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Of the Post 9/11 World

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Social Tension : The Paradox Of Malaysian Online Journalism

Rahmat Ghazali

ABSTRACT

Online journalism has bestowed Malaysians with more democratic space when it is exempted from the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1987 that liberated it from the licensee procedures. Strengthening such freedom, the Communication and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998, and the Bill of Guarantees of the Multimedia Super Corridor, have ensured that the government would not allow any act of censorship of the Internet. The freer environment had brought online journalism on a different track as compared to that of the mainstream mass media. As a matter of fact the inauguration of the CMA 1998 had marked the plunge of the mainstream presses readership. It also extensively advocates social and political criticisms, which were never before seen in the mainstream mass media. However, the current development projects that online journalism has turned out as contributory to social tension, where irresponsible pieces of journalistic discourse, discussions and debates had apparently inflamed the undercurrents of social and political discontentment. The freer environment also exposes online journalism to emotional and filthy statements that would be fatal to sound interethnic relation when they provoke racism and religious sentiments. In such light, the democratic space of online journalism also advocates a paradox to Malaysian social and political milieus.

Introduction

Malaysia has experienced a number of incidences that challenged its national security and social harmony. The condition of interethnic relations among Malaysians is not always peaceful. Political disagreement and hostilities resulted from religious extremism were

also evidenced in the past that to a certain extent marked intricacies of Malaysia's social setting. Part of the contributory variables is the multiethnic composition of the society, which distinctively highlights differences of religious belief, culture, language, customary practices and even ethnic complexion. Between 1945 and 2000 there were at least 30 racial-aggression incidences and crises recorded nationally (Means 1976; Andaya and Andaya 1982; Mohd Hamdan 1993; Malek 2000; Pereira 2001). The 13th May racial fight⁴ (May 1969), the Memali rebellions⁵ (November 1985), the Kampong Rawa⁶ (March 1998) tragedy, the Kampong Medan⁷ racial conflict (March 2000), and the Al-Maunah⁸ insurgency (July 2000) are some of the major catastrophes clouding Malaysia's efforts towards national security and social harmony.

The social catastrophes are further disturbed as most social

-
- ⁴ The 13th May 1969 racial fight refers to the Chinese-Malay bloody war in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, which caused the government to declare a state of national emergency and suspending the Parliament (Tunku A Rahman 1969). The tragedy had taken away a significant numbers of lives.
 - ⁵ Memali rebellion refers to an incident that highlights war between followers of an opposition party from a remote village of Memali against the authority. The central issue was their loyalty to a cleric who was allegedly accused as government's enemy. It led to a bloody fight between some villagers who were trying to protect the cleric, and the police. The incident claimed 14 deaths (Rahman 1999).
 - ⁶ The Kampong Rawa tragedy is considered as racial dispute that resulted from the 'close proximity' between a Hindu temple and a Muslim mosque of Kampong Rawa. The incident almost caused a racial fight when thousands of Malays gathered at the Kampong Rawa Mosque in attempt to attack the Indian communities because of dispute over noises caused by the nearby Hindu temple (Hilley 2001:123) .
 - ⁷ Kampong Medan incident was a racial-clash that involves some Malays and Indians. Five people were killed, 37 injured and 153 arrested in four days of clashes between residents in a racially-mixed district near Kuala Lumpur, although local residents claimed the death and injury toll were higher. (Jayakumar 2001:16).
 - ⁸ Al-Maunah is a named given to a group of Malay cultist, which was formed to oust the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. In July 2000, some cult members disguised themselves as soldiers and stole more than 100 weapons from two military armouries. They then retreated to a jungle hideout where they broadcasted calls over army radio for Mahathir to quit. The group surrendered after four days during which they murdered a police officer and a soldier they had held hostage. Some observers see the incident as racism since the group had earlier threatened a Church and a Hindu temple (Cameron-Moore 2001)

institutions in Malaysia that involves its multiethnic society, are drawn along ethnic lines such as ethnic-based mass media, ethnic-based education system, and in particular the ethnic-based political institutions. For that reason, Malaysia has developed as a plural society; the social concept, by which members of a society:

...mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals, they meet, but only in the market place in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Even in the economic sphere, there is a division of labour along racial lines (Furnival 1956:304).

Furnival implies that within such a society, interethnic relationships among the different ethnic groups are only functional, where they communicate mainly in the marketplace or at their workplace, rather than establishing closer personal relationships.

The pattern of ethnic-based mass media in Malaysia is seen through the establishment of ethnic-based presses that cater to the appeal of each of the different ethnic groups. Such a pattern may ignore the formation of a collective idea of a national agenda, and tends to focus on a singular ethnic group (Lent 1982:252-260) except that of the English-language dailies, which cater the readership of all ethnic groups. However the English dailies are seen to cater mainly the upper-class and the middle-class English-speakers society, and businessmen.

Under such ethnic-based pattern we also see that each medium carries the tendency to extend more coverage of issues that concerned the respective communities (Halimahton 1997:3) and thus to promote ethnic nationalism rather than 'Malaysian nationalism'.

Adding up to the problems, almost all of the mainstream mass media are associated with media corporations that are linked to ethnic-based political parties, usually the ruling affiliates of the National Front party: UMNO, MCA and MIC. This also suggests that besides ethnic nationalism, political sentiments would also be easily communicated among party members of particular ethnic groups via the mass media. Such prospect would ineffectively accommodate the philosophy and the virtue of national integration; 'integrating Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups into one that shares the fundamental values identifiable as Malaysian' (Jawan 2003:162).

In the midst of those ethnic nationalism and political sentiments, the freedom of the press has been stringently controlled through various media-related laws. Many argue that the Malaysian tradition of legislation aimed at controlling the press was inherited from its colonial past with some amendments made, each time resulting in stricter control of the press (Means 1991; Mustafa 2002; Zaharom 2002; Loo 2003b). As for instance, Zaharom (2002:125) points out:

Under certain trying circumstances, the government had to issue emergency decrees (initially introduced by the British Administration) to amend certain laws in order to attain political stability in the country. But, what is evident is that the emergency period has also provided the opportunity for the ruling party ...to strengthen its position and, more importantly, enhance the powers of the executive. ...The 1969 tragedy ...ushered in an amendment made by the government to the Control of Imported Publication Act (1958) in 1972. This empowered the minister of Home Affairs to ban or censor any imported publication deemed prejudicial to public order, national interest, morality, or security.

As far as journalists are concerned, the most intrusive media control is the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984 (PPPA) (Gan 2003:1). It gives the government power to suspend or revoke printing and publishing permits, which need to be renewed annually. Its decrees are not subject to review or challenge in court. The Act stipulates that:

A potential publisher must secure a license to use a printing press and a permit to publish a newspaper. Both must be renewed annually through The Ministry of Home Affairs, which can withdraw either without cause at any time...All license holders must guarantee that their publications will not distort facts relating to public order incidents in Malaysia, will not inflame or stir communal hostility or use material likely to prejudice public order or national security (Lent 1982:263).

Parallel to such moves, the Official Secrets Act (OSA) was also introduced in 1972. This law prohibits a person from gaining information that the government regarded as 'official secret' and which enemies of the country might abuse. Some other media-related laws are also in existence such as the Internal Security Act, the Sedition Act, the Defamation Act, and the Police Act. As a point of fact there are

at least 35 laws that directly and indirectly impinge on press freedom and freedom of speech and of expression in Malaysia (Gan 2003:1). The existence of these laws in the backdrop of Malaysia's mass media constitute a 'stringent control' which has considerable impact on the way media practitioners work (Lent 1982:265; Mustafa 2002; Abbott 2004:81).

In relation to such media control, considerable numbers of political observers perceived democratic practices during Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's (the former Prime Minister) administration in 1980s and 1990s as unfavourable. While some described such period as semi-democracy (Kroef 1957; Case 1993; Crouch 1993; Abbott 2004), others perceived it as authoritarian (Vorys 1975; Munro-Kua 1996; Heryanto and Mandal 2003). Even though during the 1980s and 1990s, the government had successfully improved Malaysia's economic achievement, the price may have been the democratic condition of the state, which included a noticeably oppressed press that did not support freedom of speech and of expression (Human Rights Watch 1998; Asian Human Rights Commission 1999; Human Rights Watch 1999).

There are several instances that illustrate stringent implementation of laws against the freedom of the press and of expression in Malaysia. International Press Institute (IPI 2004), a journalists association from more than 120 countries throughout the world, in its annual report provides exclusive detail of incidences that indicate authoritative control over Malaysia's mass media. For instance, in 2002, more than forty staff members of *The Sun*, one of Malaysia's prominent English daily had been advised to resign. The action was related to a page-one story about a plot to assassinate the then Prime Minister, and his deputy, who was also the Home Minister. The story had raised disappointment among top political leaders of the ruling parties and had regarded the news as irresponsible and speculative. However the concern editors consistently stood by the story, saying that government officials had verified the report and even insisted that the police had uncovered the plot.

Inevitably, control also comes from ownership of the media. In this respect we can see that many editors of the prominent presses such as Nazri Abdullah and Johan Jaafar, both of *Utusan Melayu*, Kadir Jasin and Abdullah Ahmad of the *New Straits Times* press, Robert Ho, Manirajan and Anita Nasir of the *Sun* 'resigned' for their journalistic pieces that were unfavourable to their superiors (International Press Institute 2004).

However lately, questions are raised that highlight scepticism regarding freedom of the press, freedom of speech and of expression; whether those freedoms would help national security and social harmony within Malaysia's multiethnic society.

Online Journalism And Freedom Of The Press And Of Expression

This paper adheres to the idea that online journalism is not simply online news, but covers a much diverse area of online newspapers, informative websites, weblogs, bulletin boards, and chat rooms, where news sources, webmaster, and participants discuss, share and debate ideas, opinions and thoughts that concerned public interest (Millison 1999; Allen 2000; Hall 2001; Wolk 2001; Deuze 2003; Gunter 2003).

The basic principle is that online journalism is 'quality news and information posted on the World Wide Web, where people can read, see, hear it through their computers and other similar devices' (Wolk 2001:6).

At a wider spectrum, online journalism changes 'the philosophy underlying the form of journalism' (Ward 2003:9); it brings about a new philosophy of reader, readership and journalism. Online journalism has toned down the role of journalists, allowed vertical and horizontal flow of communication, huge space, global audience, customisation of news selection and the irrelevance of gatekeepers and more democratic space.

However I would like to note that, in Malaysia, there are distinct differences between independent online journalism as compared to that of online version of the mainstream presses. The online versions of the mainstream presses are principally 'mirror' of their print versions, which also tell us that they are abided to the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984 (PPPA 1984) and precisely the licensee system.

Online journalism did not surface much as a popular media in the beginning. Even when the Star Online was launched in 1995, online journalism was still largely 'unknown' to the public. Only in 1998, after the enactment of the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA 1998), that assures some forms of freedom, did online journalism begin to show its potential as a vibrant channel of criticism and dissident. Among others the CMA 1998 stated in Article Three (Section 3) clearly stating

‘Nothing in this Act shall be construed as permitting the censorship of the Internet’ (Ministry of Energy Water and Communication 1998). The assurance is repeated in the Bill of Guarantees of the Malaysian Multimedia Super Corridor⁹ (MSC) that ensure no Internet censorship (Multimedia Super Corridor 1998).

The enactment of CMA 1998 has opened up a new frontier for Malaysia’s press freedom as well as freedom of expression. What is important for this study is that CMA 1998 has significantly placed online journalism, particularly independent online newspapers, weblogs, and NGOs’ websites, on a different track from that of print and broadcast media.

It has also gained major attention in response to the 1998-political crisis with public protests against the unbalanced reporting of the mainstream mass media. The dynamic utilisation of online journalism was also highlighted when the public found that their voices of criticism and adversary were blocked through the mainstream mass media (Hilley 2001:265; Siong 2004:279). As Siong (2004:279) describes, the irregularities of certain incidents ‘were blacked out and trivialised by... the mainstream mass media as they were controlled’.

Among the most successful of Malaysian independent online journalism is Malaysiakini, which has carved a niche for itself as ‘an independent’ news site. The style of Malaysiakini leads some others to follow such as Sang Kancil, Malaysia Today, Agenda Daily, Malaysia News, Malaysian Voters Union, Aliran Online, Sharir@UMNO.Com and Screenshots. To introduce, some of the prominent independent online journalisms in Malaysia are discussed as follows; Malaysiakini, Agenda Daily, Malaysia Today, Screenshots and Aliran Online.

⁹ MSC operates as an information and communication technology (ICT) hub hosting foreign-owned as well as domestic ICT companies that focused on multimedia and communication products, solutions, services and research and development (MDC 2002:1-2). As of January 2006, there were 1297 MSC companies including 67 world-class high-tech ICT companies like Netscape, IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Oracle, Compact, Silicon Graphics, Siemens, and Sony (Multimedia Super Corridor 2006).

The Potential Of Online Journalism

It is notable that freedom of expression as reflected in dissenting pieces and criticism against the government, political discourse on issues of judiciary accountability, police brutality and public corruption never before discussed in such diversity in the traditional mass media, have become common in online journalism, especially independent online newspapers, weblogs, and NGOs websites (Amnesty International 1999; Asian Human Rights Commission 1999; Human Rights Watch 1999). Important issues linked to democracy, human and civil rights, and issues of ethnicity and religion, generally suppressed from the mainstream mass media have filled most of the space in online journalism particularly during and after the 1998-political crisis.

In Malaysian political history, the 1998-political crisis denotes a critical point of freedom of the press, which also marked 'an explosion of online journalism' (Abbott 2004:85; Gomez 2004:2), which was significantly supported by the enactment of CMA 1998. That was the period when we could see the minorities, the NGOs, civil and human rights activists, intellectuals as well as politicians across different ethnic backgrounds taking part in online journalism to have their voices communicated and be informed.

During the 1998-political crisis and the approach of the 1999-General Election, the mainstream mass media were claimed as failed to provide truthful and transparent information to the people. As Heufers (2002:58) affirms:

Observers were struck by the blatant bias seen in both in the print and electronic (broadcast) media, in favour of the ruling coalition. Both Bahasa (Malay language) and English-language newspapers ran full-page ads, some of which used reworked or faked photos, aimed at showing the opposition in a bad light. As well, stories alleging corruption and sexual impropriety were widely circulated in government-controlled press.

Consequently, 'many Malaysians, troubled by the seemingly lack of credibility in the mainstream presses, turned to online journalism in search of accurate news, fair reporting and critical commentary' (Mustafa 2002:161). Noticeably, during the 1998-political crisis, online journalism, particularly online newspapers and NGO websites were preferred because 'the mainstream press had engaged in a certain degree of spreading misinformation' (Mustafa 2002:163). Evidently during the aftermath of the crisis, the number of news websites mushroomed

to more than fifty that significantly suggests plausible shifts in the attention of the public towards online journalism (Abbott 2004:85). Subsequently, Mustafa (2002:163) asserts that 'much of the mainstream presses then became widely unpopular among many concerned Malaysians'. Similarly Netto (1999a:1) observes that 'readers of the mainstream newspapers realised that they were not getting the whole picture of the disturbing events in the country from official media' and that made them turn to online journalism.

The impacts of independent online newspapers on the mainstream mass media during those periods were notable. As for instance MGG Pillai of Sang Kancil weblog concludes, 'Malaysiakini had caused pages of the main English and Malay newspapers to seem weak and tired' (as quoted in Abbott 2004:86). From other perspective, Zakiah (2000) and Arfaeza (2002) observe that between 1999 and 2000, the readership of all mainstream press except for the Star and Guang Ming dailies plunged between 1.5 percent and 37.5 percent. The year 1999 marked the 'explosion of online journalism' partly because of the effects of the CMA 1998 that assured 'non-censorship' of Internet content.

In May 2000, over 500 journalists, largely from the mainstream mass media, signed a memorandum urging the government to repeal media laws, most importantly the PPPA 1984. 'These journalists argued that the credibility of the media was at stake as Malaysians increasingly turned to alternative sources of information' (Siong 2004:298).

The democratising effect of online journalism is distinguished by the way it provides space and freedom for ordinary citizens to have their opinions and thoughts heard. The presentations of opinions and thoughts are delivered in many forms, such as criticism, political discourse, debate, reports or some others. Such scene may suggest participatory democracy as to consider people voices in the political process of decision and policy making.

The portrayal of online journalism as alternative media is also seen during the 1998-political crisis. It is an alternative media in the sense that it satisfies demand for different content, catering to different tastes, interests and orientations not catered to by mainstream mass media output (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1997:221). Some scholars use the terms alternative media and radical media interchangeably because journalism primarily concerned with social and often revolutionary change (Atton 2002:9). In an environment where the authority oppresses alternative media, it is normally because

they are associated with vibrant social and political reform. In such cases, they are described as radical media (Atton 2002:9-10) because they dare to project what the mainstream mass media dare not discuss.

The alternative feature of online journalism is also supported with the irrelevant 'gate-keeper' phenomenon. As many cyber libertarians suggest, one of the key features that makes online journalism a tool of democracy is that the liberty of the Internet makes attempts at censorship and control a difficult, if not an impossible task. As Banerjee (2004:40) argues, even in a repressive government, which gives partial freedom to the Internet, they 'cannot contain the flood of information, which then has a very strong democratising effect on the country'.

As illustrated during the Malaysian 1999-General Election, as a result of gatekeeping, the oppositions are often presented in an 'unfavourable light' in the mainstream mass media (Heufers 2002:58).

The consequence is that the members of the Malaysian middle class especially, had increasingly disappointed with the lack of critical commentary and political analysis within the mainstream mass media. Furthermore, many Malaysians were pulled towards independent online journalism during the crucial period of 1998-political crisis when a lack of credibility tainted the mainstream mass media (Heufers 2002:58; Mustafa 2002:163). Such a situation highlights the implication of gatekeeping as significant on the mainstream mass media, whereby criticism and dissent pieces against the authority were blocked. However, criticism, investigative reporting on issues of public corruption, and debates on police misconduct and brutality were some of the issues that had gained much attention through online journalism. This is not to suggest that gatekeeping is not operating at all through online journalism. What is seen is that gatekeeper of online journalism works differently as compared to that of the mainstream mass media. The principal point is that political and social criticisms, debates and sensitive interethnic issues are openly discussed through online journalism.

Numerous online journalisms, as shown during the 1998-political crisis as well as the 1999-General Election, utilised the freedom provisioned through the CMA 1998 to openly criticise the government (Mustafa 2000; Loo 2003a; Abbott 2004). Looking at the contemporary development, even the former Prime Minister, Mahathir, uses online journalism to highlight his criticism towards the government (Mahathir 2006). In point of fact, Mahathir recently accepted Malaysiakini request for an interview (Fauwaz 2006). This is quite a reversal stance, since

it was during his regime that Malaysiakini was raided. Many more politicians and parliamentarians such as Shahrir Samad of UMNO, Lim Kit Siang of DAP, Syed Hussein Ali of PKR, to mention a few, have their own websites. This suggests how important online journalism is to their political mileage, as it connects them with their electorates and provides them a platform to get to know issues that the general public are concerned about.

On a similar note, the information superhighway was difficult to police as the authorities could not tamper with or shut down websites without violating the freedom of 'no Internet censorship' (Teik 2003:105; Abbott 2004:82). This suggests that the CMA 1998 and the promising ICT policy have turned out to be a blessing for the public's democratic concern, or most likely suggesting a paradox to the authority.

Social Issues Projected Through Online Journalism

From a different perspective we could also see that the freedom attained from CMA 1998 had also contributed certain trends of social phenomenon. As to mention a few, the following accounts show that online journalism is contributory to some issues that are causal to some form of anxiety among Malaysians. They suggest causal effects to public anxiety because some of the information projected were mainly speculative and had been sensationalised. Thus some of the stories highlighted through independent online journalism, which most of them are principally social and political criticism had accumulated undercurrent discontentment among the public against the authority. To a certain extent some of the stories and reports had caused damage to particular public figures as they were found wrong and fallacious.

In 2001 Hishamuddin Rais, an online columnist for Malaysiakini, was sentenced for two years under the ISA 1960. He was charged for participating in illegal assembly and was released in 2003. However, some political observers believed that his arrest was linked to his dissenting piece published on Malaysiakini (Arfaeza 2002; Teik 2003:163). Hishamuddin article 'Pilihanraya or pilihan jalan raya' (General Election or Street Demonstration) was full of critical views against the government and had ridiculed the integrity of the Malaysian

Election Commission that raised resentment among the commission's officers as well as the ruling parties. Arfaeza (2002) affirms,

Malaysiakini columnist Hishamuddin Rais is ...under ISA detention ...after writing the article 'Pilihanraya atau pilihan jalanraya' in his weekly column 'Dotmai' [in Malaysiakini]. Although the 51-year-old writer cum film producer has succeeded in challenging the arrest, the government had refused to release him ...[for the reasons] of national security.

In 2003, corresponding to the contagious and deadly illness called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome or SARS, a Malaysian online newspaper, Malaysiakini, had quoted reports from an opposition party that the Malaysian Home Ministry 'had officially directed all major English language newspapers to 'adjust their reports on SARS by leaving out any mention of fatalities'. The news were later speculated and turned out as rumours charging Malaysian government to conceal the presence of some suspected SARS patients for reasons to avoid public chaos. In China, the disease had caused a large numbers of deaths (Tang Hang Wu 2006:11).

In 2004, Screenshots, one of Malaysian popular weblogs wrote an opinion piece regarding Islam Hadhari, the Prime Minister's (Abdullah Badawi) conception on progressive Islam. A reader of Screenshots left a comment that matched Islam Hadhari to excrement (Tang Hang Wu 2006:11). The irresponsible attitude of the concerned reader was that, while he stated his name as 'Anwar' to reflect his Malayness, he registered his email address as tongsanchai@yahoo.com that implied his ethnicity as a Chinese descent. The implication is that the comment had inflamed public aggression, especially to the Malaysian Muslims for the blasphemous remarks on Islam. The mainstream mass media then responded aggressively against Screenshots. Later in 2005, Jeff Ooi, the webmaster of Screenshots was called by the police because a criminal complaint was made against him, even though the real culprit named Anwar was successfully tracked down.

Recently the Prime Minister was associated with the purchase of a VIP plane that cost RM200 million. The story was firstly highlighted through online journalism. However the Prime Minister denied the aircraft was brought by the Government after the story claimed sensation among Internet users and later the large public. The Prime Minister

explained that PNB had bought the plane and not the government. As quoted in Malaysia Today, Dogmannsteinberg wrote:

The elusive A319CJ VVIP Jet which Penerbangan Malaysia Berhad (PMB) purchased, delivered by Airbus December last year and sent to Basel, Switzerland for outfitting is now a Malaysian registered aircraft. It now uses the pennant no. 9M-NAA. It was first featured as a scoop in Berita MyKMU Net on 25 January 2007. Again, featured in this blog as "The plane, the plane" on 17 February 2007 (Dogmannsteinberg 2007).

Online journalism is also seen to speculate rumours that the current murder case of a Mongolian lady had involved a high rank figure of Malaysian politician. As Malaysia Alternative Voices asserts:

Pressure mounts in Kuala Lumpur to put the brakes on a scandal-tainted Malay politician. Speculation is increasing in Malaysia that one of the country's elite politicians, ...is in serious trouble due to a series of messy scandals. There is considerable speculation that [the politician] will be forced to step down from national politics. (Malaysia Alternative Voices 2007)

A speculative piece posted through online journalism also charged that [high profile Malaysian politician] gained commission totalled up to RM400 million in a deal to purchase Russian Sukhoi.

On the Al-Jazeera television network, questioned commissions paid over the purchase of 18 Russian Sukhoi-30 jet fighters in 2003. 'There are complicities over the huge and massive commissions accrued by the government involving [a top minister]. [The Minister] said he wouldn't respond to [those] charges. But, he told reporters recently, «Don't listen to the stories on the internet...they are all a myth. We should not react hastily, we must stick to principles and the truth...what is important is that we understand and know who will help us» (Malaysia Alternative Voices 2007).

Online journalism was also seen to be responsible to speculate rumours that the Deputy Home Minister was involved in corruption. He was said to use his position and being paid RM5 million to release three convicts detained under ISA. However ACA interrogation found that he was defamed.

Then there is the unrelated case of the Deputy Internal Security Minister... He is in the spotlight over a claim accusing him of accepting RM5 million to assist in freeing several suspects detained under Malaysia's Emergency Ordinance, which covers suspects accused of serious crimes. Local news reports say the released suspects are believed to have been involved in gangsterism, prostitution, illegal gambling, and illicit money lending (Imran Imtiaz Shah 2007)

The Inspector General of Police Department was also charged through online journalism as to involve in corruption. However ACA investigation shows that the allegation was found to be untrue. Earlier Malaysia Today wrote:

Since Malaysia Today first revealed the unholy alliance between the Chinese organised crime syndicate and the Royal Malaysian Police, a few brave souls have come forward to testify what we wrote [regarding] Malaysia's organised crime syndicate ...is not only true, but is in fact much worse than what we said. ...Of all things, a Chinese police officer has come forward to expose his corrupt Malay colleagues when he could instead have just gone on the take and kept his mouth shut. ...According to ASP Hong, on 20 June 2006 he was instructed by his Director ...to launch an investigation into the Chinese organised crime syndicate in Johor and Melaka. ...What was more frightening was the revelation ...that the Chief of Police was the patron of this new 'national' organised crime syndicate (Raja Petra 2006).

Most recently, a Malaysian student name Wee Meng Chee, studying at one of Taiwan's university gained the spotlight of Malaysian mainstream mass media when he posted a six-minute video of himself singing the national anthem interspersed with rap through the Internet. Academicians and politicians responded furiously when the mainstream mass media discussed the video. Many would see that the act was inclined to demean the National Anthem. More to that the song over video had inflamed racism and insulting Islam (NST 2007: 9). A section of the rap lyrics that had irritably caused public furore was as follows:

Our police have another named called mata (eye)
Because their eyes are sharp

When the New Year is near, they seem to be very hardworking
They will take out the pens but they don't open ticket to you
Because they are too thirsty and they have to drink tea
And also black coffee and want some more sugar
If added more sugar they'd smile more happily to you
They even say 'tata' [goodbye] to you when you are about to leave

In the early morning Five o'clock
There is morning call to wake me up (with video clips of a Muslim performing a prayer)
Just like singing a love song
Sometimes the song got twisted just like RnB style
Sometimes they sing until out of key
Or sometimes they sing until throated
Sometimes their voices sound like cock, but they are earlier than a cock
Only like this we'd be awaken and go to school or work

Please don't blame the government for only taking care of Bumiputra [the indigenous]
Please don't blame the government for not being fair to us [the Chinese?]
Only shows that our Chinese are not afraid of working hard
Only this leads us to find our way out
Don't be surprise by their judgment
Only this shows that we are outstanding
Only those kids that are not spoilt know what is independent
If not, you see some other people still need a babysitter (as recorded in Zaharuddin 2007)

From the above excerpt of the lyrics, many would see that the singer had posted firstly a satirical commentary that portrays the police as corrupt. Secondly it is close to condemning the Muslim prayer and thirdly the Malay/Bumiputra special rights and privilege as provisioned in the Federal Constitution. Added to such negative impression, the

satirical criticism was interspersed with the national anthem of a rap version, which many politicians see as an attempt of demeaning the nation (NST 2007:9).

The Implication; Social Tension

The above accounts regarding the content of online journalism suggest that the freedom of the press, of speech and expression conferred to online journalism or in general the Internet have contributed to social tension among Malaysians. It is social tension because it promotes undercurrents of discontentment within the society with regards to speculative, defamation, libellous, negative criticisms and irresponsible discourses that may jeopardise interethnic relation as well as the dignity of the nation. They are seen contributory to social tension because the stories posted are seemingly lacking a discipline of verification. For that reason the obligation to the truth is likely to be ignored and would lead to fallacy, speculative and sensationalised pieces. The implication would be causal to social tension when defamation, libellous, seditious, and racism materials were posted and globally accessed.

The bloggers phenomenon is another issue when such stories as above openly invites readers and viewers to post personal comment on what they read and watch. As for instance, a blogger had posted an arrogant comment on one of Malaysia's political leaders regarding the issue of the VIP plane purchase. It says:

Really shock to read the news. This bloody old man is using Islam Hadari to cover up his sins and corrupt practices. How come Malaysia has such a stupid leader who spends lavishly and doesn't care much about the welfare of the Rakyat? How come the boleh land has an idiotic and sleeping PM, who is unaware of the current domestic and world events? I think all Muslims should come out to teach him a lesson in the next general election or else Malaysia will go down to the hell. Although I don't live in Malaysia, I really feel very sad for what have been happening in our country since this old serpent took over the helm from Mahathir. May Allah bless Malaysia (Kojima 2007).

We could see that filthy words such as 'bloody old man', 'a stupid leader', 'an idiotic and sleeping PM', 'go down to hell,' and 'old serpent'

were lavishly and emotionally used by the blogger in his comments. He is seemingly irresponsible because he hid himself through an anonymous identity and his out of country location would further obsess him for offensive and wicked words.

Thus, despite the democratic space of online journalism, this paper advocates that it has become a key catalyst of social tension and quite apparent to continue to add more social tension within Malaysia's multiethnic society. Unfortunately, this kind of sensationalised and speculative stories could strongly win the attention from the public. The implication would be causal to social tension when defamation, libellous, seditious, and racism materials were posted and globally accessed. The condition would be fatal to a nation such as Malaysia when ethnic, language, cultural and religious differences are distinct and considered sensitive for open criticisms.

This paper advocates that such inclination would also expose online journalism to hatred campaign if it were to lead to political disagreement and dispute. As for instance in the case of Wee Meng Chee, even though he is seen to demean the National Anthem, but the Secretary General of Democratic Action Party (DAP), Lim Guan Eng affirmed that his party would offer him free legal aid.

Contradictorily to DAP's standpoint, the Minister of Youth and Sport, Datuk Azalina Othman of United Malay National Organisation, insisted that Wee Meng Chee be charged under ISA 1960. She claimed Meng Chee's action as strictly offensive and disrespectful of the nation, the leaders, and Islam for his harsh and insensitive words. The Minister asserted that his act had affected the nation's dignity as the video was posted through the Internet and is globally accessible (Utusan Malaysia 2007).

So in the Meng Chee's case we could see disagreement of perception on his work with regard to the claim that he had demeaned the national anthem and worst still when it is perceived to condemn other people's religious belief. The disagreement would probably promote antagonism among the public or precisely trigger off social tension and accumulate undercurrents of discontentment. The worst implication is that the work of the independent online journalism may lead to racial aggression as what we had experienced in 1969 and almost similar incident in 1987.

Conclusion

In the light of the above discussion, I would not deny that there is more democratic space within online journalism, especially when it is exempted from the PPPA 1987 and further ensured for free-of-censorship through CMA 1998 and the MSC Bill of Guarantees. However the current social and political conditions have implied that the freedom attained are causal to the undercurrents of discontentment. Such undercurrents of discontentment are described as social tension and may likely to be blown up into racial aggression or public commotion. The social segmentation and distinct differences in terms of religion, culture, language, custom and even ethnic complexion are also seen as supportive variables to such trend. Parallel to what Dr Goh Cheng Teik, one of Malaysia's prominent politicians had advocated, the social tension could develop into a 'time bomb' (Teik 1978:34). Thus online journalism has also portrayed itself as a paradox to Malaysian social and political milieus.

Corresponding to such phenomenon of social tension the UMNO Vice President, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, had proposed a closed-door forum attended by Barisan National component parties. This would be followed by NGOs and the public would also be invited for the discussions. Muhyiddin said:

There are ill-feelings among Malaysians. I suggest we start off by remembering what we agreed on in the Constitution. Some Malaysians were unhappy with issues, such as education, religion, the New Economic Policy and Bumiputra rights, that the BN (National Front) thought had been resolved. Lately many issues have cropped up... It's time we go back to closed-door discussions to discuss these critical issues (as quoted in Minderjeet Kaur 2007).

For that I see the best resolution is for all Malaysians' top leaders and the people to sit down together and 'talk, talk, and talk'.

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