

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**EXPLORING THE DYNAMICS OF
NETWORKED AND
PARTICIPATORY PROPAGANDA IN
THE MALAYSIAN
TWITTERSPHERE DURING THE
2020 POLITICAL CRISIS**

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Universiti Teknologi MARA. It is original and is the results of my own work, unless otherwise indicated or acknowledged as referenced work. This thesis has not been submitted to any other academic institution or non-academic institution for any degree or qualification.

I, hereby, acknowledge that I have been supplied with the Academic Rules and Regulations for Post Graduate, Universiti Teknologi MARA, regulating the conduct of my study and research.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the complex dynamics of propaganda within the Malaysian Twittersphere during the Sheraton Move in 2020, a significant and an unprecedented political crisis that not only reshaped Malaysia's politics but also intensified the role of social media in propaganda and political discourse. Based on Jacques Ellul's classic sociological propaganda and the contemporary participatory propaganda framework, the research investigates the structure of propaganda networks, the dynamics of propagandistic discourse, and the participatory mechanisms employed in amplifying narratives during this event. It addresses a critical gap in the literature, while offering a comprehensive understanding of how digital propaganda operates within Malaysia's sociopolitical context. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining Social Network Analysis, Content Analysis, and in-depth interviews to examine the Twittersphere during the Sheraton Move. This research leverages on big data gathered from Twitter using NodeXL to analyse interactions, including retweets, replies, and hashtags such as #langkahsheraton, to construct a detailed network graph. The findings revealed the network structure of the propaganda community, its key actors, or the propagandists, which showed a highly integrated and polarised network characterised by ideological clusters with minimal cross-group interaction. Key nodes, or influential users, played a significant role in bridging clusters, and strategically disseminating propaganda narratives. The propagandistic discourse on Sheraton Move was dominated by emotionally charged themes such as betrayal, anger, and frustration, which drove engagement and amplified the visibility of content. Strategic and organic use of hashtags and emotional messaging ensured virality and sustained attention on Twitter. In this network environment, participatory propaganda emerged as a central mechanism, with ordinary users actively contributing to the amplification of partisan narratives and non-partisan narratives. However, this empowerment also reinforced echo chambers and amplified polarisation. By addressing the structure, discourse, and participatory mechanisms of propaganda during the Sheraton Move, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of big data-driven digital propaganda in Malaysia. Building on these findings, this study conceptualises the Network-Driven Participatory Propaganda Model, which illustrates the interplay between network structures, user participation, and their effects in shaping modern propaganda. These findings contribute valuable insights to the broader discourse on participatory propaganda, and social media especially within the context of Malaysia, and could serve as a foundation for future research in field of propaganda studies or political communication.

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