Public actors in new spaces
A case study of digital Malaysia in transnational public deliberation

Abstract: This article examines the role of new transnational public actors and their influence on public deliberation processes in Malaysia. Malaysia is one of the world's most social media-connected countries where online platforms greatly influence the Malaysian public sphere. Our study suggests considering digital news portals as specific 'public actors' since they enable new political debates in an otherwise fragile national public sphere. While national media are controlled by the state, digital news portals offer not only an alternative news perspective but are a stage for a diversity of voices. Furthermore, they link the Malaysian civic discourse to transnational political debates, such as human rights and ethnic interests. Results from eight in-depth semi-structured interviews with news journalists and editors of traditional media and independent digital news portals provide insights into their perceptions concerning the implications of digital news portals for new aspects of public discourse in Malaysia.

Keywords: alternative news, case study, civil society, digital media, direct democracy, gatekeeping, Malaysia, news portals, political communication, public sphere, social media

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Introduction

DIGITAL media are increasingly influencing political debates and how opinions are formed—not only in Western countries but also throughout much of Southeast Asia. Now that smartphones are affordable for large swathes of Southeast Asian societies, it is not surprising that social media platforms now constitute key hubs for political/civic interaction in the region (e.g. Sinpeng & Tapsell, 2020). The term 'Southeast Asia' reflects a large geographical area but one in which the cultures of countries are very diverse. This diversity has been caused by historical circumstances and events, societal structures, cultural and political practices among the 11 countries that are commonly

grouped under the term 'Southeast Asia'.

While social media networks constitute key platforms for political communication *across* the region, the implications for political communication and deliberation are different in each country as highlighted in recent scholarship. Regional studies reveal, for example, given the recent events in Myanmar, that social media platforms take on key roles in promoting ethnic violence against the Muslim Rohingya minority, sparking further ethnic conflicts and contributing to the country's political instability (see The-Thitsar, 2021; Fink, 2018). Other studies (Saud & Margono, 2021; Saud et al., 2020) perceive social media in Indonesia as enablers of more inclusive political participation during presidential elections. However, despite this popularity at elections, recent developments reveal that social media are today used as influential political campaign tools not only by the government but also by various Islamic groups. Processes are leading to the increasing polarisation of political debates (Tapsell, 2021; Salahudin, 2020). In the Philippines, the massive increase in the number of social media users over the past few years—Facebook now has 83 million users among a population of 111 million—had huge ramifications for the 2019 election outcomes (Arugay, 2019). It was predicted that social media would have even more power in the 2022 election. As argued by authors from the region, social media might potentially cause a polarisation of debates simply by sparking conflicts through the spread of misinformation. Concerns are that 'patriotic trolls', infiltrated by the government but also by political groups into digital space will weaken civil society in the Philippines (Sombatpoonsiri, 2018). This in turn will lead to the silencing of the regime's critics.

This article builds on these debates by offering a different perspective through a focus on the rising number of digital news portals in Malaysia. We argue that digital news portals have the potential to encourage and advance political debates. We consider these digital news portals broadly as 'public actors' who enable political perspectives in the digital public of Malaysia. The first part of this article looks at the broader context by outlining the emerging transformation of the Malaysian public sphere. In the second part we discuss the role of public actors. The third section presents empirical insights based on qualitative interviews with professionals of mainstream media and independent digital news portals who reflect on their roles in transforming digital public spheres in Malaysia.

The digital public sphere in Malaysia

While in Western countries and especially those in Europe the rights of the digital citizen—the 'data subject'—are high on the digital policyagenda because it has long been part of the democratic process, this is not the case in Malaysia

where the social media landscape is a completely open space and exposed to a multitude of influencers. It is therefore important to first provide some background on the Malaysian digital public context before addressing the influence of independent digital news portals on the broader public debate.

There are three intertwined dimensions which should be considered as they reveal the broader 'metrics' of the digital public in Malaysia. First, Malaysia is among the top five of the world's most digitally connected countries, and 87 percent of its population of 31 million can access the internet using mobile smart phones (MCMC, 2018). Malaysians prefer to spend more time online than watching television or listening to the radio (Chinnasamy, 2017). Video streaming is one of the people's favourite online activities with 51 percent of online users having an active YouTube account (MCMC, 2018). A second dimension to consider when addressing the 'metrics' of digital publics in Malaysia is that especially young citizens engage in digital political debate. Like other Southeast Asian countries, Malaysia is a young society. The youth segment—youth is defined as the age group between 15-30 years—ranges in Southeast Asia from about 60 percent in Indonesia to 45 percent in Malaysia (ASEAN, 2017). About 99 percent of youth in Malaysia own a smart phone and 71 percent access news via social media platforms (Yusop & Sumari, 2013). As some market studies reveal, young citizens often consume news which is 'opinion-based' news, i.e. produced by 'influencers' or by peers as personal comments (Nielsen, 2019).

The third dimension that characterises digital public spaces in Malaysia, is the fact that the degree of digital literacy is high. According to the report Digital in Asia (2018), 75 percent of Malaysian citizens would accept social media being banned in the event of a national crisis. They feel that being digitally literate they know of many ways to navigate around such a ban. Based on these intertwined dimensions—high penetration of smart phones, a national youth 'bulge' and considerable digital skill sets—it is not surprising that digital civic engagement is already influencing election outcomes. As recent election studies reveal, elections are no longer based on broad national debates but on 'tribal nationalism' and 'algorithmic enclaves' (Lim, 2017), processes which have already determined the outcomes of recent elections in Malaysia (Chinnasamy, 2013, 2018; Tapsell, 2018; Leong, 2015).

It is not surprising that scholars from the region are beginning to conceptually address regional specific civil societies and public sphere norms. These are discussed in current scholarship from the region with two perspectives in mind. The first perspective identifies public/civic interaction in contexts of Muslim public spheres (Abd Malek, 2018) or minority youth in Indonesia and Singapore (Yue et al., 2019). Other conceptions focus on city spaces in Asian mega cities (Douglas et al., 2008). Furthermore, public spheres are

addressed in spheres of activism (Gilson, 2013), democratisation processes (Abbott, 2011) and elections (e.g. Chinnasamy, 2018).

The second conceptual perspective includes ideas incorporating the Western public sphere, echoing the Habermasian (1999) model with a focus on national citizens and rational debate (e.g. Koo, 2007; Abadi, 2015). This Western model of public deliberation—where rational discourse in national spheres among a collective national citizenry who equally share common interests in the nation and engage in deliberation based on rational discourse ethics—cannot be directly translated to the Southeast Asian context. Decades of colonial and post-colonial politics have left their marks and have produced different processes and phases of 'rationalisation'. As Shah notes, 'Malay rationalisation occurred not only under conditions of colonisation, but also under conditions of feudalism, class-consciousness, and also nationalism' (Shah, 2007, p. 218). The control of public life by colonial powers and once they left, their successors who took control of the administrative structures when independence was achieved, followed certain rules and patterns (e.g. Jayal, 2013; Dirlik, 2012).

As has been argued in the case of India, 'The colonisers left, but their canons of controlling people remained almost intact. Fresh rules, curtailing freedom, were very often thrust upon people even in the newly-born nations in South Asia experimenting with democracy' (Chaudhury, 2021, p. 210). However, in the Habermasian model the concept of citizenship and public deliberation is related to a European national identity and the aim to generate rational debate among citizens in an established national territory (Habermas, 1999). Public deliberation is seen as a democratic force such as the process of European nation-state building in the 19th century. Instead of establishing a national citizenry based on historical values of national and cultural identity, Malaysian citizens were exposed to post-colonial 'bargaining', i.e. the somewhat forced integration of many ethnic groups into an 'artificial' state by colonial powers which was perceived as a crucial step towards—and actually a condition of—independence. Citizenry and public life were now influenced by post-colonial governments who simply carried on with the rules set by the colonial powers.

These are the important underlying structures, narratives, and influences which need to be reflected on when addressing the deeper structures of today's digital public sphere in Malaysia. The reliance on control of public life is a direct inheritance of colonialism. For example, although a new elected government has been in power since 2018, it still oversees state-owned national television and has even legal powers to threaten journalists based on the grounds of publication of 'fake news'. It is not surprising that within these historical public trajectories, social media networks are seen as a 'liberation technology' (Singpeng & Tapsell, 2020), creating a new joint political discourse territory for citizens from a variety of ethnic communities. In particular the transnational scope of these digital spheres

produces new potentials of transnational public life. At the same time, however, it is increasingly observed and governed by ad hoc policies in Malaysia.

Public actors and digital public spheres in Malaysia

While a number of regional studies address national nuances regarding the role of social media for political debates and election campaigns, only a few scholars raise concerns about new roles of digital actors within all kinds of social media publics. What is meant are not the commonly used roles of 'influencer', i.e. so-called YouTube 'celebrities' attracting millions of followers to address political issues. Instead, recent scholarship (Chinnasamy & Anida, 2019) identifies actors within the fragile digital public in Malaysia, ranging from public relations agencies to all kinds of bots and trolls who deliberately aim to shape or change political opinions. While in established Western democracies these processes in times of crisis fracture societies, this process is especially influential in some Southeast Asian nations where civic debates are not protected (Sombatpoonsiri, 2018). As observed by Tapsell (2021) the 'influencers' of extremist groups use political social media debates to ignite already existing tensions and, during elections PR professionals and 'sole-trader entrepreneurs' are operating on many social media platforms to influence voters (Tapsell, 2021, p.119).

   While these studies address those actors who disrupt political debates, we argue that it is equally important to assess those 'actors' who take on roles in enabling and sustaining civic debates. We suggest the term 'public actor' to identify actors who enable the discussion of civic debate. 'Public actors' are now emerging as digital news portals to compete with Malaysian mainstream media owned by the government and government-linked individuals while independent digital news portals are owned by business-oriented individuals. Mainstream media coverage is normally likely to support the government and its leaders and does not pay much attention to oppositional or contrary perspectives held by minority groups. The majority of mainstream media discourses are shaped by self-censorship including tight media legislation and as a consequence media gatekeeping.

   However, digital news portals are currently shaping different discourses in the country. For example, as a result of independent digital news portals such as Malaysiakini.com and Freemalaysia.com, coverage of the government's mishandling of finance issues has generated public awareness and subsequently, led to protests by individual and pressure groups. Digital news portals covered these protests and implemented critical coverage incorporating many voices in the aim to encourage more online participation and discussion. In this sense they are taking on a role as a 'public actor' to enable critical voices to be heard, and encourage civic debate regarding the legitimacy of government action.

   There are currently two phenomena occurring. The first is that the Malaysian government is trying to minimise the role that specifically independent digital

news portals take which are—in the government's view—mainly promoting oppositional perspectives. Second, besides digital news portals other types of public actors emerge which are not just radically 'oppositional' in nature but act as supporters and proxies for the state, thus serving as obstacles to, rather than agents of, political reform. For example, various pressure groups played an important role in the victory of the opposition coalition in the 2018 general election (Chinnasamy & Manaf, 2018). This influence has fostered democratic development by strengthening the space between the state, political society, market (for-profit sphere) and the private space of society at large.

Overall, these processes are monitored and sometimes 'cracked down' on by the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) which—despite an open internet policy—is legally empowered to remove material deemed to be 'subversive' (Chinnasamy, 2017). One might even go so far as to say that new norms are taking hold in Southeast Asia due to transnational digital communication, whereby it is more common to find states undermining democratic efforts and voices than trying to support them. Consequently, most countries in Southeast Asia have more often than not been trying to undermine democratic efforts (Thompson, 1993).

Influential digital actors are conceptualised in a framework of internationally linked 'connective action' (Bennett, 2013), as operators within transnational social movements (e.g. Leong, 2020) with an emphasis on the network structure of activism and more recently what is known as 'hashtag' activism (e.g. Wang & Zhou, 2021). Referring to Southeast Asia only a few published studies examined the role of transnational social media actors who contribute to rising tensions against religious communities, such as in Myanmar and Malaysia (Osman, 2017). However, rarely addressed are new phenomena of public actors who provide a platform to significantly influence local digital political debates in Malaysia. These types of public actors who are able to gain a voice through, for example, independent digital news portals in order to engage the Malaysian public in broader transnational debates, such as climate change, promote environmental organisations, advocate for meaningful electoral reforms, demand ethnic equality, promote LGBT issues and promote women's rights under Islam. In other words they expand political debates, i.e., civic deliberation through such a transnational broader perspective.

In this sense, our conception of public actor is based on Nancy Fraser's term of 'interlocutors' (Fraser, 2007a). Interlocutors are related to her conception of transnational publics. Hence interlocutors are, so Fraser argues, 'neither conationals nor fellow citizens' (Fraser, 2007a, p. 16) in a national and transnational context. She argues that 'empirically' the national framework is being 'surpassed', and so 'the public sphere will simply be disempowered unless it is reconstituted on a different scale' and that the 'addressee of communication, once theorised as

a sovereign territorial state . . . is now an amorphous mix of public and private transnational powers that is neither easily identifiable nor rendered accountable' (Fraser, 2007b. p. 19). In this sense, independent digital news portals act as public actors, as 'interlocutors' encouraging civic interaction. They do this by generating links to broader transnational discussions through interactive elements and relationships to all sorts of social media platforms in several languages such as Malay, English, Tamil and Mandarin.

Research Questions

In order to assess this new dimension of civic engagement, we conducted qualitative interviews with media professionals in Malaysia, the objective being to assess their perception of the roles of public actors. Interviews were guided by two main research questions:

RQ 1: How do media experts understand the public deliberation process in Malaysia?

RQ 2: How do media professionals perceive transnational public actors in their influence on local political opinions held by citizens?

Methodology

This study is based on eight in-depth interviews with media experts and builds on Luckmann's work (1996) concerning the social construction of reality. We adopt this soft conceptual approach when assessing how public actors are perceived by media professionals. More in-depth insight is required about how news professionals strategically engage with civic deliberation. In other words, we assess how media professionals perceive alternative voices, public debate and public engagement within their professional reality. Media professionals are defined as those individuals who work for mainstream media and independent digital news portals in Malaysia. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents. The final sampling includes eight professionals from mainstream media and independent digital news portals. We included journalists of executive ranks. Mainstream media outlets relate to mainly print and broadcast formats which are owned by the government, while independent digital news portals are owned by individuals who are funded by international organisations.

The sample of respondents was identified based, firstly, on their journalistic experience in the news organisation, and secondly, their professional seniority. The non-random sampling procedure has been chosen given the focus of the study as a specific group of professionals (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015; Neuman, 2014). Miles and Huberman (1984) and Patton (1990) concurred that most sampling techniques in qualitative research depend not on principles of random probability, but on purposeful selection. The total number of necessary

professionals to be studied was based on points of data saturation. Saturation which relates to qualitative research is a guideline and a limit where a researcher considers having reached the analysis objectives when no more new themes emerge (Saunders et al., 2018). This research noted a pattern of repetition in interviewees' answers so in effect the point of data saturation had been reached. Prior to gathering interview data, the reliability and validity of the research must be assessed to ensure the integrity and quality of the findings.

Each interview session lasted about 45 minutes and was recorded and transcribed. For the process of analysing the collected data, specific processes were executed. In Neuman's (2014, p. 487) view, data analysis involves examining, sorting, categorising, evaluating, comparing, synthesising, contemplating the coded data as well as reviewing the raw and recorded data. Interview questions addressed the overall understanding of public deliberation and, second, their perceptions of transnational public actors within such a deliberative sphere, types of deliberative issues and types of public actors.

Findings
Perception of public deliberation dimensions

(I) Public deliberation is traditionally related to ethnic contexts
As pointed out earlier, in Western countries 'the nation' is the traditional key domain of public deliberation among all citizens, while public deliberation is traditionally related to ethnic spheres in Malaysia. Within a national public, understood as a 'balanced' overarching sphere that embraces various ethnic communities, regulated by the government in order to maintain this balance, ethnic groups understand ethnic communities as 'their' space for deliberation. Relating to this specific type of national public, respondents understand the civil society in Malaysia as a space to: (1) aggregate and articulate ethnic interests; and (2) challenge state power by garnering attention for these specific interests. Respondents outline this process as a specific political 'circuit of networking' taking place between spheres of deliberation of ethnic groups, independent digital news portals and the state:

> Deliberation is to aggregate and articulate the interests of specific groups. This is the way to strengthen the civil society movement. It is important to distinguish civil society from political society. (Interview 5, independent digital news portal)

The traditional media sector is seen as a core component of such a public domain. Respondents specifically understand media overall as a 'development tool' for society in order to unify the post-colonial and ethnically diverse society. They argue that the process of constructing civic identity has been a long struggle since independence. To achieve national sovereignty across such ethnic

diversity requires tight control by the state in order to create 'unity' and 'harmony' between ethnic groups. In this sense, traditional media outlets perceive sovereignty as 'togetherness' across ethnic diversity. As one respondent notes:

> Mainstream media has distributed information to the people as a developmental tool and change agent to build and re-construct Malaysia identity as a sovereign nation state. This has been continued by traditional media today, which seems to play the role in bringing together the multi-racial society to a diverse ethnicity to create 'Bangsa Malaysia'. (Interview 6, independent digital news portal)

(II) Mainstream media associated with historical and post-independence development

Respondents see this role of mainstream media from a historical perspective. In their view, the national media's role was—from the early days of independence onwards—to help build the unity of Malaysians, 'Bangsa Malaysia'—which reflected a sense of national belonging and community, despite the existence of several other ethnic communities and their strong sense of identity. Existing research suggests that the country's mainstream media functioned as a tool for developing the state since independence. It is also argued that journalists in Malaysia adopt the traditional development journalism approach, favouring the government and political leaders (Chinnasamy, 2017). However, this role is now challenged by the rise of independent digital news portals, operating across all types of online platforms. Respondents from independent digital news portals see these as a key hub for new public actors—such as 'pressure groups.' Respondents from portals such as Malaysiakini.com argue they are more popular than mainstream media because these online portals highlight issues ignored by mainstream media and especially ethnic issues.

Respondents from independent digital news portals are very critical of the mainstream media and argue that the ignorance of various types of political conflicts by national media which citizens today pick up from independent digital news portals has led to a deep distrust of national media. Citizens today turn to independent digital news portals not only in times of crisis. Respondents from the independent digital news portals feel that mainstream media fail to address issues related to today's citizens' interests.

(III) Independent digital portals are democratic spaces in Malaysia

Independent digital portals are indirectly providing democratic spaces for new types of national and transnational public actors emerging. These public actors are representatives of pressure groups that were not getting the attention of government-linked mainstream media. Independent digital portals provide voices

to the voiceless, especially to the public actors who are not being heard through government-related communication channels. While this process destabilises the balanced multi-ethnic public discourse which was maintained and controlled by mainstream media (especially government broadcast media and publications) since independence, the independent digital portals established new spheres for deliberation and debate among public actors.

Especially the dimensions of transnational digital connectivity are perceived by respondents as a cause for the emergence of new public actors. Public actors, for example pressure groups, are linked to international politicians, non-government organisations (NGOs) and foreign media. They operate on a transnational scale, targeting specific political debates in Malaysia and also include expatriates. It is very interesting to note that the interviewed media experts perceive civil society as no longer limited to civic engagement in Malaysia; it now includes Malaysians living overseas who participate via digital media.

Respondents from mainstream media note that social media platforms—especially those operated by independent digital news portals—have mobilised pressure groups to move to a bigger and more international level and become a reference source for international pressure group networks. Independent digital news portals are seen as major hubs in such an enlarged perception of a transnationally connected Malaysian civil society. Digital news portals provide information regarding protests locally as well as news sources for international news agencies and promote democracy movements abroad. Overall, respondents argue that this process has further strengthened the emergence of a new type of civil society in Malaysia in today's digitally connected sphere:

> The present situation in Malaysia is the development of civil society. Most of the pressure groups have also international links such as Bersih. We could see how many series of protest they have organised, including protests of Malaysians overseas through social media platforms. (Interview 1, mainstream media)

Pressure groups are seen as new political actors specifically with reference to independent digital news portals in order to mobilise support from citizens, participate in their reform agenda and attempts, and to mobilize their support from international leaders.

New forms of public agency in national issues deliberation

(I) The rise of pressure groups is associated with ethnic/critical issues
Respondents are fully aware of attempts by the government to suppress certain independent digital news portals. The most common method is to crack down on criticising the government and addressing political leaders' weaknesses or alleged corruption. However, pressure groups can still circulate critical content.

Over time, independent digital news portals use specific techniques to circumvent suppression. For example, independent media portals publish political news faster compared to mainstream media's online versions. They use the factor of speed of digital technologies to provide critical information quickly and offer spaces for direct interaction with users of their portals.

The emergence of independent media portals seems to offer challenging and contradictory perspectives and new transnational perspectives compared to mainstream media:

> You can see how the street rallies were reported in details in independent media portals. Everyone sees it in different angles. This is not only viewed by Malaysians but also from overseas. Some international news quoted the independent digital news portals as news sources in highlighting the pressure group movement news as massive street protest. (Interview 2, mainstream media)

Respondents are well aware of emerging new dimensions of public communication and civic deliberation enhanced specifically by independent digital news portals which are taking on a key role in directly engaging citizens in political participation, such as posting comments, 'liking' specific news and sharing news. However, independent digital news portals provide information (and details of date and time) about the unfolding of political unrest and take on roles as a 'pressure group information hub'

(II) Increasing popularity of independent digital news portals

Based on these new roles of independent digital news portals, their subscription rates are rapidly increasing. Subscribers are not only citizens residing in Malaysia but also expatriates overseas who subscribe to digital portals, for instance Malaysiakini.com, FreeMalaysiaToday.com and a few others. Specifically, respondents who work for independent digital news portals argue that Malaysia needs to more fully recognise the political role of a functioning civil society:

> The civil society movement changed with the phase of political development. Now we have the era of New Malaysia under the new government. Street rallies organised by the civil society becoming crucial in entrenching and sustaining democratic rule in the country. (Interview 5, independent digital news portal)

In our respondents' perspectives, public actors such as pressure groups, challenge the state and the political agenda. The government was expected to offer a new form of leadership that resulted from the resistance of pressure groups.

(III) Virtual activism has led to direct democracy

Virtual activism or digital deliberation has triggered the rise of direct democracy

not only locally but also at the international level:

> Civil society is a space that is populated by all kinds of organisations, not just those inclined towards democracy. (Interview 6, independent digital news portal)

It seems that in the perspective of respondents, digital spaces constitute a democratic 'blueprint' for open public spheres, especially giving voice to the voiceless; so that no one is left behind in accessing their rights of citizenship:

> It has given voice to voiceless. That is the most visible one. The internet had given voice to the voiceless, more capacity to civil society movement, pressure groups, cultural minorities demands becoming visible'. (Interview 8, independent digital news portal)

As well, it is thought that independent digital news portals target mainly minority groups while mainstream media, as is noted by some respondents, are perhaps too focused on specific groups and not others, such as the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups:

> We don't read Tamil and Mandarin news, but the portal covers issues in Tamil and Chinese and even in English, too. (Interview 1, mainstream media) They are giving voice to the voiceless where we are not covering it such as church was torn down and temple demolitions issues. (Interview 4, mainstream media)

Overall, respondents perceive digital spheres as taking on a vital role in enhancing democratic political discourses whether it is related to ethnic groups or government failures and driving a transformation that is leading to a civil society.

Emerging youth online deliberation and types of participation

As respondents note, social media has greatly changed the role of young citizens in society. Young people engage frequently with new actors and they interact through independent digital news portals:

> Social media and youth are very much connected. The power of technology and the internet, especially social media are a major power and a strong platform for waking up the whole Malaysian society . . . For instance, the Hashtag Bersih 3.0 (2012) on social media had been spread rapidly to inform about protest movements. (Interview 1, mainstream media)

The majority of respondents feel that the new types of political actors, such as the pressure group movement made possible by social media, indirectly in-

creased the sense of national belonging among youth as they take on a new responsibility as citizens to criticise the government. The pressure groups' agenda aims to establish critical political discourse and relate this to activities, such as street protests. For instance, the *Bersih* rallies which were protests for free and fair elections were the most intense protests that Malaysia had. In Malaysia, political discourse did not stop as a space of social media deliberation. Due to the important factor of digital publicness, independent digital news portals are becoming hubs for providing information and connecting public actors locally and internationally so that agendas and activities are closely aligned.

Malaysia is a multiracial and multi-religious society, with a complex relationship between the different ethnicities, religions, and the state, which is often politically, socially, and legally 'loaded' (Steiner, 2018). At the same time, Malaysia has long been viewed as a model of moderate Islamic rule (Weiss, 2013). Muslims and non-Muslims have enjoyed civil and political rights. Growing domestic political volatility has led to questioning the viability of political moderation in digital deliberation. One respondent from the mainstream media believed that citizens have equal freedom to express themselves on digital platforms:

> We can say what we want for as long as we keep within the laws of the land. I know what I can and cannot say. As a relatively young internet user (I am 39), I have also had experience in breaching very sensitive issues about Islam once on my social media page. But, I learnt from that that my friends on the social media may or may not agree with my opinions. So, it has been a learning experience and a bit of trial and error. Judging from many cases of people being charged in court for posting religiously sensitive comments on social media, I have learned that everything I say on social media will have repercussions if I am not careful and if I break any law. (Interview 2, mainstream media)

There is a strong sentiment of connectivity between ethnic youth and their community. Youth from minority groups are specifically focusing on their community's development, and also beginning to act as a 'watchdog', checking if the state is treating their community well or otherwise. As one respondent notes:

> These guys are taking a good care of their community. They want to serve their own community to create mutual benefit for everybody. Minority group's media also are more to the development of their community. At the end, youth became news informers to news agencies. There was also a strong movement between youth and minority non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who initiated a great deal of work on the ground not only locally but also internationally'. (Interview 5, independent digital news portal)

Respondents feel that a broader context is required to understand these processes. They state that young people's involvement and actions are most likely

caused by what they have experienced and lived through during the previous government. It seems that the complaints and the voices of Malaysian youth had generally been ignored by previous governments. For them, previous governments only offered a false hope and dreams in education, freedom in information and media, economic prosperity and social equality.

Conclusion

The 'vertical' dimension of transnational deliberation has inspired new and innovative ways of examining the emergence of Malaysia's current public arena of digital interaction, and its role in the national media space. As the number of internet users worldwide continues to grow, it is becoming more local (Postill, 2008). As the digital sphere becomes the dominant place for political debate, a focus on new 'influencers' of public deliberation is now important. Although acting in a digital national sphere, public actors are transnationally connected but still able to address local issues. Such a 'vertical' type of transnational deliberation can be considered as a new public sphere, enabling discursive spaces for information, debate, and participation. We argue that such a process has the potential to invigorate democracy and increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas.

The discursive process of negotiating individual and collective judgement as reason-based agreements no longer relates to a bounded civic collective. Instead, it fluctuates across thematic spaces and loyalties of broad unbounded communication spheres which requires new normative structures. For instance the rise of political activism among youths in Malaysia greatly influenced the 2018 general election results. As has been argued, democracy and free speech go hand-in-hand with free media (Milosevic, 2017; Alvarez, 2014).

The media professionals interviewed in this study were fully aware of the influence and power of independent digital news portals in Malaysia, and how they can transform public spheres. In their view, independent digital news portals are the only medium that can be relied on and trusted to set a new critical agenda regarding minorities and religious matters. The sphere of deliberation enabled by independent digital news portals has the potential to unify citizens across ethnic communities, include non-governmental organisations, bloggers groups, independent digital media portals and religious groups as well. Furthermore, independent digital news portals enable virtual activism and intensify publicness of otherwise dispersed local discourse across transnationally accessible platforms. The public interdependence between citizens seems to reposition civic deliberation in larger transnational contexts—embedding the local community in new ways as the case of digital Malaysia reveals (Frere & Kiyindou, 2009, p. 85; Volkmer, 2014).

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