

New Media and Democracy: The Changing Political Landscape in Malaysia

Media Baru dan Demokrasi: Perubahan Landskap Politik di Malaysia

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ABSTRAK

Media baru, iaitu Internet telah diguna pakai secara berleluasa oleh pelbagai pihak seperti para peniaga, pihak kerajaan, organisasi dan individu untuk menjalankan transaksi perniagaan, perkhidmatan dan juga aktiviti-aktiviti sosial. Perkembangan dan penguasaan Internet sebagai media penyebaran maklumat telah mengubah suasana maklumat (information environment) di mana fungsi golongan elit politik dan individu yang berminat telah juga berubah (Woodly 2008). Di Malaysia, sebagai contoh, Internet dipilih sebagai satu alternatif kepada media utama yang dianggap pro-kerajaan. Sehingga kini, terdapat beberapa surat khabar atas talian seperti Malaysiakini, The Malaysian Insider dan blog dengan sesetengah blog itu juga ditulis oleh bekas-bekas wartawan. Penggunaan Internet telah menjadi platform penting dalam hal-hal politik, terutamanya semasa pilihan raya umum Malaysia pada Mac 2008. Kita telah menyaksikan penggunaan ICT oleh pihak pembangkang secara berleluasa dibandingkan dengan parti-parti kerajaan. Sesetengah ciri konsep arena umum Habermas (concept of public sphere) dapat dilihat dengan jelas semasa di ambang dan selepas Pilihan Raya Umum melalui blog di Internet, yang digunakan sebagai arena umum untuk memancing para pengundi. Salah satu ciri arena umum, di mana semua rakyat boleh mendapatkan kemudahan Internet telah memastikan sesiapa yang mempunyai komputer dan sambungan Internet (termasuk tanpa wayar) boleh menggunakan Internet. Media baru ini dilihat telah menular masuk ke senario politik di Malaysia secara berperingkat dan telah memberi kesan kepada 'status quo' seperti di dalam Pilihan Raya Umum Mac 2008 yang lalu. Oleh itu, pihak kerajaan tidak boleh mengambil mudah akan kuasa dan pengaruh media baru ini.

Kata kunci: media baru, demokrasi, pilihan raya umum, blog, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The new media, the Internet, has been used by businesses, government bodies, organisations, individuals etc. to conduct business, services and social transactions. The development and ascendancy of the Internet as an informational medium, has altered the information environment in which political elites and interested citizens function (Woodly 2008). In Malaysia, for example, the Internet is used as an alternative to mainstream media which is viewed as being pro-establishment. As of now there are a few online newspapers, such as Malaysiakini, The Malaysian Insider and blogs, with some of the blogs being run by former journalists. The run-up to Malaysia's March 2008 General Elections had seen the Internet becoming a key political battleground for the first time as the use of ICT comes into full bloom with the opposition parties using the medium more than the Government parties. Some characteristics of Habermas concept of public sphere was truly mirrored in the run up to the General Elections and its aftermath where the Internet, via blogs, served as a public sphere for voters. As one of the characteristics of the public sphere where all citizens are guaranteed access, with the advent of the Internet, anyone with a computer and Internet connection (including wireless) can have access to the Internet. The new media has gradually penetrated the Malaysian political scenario affecting the status quo as seen in the March 2008 General Elections. The government can no longer underestimate the power and influence of the new media.

Keywords: New media, democracy, general elections, blogs, Malaysia

BACKGROUND

Before the advent and subsequent blooming of the Internet, the mainstream media was the main if not the only medium for political parties in Malaysia to reach voters. Newspapers, in particular, that are owned by politicians or owned by proxy of political parties always

give more favourable news to political parties and, consequently, opposition parties tend to have very little or unfavourable stories. This is especially so during the elections when politicians used the newspapers to the hilt (Mohd Safar Hasim 2006: 231).

The new media, the Internet, has been used by businesses, government bodies, organisations,

individuals to conduct business services and social transactions. The development and ascendancy of the Internet as an informational medium has altered the information environment in which political elites and interested citizens function (Woodly 2008). We are now experiencing what Schoen (2008) call the “Internet insurgency” approach to political campaigning. This according to Schoen originated with South Korea where politicians effectively use the Internet. In the 2002 General Elections in South Korea, while the Lee campaign pounded Roh on the airwaves, the Roh campaign took refuge on the Internet. Roh was a politician who had found a way to use the Internet like no one before him. It should be noted that South Korea is a technology-loving nation and has the highest broadband penetration rate of any place in the world (Schoen 2008).

In Malaysia, for example, since 1998 the Internet has been in use by those not happy with the government to voice their concern. It has been used since early September 1998, when the then Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohamad fired his deputy Anwar Ibrahim. Many of the issues raised on the dismissal of the Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, which have never been either significantly nor sufficiently reported in the local press, have been made accessible to both the local and foreign populace through the Internet (*Far Eastern Economic Review* October 8, 1998 and *Asiaweek* October 2, 1998).

Recently attention focussed on the new media again prior to and in the aftermath of the March 2008 General Elections. We see myriads of online newspapers and blogs sprang up all aiming at the government as an alternative to the mainstream media. In fact, in the run up to the March 2008 Malaysia General Elections, the opposition capitalised more on the Internet bloom than the government.

A research conducted by a University Malaya media professor and lecturer Abu Hassan Hasbullah indicated that 70 percent of the elections results were influenced by information in the blogs. Abu Hassan cited the dramatic growth of alternative media in Malaysia over the past 10 years, with 45 bloggers in 1998 rising to 7,500 in 2004, whereas the Barisan Nasional (BN - the National Front or Alliance) had only two ‘websites and one blog in 2004 (Kaufman 2008).

The run-up to Malaysia’s March 2008 General Elections has seen the Internet become a key political battleground for the first time, with prominent bloggers standing as candidates and the government despatching its own “cyber-troopers” to counter opposition campaigning. Malaysian polls have traditionally been about poster wars and the media monopoly held by the ruling BN coalition, which has ruled the country for the past 50 years. However, this time both opposition and government candidates have been maximising the use of web and mobile technology to woo voters.

Almost a year after Malaysia’s 12th General Elections results were announced on March 9, 2008, the dust has yet to settle. In fact, there has been a flurry of media-related activities undertaken by both victor and vanquished to reach out to the people via both mainstream and alternate media (Ramanathan 2008). The new media has gradually penetrated the Malaysian political scenario making its presence and influence felt and at the same time affecting the status quo. This is obvious in the March 2008 General Elections where the opposition made use of the alternate media to gain votes and subsequently won five (5) out of the 13 states.

This article will look at the role of the new media in Malaysian political scenario, especially prior to and the aftermath of the March 2008 General Elections and the challenge it poses to the whole political landscape of Malaysia.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As we enter the ‘global village’ of the 21st century, we find that ‘real space’ has succumbed to ‘cyber space’ in many realms of human activity. While some quarters lament the shrinking of the ‘public sphere’ due to the development of information and communication technology (ICT), others hail the development of new media as breathing new life into the concept of the traditional ‘public sphere’ (Ramanathan 2008). This is undeniably true. With the advent of the Internet every one with a computer and Internet connection can go online. Control of the Internet is often difficult, so one can express one’s views through other people’s blogs or create own blogs to reach thousands, if not millions of people since no one owns the Internet.

First developed by Jurgen Habermas in the early 1960s, the concept of the ‘public sphere’ has become a key theme in contemporary discussion about public communication. In its simplest terms, it is a forum of public communication in which individuals can come together as a public and confer freely about matters of general interest. Although the location of the ‘public sphere’ was physically fixed in 19th century Europe (e.g. salons, coffee shops, beer gardens and speakers’ corners), it is now recognised that its physical location is irrelevant, for it is in essence a social rather than a physical space.

As defined by Habermas, the ‘public sphere’ possesses the following characteristics:

1. All citizens are guaranteed access
2. Within the *public sphere* citizens are in principle considered equals
3. All citizens are free to engage in dialogue without coercion or constraint
4. The *public sphere* is distinct from both the state and the market, and is not subjected to domination by either

5. Through public provision of knowledge and information, the *public sphere* promoted the development of an informed citizenry, something essential in a functioning democracy.

Many analysts have noted that the causal relationship between media content and influence on social behaviour is complex, and we need to study the role and impact of media in the broader context of the society in which they operate. Simultaneously, we shall examine how the concept of the emerging *public sphere* is affecting the different cultures of the people of Malaysia, particularly in the context of the current political scenario.

The Internet makes possible exchange of opinions without any gate keeping. While reading from others, the people are free to post their messages and opinion as well. Of course there are laws governing the usage to prevent misuse and abuse, which may threaten the security of the country. In this case the government has no choice but to use the available laws as stipulated in Sec 3 (3) of the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 (*New Sunday Times* 14 September 2008).

This interactive nature of the Internet where the people are free to exchange opinion reflects one of the characteristics, which Habermas meant for the public sphere. The Internet best represents the public sphere assuming that homepages and blogs carrying dissenting views from the government of the day, with the exception of those that are threat to national security, peace and harmony, are not blocked.

In addition, the changed circumstances of the *network society* mean that people must get used to being *flexible* in what they do and in what they expect to be doing in the future if they are to survive amid the *systematic volatility* of informational capitalism (Webster 2006:105). Webster (2006: 103) is of the view that we have now entered a new epoch that is a *network society* that has emerged from the coalescence of capitalism and the 'information revolution'.

We are aware that Habermas' concept of public sphere refers to civil society such as NGOs, media and other social groups. However, our use of the concept here does not include political parties, but rather the masses and voters who use the new media to participate in politics and political discussions. This is obvious in the run-off to the 2008 General Elections in Malaysia.

NEW MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

"... blogging is the most important development in the media in the last 50 years, at least more important than arrival of the television in terms of changing the world. I say that because it is about creating a new democratic discussion about reality and one that transcend the mass media propagation of narrow collection of cadre of editor's and intellectual's ideas about the way the world is or the way the world should be..." (Louis Rosetto Co-founder of Wired).

The New Media, especially the Web 2.0 is the latest darling of a long tradition of speculation on the power of the mass media technology to offer the promise of true freedom from big corporation and the government. While it is too soon to know for sure if the Web 2.0 will indeed 'deliver' freedom to the masses, there are some striking characteristics in Web 2.0 technology, which differentiate it from the previous generation of technologies. Web 2.0 is a generic term used to describe the group of media technology that enables user-generated content. Video-sharing websites such as YouTube.com, social-networking websites such as Friendster and Facebook, and blogs are examples of Web 2.0. The main difference between Web 2.0 and the more traditional form of mass media is the users' ability to publish their own content and for the readers to respond without interference or 'gatekeeping' from editors. Web 2.0 also allows users to circumvent existing laws and regulations that govern traditional media such as print and broadcasting. In Malaysia, especially since the last General Elections in 2008, there is growing awareness that the outcome of the elections has been influenced to a certain extent by these New Media (Lim 2008).

There are three main ways in which these New Media help deepens a healthy democracy. First, user-generated content functions as the fifth estate, performing the function of check and balance not only on the government but mainstream media as well. Secondly, the New Media, especially those with an emphasis on social-networking component, facilitate networking. Networking could be virtual or as in some cases, crossover to the real world as well. Thirdly, and this is in no small significance, the New Media provides a platform for self-expression.

The fourth estate, which has come to mean the print and broadcasting media, especially the ones in the news business, were meant to be a check and balance on the legislative, the judiciary, and the executive branches of the government. They still do that of course, but due to various reasons they sometimes fail to do so. For example, a number of public protests, which took place in Malaysia in the late 2007 were practically ignored by mainstream newspaper. Most notably the BERSIH Rally, which took place on November 10, 2007. For example, the local English daily, *The Star*, titled the news as 'Road closures, check cause massive jams in Klang Valley' (*The Star Online*, May 2009). According to some observers, this is a case of the mainstream media failing in its responsibility of being the fourth estate.

When fourth estates fail, the fifth estates fill the vacuum. New Media, especially in the form of blogs are potent in this respect of keeping in check the mainstream media. Bloggers, especially social-political bloggers perform on a regular basis, fact-checking of news, challenge the predominant point of view in the mainstream media, and give attention to issues sometimes neglected by mainstream media. This forces the mainstream media to be alert and in the process lifts

the standard of journalism, the quality of the reporting, and ultimately benefits the society on a whole. No one party, neither bloggers nor mainstream media or the government is assumed to be doing their job faultlessly. It is these constant check/rechecking that helps keep things transparent and accurate.

The second feature of the New Media is its network-based configuration. For example, the blogosphere is organised as a distributed network. There is no central hub per se, but instead blogs link to a number of other individual blogs. These links form a network, which allows for further sharing of information and exchanges of ideas. Blogging facilitates two forms of networking, first the networking, which exist primarily online and networking in the real world that started out in the cyberspace. Networking has allowed the bloggers to meet one another in the real world and enable the forming of groups. One of the most prominent groups in Malaysia is the National Alliance of Bloggers or All-Blogs, which could be attributed to the existence of a network amongst bloggers. The formation of networks is similar to the grassroots movement, fundamental to community activism. Through these networks, fundraisers, meetings and gatherings could be organised. All these are part of a healthy democracy on condition that they are not abused or misused to incite public unrest or unwarranted hatred of the government.

Lastly, the New Media provides an avenue for everyday common person to express him or herself. This ability to self-express is vital not only to democracy as a process but to the person as well. It can be a frustrating thing, if letters we write to the newspapers never gets published and our thoughts never travel further than the circle of friends and family that we have. Also, when we express ourselves we would like to know the response to that particular expression. In this regard the New Media that has effective and immediate feedback functions is ideally suited to fulfil that need. For example, blog with its commenting function allow for free discussion with some minor exceptions. In the first instance, a blog allows the blogger to formulate and articulate his ideas and opinions. In the second instance, the comment or feedback section of a blog allows for others to participate in the formulation and articulation or re-formulation and re-articulation of these ideas and opinions.

The new media has so far contributed to the practice and understanding of politics as the masses are able to interact with political leaders as well as have an avenue to air their grievances about political issues. At present we can see in Malaysia the Prime Minister has a Facebook account where the people can interact with him by giving their opinions on matters concerning them and the country. From time to time the Prime Minister does organise meetings with some of the people in his Facebook fan list.

CHALLENGES POSE BY THE NEW MEDIA

In Malaysia, both mainstream media and the websites are divided into pro-government and opposition media, and there seems to be a running battle between these two groups for control of the media. The government and opposition parties seem convinced that control over media is a vital ingredient for their electoral success, and the 'media and poster war' has become a regular feature in recent General Elections of 1995, 1999 and 2004. However, the opposition parties have always cried foul of the control the government exerts on the mainstream media, both print and electronic.

The latest development in both the electronic and print media is the appointment of Datuk Johan Jaafar as the head of Media Prima and the return of Datuk Ahmad A. Talib as the editorial adviser to the New Straits Times Press stable of newspapers, by the newly appointed Prime Minister of Malaysia. Sentiments in the profession are that controls are going to get tighter now that the Prime Minister has installed Datuk Johan Jaafar. Both individuals were senior members of the media establishment during the Mahathir era, a period when the Opposition had to be contented with footnote coverage and the public was served with daily dose of government speak (*The Malaysian Insider* 2009). This may keep the opposition and some concern citizens further away from the mainstream media, thereby attaching themselves more to the new media leading to wider usage of the Internet.

Safar (2009) observes that wider usage of the Internet could give rise to two effects could give rise to two effects. First, if the controlled media continue with their old style of publishing, i.e. continue publishing only news that an editor feel the people should read or become a propaganda tool, readers will most likely shift to Internet which is free to report what readers want to read. If this happens, circulation of newspapers will decline. Secondly, in countries practicing control of the press through laws licensing there will be greater pressure for the laws to be repeal. Some observers argue that the bi-partisan nature of the media in Malaysia, especially print media and the newly established online media (and websites of bloggers) has become more evident since 1999 (Kaur & Ramanathan 2008).

Malaysia's 12th general elections was held on 8th March 2008, more than a year before the term of the 11th Parliament was due to expire. The campaign itself was largely peaceful and all contesting parties made confident predictions of the outcome. However, this election stands out as producing the most unexpected result compared to the 11 previous elections. It is certainly the most exciting and will become the subject of intense speculation and analysis. Although the BN retained control of the federal government, it failed to obtain the two-thirds majority that many BN leaders including Abdullah had confidently predicted. It obtained 63 percent of seats contested, just

shy of eight (8) seats from the 2/3 majority. However, it was at the state level that the BN suffered shock and massive upsets, losing control over five (5) states (Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor) and failing to wrest Kelantan from PAS. This development was largely attributed to the influence of the new media, especially blogs, which the opposition used to its advantage to spread its political agenda and to garner support from voters. Many observers have noted that the mushrooming of new media prior to the 2008 elections had had a tremendous impact, especially upon the young voters (Ramanathan 2008).

The popularity of the Internet has soared in this decade, with both government and opposition newspapers going online and with the mushrooming of websites of all shades and dimensions. Internet has created a new phenomenon of change all over the world. In America, for example, readers and television viewers have begun deserting print and electronic media (Safar 2009). Currently in Malaysia, there are about half a dozen telecommunications companies, which have been given licenses to operate ISPs. It is estimated that there are about 10,000 websites in Malaysia, with Internet penetration nation-wide estimated at 40 per cent. Over the past four years, it can be seen that new media have multiplied at even faster rates (Ramanathan 2008).

For several years the Internet has been the main outlet for open political discussions in Malaysia, given the government's almost total grip on traditional print and broadcast media (Theophilus 2008). This observation is in congruent with Habermas concern on the media being hijacked by certain quarters and in doing so shape public opinion. As a result, the public sphere is no freer to express its own argument and opinion. For Habermas, mere more information does not matter as it is in the service of deception. We see this phenomenon in political campaigns in developed and developing countries. For example, the systematic campaign by the then US government under Bush which was aimed at bringing down the late Saddam Hussein saw the massive use of the media, which subsequently turned out to be an act of deception.

Therefore, blogs, e-mails, videos on YouTube and mobile short messaging services (SMS) have been extensively used by the opposition parties and activists to get their message across. According to the latest industry figures, about 60 percent of Malaysia's estimated 28 million population, or about 15 million people, now have access to the Internet (Ramanathan 2008). With about 500,000 active bloggers, Malaysia boasts one of the largest online communities in the world after Indonesia and the European Union (Kaufman 2008).

With that degree of penetration, it is no wonder that politicians, activists and individuals have been using Internet lobbying to push their wish list of policies in the March 8 vote. Weblogs (blogs), text messages and copies of Internet-streamed videos became the most influential information sources for voters ahead of Malaysia's March

8 parliamentary elections and resulted in a surprise blow to the BN party, which has ruled the country for more than 50 years. Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi acknowledged on March 25 that his coalition 'certainly lost the Internet war,' and added that it was 'a serious misjudgement' for his party to rely solely on government-controlled newspapers and television in its efforts to attract voters (Kaufman 2008).

A study by Kulikova and Perlmutter (2007) on the impact and significance of an advocacy blog linked to the 'tulip revolution' in Kyrgyzstan found that blogs had become a unique and rich source of information not available from other local sources or world press. They suggest that *samizdat* (unofficial) blogs can serve to incite or sustain democratisation in Third World countries, even those undergoing uneven economic development. Despite the fact that only a small number of people read blogs they seem to routinely effect the constitution and content of political discourse in several ways. First, blogs seem to have an increasing influence on traditional media. Second, they have proved themselves to be effective tools of communication in opinion mobilisation. And finally, non-media elites have begun to use blogs to survey and influence the debates that interested citizens engage in. Although it is fair to say that compared to traditional media, blogs cannot be considered the most direct tool of mass communication, neither are they languishing in obscurity (Woodly 2008).

Bimber (2003) powerfully demonstrates that the Internet has greatly reduced the entry costs for campaigners wanting to influence the political process. As such, there is a weakening of established political parties and an opening up of politics to those adept at website design and driven by a commitment to change. In congruent to Bimber we see in Malaysia that for the first time, bloggers ran for public office – among them Jeff Ooi, an IT consultant who runs one of Malaysia's most-visited political blogs, Screenshots. Ooi contested one of the 222 parliamentary seats up for grabs after joining the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a predominantly Chinese opposition party. This is partly due to the reduced entry costs.

Blogs are an additional node in the web of mass political communication that functions differently than any traditional news medium. In addition, blogs offer information that is distinct in its form and content, offering readers a democratic experience that cannot be offered by any traditional form. Though in comparison to traditional news media, blogs carry only a tiny proportion of readership. However, their influence in the public sphere is shaping up to be more than minor (Woodly 2008).

One may say that the change in our society is brought about by ICT. Thus our society has turned into a network society. This changed circumstances of the *network society* mean that people must get used to being 'flexible' in what they do and in what they expect to be doing in the

future if they are to survive amid the *systematic volatility* of informational capitalism (Webster 2006).

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

The government response was in two phases. The first phase saw the government involved in online campaign towards the 2008 General Elections, while the second phase was the aftermath of the General Elections where both the prime minister and deputy prime minister launched their own website so that the people could reach them. In addition, the national media, Radio dan Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), started a blog program on its TV1 channel. However, apart from these immediate measures, there has been ongoing monitoring and control under the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (The Sunday Times 2008).

Not to be outdone, the run up to the 2008 General Elections campaign had seen the government weigh in with its own online campaign machine. Realising the impact of online advocacy, the youth wing of United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant party in the BN coalition, had set up a team of volunteers at the party headquarters in Kuala Lumpur scouring the Internet to counter what it sees as rumours and misinformation. In addition to these so-called cyber-troopers, some of the other BN parties have despatched their own teams to keep track of popular sentiment in cyberspace. The then secretary-general of UMNO Youth, was quoted as saying they decided it was important to fight rumours after seeing increasing levels of 'accusations and half-truths' being spread on the Internet and via SMS. Website contents were monitored by the youth wing and the information forward to members via SMS (Ramanathan 2008; Theophilus 2008).

Gerakan, the fourth biggest component in the BN, has a team to track blogs and gauge the sentiments of young Internet users. "... Our investigation shows that the Internet plays a major role in influencing people, especially those living in urban and semi-urban areas..." Mah Siew Keong, the Gerakan youth chief, was quoted as saying (Theophilus 2008).

As part of the efforts to counteract the use of the Internet by the Barisan Alternatif (BA), that is the Alternative Front, as the opposition is known in Malaysia, the top government leaders now vigorously welcome comments and views of the citizens through their homepages. For example, one can send email to the Prime Minister (PM). The homepage contains all the speeches of the PM from May 2008 when he was the deputy.

The national TV station is not left out in this effort. It has a program about blogging on RTM1 known as Blog@1. In this program issues concerning blogging are discussed and bloggers are invited to share their views and experience about blogging. This in a way helps the government to understand blogging and bloggers and

subsequently counteract bloggers who may be out to discredit the government and at the same time encourage responsible bloggers and blogging.

What we see in Malaysia in countering or balancing the new media uprising was the participation by the government in the new media. The Prime Minister has his own website as well as Facebook account. Furthermore, looking at the concept of State in trying to have checks and balances with regard to new media uprising, one can say that the Malaysian government has done so with care so that the bill of guarantee not to interfere with the new media is upheld. The government only comes in when the peace and harmony with regard to racial sensitivities are threatened. In this way irresponsible bloggers who are out to incite racial disharmony are brought to book.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The government can no longer underestimate the power and influence of the new media, especially the use of blogs as experienced in the run-up to the March 2008 General Elections. It has indeed become a force to be reckoned with. This is an indication of the power of the Internet as an alternative media platform. We are experiencing what one may call the new and emerging democratic and political landscape made possible by the new media. The new media provide an alternative channel where the masses can air their grievances and concern without having to go through cumbersome procedures or without interference or 'gate-keeping' from editors resulting in the message not reaching the audience.

The new media may best represent the public sphere since no one party can dominate or exercise monopoly on the content couple with the fact that it is interactive in nature. Thus the masses can get their messages across without having to go through gate-keeping.

It is certainly true that the new media, especially blogs, do not overturn the effect of traditional mass media in the public sphere but there is ample evidence that blogs do affect the structure of political communication as evident in the March 2008 General Elections in Malaysia. Because blogs are not (at least not yet) elite-biased and their content is argument-centred, they can sometimes expand the range of political knowledge that is available to journalists, political elites and interested citizens. In addition, the habits of use that are, thus far, characteristic of the form have altered the pathways of political communication, providing an effective conduit (although not the only one) through which opinions and analyses can percolate up, instead of always cascading down (Woodly 2008). With the advent of the new media, political campaigns do not necessarily have to be through the traditional media. Politicians and campaigners have now got an alternative media to put their messages across. The mainstream or national media can no longer or

continue to be seen as one sided as it does not help. The people have now got an alternative media.

With these developments, the government of the day cannot shy away from using the new media as political discussion is no more limited to the confines of the traditional media. In doing so, it must also give some room for the opposition in the national or mainstream media. As it is now in Malaysia, unlike the government in power, the opposition cannot get its message across through the national or 'privately' owned television channels. In fact the latest claim by the opposition against the media is that headlines are being scrutinised and captions are being commented on. Thus the space for alternative views is shrinking (*The Malaysian Insider* May, 2009).

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