

Counter-Publics: Practicalities of Malaysian Media in Electoral Reportage

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Abstract

This paper analyses media representations of two periods of Malaysian electoral coverage from 12th and 13th general elections. It presents arguments about some media productive interventions into deliberations about democracy in public life, through the anchoring of reformist counter-publics. The Internet's role was recognized by scholars, activists and political analysts in driving the 2008 electoral results and turned into a political expression apparatus in the political landscape. The trends continued in 2013. Independent news portals such as Malaysiakini.com and Freemalaysiatoday.com constituted deliberative publics by mobilizing the expressive powers. This had impacted traditional media landscape, which bounded by developmental journalism. Mainstream media focuses primarily on positive stories for the benefit of the political elite illustrated in newsroom cultures, where close links between politicians, editors and publishers make it difficult for journalists to investigate political leaders. Malaysia has thus been called a fettered democracy. The grip on hegemonic power is exerted through invasive government regulation of print and broadcast media. The Internet portals became beneficiaries of an unforeseen loophole in regulation when the Internet was left free of censorship in the interests of the country's business development. Since mainstream media and independent portals are bounded by different legal frameworks, this paper will examine in what ways their news are different and discourses of inclusion and exclusion, circulated. To understand how counter-publics work in practice, journalists' from diverse background are interviewed through in-depth-interviews regarding their electoral experience. The findings showed that counter-publics around the independent portals are a direct result, and may explain some of the mainstream media's ambivalence on some issues because the mere presence

of independent online media increases the likelihood of diversity of opinion, and different narrativizations of reformist activities in public.

Keywords: *General Election, Independent News Portal, Mainstream Media, News, Democracy.*

Introduction

Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has been governed by a multi-party coalition - the Barisan Nasional (BN) modelled after the British Westminster's parliamentary system. BN as the ruling party has been constructing its identity as a post-colonial and sovereign state, through its extensive utilisation of traditional media, especially print media and public broadcast network (Khattab, 2008). Therefore the nation, the BN government and traditional media were brought together and still remain bonded in a symbiotic relationship as a tool for national unity and national identity since independence. Today, traditional media self-censor, but also are largely owned and controlled by the government of BN. The Centre for Independent Journalism (2013) states that 80% of traditional media coverage favourable to the government because of the BN connection. Media is used to say confirmatory and affirmative things about the government's leadership and administration. According to Khattab (2008), Malaysia has engaged in various forms of nation-building projects through utilization of traditional media for the purpose of creating a 'national' consciousness among its post-colonial people. Such projects, in particular, pertaining to patriotism, national unity, cultural identity and social inclusiveness have often been difficult to achieve given that a newly formed post-independent government is currently charged with the responsibility of uniting the population, regardless of their ethnic origins or religious beliefs, under a single national umbrella called 'Bangsa Malaysia'.

General election is one of the branches of democracy process. In Malaysia, it will be held every five years (Pandian, 2010). Despite the big win in the eleventh general election, 2008 marked the decrease support towards the ruling party. The Malaysian general election has always been

interesting to study due to its complexities. The 2008 General Election (GE2008) was also described as 'political tsunami' (Asli, 2009) because of the BN's worst performance in electoral history of losing five out of 11 states. While, the 2013 general election (GE2013) was recognized as 'Chinese Tsunami' due to Chinese votes swung to the opposition. According to Mohamad (2008) and Pepinsky (2008), the emergence of new media platforms in political culture have enjoyed a surge in popularity in reporting the election's issues, whereas the mainstream media was seen to be less successful (*Straits Times*, 2008; Mohd Azizuddin, 2009). In the latest GE2013, the BN government struggled to confront the GE2013 with gaining back some states yet; it lost more seats to the opposition, Pakatan Rakyat (PR) compared to the GE2008. Since the government has pledged not to censor the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2010), the emergence of Internet platforms such as Independent News Portal (INP) in the GE2008 and GE2013 election greatly influenced the political landscape in Malaysia, challenging the mainstream media and existing democracy practices. For instance, INP such as *Malaysiakini.com* was recognized by the general public and voters in the GE2008, due to its popularity reporting on local political issues, whereas mainstream media were less successful (*Straits Times*, 2008). In the GE2013, the portal continues to report diligently with insightful commentaries and analyses. Its readership hit 500,000 users per minute and nearly five million users visited on the GE2013 night (*Malaysiakini.com*, 2013).

The task of forming national identity and nation building by mainstream media became even more complicated with the emergence of INPs in identified groups that opposed the government. INP and its news features have apparently allowed greater participation from those who were disappointed with the government of BN. It gave a voice to the voiceless, for example, the few street demonstrations that were not given due attention by the government of BN, were also less evident in mainstream media coverage (Steele, 2009). In addition, the political issues were replaced by reports of property damage. For instance, *Malaysiakini.com* has covered the Malaysian Indian community rally organised by The Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) in November 2007. Thousands of ethnic Indians protested against racial inequality by the government of BN. The news portal has circulated the coverage

and video in the form of a CD to the Indian community, those in remote areas, and those unable to watch the incidents on *Malaysiakini.com*. A similar case happened to the Bersih rallies that demand electoral reform.

In the GE2008, Malaysian voters almost caused the BN government to be challenged by the opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat (PR), with close margins in the popular vote. A total of 8.2 million Malaysians cast their votes in the 12th general elections, held on the 8 March 2008 (Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute, 2009) compared to 6.8 million in the GE2004 (Election Commission Malaysia, 2008). In the GE2013, 11.26 million voters or 84.84% cast their votes for the 222 parliamentary seats, the highest percentage in any general election in Malaysia (Thestar.com, 2013). One popular argument for the increase of people participation was the impact of political unrest.

The BN suffered a shocking upset, with a marginal popular vote of 50.2% in the GE2008 compared to the GE2004. PR managed to hold 49.8% of the popular vote, which is considered as a tremendous victory for the opposition. The BN was originally expected to win this election, as with the GE2004, where BN successfully gained 63.9% of the popular vote, while the opposition received only 36.1%. In the GE2013, the BN only secured 46.5% of popular vote, the lowest since the last two GEs.

During the run-up to both the GEs several incidents like Hindraf and Bersih rallies and malpractices in governance in 2008 had tarnished the image of the BN. In the GE2013, the electoral outcome was ethnic based, which led to Prime Minister Najib claiming the opposition had manipulated Chinese ethnic group which he labelled as 'Chinese Tsunami'. The government witnessed a lack of support from certain groups especially urban Malaysians, who demanded more participation in the nation's politics by expressing their views through new media platforms such as INPs.

Mainstream media and its landscape are controlled by the government, and they were used to support the leaders and nation's development agenda. The situation is a product of the post-colonial governance of the country. Due to the role of INPs in the nation's political discourse

since 2007, local scholars referred GE2008 as first new media election to have happened in Malaysia (Steele, 2009; AsiaSentinal.com, 2008; Mohd Azizuddin, 2009). For instance, most of the mainstream media's headline had quoted the GE2008 results as "the (BN) government had won a simple majority in the 12th Malaysia's general election" while Malaysiakini's headline quoted the former Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's statement to the journalist "Why ask more questions? We have lost, we have lost". This statement was posted as a headline in red colour on the news portal (Steel, 2009). In the GE2013, *Malaysiakini.com* continued to claim its popularity as explained earlier. Chinnasamy (2013) supported the argument of INP potential to mobilise political participation in Malaysia by generating 'third force' group consists of university students, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), bloggers and civil society movements, residents associations, middle class people and opposition parties.

Thus, in Malaysia's context, the new media especially the INP seems set to play a vital role in enhancing the democratic political culture in Malaysia. It is also presenting media regulation policies issues for the BN government. The GE2008 results have created the emergence of new politics in Malaysia with rising two coalition parties (BN and PR), potentially leaving behind the way in which it has traditionally practiced democracy. Malaysian democracy is young, however, and there are questions about the extent to which the changes will go. GE2013 witnessed the popularity of the opposition, PR with popular votes.

Research Objectives:

- RO1. To understand the inclusion and exclusion of electoral news coverage by Utusan Malaysia and Malaysiakini.com during the GE2008 and GE2013.
- RO2. To assess the role of Malaysiakini.com in encouraging online political discussion and forming deliberative publics.
- RO3. To explore the opinions and perspectives of mainstream media and independent news portal practitioners on the reportage of GE2008 and GE2013.

Counter-publics in Malaysian Media Climate

This section will be looking through the lens of counter-publics in explaining why some types of issues have been prioritized news and published in INP like *Malaysiakini.com*.

Since 1970, almost all nation-building projects, spelt out in the first to the ninth Malaysia Plan (RMK 1- RMK9), envisioned through a range of Development Policies, have been implemented and realized through the extensive utilization of traditional media (radio and print initially) to construct the identity of post-colonial Malaya (later known as Malaysia) as a sovereign nation state (Khattab, 2010). Nevertheless, the role of mainstream media is less effective post GE2008 and GE2013 due to the popularity of new media platforms in reporting national political issues. New media platforms have emerged as an alternative source of information for the public because they are free of regulation. New media platforms have enabled people to break through the government barriers such as no freedom of speech, no freedom of assembly, and dozens of newspapers without free press (Gan, 2002).

Drawing on the theory of informationalism, Castells (2004) argued that one of the four characteristics of this theory suggested a distinction between people, machines, their roles in communication and information production have been diminished. In other word, “cyborgism” is what matters in today’s information context, whereby every aspect of human activity is dependent on and facilitated by communication technologies (in Birch *et al.*, 2001).

Technologies enhance human abilities and knowledge (Eriksen, 1996). An analogy could illustrate how a country’s political communication has been improved by the Internet technology. In Malaysia’s case, communication capacity, complexity and speed of digitisation has increased the notion of informationalism among the public after the development of Multimedia Super Corridor Malaysia (MSC Malaysia) that encouraged diverse participation especially in political communication. The cyborgism context existed in the form of political discussions in the political websites and politician blogs such as *malaysiatoday.com*, *bloglimkitsiang.com*, and

anwaribrahimblog.com. In this case, the public are more interested to be informed of political happenings from the Internet, before and after the general elections. It consequently gave the impression that political communication in Malaysia's context spread through information and communication technologies.

The Internet has often been considered as a tool to enhance participation in a democratic society especially in political communication, and also enhances the information flow and access to communication (Suborg, 2008). Meanwhile Castells (2001) argued that Internet, compared to other medium of communication, generates new outputs, immediate processed in the net, endless process of production of information and immediate feedback in real time or chosen time. For instance, Malaysiakini.com provides plays opportunity for its readers to write comments and opinions about the news discourse.

The level of Internet penetration in the country has increased to 21 million internet users as of June 2016 with 68.1% penetration compared to 65.7% in December 2010 (Internet World Stats, 2016). Alternative news websites have started in 2000 onwards, due to the government's action to control mainstream media by draconian laws such as Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA) (already abolished in 2014) and Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 (PPPA).

One of the reasons for the popularity of the new media platforms in reporting political discourse is due to the government's policy towards traditional media which often fails to cover critical news of government such as nepotism, cronyism and corruption (Ho *et. al*, 2002). Internet has become an advantage to the opposition coalition as a medium of communication because the cyberspace was not strictly controlled and it promoted greater communication and cooperation between disparate groups in civil society. When the BN almost lost its majority in the parliament and suffered defeats in five of the state assemblies in the GE2008, the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad who proposed the open internet policy stated that he did not expect the new media platforms' could change the ground rules of the nation's politics which has been maintained since 1957. The former leader expressed similar disappointment after the post GE2013 (*Themalaysianinsider.com*, 2009)

Castells (1997, p.259) predicted thirteen years ago that “Authoritarian states are losing the battle of media in the Information Age...Thus for the years to come, nation states will be struggling to control information circulating in telecommunication networks ...I bet it is a lost battle” (1997, p.259). Lilleker (2006) argues that due to the democratisation changes on political systems during and after the GE2008 and GE2013, the political communication in Malaysia’s case is no longer a top-down process. It now moves into the new public sphere in Malaysia’s context where citizens are expected to have political role. The GE2008 and GE2013 fit perfectly into this description.

Malaysia’s media landscape is bounded by developmental journalism and agenda setting – power to structure issues in the media to achieve certain objectives or set agenda for political matters that consider important (David & Pavlik, 2003). Castells’ argument of ‘counter-power’ – the mass self-communication or the ‘technology of the self’ (self construction project) has the ability to build its autonomy and confront other institutions (like the mainstream media) with its own agenda. His arguments about horizontal counter-powers could clearly apply to the use of Malaysiakini.com as against mainstream media reporting. Counter-publics around the INP are a direct result, and may explain some of the mainstream media’s ambivalence on some issues because the INP increases the likelihood of diversity of opinions, and different narrativizations of reformist activities in public. As Asen (2000) linked “counter-publics” to networked interleaving of separate groups in the public sphere, and Warner’s (2002, p.49) not only to deliberate visibility, such as a crowd which shared space and witnessed its own actions, but to the reading of texts.

On the other hand, the credibility of Malaysia’s mainstream media is being questioned due to the limitation function of national unity and national identity and always favoured the ruling government. Mohd Azizuddin (2005) also argue that mainstream media reports good news about government leaders and unity between races while promoting a single national identity and failed to cover critical news about the government and issues related nepotism, cronyism and corruption.

Taking an example of an INP, *Malaysiakini.com*, it was established as ‘activist tool’ since the sack of former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim

in 1999 and Reformasi movement. With the concept of convergence, and the policy forbidding Internet censorship in Malaysia, citizens were able to watch street demonstrations, as well as some instances of mistreatment by the BN in handling case with emotional significance to some groups of people in Malaysia. Many of these have been telecast on the INP such as *Malaysiakini.com*, *Malaysiatoday.com*, *Malaysianinsider.com*, *Merdeka Review* (belongs to Chinese) and *Makka/Sakti.com* (belongs to Indians). INP like *Malaysiakini.com* has gained popularity in the GE2008 due to mainstream media downplayed some important events. In GE2008, the Internet penetration in urban was 85.30% while in rural was 14.7%. It was noted that increasing number of INPs subscription in urban areas was Shah Alam, the highest subscribers for *Malaysiakini.com* (Alexa 2008, 2012). In GE2013, the INP had opened free access to its portal since April 17, 2013. The portal's readership has doubled to 500,000 per night.

Earlier, *Malaysiakini.com* had gained international recognition for its independent reporting (Hachten, 1999; Nain & Russell, 2002, p.134; Plate, 2001; Wong, 2001, p.382). It has won several prestigious awards for its independent and quality news reporting. It was ranked by *Asiaweek* in 2001 as 18th out of 50 as being among the most influential communicators in Asia (Brown, 2005). *Malaysiakini.com* was forced to impose charges in 2002, but it offered a free readership for a week prior to the GE2008 in all languages from 3.00 pm on 4 March to 11 March 2008 (*Malaysiakini.com*, 4 March 2008; 2008b). It remained independent until it received funding in 2012 from the National Endowment for Democracy (*Thestar.com*, 22 September 2012). In contrast, the mainstream media was losing because of its required pro-government slant (Chin, 2003, p.130). Meanwhile, other portals such as *themalaysianinsider.com* and *malaysiachronicles.com* were in the early stages of developing influence during the GE2008 and were further developed during GE2013. It was *Malaysiakini.com*, which had the main impact, because it led the way and managed to grow its readership. It has varieties of news features. Known for investigative reporting; 'contentious journalism' (George, 2006) – Special Reports/Report Cards, Video Testimonies - by Citizen Journalist (CJ.MY) and *Malaysiakini.TV*, 'Letters', 'Column' and 'YourSay/Vox Populi' and Present Networking with civil society, NGOs, University students, middle class people and opposition parties (Chinnasamy, 2013).

Thus, these elections have demonstrated how media platforms like INPs were utilised as a public platform for disseminate and sharing information among citizens and also influences the political decisions and electoral outcome. The ramification of new media platforms and notion of informationalism among Malaysians has increased greater participation in making national political decisions.

Methodology

This paper is using qualitative approaches. The rationale for using qualitative research is that it yields non-numeric information generated by examining a phenomenon that is not easily translated into numbers (Lofland, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Qualitative research offers a more systematic way of investigation to achieve the objectives and helps to get a solution to a problem. Qualitative methods also provide the techniques and tools to dig deep and to go beyond the surface, thus offering data closer to reality. In carrying out the study, I derive data using the method of in-depth interviews to answer the research questions. In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation. It affords the researcher the chance to dig for information. As noted, there is a need to develop what Brenner (as cited in Hocking et al. 2003) calls an “intimate familiarity” with the people involved which allows the researcher to understand the respondents’ point of view. This style of approach will give a clearer picture, feedbacks, ideas and subjective perspectives regarding respondents’ profession, expectations and challenges in electoral reportage. The questions were open-ended focuses on the electoral news including inclusion and exclusions and also relatively unfocused so as not to force the data. All interviews were taped, each lasting between 45 minutes to one hour.

The interviews were taken placed with 15 media practitioners and journalists from mainstream media and INP – i.e. those who are leading key players in Malaysia’s media industry and those were part in the electoral reporting. Respondents’ practicalities of experiences are countered from the GE2008 and GE2013 campaign issues. The interviewees referred as R1-R15 (respondent 1 to respondent 15).

Further, the discussion will be supported with selected news headlines from one of the INP, (*Malaysiakini.com*) and mainstream media news website (*utusanmalaysia.com*).

Findings

This section seeks to examine news inclusion and exclusion during the GE2008 and GE2013.

a. Media Ownership and Ideology

After taking account of media respondents' response, it is clear that media ownership plays a vital role in determining the news, which is reported. News selected from the *Utusanmalaysia.com* and *Malaysiakini.com* in the GE2008 and GE2013, showed the 'media stand' on important issues. This means that the media set their agenda for their respective readers. *Utusanmalaysia.com* set an agenda to influence people to believe that it is vital to vote for the BN. In contrast, *Malaysiakini.com* achieved its aims by filling the gap left by the mainstream media, reporting opposition parties' issues slightly more often, and giving the opposition a chance to voice alternative views.

Malaysiakini.com was operating independently at the time while opposition parties own other political blogs. Those, which operated independently, were not supported or funded by any political parties, but believed in an ideology of independent journalism. *Malaysiakini.com* believed that disseminating unbiased information to people helps them to make political decisions. R3 commented:

We want to be different from the mainstream media and to let Malaysians know that there is an independent medium. This is because, for a very long time, Malaysian media were owned by the BN.

This shows the respondent's view INP is a non-partisan medium because it releases news that is not available in the mainstream media. R3 added that *Malaysiakini.com* had an important mission in upholding democratic

practice. R3 registered that the INP plays a 'checks and balance' role whether the country is ruled by the BN or the PR. BN hegemony was strongly presented in mainstream media because the news was published from the perspective of the BN, rather than from the people's point of view, according to this respondent.

However among the media respondents, there is also a representative of another portal. The nature of this portal contrasts with Malaysiakini.com. Although an autonomous group owns this portal, it is business oriented. R5 established his portal on 25 February 2008, on the nomination day of the GE2008, after witnessing the Internet's potential as a greater market for circulating ideas and all kinds of information. He confessed that he let his readers to decide for whom they wanted to vote.

There are also political websites owned by opposition parties, which act as vehicles to promote their political agendas, leaders and campaign activities. Some decided to establish them due to insufficient coverage offered by the mainstream media. A respondent from another portal, R1 stated that,

"Our news aim is Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS). We are more experienced than the mainstream media. So we do not only compete with PAS, but also with other opposition publications."

However, for media representatives, the structure of media ownership offers significant political influence to the ruling regime. All respondents from R6 to R15 from mainstream media discussed this issue. For instance, R9, a mainstream media journalist, stressed the importance of highlighting the government's favoured issues.

"Our focus is to explain to the people what actions the government is taking on people's issues, even though we know that such actions are not favourable to us."

A minority group journalist respondent saw his role as emphasising ethnic Indians' socio-economic development. However, the Tamil media also registered a fearing that they might create a revolution among ethnic

Indians because they did not highlight anti-government issues. R15 revealed that,

“We only focus on important politicians’ coverage like the PM, the Deputy PM and MIC leaders. We do not have any of our own objectives or missions about this newspaper. What is the most important for us is what politicians are saying.”

This shows that the minority group media’s freedom of expression is restricted by the government particularly the BN component parties.

In contrast, another minority group’s mainstream media has different objectives in reporting compared to Malay and Tamil media. This minority group media focuses on their community development rather than supporting the government. R12 commented:

“We are special because we take good care of our community because they are the ones who contribute mainly to our revenue.”

R13 supported R12’s statement, stating that,

“We want to serve our community to create mutual benefit for everybody’. This clearly indicates that the motive behind the mainstream media ownership is development of the ethnic group.”

Overall, differences in the standpoints taken by the media respondents depend on the organisation’s ownership. Utusanmalaysia.com adopts a pro-government stance while Malaysiakini.com was seen as taking the opposition’s view while at the same time emphasising the government’s failure to encounter some issues. Below are some examples of news headlines in the GE2008 and GE2013 that shaped the inclusion and exclusion of news in their election reporting on similar issue.

‘The Hindraf dilemma – BN or Pakatan?’ (*Malaysiakini*, 2012)

‘Bertindak tegas terhadap Hindraf’ (*Utusan Malaysia Online*, 2011)

‘Apa lagi Cina mahu?’ (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2013)

‘Utusan intensifies race-baiting against Chinese and DAP’ (*Malaysiakini*, 2013)

b. INP Counter-Powers Oppositional Role

The local and international media recognized the efficiency of the INP in news reporting during the GE2008 and GE2013. There was reciprocity between the lack of mainstream media's credibility and the efficiency of the INP in its news reporting. Out of 15 respondents, 13 agreed that the INP's reporting was more successful during the elections. The INPs were seen to cover many more issues than the mainstream media in terms of speed in posting the news, and their interactivity with their readers. This was seen as important in attracting the readers.

For portals respondents, the INPs were not only popular but also faster in spreading information than mainstream media. It is seen as an alternative source that highlights news that has not been disclosed by mainstream media. R1 disclosed the advantage of the INP in the following way:

“After a press conference has been conducted, the breaking news will be posted in the INP within one minute while the same news will be printed out in the paper some days later. This is why the INP is (sic) effective.”

Further, R1 stated that the effects of video were considered most attractive by the public when portraying sensitive issues like the demolition of temples, and public's reaction against it. The video was supported with news, narrated chronologically and followed up regularly until the issues were completely resolved. R1 commented that,

“The BN demolished the temple and demolished poor houses for development. The effects of the videos were great in highlighting those issues.”

The INP's developed its popularity partly because of the NGOs' roles as news informers. For instance, a coalition of 30 Hindu NGOs was represented at the Hindraf rally which demanded ethnic Indians' rights. The most important feature that had driven 30,000 people onto the street was the videos and images captured by Malaysiakini.com, which discussed how the government had mishandled the demonstration. This caused many BN votes to swing to the opposition. R3 admitted that,

“Hindraf went to estates and captured videos on a temple being burnt and they asked us to put it up on the Internet like Malaysiakini.com, and through that people know about Hindraf’s activities. This is the reason why they can bring people onto the streets. Videos and images are much more powerful than just words.”

This shows that ‘images’ have the power to trigger people’s emotions, and this was seen as impacting on the GE2008 result. A similar case occurred in GE2013. Respondents noted that there was also a strong movement of NGOs who initiated a great deal of work on the ground, not only locally but also internationally. The videos telecast by the INP were burnt on CDs and distributed throughout the country. These affected non-educated Indians and led them to vote against the BN, as claimed by R3. Further, Malaysiakini.com like other portals was seen as having a strong belief in the values of journalism, and the selection of issues, which are based on the demands for freedom, democracy, independence of the judiciary, and anti-corruption. It provided a platform for commentaries and public opinion. R5 stated that people did not consider his organisation to be biased, which meant that from his perspective, the INP was doing good work.

Among the mainstream media, R11, who had conducted a one-week survey of Malaysiakini.com’s election coverage, admitted that the INP’s issues had a democratic agenda. R11 also revealed that the INP’s tactics pushed the mainstream media to work harder.

“It pushes the mainstream media to highlight certain issues that they didn’t bother to do before ... it is good to have a medium that gives balanced reporting and lets the public be the judge.”

This illustrates that the mainstream media has been affected by the efficiency of INP in the views of ten respondents.

Critical statements were also offered by R9 and R11. Even though these mainstream respondents admitted that the INP had been successful in its news reportage during the GE2008, the INP’s reporting agenda needs to be examined. R9 questioned how far the INP had the ability to bring changes to people’s mindsets. R11 argued that the INP news

was unreliable because it had the tendency to spin the news. This means that there are possibilities of circulating wrong information, and that Malaysians may be exposed to inaccurate information, in this respondent's view.

"I have come across lots of cases where reporters complained that what is reported on that online portal is not exactly what happened in the press conference."

c. Malaysiakini.com as Political Mobilising Tool

Out of 15 respondents, 13 agreed that Malaysiakini.com had successfully increased political participation during the elections. Malaysiakini.com was utilised by people to fulfil their needs and as a kind of resistance against the BN government. The BN was accused of overlooking the impact of the Internet, which enabled spontaneous reporting and was easily accessed. Online reports were quoted as a news source by international media like the BBC, Al-Jazeera and CNN. R3 claimed that,

"The PM never thought that the Internet could provide tools for their improvement, even during the eight days of the campaign."

The importance of the Internet in attracting more voters was emphasised by Malaysiakini.com through its news, while the mainstream media failed to do so. The impact of the Internet on political debates had been realised by Malaysiakini.com, which had carried out observations by bloggers like Jeff Ooi and Tony Pua.

As an INP media practitioner, R1 registered confidence that Malaysiakini.com had the ability to influence people to participate more in political discussions. Malaysiakini.com was utilised by the opposition parties while the mainstream media was a government messenger. Yet the trend changed, so that politicians started to consider Malaysiakini.com to be playing a role in political routines. R1 affirmed this:

"Malaysiakini.com has the potential to increase political participation because of free reading during campaign period. Among politicians, the portal was the most important reference."

Another INP respondent, R2, argued that it was important to examine the nature of participation before analysing the INP's potential to increase participation. The form of participation that arises in Malaysia's case is a new trend of political debates. This is because people are vocal on some issues, which the mainstream media neglects. R2 clarified this:

“Mainstream media has to talk about the opposition and important political events, but that didn't happen. This is the GE2008 result, where it is a combination of civil society, politics and media, which led reasonable people to talk about politics.”

For mainstream media, R10 declared that Malaysiakini.com was not only providing a voice for politicians, but also for ordinary people. The INP empowers people to feel that they are not alone because it reaches a larger group of people. Through news and 'technology of the self', they involve people in political deliberation and in participation in political activities like rallies and protests. R10 pointed out that this strategy could not be achieved by mainstream media:

“Yes I agree. It supports political participation. There is a separate section under Malaysiakini.com news where it allows the public to give their views. Ultimately, this option has allowed people to speak out and gives a chance for the opposition to inform them about their on-going activities.”

In addition, R14 supports R10's argument that Malaysiakini.com succeeded in mobilising participation because of its speed in posting information compared to the mainstream media. This impacted on people's voting choices because electoral information was not always available. R14 criticises mainstream media news:

“How many opposition nominations were exposed in the paper? They keep the focus on the BN. The curiosity among the people when people want to know who the opposition is (sic), what are their specialties and what are their arguments on certain issues. A lot of the public gatherings and rallies, like Anwar Ibrahim and Lim Kiat Siang ceramahs, were uploaded on Malaysiakini.com. This is where Malaysiakini.com has been used.”

Malaysiakini.com had enabled NGOs to combine to solve socio-political problems and this made people aware of on-the-ground political happenings. R15 said that this was proven in the Hindraf rally:

“Malaysiakini.com united all the small NGO groups. Even though the ethnic Indian had a small proportion of the population, they have many NGOs. This was revealed when the Hindraf rally occurred.”

Thus, Malaysiakini.com allowed NGOs to promote their ideas in the form of news, and became the main channel for them. It helped them network. R15 revealed that some NGOs had links to Malaysiakini.com due to distrust about the BN leadership. Most of them were Chinese business associations and Indian NGOs. Ethnic Chinese were worried about their future, while ethnic Indians were not united because of conflict within the MIC’s party.

Two other mainstream media respondents disagreed with the proposition that Malaysiakini.com has the potential to increase participation among the people. R12 claims that there are people who still love to read the mainstream media:

“Which group makes Malaysiakini.com very popular? Youngsters? But the older generation still prefers the mainstream media. Like Chinese! They still love to read the newspaper. The Internet is only a surfing partner for them.”

However, R11 feels sceptical about Malaysiakini.com news because the INP spun the news. R11 shared personal experience:

“Some of the reporters, who report on those portals, said that their bosses change certain facts. The news lead has been changed to fit their boss’s agenda.”

R11 did not mention the ownership of the news portals, but went on to explain that if they belonged to the mainstream, self-censorship practice applied to print and broadcast media, which affected their news websites as well. If it belonged to the INP, the editors could change the news according to their preferences. One example showing that Malaysiakini.

com could increase people's active engagement in political discussion was the 'Column' section dated 5 March 2008, which published an exclusive interview with former premier Mahathir Mohamad on his views about the BN leadership under his successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi; many readers openly commented about this issue.

For media respondents, the media changes were viewed as 'counter-power' by the INP like Malaysiakini.com, which reported critically on the incomplete information circulated by the mainstream media. The media landscape changes were clear from the speed of INP's news reporting compared to that of the mainstream media, and the fact that more people were technologically-savvy and because the INP's subscription rate had increased. Media practitioners viewed it from the aspects of news gathering and production.

It parallels to Castells' argument of 'counter-power' where the mass self-communication or the 'technology of the self' (self construction project) has the ability to build its autonomy and confront other institutions (like the mainstream media) with its own agenda. Malaysiakini.com can intervene in the existing media landscape largely dominated by mainstream media, and to an extent affect the mainstream media and hence influence public opinion. This has raised mainstream media credibility issues, and consideration of the popularity of the INPs.

Conclusion

Most of the INPs played an important role in developing democratic space in the country. Its subscription showed a remarkable growth and its features mobilized people participation online due to freedom of expression is suppressed by the Federal Constitution through Article 10. As has been noted, INPs 'ideology of journalism' challenges the ruling government – critical discourses lead to a stronger and diverse public sphere. While mainstream news media favoured the government; the INPs reported government and the opposition news almost equally. However, the INPs had slightly increased coverage of opposition news and BN weaknesses. Analysis of selected newspapers confirmed that some were characterized by different agendas and modes of reporting.

The INPs claimed to uphold objectivity and strong journalistic values. It is obvious that INPs put greater emphasis on the impact of political unrest and were able to report more quickly than the print media. In contrast, mainstream media performed a developmental journalism role, underpinned by media hegemony and agenda setting, which supported the government's developmental projects and promoted the BN leaders' personalities. Changes in media landscape, particularly in electoral reporting are difficult for the BN government to completely control. Yet, the Internet plays important role to sustain the present reform movements in Malaysia.

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