition than the ruling regime, former
premier and the government machinery (Table 17). There were more pro-
opposition than pro-ruling coalition material in the blog postings and
feedback of readers. There were also more blog posts urging readers to
vote for the opposition in the 2008 election than the ruling coalition. Blog
posts containing information on campaigning and electoral candidates were
highlighting the opposition more than the ruling coalition. Conversely,
blog posts containing a critical tone were mainly directed at the ruling
regime, former premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the government
machinery. Moreover, there were more readers' responses that contained a

critical tone against the ruling coalition than the opposition. The findings

indicate a partisan blogosphere supportive of the opposition.

Table 17: Targets of blog posts containing a supportive tone
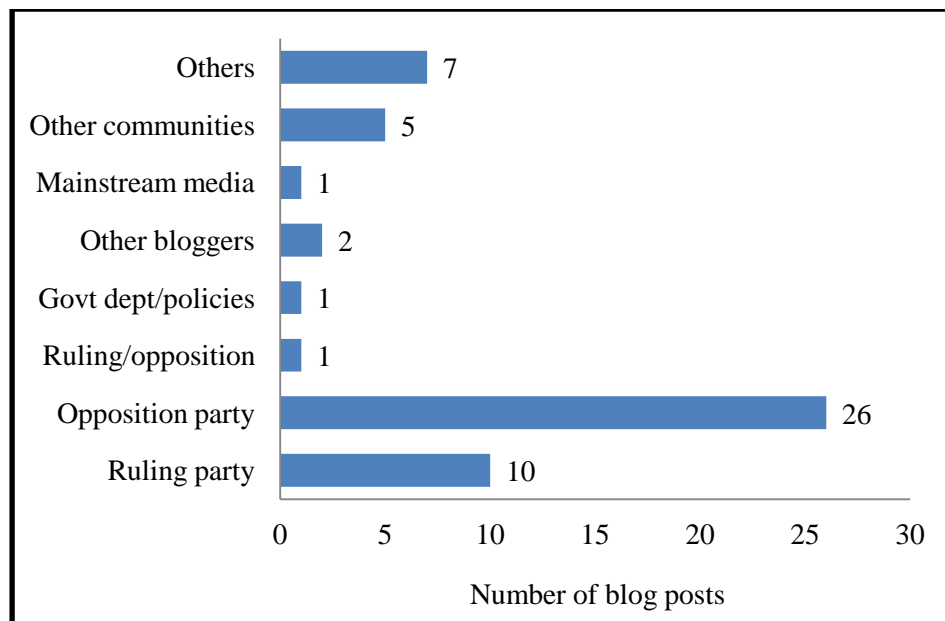
Note: The total number of targets detected in 52 blog posts containing a supportive tone was 53 because up to four choices were coded for this variable.

Blog posts containing a supportive tone were much more often directed at the opposition than the ruling party (Table 17). Out of the 52 blogs posts containing a supportive tone, almost half of them (49% or 26 blog posts) were directed at the opposition parties when compared with 10 blog posts (or 19%) that were targeting the ruling coalition (Table 17). This

was found across-the-board in the blogs of non-candidates, identified, pseudonymous, A-list and B-list bloggers, where half of the blog posts containing a supportive tone were for the opposition (Table 18). Only the politician-bloggers were supportive solely of the opposition. On the other hand, there were only two-fifths as many blog posts containing a supportive tone aimed at the ruling coalition as those aimed at the opposition (Table 17). This highlights the partisan nature of the Malaysian blogosphere.

Table 18: Targets of supportive blog posts detected in the different groups of blogs examined in this study

Targets	Candidates	Non-candidates	A-list	B-list	Identified	Pseudonymous
Ruling party	0	10	1	9	6	4
Opposition party	3	23	5	21	20	6
Ruling & Opposition	0	1	1	0	1	0
Govt dept/ policies	0	1	1	0	1	0
Other bloggers	0	2	1	1	2	0
Mainstream media	0	1	0	1	1	0
Other communities	0	5	2	3	5	0
Others	0	7	0	7	5	2
Total	**3**	**50**	**11**	**42**	**41**	**12**

Note: The total number of targets detected in 52 blog posts containing a supportive tone was 53 because up to four choices were coded for this variable.

Comments show the same trend as blog posts. Those containing a supportive tone are also directed at the opposition parties instead of the ruling coalition. Out of the 88 targets of supportive responses by readers, almost half (36 comments or 41%) targeted the opposition party (Table 19). There were even more comments (25 responses or 28%) that were supportive of the blog authors when compared with 15 comments (or 17%) that were supportive of the ruling coalition. This indicates that the blog writers are more willing to publish comments of readers that are supportive of their own online publication. This is because almost half (89 blogs or 49%) of the 179 blogs indicates on their home pages that they do moderate the comments posted by readers. Nonetheless, the findings further indicate a political blogosphere that is highly supportive or dominated by opposition politics. This reflects the reality of Malaysian society where opposition views are more easily accommodated or are more able to find space in the online platform because of the constrained mainstream media space. This finding supports the argument that blogging and the internet can become an alternative conduit of information for the opposition (Welsh, 2008; Abdul Rashid, 2009; Mohd Azizuddin & Zengeni, 2010).

Table 19: Targets of comments containing a supportive tone
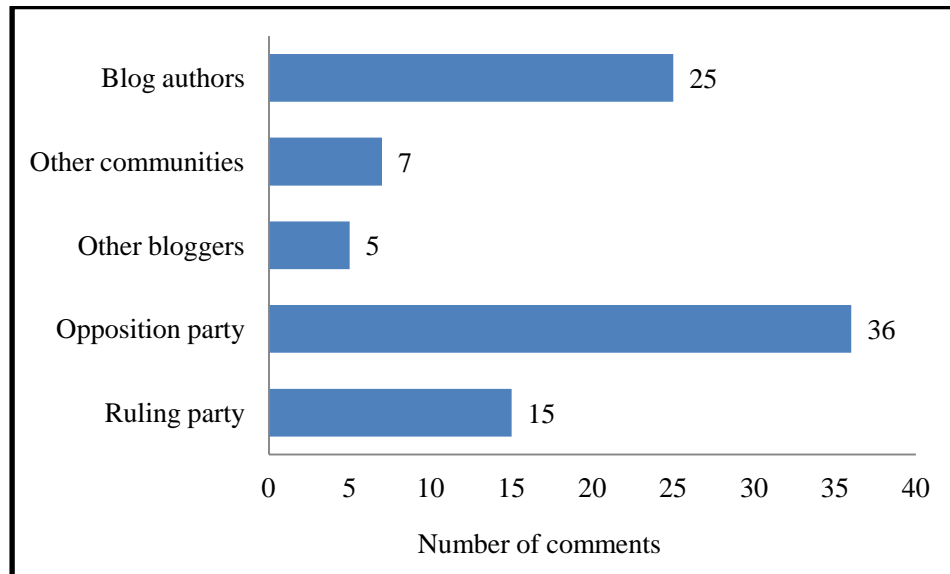
Note: The total number of targets found in 86 comments with a supportive tone was 88 because up to four choices were coded for this variable.

An analysis of blog posts encouraging readers to vote in the election also suggests that the Malaysian blogosphere is more supportive of the opposition parties. Out of the 39 blog posts that urged readers to vote in the election, 25 postings (or 64%) wanted them to support the opposition. There were even more blog posts (12 or 31%) urging readers to vote as a social responsibility than those (2 blog post or 5%) asking readers to support the ruling regime (Table 20). The call for readers to vote for the opposition stands out prominently across the different groups of blogs.

Table 20: An overwhelming number of blog posts asking readers to vote for the opposition
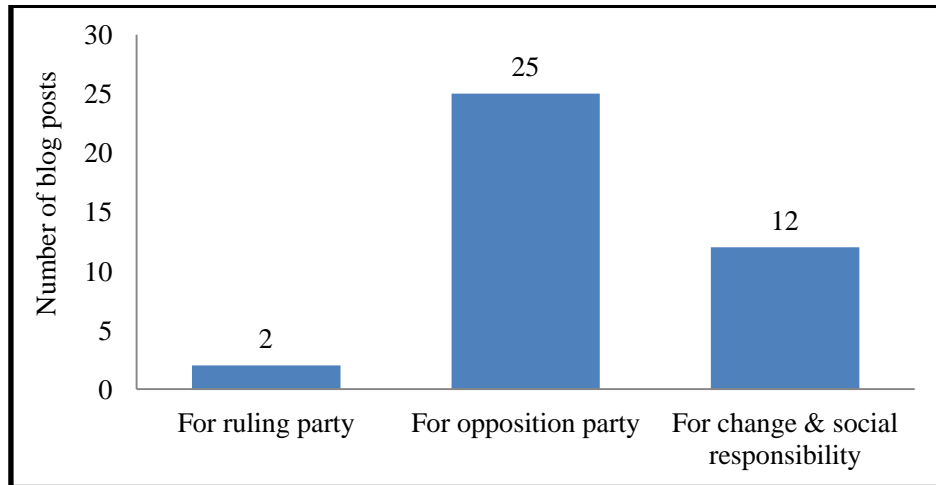
On closer examination of these blog posts, none of the A-list, candidate and pseudonymous blogs asked their readers to vote for the ruling coalition (Table 21). Calls by these three groups of bloggers were mainly aimed at supporting the opposition (Table 21). Blog posts urging readers to vote as a social responsibility came mainly from less popular B-list bloggers, who included some of the less read civil society bloggers pushing for policy reforms in the Malaysian blogosphere. A more detailed discussion is available in Chapter Nine. The overall findings on calls to support the opposition in the general election indicate that the political blogosphere is again supportive of the opposition.

Table 21: A breakdown of the political parties that readers were asked to vote in
the election according to the various groups of blogs examined

Targets	Candidates	Non-candidates	A-list	B-list	Identified	Pseudonymous
Ruling party	0	2	0	2	2	0
Opposition party	5	20	7	18	16	9
Social responsibility	1	11	0	12	7	5
Total	**6**	**33**	**7**	**32**	**25**	**14**

Note: The total number of blog posts urging readers to vote in the election was 39

The same trend of highlighting the opposition in the blogosphere, instead of the ruling regime, is evident from blog posts containing information on campaigning and electoral candidates (Table 22). There were more blog posts that contained information on the opposition party campaigns than those of the ruling parties. Out of the 21 blog posts that contained campaign information, 17 (or 81%) highlighted the opposition while only 4 blog posts (or 19%) were on the ruling coalition (Table 22). The politician-bloggers published campaign information only about the opposition parties and almost all of the campaign information by the A-list bloggers was on the opposition (Table 23). More than half of the campaign information on the opposition were found in the other categories of bloggers examined, namely the non-candidate, identified and B-list ones (Table 23). The blogosphere, however, also contained campaign information of the ruling coalition although only minimally. Nonetheless,

the findings here still reflect a blogosphere that is skewed towards the opposition.

Table 22: The number of blog posts containing campaign and candidate information on the ruling and opposition parties
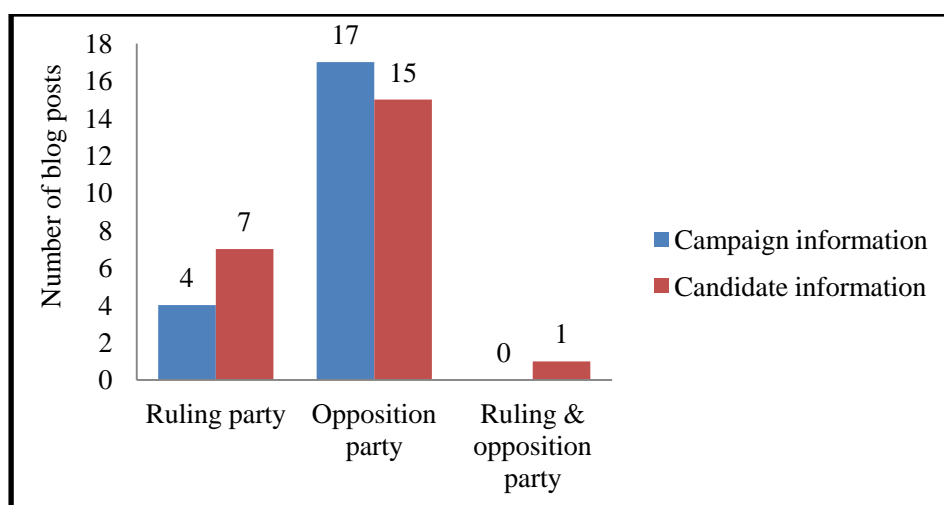
Note: The total number of blog posts containing campaign information was 21 while 23 blog posts had information on electoral candidates.

Table 23: A breakdown of campaign information supporting the opposition according to the various categories of blogs analysed

Targets	Candidates	Non-candidates	A-list	B-list	Identified	Pseudonymous
Ruling party	0	4	1	3	2	2
Opposition party	8	9	4	13	13	4
Total	**8**	**13**	**5**	**16**	**15**	**6**

Note: The total number of blog posts conveying information on campaign activities was 21.

The same picture surfaces when it comes to blog posts containing information on electoral candidates. The analysis shows that the majority of the blog posts contain information on opposition candidates. Out of the 23 blog posts that had such information, 15 postings (or 65%) were on the opposition while 7 postings (or 30%) were on the ruling coalition (Table 24). Only 1 posting had information on both the opposition and ruling candidates. More interestingly, only the B-list blogs contained information on candidates of the ruling coalition. This suggests that some of the less read blogs are supportive of particular ruling coalition candidates of the election, as discussed in Chapter Eight. The findings suggest a blogosphere that represents a space of contention for forces aligned to the ruling regime, albeit minimally.

Table 24: A breakdown of candidate information supporting the opposition according to in the various categories of blogs analysed

Targets	Candidates	Non-candidates	A-list	B-list	Identified	Pseudonymous
Ruling party	0	7	0	7	4	3
Opposition party	5	10	4	11	12	3
Ruling & Opposition	0	1	0	1	1	0
Total	**5**	**18**	**4**	**19**	**17**	**6**

Note: The total number of blog posts conveying information on electoral candidates was 23.

Finding 8: A blogosphere critical of the ruling party, former premier and government

The discussion here points to the possibility that blogging can be used to manage information flow to sway public opinion in an election. The Malaysian blogosphere appears highly critical of the ruling party and former premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. This is supported by an analysis of the targets of critical posts. More than half of the blog posts (206 or 55%) contained a critical tone, of which 145 blog posts (or 39%) were explicitly critical while 61 blog posts (or 16%) were implicitly critical (Table 25). The top two targets of the critical tone were the ruling party and government departments/agencies (Table 26). These top two targets of critical blog posts were detected in the blogs of all the different categories of bloggers (Table 27).

Table 25: The various tone detected in the 376 blog posts analysed
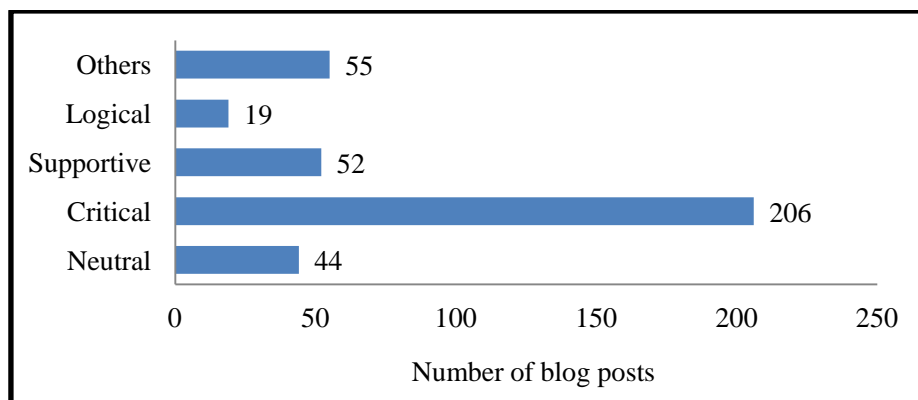
Note: Critical tone included implicitly and explicitly critical tone while 'others' category included threatening and uncertain tone coded for this variable.

Table 26: Targets of blog posts containing implicitly and explicitly critical tone
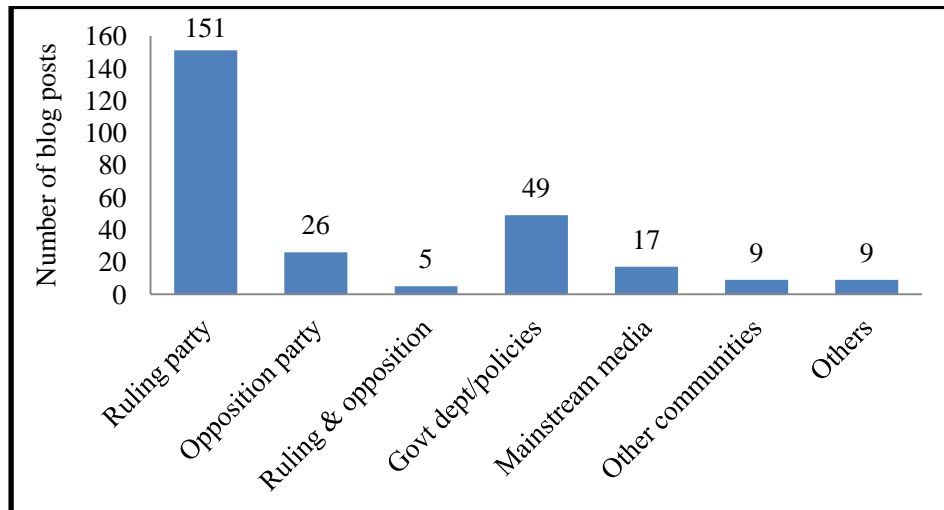
Note: The total number of targets detected in 206 blog posts containing critical tone was 266 because up to four choices were coded for this variable.

Table 27: Targets of critical blog posts detected in the various groups of blogs examined

Targets	Candidates	Non-candidates	A-list	B-list	Identified	Pseudonymous
Ruling party	21	130	33	118	73	78
Opposition party	1	25	3	23	12	14
Ruling & Opposition	0	5	1	4	2	3
Govt dept/ policies	7	42	4	45	27	22
Mainstream media	2	15	1	16	10	7
Other communities	1	8	1	8	2	7
Others	2	7	2	7	8	1
Total	**34**	**232**	**45**	**221**	**134**	**132**

Note: The total number of targets detected in 206 blog posts containing critical tone was 266 because up to four choices were coded for this variable.

The use of blogs to sway public opinion can be detected from blog postings containing a critical tone directed specifically at premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. This is further supported by in-depth interviews with the research participants. Some of the partisan bloggers admitted that blogging was used to specifically remove the then premier, as disclosed in Chapter Eight. The content analysis found a considerable number of blog posts (71 postings or 19%) that were critical of the then prime minister. There were more blog posts which were explicitly critical of the then premier than implicitly critical ones. Of the 71 postings, 19 blog posts (or 27%) were implicitly critical of the former premier while 51 posts (or 72%) were explicitly critical towards Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (Table 28). Only one blog post belonging to an identified, non-candidate, B-list blogger was supportive of the former premier.

Table 28: The number of blog posts containing a critical tone towards Abdullah Ahmad Badawi
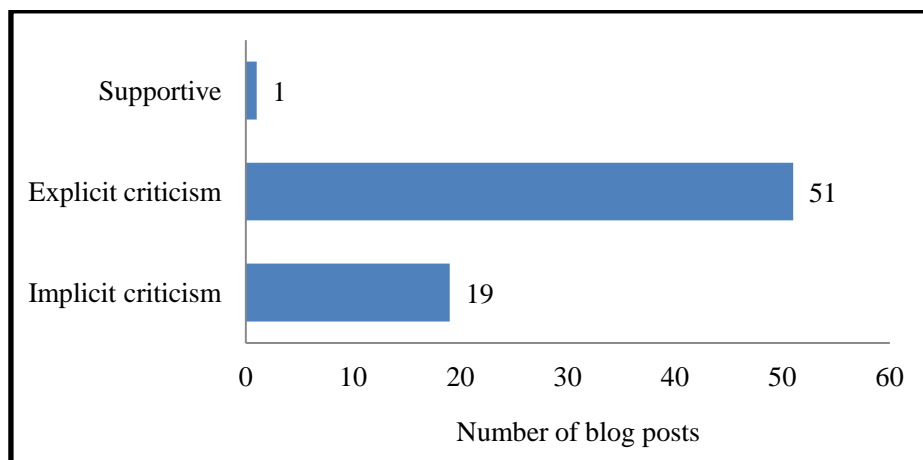
The findings, on closer examination, show that both implicitly and explicitly critical tone directed at Abdullah Ahmad Badawi are most common among the pseudonymous bloggers when compared with the identified ones (Table 29). The total number of blog posts published by the pseudonymous bloggers accounted for a considerable 23% of postings that were critical of the then prime minister. The identified bloggers recorded the lowest use of blogs for that purpose (Table 29). The second highest group of bloggers critical of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was the A-list bloggers. This indicates that the popularly read bloggers are attempting to frame the former prime minister in a negative light with an intention to dominate the blogosphere agenda. Their identities can be used to lend credibility to their blog contents, as noted by some of the partisan bloggers in their interviews. The politician-bloggers are also just as inclined to be critical of the then premier as the A-list bloggers but less so when compared with the pseudonymous ones (Table 29). The findings suggest an inclination of blog use by the pserudonymous bloggers to frame the former premier as an ineffective and incompetent leader to influence readers to get rid of the then prime minister in the general election. This raises the question of whether there is a collective move to target particular leaders in an election. This will be discussed further with input from the research participants in the next three chapters.

Table 29: A breakdown of both explicitly and implicitly critical tone towards
Abdullah Ahmad Badawi according to the various groups of blogs examined

| Blog type	Critical of former premier (%)	Not critical of former premier (%)	Total (%)
Candidates	8 (19.0)	34 (81.0)	42 (100.0)
Non-candidates	62 (19.0)	272 (91.0)	334 (100.0)
Total	**70 (19.0)**	**306 (81.0)**	**376 (100.0)**
A-list	15 (20.0)	58 (80.0)	73 (100.0)
B-list	55 (18.0)	248 (82.0)	303 (100.0)
Total	**70 (19.0)**	**306 (81.0)**	**376 (100.0)**
Identified	31 (15.0)	178 (85.0)	209 (100.0)
Pseudonymous	39 (23.0)	128 (77.0)	167 (100.0)
Total	**70 (19.0)**	**306 (81.0)**	**376 (100.0)**

The presence of pseudonymous blogs may be common among
bloggers who have reasons to hide their identity as it can reflect a concern
over restrictive legislation on free expression. At the same time, it can
indicate the possibility of how the real agenda of bloggers can be hidden
from public view. Pseudonymous blogs are familiar occurrences in the
Malaysian blogosphere, as seen from the content analysis. About 40% (or
71 blogs) of the total 179 blogs were published by the pseudonymous
bloggers. The fear of prosecution is more than just a perceived risk (Tan &
Zawawi, 2008). Not only expressing their opinions can present the risk of
bloggers facing defamation suits or prosecution under any of the existing
repressive legal provisions. Comments left by their readers also saw
bloggers being investigated by the police. The experiences of socio-

political bloggers Nathaniel Tan and Raja Petra Kamaruddin, as discussed in Chapter Five, only serve to instil further fear in the bloggers. The fear of repressive laws was also expressed by most of the civil society bloggers interviewed for this research. On the other hand, the presence of pseudonymous bloggers indicates the possibility of socio-political bloggers masking their real agenda, perhaps participating in the kind of shadow play discussed in Chapter Five. The content analysis is unable to provide a comprehensive understanding of this issue. But interviews, in Chapter Eight, revealed how some of the partisan bloggers were setting up more than one blog, including pseudonymous ones. This was done in order to highlight particular discourses and contribute to an overall campaign aimed at managing and manipulating information published on the blogosphere.

The findings, thus far, indicate that the Malaysian blogosphere is favourable to the opposition and at the same time critical of the ruling regime. However, some of the partisan bloggers, as discussed further in Chapter Eight, noted that they were not supporting the opposition but were, in fact, against the government. The interviews point to the dynamics and the different levels of power struggle, namely at the party and national level, occurring at the time, thus, providing the impression of an overwhelming support for the opposition in the Malaysian blogosphere. The content analysis is unable to capture the ongoing political drama but it is narrated clearly by some of the partisan bloggers in Chapter Eight.

Not only were the blog posts critical of the ruling regime, the readers' comments were also not supportive of the ruling coalition. However, the analysis showed that the readers were less inclined to respond negatively about the former premier. Out of the total comments analysed, 162 comments (or 42%) had a critical tone (Table 30). Out of the 172 targets of critical comments, more than half of them (93 comments or 54%) were targeted at the ruling party compared with 32 comments (or 19%) that were directed at the opposition (Table 30). The number of comments specifically critical of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was much lower than blog posts that were critical of the then premier. Only 27 responses (or 7%) out of the total comments analysed were specifically critical of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Of the 27 comments, 8 contained implicitly critical tone directed specifically at Abdullah Ahmad Badawi while 19 were explicitly critical of the former premier (Table 31). The percentage of comments critical of the former premier (at 7%) was much lower than the percentage of blog posts (at 19%) that were critical of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. This supports the argument, discussed in Chapter Eight, that the framing of former premier in a negative light can be regarded as a specific attempt of a group of bloggers to try to sway public opinion.

Table 30: Targets of comments containing both implicitly and explicitly critical
tone
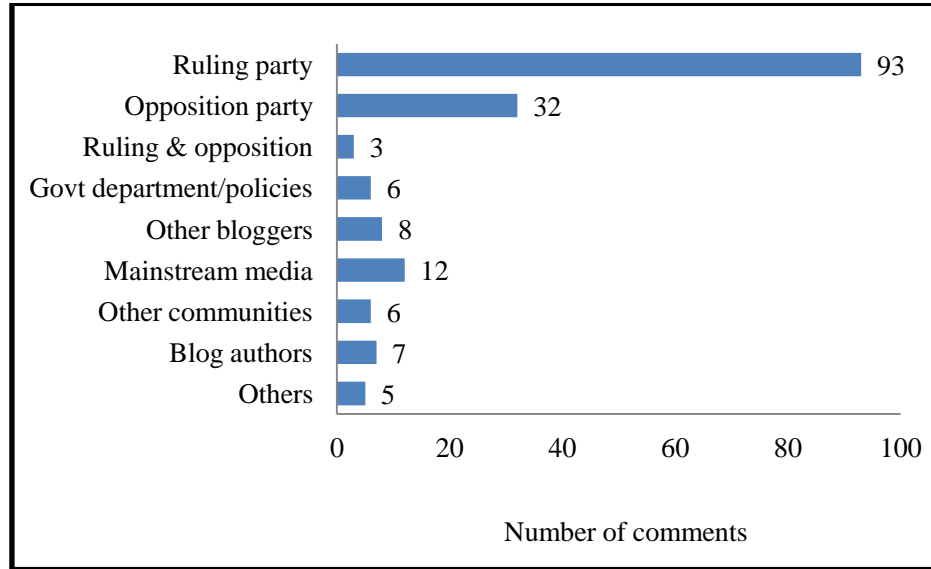
Note: The total number of targets found in 162 comments containing critical tone
was 172 because up to four choices were coded for this category.

Table 31: The number of critical comments targeting Abdullah Ahmad Badawi
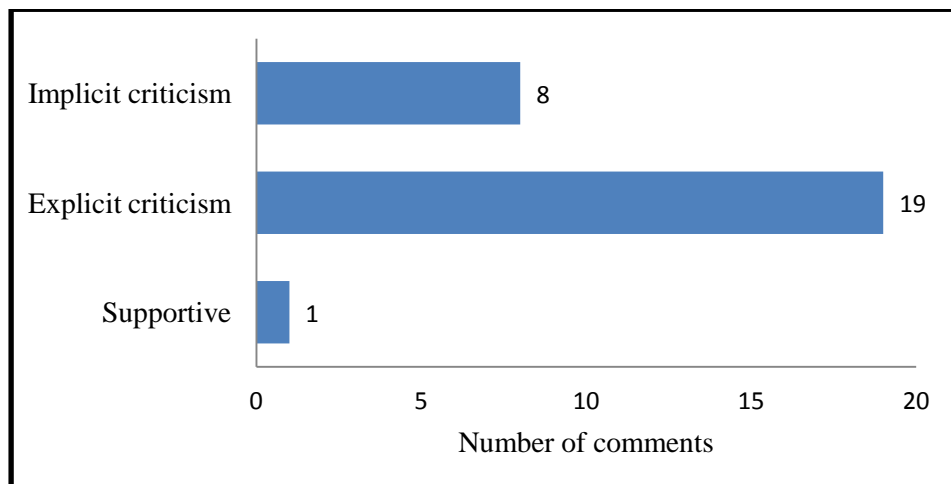
Finding 9: An apparent use of blogs to manage information flow

The prominent use of online social media, particularly other blogs and YouTube, to create contents points to an effort among some of the bloggers to project a particular dominant discourse. The use of mainstream news media, including foreign media, was the main source used by bloggers to create blog contents (Table 32). But more significantly for this research, the second most common source used to create blog contents was other blogs and YouTube. The use of other blogs and YouTube was even higher than the use of local online news sites to produce those contents. Out of the 336 sources used to create the blog posts, the mainstream news media, including foreign media, were the most common source used to create the contents of 126 blog posts (or 38%). References to other blogs and YouTube were found in 101 blog posts (or 30%) while online news sites were the third highest source, making an appearance in 61 blog posts (or 18%). The findings indicated an effort among some of the bloggers to highlight each other's views and blog contents to shape public perception. This effort was supported by information gained from partisan bloggers, as discussed in Chapter Eight. They indicated that they were attempting to strategise the use of their blogs in order to manage the information flow and change public perception towards particular political leaders.

Table 32: External sources used to create blog contents
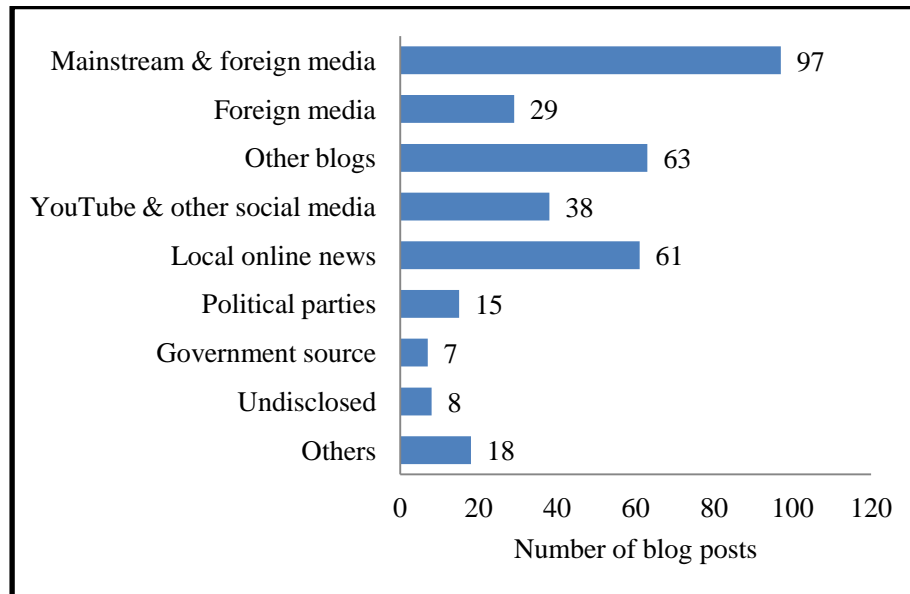
Note: The total number of external sources used to create 248 blog posts was 336 because up to four choices were coded for this variable.

Finding 10: Blogging a representation of population but dominated by elites

An analysis of the individuals behind the blogs reveals that the Malaysian blogosphere is broadly representative of the composition of the various communities in the country. It, however, also suggests that the Malaysian blogosphere seems to be dominated by those in the media profession, such as journalists or former journalists, editors or former editors and political writers. This indicates a dominance of the social and political elite in terms of access to blogging and the internet. Blogging may be able to facilitate the freedom to express alternative views but the

dominant blogosphere discourse can be dominated by media and political elites.

The blogosphere reflects the ethnic make-up of the country. Of the 105 blogs that provided information on their ethnicity, Malays made up the majority of bloggers with a count of 59 blogs (or 56%), as seen in Table 33. They are followed by the Chinese (32 blogs or 31%), Indians (12 blogs or 11%) and others (2 blogs or 2%). The composition reflects the cultural and ethnic make-up of the Malaysian population, that is, Malays being the dominant ethnic group, followed by non-Malays. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2009: 11), the Malaysian population is

Table 33: Ethnicity of bloggers stated on the profile page of sample analysed
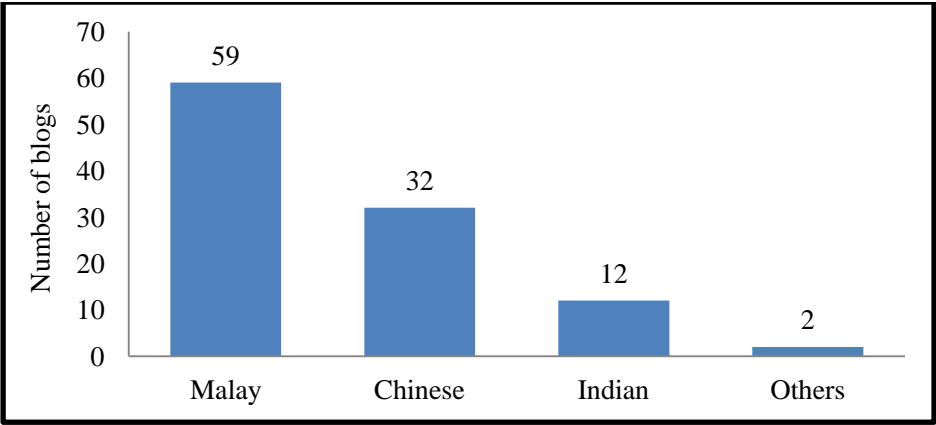
Note: The total number of bloggers that stated their ethnicity on the profile page was 105. The remaining 74 bloggers made no mention of their ethnic background.

made up of 54.3% Malays and 11.9% other *bumiputeras*, 25% Chinese, 7.5% Indians and 1.3% other ethnic groups. This suggests that the blogosphere is broadly representative of the population rather than reflective of the dominance of Malays in public life.

On the other hand, the Malaysian socio-political blogosphere seems to be dominated by media and political elites instead of 'ordinary citizens', and therefore by individuals likely to be more educated and draw a higher income than the average Malaysian. Journalists, political writers and professionals made up the majority of bloggers in the Malaysian cyberspace. For the 91 blogs that mentioned their occupation on their profile page, writers, made up of news editors, former news editors, journalists and political writers topped the list with 26 (or 29%) of them being in those professions (Table 34). This was followed by professionals, such as doctors, engineers, lawyers, lecturers, consultants, researchers and teachers who accounted for 25 (or 27%) blogs that disclosed the information on their profile page. Politicians came in third, with 19 (or 21%) of the bloggers being elected representatives, former elected representatives or assistants of parliamentarians. While half of the bloggers studied did not declare their occupation, there was no indication from the material studied that they came from different backgrounds to those who did. The huge presence of former media elites on the Malaysian blogosphere between 2006 and 2008 has been described as "the era of journalist bloggers" (Ahirudin, 2008: 3). The prevalence of media and

Table 34: Occupation of bloggers stated on the profile page of sample analysed
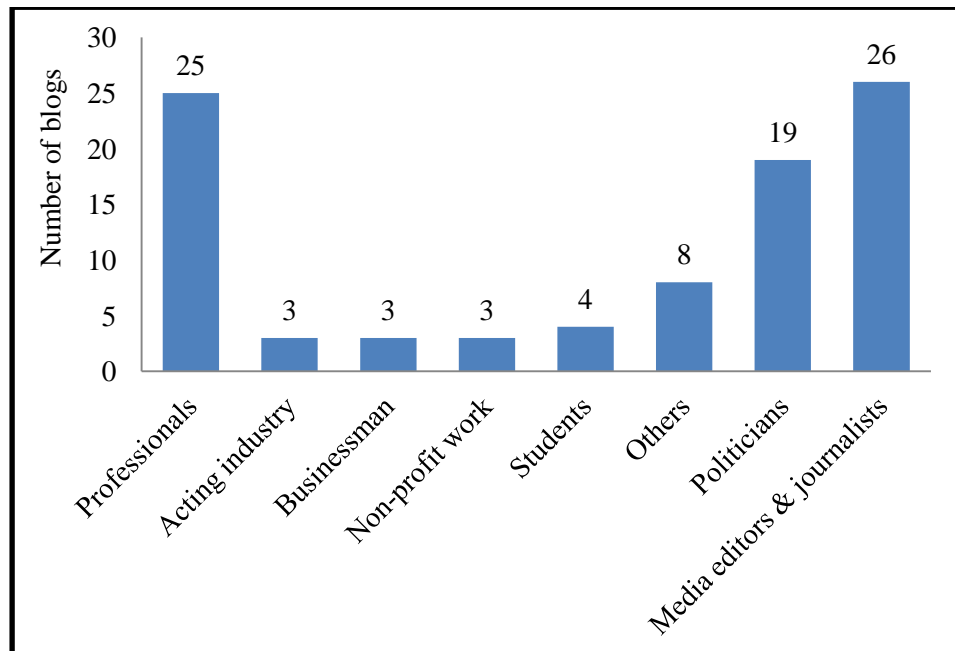
Note: The total number of bloggers that stated their occupation on their profile page was 91. The remaining 88 bloggers made no mention of their occupation.

political elites in the Malaysian blogosphere seems to reflect existing social and ideological structures in society and has various implications to the question of access and digital divide in the country where access to blogging and the internet is greater for urban than rural dwellers[28]. This also leads to the possibility that powerful elites can dominate or even manipulate the discourse on the blogosphere; a concern raised by several

[28] As noted in Chapter Five, the country's household broadband penetration rate is estimated at just over 21% by end of 2008 (The Edge Malaysia, 2009). A survey by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2008) shows that household internet users are concentrated in the urban areas, accounting for 85% of the users.

media scholars about the appropriation of the agenda by powerful elites in society (Cammaerts, 2008; Davis, 2009; Hindman, 2009). Interviews with some of the partisan bloggers in Chapter Eight revealed the possibility of powerful elites attempting to control and appropriate the blog agenda. The blogosphere is at risk of being an extension of existing spaces where elites struggle amongst themselves for ascendancy.

Summary

The Malaysian political blogosphere presents a slightly different scenario in blog use when compared with the pattern of blog use among candidates contesting an election in the United States. The results, as seen in Finding 1 and Finding 2, showed considerable reluctance in blog use by politician-bloggers to raise funds and recruit volunteers. This differed from the pattern of blog use by candidates in the 2004 United States presidential elections, as documented in the studies of various new media scholars (Williams et al, 2005; Trammell, 2006; Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009; Davis et al, 2009). For example, previous studies by Davis et al (2009), Perlmutter (2008) and Pole (2009) recorded the extensive use of blogs in the Howard Dean election campaign that raised millions of dollars and recruit thousands of volunteers. In this sense, blogging had not transformed ways of campaigning for candidates of the 2008 Malaysian election.

The results, on the other hand, reveal efforts by politician-bloggers to keep readers informed of campaign activities and electoral candidates, including a considerable use of blogs to encourage political action among

politician-bloggers. As seen in Findings 3 and 4, candidates of the 2008 Malaysian election were strategically using their blogs to keep people informed of electoral campaigns, candidates and to mobilise political action. This is similar to the pattern of blog use to keep people informed of electoral campaigns and issues confronting the people during the 2004 presidential campaign of Bush and Kerry in the United States (Trammell, 2006). To a certain extent, blogging was a tool for politician-bloggers to keep readers informed and to generate political action in the 2008 election. This, however, raises the question of whether such blog uses by candidates are similar throughout the electoral cycle. The politician-bloggers, in the next chapter, revealed that they abandoned the use of blogging during the campaigning period. The interviews can provide a more complete understanding of how blogging can change ways of campaigning in an election.

Public discussion and freedom of expression are characteristic of a thriving democracy and are said to be facilitated through blogging and the internet in the western democratic tradition. The potential of the online platform in fulfilling those democratic ideals has been highlighted in various scholarly works (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Lister et al, 2003; Trammell et al, 2006; Rosen, 2006; Perlmutter, 2008). However, results of this research indicate that blogging in the Malaysian context is only able to fulfil certain elements of the liberal democratic practices. For example, Finding 5 points to how blogging can be an alternative avenue to realise

the exercise of free speech but Finding 6 indicates that the online medium can be restricted in its ability to extensively generate focused discussion. Interactivity in the Malaysian blogosphere is not fully realised because the blog readers do not engage widely in discussions with other readers and less so between blog writers and readers. In-depth interviews with the partisan and politician-bloggers in the next two chapters can provide further explanation of the particular circumstances on the limitations of blogging in facilitating public debates. The results of this study, thus, remind us of the need to be specific in our assessment of blogging and its impact on democratic practices because the effects can be different under particular circumstances.

The Malaysian blogosphere, with its focus on partisan politics and personality, may not help with improving the quality of debate which is an important trait in a deliberative democracy. Findings 7, 8 and 9 indicate that the blogosphere information can be used to shape public opinion in order to realise the goal of various groups of bloggers in an election. The framing of particular political leaders in a negative light suggests a focus on scandal politics that can be used to manipulate information to fulfil the agenda of powerful elites in society. For example, Finding 9 points to the possibility of an effort among bloggers to manage information flow on the blogosphere to realise particular goals. A deeper analysis of the management of blog information flow is available in Chapter Eight. The content analysis suggests that the Malaysian blogosphere has not greatly

improved the quality of debate and that the information published on blogs can be manipulated, thus failing to help citizens make informed decisions.

The content analysis further shows that the Malaysian blogosphere is a representation of the population and portrays a dominance of media and political elites. Results discussed in Finding 10 reflected the ethnic make-up of the society and a dominance of media and political elites in the blogosphere. The analysis shows that the more educated and higher income groups have better access to the online platform instead of ordinary citizens. A high presence of media and political elites supports the argument that the cyberspace agenda can be appropriated by powerful elites. This suggests that the blogosphere does not see a real shift in power and distribution of resources. It is a mirror of the social and ideological structures in society, a similar concern of some new media scholars in the United States (Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Hindman, 2009).

This brings us to a discussion of the interviews with the three relatively different groups of socio-political bloggers which will be addressed in the next three chapters. Some of the questions discussed in the next three chapters arose out of the content analysis. Firstly, the in-depth interviews should examine why the politician-bloggers were making little use of their blogs during the campaigning period and the circumstances that contributed to blogging being less appealing. Secondly, questions on the objective that the individual bloggers wanted to achieve through their blogs and how they were attempting to reach those goals in an election

could offer insights into the extent to which blogging could transform ways of campaigning. This could also provide an indication of the dominant public discourse, including those benefitting from it. A third major issue, which arose out of the interviews but was not apparent from the content analysis, was the establishment of fluid ties among the different groups of bloggers. Its subsequent collapse indicated that blogging could be used in various fashions to achieve particular targets at specific points in electoral politics. Overall, these questions can provide a more comprehensive understanding on the role of blogging in enhancing liberal democratic practices and encouraging political life in an election.

Chapter 7

Blogging of politician-bloggers at particular junctures in an election

Introduction

This chapter argues that blogging does not perform a simple across-the-board function for the group of politician-bloggers. The research participants revealed that they were using their blogs to achieve a wide range of goals under particular circumstances at various junctures in the electoral cycle. Blogging was an important part of campaigning when the online medium was used as a political marketing tool in the lead-up to the election and after the March 8 polls. However, during the 13-day campaigning period of the 2008 election, most of the politician-bloggers revealed that blogging was not a major platform for campaigning. Instead, they resorted to the traditional method of non-mediated face-to-face canvassing during the official 13-day campaigning period. The wider institutional and societal structures, including the target audience and the digital divide, were some of the factors cited for relying on direct communication with the voters during this time. Although some of the politician-bloggers revealed that they did publish postings to inform readers about their campaign activities, seek donations and recruit volunteers, blogging was not widely used as part of the campaign. The content analysis also provided evidence that there was considerable use of

blogs to disseminate information of campaign activities, promote candidates and mobilise political action but there was very little use of blogging among politician-bloggers to raise election campaign funds and recruit volunteers. The lack of blog use to raise campaign funds and recruit volunteers is unlike electoral candidates in the United States where blogging is described as a 'political staple' in the 2004 election campaigns (Lawson-Border & Kirk, 2005; Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009; Davis et al, 2009). Similarly, the use of online social media, including YouTube and Facebook, among presidential candidates is considered widespread in the 2007 American election (Panagopoulos, 2009).

The broader political economy of the media, coupled with a constituency defined by their ethnicity, location, and the digital divide, as well as the preference of politician-bloggers for a personalised approach in campaigning were some factors that made blogging less appealing during the campaign period. Most of the politician-bloggers disclosed that they felt face-to-face canvassing allowed them to better connect with voters than through blogging. Some of them indicated that many of their voters were not their blog readers and blogging could only reach those who were connected to the internet and had access to broadband facilities. Moreover, the target audience during the campaigning period was voters instead of the wider cyberspace audience. The digital divide confronting the Malaysian constituency appeared to be a vital consideration for abandoning the use of blogs. Politician-bloggers contesting in rural areas

whose voters were predominantly Chinese explained that blogging would not reach their voters. Instead, the ability to negotiate for spaces in the 'freer' Chinese-language mainstream media was imperative in connecting with those voters. Unequal distribution of digital resources among the urban populace was also a concern among politician-bloggers contesting in the cities. Under this combination of circumstances, blogging did not become a significant part of campaigning and did not drastically change electoral politics for this group of bloggers during the campaigning period.

Although blogging was not a significant part of campaigning, there were instances when the online avenue was useful as a political marketing tool to promote their personal and party image for gaining public support. This was particularly so in the lead-up to the general election. Most politician-bloggers had limited access to the mainstream media. They turned to blogging to publish unfiltered information to increase their visibility and the political party they were representing. Blogging was focused on personality politics, in which blogs were used to promote the image of politician-bloggers and to expose scandals of political rivals, which indirectly helped to project their own image as competent candidates. The politician-bloggers promoted themselves as reputable politicians worthy of public support by declaring their private thoughts on public interest issues. This can be interpreted as a blurring of boundaries between the private and public sphere. This understanding supports the idea about a blurring of lines between previously distinct categories, such

as journalists and audiences, public relations and news, the private and public sphere that has been recognised as a capability of the online medium (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Bruns, 2008; Perlmutter, 2008).

The boundaries between the private and public domain appeared to be actively guarded after the general election. This was particularly so among politician-bloggers who moved from the opposition to being in power in some of the states. Some of the politician-bloggers took over state power but remained in opposition at the federal level and continued to experience limited access to the mainstream media. After the election, several politician-bloggers indicated that they were more careful with their blog contents. Some even stopped blogging because they did not want their personal thoughts to jeopardise the image of the political party they were representing. One politician-blogger went so far as to suggest a code of ethics for party members to prevent them from publishing their private thoughts about party decisions on their blogs. This clearly shows that the particular circumstances and the specific aim which this group of bloggers wants to achieve through blogging can shape the ways the online activity is practised.

An analysis on the manner of blog use before and after the election suggests that if the politician-bloggers want to boost their reputation and party image, they will publish their personal opinions on their blogs. This signals a blurring of boundaries between their private self as a blogger and their public life as a politician. The boundaries will, however, be strictly

policed to ensure that neither party matters nor public interest issues will be published on the blogs if those subjects are perceived as endangering the image of their party. This indicates a trend of blog use that is shaped by the objective of the politician-bloggers and the political realities facing them. It is a combination of the larger institutional and societal structures, the particular circumstances of politician-bloggers and the intended goal that can influence their online practices. Thus, the function of blogs cannot be assumed to be homogenous across-the-board for all politician-bloggers in all situations in electoral politics.

The perception that blogging is a personal endeavour is reflected in the way many politician-bloggers are blogging as isolated individuals. They revealed that they did not connect with other individuals or bloggers to form a network. Many politician-bloggers indicated that they did not link up with other politician-bloggers or other groups of bloggers to establish some sort of ties to use their blogs in an election. They were blogging contents of their own interest, with some treating their blogs like their 'own newspapers', without any form of coordination to achieve their political goal although they had a direct stake in the election. Blogging has not drastically changed the ways of political engagement or campaigning for this group of bloggers in an election.

The use of blogs as a political marketing tool to promote their personal and party image and to discredit rival politicians by highlighting scandal politics can limit the potential of blogging to generate discourse or

improve the quality of public debate in the Malaysian context. Some of the politician-bloggers revealed that their blogs were not set up with the aim to generate discussions on public interest issues or party matters. Some of them disclosed that blogging was an avenue to publish their stand on public interest issues, not meant to engage in a discussion with the readers. Some also pointed out that disciplinary action had been taken against members for discussing party matters on the blog and steps were being taken to restrict future blog discussion on party decisions. This is based on the belief that bloggers must be held accountable for their blog statements, in particular those which can potentially harm the image of their party. The content analysis in the preceding chapter also portrayed a blogosphere where discussions were not extensively generated. This shows that blogging has not contributed to a more vibrant space for public discussion among the politician-bloggers.

The chapter will now begin with a discussion on the circumstances that contribute to a decline in blogging among the politician-bloggers during the campaigning period. The particular circumstances under which blogging can be considered less important to the politician-bloggers will be highlighted to support the argument that larger institutional and societal structures, the political realities of the politician-bloggers, and the targeted goal can influence the trend in blog use at particular moments in electoral politics. It will then examine the pattern of blog use by this group of bloggers before and after the election. The political realities of the

politician-bloggers appear to have shaped the trend in blog use after the election. The discussions can provide a sense of whether blogging can promote democratic practices and enhance political life in a relatively authoritarian society.

Traditional approaches during campaigning

For most of the politician-bloggers, blogging waned in appeal as the election approached and the focus switched from building support and reputation among opinion-formers before the election to persuading individual voters directly during the official 13-day campaigning period. Although some of the politician-bloggers acknowledged that they did use their blogs to publish campaign information, ask for donations and recruit volunteers during the campaigning period, they stressed that it was more crucial for them to solicit voter support directly through face-to-face campaigning than through their blogs. The content analysis, as highlighted in the preceding chapter, also supports the argument that blogs are not extensively used by the politician-bloggers to raise funds or recruit volunteers but more to disseminate information on campaign activities and promote electoral candidates to the wider readership. This group of bloggers pointed out that they did not rely on blogging to reach the voters but instead relied on face-to-face campaigning. Some of the politician-bloggers even revealed that they were reaching their voters through the Chinese-language mainstream news media which they regarded as freer and fairer in their coverage when compared with the English or Malay-

language media[29] (Ooi, 2008a; Teng, 2010; Liew, 2010). Yet others felt that personalised contact with voters was more influential in gaining their support.

Many of the politician-bloggers revealed in their interviews that although blogging was able to reach audiences at the global level, it was not useful for them during the campaigning period. They disclosed that their target audience at that time was voters who were confined within particular geographical boundaries and had limited access to the internet because of an unequal distribution of digital resources. The issue of ethnicity also became a factor that appeared to have restricted the use of blogs during the campaigning period. It was not the global audience living in a borderless world that this group of bloggers was trying to engage to gain support at the ballot boxes but voters living within a particular social and political environment. Moreover, the Malaysian election rules state that not all registered Malaysian voters living overseas are allowed to cast their votes in the country they are living. Existing electoral rules only allow civil servants and students overseas, including their spouses to cast their votes in absentia if they are registered voters (Malaysiakini, 2011). Thus, the capability of blogging and the internet to reach a global audience has not attracted the politician-bloggers to the online platform during

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[29] From my experience, the Chinese-language press is arguably freer than the English and Malay language counterparts because of a perceived lack of surveillance by the ruling regime on the Chinese language media. Moreover, the Chinese media focus mainly on issues of the Chinese community, which is a minority within the Malaysian society.

campaigning. In other words, the need to engage in traditional methods of campaigning, such as door-to-door meetings, distributing pamphlets and making speeches at *ceramah* (political gatherings) to connect directly with their voters is more pertinent than relying on blogs that can potentially reach a global audience.

Social inequalities and digital divide

The concern that blogging was less capable than traditional methods in reaching their voters during the campaigning period was expressed by most of the politician-bloggers. One main factor cited was the big digital divide among citizens in the country. On one level, the huge digital gap is between urban and rural dwellers and on another level, it is among pockets of the urban poor. As highlighted in Chapter Five, statistics on internet usage and access to broadband in Malaysia show a wide digital gap between the urban and rural people. A 2008 survey on household use of the internet by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2008) revealed that as of March 31, 2008, urban users accounted for 85% while rural users stood at 15% of the total number of users. For the entire country, internet usage in Malaysia stood at 62.8% in 2008 while its household broadband penetration rate was estimated at just over 21% at the end of 2008 (Internet World Stats, 2010; The Edge Malaysia, 2009). These statistics indicate that the politician-bloggers' concern over the unequal distribution of digital resources has some justification. The digital divide appears to have contributed to blogging being less appealing for politician-

bloggers during the campaigning period. It also suggests that wider societal structures can contribute to blogging being less significant in electoral politics.

A lack of confidence in the ability of blogs to connect with voters may not be that far-fetched particularly for politician-bloggers contesting in the rural areas where voters have limited access to the internet and broadband facilities. Among those who articulated the concern were politician-bloggers Teng Chang Khim and Blogger F. Politician-blogger Teng Chang Khim, who only had one posting in February 2008, noted that during the campaigning period "it is more important to reach people who will vote for you … rather than argue with someone you don't know in the cyberworld" (Teng, 2010). Disclosing that the majority of his blog readers were not his voters, Teng Chang Khim pointed out that blogging became less effective during the campaigning period because:

> Those who go to the internet consist of a different class of people – mainly middle and upper middle class and most of them are English-educated. My constituency is a Chinese-educated area and they don't rely on blogs to get information. The Chinese press is relatively more open and that is why it [blogging] was not very important for me at that time.

Politician-blogger F who had parts of the constituents living in semi-rural areas and parts in the urban area also felt that blogging could not be relied upon to reach her voters. Although information on her campaign activities,

requests for donations and volunteers were published on the blog during the campaigning period, politician-blogger F pointed out that blogging was not as important as face-to-face canvassing during the campaign period. The issue of digital divide between the rural and urban voters and the ethnicity of voters were some of the factors that made blogging less appealing to politician-bloggers who were contesting in the rural areas.

Sentiments that blogging was less able to reach the voters were also raised by politician-bloggers contesting in the urban areas. This suggests that the digital gap is not only between urban and rural areas but also among pockets of voters within urban areas where internet facilities are possibly more accessible to the higher strata of society. Pointing out the connection between urban poverty and digital gap, politician-blogger Jeff Ooi (2008a) who contested the Jelutong parliamentary seat in Penang observed that his urban seat was "a place where flats did not even have lifts, [and so] the Internet was not prominent there" (p. 2). First-time candidate Liew Chin Tong, who also contested an urban seat in Penang, acknowledged that a lot of effort was put into on-the-ground campaigning with 30,000 leaflets being distributed because blogging served "only those who were connected" (Liew, 2010). Similar views were expressed by other politician-bloggers whose constituencies were located in urban areas. Among them were Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, Lau Weng San, Blogger E and Tian Chua. They also pointed out that they resorted to direct face-to-face

campaigning and did not depend on blogging during the campaigning period.

Ethnicity of voters and the mainstream media

Apart from the issue of digital divide, the ethnicity of voters, linked with perceptions of a freer and fairer Chinese-language mainstream media, appeared to have contributed to a decline in the use of blogging during the campaign period. This factor seemed to have a more pronounced impact among politician-bloggers who depended on Chinese voters to win the election. Some of the politician-bloggers disclosed that they were relying on Chinese-language mainstream media to reach out to voters during the campaigning period.

One such blogger was politician-blogger Teng Chang Khim. He revealed that it was more important for him during the campaigning period to use the Chinese-language media to reach his Chinese voters living in a rural area, instead of his blog. He pointed out that the majority of his voters did not have access to the internet and broadband facilities and they did not depend on the blogs for information. Moreover, the majority of his voters were Chinese, who turned to Chinese-language newspaper for information (Teng, 2010). Thus, this politician-blogger disclosed that he depended on the Chinese press during the campaigning period to reach out to his voters instead of his blog.

Although politician-blogger Jeff Ooi was contesting an urban area, he described a similar situation in which he was relying on the Chinese-

language press to reach his voters in Penang. Attributing the mainstream media, particularly the Chinese-language mainstream media as having played a role in the 2008 election results, Ooi (2008a) pointed out that the evening edition of three Chinese-language newspapers provided opposition politicians with a "swift mechanism to retaliate and rebut" the attacks of the ruling coalition during the campaigning period. He noted that the Chinese-language press was fair and "helped to impart our messages" (Ooi, 2008a: 2). It is clear here that the wider political economy of the media is a key factor in the way blogs can become less important in electoral politics, particularly during the campaigning period.

Personalised contact during campaigning

Most of the politician-bloggers voiced the perception that they needed to make their physical presence felt with their voters through on-the-ground campaigning and not mediated through blogging. Many of the participants indicated that traditional methods of persuasion through meeting the voters directly, making fiery speeches at political rallies, and distributing pamphlets were more effective in connecting them to their voters, particularly during the short 13-day campaigning period. Second-time contestant Tian Chua, who does not consider blogging to be a major political tool during the campaigning period, feels that "political activity is really on the ground, it is physical work. It is not only mind work." In an interview for this research, he said that his blog did not help him get elected because it was down to the physical work of being "out there" with

his voters. This PKR politician further explained that the "actual political activities of reaching out to the people" could not be substituted with the use of technological gadgets and devices. Chua (2010), in his interview, pointed out:

> So when it comes to the election period, it is really the physical *ceramah* and all those things. Yes, it [his blog] helps to spread a bit about the *ceramah* where it can be posted online and more people can watch it. But speaking from the viewpoint of voters, if you are successful in capturing their interest, they will prefer to go out to the street to watch your speech rather than sitting behind the computer and watching you online ... The eager fence-sitters will go out to see how Tian Chua looks like, whether he is approachable, how he speaks [and whether] he can speak fluent Bahasa Malaysia or Mandarin.

The emphasis of politician-blogger Tian Chua on the need for personalised contact with the voters is reflected in a step-by-step guide on winning elections produced by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (Lynn, 2009). Targeting voters directly is described as "the winning political campaign" in the campaign manual for Malaysia and the South East Asia region (Ibid: 8). Leaflet drops, literature handouts and door-to-door meetings are described in the manual as some of the methods of connecting with the voters. These strategies for direct contact with voters seem to be supported by research in the United States that suggests

face-to-face canvassing can increase the chance of voters turning out to vote (Eldersveld, 1956; Kramer, 1970; Blydenburgh, 1971; Caldeira et al, 1990; Gerber & Green, 2000). Although the research did not focus on personalised campaigning approaches and voter preference, they concluded that a personalised approach to contact voters, including efforts by party or campaign workers, had a significant impact on electoral participation. Face-to-face campaigning is deemed beneficial in elections which do not see a lot of information made available to the electorate (Blydenburgh, 1971: 381). Similarly, in an election that is conducted in a relatively authoritarian society where information is curtailed and not freely available in abundance to voters, the personalised approach can be more significant to the politician-bloggers during the campaigning period. Blogging is, thus, less appealing to this group of bloggers whose target audience is voters, instead of the general public.

However, this group of politician-bloggers did not totally abandon the use of blogs during campaigning. Instead, blogs were used to distribute campaign material, including the party manifesto and candidate line-up, as well as seek assistance from readers and call for support from the general public. Such specific uses were also detected in the content analysis discussed in Chapter Six. It suggests that those uses of blogs during campaigning are designed to solicit assistance from a wider audience and the target is the general public instead of each candidate's specific voters.

The target audience seems to have an influence on blog use by this group of bloggers during a particular period.

Specific uses of blogs during campaigning

Although blogging was not widely used during the campaigning period, there were attempts to replicate the use of the internet to engage readers in pragmatic and purposive ways. During this period, most of the politician-bloggers revealed that they did publish one or two postings to ask for donation and volunteers, promote the election manifesto and announce schedules for their public rallies or to highlight the size of crowds at political gatherings. The content analysis also provided evidence of a non-concerted effort by politician-bloggers to use their blogs for those purposes. The general public, instead of voters, seemed to be the target when blogging was used specifically to appeal for financial help and volunteers during the campaigning period. Moreover, politician-blogger Jeff Ooi was sharing those specific uses of blogging with other politician-bloggers because he was appointed online campaign director of the DAP during the 2008 election. During this time he conducted "two rounds of briefing (on the online campaign) for our guys at the headquarters [meant only] for the DAP" (Ooi, 2010).

All the politician-bloggers interviewed for this research acknowledged those specific uses of their blogs during the campaigning period. They were, however, resolute that face-to-face canvassing was far more crucial to winning elections than blogging at that point in time. Moreover, they

were uncertain of the effectiveness of those requests published online. For instance, politician-blogger F indicated that volunteers were coming forward to provide assistance as polling and counting agents but the politician-blogger was uncertain if they were recruited through the online medium or at political gatherings where requests for help were also sought. However, first-time candidate Jeff Ooi noted that over RM160,000 (US$42,105) was collected through online donations, which he described as a huge success[30]. This seems to support the argument of Bimber (2001) that the only link between internet use and political engagement during election campaigns is donating money.

The discussion, thus far, has demonstrated the particular circumstances that can make blog use less significant during the campaign period. The target audience of voters is an important factor for politician-bloggers to abandon the use of blogs during the campaign period. Thus, particular circumstances surrounding the voters are vital considerations on whether blogging becomes a useful tool in electoral politics. Issues stemming from the digital divide between urban and rural dwellers and among pockets of urban poor, the ethnicity of voters and the ability to negotiate for space in the mainstream news media, particularly the

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[30] Jeff Ooi pointed out that requests for donations were also facilitated through the mass use of text messages via mobile phones. The text messages were also used to transmit information about their public rallies which normally obtained last-minute permits from the police. Thus, text messages would be sent out to confirm the schedules of public rallies of the opposition parties. They were also used to counter the slogans of the ruling coalition (Ooi, 2010). However, the use of text messages and its effect on electoral outcomes are out of the purview of this research.

Chinese-language press, are central to politician-bloggers when they want to reach out to their voters. Blogging is not totally abandoned, however. It is used to reach a wider audience, not just voters, for donations and volunteers during the campaigning period. The discussion will now turn to blogging in the lead-up to the general election.

Blogging to boost image of self and party before the election

An analysis of interviews with this group of bloggers suggests that blogging is useful in promoting the visibility of politician-bloggers contesting the election and in enhancing the image of the political party they are representing. This is achieved by publishing the views of politician-bloggers to promote their own image and by exposing scandals of rival politicians in the lead-up to the election. Interviews with the politician-bloggers revealed the need for self-promotion because they were unknown to the general public due to the miniscule coverage they were receiving in the mainstream media. Thus, blogging became an essential tool for these politician-bloggers to project a positive image in the run-up to the election. This mirrors the findings in a study of the 2005 Danish election which suggest that blogs are "primarily tools of political marketing" (Kalstrup & Pedersen 2005: 8) for self-promotion rather than for dialogue. The Danish politicians embrace blogging as a tool to communicate in a personal way, in which they can frame stories to appear more trustworthy, thank supporters and appear interested in listening to the readers. The two scholars argue that such priming and framing in a blog

context can present the politician as a "competent and reliable person" (Ibid: 8). Being trustworthy and having a good reputation are deemed important characteristics on which a politician contesting in the general election will be evaluated.

First-time candidate Lau Weng San, in his interview, indicated that he was using his blog to promote his credentials, views and activities to the readers. This relatively unknown candidate, who had limited access to the mainstream media, explained that he used his blog to promote himself, his views and activities to his readers and voters when he noted:

> You can't expect a new guy or candidate like me, who is not prominent, to be famous or prominent overnight with a new blog created overnight. You have to do it from a year or two ago. You have to build up slowly … to utilise your blog by publicising or putting up comments, inviting public comments or introducing [your blog] to the public via the media or press conferences.

The blog became a vehicle for Lau Weng San to promote himself as a credible politician in the run-up to the election. Lau Weng San, who was successfully elected as a Selangor state legislative member in 2008, felt that the contents on his blog in the lead-up to the elections portrayed him as a reputable politician to his audience and it was part of a wider effort to build his reputation as a trustworthy politician (Lau, 2010). Promoting oneself as honest or "truthful" can be interpreted as a way of boosting the personal image to voters.

Veteran politician Lim Kit Siang disclosed in an interview for this research that he was using his blog to publish press statements in his bid to promote his views to a wider audience while politician-blogger Teng Chang Khim revealed that he was exposing scandals of rival politicians to build the image of his party nationwide. The two seasoned politicians who contested in the 2008 election indicated they were using their blogs as an extension of their past practices. Politician-blogger Lim Kit Siang, who perceived his blog as merely "a switch in the medium," described that the change was from his usual practice of sending press statements to the mainstream media to posting them on his blog. His daily average of four to five press statements normally touched on affairs of public and national interest that he wanted to share with his readers[31]. However, Lim Kit Siang observed that the mainstream media gave minimal to zero coverage to the statements he sent out daily to the traditional news outlets. By publishing those statements on his blog, the veteran politician feels that he can churn out an unlimited number of statements, possibly reaching a wider audience. The blog has the added benefit of being uncensored as he is able to publish his thoughts in full (Lim, 2010). As one of the most widely read political blogs in the country, it can be concluded that Lim Kit Siang's statements are able to reach a wider audience through his blog. This is because Lim

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[31]Lim Kit Siang used to write media statements that were faxed to mainstream media offices when he was chairman of the DAP in 1999. He also used to post his statements on the DAP website starting from 1997 and he used his blog which he started in 2005. He later moved his blog to a new site (Lim Kit Siang for Malaysia, 2005).

Kit Siang's blog is considered an A-list or popular blog in terms of the high number of comments he receives for his postings. A check on the number of comments for posts published in November 2007 and February-March 2008 showed that Lim Kit Siang's blog received an average of 84 comments per blog post during the three-month period. The wide blog following of this former parliamentary opposition leader could be from his supporters, party members, journalists and other political elites, including his rivals who would monitor his statements so that they could respond to them, particularly during the general election. Moreover, censorship on Lim Kit Siang and the DAP by the mainstream media could have pushed his supporters and the general public to seek out his political views on his blog.

Recalling his early days of blogging in 2006, politician-blogger Teng Chang Khim noted that he was initially running his blog like "his newspaper," to expose malpractices in government, including scandals of political rivals. This experienced opposition politician disclosed that before he started blogging, he was channelling information on scandals and malpractices through the Chinese-language newspapers, which he described as freer than the Malay and English media (Teng, 2010). When he started blogging, Teng Chang Khim revealed that he was updating his blog daily like how a newspaper would operate and began publishing scandals and misconduct of rival politicians on his blog. His enthusiasm in wanting his blog to be "his newspaper" saw him publishing at least two

articles a day. An examination of his blog *Straightforward* shows that Teng Chang Khim published a total of 145 postings when he started in 2006 but dipped to 12 in 2007. In 2008 there was a slight increase to 38 postings but this number again dropped to 13 in 2009. In 2010, he had only one post. His busy work schedule was cited as the reason for a decline in his blog postings (Teng, 2010). The manner in which Teng Chang Khim and Lim Kit Siang shaped their blogs recalls McLuhan's (1964) observation that every new medium is read as if it is an old one. The two seasoned politicians were using their blogs as if they were an extension of their old practices of producing press statements for the media and getting scandalous stories of rival politicians published in the Chinese-language media.

Using his blog to expose scandals involving leaders of the ruling regime can indirectly promote the credibility of the DAP. This is politician-blogger Teng Chang Khim's perception on the role of his blog before the election (Teng, 2010). He was using his blog to paint the BN leaders in a negative light by exposing the hypocrisy of his rival politicians. At the same time, Teng Chang Khim felt that his blog was able to reach out to the upper-middle class, English-educated professionals, whom the DAP had failed to attract for decades (Teng, 2010)[32]. In the

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[32] The DAP support base has traditionally been the Chinese-educated working class and a small segment of the Indian community. Because of this, the DAP has been accused of being "too Chinese" and needed a "bit more colour" by attracting other communities to join the party (Khoo, 2010a).

interview, he cited three pieces of scandalous news involving his political rivals which he published on his blog. The three blog postings were about a male UMNO parliamentarian being photographed in a hotel room with a female UMNO senator which was posted in November 2006. Another posted in March 2006 was regarding losses made by two Selangor government linked companies and the third posting in February 2006 was about an UMNO assemblyman, Zakaria Deros, who had built a multi-million ringgit mansion (Teng, 2010). Putting succinctly the role of his blog before the election, Teng Chang Khim noted:

> During the 2008 general election, I did not rely much on the blog. I think it was before, which was more important. That was between 2004 and 2008 and there were a lot of scandals, including the Zakaria Mansion. All these were published there … I achieved my objective in reaching out to the English-educated group. That was part of my work in publishing my type of stories. It helps to build my image and the party's image and to disseminate information.

It is clear that some of the politician-bloggers were using their blogs to build their own reputation and their party's image in the lead-up to the election. The emphasis of Teng Chang Khim on scandal-busting can indirectly promote the image of the DAP as being more accountable and intolerant of scandalous politicians when compared with the ruling coalition. This suggests a prevalence of personality politics in the blogosphere where blogs are used to build the reputation of politician-

bloggers as trustworthy politicians and to highlight rivals as rogue politicians. The narratives also provided glimpses into how politician-bloggers were telling readers how to think about them and their political party. This is understood as the functions of framing and priming theories (Entman, 1993; Kuypers, 2002; Entman, 2007). The limited access to the mainstream media, the interest of the mainstream media on political scandals and the goal to improve their personal and party image were some of the circumstances that contributed to the use of blogging as a political marketing tool before the general election.

An active policing of the private and public sphere after the election

The perception of a clear demarcation of boundaries between the private and public sphere seemed to prevail among some of the politician-bloggers after the March 8 polls. Two politician-bloggers decided to stop blogging after the election while two others disclosed that they were more cautious with the type of contents published on their blogs. Another politician-blogger spoke about drawing up a code of ethics to control party members from discussing party matters on their blogs because some of the contents could be used by the ruling coalition to tarnish their party image.

Some of these concerns were raised by politician-bloggers who moved from opposition to being in power in the state administration after they had been successfully elected in the 2008 election. For example, politician-blogger F appeared to have actively policed the boundary

between the private and public sphere after the election. Politician-blogger F revealed in an interview that she stopped blogging for fear that her private views about policies of the PR opposition made public on the blog could be used by political rivals to damage her party image. What was initially seen as a platform to express her personal thoughts was later deemed 'unwise' politically after the election saw the opposition securing an overwhelming victory against the BN (Politician-blogger F, 2010).

Another politician-blogger, who also wanted to remain anonymous, felt the same way and stopped blogging after the election. In an interview for this research, politician-blogger E explained:

> After I won, it became a bit difficult because suddenly you are a public figure ... Whatever I said or wrote, which I could do in some ways very freely in the past, [because] no one was going to judge me [but] now people would associate it with my political party. In the end it got harder and harder to write and I had to straddle between statements, [my] position and expression. The irony was that in the end, it was harder for me to express myself on the blog. As a public figure I no longer have that luxury. I could not use expletives which I was quite used to before ... It was a platform for free expression essentially but now I am not in a position to express myself. So my blog started to take a backseat. The constraints came from the fact that I was an elected representative.

Two other politician-bloggers who felt similar constraints although they continued to rely on blogging to reach a wider audience after the election were Jeff Ooi and Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad. Penang parliamentarian Jeff Ooi and Selangor state legislative assembly member Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, who became a part of the state administration, indicated that they were more cautious about the contents published on their blogs after the election. Taking over power in the two states did not automatically mean that they would obtain better or fairer coverage in the mainstream media because the traditional media were still under the tight control of the ruling coalition. The PR governments in the newly-captured states were still finding it difficult to get their policies across to the people without some form of censorship or spin[33]. Blogging continues to be an important platform for these politician-bloggers to explain the state government's positions, weaknesses and shortcomings, including difficulties in implementing particular policies. For example, politician-blogger Jeff Ooi acknowledged that his blog contents then were used to justify the Penang government's inability in fulfilling some of their election promises to the people. At times, he felt he was unable to blog about the DAP's unfulfilled

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[33] An immediate incident was when DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng who was appointed Penang chief minister was quoted in the government news agency on March 12, 2008, as wanting to do away with practices under the New Economic Policy that awards special privileges to the Malays. His statement sparked a mass protest in Penang by the Malay community and it was later discovered that the Penang chief minister had been misquoted. Two days later, the government news agency editor-in-chief Yong Soo Heong issued an apology, which is considered rare in the history of the Malaysian media (Screenshots, 2008).

election promise of reinstating the electoral process for local councillors in Penang. The election of local councillors in Malaysia was abolished in 1964 and the election manifesto of the DAP had called for local council elections to be reinstated (Lee, 2010). However, the DAP state government in Penang had been silent about fulfilling this election pledge when they were voted into power in 2008. The local council elections were only held two years later in 2010 (Anilnetto.com, 2010).

Similarly, politician-blogger Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad acknowledged that there were certain constraints on what he could blog about after he became an elected representative because he would be seen as representing his party and working for the chief minister of Selangor. He noted in an interview for this thesis that:

> There are certain boundaries I have to guard and the idea of collective responsibility in the party is there obviously. For example, I can't discuss the MB (menteri besar or chief minister, in English) in my blog post because I am working for him and I can only cite him in my job, not outside of it.

This showed how some politician-bloggers perceived blogging as a personal activity that could have ramifications on their public life as ruling politicians. Their concern was heightened when they felt that blogging on party matters could pose a risk to the reputation of the parties they were in. Citing the six-month suspension of DAP leader Voon Lee Shan, who wrote about an internal party matter on his blog in 2010, Lau Weng San noted:

He (Voon Lee Shan) wrote about some of the secret internal dealings of the party. Firstly, some of these things will affect the party's image. Secondly, [is the question of] whether it is true or not. Thirdly, it is always very difficult to prove whether it is true. And even if you are able to do that, it will have a long standing negative image of the party to the general public.

Politician-blogger Teng Chang Khim (2010) also stated clearly that his blog was set up "more for (personal and party) image building and reputation nationwide" and not for public discussion. Similar sentiments were expressed by politician-blogger Idham Lim, who is currently PAS state legislative member in Perak. In his interview, Idham Lim noted that his blog was to pass on uncensored information or "truth" to PAS members and he did not condone any controversial discussions about party leaders on his blog. The "truth" refers to accurate information on party decisions and not speculations or deliberation about the decision. He went a step further by suggesting that PAS members should abide by a code of blogging conduct that would be drawn up in the near future (Idham, 2010). Idham Lim believes that the code of conduct can provide guidelines on what party members are allowed to publish on their blogs. He suggested that PAS members should not be overly critical of party leaders, should not publish extreme views or use coarse language and must not put up crude images on their blogs. The potential of blogs in generating public discussion does not seem to be an important function for this group of

bloggers, who seem more interested in the function of blogs as a political marketing tool. The boundaries between the private and public sphere will, thus, be actively guarded. This is particularly so if blog contents are perceived as potentially harmful to the reputation and image of the political party that the politician-bloggers are representing. Under those circumstances, politician-bloggers will refrain from using their blogs to highlight their personal thoughts.

These narratives point to how an active policing of the private and public sphere can limit the use of blogs to generate public discourse. The concern is heightened when blogging is perceived as having the ability to threaten the image of their political party. The content analysis, highlighted in Chapter Six, also indicated that blogs were not widely used to generate public discussion. Almost half of the readers' feedback did not discuss the blog posts, the bloggers only occasionally responded to the readers and discussions among readers were rather limited. This indicates that the perception of politician-bloggers about blogging and its consequences, including their political status, can influence the use of blogs at different points during electoral cycles.

Perception of blogging as a personal endeavour

Perceptions of blogging as a personal activity seem to have deterred this group of bloggers from forging ties with other bloggers to achieve a particular goal in an election. The stories of many politician-bloggers point to the perception of blogging as a personal tool for publishing their private

thoughts, without forming strategic alliances with other bloggers in electoral politics. For example, politician-bloggers Lau Weng San, Blogger F, Tian Chua, Lim Kit Siang, Teng Chang Khim explicitly described blogging as a personal tool. Politician-blogger Lau Weng San stated clearly that:

> My blog postings are purely on my own personal interest. Nobody in my party has told me not to blog on certain issues. It is basically your own stuff. It is very personal. Like I said the blog is a personal tool.

Politician-blogger Tian Chua, who describes himself as a "political activist engaged in blogging" is also of the view that blogging is a personal platform to communicate his activities and thoughts on issues with his readers (Chua, 2010). Likening blogging to "online diaries," his take on blogging brought home this point when he noted:

> Blogs are more personalised. My attitude is my blogging is not so much directly to propagate party news. It is more to communicate my activities and thinking on issues. I make it very strictly to the original objective of blogging. Earlier blogs are online diaries and I keep mine very much like that. That has been the characteristic of my blog.

Politician-bloggers Lau Weng San, Tian Chua and Liew Chin Tong did not even consider themselves as bloggers because they felt that they were not fulfilling some of the requirements of blogging. For example, Tian Chua

and Liew Chin Tong felt that they were not setting the agenda, creating issues for public discussion, challenging policies or influencing the discourse of Malaysian politics like other more influential bloggers. Lau Weng San's perceived a blogger as someone who published his or her own opinions regularly on the blog without using external sources like the mainstream media or other blogs to produce content. He went further to say that a blogger was someone with no affiliation to any political parties when he gave his reason for not teaming up with members of the All Blogs[34] in the lead-up to the election. Lau Weng San is of the view that:

> This group of bloggers is not related to political parties. So I did not want to join because I thought it would be better to leave them alone and I, as a politician, would utilise my blog for my own political agenda. I didn't want to interfere. They have their own agenda and we welcome them.

These narratives point clearly to a prevailing view that blogging is a personal activity without the effort of forming alliances with other bloggers in electoral politics. Although they had access to digital technologies to enable an exchange of information (flows), they did not form any ties with other individuals (or nodes). The understanding of network theory does not seem to apply well with the way this group of bloggers is using the online platform in an 'isolated manner'. The manner of blog use by the politician-bloggers seems to contradict the claim that the interactivity characteristic

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[34] See Chapter Eight for a more detailed discussion on All Blogs.

of blogging can potentially transform politics and increase civic engagement in contemporary society, as propounded by Perlmutter (2008) and Pole (2009). The digital communications are unable to promote the establishment of loose ties or a network among this group of bloggers.

The narratives, thus far, demonstrated that blogging, in the lead-up to the 2008 election, was used to promote the visibility of politician-bloggers contesting the election and to expose scandals of rival politicians. These efforts were aimed at shoring up support for the candidates and to promote the image of the political parties they were in. After gaining power, blogs were also used to publish information on state policies and party decisions or defend them. Blogging was not used to enter into a discussion of those decisions but only to announce or defend them. The interviews also pointed to how the boundaries between the private and public sphere could be blurred or actively policed. Private thoughts are published to sway public opinion, blurring the private and public domain of the politician-bloggers. However, the boundaries are actively policed if blog contents are perceived as having the potential to harm the image of their political parties. These circumstances can determine the manner of blog use by this group of bloggers.

Negotiating for space within the mainstream media

The lack of access to the mainstream media was expressed as the main reason for the politician-bloggers to resort to blogging as an alternative platform to publicise their views and promote their visibility.

Many politician-bloggers, such as Lim Kit Siang, Teng Chang Khim, Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, Lau Weng San and Jeff Ooi noted that they resorted to blogging as the platform to reach out to the people because they were facing blackout or censorship in the mainstream media. This is because the government has full control over the mainstream media through corporations set up by the respective BN coalition partners (Mustafa, 2002; Zaharom, 2002; Lim, 2009). A study on the coverage of mainstream media in Malaysia during the campaigning period in 2008 showed that the opposition parties obtained about 20% of the news coverage (Sankaran, 2008). A content analysis of 775 stories from five newspapers in four languages between February 26 and March 11, 2008, showed that 61% of the coverage were pro-BN, 19% were pro-opposition and 20% of the stories were neutral (Ibid, 2008). Blogging becomes an alternative vehicle for opposition groups to reach out to the people or specific segments of the society. The stranglehold on the mainstream media by the government makes it extremely difficult for these opposition politicians to make known their views. Thus, blogging is an avenue for these politician-bloggers to use their blogs as mouthpieces of their respective political parties.

However, the blackout of opposition politicians by the mainstream media is not without its weaknesses. As highlighted in Chapter Five, "spaces of negotiation and contestation still exist" in the tightly controlled Malaysian mainstream media by the ruling regime (Brown, 2005: 55). Although the MCA and UMNO are partners in the BN coalition, the two

political parties are suspicious of each other. This is particularly so when certain stories in the English daily, *The Star*, highlight weaknesses of UMNO. An example could be seen from an anonymous editorial of UMNO-linked Malay newspaper *Utusan Malaysia* that penned a veiled attack on *The Star*, accusing the MCA-owned newspaper of racism and supporting the policy of the DAP (Utusan Malaysia Online, 2009). This shows that it is not a simple case of the BN-controlled newspapers blanking out coverage on opposition politicians but that there are spaces for negotiation.

Some degree of access to the mainstream media, particularly the Chinese-language media, is enjoyed by some of the politician-bloggers. For example, politician-blogger F, Lim Kit Siang, Teng Chang Khim and Liew Chin Tong acknowledged they had slightly more access to the Chinese-language press when compared with the Malay and English media. Politician-blogger Teng Chang Khim, who is former opposition leader of the Selangor state legislative assembly[35] and currently the assembly speaker, observes that in his years of dealing with the media, the Chinese-language press is 'freer' than the English or Malay press. Making this observation, Teng Chang Khim noted in an interview that:

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[35] Teng Chang Khim was opposition leader of the Selangor state legislative assembly from 1995 to 1999 and from 2004 to 2008. When the opposition took over power in Selangor after the March 8 polls, he was appointed assembly speaker (Teng, 2010).

For the past four years, my name has been published less than five times in the Malay daily. Now more as a speaker, they will report. Before that, for a whole term as an assemblyman, you get published less than five times and so it is very limited. So blogs help. English press coverage is [also] very limited. You cannot even get your name published once in a month. *The Star*, I'm told, you can print anything. But if you touch on MCA, it is a no-no but if you touch on the government, yes … and you must have something special.

Using his blog to expose scandals of political rivals of the ruling regime, Teng Chang Khim revealed that the Chinese-language mainstream media would reproduce them and the journalists would contact him for further clarification of the scandals. He explained that the Chinese press would monitor his blog closely for scandals of rival politicians while the English press, particularly *The Star*, was more selective. He is of the view that *The Star* is more discerning about who and which coalition partner of the ruling regime is involved in the alleged wrongdoing. He believes that *The Star* will refrain from publishing articles that are critical of its owners, the MCA, but are more willing if the alleged wrongdoing involves other partners of the BN coalition (Teng, 2010). His observation is similar to the conclusion of Brown (2005) pertaining to spaces of negotiation and contestation in the Malaysian mainstream media.

Because of the 'freer' Chinese-language press, Teng Chang Khim disclosed that it was more important for him during the campaigning period to use the Chinese-language media to reach his Chinese voters living in a rural area, instead of his blog. As discussed in the earlier section on the use of traditional ways of canvassing during the campaign period, the majority of Teng Chang Khim's blog readers were not his voters who were predominantly Chinese living in remote areas that had limited access to the internet and broadband facilities. In his attempt to reach his voters, Teng Chang Khim revealed that he resorted to the Chinese press during the campaigning period to reach out to his voters.

The level of access that some of these politician-bloggers has to the mainstream media can also influence the pattern of blog use. For example, first-time candidate Liew Chin Tong noted that did not rely on his blog to build his reputation. He used to write two columns per week in a Chinese newspaper and appeared as a political commentator of a Chinese talk show. Those commitments paved the way for him to have relatively greater access to the mainstream media before the 2008 election, thus promoting his image as a political commentator (Liew, 2010). This parliamentarian expressed the same observation as Teng Chang Khim and Ooi (2008a) that access to Chinese press was relatively 'freer' when compared with the English and Malay press. Being a part of the Penang government after the election, Liew Chin Tong revealed that it was also easier for some of them to get coverage in the Chinese-language press in Penang, saying:

There are two major Chinese newspapers that are based in Penang. They have to cover Penang politicians and we are part of the Penang political zoo, so the papers have to carry it.

This indicates that the use of blogs can be influenced by the political economy of the mainstream media. The level of access to the traditional media also seems to have an impact on how blogging can become less important for politician-bloggers who are able to contest for spaces in the mainstream media.

It is clear that, thus far, the narratives reflect a state of flux in the way blogging is used to achieve particular goals during the Malaysian election cycle. In the lead-up to the election and after the March 8 polls, blogs were used as a political marketing tool to sway public opinion, shore up support for their side and announce or defend state or party decisions and policies. However, blogging was not used to generate discussion on party matters if the subject could potentially jeopardise the party image. During the 13-day campaigning period, blogging became less important as the politician-bloggers faced their voters directly to seek support through the ballot boxes. On the other hand, blogs were used when the online platform was required to reach a wider audience, instead of just the voters. This demonstrates that the pattern of blog use by this group of bloggers changes according to the prevailing political and social circumstances at a particular time.

Summary

From the discussion above, it is clear that blogging does not have a uniform function for this group of bloggers during the Malaysian electoral cycle. An analysis of blog use by the politician-bloggers points to the importance of particular moments in an election that can determine whether blogging can be a significant tool in an election. Blogging becomes an important part of electoral politics before and after the election but not so during the official 13-day campaigning period. The wider political economy of media, the target audience and the digital divide, perception of blogging as an individual activity, the status of being a part of the state administration after the election are some of the factors that can have an influence on blog use and its significance at particular moments in an election.

Amidst a tightly controlled mainstream media, blogging is considered as an alternative avenue by this group of opposition politician-bloggers who are using the blogs to build their personal and party reputation in the lead-up to the election. Highlighting the political scandals of rival politicians can indirectly boost the author's own image. During this defining moment in electoral politics, blogging can be a significant medium to campaign to a wider audience. It continues to be a crucial platform after the March 8 polls to promote and defend policies and decisions of state administrations, of which some of the bloggers become a part. Thus, the online platform can be deemed significant when politician-

bloggers are blogging to advance their personal and party image before and after the election, overcoming limited access to the mainstream media.

During the 13-day official campaigning period, the appeal for blogging waned because the politician-bloggers were targeting their voters. Many of the politician-bloggers believe that face-to-face campaigning allow them to better connect with their voters than the use of digital technologies. A personalised method of campaigning is more crucial for the politician-bloggers, who feel that meeting voters directly is more important than mediated communication. The digital divide between rural and urban populations and among pockets of the 'digitally deprived' urban populace is a key consideration for face-to-face canvassing. The ethnicity of voters and access to the mainstream media are other factors that can render blogging as less important during the campaigning period. These three scenarios of blog use before, after and during the election demonstrate how blogging can change in significance at particular junctures in electoral politics.

Although blogging was not significant during the 13-day campaigning period, this group of bloggers was publishing campaign information and donation and volunteer requests on their blogs. These particular blog functions were highlighted because the target audience was not only the voters, confined to a geographical location, but the wider global audience who were not restricted to a particular time and space. It points to a

pragmatic use of blogs in fulfilling particular goals at a specific point of the electoral campaign despite a drop in the use of blogs to reach the voters.

The pragmatic use of blogging to boost the image of politician-bloggers and their parties before and after the election is a reminder that information can be slanted. This is evident in a couple of instances. Firstly, blogging was not a major platform for publishing the private thoughts of politician-bloggers if they could potentially jeopardise the image of the political party and the politician. Some politician-bloggers were even explicit that their blogs were not set up to generate public discourse, least of all debates on party matters that could put their party image at risk. Secondly, boundaries between the private and public sphere seemed to be actively policed particularly after the March 8 polls among those who became a part of the state government. Some were more careful with their blog content while others terminated their blogging activities to prevent their personal thoughts from harming their party image. If blogging is to become a political marketing tool, only information that can project a positive image will be published on the blogs. This manner of blogging does not help improve the quality of debate, thus constraining the role of blogging to generate public debates. Under these circumstances, blogging may be limited in its role in promoting the ideals of a deliberative democracy. While blogging can be a tool for politician-bloggers to promote their image, it is limited in encouraging public discourse.

The perception that blogging is a personal endeavour seems to have prevented this group of bloggers from establishing network or connections with other bloggers. Efforts to form a network through digital technologies, as described by network theorists, did not seem to have materialised among them. This group of bloggers was blogging as individuals, unconnected with other politician-bloggers, and did not form a network in order to set up a blog campaign to realise their political goal. Some were even using their blogs as an extension of the old medium. Blogging does not seem to have drastically changed electoral politics for this group of bloggers. The interactive capability of blogging and the internet has not contributed to increased political engagement among the politician-bloggers.

The ability to negotiate for spaces in the tightly controlled mainstream media seems to be a factor that can render blogging to be a less appealing tool, particularly for politician-bloggers, who enjoy some amount of coverage in the mainstream media. This is even more so for those contesting in remote areas, whose voters are Chinese and have limited access to the internet and broadband facilities. The relatively 'freer' Chinese-language media is a more important tool than blogging for this group of bloggers faced with those social and political realities. This demonstrates that the wider political economy of the media is essential in understanding whether blogging can be a significant part of electoral politics.

Chapter 8

Blogging as part of scandal politics for leadership change

Introduction

An analysis of interviews of the partisan bloggers suggests that blogging is a part of scandal politics for purposes of propaganda to change the national leadership in electoral politics. Many partisan bloggers indicated that blogging was an avenue for them to express their thoughts and ideas in the practice of citizen journalism. However, they also provided glimpses into how the online platform was used in attempts to shape public opinion in order to achieve a particularistic goal at a specific moment in time. Some of the research participants disclosed that blogging was used to wage "psychological warfare" in order to change public perception towards the ruling elite in the lead-up to the 2008 election. The "psychological warfare" was essentially a blog campaign aimed at assassinating the character of certain political leaders of the ruling regime. It was executed through planned strategies to deliberately flood the blogosphere with information that could discredit the reputation of the national leadership. Private meetings were held to draw up secret arrangements on how the partisan bloggers could form organised yet informal ties through what they termed the "band of brotherhood." The "band of brotherhood" made strategic use of their blogs in order to better manage the flow of information in an effort to influence public opinion.

Managing the flow of information to highlight political scandals is a reminder of how biased views can be shaped by people working within easily available framework of ideas (Entman, 1993; Entman, 2007). It also reflects how information can be manipulated by spin doctors or public relations experts in such a way that it hampers citizens' ability to engage in rational debates and obstruct public reasoning (Habermas, 2008). This shows that the much heralded potential of blogging and the internet in providing spaces for a free marketplace of ideas to engage public debates can be restricted. In the Malaysian context, the most prominent use of blogging around the 2008 election was to create scandal for purposes of propaganda. As such, it appears to have done little in terms of widening public spaces for political discourse and participation.

While blogging may be limited in the promotion of democratic principles by becoming a part of scandal politics, the establishment of a network to set up a blog campaign through the "band of brotherhood" provides evidence that the online avenue can facilitate the coming together of agendas to unite a fragmented blogosphere for a specific goal at a particular moment in electoral politics. The online activity was used to harness diverse political forces to forge opportunistic ties in an attempt to remove the then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the ruling regime. The "band of brotherhood" was a loose coalition comprising partisan and civil society bloggers who were bound together with the objective of using their blogs to achieve a specific goal at a defining

moment in an election. Partisan bloggers in the "band of brotherhood" were from both the ruling regime and opposition political parties. However, they worked together to manage the flow of information in the Malaysian blogosphere to shape public opinion against the then premier and ruling regime. This clearly suggests that blogging can facilitate fluid forms of political engagement to build and crystallise a network of opposing political forces to achieve a specific goal in an election.

The loose coalition of the "band of brotherhood," however, collapsed after the election when the opposition scored an overwhelming success at the polls. Pro-UMNO bloggers and some civil society bloggers in the "band of brotherhood" continued to target Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who was re-elected as a parliamentarian and re-appointed as prime minister after the election. On the other hand, pro-opposition partisan bloggers and some civil society bloggers in the "band of brotherhood" were targeting the then deputy prime minister Najib Razak, who later replaced Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as prime minister in April 2009 (Office of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, 2011). The "opportunistic ties" gave way to a politically divided blogosphere which contributed to a contentious relationship among members of the loose network. This illustrates the different dynamics and particular political circumstances at defining moments in electoral politics that can limit the capability of bloggers to form voluntary associations.

The loose coalition of the "band of brotherhood" reflects existing relationships and ideological structures in the Malaysian society dominated by race-based politics. Firstly, this could be seen from the involvement of "Malay influential bloggers" at the secret meeting, as revealed by some partisan bloggers. These "Malay influential bloggers" were made up of supporters of the Malay ruling party, that is UMNO, and the Malay opposition parties, mainly PAS and PKR[36]. Although there were a few non-Malay bloggers in the "band of brotherhood", the majority of members were Malays. This indicates a dominance of Malay politics on the blogosphere which parallels the dominant political position of Malays in the Malaysian society. Secondly, the Malaysian blogosphere, at that time, also provided a snapshot of the undercurrents of UMNO politics, particularly the contentious relationship between factions of immediate past prime minister Mahathir Mohamad and his successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Thirdly, the use of blogs to tarnish the reputation of leaders is a reminder of the common practice to produce and circulate *surat layang* (anonymously written letters containing allegations of various wrongdoings of rival politicians) to discredit political enemies, which can become particularly intense during the party election of UMNO (Raja Petra Kamarudin, 2009; Wain, 2009). Thus, the Malaysian blogosphere at that time partly mirrored the power struggle and infighting that was occurring

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[36] PAS and PKR have historical links with UMNO. PAS was once a member of the BN in 1973 but later left the coalition in 1974. PKR, an UMNO breakaway faction, was formed after the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim in 1997.

within UMNO between the two political elite groups. Blogging can, thus, provide a more transparent account of the power struggle among political elites in UMNO which is normally conducted behind closed doors, away from public scrutiny and privy mainly to UMNO members.

An examination of the alignment of some of the partisan bloggers indicates that the blogosphere is structured according to the interests of former media and political elites. Some of the "Malay influential bloggers" were former mainstream media and political elites whose access to the mainstream news media had been curtailed during the premiership of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The significant presence of former editors and ex-politicians was also detected in the content analysis, as discussed in Chapter Six. Several research participants described themselves as "pro-UMNO bloggers" aligned with Mahathir Mohamad, the country's fourth prime minister who had been in power for 22 years, from 1981 to 2003 (Office of the Prime Minister, 2010). The campaign of "psychological warfare" being carried out by these pro-UMNO bloggers can be interpreted as a move supported by the powerful elites in the country to pressure Abdullah Ahmad Badawi into resigning as the UMNO president. The blog campaign did not stop immediately when polling ended but continued well after the 2008 general election. This points to how blogging, touted by certain quarters as having the potential to promote democratic ideals, can possibly be appropriated by powerful elites to exert their dominance on the country's political agenda. Instead of being a democratic tool that promotes

political participation, public discourse and marginal voices, the Malaysian case illustrates that blogging can be used to advance the agenda of powerful elites.

The chapter will now begin with the establishment of the "band of brotherhood" and the social and political circumstances leading to its formation. It will also discuss the management of blogosphere information flow, aimed at shaping public opinion against the national leadership. The different dynamics and particular circumstances that led to a break-up of the "band of brotherhood" after the election will be addressed briefly while a more detailed discussion will be examined in the next chapter. This chapter will also discuss the various affiliations of members of the "band of brotherhood" to argue that the Malaysian blogosphere is a reflection of existing relationships and ideological structures in society. This chapter will also include a discussion of blogging in relation to the mainstream media.

Political scenario/factors contributing to the forging of ties

The story of blogging during the 2008 general election is connected to a move to destabilise the president of the country's dominant Malay political party, UMNO, in 2006 and 2007. The party conflict, initially designed on the blogosphere as a move to "cleanse UMNO from within" later snowballed into an attempt to change the national leadership and the ruling regime when the 2008 general election was held. The effort to "cleanse UMNO from within" refers to an attempt by pro-UMNO bloggers

aligned to Mahathir Mohamad to pressure Abdullah Ahmad Badawi into giving up his position as UMNO president. Several partisan bloggers disclosed that it was considered timely then because members were expecting a party election and not a general election (Syed Azidi, 2010; Partisan blogger A, 2010; Partisan blogger B, 2010). However, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi called for a general election instead of the anticipated party election (Partisan blogger A, 2010). As a result, the initial endeavour to affect a leadership change within UMNO shifted to the national level.

Although Abdullah Ahmad Badawi took over from Mahathir Mohamad as UMNO president and prime minister on October 31, 2003, the latter continued to wield enormous influence among his followers and party members who remained loyal to him (Raja Petra Kamarudin, 2009). Given the culture of political patronage in Malaysia, as discussed in Chapter Five, it is not surprising that the latter continues to enjoy the support of party members because the UMNO president and prime minster has been in power for more than two decades. When Abdullah Ahmad Badawi began reversing some of the decisions put in place by Mahathir Mohamad, the latter began voicing his discontentment (Wain, 2009: 307-339)[37]. Abdullah Ahmad Badawi further earned the wrath of Mahathir

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[37] Among the issues that Mahathir Mohamad was unhappy with Abdullah Ahmad Badawi were the cancellation of the crooked bridge linking Johor in Malaysia to Singapore on April 11, 2006, and the sale of the country's 57.57% stake in Augusta, an Italian motorcycle company, for one Euro Dollar (Singapore Straits Times, 2006; Ooi, 2007; Wain, 2009).

Mohamad when it was later alleged that the former had blocked his predecessor's bid for the position of a divisional delegate to UMNO's general assembly in November 2006 (Kuda Kepang, 2007). Unfortunately for Mahathir Mohamad, his grievances did not receive much coverage in the mainstream media. In some instances, Mahathir Mohamad even accused the mainstream media of blacking him out or censoring his press statements by reducing them to fillers in their news reports. In other instances, he claimed that mainstream newspaper editors had twisted his statements "to suit their own political agenda" (MyKMU.net, 2006).

Control over UMNO-linked media organisations in the hands of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi consolidated after he took over as president and prime minister. He replaced, with people he trusted[38], the top management and the editorial team in UMNO-linked media organisations, such as *The New Straits Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Malay Mail* and television station, *TV3*. The new appointments, however, ruffled the feathers of many editors and journalists who later left the industry (Rocky's Bru, 2009a). Several editors of UMNO-linked newspapers, who were appointed during Mahathir Mohamad's tenure as prime minister, resigned from their posts

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[38]Kalimullah Hassan was made group editor of UMNO-linked New Straits Times Press (M) Berhad (NSTP), which owned English daily *The New Straits Times*, when Abdullah Ahmad Badawi came into power (Rocky's Bru, 2009a). Kamarulzaman Zainal, who was former press secretary of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, was made executive director of Media Prima Berhad under a restructuring exercise in 2003 in Malaysian Resources Corporation Berhad, which had majority control of NSTP. Following that, Media Prima Berhad became "Malaysia's largest newspaper publishing company" having total control of *TV3* and 43.5% equity in NSTP (Zaharom & Wang, 2004: 264).

and many started blogging about the country's social and political landscape. Among them were Ahirudin Attan, whose blog is the popular *Rocky's Bru*, and Nuraina Samad, who runs the blog *No 3540 Jalan Sudin*. Other influential former editors, such as Kadir Jasin started his popular blog known as *The Scribe* and Ahmad Talib also kept a blog called *Pahit Manis* (Bitter Sweet, in English). This contributed to a situation where former media elites, particularly from UMNO-linked news groups, began making their online presence felt before the general election in 2006 and 2007. Blogging came along at an opportune moment for these prominent media and political actors whose access to the mainstream news media had very recently been curtailed.

The internet subsequently became a tool for former media and political elites to publish their views. One such elite was former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, who received wide coverage in the online news portal, *Malaysiakini*, and UMNO website, *MyKMU.net*. Although he did not maintain a blog during the 2008 election, the country's fourth prime minister had his views published on *MyKMU.net* website, which had been described as "Mahathir's blog" (Ruhanie, 2010). The *MyKMU.net* website is run by a group of well-organised individuals who collectively finance the website that writes about UMNO politics. It is believed to be one of the early UMNO cybertroopers from 1997 to 1998 when UMNO was fighting Anwar Ibrahim's *reformasi* in cyberspace (Partisan blogger A, 2010). From mid-2006, *MyKMU.net* had been publishing pro-Mahathir

postings and articles that questioned the credibility of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as UMNO president. This website also carried press statements of Mahathir Mohamad, expressing his dissatisfaction with his handpicked successor. The blogs of some of the former media elites were also providing publicity to Mahathir Mohamad, with some even blogging about the former leader in press conferences and other events attended by the former premier.

As some of the bloggers began highlighting statements critical of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi that were ignored by the government-controlled mainstream media, they were inevitably perceived as anti-establishment. A defamation suit[39] brought against two bloggers Ahirudin Attan and Jeff Ooi by then group editor of UMNO-linked *The New Straits Times*, Kalimullah Masheerul Hassan, and three others in January 2007 was considered a clampdown on the right to free speech on the internet. As such, the mainstream media was perceived as complicit with the administration of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (Tan & Zawawi, 2008). Support for the two bloggers at that time, thus, represented a struggle for freedom of speech and expression. The situation at that time culminated in a united blogosphere, spurred on by the struggle for liberal democratic principles against the ruling regime.

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[39] As noted in Chapter Five, Jeff Ooi was sued for 13 articles that appeared on his blog *Screenshots* while Ahirudin Attan was charged with 48 defamatory articles that he posted on his blog *Rocky's Bru* (The Star Online, 2007a).

The coming together of partisan and civil society bloggers to fight for liberal democratic principles had apparently presented an opportunity for pro-UMNO bloggers, who were strategising and coordinating the use of their blogs to oust Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. This observation was made by a pro-tem committee member of the National Alliance of Bloggers[40] (All Blogs) that was set up to defend free speech and right of expression. The pro-tem committee member, who was also a blogger and wanted to remain anonymous in this research, recalled that it was not a collective decision of All Blogs to run down Abdullah Ahmad Badawi but "it was obvious that there was a group which had a particular agenda and this was the UMNO group."

The fight for civil liberties against an oppressive regime, subsequently, morphed into a political drama of power struggle between two powerful elites. An analysis of interviews with the partisan bloggers suggests that the blogosphere is evolving into a proxy fight (or *wayang kulit*[41] in colloquial terms) between Mahathir Mohamad and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi for political control of UMNO. This became obvious when politician-blogger Jeff Ooi, who was then a member of the "band of brotherhood," remarked in an interview for this research:

[40]The National Alliance of Bloggers (All Blogs), identified with the icon 'Bloggers United' on their blogs, was an organisation that was formed after Ahirudin Attan and Jeff Ooi were sued by the New Straits Times Press. The pro-tem committee headed by the two personalities wanted to register the association with the Registrar of Society of Malaysia but was met with objections from other bloggers (Khoo, 2010a).

[41] See Chapter Five for an explanation of *wayang kulit*.

> We were facing Kalimullah and the gang because we fought and spoke on behalf of Mahathir. It is basically that. We defended Mahathir versus Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

This was clearly supported by pro-UMNO bloggers aligned to Mahathir Mohamad who felt they were being pitted against the team of bloggers hired by Azalina Othman[42] and Khairy Jamaludin[43], both seen as supporters of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Putting it succinctly, pro-UMNO blogger A explained in an interview for this research:

> The other side we were up against was Azalina (Othman) and Khairy (Jamaludin). They were very raw. Her cybertroopers were young and not articulate. They were paid. This (our) side, you are dealing with Kadir Jasin, Ahmad Talib, the whole NST (*The New Straits Times*) rejects … all the veteran cybertroopers fighting *reformasi*, fighting Raja Petra (Kamarudin) and the *Free Anwar Campaign* … [they] are [now] on this (our) side, including Raja Petra (Kamarudin).

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[42]Azalina Othman was the head of Puteri UMNO, the women's youth wing of the party. She was also youth and sports minister at that time.

[43]Khairy Jamaludin is the son-in-law of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. At that time, he was also the deputy head of Pemuda UMNO, the youth wing of the party.

Another pro-UMNO blogger, Ruhanie Ahmad, who participated in this research, supports the observation. Ruhanie Ahmad, who is a former UMNO parliamentarian, revealed that there were "two opposing blocs" at that time. In an interview, he pointed out:

> Abdullah's (Ahmad Badawi) UMNO under Azalina (Othman) maintained a stable of bloggers who were paid quite well off, about RM2,500 (US$657) per head a month, just to discredit bloggers who were not pro-Abdullah.

The political scenario seemed to have been timely for pro-UMNO bloggers to push for a change in UMNO's leadership by pressuring Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to step down as party president. The bloggers, perceived as anti-establishment with limited access to the mainstream media, had been expecting the then UMNO president to hold party elections. However, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had unexpectedly dissolved parliament in February 2008, paving the way for the country's 12th general election (Election Commission Malaysia, 2009). This took many observers and political groups by surprise as the 12th general election was not due until May 16, 2009, some 19 months away at that time (Ibid: 92). Thus the aim of changing the party leadership seemed to have shifted to a change in the national leadership by 2008. As partisan blogger A (2010) pointed out:

We, the pro-UMNO bloggers (aligned to Mahathir Mohamad), did not want a general election. We just want to pressure him (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) to the point where he realises he has no choice but to quit. I think the fourth floor boys[44] (aligned to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) were thinking of a purge (to get rid of leaders disloyal to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi). So they were thinking of using the general election to purge.

Pro-UMNO blogger Syed Azidi Syed Aziz[45] agreed, in an interview, that blogging during the 2008 election was aimed at changing the party leadership. This provides an understanding into the initial effort among pro-UMNO bloggers in using their blogs to overthrow the then party president and prime minister. It also explains why only UMNO ministers are being targeted in the exercise (Syed Azidi, 2010; Partisan blogger A, 2010; Partisan blogger B, 2010). The campaign to change the party leadership was later extended to the national level when parliament and state legislative assemblies were dissolved to make way for the 2008 general election.

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[44] The phrase 'fourth floor boys' was used to refer to aides of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, including his son-in-law Khairy Jamaludin, who occupied the fourth floor of the Prime Minister's Office in Putrajaya. They were accused of using their positions to influence some of the administrative decisions of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (Shah, 2009).

[45] Syed Azidi Syed Aziz revealed that he was no longer a member of UMNO at the time when he was interviewed for this research in February 2010.

Private meetings and the secret pact that led to the "band of brotherhood"

Interviews with the partisan bloggers disclosed secret meetings, involving influential Malay bloggers, were held to set up a blog campaign aimed at tarnishing the image of then UMNO president and prime minister. Partisan bloggers from both sides of the political divide attended the private meetings that drew up secret agreements on how the propaganda campaign could achieve that goal. The effort for a blog campaign was likened to the "band of brotherhood" whose members blogged strategically in an attempt to remove the national leadership.

The private meetings were part of an effort to initiate "psychological warfare" against the national leadership. This was revealed by several pro-UMNO bloggers in separate interviews for this research. Pro-UMNO blogger Syed Azidi Syed Aziz explicitly described the campaign as a form of "psychological warfare" with the blog being the "best weapon" for that purpose. Elaborating on this, he said that he believed pro-establishment bloggers who were critical of the BN leadership could be deemed as being more credible to their readers. This is because pro-BN or pro-UMNO supporters are traditionally not openly critical of their own political party. If they were openly critical of their own political party, they would be regarded as putting out 'more accurate' accounts of the ruling government. The audiences may also be more willing to accept critical views of the

government on the blogs because of the tight control of the mainstream media. Pro-UMNO blogger Syed Azidi Syed Aziz remarked:

> So when a group of pro-establishment or pro-government bloggers mostly aligned to Mahathir (Mohamad), moves to the other side and starts to attack the government, the people will trust them, for example, (former editors) Rocky (Ahirudin Attan), Nuraina (Samad), (former UMNO parliamentarian) Ruhanie (Ahmad) and (former editor) Kadir Jasin.

The use of blogging as a form of "psychological warfare" to undermine political enemies is also obvious from the narratives of pro-UMNO bloggers A and B. For example, pro-UMNO blogger B described blogging as a way for him to share his thoughts and views, and to create blog contents to "gun down other political personalities," apart from Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his fourth floor boys. Pro-UMNO blogger A even described some of the blog information as "propagandistic" when referring to an effort to tarnish the image of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi by alleging that the former premier was the owner of a house in Perth. He explained: "Everybody (band of brotherhood) just talked about it. That was very propagandistic. To be frank, we were unable to prove the house. But no one tried to disprove it too."

The use of blogs for "psychological warfare" was not only prevalent among pro-UMNO bloggers. Bloggers aligned with the opposition parties and civil society bloggers who wanted a regime change were also using

their blogs to sway public opinion in the "psychological warfare." Partisan blogger, Nathaniel Tan who is a PKR member, revealed that blogging during the 2008 election was aimed at influencing public opinion and his blog was used "to spread the word about whatever propaganda we are trying to push." He elaborated by saying that he was working for Anwar Ibrahim at that time and his blog was "pretty much stuff on Anwar" (Tan, 2010). Similar sentiments were expressed in an interview for this research by civil society blogger H, who disclosed that he was anti-UMNO but formed ties with the "band of brotherhood." Like Tan, civil society blogger H (2010) indicated that his blog was used for similar purposes when he remarked:

> I want to change public perception about UMNO but I don't want to imitate Joseph Goebbels that 'a thousand lies will become truth.' It may work during Nazi Germany where people were not free to obtain information. But now information is more freely available and you cannot say a thousand lies will become truth. Yet I want to change public perception by telling people that UMNO is evil.

This showed how the aim of pro-UMNO bloggers to wage "psychological warfare" against then UMNO president and prime minister also gained traction among pro-opposition and civil society bloggers who made use of information discrediting the national leadership in the 2008 general election.

Recalling the first secret meeting that resulted in an informal yet organised effort to set up the "band of brotherhood," several pro-UMNO bloggers confirmed that the initial meeting was held in February 2007 at the National Press Club, located on Jalan Tangsi, about 100 metres away from Bukit Aman (police headquarters) in Kuala Lumpur. In an interview for this thesis, pro-UMNO blogger Syed Azidi Syed Aziz recalled:

> I would say 10 to 11 influential Malay bloggers and we formed a secret plan. We had three to four meetings. Among those at the first meeting were me, Rocky (Ahirudin Attan), Raja Petra Kamaruddin, Syed Akbar Ali, Datuk Ruhanie (Ahmad). Kadir Jasin was not around but he sponsored the meal. Mahathir's (Mohamad) special officer Sufi (Yusoff) was there. They came from all sorts of background. Raja Petra (Kamarudin) was webmaster of *Free Anwar Campaign*, Ruhanie was hardcore UMNO blogger.

Pro-UMNO blogger A, in his interview, described the first meeting as strange because "we had the PKR people, we had the pro-UMNO people, we had the journalists, we had the pro-PAS people and everybody was quiet and we used very measured words." He pointed out that the attempt to bring down Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was a "concerted effort" which included:

> Go(ing) after the two (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Khairy Jamaludin) and we will unite on issues. We will have common grounds on certain issues. We will play on those issues and then we

attack. Back then, we agreed that *Malaysia Today* will be the conduit. That was when he (Raja Petra Kamarudin) started opening up to even opposing views.

Malaysia Today[46] is a popular blog run by Raja Petra Kamarudin, who is now self-exiled in London. Raja Petra Kamarudin started hosting postings from other blogs which he later categorised as "From around the Blogs" (Outsyed The Box, 2010). A blog post in *Rocky's Bru* on February 19, 2007, introducing the new feature "From around the Blogs" also implicates the role of *Malaysia Today* in the secret pact. However, interviews wtih Raja Petra Kamarudin and Ahirudin Attan for this research failed to materialise.

Elaborating on the effort of the "band of brotherhood," the group agreed that the aim was not to change the government so that the opposition would win, but it was only to ensure a leadership change within UMNO (Ooi, 2010; Syed Azidi, 2010). The secret meeting, according to pro-UMNO blogger Syed Azidi Syed Aziz, agreed on several things. Firstly, it was to ensure Kelantan remained under the opposition rule of PAS. This was necessary because if Abdullah Ahmad Badawi were to win Kelantan in the 2008 election, he would be remembered as the leader who achieved the feat that even Mahathir Mohamad had failed to achieve. The meeting was clear that UMNO must remain in power but its powers must

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[46]The popular A-list blog received an average of 95 comments per post published within the three-month period selected for this research.

be eroded by ensuring that the party won fewer seats in the general election. This, it was hoped, would create enough public anger to force Abdullah Ahmad Badawi into resigning. Secondly, the bloggers agreed to highlight particular issues that would be kept alive by other bloggers who would follow up with different angles. The various investigative angles would ensure the issues were made relevant to a wide range of audiences. Thirdly, the group also recognised the importance of offline materials and pushed the Malay opposition party members and pro-Mahathir Mohamad machinery within UMNO to print out blog postings and circulate them in areas where internet penetration was low (Syed Azidi, 2010). Members of the "band of brotherhood" were essentially utilising their blogs to shape public opinion and to create an impact on the different groups of audiences, including those who were living in remote areas of the country. As mentioned in Chapter Seven, there was a big digital gap in 2008 when 85% of internet users were located in the urban areas in Malaysia. Those in the rural areas may not be exposed to the blog postings due to limited access to the internet. This can, however, be overcome by downloading the postings and circulating them in the form of leaflets or pamphlets.

Further meetings followed. According to pro-UMNO blogger A, they used to meet at their favourite mamak[47] restaurant in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur. The list of targets grew to include UMNO ministers who were

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[47] This is a common term used to refer to restaurants run by Malaysians of Indian Muslim descent.

either supportive of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi or UMNO leaders who were critical of Mahathir Mohamad. Apart from Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his son-in-law Khairy Jamaludin, other UMNO ministers targeted by pro-UMNO bloggers in the "band of brotherhood" were Syed Hamid Albar, Azalina Othman, Zainudin Mydin, Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor and Nazri Aziz (Syed Azidi, 2010). Of the targets listed, only Zainudin Mydin and Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor lost in the general election. Despite this, members of the "band of brotherhood" felt blogging was effective in contributing to the ruling regime's dismal performance at the polls.

Some pro-opposition and civil society bloggers took advantage of the political strife within UMNO and the secret pact of the "band of brotherhood" to bag a victory at the election. Parts of the secret plan worked out to be in line with the aspiration of pro-opposition and civil society bloggers who wanted to undermine Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his administration. Some of them took advantage by linking or copying blog posts that portrayed the UMNO president in a negative light, as noted by partisan bloggers C and D. For example, partisan blogger D, who is an influential PAS member, attributed the victory of the opposition in the 2008 election to the discontent of Mahathir Mohamad and his loyalists towards Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's administration. In an interview for this research, partisan blogger D (2010) made the following observation about the political situation at that time:

When Mahathir's (Mohamad) criticisms against Abdullah (Ahmad) Badawi became louder, I saw it as a chance to raise public sentiments against the government. At that time, PAS was merely taking advantage of Mahathir's dissatisfaction with Abdullah. For example, PAS did not agree with the construction of a crooked bridge down south[48] but when Abdullah cancelled the project and earned the wrath of Mahathir, we just hopped onto the bandwagon and took advantage of the political situation (by supporting Mahathir Mohamad's grievances).

Similarly, civil society blogger Haris Ibrahim knew about the "secret pact" that involved getting rid of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi although he noted in an interview for this research that he was not too clear at that time about the objective of pro-UMNO bloggers was to retain the BN in power. Haris Ibrahim, in his blog called *The People's Parliament*, wanted a regime change while the pro-UMNO bloggers only wanted Abdullah Ahmad Badawi out of the seat of power. This reflects the fluidity of online ties and the capacity for diverse elements of the blogosphere to unite at particular junctures in electoral politics.

Not all the bloggers who got together to defend their right of free expression on the internet agreed with the political agenda of pro-UMNO

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[48]The crooked bridge project linking Johor to Singapore was approved by Mahathir Mohamad during his tenure as prime minister but Abdullah Ahmad Badawi cancelled the project after he took over as prime minister, thus turning Mahathir Mohamad against his successor (Ooi, 2007).

bloggers. For example, civil society blogger Susan Loone pointed out several reasons for not wanting to be a part of the "band of brotherhood." She disagreed with an initial idea to officially register an association of bloggers, who were in support of freedom of speech and expression. Her reason was because "we wanted to be free, a loose kind of network for people to come in and out" (Loone, 2010). The idea of registering with the Registrar of Societies made a lot of bloggers felt uncomfortable, especially pseudonymous bloggers whom Ahirudin Attan wanted to either unmask their identities or reveal their true identities to him (Loone, 2010). After attending one of the gatherings and observing the alliances and affiliations of some of the bloggers, Susan Loone pointed out:

> At that time, they were trying hard to get rid of Pak Lah[49] which was okay. But they wanted Najib (Razak) instead. Mahathir's (Mohamad) influence was very much there. He did not turn up for their events but he sent his assistant Sufi (Yusoff). So I did not feel comfortable. We did not want to be made use of. So I decided to go on my own.

Susan Loone seems to ascribe strongly to a discourse of freedom and individualism as a blogger when compared with Ahirudin Attan, a former mainstream newspaper editor. The former editor perhaps made sense of blogging more in traditional journalistic terms in which anonymity and complete freedom are valued less compared with writing with one's

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[49] A name commonly used to refer to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

identity known. It could also be an issue of trust that influenced Susan Loone's decision because Ahirudin Attan was former editor of an UMNO-owned newspaper. This probably relates to the issue of risk that individual participants may take "in exchange for the benefits of cooperation" (Warren, 1999: 1). Thus, the support of pro-UMNO bloggers in the "band of brotherhood" for Najib Razak did not sit well with Susan Loone's perception of the current prime minister. Susan Loone had been blogging about the possible involvement of Najib Razak, who was then deputy prime minister, with a Mongolian woman Altantuya Shaaribu who was murdered in Kuala Lumpur in October 2006[50]. She was actively blogging about the murder when she was based in Bangkok, where she was able to obtain information from the family of the deceased (Loone, 2010). The civil society blogger was looking for evidence to try to link Najib Razak to the Mongolian woman. Thus, the idea of deposing Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in favour of Najib Razak did not sit well with her (Ibid).

Another civil society blogger, who wanted to remain anonymous in this research, felt the same way as Susan Loone. The blogger felt that some of the members of the "band of brotherhood" involved in the "secret pact"

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[50]A cursory look at *Susan Loone's blog* showed she had written 235 blog postings related to the murdered Mongolian woman Altantuya Shaaribu since November 20, 2006. Some of the postings questioned the news stories published by the mainstream media. There was one posting that poked fun of Najib Razak, whom she compared to her pet dog, which was more reliable and could protect her and her home (Susan Loone's Blog, 2008a).

had a personal agenda by supporting the move to oust Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. An observation made by this civil society blogger was that:

> Those who had been in the media, had hijacked the blogging agenda to further their own careers in journalism. For example, Rocky (Ahirudin Attan) had a personal revenge against Kalimullah (who was appointed by Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) and his agenda was to get back his old job in *The Malay Mail*.

The issue of trust that some of the bloggers had in relation to former media elites, such as Ahirudin Attan or Nuraina Samad may be justified when pro-UMNO blogger Syed Azidi Syed Aziz observed:

> To remember all those who were there (as part of the "band of brotherhood"), I am not sure where (Raja) Petra (Kamarudin) is but everybody is well reimbursed now. Rocky (Ahirudin Attan) has his datukship[51] and Nuraina (Samad) is an editor. It is payback time.

Despite some tension and non-cooperation from certain civil society bloggers, the "band of brotherhood" was harnessing diverse political forces to bring down Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, his son-in-law Khairy Jamaludin and numerous UMNO ministers. Pro-opposition bloggers, particularly those supporting PKR and PAS, took advantage of the move to fulfil their own political goal of winning power in the 2008 general election. Other civil society bloggers, who wanted a change in the regime, also took the

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[51] Ahirudin Attan received the honorific title 'Datuk' from the King in January, 2011 (Rocky's Bru, 2011).

opportunity to question the credibility of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his administration.

Interviews with the partisan bloggers had, thus far, revealed that blogging facilitated the coming together of competing political forces that had an overlapping agenda of changing the UMNO leadership and the ruling regime at a particular moment in time. Partisan bloggers from the opposition and ruling parties, including some civil society bloggers, were united in the use of blogs to pursue a common goal. The "band of brotherhood" seemed to have crossed political boundaries but not racial lines, as indicated by a domination of Malay bloggers and Malay political party members. However, the online platform presented an opportunity for people who did not have access to the mainstream media to temporarily abandon their political affiliation to achieve a particularistic goal in electoral politics. The next section will look at the active management of blog information flows by the "band of brotherhood" to change public perception towards their political enemies.

Managing blog information flows

The secret pact of the "band of brotherhood" spelt out how they managed and coordinated negative postings about Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his administration in order to change public perception towards the ruling regime. The private agreement seemed to have carefully designed the influence of the respective bloggers because specific bloggers took on different roles in order to communicate with different audiences.

As pointed out by some pro-UMNO bloggers, the credibility that individual bloggers had with their respective audiences was an important factor in capturing and convincing the readers who might only follow the postings of a particular blogger. These efforts demonstrated that members of the "band of brotherhood" were trying actively to shape the dominant discourse in the blogosphere. The "band of brotherhood" also seemed to be conscious about the power-law distribution of influence in blogging regarding the relationship between best-trafficked blogs and audience size (Shirky, 2009: 125-129). In particular, popular blog *Malaysia Today* was used as a conduit for other less-trafficked blogs so that they could gain prominence on the blogosphere.

Framing the then UMNO leadership and prime minister as inefficient, weak, dishonest and corrupted was probably the most common method employed to change public attitudes. The pro-UMNO bloggers would create the critical blog posts which were readily picked up by other pro-opposition and civil society bloggers. In some cases, the pro-UMNO bloggers, including pro-opposition partisan bloggers, kept more than one blog in order to publish the same negative posts, which were then linked to their own blog. This effort can capture a wider audience or create the perception that the same negative views are prevalent in the blogosphere. For example, pro-UMNO blogger Syed Azidi Syed Aziz divulged that he had two blogs, of which one was pseudonymous while pro-UMNO blogger B was also keeping two blogs. Pro-UMNO blogger Ruhanie Ahmad, who

pointed out that he was not involved in a coordinated blog campaign against Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, revealed he was running four different blogs then.

A concerted effort aimed at framing the ruling party in a negative light and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as a weak and corrupt leader was also evident in the content analysis, available in Chapter Six. For example, the analysis showed that blog posts specifically critical of then prime minister were most commonly found in the pseudonymous blogs (Table 29). It also showed a considerable number of blog posts that were specifically critical of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (Table 28). The analysis indicated a blogosphere that was primarily critical of the ruling party and the government machinery. The top two targets of critical tone were the ruling party and government departments/agencies (Table 26).

The negative frames were usually posted at around the same time, creating the impression of a loud voice verbalised in unison in order to direct the public's attention towards the unflattering frames of the national leadership. According to pro-UMNO blogger Syed Azidi Syed Aziz, negative information that bloggers received about Abdullah Ahmad Badawi were posted on their blogs. Recalling some of their initial efforts, Syed Azidi Syed Aziz explained:

That was how Rocky's (Ahirudin Attan of *Rocky's Bru*) first attack

on Pak Lah was the yacht. Then a series of attacks against Pak Lah

commenced, on his holidays in Brisbane, on his house in Perth and

his marriage.

The luxury yacht and rumours surrounding the marriage of Abdullah

Ahmad Badawi to Jean Danker in March 2007 were highlighted on the

blogs to create suspicions about the integrity of the then premier, thus

questioning and possibly eroding his credibility in leading the country.

Other negative frames of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi that flooded the

blogosphere were photographs and posters to create the perception that the

national leader was dishonest and 'sleeping on the job.' This earned

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi the infamous reference of 'Sleeping Beauty' on

the blogosphere (Kickdefella, 2007a). The offensive framing of Abdullah

Ahmad Badawi as a 'flip flop' prime minister who was unable to take

decisive actions without being influenced by his infamous 'fourth floor

boys' also began circulating in the blogosphere from as early as February

2007[52]. It was then commonplace to find terms, such as 'sleeping beauty'

and 'prime minister flip flop' used to characterise Abdullah Ahmad

Badawi in the blogosphere. This gave the impression that they were widely

held views, not simply those of individual bloggers.

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[52] Contents framing the former premier as 'sleepy' and 'flip flop' in his administration are available in the *MyKMU.net* website. Those contents were posted in 2007 and February 2008, just before the 12th general election. Similar negative frames on the prime minister continued to fill the blogosphere after the 2008 election.

Managing the information flow required some form of coordination in order to dominate the blogosphere discourse. When members of the "band of brotherhood" started a negative post, it would be linked, replicated or presented in a different angle, giving the impression that the blogosphere was flooded with critical posts of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. For example, pro-UMNO blogger Ruhanie Ahmad (2010) recalled that some of his blog posts linked to the *MyKMU.net* website were picked up by opposition parties like the DAP. Some of his negative postings were also linked to the popular blog *Malaysia Today* at that time. Similarly, pro-UMNO blogger B disclosed that a lot of his articles appeared in the popular blog *Malaysia Today*. Pro-UMNO blogger B further explained that members of the "band of brotherhood" would meet to coordinate the information flow. In an interview for this research, pro-UMNO blogger B said:

> I would meet them and sometimes we planned the stories. I would inform them about a certain issue and I would ask if they could carry those stories. You do this angle and you do that angle. So, it was like '*pakat*' (planned or coordinated).

Pro-UMNO blogger A also revealed that members of the "band of brotherhood" called each other regularly and met once a month to sound out ideas on what to post. They would also tag each other if they found interesting articles that were appropriate for their political agenda. He also recalled that *Malaysia Today* had agreed to be the "conduit" for the chain of issues against Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. It was after the secret pact that

Raja Petra Kamarudin, webmaster of the *Free Anwar Campaign* in the late 1990s, began opening up his popular blog *Malaysia Today* to contents of pro-UMNO bloggers (Partisan blogger A, 2010). This shows how the informal, ideologically varied network can become an organised group, coming together to achieve a particular political agenda through blogging.

Without this kind of coordination, pro-UMNO blogger B believes that the flow of information and the underlying agenda will be less coherent and the people will be confused. Coordination on the kind of articles to be posted on their blogs also reflects the belief of pro-UMNO blogger A who observes that "flooding the internet can result in other bloggers picking up our stories," thus, increasing the possibility that those messages will filter down to the audiences. This further explains how and why hyperlinks to other blogs can be used to direct audiences to read what the bloggers want them to read, thus giving the impression that the 'unconnected' bloggers are discussing the same failures of the ruling regime.

Efforts of the "band of brotherhood" to manage information flows in order to sway public opinion are also evident from a posting by pro-UMNO blogger Syed Azidi Syed Aziz in his blog *Kickdefella* (2009).

> [The secret meeting saw the] Malay big gun in the Malay blogosphere and one non-blogger whose agenda was to topple Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, using a well fine tuned orchestrate informal movement within the bloggers' circle … We also strategized our postings by creating a chain of issues against

Abdullah's (Ahmad Badawi) lifestyle, character, attitude and policies.

This is further supported by findings of the content analysis that suggest the use of blogs to manage information flows to change public perception. Tracing the sources used to create blog contents, the results showed a prominent use of online social media, particularly other blogs and YouTube. While mainstream media remained the most frequently used source to generate blog posts, the second most common source was other blogs and YouTube (Table 32). This indicates an effort among some of the bloggers to highlight each other's views in order to shape public opinion.

An analysis of interviews with members of the "band of brotherhood" has, thus far, demonstrated that blogging is a part of scandal politics which involves an active management of information flows to change public perception towards the national leadership. Efforts to flood and shape the blogosphere with political scandals and thereby tarnish the character of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and targeted UMNO leaders demonstrate how biased information can be used to shape public opinion and electoral outcomes. The way information is managed and framed on the blogs shows how blogging can fulfil the functions of framing and priming. As acknowledged by some pro-UMNO bloggers, some of the information published on their blogs was one-sided and could not be substantiated. Nevertheless, the aim was to change public opinion. It also points to a process of "refeudalization" of the public sphere in which information is

manipulated by spin doctors or public relations experts. Although blogging provides an opportunity for this group of bloggers to voice and express their views, the focus on political scandals does not contribute to more informed public debate in electoral politics.

Blogging as part of scandal politics can also be interpreted as commonplace in UMNO politics and a reflection of the wider political environment. As highlighted in Chapter Five, campaigns to assassinate the characters of certain personalities in UMNO through the production and circulation of *surat layang*[53] (flying letters or poison pen letters) are not new. Such materials, however, are usually circulated among UMNO members to discredit rival politicians particularly during times of intense power struggle in the party (Raja Petra Kamarudin, 2009: 29). Political scientist Hilley (2001: 151) also observes that character assassination is not new to UMNO politics when referring to the emergence of the book entitled "50 Reasons why Anwar cannot be PM (Prime Minister)" to tarnish the reputation of then deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim. The traditional method of circulating *surat layang* to UMNO members on alleged scandals of political rivals seems to have spilled over into the blogosphere. Blogging seems to have become a more convenient and cheaper method for pro-UMNO bloggers to carry out such campaigns. The political culture of assassinating the character of political rivals seems to

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[53] See Chapter Five for an explanation of *surat layang*.

have shifted to the online platform. Thus, blogging as part of scandal politics appears to mirror the wider political culture of UMNO politics.

Involvement of former media and political elites

An analysis of bloggers involved in the first secret meeting showed that they were influential people of high standing in society and not just ordinary citizens. Some were former media and political elites. Among the former media elites were Ahirudin Attan, Nuraina Samad, Kadir Jasin, Syed Akbar Ali and Sufi Yusoff, who was also Mahathir Mohamad's personal assistant. The former media elites were also politically connected. Others who were perceived as politically connected were Ruhanie Ahmad, who was then a former UMNO parliamentarian, pro-UMNO bloggers A and B, Syed Azidi Syed Aziz, Raja Petra Kamarudin and Jeff Ooi, who was then a member of Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan) which is a coalition member of the BN. Jeff Ooi resigned from Gerakan in early July 2007 and joined the DAP on July 31, 2007, after he was offered to be a DAP candidate in the 12th general election (Ooi, 2010). All of them kept a blog during the 2008 election, except Sufi Yusoff and Syed Akbar Ali. The latter, who described himself in his blog profile as a newspaper columnist, a writer of two books and a company director, began blogging in October 2008.

The vast presence of former media and political elites in the blogosphere is also supported by the content analysis. As highlighted in Chapter Six, news editors, former editors, journalists and political writers

topped the list of occupations among those who kept a blog during the three-month period selected for this research (Table 34). Professionals, such as doctors, engineers, lawyers, lecturers, consultants, researchers and teachers were the second highest while politicians, such as elected representatives, former elected representatives and assistants of parliamentarians, were listed as the third highest occupation of the blogging community. The involvement of former editors and journalists in the blogosphere was also highlighted by Ahirudin (2008) who described the period between 2006 and 2008 as the "era of journalist bloggers" (p. 3). Ahirudin (2008) listed several former editors, who had left the mainstream media, as active bloggers at that time. The content analysis and interviews with partisan bloggers suggest the support and active involvement of former media elites in the "band of brotherhood" to use their blogs in a strategic manner to oust Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. It points to attempts by some of the former media and political elites to set the blog agenda by managing the information flows.

Many of the bloggers who attended the initial private meeting were A-list bloggers. An analysis of the blog traffic during the three-month period by comparing the number of comments received per blog post showed that majority of those who attended the first secret meeting were running popular blogs. Among the A-list bloggers were civil society blogger Bernard Khoo, who runs the blog *Zorro-Unmasked*, pro-UMNO blogger B, Jeff Ooi of *Screenshots*, Raja Petra Kamarudin of *Malaysia Today*,

Kadir Jasin of *The Scribe*, Ahirudin Attan of *Rocky's Bru*, Nuraina Samad whose blog is *3540 Jalan Sudin* and Syed Azidi Syed Aziz of the blog *Kickdefella*. Only pro-UMNO blogger A and Ruhanie Ahmad were considered B-list blogs. It suggests the involvement of influential Malay bloggers is an important consideration in the use of blogs to shape public opinion. However, it must be acknowledged here that efforts to interview some of the former media elites on their involvement in the "band of brotherhood" did not materialise, despite repeated attempts.

Interviews with the "band of brotherhood" and the relationship of former media elites had with Mahathir Mohamad point to the role of the former premier as the primary figure behind the pro-UMNO bloggers. Again it must be noted clearly here that attempts to interview Mahathir Mohamad to obtain a deeper understanding on his possible influence in the "band of brotherhood" were unsuccessful[54]. It must also be stated plainly here that Mahathir Mohamad had never openly spoken about the "band of brotherhood" or the attempt of pro-UMNO bloggers to remove Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. However, there were several factors to suggest that Mahathir Mohamad was a pillar behind the bloggers who strategised the use of their blogs to bring down his political nemesis Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

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[54] Efforts to secure an interview with Mahathir Mohamad through his personal assistant Sufi Yusoff failed to materialise. A set of questions, including his role in the lead-up to the 2008 general election, was emailed to Sufi Yusoff in May 2010. However, there was no response to the questions sent to the former premier.

One factor that pointed to Mahathir Mohamad's role in supporting the "band of brotherhood" was the presence of his personal assistant Sufi Yusoff at every bloggers' meeting (Syed Azidi, 2010). Partisan blogger Syed Azidi Syed Aziz believes that the idea of strategising the use of pro-UMNO blogs to oust Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is from Mahathir Mohamad because of the presence of Sufi Yusoff. He observed that "his private secretary was not a blogger but he was there at the meeting, taking down notes ... every bloggers' meeting, he would be around" (Syed Azidi, 2010). The presence of Sufi Yusoff at every bloggers' meeting raised the suspicion because he was under the employment of Mahathir Mohamad.

Expressing a similar view were politician-bloggers E and Jeff Ooi. Politician-blogger E (2010) believed that Mahathir Mohamad funded the pro-UMNO bloggers' campaign against Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and that his support continued after the 2008 general election. In the lead-up to the 2008 general election, politician-blogger E felt that the main targets were Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Khairy Jamaludin and Kalimullah Hassan. After the election, politician-blogger E observed that the funded bloggers became more racist in their agenda and "Mahathir's thinking was to control the bloggers so that he could then control the national and political agenda" (Politician-blogger E, 2010). Politician-blogger Jeff Ooi who was actively involved in the "band of brotherhood" before the election was, however, less clear about the role of Mahathir Mohamad when he said: "He (Mahathir Mohamad) provided us with a platform and he is still a

force to be reckoned with as people sorely missed Mahathir especially with Abdullah's ineffectiveness." The former prime minister had also been going on road shows in 2006 to voice his grievances and some of the members of the "band of brotherhood" were involved in those activities (Ooi, 2010; Partisan blogger A, 2010). It was also a common observation that the former prime minister had been vocal about his grievances against his successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (Wain, 2009). Thus, Mahathir Mohamad's name began surfacing as the primary figure behind the "band of brotherhood."

One indisputable fact is the close ties Mahathir Mohamad has with the former editors of the UMNO-linked media group, such as Ahirudin Attan, Nuraina Samad and Kadir Jasin. They were editors when Mahathir Mohamad was UMNO president and prime minister. Ahirudin Attan was quick to blog about a press conference of Mahathir Mohamad with the headlines "Pak Lah should resign," a day after the 2008 polls showed the dismal performance of BN in the general election (Rocky's Bru, 2008a). Kadir Jasin wrote the introduction in Mahathir Mohamad's book entitled "Blogging to unblock," published in 2008. The book featured some of the former premier's articles penned on his popular blog *chedet.com*. Civil society blogger H, who was actively engaging members of the "band of brotherhood" pointed out that most of his pro-UMNO blogger friends were helping Mukhriz Mahathir (Mahathir Mohamad's son) during the campaigning period of the 2008 general election. Mukhriz Mahathir

contested as a candidate in the parliamentary seat of in Jerlun in Kedah, (north of Peninsula Malaysia). This further highlights the possibility of Mahathir Mohamad's influence on pro-UMNO bloggers from behind the scenes.

One posting that seemed to concur with the perception that Mahathir Mohamad was the influential figure behind the use of blogs to run down Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his regime could be seen in the posting of Syed Akbar Ali on his blog *Outsyed The Box* in May 2010. Syed Akbar Ali, an attendee of the first "secret meeting," wrote about the "clandestine meeting" held to discuss strategies among some of influential bloggers at the National Press Club. Syed Akbar Ali singled out Mahathir Mohamad as the "common factor uniting us all at that time" (OutSyed the box, 2010). These narratives demonstrated how influential media and political elites could be a force behind the blog campaign which began as a move to oust a party leader. Those involved in the campaign were not ordinary citizens but were individuals who were already politically active in society. This also points to how the Malaysian blogosphere can be a reflection of the existing social and ideological structures of society, rather than a creator of new ones.

The role of Mahathir Mohamad behind the "band of brotherhood" and his use of blogs to control the political agenda may be difficult to link directly. However, the common elements that bound some members of the "band of brotherhood" and Mahathir Mohamad seemed too much of a

coincidence to ignore the possibility that the strategic use of the blogs in the lead-up to the 2008 general election was primarily the work of former media and political elites. The mainstream news media were no longer available to the former prime minister to articulate his concerns, thus the internet served as the only avenue to voice his views and discontentment with the ruling regime. But more significantly, the blogosphere also reflects the way UMNO politics is played out where the undercurrent and the real political moves are away from the public eye. Where traditionally the involvement of political elites is hidden, blogging provides a more transparent window through which to view the power struggle between powerful elites in UMNO.

Collapse in the "band of brotherhood"

After the opposition scored an overwhelming victory at the March 8 polls, the "band of brotherhood" began to disintegrate as the political goal that bound members together was becoming a force for division. The 2008 election results revealed the divergent goals among the members as some of the pro-UMNO bloggers felt responsible for the dismal performance of the BN. For example, pro-UMNO bloggers A and B disclosed that they felt responsible for the BN's huge losses in 2008. Pro-UMNO blogger B pointed out in his interview that his blogging for 2008 was "to put a dent on Pak Lah's leadership without sinking the ship" while pro-UMNO blogger A was more explicit when he said:

> For us, UMNO bloggers, we have a guilty conscience. We almost toppled the government. If you did your math, we lost Selangor, Perak, Penang, Kedah, [which are] major industrial states where 70% of the country's revenue are from. You've lost your grasp on the nation, the heartbeat of the nation.

The general election result was definitely not what the pro-UMNO bloggers in the "band of brotherhood" wanted. Some of their targets, such as Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Khairy Jamaludin, Azalina Othman, Syed Hamid Albar and Nazri Aziz were re-elected in the election while BN suffered a major defeat in its almost 50-year rule in the country. As such, efforts of pro-UMNO bloggers to pressure Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to resign from his position as party president and prime minister continued. Some members of the "band of brotherhood", particularly pro-UMNO bloggers, began calling for the resignation of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, blaming him for the loss of BN's two-thirds majority in parliament (Ruhanie, 2010). Support for the then deputy prime minister Najib Razak to replace Abdullah Ahmad Badawi began emerging in the blogosphere.

The call for support of Najib Razak marked the beginnings of the collapsed ties among members of the "band of brotherhood." Some civil society members, who teamed up with the "band of brotherhood," were aiming for a change in the ruling regime (Haris, 2010). As such, calls by pro-UMNO bloggers, including some former media elites, to support Najib Razak as a replacement for Abdullah Ahmad Badawi were not supported

by some civil society bloggers. The relationship among members of the "band of brotherhood" was becoming contentious, with accusations and counter-accusations surfacing in the blogosphere, further highlighting the emerging divisions.

The re-appointment of some former media elites connected with the "band of brotherhood" to their positions in mainstream news organisations further strained relations among its members. Several former media elites who left their jobs in mainstream newspapers during the premiership of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi were reinstated as editors of UMNO-linked stable of media organisations (The Malaysian Insider, 2009; Rocky's Bru, 2009b; 2009c). Among them were Ahirudin Attan, Nuraina Samad and Ahmad Talib who had been identified as attendees of the first secret meeting of the "band of brotherhood." Ahirudin Attan returned to *The Malay Mail* as an editor while Nuraina Samad was reinstated as an editor of *New Straits Times*. The new appointments came about a month after Najib Razak took over from Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as the country's sixth prime minister in April 2009 (The Malaysian Insider, 2009). These changing dynamics in the media and political landscape contributed to the collapse in the "band of brotherhood." The break-up suggests that blogging can help create opportunistic associations at a particular moment in electoral politics to achieve a particularistic goal, but fails to build more enduring partnerships.

Mainstream media and the partisan bloggers

Blogging in the Malaysian context is inextricably linked to the oppositional stance of bloggers to the government-controlled mainstream news media. This is because the tight government control contributes to the traditional media being less tolerant of dissenting views. Recent studies on coverage in the mainstream media during the 13-day campaigning period of the 2008 Malaysian general elections showed that they were overwhelmingly supportive of the BN when compared with the opposition (Sankaran, 2008; Abdul Rashid, 2009). In a content analysis of the mainstream media coverage between February 26 and March 11, 2008, the majority of coverage was pro-BN while pro-opposition stood at 19% of the total number of election stories (Sankaran, 2008). A similar conclusion was reached in another study of eight newspapers, radio and television by the Electoral Studies Unit of the International Islamic University Malaysia. Space allocation to opposition parties during the campaigning period was between 20% and 35% (Abdul Rashid, 2009). With limited coverage of oppositional views, blogging, thus, becomes an avenue for information ignored by the mainstream media (Syed Azidi, 2010).

The tight control of the mainstream media by the ruling regime contributed to a perception that blogging embodied that right to free speech and expression. The democratic right to free expression seems to include publishing information that can shape public opinion to bring down particular personalities and leaders. Pro-UMNO blogger Ruhanie Ahmad

went to the extent of calling himself a "practitioner of citizen journalism …

disseminating the voice of the people" in his endeavour to use his blog to

remove a national leader in electoral politics. Blogging is not only a

platform for them to voice their political thoughts and opinions but it also

helps to further their political agendas (Syed Azidi, 2010). The extent of

control over the mainstream media has encouraged these bloggers into

using their blogs as a tool to oust their political rivals.

The motivation to blog is not only to publish views and information

ignored by the mainstream media but it is aimed at fuelling public

frustration and anger towards the ruling regime. Several partisan bloggers,

who were members of the opposition parties, explained that blogging was

aimed at encouraging public dissatisfaction so that the people would

demand a change in government during an election. For example, partisan

blogger Din Merican (2010), then a PKR campaign strategist for Anwar

Ibrahim and PKR member during the 2008 general election[55], stressed:

"We were not getting enough publicity from the mainstream media so I

decided … that I should start a blog of my own." When he first started

blogging in 2007, Din Merican noted that he began by reporting on Anwar

Ibrahim's road show and publishing press statements of the de facto PKR

leader that saw miniscule coverage in the mainstream media. Din Merican

also observed that "in 2008, there was frustration, there was anger of the

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[55] Din Merican, in an interview for this research, revealed that he resigned as a member of PKR in November 2009 because of the party's failure to realise some of the election pledges made during the 2008 general election.

people and what the blogs were doing were just fuelling it – making people more aware and spreading it." Concurring with Din Merican were PAS bloggers C and D. In an interview for this research, partisan blogger D asserted that blogging gave him the freedom to publish negative postings of pro-UMNO bloggers in order to raise public sentiments against the government. Pro-opposition blogger C, who is now a pensioner, recalled that some of the negative postings regarding Abdullah Ahmad Badawi did not make it to the mainstream media but they were used in his blog to step up attacks against the former premier and ruling regime. These narratives suggest that blogging is not just to accommodate alternative views but it can shape public opinion to vote out the ruling regime in an election.

The use of blogging to provide alternative information that is anti-establishment or oppositional within the context of a tightly controlled mainstream media operating in a relatively authoritarian political environment contributes to the view that the Malaysian blogosphere serves as a counterbalance to traditional media outlets. This supports the idea that blogs can be more credible than the mainstream media. As recorded in an online survey of 1,537 blog readers in Kuala Lumpur conducted between November 30 and December 2006, the study showed that the local mainstream media were perceived as least credible when compared with foreign mainstream media, alternative media and blogs (Tan & Zawawi, 2008: 62). A similar conclusion was reached in a study of weblog users' view on the credibility of blogs in America where blogs were regarded as

highly credible when compared with mainstream media (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). So when the mainstream media carried reports of government action against bloggers, the news stories could help drive up the number of visitors to the blogosphere. Reflecting on his experience, pro-UMNO blogger Syed Azidi Syed Aziz (2010) said those media reports[56] could further "strengthen the people's trust in blog postings." Agreeing with this analogy is PKR blogger Nathaniel Tan, the first blogger to be arrested under the Official Secrets Act in July 2007 for a comment posted on his blog *Jelasinfo.net*. The analysis, thus far, indicates that the state of the mainstream media can contribute to blogging being viewed as an avenue for anti-establishment or alternative information.

Summary

The interviews showed that blogging was deployed by elite groups in Malaysia as an extension of scandal politics practices, aimed at assassinating the characters of particular leaders to change the national leadership in an election. The effort was described as a campaign of "psychological warfare" to highlight political scandals of national leaders in order to influence public opinion and, consequently, the result of the 2008 election in Malaysia. During the election, the Malaysian blogosphere

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[56]The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission questioned Syed Azidi Syed Aziz in August 2007 for 90 minutes regarding his blog posting on a doctored photo of the current prime minister Najib Razak with his aide Razak Baginda and a murdered Mongolian woman Altantuya Shaaribu (Kickdefella, 2007b). His second run-in with the law was when he posted an upside down flag of Malaysia on August 6, 2008, in his *Kickdefella* blog. He was jailed for four days when he was investigated on charges of sedition (Kickdefella, 2008).

was a primary contributor to the centrality of scandal in the public sphere. This focus on political scandal is reflective of a broader trend in modern democracies, as highlighted in the work of Thompson (2000). The management of information to promote biased views about the national leadership also demonstrates the effort of partisan bloggers to tell the audience how to think about particular leaders and not only what to focus on. A blogosphere filled with political scandals framed in ways to shape public perception highlights the constraints acting upon the free transmission of information. This also limits the extent to which blogging can contribute to a widening of public spaces for democratic discussion. A manipulation of information by spin doctors or public relations experts can also hamper the citizens' ability to engage in rational debates and obstruct public reasoning (Habermas, 2008). In this sense, blogging can reduce the quality of debates, thus falling short in its ability to facilitate a free marketplace of ideas.

The use of blogs as part of political scandal involved various strategies, from seeking out influential Malay bloggers to framing, managing and coordinating information flows in the blogosphere. The effort emerged out of the strategic planning of members of the "band of brotherhood" to organise bloggers and manage the flow of blog information to shape public opinion towards the national leadership. In other words, the blog campaign did not occur just because new digital technologies were available but grew out of the political environment at a

particular moment in electoral politics. It was a consciously created network to achieve a specific goal at a particular point in electoral politics. The circumstances leading to the blog campaign suggest that common application of network theories to political blogging is only partly useful here. Network theory gives the understanding of connectivity emerging incidentally, unplanned and uncoordinated. However, the "band of brotherhood" was planned, managed and linked together by different dynamics and circumstances at a particular moment in electoral politics. It demonstrates how a usually fragmented blogosphere can be consolidated and crystallised to achieve a particular goal in an election.

The establishment and subsequent break-up of the network reflect the influence of different dynamics and political circumstances at a defining moment in electoral politics. The network was first set up in the lead-up to the general election and it continued until the polling day on March 8 with a clear goal to remove the national leadership. It was, however, continually shaped by the wider political environment and the different forces at play within it. When it subsequently collapsed, the analysis pointed to the influence of the specific political scenario at that time, particularly the major defeat of the ruling regime. The split became clear when members of the "band of brotherhood" returned to their respective political shells. This supports the argument that the impact of technologies on contemporary society needs to take into consideration the dynamic relationships and

interdependencies that can develop out of the devices and practices (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002).

The interviews and content analysis portrayed a blogosphere that was structured according to the interests of former media and political elites. The involvement of former media elites and their connection to certain powerful figures in Malaysian politics were indicative of their dominant presence in the blogosphere. Their huge presence in the blogosphere also demonstrates that blogging can be a reflection of the social and ideological structures of society. A dominance of Malay politics, as seen in the way the pro-UMNO bloggers were engaging "Malay influential bloggers" was a reflection of the political reality of the Malaysian society where power was in the hands of the Malays. Moreover, the Malaysian blogosphere at that time revealed a clash of two political giants of UMNO – Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Mahathir Mohamad. The dominant discourse to present the former in a negative light could be indicative of an appropriation of the blog agenda by the latter. This demonstrates that the internet can become the voice of the elites, thus negating the democratic potentials of blogging and reflecting the existing structures of society (Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Cammaerts, 2008; Hindman, 2009). However, blogging in full public view about the power struggles of political elites in UMNO can provide a more transparent account of the contestations for power among UMNO elites.

The political economy of the mainstream media seems to have contributed to the claim that blogging can accommodate anti-establishment

or dissenting views within the workings of a controlled media operating in a relatively authoritarian society. Interviews with the partisan bloggers suggest that blogging can be a platform for them to air wide-ranging opposing views and information to shape public opinion in an election. In this respect, blogging can flourish as a vehicle for advancing oppositional viewpoints ignored in the mainstream media.

Chapter 9

Blogging to promote alternative views and political change

Introduction

This chapter discusses another group of bloggers who were also actively blogging about the political situation during the election. This group of socio-political bloggers described themselves as "independent" bloggers because they were not members of any political parties. Instead, many of the research participants disclosed that they were members of non-governmental organisations and they were blogging out of their own volition and interest. Although this group of bloggers was non-partisan, most of them acknowledged that their aim was to remove the ruling regime with the hope that a change in government will bring about fairer policies in the country. An assessment on the ways they were using their blogs and the political goal they were aiming to achieve suggested that this group of bloggers was generally anti-establishment and was leaning towards the opposition. They were neither "independent" nor "neutral" per se. Thus, it would be more appropriate to address this group of socio-political bloggers as "civil society bloggers" as opposed to "independent" bloggers.

Although many of the civil society bloggers interviewed for this research acknowledged that they were using their blog to express their thoughts and fulfil their right to free speech, some of them did more than just propagate their views. Some of them were acting like pressure groups

during the 2008 election by initiating blog campaigns to generate public

participation and make demands on the government, the mainstream media

and the opposition. Evidence of blogging to generate public participation

and make demands on the government could be seen from calls for support

of protest rallies, such as Bersih and Hindraf in November 2007[57]. In other

instances, the demands could be interpreted as a form of negotiation or

bargaining between the blog campaigners and the various political parties

contesting in the election. An example was the blog campaign initiated by

civil society blogger Haris Ibrahim, who launched two documents, parts of

which were later turned into election manifestoes of the opposition parties

during the election. The two documents were designed to seek the

endorsement of political parties contesting the election. In return, the A-list

blogger pledged support to opposition parties that endorsed the documents.

Other civil society bloggers participated and supported this campaign by

linking it to their respective blogs or passing on information about the

campaign to a wider audience. Another blog initiative by Haris Ibrahim

was a boycott of the mainstream media. It was an attempt at pressuring the

traditional media into being fairer in their coverage of the election

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[57] The Bersih gathering, held in Kuala Lumpur on November 10, was a call for free and fair elections in the country. It was organised by the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, a group of 60 non-governmental organisations, supported by five opposition parties (The Star Online, 2007b). The coalition was calling for electoral reforms, with particular reference to the use of indelible ink on polling day, a clean-up of the electoral roll, the abolishment of postal votes and access to the media (The People's Parliament, 2007a). The Hindraf protest, held in Kuala Lumpur on November 25, was a call for better social and economic treatment of the Indian community in Malaysia.

campaign. The blog campaigns are a reminder of how public interest groups can make demands on those contesting the elections in order to obtain their support, much like using their blogs as a bargaining tool. Blogging for the civil society bloggers did not only facilitate the freedom to express their views but accommodated the functions of a lobby group in electoral politics.

The ability of blogs to facilitate fluid ties to achieve a specific goal in electoral politics is evident from an analysis of interviews with the civil society bloggers. Many chose to blog individually, without any form of coordination or collaboration, in their effort to urge readers to remove the ruling regime while others preferred to establish loose ties with the "band of brotherhood" for the purpose. Civil society bloggers who did form informal ties with members of the "band of brotherhood" indicated that they felt some sort of commonality with them. The "band of brotherhood", as discussed in Chapter Eight, was focused on framing the then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in a negative light while the civil society bloggers wanted a change in government and policy. Similarly, some of the civil society bloggers were framing Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the ruling regime in a negative light, much like the partisan bloggers. The forming of loose ties between some of the civil society and partisan bloggers demonstrates an emergence of "a complex mosaic" of interconnected public spheres in cyberspace (Keane, 2000). It also suggests an ease in establishing informal ties when certain forces in the blogosphere

converge to affect a regime change in the country. However, this loose coalition was achievable only at a specific moment in time as some of the civil society and partisan bloggers began drifting apart after the March 8 polls.

The loose ties established during the 2008 election between some civil society bloggers and the "band of brotherhood" broke down and gave way to tense and contentious relationships, particularly after the March 8 polls. Suspicions on the real agenda of the "band of brotherhood" began to surface after the ruling regime suffered a major setback at the polls. Members of the "band of brotherhood" continued attacking then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi after the election and some of them wanted the then deputy prime minister Najib Razak to replace the former while some of the civil society bloggers were critical of the latter. Accusations and counter-accusations between some civil society bloggers and members of the "band of brotherhood" brought into focus the ulterior motives of some of the bloggers. This was especially so when A-list civil society bloggers were accused of receiving payment for publishing particular contents in support of certain political parties and leaders. Such allegations could tarnish the reputation of those bloggers and possibly reduce the level of influence on their readers. Some civil society bloggers who were critical of Najib Razak after the March 8 polls were accused of being paid by the leader's political rivals. The competing forces in the blogosphere were essentially discrediting the reputation of particular civil

society bloggers. The effort bore some resemblance to the method used by the "band of brotherhood" to tarnish the reputation of rival politicians. The blogosphere was not only fractious and fragmented but was dominated by scandal politics where bloggers were being discredited in the same manner. The tense relations demonstrate how the quality of debate can degenerate into accusations and counter-accusations which fail to enhance the quality of public discussion or debate. While blogging can facilitate the forming of loose ties in an election, a focus on tarnishing the reputation of political enemies can constrain public debates.

The ideal that blogging can facilitate democratic discussion leads to a key debate on how the new media can potentially provide the public space for it. An examination of interviews with this group of bloggers suggests that the online platform is, in a limited way, able to generate discussions among readers. Some of the civil society bloggers believe that certain topics of discussion, such as religion, can generate wide ranging responses from readers, indicating that public debates can thrive on the blogosphere. On the other hand, some of them perceive that public discussions can be restricted by suspicions on the real intention of the comments left by readers. Others feel that reader responses are merely "senseless chatter" (Civil society blogger J, 2010; Loone, 2010). Because of their suspicions, some of the bloggers disallowed readers from giving their feedback. The content analysis also showed that blogs were not widely used to create public discussions, were hardly used to express opinions crossing political

divisions and the feedback was rarely used for extended public debate (Table 14).

Many civil society bloggers indicated that blogging did enable them to exercise their democratic right to free speech and to challenge coverage of the tightly controlled mainstream media. Interviews with this group of bloggers revealed that blogging was able to accommodate a multitude of views and discourses, unlike the traditional media. For example, discussions on demands for a free and fair election, a better living standard for the Indian community or for fairer and more equitable policies were largely ignored by the traditional media but those discussions were widely published on the blogosphere. Many of the civil society bloggers even indicated that they adopted the role of journalists and editors by reporting and publishing issues and events ignored by the traditional media. The collective challenge to mainstream media coverage by a network of bloggers can turn the blogosphere into an alternative media form. Blogging may not be able to change how the traditional media operate but it can be an avenue for alternative views in a relatively authoritarian society.

Blog campaigns for political and policy reforms

The use of blogs by this group seems to extend beyond publishing political views and commenting about the political situation in the country. Some civil society bloggers indicated that they were using their blogs to launch online campaigns to pressure the government and media owners including the opposition, if they were elected to power. Interviews with

civil society bloggers revealed that several online campaigns had been initiated during the 2008 general election and most of the campaigns pointed to the political reforms they were hoping for. It shows that this group of bloggers is operating much like a pressure group by using their blogs as a sort of bargaining tool to push for political and policy reforms in an election. This follows the understanding of American political scientist Henry Turner (1958) that pressure groups are non-partisan organisations that may attempt to influence, among others, the electoral process and public opinion "using any method or technique which they believe will serve their purpose effectively" (p. 64). In this case, blogging was available to this group of civil society bloggers who were pushing for various demands in an election. The new media did not only live up to its technological design in accommodating free speech but it became a tool for civil society to publicise their demands and to exert pressure to ensure that the political and policy reforms promised during the election were met.

One blog campaign that could be interpreted as an attempt at making political changes in an election was the move to obtain the endorsement of political parties to agree with some of the demands of civil society. The online campaign, containing two documents called *The People's Voice* and *The People's Declaration*, was launched by civil society blogger Haris Ibrahim on his popular blog *The People's Parliament*, after the parliament was dissolved on February 13, 2008. The two documents, comprising calls to restore genuine democracy, transparency, justice and equality in the

country, were written in Malay, English and Chinese (The People's Parliament, 2008). Efforts to enlist the support of political parties for the two documents began on February 6, 2008 (Ibid). Recalling his blog campaign in an interview for this research, Haris Ibrahim, who is a lawyer, human rights activist, founder of public interest group *Article 11*[58] and president of the Malaysian Civil Liberties Movement (MCLM)[59], said:

> We extended both documents to all political parties from both sides of the divide, with an invitation to endorse. BN completely ignored [them]. The three present Pakatan [Rakyat] parties[60], MDP (Malaysian Democratic Party), PSM (Parti Sosialis Malaysia) and Pasok (United Pasok Nunukragang National Organisation[61]) from Sabah, endorsed them. So we had an official launch of the documents where we formally adopted the three main parties as our Barisan Rakyat (People's Front). Clearly in the run-up to the general election, if we take it from January to February, the objective was to dump the BN. I made it very clear that we have to

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[58]*Article 11* refers to the article in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia that says every Malaysian has the right to profess and practise his or her religion.

[59] Haris Ibrahim was president of MCLM, a non-governmental organisation formed in 2010 aimed at empowering civil society and initiating change. But he resigned after a disagreement with chairman Raja Petra Kamarudin, the blogger of popular blog *Malaysia Today* (The Sun Daily, 2012).

[60] This refers to opposition political parties of the DAP, PKR and PAS.

[61] The party was deregistered by the Registrar of Societies on May 27, 2008, after it failed to resolve a leadership stalemate between John Richard Jayasuria and Cleftus Mojingol (Daily Express, 2008).

get rid of the BN. There was no guarantee that the Barisan Rakyat

parties will deliver. But the message was about people playing the

role of boss, people taking back the processes that were put in the

Constitution for us.

The expectations of some of the civil society bloggers, including the

position of political parties on civil liberties, were communicated openly

through blogging. Parts of the document were adopted by the opposition

political parties and incorporated into their pledge of promises in the

election. The success of his campaign in getting six political parties to sign

up indicated that Haris Ibrahim was articulating a view felt more widely in

the Malaysian society.

Endorsement of the two documents by the three main opposition

parties – PKR, PAS and the DAP – which later made up the PR or

opposition front seemed to have fitted well with the objective of Haris

Ibrahim and other civil society bloggers who wanted fairer policies. The

ruling regime ignored the blog campaign while the opposition parties

supported the demands of civil society as part of their election pledges.

Moreover, wider expectations of civil liberties, good governance and better

welfare of the people, listed in the two documents, could also be read as

failures of the ruling regime. The launching of the two documents online

also indicated that this group of bloggers was acting as a kind of pressure

group to ensure that the opposition parties would honour those pledges if

they were to be voted into power. More importantly, it suggested that

influential civil society bloggers like Haris Ibrahim, who was also an A-list blogger, could potentially become a considerable force in the Malaysian blogosphere. The negotiation was happening in full public view instead of behind closed doors. This provided a more transparent account of this "bargaining" that was occurring between civil society bloggers and political parties. In that sense, political parties could be made more accountable for the promises made in an election.

A couple of online campaigns were also launched against the mainstream media by Haris Ibrahim in the lead-up to the 2008 general election. One of them was following dissatisfaction over mainstream media coverage which was favourable towards the ruling coalition. It called on the traditional media to be more inclusive and fairer in their coverage. This blog campaign to boycott the traditional media saw the emergence of a diversity of views in the Malaysian blogosphere as some of the civil society bloggers agreed with it while others did not. For example, civil society blogger Susan Loone pointed out that the country needed a free press instead of a boycott of the mainstream media, which was not a new effort (Susan Loone's blog, 2007a). However, the online call to boycott the traditional media was supported by other civil society bloggers, such as Bernard Khoo (Zorro-unmasked, 2008) and Ahirudin Attan (Rocky's Bru, 2008b) while Anil Netto publicised it on his blog (Anilnetto.com, 2008). Recalling the boycott mainstream media campaign, Haris Ibrahim noted:

One of the biggest problems we have is circumventing the reporting in the mainstream media. That is a big challenge. In that sense, I think [for] the circle of bloggers who actually worked collectively to try to bring about certain changes to the political tapestry that we see today, that is always a major concern. For example, the lies of *Utusan* (*Melayu*), how do we reach out to the Malay heartland? You talk about the Chinese (language) media. Today, we have the alternative (news portal) *Merdeka Review*[62] which publishes in Chinese. That's one of our biggest challenges, overcoming the misinformation of the mainstream media.

Haris Ibrahim also launched the *Balik Kampung Bawa Berita* campaign to further counter the mainstream media on his blog. The campaign which means *Bringing news back to your village* encouraged urban readers who were connected to the internet to download alternative information from socio-political blogs and circulate them to the rural communities when they returned to their villages. The campaign to help distribute alternative views was aimed at the rural people because of the low internet use and access to the broadband facilities in remote areas of the country. As noted in Chapter Five, statistics in 2008 showed that rural communities made up only about 15% of internet users in the country. Haris Ibrahim also indicated his interest to use his blog to start a campaign

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[62] *Merdeka Review*, established in August 2005 by former private college lecturer Chang Teck Peng, is a Chinese independent news portal. It was on the verge of closing in May 2011 due to a lack of funds (Lim Kit Siang for Malaysia, 2011).

that could "bring people out of cyberspace into the real world" (Haris, 2010). This is based on the realisation that engaging readers online is insufficient for political change if they remain online and are not involved in real-world politics (Ibid).

Other civil society bloggers were more subtle in their push for political and policy reforms on their blog. Instead of launching online campaigns, some were using their blogs to persistently publish their own expectations in the pursuit of fairer and less discriminatory policies. One of them was B-list blogger Dr Chris Anthony who was publishing his thoughts about the country's political situation on his blog *My Malaysia Today*. Chris Anthony, who may not be an A-list blogger like Haris Ibrahim, is a medical doctor and is well-regarded among his circle of friends and churchgoers. An indication of his perceived influence within his community was when he was asked to be a candidate for an opposition party in the 2008 election (Chris, 2010). However, he rejected the proposal. Highlighting weaknesses of the ruling coalition, Chris Anthony expressed his views on the need to end racial and religious bias in the country, the need to restore an independent judiciary and to check the power of the BN by denying the ruling regime its two-thirds majority (My Malaysia Today, 2008a; 2008b; 2008c). The messages essentially point to a regime change in the election. This civil society blogger believes that his profession can help to influence his blog readers on the need to bring about those changes

in an election. These examples indicate an increasing use of blogging for public lobbying in an election.

The interviews, thus far, suggest that blogging is used to make demands and put pressure on the government, media owners and the opposition to concede to the demands of the civil society bloggers. It appears to be a major function of blogging for influential bloggers who feel their credibility as opinion leaders within their respective circle or community can influence readers in an election. The influential bloggers are well-educated, employed in respectable professions and members of non-governmental organisations that are actively defending civil liberties. For example, Haris Ibrahim and Chris Anthony can become a considerable force in the Malaysian blogosphere because they are opinion leaders within their respective social circle or community. The hope of using their identity to influence the public is also reflected in the content analysis. For example, there were more postings of identified blogs urging readers to participate in political action, such as taking part in protest rallies and to vote in the general election when compared with the pseudonymous ones (Table 10). Similarly, blog posts urging readers to vote in the election were more common among the identified blogs than pseudonymous ones (Table 11). Additionally, there were more identified blogs asking readers to vote for the opposition when compared with the pseudonymous blogs (Table 21). Blogging in this sense seems to indicate that the online platform can

be used as a bargaining tool by influential bloggers to push for particular demands in an election.

Fluid ties and scandal politics to oust ruling regime

One overriding goal that civil society bloggers wanted to achieve through blogging was to overthrow the ruling regime. In their interviews for this research, many of the bloggers articulated that policy changes in the country could only be achieved through a regime change. Some of the bloggers were overt while others were more subtle in the call for a regime change, by weaving broader political changes, such as the restoration of civil liberties, good governance and accountability when encouraging readers to oust the ruling regime. The call to weaken the powers of the ruling regime was also focused on personality politics by painting a negative image of the then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and several other leaders of the ruling party. A concentration on personality politics was evident from the narratives of some of the civil society bloggers, especially among those who teamed up with the "band of brotherhood" to frame Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in a negative light. Many of those who did not form loose ties with the "band of brotherhood" were also highlighting scandals involving other BN leaders, such as the then deputy prime minister Najib Razak.

The political scenario and agenda at that time appeared to have provided the impetus for some of the civil society bloggers to work closely with members of the "band of brotherhood." The defamation suit taken

against bloggers Jeff Ooi and Ahirudin Attan by editors of the UMNO-linked mainstream media in 2007 united the diverse social and political forces in the blogosphere. It fuelled discontentment of socio-political bloggers, who turned the then prime minister into a common enemy. The aim of some of the civil society bloggers in wanting to oust the ruling coalition to restore civil liberties, justice and equality coincided with the political agenda of members of the "band of brotherhood". The pro-UMNO bloggers wanted to get rid of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and a range of UMNO ministers while many of the civil society and opposition party bloggers were aiming for a regime change.

Three of the civil society bloggers who took part in this research indicated that they were working with some partisan bloggers in the "band of brotherhood" to bring about political change during the 2008 election. The three - Haris Ibrahim, Bernard Khoo and civil society blogger H – revealed that they had a common goal with the "band of brotherhood" who were working towards removing then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi from the seat of power. They suggested that they were working together with former mainstream news editor Rocky[63] (Ahirudin Attan), whom they believed was instrumental in the "band of brotherhood." For example, civil society blogger H (2010) disclosed:

[63] Again, I would like to point out that efforts to interview Ahirudin Attan on his involvement in the "band of brotherhood" failed to materialise despite repeated attempts during the field research in Kuala Lumpur between February and May 2010.

It happens we had the same line of thinking. Sometimes we did not

meet. We had one intention and our 'wavelength' was the same.

We wrote different angles and took different approaches but it was

on the same thing – *hentam* (criticise) Pak Lah (Abdullah Ahmad

Badawi) and UMNO. I became friendly with some of the UMNO

bloggers who were anti-Pak Lah.

Haris Ibrahim revealed that he shared some commonality though not a

fully united agenda with the "band of brotherhood." The lawyer wanted a

regime change and not just to remove Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. He

explained his motivation was about "getting rid of the BN and everything

that the BN had stood for during the last 40 years" (Haris, 2010). This was

similar with the objective of civil society blogger H who also explained

that he set up his blog with the sole aim of "building negative public

perception about UMNO." The political scenario and the shared agenda

presented an opportunity for these civil society bloggers to work together

with the "band of brotherhood" towards a common goal in an election.

The emergence of scandal politics in the blogs of some civil society

bloggers became evident as they teamed up with the "band of brotherhood"

and began tarnishing the credibility of the then prime minister. For

example, Bernard Khoo disclosed that he did make snide remarks about

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi 'sleeping on the job.' Civil society blogger H

revealed that he was making use of some of the blog postings published by

members of the "band of brotherhood" that were framing Abdullah Ahmad

Badawi in a bad light by linking and publishing them on his blog. A cursory look at their blogs during that time also revealed that they contained similar negative images of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi 'sleeping on the job.' Moreover, findings of the content analysis, as discussed in Chapter Six, suggested an effort among some of the bloggers to highlight each other's blog contents to change public opinion towards the national leadership. The analysis revealed that the second most common source used to create blog content was other blogs. Thus, the linking and highlighting of blog postings that framed the ruling regime and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in an unflattering manner became a common practice among bloggers who harboured the same political hope of ousting the ruling regime in the election. The practice also saw the establishment of loose ties among some of the bloggers in the lead-up to the elections and during the 13-day campaigning period. However, the informal ties fell apart after the March 8 polls. The break-up demonstrated the fluid nature of those ties but also highlighted the different dynamics and the particular circumstances that emerged after the election. The situation culminated in accusations and counter-accusations among members of the "band of brotherhood."

For civil society bloggers who did not link up with the "band of brotherhood," a focus on personality politics was also evident. For example, civil society blogger Susan Loone was questioning the possible involvement of the then deputy prime minister Najib Razak in the murder

of Altantuya Shaaribuu. Those questions could project Najib Razak in a negative light because they could provoke unexplained circumstances of his alleged involvement in the case. In an interview for this thesis, Susan Loone acknowledged her passion in writing freely on the circumstances surrounding the death of Altantuya Shaaribuu. She indicated that she was spending a lot of time and resources in Bangkok, where she was then based, to unravel the mystery surrounding the murder. Likening her obsession in writing about the possible link of Najib Razak and the murder to that of a hobby, she explained:

> There are so many questions not answered. Maybe he (Najib Razak) is not the murderer, [but] everyone involved in the case is linked to him. Why is everyone linked to him in some way or another? My final quest is to look for the photo[64].

A cursory look at Susan Loone's blog showed she had written 235 blog postings related to Altantuya Shaariibuu since November 20, 2006. Some of the postings cried out for justice for the victim's family while others challenged news coverage of the mainstream media in an attempt at providing a different angle to the reports. There were also other postings attacking the character of Najib Razak. By raising questions about his alleged involvement in the case, the blog postings of Susan Loone could

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[64] There were allegations about the existence of a photograph of Najib Razak with his aide Abdul Razak Baginda and Altantuya Shaaribuu. Abdul Razak Baginda was charged but acquitted for abetting the murder of Altantuya Shaaribuu in October 2008 (The Star Online, 2008c). Two other policemen were convicted in 2009 for killing the Mongolian national (BBC News, 2009).

potentially soil the reputation of the then deputy prime minister. The use of blogs by these individuals seemed to be similar to the ways in which the the "band of brotherhood" was concentrating on scandal politics, as discussed in Chapter Eight.

Fragmented blogosphere after March 8 polls

The opportunistic nature of the fluid ties formed between some civil society and partisan bloggers in the "band of brotherhood" during the election subsequently collapsed after the March 8 polls. The break-up could be due to a major defeat of the ruling party and the successful re-election of the then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was the primary target of the "band of brotherhood." The split highlighted a dominance of personality instead of issue-based politics in the Malaysian political scenario. This became apparent when pro-UMNO bloggers in the "band of brotherhood" continued to attack the reputation of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Some promoted calls for the then deputy prime minister Najib Razak to replace the former. However, many civil society bloggers were not in favour with the idea of Najib Razak taking over from Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as they were hoping for a complete regime change. As discussed in Chapter Eight, the collapsed ties took a turn for the worse when some of the former media elites, involved in the "band of brotherhood," were re-appointed to their jobs as editors of UMNO-linked news organisations after Najib Razak took over as the country's sixth prime minister in 2009. The contentious relationships culminated in

accusations and counter-accusations aimed at tarnishing the reputation of fellow bloggers.

Accusations against civil society bloggers were centred on the notion that they had been paid by particular political leaders of the BN or PR to publish certain articles on their blogs. Such accusations carried the connotation that the postings of those bloggers could not be trusted because their blog contents were determined by the agenda of their paymasters. This could give the impression that opinions published on the blogs were not the true and honest views of the writers but those of their political masters or paymasters. These accusations created tensions among the bloggers as they began to become suspicious of each other's motives. Such suspicions were further fuelled when it was made known that UMNO was paying blog writers, termed as UMNO cybertroopers. The blogosphere, thus, began to reveal a fractious and fragmented characteristic with such accusations surfacing after the election. But more importantly, efforts to tarnish the personality of some of the civil society bloggers by their cyberspace competitors seemed to be a move to distract readers from the real issue. The focus was again on tarnishing the image of rivals, in a similar way as the attempt by the "band of brotherhood" to paint Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in a negative light.

The experience of civil society blogger Bernard Khoo was an example of the various accusations and counter-accusations that surfaced after the "band of brotherhood" collapsed. Collaborating with the "band of

brotherhood" during the election, A-list blogger Bernard Khoo recalled his earlier days when he began blogging to support Ahirudin Attan and Jeff Ooi, who were sued by editors of *The New Straits Times*, an UMNO-linked media group, in 2007. In the process of defending the right to free expression, they shared a common agenda of wanting to topple Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. However, the affiliation changed after the election when pro-UMNO bloggers in the "band of brotherhood" revealed their true leanings towards the political ideals of UMNO, which propagates race-based politics and policies. In an interview for this research, Bernard Khoo divulged that Ahirudin Attan had accused him of "either idolising Anwar Ibrahim or being on the payroll of Anwar Ibrahim" because of his blog contents. After the polls, Bernard Khoo revealed that he continued supporting the opposition in his blog and even blogged for the opposition in 10 by-elections that took place after the March 8 polls. Describing the situation after the election as a split in the "band of brotherhood," he explained:

> I stayed true to my cause while others [bloggers who were a part of the "band of brotherhood" during the 2008 election] got aligned and were bought over.

It is obvious that Bernard Khoo and the former media elite are no longer in the same camp, unlike their earlier days in the "band of brotherhood." The reinstatement of Ahirudin Attan and other former media elites involved in the "band of brotherhood" to their previous jobs as editors in UMNO-

linked news organisations in 2009 seemed to be a sore point among some civil society bloggers who did team up with the "band of brotherhood." The narratives indicated that the accusations revolved around the notion of bloggers reaping financial benefits to publish particular contents on their blogs. This accusation of bloggers benefitting from articles published on their blog could be related to the emergence of UMNO cybertroopers, as mentioned earlier in Chapter Five. It could also be rooted in the culture of political patronage, a practice perceived as deep-seated in the Malaysian society.

Indeed, these accusations were spread widely. Some civil society bloggers who did not work closely with the "band of brotherhood" were not spared. For example, Susan Loone, Mahendran and Raaja, all of whom were anti-establishment and A-list bloggers, had been accused of promoting the agenda of powerful agents on their blogs. For her interest in blogging about the murder of Mongolian translator Altantuya Shaariibuu and the possible involvement of then deputy prime minister Najib Razak, Susan Loone disclosed in her interview that she had been accused of being paid and was even called a CIA-operative in Bangkok. She believes that those accusations are the work of UMNO cybertroopers. Civil society bloggers Mahendran and Raaja revealed that they had been accused of being paid by the MIC (a BN coalition party) for some of their postings. The two young bloggers disclosed that they had also been called

"terrorists" for their blog postings on the demands of Hindraf. These accusations can be perceived as efforts to discredit them.

The suspicion that some of the bloggers were paid by particular leaders of the BN or PR to write certain articles could be compounded by monetary offers to tarnish the reputation of certain leaders. A civil society blogger who wanted to remain anonymous in this research revealed that politically connected individuals had propositioned to pay the blogger to publish biased writings on the blog. Elaborating on the incidents when the offer was made, the civil society blogger said:

> The deal was to put vicious comments and at one point they wanted me to slander people anonymously. I would say two or three people approached me to do that. These are people with political parties. This was just before the general election. If I had agreed, I would be paid more than RM5,000 (US$1,400) a month. I would have to pay for my own expenses for the running around like pay for my own petrol. I did not take up the offer. The only thing I would agree to do was to set up portals and write based on facts. We could not agree on the terms. Anonymous comments to attack people are still ok but to slander people or insinuate half-truths are too down low.

Such offers demonstrate that some of the suspicions may have some factual basis to them and there are ostensibly 'independent' bloggers who are paid to maintain blogs in order to further the agenda of their political masters or paymasters.

The interviews had, thus far, highlighted the underlying tension and suspicions that emerged in the Malaysian blogosphere after the 2008 election. The suspicion of bloggers being used to promote the agenda of other political masters seemed real to some of the civil society bloggers. More importantly, the accusations aimed at tarnishing the reputation of fellow bloggers served to mirror the manner of blog use by the "band of brotherhood" to bring down rival politicians in the election. Accusations of being on the payroll of certain political masters became the key element used to discredit fellow bloggers. When former media elites involved in the "band of brotherhood" were able to secure their old jobs after the election, the issue of monetary gain was the point of contention among civil society bloggers. It was used to put doubts in the blogs of some civil society bloggers and members of the "band of brotherhood." The different dynamics and political scenario after the election seemed to have contributed to a fractious, fragmented and competitive blogosphere that also witnessed a dominance of scandal politics to discredit political rivals.

Limits to generating public discussion

While blogging can potentially facilitate freedom to express a range of different views, an analysis of interviews with the civil society bloggers highlights some limitations in its capacity to stimulate public debates. Some of the civil society bloggers revealed how their blog contents were able to generate lively public debates and how they were also keen to engage with their readers despite a need to moderate the comments (Haris,

2010; Anil, 2010; Mahendran, 2010). However, one civil society blogger spoke negatively about blogging as a medium for promoting public discussions and did not allow reader feedback to his blog posts (Civil society blogger G, 2010). Others found that they became the target of nasty and malicious feedback from readers (Civil society blogger H, 2010; Civil society blogger J, 2010). These narratives point to how blogging can be limited in providing democratic spaces for public debates. This is further supported by an examination of reader comments in the content analysis. As highlighted in Chapter Six, the results suggested that blogs were not widely used to create public discussions, were hardly used to express opinions crossing political divisions and they were rarely used for extended public debate. Out of the 383 comments analysed, half of them did not discuss the blog posts (Table 14). Blogging was also not widely used to express opinions crossing political divisions as the pattern of comments that discussed the blog posts suggested a higher degree of readers agreeing with the bloggers than those who did not (Table 15). The comments also showed a lack of interactivity among readers and between blog writers and their readers, indicating that comments were rarely used for extended public debate (Table 14).

Welcoming the potential of blogging in contributing to a lively debate, civil society blogger Haris Ibrahim believes that the online platform is "an arena for others to share ideas" and "a space that has been

created for public discussion." Giving an example of how blogging could enhance public discussion on the topic of Islam, Haris Ibrahim noted:

> You can find a commenter commenting on mine and then he will comment on several other blogs. You know he or she is savouring different viewpoints and that is good. The commenter would go to mine and then to *Malaysian Waves* [a blog], which is [run by] Abdul Rahman Talib. He and I cannot see eye-to-eye on anything that has to do with Islam. [But] this means people are getting different views and that is really what you want. They are comparing viewpoints and that is healthy.

Making a similar observation on how religion could become a focus of public discussion was civil society blogger Mahendran. He cited his blog discussion on whether it was *halal* for a Muslim to have a haircut performed by an Indian barber as an example of how the topic was able to generate public debates. He pointed out that a question on whether an accident victim urgently in need of blood transfusion would ask if the source was from an Indian or a Muslim person also generated diverse discussions from his blog readers. Similarly, his blog postings on the Hindraf rally generated a lot of discussion on the problems confronting the Indian community in Malaysia (Mahendran, 2010). Agreeing with the ability of the new medium to generate public discussion, Anil Netto cited his blog content on the development of the Botanical Gardens in Penang as an example of how blogging could enhance public debates. Although he

had to moderate the comments for accuracy, Anil Netto felt that the discussions stimulated were wide-ranging.

Other civil society bloggers held a less optimistic view when it came to the potential of blogging in promoting public debate. Civil society bloggers G, H and J went further by saying that the capacity of blogging to encourage public discussions could potentially become personal attacks by rival bloggers, who were unhappy with their blog contents. Acknowledging that he subscribed to the "undemocratic" practice of barring readers from giving feedback on his blog, civil society blogger G made the observation that some of the comments he received were derogatory feedback which would have been deleted even if he had allowed his readers to comment on his blog contents. Unlike civil society blogger G, blogger H used to allow his readers to post their comments on his blog but he became more careful after the 2008 general election. Civil society blogger H (2010) explained:

> Now I am rejecting a lot of UMNO comments. They are from the cybertroopers. Even if you say I am undemocratic, who cares. Last time I did allow them but not now, particularly if they were UMNO propaganda. They use filthy words and make derogatory remarks. I moderate them as I am concerned that what had happened to Raja Petra Kamarudin could happen to me. He was arrested for the comments of his readers. So I am fearful too.

Similar troubling experiences were noted by civil society blogger J, who recalled being criticised for some of the blog contents. Instead of UMNO, blogger J revealed that negative responses were coming from the PKR. Civil society blogger J (2010) recalled:

> Sometimes when I write about Anwar [Ibrahim], the PKR people will come and attack me. The worst attack was when I wrote about Elizabeth Wong. I had a hundred over comments whacking me. The cyber attack was so great that I had to keep deleting them. I deleted some of them but they used another username. I had to block them. I was overwhelmed by the reaction.

The interviews have, thus far, demonstrated that blogging may not be able to uniformly fulfil its potential of providing spaces for democratic debates but that it can do so sporadically and to a certain extent. The analysis suggests that certain topics of interest, such as race and religion, can generate a multitude of views on the blogosphere, thus promoting public discourse. On the contrary, blogging can discourage public debates especially if the discussions turned into nasty and malicious attacks to tarnish the image of blog authors.

Diversity in the blogosphere

The state of a tightly controlled mainstream media was cited by many civil society bloggers as the main reason they resorted to blogging which, they felt, had the capacity to accommodate a wider range of views. The myriad of opinions ranged from information largely ignored by the

mainstream media coverage to political issues and events deemed sensitive by the traditional media. This included the mass protest rallies of Bersih and Hindraf, in which the gatherings were widely reported in the blogosphere while the traditional media were framing the two illegal gatherings in a negative tone. Many of the civil society bloggers also disclosed that they took on the role of journalists to post alternative views on their blogs. The wide coverage of those issues and events by civil society bloggers, including on alternative online news sites like *Malaysiakini*, can be seen as a collective challenge to the mainstream media and an emerging form of alternative communication in a relatively authoritarian society.

The diverse views of civil society bloggers pertaining to the Bersih and Hindraf protests show that blogging is able to accommodate wide-ranging voices, unlike the traditional media. The two mammoth public protests in the country, both held just months before the 2008 general election, were deemed illegal because the organisers were unable to obtain police permits for them. The two rallies were held to demand several concessions from the ruling regime and, as such, they were negatively framed by the mainstream media. However, many of the civil society bloggers were blogging about the two protest gatherings and urging the people to show their support by turning up at the street rallies. The content analysis also pointed to a considerable use of blogs to mobilise political participation in the two protests and to vote in the 2008 election (Table 10;

Table 11). Almost 20% of the total blog posts analysed urged readers to participate in those political actions (Table 10). The bloggers were generally supportive of the Bersih rally but the Hindraf protest saw a raft of discussion. The debate on Hindraf generally revolved around the issue of social inequality versus racial discrimination. Some of the civil society bloggers perceived the event as ethno-centric, focusing only on demands to uplift the living standards of the Indian community. As such, some civil society bloggers were telling the readers to stay away from the protest, saying that it was a race-based gathering. On the other hand, other bloggers who agreed with the Hindraf protest felt that the demands reflected the poor living conditions of the Indian community as a marginalised group. These discussions aimed to better engage Malaysians were occurring in the blogosphere but not in the mainstream media (Lim, 2009).

The Bersih protest received wide coverage in the Malaysian blogosphere, many of which challenged the factual accounts of the mainstream media through photographs of mammoth crowds posted on the blogs. Civil society blogger Haris Ibrahim was providing information about when and where the protest was to occur (The People's Parliament, 2007b). His blog posts also intimated reasons on what the Bersih protest was hoping to achieve. A day before the protest, civil society blogger Susan Loone provided some advice on what to do when protestors were confronted with teargas and water cannons sprayed on them by the police (Susan Loone's blog, 2007b). On the day of the protest, the bloggers were

posting photographs of what was happening on the ground, practically doing the job of mainstream journalists. For example, Haris Ibrahim was using his blog to publish photographs, provide updates and document his experience as he joined the tens of thousands of protestors at the rally (The People's Parliament, 2007b). The photographs of the large crowds who attended the event were missing from the mainstream media coverage. The large crowds even took some of the bloggers by surprise as they did not expect a huge turnout for the assembly, deemed illegal under Malaysian statutes (Ibid). After the gathering of tens of thousands of Malaysians, civil society blogger Anil Netto, who attended the protest, compared the situation on the ground with what was reported by the mainstream media. Anil Netto wrote that there was a crowd of 50,000 who took part in the rally when compared with an estimate of 4,000 people as reported in English daily, *The Star* (Anilnetto.com, 2007). This indicates the ability of blogs in challenging the mainstream media coverage by highlighting different factual accounts of the same event. Alternative reporting on the blogs may erode the credibility of the mainstream media in the eyes of the readers when comparing the different accounts and perspectives in the traditional media and the blogs. Blog coverage on the Bersih rally also serves to show up the bias of the mainstream media towards the ruling regime. It may not have changed the way traditional reporting is practised in the mainstream media but blogging provides alternative accounts and perspectives to the public.

A similar trend could be gleaned from the coverage of blogs in the Hindraf protest that took place 15 days after the Bersih gathering. Blog coverage of the former event also demonstrated that a collective challenge by a network of bloggers could become an alternative form of media. Most of the news stories published in the mainstream media on the Hindraf protest highlighted government warnings to the people to stay away from the illegal gathering or threats to arrest the event organisers under the Internal Security Act (The Star Online, 2007c; The Star Online, 2007d). However, the event was extensively covered by the blogosphere when compared with the mainstream media. Civil society bloggers Mahendran and Raaja, both tertiary students then, devoted their blogs[65] to the Hindraf protest in Kuala Lumpur. Mahendran's blog became high-profile when widely-read online news portal *Malaysiakini* carried a banner headline on its website saying that live updates would be available on Mahendran's blog (Mahendran, 2010). Both Mahendran and Raaja were encouraging the people to take part in the protest. They also posted advice on what to do in case the protestors were arrested or were confronted by the tear gas-armed police (Mahendran, 2010; Raaja, 2010). Mahendran, who was unable to attend the protest because he was preparing for his university examinations at the time, was using the government's closed-circuit television cameras

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[65] Mahendran runs the blog *Mahendran.com* while Raaja is the author of *Raajarox.com*. The two were information technology students when they started their blogs in March 2007. Their blogs started as personal diaries but later turned political when they began writing about the condition of the Indians in Malaysia (Mahendran, 2010; Raaja, 2010).

and input of his friends and brother, to provide the live feed updates. Raaja, on the other hand, attended the gathering and was updating his blog from his own perspective. Bernard Khoo, who also took part in the gathering, posted photographs and was also questioning the event's coverage in the mainstream media (Zorro-unmasked, 2007). This network of bloggers, together with the alternative news portal *Malaysiakini,* created a collective challenge to the mainstream media, thus emerging as an alternative media form.

Another example of civil society bloggers presenting alternative views was blog coverage on the case of the murdered Mongolian woman, Altantuya Shaariibuu. Blog posts on the murder of the translator that occurred in Kuala Lumpur in October 2006 could reflect an effort to challenge the mainstream media coverage and the ruling regime. The mainstream media were clinical in their coverage, sticking to court proceedings and official police statements on the case while the blogosphere was filled with all kinds of conspiracy theories about the alleged involvement of the then deputy prime minister Najib Razak. As mentioned earlier, Susan Loone was actively publishing blog contents about the murder (Loone, 2010). Describing her blog writing on Altantuya Shaaribuu as fulfilling a passion to write freely, Susan Loone recalled a frightening experience which she believed was connected with her blog

contents. It was on the day when a bomb blast[66] occurred at the platform of the Puduraya bus station in Kuala Lumpur on June 15, 2007 (The Star Online, 2007e). The then Bangkok-based blogger was to board a bus to return to Penang after attending the opening of the murder trial of Altantuya Shaariibuu on that day. The blast was most discomforting for the blogger because Altantuya Shaariibuu was killed with C4 explosives (The Nation, 2009). She felt that there were a lot of questions pertaining to the alleged involvement of Najib Razak and she was attempting to find the answers from Bangkok because she had contact with the family of Altantuya Shaaribuu and other organisations providing support to the family (Loone, 2010). She felt that her blog contents on the murder of the Mongolian woman provided information that was unavailable elsewhere, particularly in the mainstream media.

Blog postings of opposition news and events in the 2008 general election pointed to a similar trend that blogging was able to publish views alternative to the mainstream media. In situations where the mainstream media were biased against the opposition, blogs came out with a different perspective. As civil society blogger Anil Netto pointed out in an interview for this research, the objective of blogging during the general election was

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[66] An 11-year-old girl who was waiting to board a bus to the south of the country was injured in the explosion that was the result of a homemade bomb. Several days later, the police announced that the explosion was not the work of militants and a task force was set up to investigate the incident (The Star Online, 2007f). However, no further development in the police investigations had been reported on the bomb blast.

"to overcome the media blackout as they were not covering some of the issues." This was particularly so during the 2008 general election when political gatherings organised by opposition political parties were extensively covered in his blog (Anil, 2010). Citing the huge crowd at a political gathering of the DAP in Penang during the 2008 campaign as an example, Anil Netto felt that without the blog coverage, readers outside of Penang would not know about the large turnout. Comparing the 2008 general election campaign coverage in the blogs with a previous election in 1995 when the internet was in its nascent stage, Anil Netto explained:

> This is the difference in 1995. There was a huge crowd at McCallum Street flats but unfortunately, people outside the circle did not know. That makes a big difference. Not only the election. During the Bersih and Hindraf, the blogs and YouTube highlighted the crowd. So people know that they are not alone in feeling the same way and I think that sense of solidarity is quite empowering.

This sense of solidarity, derived from the interactive element of blogging, can engage public participation and voluntary associations. This argument is supported by many new media researchers in the United States where the interactive element is regarded as having the ability to enhance people's participation in public discourse (Perlmutter, 2008). This includes improving the prospects of minority and underrepresented groups to participate in political discourse by expressing their views on particular issues (Pole, 2009). Similarly, coverage of the large crowds at rallies by the

civil society bloggers relayed the message to a wider audience that the opposition did have the support of the people and they were not the troublemakers as described in the mainstream media for the past decades.

It becomes commonplace for this group of bloggers to provide publicity to opposition political parties and their candidates, thus highlighting a distinctly pro-opposition leaning in the Malaysian blogosphere. This is further supported by the content analysis, discussed in Chapter Six. The analysis suggests that the Malaysian blogosphere is more supportive of the opposition than the ruling regime, former premier or the government machinery. The blog posts and readers' feedback were more supportive of the opposition than the ruling coalition (Table 17; Table 19). There were also more blog posts encouraging readers to vote the opposition instead of the ruling coalition (Table 20). Blog posts containing information on campaign activities and candidates competing in the elections also highlighted the opposition more than the ruling coalition (Table 22). Civil society bloggers are, thus, providing alternative views, which are mainly supportive of the opposition, and possibly becoming an alternative media form that can, in certain cases, challenge the mainstream media.

Summary

Blogging is not only used to exercise their authors' right to free speech but it is also used as a tool to push for political and policy reforms, much like how pressure groups operate in society in electoral politics. This

was evident from the blog campaigns where support for the contesting political parties was determined by those who endorsed the demands of civil society. The demands became a part of the election manifesto of opposition parties contesting the election. The blog campaign was also a way of ensuring that election pledges of political parties were fulfilled after the election. This open negotiation or bargaining through the blog could provide a more transparent account of the demands that civil society made on political parties in an election.

The ease with which some of the civil society bloggers and some of the members of the "band of brotherhood" were able to establish opportunistic ties during the 2008 election demonstrated the ability of blogging in accommodating fluid ties. As noted by Chadwick (2007), the internet can facilitate new ways for public interest groups and political parties to forge fluid forms of political engagement. The emergence of "a complex mosaic" of interconnected public spheres in cyberspace (Keane, 2000) also suggests an ease in establishing informal ties. This is notable in the formation of fluid ties among members of the online community (Granovetter, 1973). The blogosphere was able to accommodate fluid ties which seemed to be influenced by a common agenda and the political landscape at a particular time. If the political scenario encouraged the bloggers to share a common agenda, the different groups of bloggers could merge to be a considerable force for change in an election. This was evident from the commonality that the different groups of bloggers shared

at a particular moment in time in the lead-up to the general election. Blogging, in this sense, can be an avenue to form loose and opportunistic ties in electoral politics.

These fluid ties collapsed, however, into a fractious and fragmented blogosphere as soon as the new political landscape could no longer allow for such a broad-based configuration of agendas. After the March 8 polls, the divided blogosphere was fraught with accusations and suspicions about the real agenda of some of the civil society bloggers. The accusations, designed to tarnish the reputation of some of the active civil society bloggers, were focused on smearing their personality instead of the prevailing issues at the time. The blogosphere, thus, reflects a dominance of scandal politics where political rivals are being framed as untrustworthy and unprincipled. This does not help to improve the quality of debate for public discussion, a crucial element in the promotion of deliberative democracy.

The blogosphere may be limited in generating public discussion but it does offer civil society bloggers an opportunity to emerge as an alternative media form by challenging coverage, factual accounts and perspectives of the mainstream media. Blogs, unlike the mainstream media, are able to accommodate alternative views as seen from the various examples of blog coverage on the murder of a Mongolian woman, the Bersih and Hindraf protests. Blogs may not be able to change how the mainstream news media

operate but they can provide an avenue for alternative views in a society ruled by a relatively authoritarian regime.

Interviews with this group of bloggers had, on the whole, drawn out multiple aspects of their experiences and in particular their complex relationships with forms of power in society. The analysis suggested that they could blog freely about their views but within the boundaries of existing legislations that constrained civil liberties. Some of the civil society bloggers also disclosed that they had to face the consequence of "cyber attacks" for articulating views that were different from other prevailing elites in the blogosphere. Blogging may have become a tool to accommodate dissenting views, to generate public discussion somewhat and to establish opportunistic ties easily in an election. Their experiences, at the same time, indicate their complex relationships with forms of power in society.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

Introduction

The unprecedented success of the opposition in the Malaysian 2008 general election provided the social and political backdrop for this thesis to examine the extent to which blogging could enhance liberal democratic principles and enrich political life. Many political observers and analysts were left searching for answers and explanations when the opposition demolished the customary two-thirds majority of the ruling regime and took over power in four states - Selangor, Perak, Penang and Kedah – and retained power in the state of Kelantan. Many political writers attributed the victory to blogging and the internet, describing the new digital technologies as a significant force in bringing about the defeat of the ruling regime (Suhaini, 2008; Tan, 2008; The Straits Times Singapore, 2008). Political writer Suhaini Aznam (2008: 2) attributed the use of the internet by the younger generation for sealing the "country's political fate." Some scholars were also quick to describe the web phenomenon as a form of 'democratisation' of the Malaysian society (Tang, 2006; Tan & Zawawi, 2008), thus, playing a significant role in the March 8 polls (Mohd Azizuddin & Zengeni, 2010).

Such a correlation is somewhat simplistic, dichotomous and reductive in its analysis and this research seeks to highlight the need to be more

cautious about the 'democratisation' effects on Malaysian society. This thesis argues that blogging can open up a space for free expression of opinions and, at times, can even facilitate wider debate in a relatively authoritarian society. At the same time, blogging is heavily shaped by the prevailing elite groups and political culture in Malaysian politics. The analysis suggests that blogging can become a platform to facilitate the forming of a network of alternative or dissenting views but those opinions can be dominated by existing elite groups in society. Blogging can easily accommodate dissenting views of the three relatively distinct groups of bloggers studied in this thesis. The online platform can, to a certain extent, generate discussion particularly among the civil society bloggers. At the same time, the analysis reveals that the three groups of bloggers are largely made up of individuals who can be considered as elites in society. The bloggers are from a higher socio-economic background. The majority of them are highly educated professionals and many are media and political elites.

This thesis also argues that blogging reflects the existing political culture in Malaysian politics. The staging of "psychological warfare" through blogging by some civil society and partisan bloggers to remove their political rival points to a dominance of factional politics of UMNO in the Malaysian blogosphere. It reflects the existing political culture when blogging is used to discredit rival politicians, similar to the dissemination of *surat layang*, which is common in Malaysian politics. The analysis

points to a scenario where blogging is able to open up a space for certain aspects of liberal democratic practices and at the same time, it is influenced by existing elite groups and political culture in Malaysian politics.

Another aspect of blogging is its ability to bring about new ways of campaigning in electoral politics. This thesis argues that blogging can bring about new ways of campaigning in an election but the use of blogs as part of campaigning is influenced by the wider institutional and societal structures in society. The analysis reveals that blogging can provide a space for mobilising political action, such as encouraging readers to take part in protest rallies and to vote in the general election. Opposition politicians can overcome little coverage in the mainstream media by disseminating information on campaign activities and promote electoral candidate on their blog but it is not widely used to raise campaign funds and recruit volunteers. Thus, blogging does not perform a simple across-the-board function of transforming ways of campaigning, in particular among the politician-bloggers. This was particularly during the campaigning period when the politician-bloggers indicated that face-to-face personal contact with voters was more crucial than blogging. Politician-bloggers who were able to negotiate a space in the mainstream media revealed that the traditional media became a more important tool than blogging during the campaigning period. Other factors that resulted in the abandonment of blogging by this group of bloggers during the campaigning period were the constituency of voters, who were of a certain

ethnic group and were digitally deprived of access to the internet and broadband facilities. This thesis, thus, contends that blogging is able to bring about new ways of campaigning but the wider institutional and societal structures can make the online platform less appealing to politician-bloggers in an election.

Guided by the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2, this thesis provided a closer examination on the individual bloggers in terms of the blog practices and behaviours adopted to reach their political goal, their political affiliations and connections, the power or influence they wielded within their social environment and their perception of blogging. These factors could provide a clearer picture on the pattern of blog use by the different groups of bloggers under particular circumstances at defining moments in electoral politics. The particularities of how, when and why blogging could become a significant part of electoral politics or political life would be able to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the web phenomenon instead of adopting a simplistic perspective on the effects of the new media. As such, this thesis argues for an evaluation of blogging within its specific social and political context at a particular moment in time in order to obtain a more broad-based understanding of blogging and politics.

This line of inquiry follows the scholarly work of new media researchers who employ a more broad-based understanding of political blogs. For example, Wright (2009) describes the political blogosphere as

being in a state of "constant flux" (159-160) while Bimber (1998) and Chadwick (2007) indicate that the internet can create new ways for public interest groups and political parties to form more fluid forms of political engagement. This research, thus, adds to those scholarly works by providing empirical evidence of how, when and why blogging can become significant platform at a particular moment in time within a relatively authoritarian society where control of the mainstream media is in the hands of the ruling regime. It also highlights the particular circumstances under which blogging can flourish as a vehicle for advancing certain aspects of the democratic practices within a relatively authoritarian environment.

The research questions

This thesis is positioned within the emerging scholarly debate on the role of new media and its influence on electoral politics and political life in contemporary societies. As it is difficult to measure its effect, this study examines the extent to which blogging can influence electoral politics and political life and encourage democratic practices. To avoid taking a dichotomised approach on blogging and politics, the two broad questions evaluated in this thesis are: The extent to which blogging can enhance liberal democratic practices and contribute to methods of campaigning in an election within the Malaysian context.

How does blogging expand liberal democratic practices?

Blogging is widely regarded as having the potential to provide new spaces for open and free debates on public interest issues. This is closely

connected to Habermas's notion of the public sphere, particularly to the subject of deliberative democracy. This research, thus, content analysed the feedback of readers to evaluate whether the responses were able to generate wide-ranging discussions of the blog posts. In-depth interviews with the research participants also addressed the question of public discussion through the blogs. The questions helped to provide a deeper understanding on whether the web phenomenon was able to expand and improve the quality of deliberation in the public sphere.

The process of "refeudalization" of the public sphere, which describes the manipulation of information for propaganda purposes, was another component of inquiry in this thesis. It assessed how blog contents could contribute to public debates. Attention was focused on how information was framed when the content analysis was conducted. In-depth interviews with the research participants also provided evidence on how some of them were actively managing blog information to influence public opinion in order to achieve a political goal in an election.

Another facet of democracy relates to the use of blogs to express views, to push for political and policy reforms, mobilise readers for political action, such as the Hindraf and Bersih rallies in November 2007, and to encourage readers to take part in the election as voters, volunteers or campaign fund donors. These questions can provide an indication of whether blogging can encourage the public to take part in political life. An evaluation of this aspect of political life was conducted through the content

analysis while the in-depth interviews provided a deeper understanding of the reasons behind some of the trends identified.

How does blogging contribute to ways of campaigning in an election?

In the western tradition, research has shown that blogging has become a common part of campaigning to raise funds, recruit volunteers and keep readers informed of campaign activities. Similar questions were forwarded to the politician-bloggers and a content analysis of blog use for those purposes was examined. The questions were significant in providing an understanding on how blogging could contribute to new ways of campaigning in an election.

Information about the forging of a network or temporary ties as a result of a blog campaign emerged during the in-depth interviews. The phenomenon points to a strategic use of blogs as a campaigning tool in an election for particular groups of bloggers. This provides evidence on how loose or opportunistic ties can be established to achieve a particular goal at a specific moment in an election. The in-depth interviews also offered a deeper understanding on the precise moments of how, when and why blogging could be useful in achieving particular political goals in an election.

Summary of findings

Three relatively different clusters of bloggers

Socio-political bloggers in Malaysia were found to belong to three relatively distinct groups as they exhibited different trends in blog use,

guided by their respective social and political circumstances at particular moments in time. The pattern of blog use displayed by the group of politician-bloggers, partisan and civil society bloggers, seemed to be determined by larger institutional and structural societal factors, including the particular social and political environment. Thus, this study argues that blogging must be located within its wider social and political context at a particular moment in time to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of its impact on political life. I will first discuss the group of politician-bloggers, then the partisan bloggers and finally, the civil society bloggers, in an attempt to examine how, when and why blogging can have an influence democratic practices and electoral politics.

Politician-bloggers

Findings in Chapter Six and Seven indicated that politician-bloggers were pragmatic and purposive in the use of blogs when it came to reaching out to their voters in the election. During the official 13-day campaigning period, they made little use of their blogs and, instead, resorted to unmediated face-to-face campaigning to connect directly with their voters. This is unlike the common use of blogs during election campaigns in the United States and parts of Europe where blogging can be a source of information and public discussion and has a greater potential to enrich political campaigns and be an integral component of national elections (Lawson-Border & Kirk, 2005; Kalstrup & Pedersen 2005; Albrecht et al, 2007; Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009). One of the most publicised blog

campaigns was the Howard Dean campaign in the United States in 2003-2004 whose success could be seen in its ability to raise funds and mobilise his thousands of supporters (Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009). Other new media scholars have even described blogging as a 'political staple' in election campaigns in the United States (Lawson-Border & Kirk, 2005; Perlmutter, 2008; Pole, 2009; Davis et al, 2009). A more recent example of the widespread use of online social media in election campaigns is the 2008 US presidential election. Presidential candidates, such as Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama announced their plan to run for president via the internet in 2007 (Panagopoulos, 2009). However, in the Malaysian context, most politician-bloggers revealed that they did not rely on blogging during the campaigning period because of larger institutional and structural societal factors. The broader political economy of the media and the constituency of voters, such as culture and ethnicity, as well as the the digital divide confronting their voters were some of the reasons that undermined the appeal of blogs during the campaigning period. At this particular point of campaigning, blogging did not seem to have drastically changed electoral politics for this group of bloggers.

Unequal resource distribution and limited access to the internet in some areas were some of the factors that most of the politician-bloggers cited as limiting the use of blogs during the campaigning period. Many of their blog readers were not voters, who lived in rural or semi-rural areas that had limited access to the internet when compared with their urban

counterparts. The issue of digital divide was also a real concern among politician-bloggers who were contesting in the urban areas, which also saw poor urban voters facing limited access to the internet and broadband facilities. These concerns lend credence to the notion that advancements in new technology do not necessarily bring about equal political participation in society. As many new media scholars, such as Nicholas (2003), van Dijk (2006) and Tsatsou (2011) argue, physical access to a computer or broadband connection, motivation and social skills needed to participate in the use of the new media can influence the outcomes of new technology on postmodern societies. Similarly for the politician-bloggers, although blogging can reach a wider audience globally, the capability serves little use in a national election. It is a time when reaching out to the voters is more crucial than a non-voting global audience. Thus, the capabilities of blogging do not appear to have afforded new ways of campaigning in electoral politics to this group of bloggers.

The wider political economy of the media, tied with the overarching issue of culture and ethnicity, also made blogging less appealing during the campaign period. Politician-bloggers, who depended on Chinese voters to win in the rural constituencies, had relatively better access to the Chinese-language mainstream media and so preferred the traditional media to blogging at that time. They believe the Chinese-language mainstream media are 'freer' and can reach more Chinese voters especially in the rural areas when compared with blogging. Under those circumstances, blogging

becomes less important during the campaigning period and has not drastically changed electoral politics for this group of bloggers.

On the other hand, blogging was useful as a political marketing tool before and after the election when this group of bloggers was attempting to influence the general blog-reading population instead of just their voters. The move to turn blogs into tools of political marketing was also evident among candidates of the 2005 Danish election (Kalstrup & Pedersen, 2005). For many of the politician-bloggers, blogging was aimed at increasing their visibility and promoting their personal image and their political party. It was a form of autonomous and personalised mass communication, as noted by Perlmutter (2008), in order to overcome the little mainstream media coverage that the opposition politicians were receiving. This is supported by the content analysis that show considerable use of blogs to mobilise political action, disseminate information on campaign activities and to promote electoral candidates.

In the process of promoting themselves, some of the politician-bloggers highlighted scandals of their political rivals. Blogging may have enhanced certain aspects of democratic principles in terms of enabling this group of bloggers to express their views freely and provide more information to the public. However, information published on the blogs was biased or favourable towards the politician-bloggers. The situation did not help to create a 'free marketplace of ideas.' Moreover, the politician-bloggers revealed that their blogs were not set up to generate public

discussion of issues or party decisions. This was particularly so if the topics could harm the image of the political party they were representing.

Partisan bloggers

The group of partisan bloggers discussed in Chapter Eight indicated that blogging was a part of scandal politics, aimed at tarnishing the image of certain political rivals in an attempt at removing them in an election. Crossing political boundaries, the partisan bloggers were waging "psychological warfare" in a bid to assassinate the character of certain leaders, particularly the then UMNO president, who was also prime minister at that time. The online activity was strategically used to harness various political forces and forge opportunistic ties. This "band of brotherhood" then worked to frame the then prime minister and certain UMNO leaders in a negative light and, ultimately, oust them from power. They held secret meetings, engaged influential Malay bloggers and drafted agreements on the strategic use of blogs to manage bloggers and the flows of blog information to shape public opinion. At this defining moment, blogging was used to manage information flows for purposes of propaganda in an election. The focus on scandal politics by this group of bloggers reflects similar characteristics pertaining to the rise in mediated political scandal in western democratic politics, as documented in the scholarly work of Thompson (2000).

The way information is managed and framed on the blogs seems to support the argument of media communication scholar Entman (2007) who

argues that biased views can be propagated in the media through theories of agenda setting, framing and priming. Most of the partisan bloggers pointed out that they were framing their political enemies in a negative light by focusing on scandals that could tarnish the reputation of certain leaders. They systematically published similar articles to discredit certain leaders on their blogs, thus creating a "flooding effect" of negative information about the national leadership in a bid to change the outcome of the election. Blogging took on the functions of framing and priming when this group of bloggers began telling the audience how to think about particular leaders and not only what to focus on. In this sense, a blogosphere filled with political scandals did not appear to contribute to deliberative democratic ideals because it indicated a restriction of the free transmission of information afforded by the online platform. This can contribute to a decline of the public sphere or a process of "refeudalization", where information is manipulated by spin doctors, public relations experts and advertisers. These interferences can hamper the citizens' ability to engage in rational debates as well as obstruct public reasoning (Habermas, 2008). In this sense, blogging is limited in promoting public debates and discussion.

On the other hand, the focus on scandal politics provided, in full public view, an account of the power struggle between political elites in the country's dominant political party. Normally, such contestations for power were conducted behind closed doors or privy only to UMNO members.

Publishing the contestation and conflict of leaders on the blogs also provided a clearer picture of the links between some of the partisan bloggers and political elites. This suggests that blogging can become a crucial part of campaigning in electoral politics if the online activity is used to highlight political scandals. It may not have expanded the public sphere in terms of improving the quality of public debates but the contentious relationships among political elites can be made more transparent in the online arena. This, in turn, can provide an understanding of the possible power relations and connections that some partisan bloggers have with particular political elites. Blogging, in this sense, can be interpreted as a democratic tool in accommodating a range of micro political spheres colliding with each other at particular junctures in electoral politics, thus capturing the dynamics and changing relationships on their blogs.

The establishment of the "band of brotherhood" suggests the coming together of a common agenda which helps to consolidate fluid ties into a cohesive force in a bid to oust the then premier and ruling regime. This is unlike a concern noted by Sunsten (2007) that the new technology can polarise groups of like-minded individuals into fragmented entities without engaging each other to achieve a common good. The emergence of the "band of brotherhood" is not merely a situation of 'like-minded' individuals or individuals sharing similar views getting together to fragment the blogosphere. On the contrary, its emergence in the Malaysian blogosphere provides evidence on how blogging can facilitate the coming

together of diverse political forces through the creation of opportunistic associations to achieve a specific goal at a defining moment in an election. The forging of ties by the "band of brotherhood" through blogging strengthens the argument of Chadwick (2007) that the internet can create new ways for public interest groups and political parties by allowing for more fluid forms of political engagement. It also reinforces the understanding of "organizational hybridity" by Chadwick (2007: 284) in which the internet is seen as enabling interest groups and political parties to form "looser network forms characteristic of social movements" that bring together "online and offline efforts" (p. 286). This shows that blogging can be a tool to build and crystallise a range of opposing political forces to achieve a specific goal in electoral politics.

The subsequent collapse of the strategic ties of the "band of brotherhood" illustrates that the political circumstances can have an effect on blog use in maintaining voluntary associations. The opportunistic ties gave way to a fragmented blogosphere, in which accusations and counter-accusations were traded among members of the "band of brotherhood." This scenario presented a politically divided blogosphere based on ideological leanings. As highlighted by some new media scholars, the new media technologies can contribute to a possible narrowing of ideas in the blogosphere (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Hargittai et al, 2008). However, the disintegrated ties suggest that blogging can facilitate opportunistic

associations at a particular moment in electoral politics to achieve a particularistic goal based on personality instead of public interest issues.

The practice of blogging by this group of bloggers suggests that the online platform may not contribute to a flourishing of deliberative democracy. However, it demonstrates how blogging can be strategically used to organise diverse political forces into a significant component in electoral politics. The partisan bloggers abandoned their political leanings to target their common enemies at a time of intense power struggle in the country's dominant ruling party. This implies that blogging focused on a short-term goal based on personality politics can mobilise individuals to crystallise the blogosphere into a political force for change in an election.

Civil society bloggers

The group of civil society bloggers, many of whom were members of public interest groups promoting civil liberties, was able to express a wide range of views, aimed at exerting political demands and policy reforms during an election. The views in the Malaysian blogosphere ranged from demands for political and policy reforms based on liberal democratic principles to scandal politics. The civil society bloggers demonstrate that marginalised groups are able to take part in counter discourses through blogging. It supports the idea that blogging can encourage the emergence of "subaltern counterpublics" (Fraser, 1994: 123) where marginalised group are able to highlight their versions of identities, interests and needs. The way in which this group of bloggers is able to promote diverse views

on their blogs projects the idea of a "pluralist public sphere" (Garnham, 1994: 360) instead of a unified public sphere which has been rejected by many scholars (Calhoun, 1994; Fraser, 1994; Keane, 2000). For example, some of the civil society bloggers were setting up blog campaigns to push for political reforms while others were expressing their views on the need to have fairer and more equitable policies. Yet others formed ties with the "band of brotherhood" to highlight political scandals to bring political change in an election. Blogging, in this sense, can facilitate and promote diverse views from the various public spheres, a crucial component of liberal democratic political life.

Demands for political and policy reforms based on liberal democratic ideals, conducted through blog campaigns, saw bloggers taking on the role of pressure groups or becoming a part of civil society activism in electoral politics. The findings, discussed in Chapter Nine, indicated that blogging was not only about free expression or running commentaries on political and public interest issues. It could also function as a bargaining tool, particularly for influential civil society bloggers, to push the contesting political parties into accepting their demands in return for their support at the polls. Blogging can, thus, be seen as affording a certain degree of power to civil society bloggers to press for reforms for the common good. Although the civil society bloggers could be considered as elites in society because they were more educated and employed in respectable and professional positions, they could further strengthen the voice of diverse

groups to lobby for changes in an election. Moreover, the use of blogging as a bargaining tool being wielded in full public view could increase transparency in the precise manner in which this group of bloggers was pushing for political demands. This, in some sense, can be interpreted as blogging having the capability in expanding certain aspects of democratic practices.

At particular junctures in an election, blogging for some civil society bloggers was a part of political scandal. This occurred when some of the influential bloggers teamed up with members of the "band of brotherhood" to synchronise information flow on their blogs. The establishment of loose ties between the two groups of bloggers reflects the idea of "a complex mosaic" of interconnected public spheres (Keane, 2000: 76) or an overlapping public sphere. However, the loose coalition collapsed after the March 8 polls, bringing about a fragmented blogosphere. The political landscape after the election saw mounting accusations and counter-accusations between the bloggers, thus eroding the quality of public debates in the blogosphere. Blogging may have facilitated the ability of the civil society bloggers to express views, publicise and pressure for political reforms but a focus on scandal politics does not improve the quality of public debates.

This group of bloggers exhibited ways in which blogging was able to promote certain aspects of liberal democratic ideals, such as becoming an alternative media platform for free expression and for political and policy

reforms in electoral politics. Negotiations with political parties conducted through their blogs for political and policy reforms afforded some form of transparency in the way this group of bloggers was engaging with the political parties contesting in the election. It also enabled some of the civil society bloggers to establish loose but opportunistic alliances to try and change the ruling regime at particular moments in the election. Blogging seems to have realised some aspects of liberal democratic ideals and this group of civil society bloggers orients to those ideals.

Theoretical contribution

Aspects of network theory and network society

The manner of blog use by the group of partisan bloggers and the processes involved in the establishment of the "band of brotherhood" provided a different facet to the understanding of network theory. The partisan bloggers consciously sought out influential bloggers who wanted to achieve a common political goal in electoral politics. The phenomenon observed here is one of different groups transcending political boundaries to form opportunistic ties in order to manage information flows and realise a common goal. This, however, does not seem to sit well with certain predictions of network theory. The normative understanding of a network as consisting of three essential elements, nodes, ties and flows, where individual actors (or nodes) are connected with each other through the use of digital technologies may not be sufficient to explain the network of the "band of brotherhood" within the Malaysian blogosphere. Network theory

gives the understanding of connectivity emerging incidentally with the notion of a serendipitous network or "network in itself" characterised by an aggregate of "dyadic relations [that were] not consciously designed … unplanned, uncoordinated" (Raab & Kenis, 2009: 199). Network theory, in this sense, did not relate well to the particular ways in which the "band of brotherhood" was set up, managed and linked together by different dynamics and circumstances at a particular moment in time. The common political goal to overthrow particular leaders in a dominant ruling party based on personality rather than issues, in anticipation of an election, were the circumstances that created the push for a network to blog strategically for political change in electoral politics.

The scenario in the Malaysian blogosphere at that time lends some credence to the argument of Raab and Kenis (2009: 199) pertaining to the rise of "network for itself" which refers to a consciously-created network in an organisational form to achieve a specific goal. The two scholars argue that western societies are evolving into a "society of networks," where individuals are consciously forming networks to achieve specific goals instead of unplanned and uncoordinated networks, whose goals are emergent with the network. The changing organisational form, they contend, can give rise to a "network for itself" (Ibid: 199). They assert that hierarchical organisational forms of the 20th century are moving towards "consciously created and goal directed networks of three and more organizations" (Ibid: 198). The two scholars argue that whole organisations

are consciously seeking out each other to create a network to reach a specific goal. The organised yet informal network of the "band of brotherhood," formed to remove the then prime minister from his seat of power, pointed to some similarities with the arguments of Raab and Kenis (2009) about a "consciously created and goal directed" network. However, the consciously-created and goal driven "band of brotherhood" did not involve whole organisations. They were individuals who temporarily abandoned their organisations to form temporary and opportunistic networks for a particular goal. Nonetheless, the forming of the "band of brotherhood" supported certain aspects of the idea of a "network for itself" where the partisan bloggers had consciously created a network for a particular goal in electoral politics.

This consciously-created network aimed at achieving a particular goal collapsed after the general election. This suggests that the goal-driven network can only be sustained under certain circumstances. Firstly, the balance of political power in the country tilted towards the opposition after the election while support for the ruling regime dwindled. Partisan bloggers involved in the "band of brotherhood" began returning to their respective political and ideological boundaries after the election. Secondly, the contentious relationships among members of the "band of brotherhood" began surfacing when the goal that bound them together became a source of friction. A divergence in political goals saw the disintegrating of the loose ties among the bloggers. It was not because they were no longer

connected to the digital technologies but the specific circumstances and different dynamics at that time led to the subsequent collapse of the "band of brotherhood." The fluid forms of political engagement in cyberspace, as demonstrated by the "band of brotherhood", provided evidence that specific circumstances of the bloggers and particular junctures in electoral politics could invoke new dimensions to the terms network and network society. An assessment of the impact of new technologies on politics has to adopt a more broad-based approach by investigating the participants involved, larger social processes surrounding the internet and the wider institutional and political economic factors (DiMaggio et al, 2001; Agre, 2002; Albrecht, 2006; Cammaerts, 2008).

The network theory also does not apply well to the group of politician-bloggers. They indicated that they were using their blogs as isolated individuals, largely separate from other bloggers, and did not form a network to realise their political goals in the election. They were unlike the partisan bloggers who formed the "band of brotherhood" in a strategic fashion to achieve a particular goal. Although the politician-bloggers were using digital technology and were involved in the exchange of information, they were not establishing any kind of network with other politician-bloggers or bloggers outside of their group during the election. Although they had a direct stake at the election, they seemed to have taken themselves out of the equation in the blogosphere when it came to the use of blogs in an election. The new technology does not seem to have

drastically changed ways of political engagement for this group of bloggers in an election.

A lack of blog use by politician-bloggers during the campaigning period challenges certain aspects of the analysis of a blurring of boundaries, which is one of the central discourses within the network society thesis (Castells, 1996; Barney, 2004; van Dijk, 2006). One main contention of the network society thesis is the purported global or deterritorialised nature related to the dynamics of time-space compression as a result of digital technologies, in which distance no longer becomes a determining factor (Barney, 2004: 62). No longer tied to particular times and places, the network society thesis expects to see mediated communication gradually replacing or supplementing face-to-face communication (van Dijk, 2006: 36). However, priority placed on face-to-face canvassing over blogging by politician-bloggers to reach voters suggested that the dynamics of time-space compression were insufficient to explain the lack of blog use in campaigning. Despite the much-heralded capability of the internet in collapsing geographical boundaries to reach a global audience, geographical distance, coupled with broader institutional and societal structures, such as the digital divide confronting voters, remain determining factors in the preference of campaign method by the politician-bloggers. This suggests that the particular context and specific moments during an election can generate a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of blogging on politics. Geographical

boundaries can still render digital technologies as being less significant for politician-bloggers campaigning under those particular circumstances.

Another characteristic of the blurring of boundaries afforded by digital technologies in the network society thesis is the blurring of public and private spheres. This is pertaining to how private thoughts can become public in the realm of online communication, with particular reference to blogging as a form of political communication (Barney, 2004) or how the private life of individuals becomes public with the rise of mediated scandals (Thompson, 2000). Several politician-bloggers were, instead, actively policing the demarcations between their private self as an individual and public life as a politician when blogging was used for political marketing before and after they were voted into power. They were concerned that some of their private thoughts could jeopardise their personal and party image. As a result, a couple of politician-bloggers stopped blogging after their political party took over state power and two others acknowledged that they were more careful in their blog contents. Another example that points to an effort in institutionalising this active policing of boundaries between the public and private sphere after the election is an intention to create a set of codes to stop party members from publishing private thoughts that can conflict with party decisions. Guarding these boundaries seemed to be more important for some of the politician-bloggers who wanted to advance their standing as candidates before the election and when they were voted into power after the election. Instead of

a blurring of private and public sphere, many politician-bloggers were inclined to actively police the boundaries to promote their visibility as candidates in an election. Highlighting particular information to elevate their standing in electoral politics becomes a priority of blogging over the function of blogs to facilitate public discussions.

Strengthening the political economy approach

This research reinforces the value of the political economy approach in obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of blogging and its impact on political life on various fronts. Firstly, this approach takes into account the wider institutional and societal structures to help position the practice of blogging within a particular social and political environment. It highlights the social and political realities confronting the three different groups of bloggers when the online medium is used for political change. Secondly, its focus on media ownership and power relations to provide an understanding on how people experience media and how media shape the world (McChesney et al, 1998: 3). Moreover, the question of ownership and control of the media and how information is treated as a commodity for private gains instead of a public good is pertinent to the broader philosophical concerns of democracy and press freedom (Herman & Chomsky, 2002; McChesney & Scott, 2004; Gans, 2004; Dahlberg, 2005; Webster, 2006; Fuchs 2009). Another aspect of the political economy approach is evident in the study of Allan (2006) on citizen journalism. The internet scholar focuses on crucial information, such as the people behind

the blogs and the historical context in which blogs were created and developed, including questions of funding which can be useful in addressing questions of control and dominance in the blogosphere.

In this study, blogging is examined within a relatively authoritarian society where the mainstream media are controlled by the ruling regime. As highlighted in Chapter Five, the link between the mainstream media and the government is relatively strong because of the ruling regime's ownership and control of the mainstream media. This leads to limited coverage of dissenting views in the traditional media. Apart from that, rules and regulations governing the print and broadcast media make it difficult for new players to enter the industry. The relatively authoritarian society is also characterised by a raft of regulations that restricts civil liberties, such as freedom of assembly, freedom of speech and freedom of association despite having those rights enshrined in the country's Federal Constitution. Set against an environment of tight media control and restrictive laws, blogging becomes a viable alternative to those who want their voices heard. This is even more so after the government's non-censorship guarantee on the internet in 1996 (Mahathir, 1998). As noted by the different groups of bloggers, many found that they were able to publish their views freely on their blogs. Many of the civil society bloggers indicated that they were publishing views that were alternative to the mainstream media. This reflects the influence of the wider political economy of the media that are controlled by the ruling regime and are,

thus, less able to accommodate diverse opinions, unlike the blogosphere. Because of this tight media control, blogging presents itself as a platform for alternative views. In this respect, the political economy approach is useful in providing a macro level analysis on the use of blogging within a specific environment and particularly in relation to the traditional media.

The influence of broader societal structures on the manners in which the different groups of bloggers were using their blogs could be detected at particular moments in an election. For example, the unequal distribution of resources could be traced from the way the group of politician-bloggers abandoned their blogs in the campaign period. They cited the issue of digital divide among voters in remote and urban areas as one of the reasons for discarding the use of blogs at that time. Reaching out to voters who had limited access to the internet and broadband facilities was not possible through blogging. As such, direct face-to-face contact with voters became a better option for this group of bloggers. The limited access of a certain segment of the population to the internet and broadband facilities suggests a restricted public sphere. As such, this thesis reinforces the usefulness of the political economy approach in identifying the particular circumstances in which blogging can constrain political life.

An emphasis on media control and power relations as a part of the political economy approach helps to elucidate the possibility that blogging can be used to promote the voice of former media and political elites. Subscribing to aspects of the political economy approach adopted by Allan

(2006) in an investigation of citizen journalism, this thesis highlights the possibility that the blogosphere discourse can be dominated by former media and political elites. For example, a focus on scandal politics through the framing of particular leaders in a negative tone, the management of blog information by the "band of brotherhood" and the alignment of its members to certain political elites point to the question of dominance and possible control of the blogosphere agenda. These are similar concerns raised by critical scholars of the new media (Mansell, 2004; Webster, 2006; Pereira, 2009). An analysis of interviews with the partisan bloggers indicates the plausibility that the new digital technologies can be used to push the agenda of particular elites during a contestation for political power and control. This research highlights the significance of aspects of the political economy approach in clarifying questions relating to control and dominance in the blogosphere.

The value of Habermas's notion of the public sphere

One of the main concerns of Habermas's public sphere is the requisites for all citizens to take part in debates. His notion has been used to frame questions on how the new media or blogging can lower the barriers of entry into the public sphere or provide new spaces for open and free debates on political issues. This is based on the assumption that all citizens are guaranteed access, in an unrestricted fashion, to be involved in forming opinions on matters of general interest (Habermas, 2008). All citizens are supposed to be able to make reasoned arguments from the

information made available to them and their views are given in an arena that is free from the influence of partisan economic forces (Webster, 2006). Those conditions that are required for citizens to take an active part in the public sphere help to provide an understanding of the circumstances in which the new media can promote or constrain the public sphere or create multiple public spheres, arising out of public discourse and democratic publics. One of the conditions identified in this study is the issue of digital divide that can hamper the participation of certain strata of society in public debates because of a lack of access to the internet and broadband facilities. Apart from that, the manipulation of information, signalling a "refeudalization" or a weakening of the public sphere, can interfere with the citizens' ability to engage in rational debates. Thus, the deliberative aspect of Habermas's public sphere helps to understand the extent to which blogging can provide new spaces for public deliberation by becoming a marketplace of free ideas.

The emergence of the "band of brotherhood" underlines Habermas's notion of a "refeudalization" of the public sphere in terms of how the boundaries of the public sphere can be "discursively constructed, maintained, and altered" (Dahlgren, 2001: 42). A focus on scandal politics and framing of particular leaders in a negative light provided examples of how blogging could be used to publish one-sided information in order to sway public opinion. Findings in Chapter Eight suggested that the blog information was part of "psychological warfare" to remove the national

leadership. In this sense, blogging does not contribute to the quality of public debates as information is framed in particular ways to sway public opinion. However, the blog discussion on the political scandals of particular leaders demonstrates how blogging can provide a more transparent account of the power struggle between powerful elites in the ruling party. It provides glimpses into the links of some of the bloggers to those powerful elites in the dominant party. Versions of the power struggle, conducted behind closed doors and privy to elite party members, are now available to the public through blogging. The boundaries of the public sphere may have been constrained by biased information on scandal politics but they can be discursively altered by a more transparent description of the power struggle of powerful elites. The boundaries can change under particular circumstances confronting the different groups of bloggers and at different points in an election.

Another facet of "refeudalization" of the public sphere can be detected in the way the politician-bloggers are using their blogs as a political marketing tool. Information published on their blogs was aimed at uplifting the personal image of the politician-bloggers and the political parties they were representing before and after the election. In doing so, they were essentially framing their blog information to sway public opinion towards them. This example of blog use by politician-bloggers also supports the idea that blogging may not be a marketplace of free ideas, essential for improving the quality of debates in a deliberative democracy. It became

obvious when most of the politician-bloggers did not perceive the stimulation of public discussion to be an important function of their blog. This was even more so when blogging on party matters was regarded as sensitive and could potentially harm their party image.

This thesis also reinforces the idea of multiple public spheres, instead of a unified one. Certain weaknesses pertaining to Habermas's notion of the public sphere, such as the failure to address the idea of "subaltern counterpublics" (Fraser, 1994: 123) or "a complex mosaic" of interconnected public spheres (Keane, 2000: 76) are useful in clarifying the practices and behaviours of the civil society bloggers. This group of bloggers was blogging differently from the other two groups of partisan and politician-bloggers. They were exercising their right to free expression, supplying a multitude of views that could not be accommodated in the mainstream media. The civil society bloggers were also pushing for political and policy reforms through blog campaigns, with some teaming up with the "band of brotherhood" to take on various roles in electoral politics. It is not a unified public sphere but one that is complex and changes according to the different dynamics, circumstances and particular moments in an election.

Influence of social and political realities on blogging

This study contributes to the argument that an examination of blogging must be situated within a particular social and political environment and a specific timeframe in order to obtain a more inclusive

understanding of the blog phenomenon. This can be seen from the various blog practices, behaviours and political affiliations of the three relatively distinct groups of bloggers at particular moments in electoral politics. The three groupings demonstrate the need to refrain from adopting a generalised or across-the-board position about the role of blogging and political life. The complexity of the bloggers themselves, in terms of their social and political affiliation, the wider institutional and societal structures, including the political scenario at particular junctures in electoral politics, can have an impact on how blogging can promote liberal democratic principles and political life in an election. These competing factors necessitate a more nuanced approach in order to take account of the complexity of blogging behaviour. This broad-based approach is more effective in understanding how, when and why the impact of blogging on politics can be more or less enriching to political life at various moments in electoral politics.

The emergence of the three relatively distinct groups of bloggers in the Malaysian blogosphere strengthens the argument of new media scholars that the development of new media and society is mutually embedded (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002; Barney, 2004; van Dijk, 2006). They are of the view that technological advancements cannot be separated from society. The framework for examining the outcome of technology on society must consider the dynamic relationships and interdependencies between the devices used to communicate information, the activities or

practices that people adopt to convey the information and the social arrangements or organisational forms that develop out of the devices and practices (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002). Other new media scholars also suggest a multi-dimensional approach in understanding the role of internet, including blogging, on politics (Buchstein, 1997; DiMaggio et al, 2001; Agre, 2002; Albrecht, 2006; Chadwick, 2007; Cammaerts, 2008). They advocate the need to study social processes (Agre, 2002), and existing democratic institutions (Buchstein, 1997), including the political economic factors that can shape internet use and behaviour (DiMaggio et al, 2001). Identifying the process and the trend in blog use by the three different groups of bloggers within their respective social and political realities at particular moments in time can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of blogging on political life. Instead of making or debunking generalised claims about the potentials of the internet and blogging, the findings point to particular situations and defining moments when blogging can be significant or insignificant to political life in a relatively authoritarian society.

The politician-bloggers, bound by the broader institutional and societal structures, exhibited different ways of blogging at particular moments in electoral politics. For example, issues of the digital divide confronting their respective voters, the culture and ethnicity of voters, including the wider political economy of the media were particular circumstances that could limit the effectiveness of blogging as a campaign

tool. Blogging, however, became an important platform when they were promoting their personal and party image before and after the elections. This was when they were facing limited access to the mainstream media and were trying to reach a wide and, possibly, global audience. The ability of the new media to transcend geographical boundaries became a crucial feature for this group of bloggers when blogging was a political marketing tool before and after the elections. But this was not so during the campaigning period when it came to reaching a specific audience that were experiencing limited access to the internet and broadband facilities and were confined within specific geographical and ethnic boundaries. The significance of blogging to electoral politics for this group of politician-bloggers varied according to the particular social and political circumstances at specific junctures in an election.

Many of the bloggers highlighted that they were publishing views that were alternative to the mainstream media. Because of this tight control of the media in the hands of the government, blogging presented itself as a platform for alternative views. This is particularly so among the group of civil society bloggers who are adept at the use of blogs to publish views largely ignored by the mainstream media. Examples of issues, events and incidents that witnessed widespread coverage by civil society bloggers suggested the emergence of an alternative media form in relation to coverage in the traditional media. This reflects the influence of the wider political economy of the mainstream media that are less able to

accommodate diverse opinions. As disclosed in Chapter Five, control of the mainstream media in Malaysia is in the hands of the ruling regime. Apart from that, the traditional media are tightly governed by strict legislation that has huge impacts on how they operate. Among the restrictive laws that have an effect on how the media operate are the Printing Presses and Publications Act in 1988, the Internal Security Act (1960), the Sedition Act (1948) and the Official Secrets Act (1972). They serve to restrict the freedom of expression of the mainstream media in the country (Zaharom, 2002). An indication of how controlled the press is in Malaysia is the Press Freedom Index published in the website, Reporters Without Borders. In 2008, Malaysia's position in the index was a low 132nd out of 173 countries. A tightly controlled mainstream media seems to have contributed to blogging becoming a medium for alternative news in a relatively authoritarian society. This suggests the possible influence of social and political realities on how blogging can be used to fulfil liberal democratic practices.

A moment in history on new media and electoral politics

This research records a moment in history on the evolution of new media and public debate in electoral politics by taking into consideration the specific social and political realities and the particular moments in an election in Malaysia. The study has dissected the different actors, in terms of their social and economic background, their political affiliation, their relationship with other bloggers and political elites, the particular social

and political realities surrounding the respective actors, including the wider institutional and societal structures to understand the wide-ranging public discourse in the blogosphere at a specific moment in electoral politics. It clarifies the particular dynamics and interrelationships and situates them at various junctures in an election to arrive at a more broad-based understanding of how, when and why blogging can affect democratic practices and political life. By doing so, this thesis has provided a more comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of Malaysian mediated politics, in particular the distinctive ways of blog use by the different groups of bloggers at different moments in the Malaysian blogosphere. It has also provided a glimpse into when certain manners of blogging are more significant than others and how certain practices are being replicated and perpetuated in the blogosphere. By separating the three different groups of bloggers, identifying the similarities and differences in blog use within the particular context at defining moments in electoral politics, this research has provided a clearer understanding of the impact of blogging on politics.

Restoration of online democratic forms

This thesis contributes to the wider theoretical debate on the significance of digital media in shaping the path towards democracy in authoritarian societies. By focusing on the processes of blogging by the different groups of bloggers in the Malaysian context, this study demonstrates how particular instances can enhance certain aspects of

democratic practices in relatively authoritarian societies. For example, the civil society bloggers were able to express views within the boundaries of existing restrictive legislation to promote civil liberties and they demonstrated how blogging could be used to pressure for political and policy reforms in electoral politics for the common good. They displayed flexibility in forming loose ties with other bloggers or working in an autonomous manner to promote marginalised voices to achieve particular goals in an election. Although many of the civil society bloggers pointed to their experience of harassment by the authorities for their blog contents, they were still able to practise some aspects of democratic principles of free speech and free association. These are some aspects of broader democratic ideals that can possibly be restored in relatively oppressive societies.

Some of the civil society bloggers demonstrated that they could present themselves as an alternative form of media network by publishing information or covered events ignored by the mainstream media. They were publishing blog contents that were not easily published in the traditional media, for example the mass protests of Hindraf and Bersih and information of possible misuse of power by the elites. The blog contents can provide views or information that the mainstream media are reluctant to publish for fear of losing their permits. Some civil society bloggers even formed links with alternative online news portals, such as *Malaysiakini*, to highlight the promotion of civil liberties. As such, the civil society

bloggers, together with alternative online news sites, can act as a network of alternative forms of media to keep the reading public informed. The public can have another source of information, apart from the government-controlled traditional media. This is another way in which blogging can help to provide wide-ranging views and opinions in a society where media control is held tightly by the ruling regime.

The group of partisan bloggers exhibited ways in which blogging on scandal politics could supposedly bring back aspects of democracy in societies where power struggles were fought behind closed doors. Blogging that is focused on political scandals to frame particular leaders in a bad light can help clarify links and affiliations that some bloggers have with certain political elites. This makes the fight for power in the country's dominant ruling party more transparent because blogging can shed light on the struggle between powerful elites. In the past, such power struggles normally occurred behind closed doors and were privy only to party members. Similarly, the group of civil society bloggers who pushed for political and policy reforms in full public view with political parties contesting the election could provide better transparency in the use of blogs as a bargaining tool. These two examples can help re-establish some sense of democracy in a relatively authoritarian society.

Future of blogging and electoral politics in Malaysia

Several lessons can be drawn from the three different groups of bloggers on the future of blogging and politics in Malaysia. The most

significant is the importance of identifying the social and political realities when attempting to capitalise on particular moments to realise specific goals in an election. Legislation that curtails civil liberties, the wider political economy of media and the broader societal structures are among the obstacles that can limit the potential of blogging in improving democratic practices and enriching political life. Apart from that, the particular political circumstances can provide an impetus in the use of blogs to achieve a specific goal at a particular moment in time. Therefore, it may be more pertinent to use blogging to achieve a particular goal at a defining moment in time under specific circumstances, rather than attempt to reach a general political goal without considering the social and political realities or the importance of particular moments.

The partisan bloggers demonstrated the ability to foster a network based on an opportunistic association driven by a specific goal to manage bloggers and information flow to change the national leadership. This group of bloggers had the involvement of some of the civil society bloggers to realise political change. Blogging crossed political boundaries, facilitated free associations, and enabled the partisan bloggers to use their blogs in a strategic manner for political change. However, it must be recognised that the specific goal was personality-based, sparked by a moment of intense power struggle between political elites in the dominant ruling party. Blogging can become a significant platform for change in

future elections in the country if particular leaders or political personalities are targeted.

In a relatively authoritarian society where control of the traditional media is in the hands of the ruling regime, blogging has been described as an alternative avenue of free expression for bloggers. It helps to provide information and views that are largely ignored by the mainstream media. As such, it continues to be a crucial outlet for the politician-bloggers to promote their personal and party image in an election. Similarly, it remains to be a pertinent tool for the partisan and civil society bloggers who are shut out of the mainstream media. When compared with the constraints presented by the traditional media, blogging can continue to be the platform for these bloggers to reach an audience who have internet-access.

The civil society bloggers has shown that blogging can promote democratic practices and enrich political life by facilitating free expression, providing views alternative to the mainstream media and pressuring political parties to commit to fairer policies in an election. They display a tendency in using their blogs to promote liberal democratic principles for the common good. Together with alternative online news sites, such as *Malaysiakini*, this group of bloggers can turn into an alternative media network to supply information alternative to the traditional media. Blogging can be a useful tool in the face of adversity in a relatively authoritarian society. Efforts towards this direction can help to promote blogging as an alternative form of media for political communication.

On the downside, blogging does not seem to have generated public discussion particularly among the partisan and politician-bloggers. The partisan bloggers are focused on political scandal which does not help promote deliberative democracy while the politician-bloggers are not keen to use their blogs to discuss issues that can jeopardise their personal and party image. Even some civil society bloggers feel that blogging is limited in its potential to facilitate public debates. The future of blogging in Malaysian politics will likely continue in the form of scandal politics with the partisan bloggers showing a tendency to align themselves with various political elites instead of discussing public interest issues. Strategic alliances to manage information flows will likely persist in the Malaysian blogosphere in future elections but the common agenda will most likely continue to be overwhelmingly personality-based. While blogging can be used to target particular leaders in an election, it can be limited in its capacity to promote public discussion.

The broader institutional and societal structures can see blogging taking a backseat in electoral politics. This is evident from the way the politician-bloggers are not drawn to the online platform during the campaigning period. The issue of digital divide, the specific target audience of voters during a defining moment of electoral politics and the larger political economy of the media can contribute to the digital media being less appealing. Thus, the social and political realities under which

blogging can be used to achieve a particular goal at a specific moment will

determine if blogging remains an important tool in future elections.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

List of successfully elected parliamentarians who blogged during the 2008 general election

Name of elected parliamentarians	Name of blogs
1. Lim Kit Siang	Lim Kit Siang for Malaysia
2. Teng Chang Khim	Straightforward
3. Tony Pua	Philosophy Politics Economics
4. Fong Po Kuan	Chamber of thoughts
5. Liew Chin Tong	Malaysiana
6. Jeff Ooi	Screenshots
7. Charles Santiago	Charles Santiago MP for Klang
8. Teresa Kok	Sassy MP
9. Dr Tan Seng Giaw	View issues with Tan Seng Giaw
10. Elizabeth Wong	Elizabeth Wong
11. Tian Chua	e-contrario
12. M. Kulasegaran	M. Kulasegaran
13. Lim Lip Eng	Lim Lip Eng
14. Chong Eng	Chong Eng for Bukit Mertajam
15. Chow Kon Yeow	Chow Kon Yeow
16. Zulkifli Noordin	Zulkifli Noordin
17. Fuziah Salleh	Fuziah Salleh
18. Wee Choo Keong	Wee Choo Keong
19. Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah	My Ku Li
20. Nur Jazlan Mohamed	Jazlan.net

Appendix 2

List of blogs selected for content analysis

List of 35 candidate blogs (political parties of blogger):

1. Bloginie (PKR)*

2. Chamber of Thoughts (DAP)

3. Charles Santiago MP for Klang (DAP)

4. Chin Wen for Bukit Tengah (DAP)

5. Chong Eng for Bukit Mertajam (DAP)

6. Chow Kon Yeow (DAP)

7. e contrario (PKR)

8. Elizabeth Wong (PKR)

9. Fuziah Salleh (PKR)

10. Hannah Yeoh (DAP)

11. Husam Musa (PAS)

12. Jazlan.net (UMNO)

13. Jimmy Wong weblog (DAP)

14. Kalimat Zaman (PKR)

15. Kamparinn.blogspot.com (PAS)

16. Kota Anggerik (PKR)

17. Lau Weng San's blog (DAP)

18. Lim Kit Siang for Malaysia (DAP)

19. Lim Lip Eng (DAP)

20. M. Kulasegaran (DAP)

21. Malaysiana (DAP)

22. Memori perjalanan insan yang kerdil (PAS)

23. My Ku Li (UMNO)

24. Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad (PKR)

25. Norman Fernandez (DAP)*

26. Perjuangan adalah perlaksanaan kata-kata (PKR)*

27. Philosophy Politics Economics (DAP)

28. Sassy MP (DAP)

29. Screenshots (DAP)

30. Straightforward (DAP)

31. The blogging Syed Shahrir (PKR)*

32. View issues with Tan Seng Giaw (DAP)

33. Wee Choo Keong (PKR)

34. Wong Ho Leng (DAP)

35. Zulkifli Noordin (PKR)

Note: * Candidates who lost in the 2008 election.

List of 251 non-candidate blogs:

1. 4896

2. A little taffer's room

3. A matter of choice

4. A piece of my mind

5. Aarvidi's weblog

6. Abdullah Jones

7. Ada otak fikir fikir fikir

8. Afifi

9. Aisehman

10. Al Khazaain

11. Alhusseyn

12. Alkerohi

13. Amdang81

70. Faisal Mustaffa Online

71. Forum Maya Intelek Muda

72. Free Little Brain

73. From Sarawak, land of the hornbill

74. Fruss and Fuss – Semua OK

75. Fudzail

76. Garis Perubahan

77. Gelanggang Keris Silau

78. Gelanggang Minda, Medan Bicara

79. Get an MP

80. Hantu Laut

81. Habullah Pit

82. Hiroblog2007

83. Human Rights Movement Malaysian Indian

84. Hunusan Lidah

85. I am a Malaysian

86. I truly don't give a fuck

87. Ibnu Hasyim

88. Ibrahim Baba

89. Infernal Ramblings

90. Inspirasi 1982

91. It's time

92. Jebat Must Die

93. Jelas

94. Jiwo Kelate

95. Kamal Talks

96. Kata Tak Nak

195. Sagaladoola

196. Sahabat Mantap

197. Sanggahtoksago.com

198. Sean-the-man

199. Sembang-sembang generasi merdeka

200. Serama Berkokok

201. Shagdelica

202. Shanghai Fish

203. Sheikh Teluk Intan

204. Siber Party of Malaysia (M)

205. Simpangsiur

206. Simply Puteri

207. Snap Happy

208. Spanking da monkey

209. Straight Talk

210. Stupid Malaysia

211. Suara

212. Suara Islah Pas

213. Suara Lantang Jejaka

214. Surat Dalam Botol

215. Surind

216. Susan Loone's Blog

217. Tangents

218. Tarak Nama

219. Teropong Langkawi

Appendix 3

Coding schedule for blogs

A. Name of blog:

B. Name of blogger:

C. Ethnicity of blogger:
   Not stated (0)
   Malay (1)
   Chinese (2)
   Indian (3)
   Others (4)

D. Occupation of blogger:

E. If the blogger is a 2008 general election candidate, which party is he/she representing?
   Irrelevant (0)
   Umno (1)
   MCA (2)
   MIC (3)
   Gerakan (4)
   DAP (5)
   PAS (6)
   PKR (7)
   Independent (8)
   Others (9)

F. E-mail address of blogger:
   No (0)
   Yes (1)

G. Age of the blog:

H. Are comments allowed on the blog?
   No (0)
   Yes (1)

I. Does it state that the comments are moderated by the blogger?
   No (0)
   Yes (1)

J. Are there advertisements on the blog?
   No (0)
   Yes (1)

K. The donation is contribution for who?
　　Irrelevant (0)
　　The blogger (1)
　　A political party (2)
　　An election campaign fund (3)
　　A charitable organisation (4)
　　Both blogger and political party (5)
　　Both blogger and election campaign fund (6)
　　Blogger, political party and election fund (7)
　　Others (8)

L. Additional information:

Appendix 4

Coding manual for blogs

Name of blog: This refers to the name written at the top of the blog.

Name of blogger: This refers to the name that the blogger uses in the profile page of the blog.

Ethnicity of blogger: This refers to the ethnic background of the blogger. Use the following five categories:

0. Unable to determine the ethnicity of blogger, particularly for anonymous bloggers.

1. Malay

2. Chinese

3. Indian

4. Others

Occupation of blogger: This refers to the occupation of the blogger as written on the profile page of the blog.

Candidate or non-candidate: Indicate the political party that the blogger is from if the blogger is a candidate in the 2008 general election candidates. There are ten categories for this variable.

0. Refers to non-candidates.

1. Umno

2. MCA

3. MIC

4. Gerakan

5. DAP

6. PAS

7. PKR

8. Independent

9. Others

Contact with blogger: Indicate whether the blogger has given an e-mail address or other forms of contact, including through the facebook or telephone contact, to enable readers to establish contacts with the blogger. Use the following two categories for this variable:

0.   If the blogger does not provide such contact information

1.   If the blogger provides an e-mail address or gives a name for readers to contact them through the facebook or gives a telephone contact.

Age of the blog: Indicate the number of years the blog has been set up according to the archives. For blogs that had been set up for less than a year, use '0'.

Comments on the blog: Refers to whether the blogger allows comments to be posted on the blog. Use the following categories:

0.   If the blogger disallows to post their comments to a blog post.

1.   If the blogger allows readers to post their comments to a blog post.

Comments moderated: Indicates if the blogger moderates or edits the comments posted by readers to a blog post. Use the following categories:

0.   If the blogger does not have a statement or policy that clearly states that comments from readers will be moderated, edited or anonymous comments are not allowed or restricting comments to team members only.

1.   If the blogger has a statement or policy that clearly states that comments from readers will be moderated, edited or that it disallows anonymous comments or restricting comments to team members only.

Advertising: Note down if there are advertisements on the blog. Use the following categories:

0.   If there are no advertisements seen on the first page of the blog.

1.   If there are advertisements of services or products seen on the first page of the blog, for example advertisements by google or nuffnang or advertisements on the blogger's own products and services.

Donation: Indicate if the blogger asks for donation from readers and for what purposes. Use the following categories:

0. If the first page of the blog does not ask for donation from readers.

1. If the first page of the blog asks for donation for the blogger's personal cause or to support his or her online work.

2. If the first page of the blog asks for donation for a political party, for example development fund for a political party.

3. If the first page of the blog asks for donation for funding the election in 2008 or future elections. This includes donation to support the blogger's work in a particular constituency.

4. If the first page of the blog asks for donation for a charitable organisation or a voluntary body.

5. If the first page of the blog asks for donation for the blogger and the political party that the blogger is representing.

6. If the first page of the blog asks for donation for the blogger and for funding his participation as a candidate in the general election. This includes donation to support the blogger's work in a particular constituency.

7. If the first page of the blog asks for donation for the blogger, the political party he or she is representing and for election fund.

8. If the first page of the blog asks for donation for purposes other than those stated above. For example donation for the Red Cross.

Additional information: Write down interesting information that had not been captured through the earlier variables and the information could be used to further understand the blog in a qualitative manner. For example, blogs posting cartoons to make a political statement.

Appendix 5

Coding schedule for blog posts

A. Name of blog:

B. Date of post:

C. Language in which the post is written:
Malay (1)
English (2)
Chinese (3)
Eng/Malay (4)
Eng/Chinese (5)
Malay/Chinese (6)
Eng/Malay/Chinese (7)
Others (8)

D. Is the post giving views or information to readers?
Giving views (1)
Giving information (2)
Giving views and information (3)
Others (4)

E – H. What is the content of the post? Up to four choices:
Fewer than four choices (0)
Ethnicity and religion (1)
Crime and public security (2)
Civil rights, good governance, free and fair election (3)
State-federal relations and powers of the royalty (4)
Physical amenities and social welfare of the people (5)
Traditional and new media issue (6)
Price hikes and economic woes (7)
General election, candidates and campaign (8)
Party leaders and matters (9)
Others (10)

I – L. What is the source of the post? Up to four choices:
Fewer than four choices (0)
Mainstream media (1)
Local online news sites (2)
Foreign media/foreign online (3)
Political parties (4)
YouTube and similar online social media (5)
Government sources (6)
Other blogs (7)
Own comments/views/knowledge/experience (8)
Undisclosed (9)

Others (10)

M. Does the content urge readers to act on the issue or take part in the Hindraf/Bersih or vote in the general election?
    No (0)
    Yes (1)

N. If it does ask readers to vote, which party is it asking readers to vote for?
    Irrelevant (0)
    Barisan Nasional/Ruling party (1)
    Opposition parties (2)
    Both ruling and opposition parties (3)
    Independent candidates (4)
    Voting as a social responsibility (5)
    Others (6)

O. What is the predominant tone used in the content?
    Neutral (0)
    Implicit criticism (1)
    Explicit criticism (2)
    Supportive/optimistic (3)
    Logical (4)
    Sad (5)
    Threatening (6)
    Uncertainty (7)
    Others (8)

P – S. If it is implicitly or explicitly critical or supportive, who/what is it directed at? Up to four choices:
    Irrelevant (0)
    Barisan Nasional/Ruling party (1)
    Opposition parties (2)
    Both ruling and opposition parties (3)
    Government departments/agencies/policies (4)
    Other bloggers (5)
    Mainstream media (6)
    Other communities (7)
    Others (8)

T. If it is implicitly or explicitly critical or supportive, does it make specific mention to the prime minister?
    No (0)
    Yes (1)

U. The general election campaign information is for which political party?
    Irrelevant (0)
    Barisan Nasional/Ruling party (1)
    Opposition parties (2)
    Both ruling and opposition parties (3)

Independent candidates (4)
No party in particular (5)
Others (6)

V. If the post is on election candidates, which parties are the candidates from?
Irrelevant (0)
Barisan Nasional/Ruling party (1)
Opposition parties (2)
Both ruling and opposition parties (3)
Independent candidates (4)
No party in particular (5)
Others (6)

W. The number of comments received for the post:

X. If the post asks for donation, who is it for?
Irrelevant (0)
The blogger (1)
A political party (2)
A campaign fund (3)
A charitable organisation (4)
The blogger and political party (5)
The blogger and campaign fund (6)
A political party and campaign fund (7)
Others (8)

Y. Does the post ask for volunteers?
No (0)
Yes (1)

Z. Additional information:

Appendix 6

Coding manual for blog posts

Name of blog: This refers to the name written at the top of the blog.

Date of post: This refers to the date a particular comment or writing is posted.

Language in which the post is written: This is an indication of the language used by bloggers to write the postings. Use the following categories for the respective language used to post the blog:

1. Malay

2. English

3. Chinese

4. English and Malay

5. English and Chinese

6. Malay and Chinese

7. English, Malay and Chinese

8. Others

Post written by the blogger: This refers to whether the blogger is giving his/her views or passing information on to the readers. Use the following codes for this variable:

1. If the post contains only the views or comments or statements of opinion pertaining to a public interest matter.

2. If the post contains only information taken solely from external sources, such as the mainstream media, online media, other bloggers, e-mail or other social media like YouTube without making statements of opinion on the public interest matter.

3. If the post has information taken from external sources and contains statements of opinion on the public interest matter.

4. If the post does not give any views or comments or statements of opinion regarding a public interest matter. For example, a festive wish or just a word of thanks to readers.

Content of the post: This refers to the topics that a blogger writes about in a post. Read the entire blog post then determine the topics of discussion. There are four choices in this variable to capture the various topics that the blogger writes about on a particular date. If a blog post discusses education in terms of the use of English to teach Mathematics and Science, the post should have two codes - the language code (1) and the social well-being code (4). The categories are:

0. Fewer than four choices.

1. This refers to blog posts discussing matters related to the various races in the country. This means problems that make specific references to the Malay, Chinese, Indian or other communities in the country will be coded with this category. If the blog post is about problems of Indian community in general and related to the Hindraf rally, it will be coded with this category. This includes blog posts that are on the leaders involved in the Hindraf movement, discussions on racial or religious discrimination, Malay customary rights or rights of minority ethnic groups. Discussions on the quota system, the New Economic Policy will also be coded with this category because discussions of the two policies usually revolve around the issue of ethnicity. The policy has been described as the Malaysian version of an Affirmative Action Plan (Mehmet 1968: 8). Discussions on language or culture of the respective races will also be coded with this category. For example, the use of the Malay language to teach Mathematics and Science should use this code. Related to ethnicity are religion and blog posts that discuss topics on religion such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or the Bahai faith should be coded with this category.

2. This refers to blog posts that discuss high crime rates or crime-infested areas, concerns of the people on high crime rates. This includes blog posts of incidences of kidnapping, other crimes, including concerns about illegal immigrants.

3. This broadly refers to discussions on civil liberties, good governance and a free and fair election, including the Bersih gatherings. This category includes blog posts that discuss freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, unlawful arrests and detention under the Internal Security Act that breaches the rights of citizens. Discussions on abuse of power and allegations of corruption by government servants, the judiciary, the police, including allegations of deaths of detainees while in police custody will also be coded with this category. Discussions on how the government departments and their officers should practise check and balance and be accountable in its system of governance will also be included in this category. This includes blog posts that raise the issue of government contracts given out without calling for open tenders. This

category includes posts that discuss the demands of political parties and non-governmental organisations for a free and fair election that culminated in a public rally on 30 November 2007. Discussions on fair and free election, including topics related to the Election Commission, must use this code. Blog posts on allegations of corrupt practices among politicians or discussions on politicians declaring their assets will be coded with this category and also the 'party leader/matters' category.

4. This refers to blog posts that discuss state-federal rules and relations, including the powers of the *Sultan* or *Agong*. For example, blog posts on the power of the *Agong* in the appointment of chief ministers or mentri besar in Terengganu or Perak will be coded with this category. Discussions here include the issue of oil royalty to Terengganu or other states, state constitutional crisis that refers to the powers of the *Sultan*.

5. This refers to discussions on physical amenities and social welfare of the people. This category is used for discussions on problems of land, abandoned housing and squatters, lack of proper transportation system, telecommunication and IT related infrastructure, including matters like drainage. Other social ills like drug abuse, education, health and unemployment will also be coded with this category. For example, problems of access to proper health care, the complexities from corporatising particular health sectors, weaknesses in the education system will be coded under this category. This category includes discussion of the government's responsibility to provide amenities to the people.

6. This refers to blog posts that question or discuss the ethics, practices and quality of journalism in the mainstream media and citizen journalism, such as blogging and online news sites. Examples of discussions to be coded under this category are complaints against particular journalists or editors, ethics of blogging and complaints against bloggers. Discussions on professional journalists or bloggers who are prosecuted under the country's criminal laws will be coded under this category because the post still discusses the practices or ethics of the journalist. If the blog post discusses the practices of journalist in relation to civil liberties, then it should be coded with an additional category (3).

7. This specifically refers to blog posts that discuss price hikes in consumer items and its related problems, such as price increase in flour, price hikes in toll rates or rise in water, electricity and toll tariffs.

8. This specifically refers to blog posts that discuss the 2008 general election, such as the dissolution of parliament, calls for readers to take

part in the voting process, the respective manifesto of political parties, their candidates or campaign events of the various candidates and political parties. For example, discussions on crowd turnout in a campaign event, new websites set up to cover the election, the results of the general election or predictions of the outcome of the 2008 general election will be coded with this category. Malaysia is unlike the US presidential election that has regular opinion polls on the possible outcome of the election outcome. So posts that discuss the results or the predictions will be coded with this category. Blog posts that discuss the 2008 election candidates such as the qualities of the candidates will also be coded under this category. This category includes blog posts on appointment of prime ministers and the Cabinet, including the chief minister or mentri besar in the respective states that took place after the March 8 polls where the appointments are not complicated with discussions on the powers of the royalty to make such appointments.

9. This refers to posts that discuss or question the direction, aim or beliefs of a political party. This category includes posts that question the ethics, practices or qualities of a political leader. For example, discussion on particular party leaders, the qualities or the lack of it, discussions on how a particular party should operate to win over the people or how the party approach should change in order to survive the next general election or discussion on particular party crises. This category includes blog posts that discuss scandals or allegation of scandals of political leaders.

10. This refers to blog posts that discuss matters which do not fall into any of the other categories. For example, season greetings or posts that thank readers for their support in the general election.

Source of the post: This indicates the sources which bloggers used to compose his/her blog posts. This will help give an idea of the relationship between bloggers and other news providers when they are composing their blog posts. There are four choices for coding this variable. The categories for this variable are as follows:

0. Fewer than four choices.

1. This refers to print, broadcast and online sites that the mainstream media use to provide news to readers.

2. This refers to news sites that make use of only the internet to provide news. These local online news sites do not need a permit to operate, unlike print and broadcast media in Malaysia, such as, Malaysiakini, Malaysian Insider or Agenda Daily, Nutgraph, Malaysia Votes.

3. This refers to blog posts that are from foreign news media, including their online sources.

4. This refers to websites, newsletters or documents of political parties to source their writings in their blogs. For example, Harakah, the DAP or Umno website.

5. This refers to the use of YouTube and other online social media like Facebook, Twitter, SMSes or electronic mail which bloggers used to source their posts. This includes the use of information from Wikipedia or the online encyclopedia as the source of a particular blog post.

6. This refers to the use of government documents, online or offline, such as government statues, government department reports.

7. This refers to the bloggers' use of information from other blogs when sourcing their posts. These other blogs are blogs produced and maintained by individuals and not political party blogs or websites.

8. This refers to blog posts that present their personal views, comments, knowledge or experience. Some of the personal views are based on information retrieved from mainstream media or local online news sites or statistics/figures without citing those sources or what the blogger learnt at political gatherings. Such posts will show additional codes, apart from being coded as own comments/views/knowledge/experience.

9. This refers to a situation when the bloggers did not want to disclose the source of his information in a particular blog post.

10. This refers to sources other than the nine categories that had been specified. For example, books, Quran, journal articles, affidavits, leaflets, posters, comments taken from an earlier blog post or from company websites or documents.

Taking action: This is to find out if a blog post is asking readers to take particular actions to register their stand on an issue discussed. For example, a blog post may ask readers to write to the government or take part in public rallies such as the Hindraf or Bersih rally or vote for a change in government or vote as part of the readers' social responsibility. Use the following codes for this variable:

0. If the blog post does not ask its readers to act on the issue discussed, take part in the Hindraf/Bersih rally or vote in the 2008 election.

1. If the blog post asks its readers to act on the issue, take part in the Hindraf/Bersih rally or vote in the 2008 election.

If the post urges readers to vote, which political party is it asking readers to support: This refers to which political party that the election campaign posts are asking readers to vote for. The categories are:

0. This code is for blog posts that are on matters not related to the 2008 general election campaign.

1. This refers to political parties under the Barisan Nasional or ruling party such as Umno, MCA, MIC, Gerakan and PPP.

2. This refers to political parties under the opposition such as the DAP, PAS and PKR. It includes posts that urge readers to not vote for Barisan Nasional or posts that urge readers to vote for a change in government.

3. This refers to both ruling and opposition parties

4. This refers to candidates who contested independently without any political party affiliation.

5. This refers to blog posts that ask readers to vote because it is their social responsibility to do so or to vote for change or to vote according to your conscience. This includes blog posts that do not mention which particular political party to vote for.

6. This refers to any other political parties that do not fall into any of the other categories.

Tone of the content: This refers to the predominant tone of a blog post, whether it is critical or supportive of the topic that the blogger writes about. The categories are:

0. This refers to a blog post that is not biased nor takes sides.

1. This refers to criticisms in a blog post that is made in a covert and subtle manner, for example sarcasm. An example is a blog post that pokes fun at the ruling government's manifesto of ensuring public safety for the people but the statistics show a high crime rate.

2. This refers to criticisms made in a blog post that takes on an overt and obvious manner. It includes blog posts written in a hostile or aggressive tone. An example is a blog post that urges the people to stop believing in the government as the leaders have been lying to the people.

3. This refers to optimism of a blog post when discussing an issue. For example, blog posts that took on an optimistic tone about the performance of the opposition parties or a statement of support for Hindraf leaders will be coded with this category.

4. This refers to a rational and logical discussion of an issue. For example, a rational discussion on the NEP that takes into account the historical development of the country.

5. This refers to blog posts that laments about the state of political affairs in the country.

6. This refers to a threatening tone of a blog post. For example, a blog post that is sourced from the mainstream media instills fear in its readers on possible riots if they did not vote for the ruling party.

7. This refers to blog posts that are unsure about the accuracy of the topic discussed or raises questions relating to the subject matter discussed in the blog posts.

8. Any tone that is not captured in the other categories will be listed here. This includes blog posts that contain both critical and supportive or ambiguous tone.

Criticisms or support directed at who/what: This refers to who or what the implicit/explicit criticisms or support/optimism are directed at. Up to four choices are coded this variable. The categories are:

0. This refers to blog posts that are not critical or supportive about an issue or a group.

1. This refers to leaders of political parties under the Barisan Nasional or ruling party such as Umno, MCA, MIC, Gerakan and PPP. This includes government ministers, prime minister or chief minister or party leaders acting in their government positions.

2. This refers to leaders of political parties under the opposition such as the DAP, PAS and PKR.

3. This refers to leaders of both ruling and opposition parties

4. This refers to government departments/agencies/policies. This includes the Election Commission, the police, the Multimedia Commission or top officers of the relevant government agencies. It also includes the New Economic Policy including the policies that support a particular race.

5. Other bloggers or online news sites, new media journalists or editors

6. Mainstream media/journalists/editors

7. A particular ethnic group/religion/culture/language

8. This is to capture other targets that have not been listed in the other categories, for example the target is Malaysians in general.

Critical/supportive of prime minister: This refers to blog posts that are specifically critical or supportive of the prime minister.

0. No specific reference to prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

1. Has specific reference to prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

General election campaign information: This refers to which political party that the election campaign information is written for in the blog posts. The categories are:
0. This refers to blog posts which are not about the election campaign.

1. This refers to political parties under the Barisan Nasional or ruling party such as Umno, MCA, MIC, Gerakan and PPP.

2. This refers to political parties under the opposition such as the DAP, PAS and PKR.

3. This refers to both ruling and opposition parties

4. This refers to candidates who contested independently without any political party affiliation.

5. No mention of which particular political party the campaign information is for.

6. This refers to any other political parties that do not fall into any of the other categories.

Election candidate of which political party: This refers to blog posts that discuss candidates contesting in the general elections and which political party the candidates are from. The categories are:

0. This refers to blog posts that are not on matters relating to candidates of the 2008 general election.

1. This refers to political parties under the Barisan Nasional or ruling party such as Umno, MCA, MIC, Gerakan and PPP.

2. This refers to political parties under the opposition such as the DAP, PAS and PKR.

3. This refers to both ruling and opposition parties

4. This refers to candidates who contested independently without any political party affiliation.

5. No mention of which particular candidate the campaign information is for.

6. This refers to any other political parties of a candidate that do not fall into any of the other categories.

Feedback received for a post: This refers to the number of comments received for a blog post.

Content asking for monetary contribution: This refers to blog posts that solicit donations from readers. Use the following categories to indicate the contribution is for whom, if the post does ask for donation:

0. If the blog post does not ask for donation from readers.

1. If the blog post asks for donation for the blogger's personal cause or to support his or her online work.

2. If the blog post asks for donation for a political party, for example development fund for a political party.

3. If the blog post asks for donation for funding the election in 2008 or future elections. This includes donation to support a blogger contesting in a particular constituency in the general election.

4. If the blog post asks for donation for a charitable organisation or a voluntary body.

5. If the blog post asks for donation for the blogger's personal cause and the political party that the blogger is representing.

6. If the blog post asks for donation for the blogger's personal cause and for funding his participation as a candidate in the general election. This includes donation to support the blogger contesting in a particular constituency in the election.

7. If the blog post asks for donation for the blogger's personal cause, the political party he or she is representing and for campaign fund.

8. If the blog posts asks for donation for purposes other than those stated above. For example donation for the Red Cross.

Content asking for volunteers: This refers to a blog post that asks its readers to volunteer their time to help out in the general election or translation skills. Use the following categories:

0. If the content does not ask for volunteers.

1. If the content asks for volunteers.

Additional information: Indicate any other information of interest that had not been captured earlier and could be used to further understand the blog in a qualitative manner.

Appendix 7

Coding schedule for comments

A. Blog name:

B. Date of post:

C. Comment number:

D. Language used in comment:
   Malay (1)
   English (2)
   Chinese (3)
   Eng/Malay (4)
   Eng/Chinese (5)
   Malay/Chinese (6)
   Eng/Malay/Chinese (7)
   Others (8)

E. Does the comment agree or disagree with the post?
   Neutral (0)
   Agree (1)
   Disagree (2)

F. Does the comment discuss the post?
   No (0)
   Yes (1)

G. Does the comment give additional information to the post?
   No (0)
   Yes (1)

H - K. If comment gives additional information, what is the source? Up to four choices:
   Irrelevant (0)
   Mainstream media (1)
   Local online news sites (2)
   Foreign media/foreign online (3)
   Political parties (4)
   YouTube and similar online social media (5)
   Government sources (6)
   Other blogs (7)
   Own comments (8)
   Undisclosed (9)
   Others (10)

L. Is the comment replying to a previous feedback given by another reader?
    No (0)
    Yes (1)

M. Is the comment a reply by blogger to a reader?
    No (0)
    Yes (1)

N. Predominant tone of the comment?
    Neutral (0)
    Implicit criticism (1)
    Explicit criticism (2)
    Supportive/optimistic (3)
    Logical (4)
    Sad (5)
    Threatening (6)
    Uncertainty (7)
    Others (8)

O - R. If comment is implicitly/explicitly critical or supportive/optimistic, who/what is it directed at? Up to four choices:
    Irrelevant (0)
    Barisan Nasional/Ruling party (1)
    Opposition parties/leaders (2)
    Both ruling and opposition parties/leaders (3)
    Government departments/agencies/policies (4)
    Other bloggers or online journalists (5)
    Mainstream media/journalists/editors (6)
    Other communities (7)
    The blogger himself/herself (8)
    Others (9)

S. If it is implicitly or explicitly critical or supportive, does it make specific mention to the prime minister?
    No (0)
    Yes (1)

T. Additional information:

Appendix 8

Coding manual for comments

Name of blog: This refers to the name written at the top of the blog.

Date of post: This refers to the date a particular article or writing is posted.

Comment number: This refers to the specific number of a comment/feedback that is given by readers, counting from the earliest to the most recent comment.

Language in which the comment written: This is an indication of the language the blog reader used to write his comments. Use the following categories for the respective language used to post the blog:

1. Malay

2. English

3. Chinese

4. English and Malay

5. English and Chinese

6. Malay and Chinese

7. English, Malay and Chinese

8. Others

Does the comment/feedback agree with the post: This refers to whether a comment agrees or disagrees with the blog post. Use the following categories:

0. If the comment does not make or indicate a statement of agreement or disagreement with the blog post.

1. If the comment makes or indicates a statement of agreement with the blog post.

2. If the comment makes or indicate a statement of disagreement with the blog post.

Does the comment discuss the post: This refers to whether the comment talks about the topic of the blog post and gives a different view from the blog post. Use the following categories:

0. If the comment does not address the topic of the blog post or merely repeating the view of the blog post.

1. If the comment addresses the topic of the blog post by giving his/her statements of opinion that is different from the blog post.

Does the comment give additional information to the post: This refers to whether the comment is passing or giving extra information to what is given in the blog post. The categories are:

0. If the comment does not contain further information related to discussions in the blog post.

1. If the comment contains additional information related to discussions in the blog post.

If it gives additional information, where is the source from: This refers to whether a reader is getting extra information in the comments given to a blog post. There are four choices for comments that give additional information. Use the following categories:

0. If the comment does not give additional information, use this code.

1. This refers to print, broadcast and online sites that the mainstream media use to provide news to readers.

2. This refers to news sites that make use of only the Internet to provide news. These local online news sites do not need a permit to operate, unlike print and broadcast media in Malaysia. Examples of online news sites are Malaysiakini, Malaysian Insider, Agenda Daily, Nutgraph or Malaysia Votes.

3. This refers to foreign news media, including their online portals that the bloggers used to source their posts.

4. This refers to bloggers who use websites, videos or newsletters of political parties to source their writings in their blogs. Examples are Harakah, the DAP or Umno website.

5. This refers to the use of YouTube and other online social media like Facebook, Twitter, SMS or electronic mail used to provide feedback to the posts. This includes the use of information from Wikipedia or other online encyclopedia.

6. This refers to the use of government documents, online or offline, by bloggers to compose their posts. Examples are government statues or government department reports.

7. This refers to comments taken from other blogs produced and maintained by individuals and not political party blogs or websites.

8. This refers to comments that are based on personal views, comments, knowledge or experience. This includes comments based on information retrieved from mainstream media or local online news sites or statistics/figures without any sources cited or what the commenter learnt at political gatherings. Such comments will show additional codes, apart from being coded as own comments/views/knowledge/experience.

9. This refers to a situation when the bloggers did not want to disclose the source of his information in a comment.

10. This refers to sources other than the ten categories that had been specified. For example, books, Quran, journal articles, leaflets, posters or comments from an earlier blog post.

Comment replying to a previous feedback: This refers to a comment that is replying to a previous feedback given by another blog reader. Use the following categories:

0. If a comment is not replying to a previous feedback given by another blog reader.

1. If a comment is replying to a previous feedback given by another blog reader.

Comment is a reply by blogger to a reader: This refers to a comment that is a reply by the blogger to a reader. Use the following categories:

0. If a comment is not a reply by a blogger to a reader.

1. If a comment is a reply by a blogger to a reader.

Tone of comment: This refers to the predominant tone of the comment, whether it is critical or supportive of the issue in the blog post. The categories are:

0. This refers to a comment that is not biased nor takes sides.

1. This refers to criticisms in a comment that is made in a covert and subtle manner, for example sarcasm. An example is a comment that pokes fun at the ruling government's manifesto of ensuring public safety for the people but the statistics show a high crime rate.

2. This refers to criticisms made in a comment that takes on an overt and obvious manner. It includes comments that take on a hostile or aggressive tone. An example is a comment that urges the people to stop believing in the government as the leaders have been lying to the people.

3. This refers to optimism of a comment when discussing an issue. Examples are comments that are optimistic about the performance of the opposition parties or an outpouring of support for Hindraf leaders.

4. This refers to a logical tone of taken when discussing an issue. For example, a discussion on the NEP that gives historical facts in a logical manner or how the opposition should act after the elections.

5. This refers to comments that lament about the state of political affairs in the country or the issue being discussed.

6. This refers to the threatening tone of a comment or it reflects fear. For example, a comment that is sourced from the mainstream media instills fear in its readers on possible riots if they did not vote for the ruling party.

7. This refers to comments that are uncertain or questions the authenticity and validity of the contents in a blog post.

8. Any tone that is not captured in the other categories will be coded with this value, which includes comments that contain both critical and supportive or ambiguous tone.

Criticisms or support/optimism directed at who/what: This refers to who or what the implicit or explicit criticisms in a comment/feedback is directed at. There are four choices for coding this variable. Use the following categories:

0. This refers to comments that are not critical or supportive of an issue or a group.

1. This refers to political parties under the Barisan Nasional or ruling party such as Umno, MCA, MIC, Gerakan and PPP. This includes government ministers, prime minister or chief minister or party leaders acting in their government positions.

2. This refers to political parties under the opposition such as the DAP, PAS and PKR.

3. This refers to both ruling and opposition parties

4. This refers to government departments/agencies/policies. This includes the Election Commission, the police, the Multimedia Commission or top officers of the relevant government agencies. It also includes the New Economic Policy including the policies that support a particular race.

5. Other bloggers or commenters or online journalists/editors

6. Mainstream media/journalists/editors

7. A particular ethnic group/religion/culture/language

8. The blogger himself/herself

9. Other targets that have not been listed in the previous nine categories.

Critical/supportive of prime minister: This refers to comments that are specifically critical or supportive of the prime mMinister.

0. No specific reference to prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

1. Has specific reference to prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

Additional information: Indicate any other information of interest that had not been captured earlier and could be used to further understand the dynamics between the blog reader and blogger in a qualitative manner.

Appendix 9

Questions for in-depth interviews with bloggers

Part One (Background of blogger)
Name of blog and blogger (or anonymous):
How many blogs do you have?
Age:
Sex:
Ethnicity:
Religion:
Language used in blog:
Educational level:
Course taken for blogging:
Occupation:
Membership of organisation:
Position in organisation:
Political affiliation (membership):

Part Two (Blogging activity)
What do you aim to achieve?
What sort of values and ideals you want to promote and why?
Have you been able to achieve those values and ideals? How did you achieve them?
If not, why have you not been able to achieve them and what needs to be done?
Do you think your blog has influenced public opinion and why? Provide examples.
For those who blog anonymously, why do you do so?
Has it been easy to obtain information on what you want to blog about and why?
How do you obtain the information you need for your blog postings and why?
What are the benefits or satisfaction you get out of blogging? Provide examples.

Part Three (Blogging during the 2008 general election)
How did you decide what to blog about?
Has anyone influenced you in the topics you blogged about, how and why?
Do you feel you are free to write what you want on your blog?
Has there been any pressure on what you blog about?
Do you fear backlash from what you post on your blog?
What did you hope to achieve when you blogged during the general election and why?

Part Four (On comments and other bloggers)
Why do you think you get many or few comments from your readers? Do you think it has to do with your experience or background?
What do you do with the comments? Do you engage in a discussion with your readers and why? Do you moderate the comments and why?
Are the discussions informative and useful for you and why?

Do you feel that your readers are able to engage in substantive discussions on the issues you blog? Why and provide examples

How do you feel about the practices of other socio-political bloggers? Are there any bloggers whom you are not happy or dissatisfied with and why? Provide examples.

How do you deal with the matter? Does it get resolved and how?