

Blogging in Malaysia: Hope for a New Democratic Technology?

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Abstract

By facilitating the open sharing of ideas, information and perspectives, blogging in Malaysia has the potential to serve as a democratizing force in a country with little freedom of expression. Democratic expectations of the local blogosphere must be tempered, however, with a realistic understanding of its limitations and of the government's hegemonic, and sometimes coercive, mechanisms of control. This paper first examines how blogging in Malaysia must be contextualized within the country's broader information and communication technology (ICT) regulatory landscape, with an understanding of the political and economic restrictions placed on domestic media.

Although the Malaysian government has promised not to censor the Internet, effectively allowing bloggers to operate without a publishing license, these individuals are still subject to a wide range of laws. Part 5, Section 3.5 of the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Content Code states: "The Online environment is not a legal vacuum. In general, if something is illegal 'off-line', it will also be illegal 'on-line'. In this matter, the relevant existing laws apply". In an attempt to encourage on-line journalistic professionalism and self-regulation, a number of local bloggers have discussed establishing a bloggers' manifesto. Consequently, this paper also explores the tenuous future relationship between this kind of self regulation and government attempts to control this new technology.

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By facilitating the open sharing of ideas, information and perspectives, blogging in Malaysia has the potential to serve as a democratizing force in a country with little freedom of expression. Democratic expectations of the local blogosphere must be tempered, however, with a realistic understanding of its limitations and of the government's hegemonic, and sometimes coercive, mechanisms of control. In this article, particular attention is paid to critical blogs (short for Weblogs) that fit Cherian George's (2005, 2006) criteria of "politically contentious" media. The foremost goal of these media (which range from professional online newspapers and amateur radio, to personal blogs and 'zines) is to "directly and explicitly challenge the authority of elites in setting the national agenda and in forging consensus" (George, 2006, p. 4). With the government's promise to not censor the Internet, a wide range of politically contentious electronic media have emerged in Malaysia over the past several years¹ with the Anwar affair and *Reformasi* movement having clearly played pivotal roles in the initial surge. The focus here is on politically contentious blogs that Herring et al. would define as "A-list": blogs that are "widely-read, cited in the mass media, and receive the most inbound links from other blogs" (Herring et al., 2005, p.1).

The article opens with a discussion of how blogging in Malaysia must be contextualized within the country's broader information and communication technology (ICT) landscape, with an understanding of the political and economic restrictions placed on domestic media.

Subsequently, the article turns to critically examine the potential democratizing power of blogging, presenting optimistic and skeptical perspectives of the impact this "new" activity may have on the socio-economic and political landscape of Malaysia.

¹ Currently, there exists no politically contentious television journalism in Malaysia. The only domestic radio that could fall into this category (depending on selected content) is *RadiqRadio*, reintroduced in March 2006 by Malaysia's *Centre for Independent Journalism* (CIJ). The primary mandate of this community radio station, however, is to encourage local communities to create content. For additional information, refer to the CIJ website - <http://www.cijmalaysia.org/>.

Contextualizing the Malaysian Blogosphere within the Wider ICT and Media Landscape

In the mid-1990s, Malaysia began construction of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), an Asian Silicon Valley expected to catapult the country into a position of international power and economic independence. Former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad envisioned the MSC as the foundation of Vision 2020, an overarching strategy designed to steer Malaysia toward the status of a “developed nation” by the year 2020. This strategy encouraged citizens to remain united and embrace the progressive powers of ICTs; in return, Malaysians were promised universal socio-economic benefits and overall national progress. A decade and a new administration later, the government continues to symbolically construct new ICTs as a principal engine of economic growth. According to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, by the first quarter of 2006, approximately 11 million Malaysians – roughly 41 percent of the population – were Internet users (MCMC, 2006). These statistics tell us little, however, about citizens’ actual usage of the technology. Although ICTs can be used as tools for change and empowerment, the technological determinism that tends to permeate the governmental, mainstream media, and business rhetoric in Malaysia often overlooks the social, political, and economic context in which these technologies are introduced and incorporated (see, as examples, Boey, 2002; Bunnell, 2002, 2004; Lepawsky, 2005). A citizen’s ability to access and successfully use the technological tools needed to participate in the blogosphere, for example, is determined by a wide range of issues. These include, but are not limited to, financial resources, literacy, language, education, gender, geography, ethnicity, age, and disabilities.² Consequently, the potential political impact of the Malaysian blogosphere must be contextualized in terms of the size and demographic composition of bloggers and their readers, which, in turn, are dependent upon who can, and wants, to access and use computers and the Internet.

² However, even if a citizen does have the access, capability, and desire to use a technology, we must also ask for what purpose is this technology being used and how does this usage impact civic engagement, democratic participation, and economic empowerment? These more qualitative assessments of the “real life” effects of technology use are missing in Malaysia (as they are in other parts of the developing, and often developed, world).

Since the mid-1990s, the Malaysian government has introduced myriad programs and policies to encourage ICT adoption and bridge domestic digital divides, with varying degrees of success.³ Concomitantly, the government introduced its MSC Bill of Guarantees – a list of ten promises designed to attract national and international companies to the country's high-tech hub. Included in the list is a pledge to not censor the Internet. However, politically contentious blogging was clearly *not* what the government had in mind when it made this promise or when it introduced initiatives to encourage widespread Internet use. It did not, and does not, intend for the Internet (or any other ICT for that matter) to be used as a tool to critically discuss or challenge the political, socio-economic status quo. In other words, attention is focused on ICTs for socio-economic development as determined and delineated by a government that tends to control and constrain domestic media and other forms of communication.

To curb unwelcome critiques of the government and its programs and policies, media are impelled to practice self-censorship through the inherent threat and enforcement of a wide range of restrictive laws. These laws include: Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), Sedition Act, Defamation Act, Official Secrets Act (OSA), Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA), and the Internal Security Act (ISA). Rather than play a critical role, media are instead expected to practice developmental journalism by endorsing government programs and policies, encouraging national unity and integration, and focusing on the country's economic prosperity and growth. As Malaysia's Information Minister, Datuk Zainuddin Maidin (2006) has made clear: "each media has its own social responsibility which should be appropriate to the national spirit and inspiration...The media should not create unnecessary contentious [*sic*] in the country's peaceful condition". Development economist Amartya Sen (2000) has argued that this "media as development" approach is common throughout the developing world where economic

³ Some of these programs have included: Rural Internet Centres (Pusat Internet Desa), the PC Ownership Campaign, Community Awareness Programmes, the Universal Service Provision programme, and the MSC's Flagship Applications. Although the government has spent less time, energy, and resources on these programs over the past few years, it appears to be recently reinvigorated with the Economic Planning Unit of the Prime Minister's Department leading the momentum.

development is placed before political freedoms, even though they represent false alternatives. Sen (2000) maintains that a more appropriate human-centered form of development should focus on the removal of “unfreedoms” such as poverty, lack of labour opportunities, neglect of public facilities, and the “denial of political and civil liberties” (p. 4). In other words, development projects should aim to produce environments that provide citizens with an opportunity to freely exercise their human agency, which is in direct contrast with how media are managed in Malaysia.

Despite press freedom advocates’ hopes that the media situation might improve under the Badawi administration, in July 2006 Minister Zainuddin (2006) stated: “I have to stress that if certain quarters are of the view that the Prime Minister was in a honeymoon period on the press freedom policy in Malaysia, then it is their own view.” His statement also included a veiled threat of what may happen if media step outside their developmental journalism role – “Newspapers should have learnt from the history of journalism and media in Malaysia which has shown that newspapers have also been involved in creating instability until the tragedy of May 13 [1969 race riots] occurred and then the government had to take action against the media by launching ‘Operasi Lalang’” (Zainuddin, 2006). Zainuddin’s comments refer to the events of October 1987, in which more than a hundred Malaysian citizens – from activists to intellectuals to members of opposition parties – were detained without trial under the Internal Security Act for a variety of actions deemed prejudicial to national security. When *The Star* published headshots of those arrested, its actions were also deemed prejudicial to national interest, causing the government to revoke the paper’s printing license for a period of five months (also suspended were the licenses of *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, *The Sunday Star*, and *Watan*). In addition to these kinds of political constraints, private media in Malaysia are also expected to generate profit, which means they face significant financial pressures to remain within certain parameters of acceptability for fear of alienating advertisers. Moreover, most media are either directly or indirectly owned by members

of the ruling coalition or by politically-supportive economic elite.⁴ When combined with laws that produce an environment of self-censorship via the threat of coercive reprisals, these ownership patterns reveal a serious lack of independent, free press in Malaysia and a dearth in diversity of information, opinions, and perspectives.⁵

The Malaysian Blogosphere

Blogging burst onto the electronic media scene in the late 1990s and early 2000s, quickly moving to the forefront of popular and critical consciousness (see Blood, 2002; Welch, Jensen and Reeves, 2003). By 2004, “blog” had become the “buzz” word (Pew, 2005), reflecting its role as an alternative source of information, ideas, and opinions. Some of the more prominent examples of issues and events discussed in the growing blogosphere have included: 9/11, the ongoing war in Iraq and the concomitant War on Terrorism, the 2004 U.S. Presidential election, the Rathergate/Memogate scandal, the toppling of Trent Lott, and the tsunami that ravaged Southeast Asia. However, as Herring et al. (2005) conclude from a 2003 quantitative content analysis study of randomly-selected English-language text-oriented blogs, most blogs are not political in nature. Rather, they tend to consist of personal reflections on the daily lives of individual bloggers. Although we should not underestimate the importance of these “individualistic, intimate forms of self-expression” (Herring et al., 2005, p. 142), the focus here is on the limited number of A-list politically contentious Malaysian blogs whose primary objective is to challenge the status quo and mainstream media control by providing space for bloggers and their readers to share information, circulate news, and critically discuss issues and events. Therefore, although many critical blogs in the international blogosphere may reproduce rather than challenge mainstream media discourse, thereby failing to “represent a radical departure from

⁴ In 2005, the situation worsened when a single company, *Media Prima* (which has links to the ruling party, UMNO), was given the go-ahead to own all private free-to-air television stations in the country. When combined with its newspaper – in 2006, it merged with the Utusan Melayu group, which controls many of the country’s Malay-language newspapers – and radio holdings, the company epitomizes a growing trend of media concentration in Malaysia.

⁵ Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the political and economic control of Malaysia’s mainstream media is not absolute and local journalists are not an acquiescent monolith. Although they may be restricted in what they are allowed to write about, there are critical mainstream journalists who work to push the envelope in their reporting (see Hilley, 2001).

more established media of communication” (Haas, 2005, p. 387), politically contentious Malaysian bloggers do not, for the most part, fit this mold. Instead, they write stories and voice opinions not represented, or underrepresented, in the mainstream media, while also offering critical readings of how issues and events are addressed and discussed.

Estimates place the number of Malaysian blogs somewhere between several thousand to as many as 30,000; however, many are not updated regularly and most focus on the quotidian personal lives of individual bloggers. In comparison, estimates of the number of politically contentious blogs range from fewer than a hundred to, at most, a few hundred.⁶ While the Malaysian blogosphere includes examples of Malay-language and Chinese-language blogs, most of these critical blogs operate primarily or entirely in the English language.⁷ It is important to clarify, however, that a distinction exists between Chinese Malaysian blogs, for example, and Chinese-language Malaysian blogs. Content of the former tends to focus on issues of particular interest to Chinese Malaysians and may or may not be written in Chinese, while the latter is written in Chinese, but may or may not focus specifically on Chinese issues (the same holds true for Malay and Malay-language blogs). Not surprisingly, the majority of these bloggers (when their identities are known) are male,⁸ well-educated, and urban-based – largely, although by no means exclusively, in Kuala Lumpur. Though their blogs focus on political content, many also incorporate personal commentary into their writing (e.g. during the 2006 World Cup, many bloggers wrote about their favourite football teams), and some provide links to apolitical blogs and websites. Conversely, many apolitical, personal blogs feature political content during key events and about particular issues (e.g. federal elections, the war in Iraq, the “crooked bridge” between Malaysia and Singapore). Also of note, the top handful of A-list politically contentious blogs – e.g.

⁶ These estimations, as well as much of the following information, are based on semi-structured and unstructured interviews conducted in February and May 2006 with a wide range of English, Chinese, and Malay-language Malaysian bloggers based in Kuala Lumpur and Penang. Interviewees were selected based on pre-fieldwork research of A-list bloggers, as well as a snowball methodology once in the field to identify additional individuals. In addition, a number of anonymous bloggers were interviewed via email to protect their identity.

⁷ Tamil language blogs are virtually non-existent within the Malaysian blogosphere.

⁸ Although there are numerous political female bloggers, few are politically contentious. Some notable examples include Teresa Kok, Elizabeth Wong, Lucia Lai, Susan Loone, and Boon Hooi. However, gender can be difficult to determine, as a number of Malaysian bloggers, as well as the majority of commentators, do not reveal their “real life” identities.

Jeff Ooi's *Screenshots* (www.jeffooi.com), *Aisehman* (www.aisehman.org), the blog section of Raja Petra Kamarudin's *Malaysia-Today* website (www.malaysia-today.net/Blog-e/), Aizuddin Danian's *Volume of Interactions* (www.aizuddindanian.com/voi/) – tend to use .com or .org, (and sometimes .net) as top-level domain names to host their blogs (which indicates a certain level of technological savvy), while slightly less popular A-list bloggers tend to rely on blog publishing systems to create and manage their blogs; particularly *Blogger*.

In addition to politically contentious blogs, there exists a wide range of Malaysian blogs that regularly contain political content but are not focused on political change. In other words, they do not, for the most part, address such issues as human rights, freedom of the press, or government activities. They do, however, challenge the status quo by writing about subject matter not normally discussed in domestic public forums, including sexuality, women's rights, religion, and legal and illegal substance usage. Blogs such as Kimberly Cun's *Narcissism is Necessary* (www.kimberlycun.com/), *Kinky Blue Fairy* (<http://www.xanga.com/kinkybluefairy>), *minishorts* (<http://www.minishorts.net/>), and Huai Bin's *sixthseal* blog (www.sixthseal.com) are a few examples of particularly popular blogs that incorporate rather frank discussions of relationships, sex, sexual orientation, substance use, and occasional comments about religion and politics.

The Power of the Malaysian Blogosphere?

The power of blogging to positively transform politics, civil society, and mainstream, or Big Media has perhaps been most famously argued by Dan Gillmor, former columnist for the *San Jose Mercury News*, technology writer, ardent blogger, and author of *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By The People, For The People* (2004). In his book, Gillmor argues that blogging has opened the door for a new kind of citizen-based "grassroots journalism" — one that allows the former audience to play a central role in the production of news. Blogging provides citizens with an opportunity to disseminate information, ideas, opinions, images, and videos, as well as to engage in debates and discussions without the gatekeeping restrictions of Big Media. In contrast

to mainstream media, which tend to rely on a limited and fairly narrow selection of perspectives and experts, Gillmor extols the plurality of voices, viewpoints, and knowledge available in the blogosphere. Blogging, he maintains, provides a conduit for people actually living the stories to talk about their experiences and to engage in a real dialogue with other citizens. Glenn Reynolds, law professor, libertarian, and blogger of *Instapundit.com* fame, echoes Gillmor's line of reasoning in his new book, *An Army of Davids: How Markets and Technology Empower Ordinary People to Beat Big Media, Big Government, and Other Goliaths* (2006). Both Gillmor and Reynolds still believe, however, that notwithstanding the political and economic limitations placed on mainstream media, they play an essential role in a functioning democracy. Big Media have the expertise, the financial resources, the labour power, and the credentials to engage in comprehensive journalistic activities. As Gillmor (2004) writes: "Credibility matters. People need, and want, trusted sources – and those sources have been, for the most part, serious journalism....I seek a balance that simultaneously preserves the best of today's system and encourages tomorrow's emergent, self-assembling journalism" (pp. xvi-xvii). Law professor Cass Sunstein (2004) concurs: mainstream media act as general intermediaries by providing citizens with "a range of chance encounters with diverse others, as well as exposure to material they did not specifically choose" (p. 58).

Yet, in the Malaysian scenario, these intermediaries do not provide multiple perspectives and instead play a developmentalism role that eschews any serious critique of the status quo. In this kind of environment, blogging opens up at least a modicum of space for critical information and dialogue hitherto unavailable within the country – about issues such as Bumiputra affirmative action policies, cronyism, press freedom, religion, government mega-projects, and environmentally-destructive initiatives like the Bakun Dam and Broga Incinerator. As Julien Pain (2005), head of the Internet Freedom Desk at *Reporters Without Borders*, comments: "Bloggers are often the only real journalists in countries where the mainstream media is censored or under pressure. Only they provide independent news, at the risk of displeasing the government and sometimes courting arrest". These blogs can also provide a valuable extension to electronically-

mediated critical newspapers, magazines, and NGO websites, such as *Malaysiakini*, *Malaysia Today*, *Aliran*, *Merdeka Review*, *The Free Media*, and *Rengah Sarawak*. These different types of media mutually support and often reference each another (e.g. readership of Jeff Ooi's blog, *Screenshots*, soared after *Malaysiakini* linked his blog to its main website).

However, blogging holds a particularly alluring democratic appeal for two reasons. First, in comparison to websites, readily accessible software has made it relatively easy for citizens to create, maintain, and update blogs on a regular basis. Second, if desired, blogs can facilitate dialogue between host and readers, as well as between readers, thus allowing for multi-point discussions. Numerous Malaysian interviewees expressed feeling empowered by blogging – connecting with like-minded people gave them hope for a more democratic future in Malaysia, as well as a sense of connection to a virtual and real-life convergence of citizens. As Hang Wu Tang (2006) writes in specific reference to the Malaysian blogosphere, when blogs “are hyperlinked and networked to one another and bloggers and their readers congregate metaphorically in cyberspace and produce a cacophony of voices”, what emerges is a “digital conversation [that] can properly be characterised as a growing culture of democratization” (p. 5). In her discussion of “on-line nation building” in Malaysia, anthropologist Paula Uimonen (2003) similarly argues that the Internet has provided “a discursive space in which users can communicate and interact on issues of common concern... [and] allows for the creation of a community of interest, which in this case is directly related to the reconstruction of the off-line community of the Malaysian nation” (p. 309). Focusing specifically on Internet use by middle-class Malaysians during the *Reformasi* movement, Uimonen demonstrates how local websites served as an invaluable conduit for citizens to share information and ideas that otherwise would have been difficult to access. The political on-line community, in other words, was very much grounded in real life politics. Although the headiness of the *Reformasi* movement waned, civil society and politically active citizens continue to ground their contemporary on-line activities in everyday politics for which blogging has provided another new – and often very important – medium of communication. It is, however, essential to note that blogging did not *cause* these individuals to become politically contentious or

active, particularly considering that many were already involved in what might be broadly referred to as critical activities of one sort or another prior to their entrance into the blogosphere.

In a similar vein, Singaporean communication scholar and journalist Cherian George (2005, 2006) contends that Malaysia has a more vigorous on-line critical community than its neighbour to the south, Singapore. Despite Singapore's advanced Internet penetration rates, Malaysia's more active *off-line* critical community and stronger civil society has translated into a more contentious blogosphere. George's research thus challenges the technological determinism that tends to guide programs and policies designed to "wire" communities. His work also provides evidence of a positive correlation between virtual and real life politics, which is particularly important in countries with restricted freedom of expression. As freelance journalist Mark Glaser (2004) comments, when "freedom of speech and freedom of the press are in danger....bloggers' voices online are an important link to the reality on the streets of their towns. The photos they take and the stories they tell are vital". Tang (2006) also argues that when Malaysian bloggers congregate online and share information, they are effectively "routing around laws against freedom of assembly" (p. 9), as well as geographical proximity and physical constraints. As well, blogging is useful for external audiences (e.g. international NGOs, academics, activists, Malaysians living abroad) seeking news and commentary unfiltered by the mainstream Malaysian press. As Glaser (2004) writes: "the world is watching" the content of blogs "to learn about stories the press in their countries dare not tell" (p. 33).

Journalistic credibility

Although some politically contentious Malaysian bloggers are journalists or former journalists – e.g. A. Kadir Jasan of *The Scribe*, Ahirudin bin Attan of *Rocky's Bru* – many are not. As with elsewhere in the world, a lack of journalistic experience and credentials has raised questions about the credibility, accuracy, and thoroughness of blogging activities. However, as Shawn McIntosh (2005) contends, "some of the most prominent bloggers who do not have journalism

backgrounds have realized the importance credibility has for their success, and that many of the practices of professional journalism...are precisely what they must do if they want to have a participatory journalism that truly informs citizens” (p. 387). In an attempt to encourage on-line journalistic professionalism and self-regulation, a number of Malaysian bloggers have discussed establishing a bloggers’ manifesto. As former A-list critical blogger Mack Zulkifli (2005a) (*Brand New Malaysian*⁹) contends, “it is time that we stepped forward and demonstrated our maturity in able to self-regulate ourselves [*sic*], and stay within civil conventions. It will do a lot for our credibility and readability [*sic*] in the long run”. However, some bloggers have expressed concerns that a manifesto will prove ineffective in regulating individuals wanting to use this medium to discuss issues that fall outside the parameters of “civil conventions”. Conversely, Malaysian blogger and host of the popular *Project Petaling Street* (PPS) blogtal, Aizuddin Danian (2006), has stated that Malaysian bloggers *already* “practise community censorship – correcting each other when they make mistakes”. “Community censorship” can be positive inasmuch as it helps ensure that facts are checked, sources legitimate, and commentary refrains from becoming slanderous, defamatory, or overtly offensive; yet, it can also be problematic *if* it is used to keep people on the same political “page” and *if* it is used to avoid critical debates from different points of view – the kinds of discussion, disagreement, and “agonistic pluralism” that are the heart of a functioning democracy (Mouffe, 2000).

Promises vs. Actions: Controlling Online Media?

Notwithstanding some questions regarding journalistic credibility, blogs throughout the world are often lauded for their ability to influence mainstream media coverage and for persistently exposing, writing, and debating stories that might otherwise have disappeared from the public radar screen. However, mainstream media in Malaysia are far too controlled for politically contentious bloggers to have a significant impact on what issues are printed or broadcast, especially if the information or opinion poses some sort of threat to the status quo. Moreover,

⁹ *Brand New Malaysian* went offline, and has stayed off-line, since July 1st 2006 (apparently prompted by a posting on *Screenshots* that Zulkifli considered inappropriate).

recent political developments in the country indicate that on-line media may increasingly become subject to the same sorts of control as their print and broadcast counterparts, as previously discussed.

Although the Malaysian government has promised not to censor the Internet, effectively allowing bloggers to operate without a publishing license, these individuals are still subject to a wide range of laws. Part 5, Section 3.5 of the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Content Code (an extension of the 1998 Communications and Multimedia Act) states: "The Online environment is not a legal vacuum. In general, if something is illegal 'off-line', it will also be illegal 'on-line'. In this matter, the relevant existing laws apply" (CMCF, 2006). Therefore, the government has made it very clear that despite its no-censorship pledge, on-line activities remain subject to the country's preexisting laws, including, but not limited to, the Sedition Act, Defamation Act, Internal Security Act (ISA), and the Official Secrets Act (OSA). This means that politically contentious journalists (and by extension other Malaysian citizens) have "enough political space to practice their craft openly on the internet (unlike in, say, China), but not the constitutional protection from political censorship or politically motivated reprisal..." (George, 2006, p. 3).

In July 2006, the Internal Security Ministry announced that it intended to conduct a review of the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) to investigate whether the law should be amended to also include electronically-mediated forms of communication. Deputy Internal Security Minister Fu Ah Kiow stated that the review would address concerns expressed by the mainstream press that the Act unfairly constrained their activities, while allowing the online community to publish without impunity: "They [print media] feel there are double standards, and that it is not a level playing field" (Government, 2006). Deputy Minister Fu has been very careful, however, to clarify that even though the government may review the Act, it would not necessarily amend it.

Concerns expressed by press freedom advocates about the potential impact of such comments have been somewhat assuaged by Energy, Water and Communications (MEWC) Minister Lim Keng Yaik. When asked whether his Ministry was planning to regulate the Internet, Lim stated:

“Not that I am aware of. Not at the present moment because we've given a bill of guarantees to the MSC” (Puah, 2006).

Notwithstanding this internal ministerial jockeying,¹⁰ it is Prime Minister Badawi's perception of online media (including blogging) that may be of much greater concern. In an August 2006 article in *The Star Online*, reporter Ian McIntyre (2006) described Badawi's stance on electronic communication:

If information in blogs, websites and online portals were [sic] incorrect, bordered on slander, caused disturbance or compelled the public to lose faith in the nation's economic policies, their authors would be detained for investigation, said Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. 'We cannot allow such matters to flow through uncontrolled....They say all kinds of things, make all kinds of dubious claims. We cannot allow them to abuse the freedom earned under the media. If left alone, they can say or pass on all kinds of things'.

In reaction to Badawi's comments, A-list blogger Ahirudin bin Attan (2006) (of *Rocky's Bru*) wrote on his blog that “when the PM is the one issuing the warning, then we must conclude that something is really wrong”. Badawi's comments may, in part, be attributed to mounting public conflicts between himself and former Prime Minister Mahathir. Mahathir has, rather ironically, complained that the mainstream media have unfairly denied him space to express his views and has accused the current administration of obstructing press freedom. Despite his long-standing aversion to *Malaysiakini*, in May 2006, Mahathir turned to the politically contentious online newspaper to publish his opinions and concerns, including critiques of some of Badawi's recent actions and policies.

¹⁰ To clarify, the Internal Security Ministry (Prime Minister Badawi is the Minister, Fu the Deputy Minister) monitors all newspapers in the country after taking over responsibility of the PPPA from the Home Affairs Ministry in 2004. The MEWC (Minister Lim Keng Yaik) is responsible for the Internet, as well as private broadcasting. The Information Ministry (Minister Zainuddin Maidin) oversees *Bernama*, Malaysia's national news agency, and the publicly-owned *Radio and Television Malaysia* (RTM).

More significant than the reasons for the warnings, however, is the potential impact they may have on the Malaysian blogosphere. According to the 2006 *Reporters Without Borders* (RSF) Annual Report,

Government intimidation of online journalists and bloggers [in Malaysia] has increased in the past three years, notably of Malaysiakini, the country's only independent online daily whose journalists have been threatened and its premises searched. Summonses and questioning of bloggers has been stepped up recently, leading to self-censorship that harms democracy.

A-list anonymous Malaysian blogger *Aisehman* (2006) has challenged this perspective, arguing that "RSF makes it sound like Malaysian bloggers are afraid to publish the truth", which s/he argues is "crap". Other Malaysian bloggers interviewed contend that individuals wishing to stay off the government's radar screen simply need to host their blog in another country and remain anonymous. However, even before the government's recent warnings, other interviewees indicated that they thought some Malaysians may be uncomfortable visiting and commenting on politically contentious blogs for fear that the authorities could trace their identity, thereby limiting the size and diversity of citizens participating in the blogosphere. More recently (December 2006), the government suggested that it might need to register bloggers to keep track of their activities, which may also deter some would-be contributors to the on-line community. In the end, if politically contentious electronic communication did not have political impact in the country, the Malaysian government would not publicly comment on, or care about, bloggers' activities. It is also important to recognize that A-list politically contentious blogging requires a significant amount of time and dedication – bloggers must keep abreast of political activities and track stories that are/are not reported in mainstream and alternative media. These bloggers must also monitor reader comments for content the government may deem objectionable. For all these reasons, many of the individuals interviewed indicated that although blogging is personally and politically valuable, the time and emotional energy needed to write and monitor their blog has led to varying degrees of frustration and "burn out".

Removing Unfreedoms to Facilitate Blogging

Societies today do not require the fastest or the most efficient information and communication technologies to advance democracy. Although ICTs can, and are, being used as tools of democratic development, citizens must also possess and actively engage their fundamental human rights, including freedoms of speech, expression, and assembly. It is thus tempting to argue that blogging has, and will continue to, enhance democracy in Malaysia. Within restrictive communication environments, blogging can be used to disseminate information, facilitate discussion, and offer perspectives not presented in mainstream media. Blogs are therefore useful for building both community and the political solidarity necessary for encouraging disparate citizens to collectively champion a more democratic future for themselves and their country.

However, the politically contentious Malaysian blogosphere may also be viewed as an echo chamber of primarily (although not exclusively) like-minded individuals discussing issues and events of common interest from a shared perspective, often eschewing points of view that differ from their own – the chief concern of Cass Sunstein in his critique of the burgeoning Daily Me phenomenon (2001, 2004). As well, we should not underestimate the government's ability and willingness to control on-line and on-the-ground activities that may threaten the status quo. Consequently, blogs should be understood as another tool in the toolkit of politically active and contentious Malaysian citizens; however, enthusiasm of their democratizing powers must be tempered with a realistic understanding of the country's political and economic framework. A-list politically contentious blogger Mack Zulkifli (2005b) captures well the state of the Malaysian blogosphere: "Are we popular? No doubt we are. Do we project influence? Yes we do. Are we influential? Again, the answer is no....true influence that creates a new landscape of thinking and defines actionable change on a large scale is still very far away for blogs in Malaysia".

Future research in this area should, therefore, include in-depth examinations of the relationship between on-line politics and on-the-ground political activity in the aftermath of *Reformasi* and under the shifting Badawi administration. As well, comprehensive ethnographic research is needed to understand to what extent on-line activities impact non-bloggers and non-users of the Internet.

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