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Social Media, Democratic Movement and Challenges on the Content

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Abstract

The freedom of Internet has created emerging trends, particularly as it now plays greater role in enhancing new political culture, in changing mainstream media democracy practices, and in supporting more diverse participation among Malaysians. The most notable trends are the growing numbers of bloggers since the Malaysian 12th and 13th general election, the formation of bloggers' group, and also the popularity of internet media which is run by independent groups; mostly linked to opposition parties and the increase of video sharing websites posted by citizen journalists in spreading political issues and their own opinions. However, this expansion has continuously created difficulties for the ruling government (BN), as public were exposed to other alternative online views rather than through mainstream media. Meanwhile, Internet community also faced obstacles such as defamation and sedition charges and being arrested under blurring legislation provisions. In the present time, concerns have arisen among Internet community whether mainstream media restrictions may spill over into cyberspace. This paper will investigate how and why the Internet has made a difference to Malaysian political culture, how news discourses have produced more diversity in participation, and how independent Internet media can be managed through a policy framework.

Keywords: Malaysia, Internet, mainstream media, democracy, election

1.1 The beginning of the Internet venture

The 21st century has witnessed the rapid growth of information and communication technology due to the momentum of Internet development and the rising rate of consumption. However, in the developing countries, the level of information technologies' (ITs) implementation, its

development, and the number of users is diverse. In Malaysia's case, the nation can be considered as the first country in Southeast Asia to allow open Internet access in 1994. Chinnasamy (2013) has tracked the development of Internet in Malaysia from the period of Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems (MIMOS) established computer network called Rangkaian Komputer Malaysia (Malaysian Computer Network) called Rangkom (Hashim & Yusof, 1999) to the dial-up network connected to countries such as Australia, United States (US), Netherlands and Korea. In 1992, these connections were replaced by the satellite link between Malaysia and US for the purpose of establishing a permanent link to the Internet (Internet World Stats.com). MIMOS initiated the launch of Joint Advanced Integrated Networking (JARING) in 1992 as first Malaysian Internet Service Provider (ISP) with an initial group of 28 subscribers and capacity of accessing resources in more than 140 countries (Xue, 2004). The country's second ISP, TMnet-Telekom Malaysia Berhad's (TMB) was initiated in July 1996. Thus, the government was seriously engaged in the rapid ICT developments through few of Malaysian Development Plans (Rancangan Malaysia) and state guided initiatives such as Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC MALAYSIA). This has made the growth of Internet in Malaysia steady and incremental. In addition, the leaders have announced plans to enter the Information Superhighway and initiated goals and visions that include technology development as a core component to transform the economy into the information age. In the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000) the government has allocated RM2.3 billion for IT related investment in the local and overseas markets (Alsagoff and Hamzah, 2007). The National Information Technology Council (NITC- advisory group on ICT development to government) established to assist this plan. NITC's well-known project on The National IT Agenda (NITA) in 1997 was mainly introduced to create "Values-based Knowledge Society", which outlines the frameworks for ICT usage and development from three perspectives: people, infrastructure and applications. Allocations on ICT development continuously expanded to Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001-2005) with RM5.2 billion over the five years (Economy Planning Unit, 2002) where information and communication expenditures have increased the GDP growth from 5% in 1992 to 7% in 2002 (Chinnasamy, 2013).

 Hence, the development of ICT treated as long-term strategy to achieve "Vision 2020" as an information society with focus of knowledge empowerment and as a bridge "from the Industrial Age to the Information Age" (Mahathir interviews in the New Straits Times, 1996). As an attempt to attract foreign investors to transfer and develop their information technology infrastructures in Malaysia, Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC Malaysia) was set up on 1st August 1996, a state-led attempt to develop a Silicon Valley-like technology hub in Malaysia. The MSC Malaysia is a platform for Malaysians to enter the information society (Huff, 2002). The project facilitated by a technology environment, particularly the Internet as a basic tool to establish knowledge based society. MSC Malaysia was able to link Malaysia with other known World Web and indirectly attract world- class companies to invest in Malaysia (www.mscmalaysia.my).

1.2 Boosting Malaysian Economy via technology corridor

MSC Malaysia is known as 'Siliconization of Asia' (Jessop and Sum, 2000; Burnnell, 2002) with 15 by 50 km long high tech zone designed for the development of information technology. The corridor was assisted by two new 'intelligent cities': Putrajaya as federal government administration centre with 100% utilization of information technology (ITs) as a core component in 'electronic government' practices (Putrajaya Corporation, 1997); and Cyberjaya as MSC Malaysia intelligent cyber city and as also a technopole which attracts foreign information technology companies to invest in Malaysia (Multimedia Development Corporation-MDC, 1997; Bunnel, 2002). describes both cities as 'greenfield sites' in marketing literature mainly in the mega urban region of Kuala Lumpur, which started from the northern node of MSC Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur City Centre, KLCC) to Klang Valley (the southern node of MSC Malaysia at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, KLIA) (Lee, 1995). This project was initially assisted by McKinsey consultants, who predicted that Malaysia could leapfrog into the Information age if it developed its information industries (NITC Malaysia, 2001) with 'smart partnership' collaborations between international and local firms and links with other intelligent cities in the world. Driving the development of this initiative is the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDeC) previously known as MDC, which was established as "a fully empowered one-stop shop" (New Straits Times, 1997a). MDeC has the authority of direct links to the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, and also tasked to advise the government on ICT policies, sets standard for the country's ICT and multimedia operations and develop MSC Malaysia as a key growth driver in Malaysia's economy (www.mscmalaysia.my). As a core component of MSC Malaysia project, the Bill of Guarantees were formed as pull factors to ensure continuous information technology development in Malaysia, which outlines 10 points of following incentives:

i.   A world class physical and information infrastructure

ii. Unrestricted employment of local and foreign knowledge workers

iii. Freedom of ownership

iv. Freedom to source capital to funds globally

v. Competitive financial incentives

vi. Intellectual Property Protection and Cyber Laws

vii. No censorship of Internet

viii. Competitive telecommunication tariffs

ix. Tender key MSC Malaysia infrastructure contracts for companies using the MSC Malaysia as their regional hub

x. MDC as an effective one-stop super shop

(Multimedia Development Corporation, 1997)

Addressing in a speech at the UCLA in January 1997, Mahathir assured his MSC Malaysia project has "the world's best soft infrastructure of laws and practices with a 10-point Multimedia Bill of Guarantees, which one of the point stressed "Malaysia will ensure no censorship of the Internet" (New Straits Times, 1997; George; 2003). Mahathir pledged not to censor the Internet in the name of pursuing trade and economic interests and also as an attempt to attract foreign investors to his project in 1996.

 Mahathir's MSC Malaysia project has attracted world attention, particularly the world's leading IT conglomerates such as CEOs and President of Microsoft, Compaq, Fujitsu, IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Sun Microsystems, ACER and Nippon Telegraph & Telephone (Alsagoff and Hamzah, 2007). Companies invested in Malaysia are entitled to apply for MSC Malaysia Status certification if they fulfilled MSC Malaysia standard requirements: a provider or heavy user of multimedia products, having substantial number of knowledgeable workers in IT sectors and be able to transfer their expertise of technology in Malaysia (Internet World Stats.com). These companies will be able to receive additional privileges in MSC Malaysia projects and also the government taxation exception. MDeC (2008) report states by the end of 31st December 2001, there were 631 companies with MSC Malaysia certification and 50 world-class international companies. By the end of 2003, the figure has prompted to 750 MSC Malaysia companies and 70 world-class companies. Most of the companies are international oriented such as Alcatel, Cable & Wireless, Ericsson, Fujitsu, IBM, Intel, Lotus, Lucent, Nokia, NTT, Oracle, Siemens and Sun, which have been committed to the MSC Malaysia project (MDeC.com). Several of these companies have established their facilities in Cyberjaya. For instance, Japan's NTT has set-up second largest overseas Research and Development centre, multi-national companies established Asia Pacific Regional Data centres and Fortune Top 10 Company has located a Global Data and Support Centre, the company's third location worldwide in the MSC Malaysia.

MSC Malaysia Impact Survey (2013) states more than 2,173 companies have been certified as MSC Malaysia status (MSC Malaysia.com). The survey illustrates six categories have been identified to signify the certification of the MSC Malaysia status: Application Software (AS), Mobility, Embedded Software & Hardware (MeSH), Internet-based Business (IBB), Creative Multimedia Companies (CMC), Shared Services & Outsourcing (SSO) and Institutions of Higher Learning (IHLs) and Incubators. Approximately, total of 91 % from 2,173 companies with MSC Malaysia status are still active and contributes to the growth of the Malaysian economy (MDeC.com). Mahathir's decision on the implementation of IT was difficult to be judged. This later followed by the announcement of Open Internet Promise. The development of IT was seen as an achieving tool for Vision 2020, which is more likely to meet the economy target. Hilley (2001) describes Mahathir's decision as "a millennial symbol of growth, wealth-creation and nation-building on a unprecedented scale" (p.4). However, George (2003) observes Mahathir's

MSC Malaysia as an epic role and as a small country Malaysia has chosen America as a role model in developed its information technology industries:

"At the time, England launched the Industrial Revolution but America won it. Why? Because the technology could be moved to an environment much more conducive to realising its full potential. Malaysia has come late to industrialisation and this has given us the will and skill to make sweeping changes that others cannot because we have much less to lose. The MSC Malaysia provides all the critical components required to create the perfect environment to achieve the promise of the Information Age (New Straits Times, 1997)". Literally, the Open Internet Promise is only practicable to all MSC Malaysia companies that have been investing and having partnership with local companies. However, Mahathir's decision was indirectly applicable to Malaysians due to the concept of MSC Malaysia as "a pilot project for harmonising our entire country with global forces shaping the Information Age" (cited by George from News Straits Times, 1997). Nevertheless, the Open Internet Promise absolutely not assuring that people are open to publishing any materials on the Internet or free from Malaysia's security laws. For those publishing seditious or defamation content, action will be taken under other the government stringent laws such as the Sedition Act (SA), and the Defamation Act for the purpose of guarding the nation's political stability, racial harmony and national prosperity. These restrictions will be deployed by the officials from the Ministry of Home Affairs, who is in charge of the nation's security. Also they raised the spectre of reviewing the Open Internet Promise. Yet, there are contradicting views from the other body of government primarily those from the multimedia ministry and IT sections, that openness of Internet policy remained intact.

1.3   The Internet Penetration and Usage in Malaysia

According to the Internet World Statistics, Malaysia has a relatively high degree of Internet penetration. The users are approximately 20,596,847 as of Dec.31, 2014 with 67.5% penetration. Almost 44.5% of internet penetration resulted from 13,589,520 Facebook subscribers on Dec 31/12. Freedom House-UN Refugee Agency report (2009) states there are 21 Internet Service Provider (ISPs) operating in this country and mostly run by private sectors. The access of Internet also were driven by the telephone service providers, where the Star (2009a) quotes there are three main private mobile telephone service providers in Malaysia such as Maxis Communications, Celcom, and Digi.com which have respectively 42 percent, 32 percent, and 26 percent of country's telecommunication market. The higher percentage of Internet penetration also is due to early adoption of Internet with first ICT regulatory frameworks, specially the MSC Malaysia project. Even though MSC Malaysia was initiated 15 years ago, the phenomenon of online access remained focused on the urban area. The problem spinning this trend is known as "digital divide" (Straubhaar & LaRose; 2004, p.391) where the "gaps in the Internet access remain between income, racial, and education groups over time". In 2003, Internet subscribers in urban areas have reached almost to 93% in the country (Zaitun Abu Bakar &

Crump, 2005). The Malaysian government is aware of the digital divide between urban and rural areas and has initiated few Internet projects from the earlier stages in the remote areas (International Telecommunication Union ITU, 2002). The encouragement was started with Gerakan Desa Wawasan project in 1996 and Rural Internet Centre program, followed by the e-Bario project and allocation of Internet facilities to 230 rural schools by the Ministry of Education in 2000. In 2002, ITU tracked record that the digital divide between urban and rural respectively was over 10% and less than 2% due to the immense income gap between urban and rural areas.

However, Internet access has positives notable growth from 15% in 2000 (ITU, as cited in Malaysia: Internet Usage Stats) to 47.8% in 2007 (MCMC, 2007) and 65.7% in December 2010 reached to 67% in 2013. According to (MCMC, 2009) one of the factor that contributes to the growth of Internet penetration in the country is due to the government's aggressive support in promoting broadband access with 1.4 million broadband users.

In the present time, the Internet falls under the monitor of Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), a regulatory body in-charge of the country's telecommunication industries and also tasked to respond to the Energy, Water and Communication (EWC) ministry. Both bodies are guided by the 1998 Communication and Multimedia Act (CMA) – the regulatory framework, which was imposed to regulate the increasing convergent in the multimedia and communication industries. The CMA was enacted to replace the Broadcasting Act 1988 and the Telecommunication Act of 1950, which were repealed in 1999 (Kaur and Ramanathan, 2008). The act established the fundamental of social economy development by the utilization of information technology, with focus on contents and applications with principles outlines by the MCMC: transparency and clarity, more competition and less regulation, flexibility, bias towards generic rules, regulatory forbearance, and focus on process rather than content; administrative and sector transparency and industry self- regulation (CMA, 1998; Xue, 2004).

The CMA also gives the EWC power to be in-charge of a wide range of telecommunication industries licences. CMA outlines the requirement of licence and operates a network facility in Malaysia (www.mcmc.gov.my- CMA Act 1998). Currently, most of the country's ISPs are linked to government or government links people. For instance, two largest ISPs in Malaysia: TMnet and Jaring are owned by the Ministry of Finance and Maxis Communication. Malaysia's largest mobile phone service provider is owned by Ananda Krishna, who owns the largest satellite broadcaster in the country and is connected to the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. At present, the majority of Malaysians are using the Internet for e-mail and daily

communication purposes. At the same time, it also has been used as an alternative medium to voice their opinion, particularly given the lack of dissenting views in the mainstream media.

1.3.1 Restriction on Content

The MSC Malaysia project was established nearly 15 years ago with the Bill of Guarantees, which promises no censorship of Internet. Hence, the BN government does not deploy any filtering technology particularly to censor the Internet content or limit the Internet communication. Since Mahathir's administration, the Internet was seen as a tool to nurture the information technology resources and also creates good and healthy application environment for end users (Xue, 2005). As a primary mover and planner for the ICT strategies and development in Malaysia, Mahathir has released few statements that indicate no censorship of Internet and no specific restriction that could censor the Internet's content. With the formulation of the Bill of Guarantee that assured the freedom of the Internet, CMA 1998 also explicitly outlines 'Nothing in this Act should be construed as permitting censorship of the Internet' (www.mcmc.gov.my). However, the promise of no-censorship of the Internet is meaningless when the government is using other existing and stringent laws such as the the Defamation Act, the Official Secret Act (OSA) and the Sedition Act to arrest and to detain those who publish seditious, defamatory or challenging and threatening content on the Internet, which indirectly frightens Malaysian web surfers. The BN government has introduced self-regulatory mechanisms and also encourage industries and individual to practise self-regulation in order to create good culture of Internet environment with continuous information flow. This means the Internet should be self-regulated instead of being monitored by the government. Even though self-regulation practices are emphasized by the MCMC, the current trends of online phenomenon in Malaysia had made a great impact before, that is, during and after the 2008 and 2013 general elections. The public was exposed to other alternative online views, especially blogs and independent Internet media coverage on some important events before these elections, where mainstream media media was less focused. The high number of Internet consumption in the country and the concept of the uncensored 'borderless world' have also made online information more easily accessible to anyone.

Due to the popularity of the Internet, the government of BN has started to discredit independent Internet media and blogs with clampdowns on few bloggers and also online communities. After the 2008 general election, the Star (2008b) reported the government has closed down 127 popular and controversial websites and blogs (including pornography and financial scams) for contravening various sections of restrictions such as OSA, the Defamation Act and the Sedition Act. The Deputy Science and Technology Minister Kong Cho Ha has stated that the independent internet media and blogs may have to register with the Ministry of Information as they are promoting disorder in a multi-ethnic society (The Star, 2008b). For instance, on 28th August 2008, MCMC ordered nationwide ISPs to block controversial independent Internet media news websites have been very critical of the ruling party, BN government. In an interview with the

Star newspaper, Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar justified the government's decision in this case by citing Sections 263 and 233 of CMA, which penalize "improper use of facilities or network services" (Freedom on the Net from www.unhcr.org, 2009) and the same provision of legislation has also been addressed by the EWC Minister Shaziman Abu Mansor in malaysia-today.net's case. The case was acceptable legally as there are other stringent laws, which are harsher in malaysia-today.net's case, including the Sedition Act. In this case, the government action has breached the earlier promises under Point 7 of MSC Malaysia, Bill of Guarantees that there would be no Internet censorship. According to Tan et al (2008), the activities of clampdown websites and the prosecution and detention of independent Internet media authors and bloggers, mainly under the ISA act and other stringent laws has started to rise from the beginning of 2007. It started with defamation charges issued by the pro-government media conglomerate, NSTP group against bloggers Ahiruddin Attan and Jeff Ooi in January 2007 for speeding their formation of the National Alliance of Bloggers (All-blogs). This event was followed by the detention of Nathaniel Tan. The first blogger was arrested under the OSA on 13th July 2007 because of a comment left by anonymous visitors on his blog, with reference to the allegations of corruption involving the Deputy Minister of Internal Security, Johari Baharom (Tan and Ibrahim, 2008). Steven Gan, the author of independent Internet media, Malaysiakini.com describes the government's action as unfair as the two other government owned dailies, The Star and Utusan Malaysia also reported the same news about the unnamed senior politician who was being investigated for receiving RM5 million for releasing underworld figures detained without trials under the Emergency Ordinance. Ten days later Raja Petra Kamaruddin, the author of malaysia-today.net was prosecuted for insulting the King and Islam. This allegation was made in reference to a blog post in his website on 11th July 2007 and the author was questioned for eight hours by the authorities for the charges of insulting the monarchy and Islam on his blog (The Star, 2007c). This followed by another case of criminal defamation charges by two military officers towards Raja Petra, who objected to their involvement in Mongolian model murder charges (Bernama, 2008b). The author was detained again in September 2008 under the ISA act, without trial and later was released in November 2008 after the High Court of Malaysia declared the detention as an unconstitutional (The Sun Daily, 2008a). Previously, Raja Petra had also been arrested under the ISA act in 2001. In another case, in August 2007, the Sun Daily (2007b) quoted Mohammed Nazri Aziz, minister in the Prime Minister's Department saying that actions will be taken against those posting images and content on video sharing website, YouTube and blogs, which over steps the boundaries on sensitive issues after the incident of a Malaysian student in Taiwan making a parody of the national anthem on YouTube. The issue has made Malaysian communities angry and finally, the boy's father apologised openly in a press conference for the controversy caused by his son and the statements were also supported by the President of Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA-BN Chinese component party), Ong Ka Ting during the press conference.

With continuous controversies on the Internet publication, Malaysia government states it would not hesitate to use existing laws such as ISA, the Sedition Act and the Penal Code against the

Internet community to wipe out the freedom to defame, cheat and hurt people's feelings (Bernama, 2007c). The argument was clear to government that new media content should be used for accurate information and sincere views, and not to hurl abuse at people. For instance, the statement from the current Prime Minister, Najib Tun Razak in Malaysia Insider.com was, "Civil society must be aware of cyber threats that are causing harm to the nation's sovereignty and society interest" (2009). The ECW minister has declared the MCMC had established a committee to monitor the websites and blogs, which are represented by the government authorities, officials from the attorney general's office and also from the Ministry of Home Affairs. Yet, it is still unclear to what extent the monitoring level has been implemented. The strategies that government uses in solving this problem are still vague. Malaysian government has established the Open Internet Promise 15 years ago but in the present time, the government tried to control the Internet content with other existing laws. There are also contradicting views among the government officials on the Internet censorship issues in Malaysia, as various bodies and ministries are involved in making this decision. For instance, even though the MCMC is a government owned body, which is in-charge of telecommunication and multimedia industries, this institution does not have absolute rights to penalise or control unethical publication on the Internet as the Ministry of Home Affairs is headed in this matters.

Nevertheless, for the Internet community, concern is raised whether the Internet will be censored in the future or the possibility of mainstream media media restrictions will be deployed in cyberspace. Those on blog-sites have voiced opposition to the censorship issues and also pointed to the policy vacuum. The earlier promise made by the government, on the Open Internet Promise with legal provisions: Internet Law Section (3) "No censorships of Internet" in the MSC Bill of Guarantee and also in the Communication and Multimedia Act (CMA) of 1998 are called into question. There are also some criticisms raised particularly on the effectiveness of Cyberlaws in Malaysia and why the government is not referring and using the Cyberlaws legal provisions to monitor the Internet content or penalise the users, whom government thinks as threatening the nation's security. The Cyberlaws were previously issued by the BN government in order to track the information flow and also outlines the specific use of the Internet such as do not employ the network for activities that prohibited by government, not to distribute information that could cause anxiety to any person (particularly issues related to racial, religion, political grounds and immoral activities) and not to breach other intellectual rights (cited by Xue, 2005 from JARING; TMnet, 2004). Today Cyberlaws are less being focused as it covers few provisions: The Digital Signature Act 1997, the Computer Crimes Act 1997, the Copyright (Amendment) Act 1997 and the Telemedicine Act 1997 (www.ktkm.gov.my). Few suggestions have also been made to review again the existing Cyberlaws to deal illegal activities over the Internet. On 7th September 2009, after chairing a meeting of the National Information Technology Council (NITC), Prime Minister Datuk Najib Razak stated that the provisions that assured no censorship of the Internet will be honoured and will be maintained (The Malaysian Insider.com, 2009). In August 2009, The Malaysian Insider also reported the government was evaluating whether to use an Internet filter blocking, which is similar to China's "Green Dam"

software. However, the statement was denied by the Minister of Information, Communication and Culture, Datuk Rais Yatim, where the move is only to block pornographic websites. In the circumstances of online policy consideration, the redundancy of legal provisions with several bodies involved in the Internet monitoring, and also the number of bloggers and authors of independent Internet media being arrested from 2006 to 2008, internet users in the country have continued to be discouraged. This includes fear to voice their views or express their opinion, particularly on the issues that are considered by Malaysian government as "sensitive" such as religion status, special rights, and economy allocations quota according to races.

1.3.2 Popularity of Internet Media

Following the notion of the Open Internet Promise and also the government ownership and control of mainstream media with rigorous laws such as the ISA and the Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA) 1984, there has been exponential growth of independent Internet media news websites since 1996. These include Malaysiakini.com, Malaysia Today, and Aliran.com. The websites have reached an even wider audience than mainstream media (ITU Telecom World, 2006).

Existing researches have argued the potential of Internet in challenging the state power with alternatives views against the state power (Jason P.Abbott, 2001; Gan, James Gomez & Uwe Johannen, 2004; Yang Guobin, 2003). In Malaysia, with 35% of people accessing alternative news websites in 2007, the government's tight control over the mainstream media is now unable to mould and control popular perception as it could in the past. The rapid and continual flow of information through independent internet media has proved favourable to the opposition; as the 2008 general elections saw former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's political comeback and the opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat (PKR) gain ascendancy. Since the opposition coalition was not getting sufficient coverage in the mainstream media, the only democratic medium left for them is cyberspace, since the government had promised not to sensor the Internet. The independent Internet media has enabled them 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). Here the Internet community aims to verify the truth behind the slew of exposes, scandals and revelations against government politicians. As the public grows increasingly doubtful of mainstream media media's discourse due to government's ownership and control, it has caused public to venture into cyber space and turn overnight into citizen journalists, and public interest bloggers also are disseminating their grassroots views and exchanging their ideas here. As a result, independent internet media have managed to inveigle itself to the dominant media and have risen to become the only source of information from the other side and blogs as a medium to express and exchanging ideas and views about the nation's political happenings. The political power of the Internet in Malaysia is much more penetrating and effective even though the number of Internet users in Malaysia is relatively small compared to other neighbouring countries such as Singapore (George, 2005). This is due to people's

dissatisfaction with mainstream media since it is owned and controlled by the BN government. On the other hand, most of the independent Internet media is run by the opposition parties and reveals the truth of current happenings to the public. Today, the nation's Internet penetration is increasing as 5 of 10 people are accessing Internet at least one hour a day (The Nielsen Media Index, 2008). The audience for independent Internet media news websites is massive and growing. Malaysiakini.com is one of the best examples of independent Internet media in Malaysia, which has "gained increasing importance both as an arena for battling the political confrontations and also as a locus for pushing government accountability" (Tumber 2001: 21). Established in November 1999, the independent website has survived in Malaysia's constrained environment and managed to hold a record with 100,000 readers every day. Malaysiakini.com was launched one year after the expose of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim by Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran (ex-journalists from The Sun) after the print media rejected their investigation report on tedious condition at one of the migrant labour camps in Malaysia (Steele, 2007). Believing mainstream media ownership and control have impacted the good values of journalism, Malaysiakini.com through its high quality and independent reporting has managed to gain popularity among Malaysians. Malaysia's mainstream media publication is not only licensed, but its journalists are also working under constraints and pressure of various restrictions. Steele (2007b) quotes her interviews with former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, where Anwar says,"Malaysiakini has independence, credibility and it's the only avenue we have; the other media have an instruction to block us out" (p. 87). However, the author of Malaysiakini.com, Steven Gan argues the independent Internet media is not an opposition news publication but more into news publication that is fact and truth since mainstream media is being controlled. The author also denied government accusation on Malaysiakini.com as an opposition voice (Steele, 2007a). Traffic History for Malaysiakini.com record (2008) shows in 2007, the website has 5 thousand paid subscribers and is accessed by one hundred thousand different computers daily. Malaysiakini.com has additional privileges compared to mainstream media, particularly in news coverage whereases it has maximum 15 peak stories posted daily in various languages mainly Mandarin (Chinese readers) and Tamil (Indian readers), commentary letters, and "Vox Populi", reader comments.

Another well-known independent Internet media in Malaysia is malaysia-today.com, a news website that focuses on Malaysian politics, politicians and current affairs. This independent website is run by Raja Petra Kamaruddin (RPK) with inclusion of commentaries by Anwar Ibrahim (MalaysiaToday.com). Raja Petra Kamaruddin has been arrested by police several times and also been detained under the ISA act due to his critics on the ruling government from 2001 until recently in 2008. This website was established in August 2004, and received 100 million hits compared to the New Straits Times, a major English language daily newspaper in Malaysia (Kamaruddin, 2006). The Star (2006) states this website receives 1.5 million hits a day and remained as one of the top ten popular political sites in Malaysia. There are also other online media, which operates on daily, weekly and monthly publications such as Aliran.com,

Freemedia.com, Harakah.com, Malaysia Insider.com, Aliran.com, Merdeka Review.com and thefreemedia.com (belongs to ethnic Chinese) and MakkalSakti.com (belongs to ethnic Indians).

Since Malaysia's leaders pledged not to censor the Internet, the authorities were largely stuck between the desire for international capital and the effect technology could have on their leadership (Kelsey, 2008). However, one of the reasons that Internet has been vigorous in Malaysia's context is due to policy vacuum in regulating the cyberspace. When BN lost its significant power in the parliament house and suffered defeats in five of the state assemblies, Mahathir Mohammad gave a statement that he didn't expect that the Internet had the ability to change the ground rules of the nation's politics. As mainstream media media is being controlled by strict laws such as Internal Security Act (ISA) and the Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA), the government has to review the current state of new media technology and its implications in order to preserve the nation's stability and national identity.

1.3.2.1 Reportage on General Elections

Several street protests organized by various groups with different agendas took place around the country. For instance, the Malaysian Indian community rally organized by The Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) in November 2007, where thousands of ethnic Indians protested against racial inequality by the BN government, and demanded free and fair elections by a group of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs). Another example was the BERSIH rally under the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, a street protest to release Internal Security Act (ISA) detainees, during which the destruction of temples occurred. Lim (2009) claimed that events like these had not been seen in the nation since the late 1990s aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis and Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's firing, which sparked reformasi among Malaysians. The public had also witnessed unfair treatment towards the nation's judicial system in the form of a grainy video clip of a senior lawyer, V.K Lingam, where the ruling regime tried to fix the appointments of "friendly" judges. This was posted on Malaysiakini.com.

With the concept of convergence, and the policy forbidding Internet censorship in Malaysia, citizens were able to watch all these street demonstrations, as well as some instances of unfair treatment by the BN in handling the case with emotional significance to some groups of people in Malaysia. Many of these have been telecast on news websites and blogs such as Malaysiakini.com, MalaysiaToday.com, Malaysia Insider.com, Merdeka Review (belongs to Chinese) and MakkalSakti.com (belongs to Indians).

At the same time, the public also witnessed how authorities fired tear gas and chemical-laced water cannons towards those who took part in the street protests, especially biggest street protests, such as the BERSIH and HINDRAF rallies. Hundreds of images flooded websites, showing demonstrators with reddened eyes from the chemicals, coughing, screaming, and running for safety (Al Jazeera English, 2007). However, as I mentioned above, the nation's mainstream media only highlighted how the demonstration damaged the public infrastructure in

the city of Kuala Lumpur and the disruption to daily business for traders. Some of these incidents were also happening due to the deepening public dissatisfaction caused by rising fuel prices, high- profile cases of clampdowns on vocal critics of the ruling government including several socio-political bloggers, and even crass handling of a YouTube video parody of the national anthem made by a student.

All these events brought to light a side of the government, which the public had not seen in nearly forty years. The cumulative effects of these actions made the BN seem out of touch with the people, and appear to simply not be doing anything to hold on to power (Lim, 2009). Former Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi described emergence of new media platforms thus: "We didn't think it was important. It was a serious misjudgment…We thought newspapers, the print media, the television were important…the influence of alternative media 'was painful'. "(New Straits Times, March 2008, "Internet served a painful lesson", p.2). Continued coverage, especially in the independent Internet media about the way the government mishandled the street protests and controlled mainstream media reporting created anger among several groups of people, who have felt discriminated against in their own country. For instance, independent Internet media website Malaysiakini.com covered pertinent issues which gave voice to the voiceless, such as the incidents among the Indian community, with special coverage on how the police handled the demonstration with violence. The video of the scene captured by Malaysiakini.com (http:malaysiakini.com.my-hindaf demonstration.htm) was also released and distributed to the suburbs. This gave a big impetus to the Indian community in swinging their votes to the opposition coalition in the 2008 general elections. Other issues, such as temple destructions in a few places in the Selangor state, have never received attention from the mainstream media coverage. However, Malaysiakini.com uploaded raw videos of the destruction to their website, in order to make people aware of these incidents.

The public has also been disappointed with the mainstream media media's reporting, which continues to be controlled directly and indirectly by the government. The public could see that mainstream media is less frequently reporting major events that have been occuring in the country such as street demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur before the 2008 elections. Only few events were highlighted, which focused on how the demonstration had damaged the public infrastructure in the city of Kuala Lumpur and distracted business activities among traders. For instance, mainstream media such as public broadcast network Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) covered the HINDRAF issue on 26th November 2007, and showed how the street demonstration damaged the city's infrastructure. The precise and comprehensive examination of all the factors involved in the Malaysia 2008 and 2013 general elections would be too complex and unwieldy for this study. As argued above, one of the factors unique to the 2008 general election is the significant presence of new media, especially blogs and independent Internet media, in the nation's political culture.

Thus, the emergence of Internet in the general elections has created new trends and particularly plays a greater role in enhancing political culture in Malaysia, with the possibility of changing

mainstream media democracy practices, and in supporting more diverse participation among the Malaysians. The most notable trends are the growing numbers of bloggers during the run-up to the 2008 general elections with the formation of the bloggers' group, National Alliance of Bloggers (All-blogs), and also the popularity of independent Internet media which is run by independent groups mostly linked to opposition parties, and the increase of video sharing websites posted by individuals in spreading political issues and their own opinions. This expansion created difficulties for the ruling government; especially in holding power after the 2008 general elections as the public were exposed to other alternative online views rather than just the mainstream media. Foucault's perspective has been used to illustrate the concept of power and how power functions in a society. Foucault (1979) describe power as "actions on others", which exists when chained together with other functions and practised by other networks which extend the chain further. Smart (1985) argues Foucault's concept on power does not focus on power but more on the techniques of conduct embodied by the institutions. According to Foucault (1982), power is a field of social relations, which gives the ability to act upon the particular subjects according to their position within it. There are two main ideas which support these arguments based on the power as sovereignty: power is not separable from the relationships, and it is productive of possibilities. In states, coercive power exists in the form of sovereignty. In Malaysia, forces appear to pull for democracy and authoritarian practices at the same time. To implement these forces, the 1957 Federal Constitution provides the basic reference and guidelines upon which the functions of all components (Part 1 - Part 15 which contains 230 articles) are relating to the power operation in the nation. The constitution also states the essential rights of each component, and emphasises that they should not go beyond their vested authorities. Furthermore, the essential rights stated in the federal constitution can be only amended with two-thirds majority support from the parliament house, and approval from the ruling King.

In Malaysia's context, power produces regulations and policies that derive from the constitution and are being executed by the BN government. The essential rights that affect media organisations and freedom of individuals, such as giving public speeches, conduct of assembly, and freedom of expression have been prescribed in Article 149 and Article 10 of Federal Constitution. Since, tight regulations have been imposed in expressing ideas and opinions and multi-forms of tactics in governing the population. Those who were disappointed with current leadership have used Internet mediums to express and exchange ideas among them. The Internet, and particularly independent Internet media and blogs have offered opportunities for greater diversification of available views and opinions among people and greater participation in making political decisions before, during and after the 2008 general elections.

Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' also may provide a new understanding of Malaysian democracy, as governmentality is effectively "a way of doing things" where, to paraphrase Gordon, sovereignty and discipline via the subjection of individuals to regulations could be rendered thinkable and practicable. This means the "conduct of conduct" is involved in an

institution, which shapes, guides, or affects the conducts (Gordon, 1991). Gordon acknowledged that Foucault's term, "art of government" discloses the nature of a government's operations in terms of what is possible for the practitioners and to whom it is performed. Foucault explains governmentality as, "the ensemble formed by the institution, procedure, analyses and reflections, the calculation and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population as its principal form of knowledge political economy and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security" (Gordon, 1991, p.102). As in Malaysia's case, the BN government controlled the population with implicit control of legal instruments such as federal constitution and other government regulation. In the present time, Internet is playing different kinds of power roles before, during and after the 2008-2013 general elections. Due to this phenomenon, the BN government has been losing minority groups' support, mainly Chinese and Indians after a few independent Internet media such as Malaysiakini.com, Merdeka Review.com and Makkal Sakti.com have been focused on minority groups. The Internet has set the boundaries among the populations, which mean government apparatuses are being challenged and has brought forward the notion of national identity being called into question. After the 2008 general election, the notion of power is changing in Malaysia's context where the people are taking opportunity with different kind of pastoral power with the emergence and popularity of the Internet. This circumstance also gives a picture of what kind of identity Malaysia is heading towards in the future, particularly in the coming elections.

Therefore, governmentality deals with different "mentalities of government" which involve the subject of the government, and the techniques of government. Such an agenda can be applied to an analysis of the nation's mainstream media practices and how the activities of "conduct of conduct" affect the process of news gathering. Mainstream media in Malaysia is not only being owned and controlled by the government, but also use "self- censorship" practices among editors and journalists. The nature of the ruling regime (BN) is to ensure that media is run by government-allied organisations, as partners of the government. Frustrated with the BN government's attempts to restrict and control the mainstream media news, more Malaysians have turned to independent Internet media in seeking alternative news rather than that provided by the mainstream media. The public are also disappointed with mainstream media as they failed to report a few of the biggest street demonstrations which happened before the 2008 general elections, especially pertaining to ethnic concerns. Independent Internet media such as Malaysiakini.com has covered pertinent issues, thus giving voices to the voiceless street protests and reveal some of information that the government failed to handle.

Both general elections also have seen changes in mainstream media democracy and political culture, which could refer to the concept of "participatory democracy". This type of democracy is more sophisticated than the mainstream media democracy practice as greater participation of population is involved in influencing public policies. Sani (2009) describes that Malaysia is practicing a consociational way of democracy since 1957, where the country uses the power of sharing concept in ruling the nation. According to Lijphart (2000), consociational democracy is

an agreement among group of representatives in a deeply divided society to share the government, involving a "grand coalition, segmental autonomy, proportionality and minority veto". From historical background such as 1969 riots, Malaysia is a country with challenges in managing minority groups such as Chinese and Indians. Based on Lijphart's term, a consociational way of democracy has became a platform of BN, which is a coalition of multi-parties with weak power of minority veto from the opposition. Even though the BN coalition is being dominated by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), other group representatives such as the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) still enjoy the same right to input to government policy. Nevertheless, some local scholars (Khoo, 2002; Tan and Ibrahim, 2008) have illustrated Malaysia's way of democratic practise is "pseudo-democracy", where there is still a conflict of forces between democracy (as understood in the west) and authoritarian enforcement. The country may heading to participatory democracy because it gives Malaysian options to "push forward initiatives and issues that were neglected by the government of BN or not sufficiently covered by representative way of democracy" (Malek, 2008). The diversification after the elections had made citizens indulge themselves to a greater extent in making political decisions and policies. Since 1970, almost all nation-building projects, spelt out in the first to the ninth Malaysia Plan (Rancangan Malaysia 1-9), envisioned through a range of Development Policies, have been implemented and realized through the extensive utilization of mainstream media (radio and print initially) to construct the identity of post-colonial Malaya (sia) as a sovereign nation state (Khattab, 2008). Nevertheless, the role of mainstream media in unifying the nation is no longer practicable after the 2008 and 2013 general elections due to the popularity of the Internet in reporting local political unrest issues and offering a different perspective from that of the mainstream media. These channels have risen to become the only source of information for opposition to the government because they are free of regulation. These elections also witnessed information flow among Malaysians, particularly greater participation in political communication. Political communication starts to spread through information and communication technology before, during and after the elections. This draws on Manuel Castells' theory of informationalism, where the 21st century is known as the information age and informationalism means "A technological paradigm based on the augmentation of human capacity of information processing and communication made possible by the revolutions in microelectronics, software and genetic engineering" (Castells, 2004, p.3). One of the four characteristics of informationalism suggests a distinction between people, machines; their roles in communication and information production are being 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 (as cited in Birch, Schirato & Srivastava, 2001, p.73).

Technologies enhance human abilities and knowledge. An analogy could illustrate how political communication has been improved by the Internet technology. In Malaysia, communication capacity, complexity and speed of digitization has increased the notion of informationalism among the public after the rapid development of Multimedia Supercorridor project (MSC

Malaysia) and the effective of the Open Internet Policy which diverse greater participation particularly in the political communication. The "cyborgism" context existed in the form of political discussions in the political websites and politician blogs such as malaysia-today.com, Lim Kit Siang.com, and Anwar Ibrahim.com etc. Thus, the public are more interested "to follow-up" political happenings in Internet which give such interpretation that political communication in Malaysia's context start to 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). The Internet has added value compared to other communication media where information generates new outputs, immediate processed in the net, endless process of production of information and immediate feedback in real time or chosen time (Castells, 2001). However, in the 2008 general election, Oorjitham (2008) suggests Internet's publication has played crucial role in the political "tsunami" and 70% of the election results were influenced by blog's information. One of reason of the popularity of the independent Internet media in reporting political discourse is due to result of government's policy on mainstream media which often fails to cover critical news of governments such as nepotism, cronyism and corruption.

In other hand, Internet has become an advantage to the opposition coalition as a medium of communication because the cyberspace not was strictly controlled and it served as "greater communication and cooperation between disparate groups in civil society". When BN lost its significant power in the parliament house and suffered defeats in five of the state assemblies in the 2008 general election, the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad who initiated the Open Internet Promise has stated that he did not expect the Internet could change the ground rules of the nation's politics which has been maintained since 1957. Castells (1997, p.259) has predicted this scenario 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 before, during and after the 2008 general election, the political communication in Malaysia is no longer a top-down process. It now moves into the new public sphere in Malaysia where citizens are expected to have political role. The 2008 and 2013 Malaysia general election fits perfectly into this description. This election has demonstrated how Internet particularly independent Internet media and blogs 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 Internet and the notion of informationalism among Malaysians have increased greater participation in making national political decisions. At present, both mainstream media and independent news websites are divided into pro-government and opposition media and it seems to be a running battle between these two groups. The phenomenon heated up during the 2008 general elections as mainstream media such as News Straits Times and Utusan Malaysia argued against independent news websites such as Malaysiakini.com and Malaysia Today. The

battle here is to win Malaysian hearts and minds during the run-up to the elections. Pepinsky (2009) claims that the battle occurred due to independent Internet media discourses on ethnic relations, high-level personnel issues within the BN party and future leadership of government of BN and dissatisfaction about the nation's economy were ascended. The rapid and continual flow of information through independent Internet media has proved favourable to the opposition; as these elections saw former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's political comeback and his opposition coalition's Pakatan Rakyat (PKR) ascendancy. Since mainstream media owned by the BN government, the opposition was not getting sufficient coverage from mainstream media. Thus, the medium left for opposition is 'cyberspace', since the government has promised not to censor the Internet. Malaysiakini.com author, Steven Gan (2002) has acknowledged the emergence of independent Internet media in these elections has enabled the opposition to break through the government barriers such as no freedom of speech, no freedom of assembly, and dozens of newspapers without free press.

1.4 Conclusion

With the rapid spread of ideas, information, and movement among people, the task of national identity formation and government is complex. When new media technologies are in the globalization mix, the ubiquity of imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) is continuously flagged. Anderson has indicated the role of government in creating nationalism and "bound serialities" which could create a sense of community and generates the politics of ethnic identity. Through his work on technologies and states, Anderson informs us how to focus the techniques of government with the understanding of nationalism. Ever since Anderson introduced the idea of 'the nation' as an imagined community and that the mass media are primary though by no means exclusive agents of its imagining. According to Frosh and Wolfsfeld (2006) the phrase of 'imagining communities' is hard to be avoided as people are experience the 'sense of belonging' in the form of reading or writing materials such as how the citizens experience their relationships to politics, economic and social activities. Anderson concluded that mass media enables the individual to participate in the modern nation-states as citizens. They do so by providing a set of shared reference points that contribute to the idea of a common culture and a celebration of nationhood. Anderson's description of the nation as an 'imagined community', whose people are interconnected over time and space, serves as a useful framework in examining the construction of nationalism in Malaysia under the current media environment.

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