



# Political Communication in Malaysia: A Study on the Use of New Media in Politics

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*Abstract: To gain and retain political power, politicians use the media to persuade the masses to vote and support them, especially during elections. Barisan Nasional (BN) has successfully used the media to maintain its power for the past 57 years, making it the longest-serving elected government in the world still currently in office. However, the emergence of the Internet has challenged the status quo. The purpose of the research was to investigate how new media has influenced the political process and communication strategies in Malaysia and its impact on the political landscape. The researcher interviewed 19 respondents: politicians, bloggers and media consultants from both sides of the political divide. The findings showed that new media, especially Web 2.0, has expanded the public sphere and enabled more Malaysians to participate in the democratic process, through information dissemination, mobilisation or crowd-sourcing. However, the cyber-war between BN and the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) has caused confusion and disinformation, affecting the quality of democratic decision-making. Nevertheless, new media has enabled more voices to emerge and challenge the political hegemony. Communication is increasingly two-way, with the public expecting greater engagement and interactivity with their political representatives. The Internet and social media have led to unprecedented complexity in the political communication process in Malaysia. External factors such as the electoral system and political institutions play a part in determining whether ideas spread by social media can find fertile ground in the polity which can ultimately bring about political change.*

*Keywords: political communication, Malaysia, Web 2.0, social media, democracy, campaign*

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## 1. Introduction

Politics is a decision-making process and a struggle to gain access to decision-making positions and resources that could be used to further one's own interests (Louw, 2010). This involves the ability to manipulate the machinery of language making – the media. To gain and retain political power, hegemony has to be built (Gramsci, 1971) whereby masses need to naturally accept the dominant group(s) leadership, moral codes, practices and discourses. Media and education systems help to build consent, legitimacy and support for group interests.

In liberal democracies, access to power is gained by winning elections (Louw, 2010), which is why politicians and political parties need the media to persuade large numbers of voters to support them. Politicians focus on image and myth making, as well as creating hype to whip up support as the passive mass audience is usually disinterested in politics. Success in impression management enables politicians to persuade sufficient numbers of passive mass-citizenry to vote for them, thus gaining access to Parliament and Government: Places of power where policies are made and executed. The media is the most important cultural resource for politicians and political parties, key political “king makers” as media discourses legitimise or de-legitimise hierarchies of positions.

Previously, mass media consisted of newspapers, radio and television. When Internet emerged, these became known as traditional media in contrast to new media. While the former operated on a centralized model, the latter are different. Due to their decentralized structure, governments find it hard to control online news and information flow, which affect the political power of authoritarian governments. New media enable the public to have greater and unrestricted direct access to political news, bypassing the usual barriers and gatekeeping controls of publishers, editors and journalists in traditional media (McPhail, 2002).

Tay (2000) argued that many Asian governments, in pursuit of national development as well as cultural and informational autonomy, minimised the media's watchdog role as an independent check-and-balance on the government. He said, “News was seen as a social resource, and the mass media allied to the government in the development process.” Unsurprisingly, many Asian governments controlled the media via regulations and licensing as well as ownership in commercial media (Banerjee, 2004). In Malaysia, the incumbent Barisan Nasional (BN) has successfully maintained political power since independence due to its tight control of traditional media, making it the longest-serving elected government in the world still in office.

However, the emergence of new media has slowly eroded the BN's grip on power, which resulted in the “political tsunami” during the 2008 General Election (GE) and the increase in popular vote (51%) in the recent 2013 GE. New media represented a double-edged sword to authoritarian governments because widening the public sphere to previously-suppressed alternative opinions and information caused the erosion of their long-standing media dominance (Clarke, 2004). The Internet played an important role in strengthening peripheral local and community-based civil society organisations by enabling them to promote and mobilise the public to support their cause and challenge the authorities. By creating new networks between public, semi-public and private

organisations, new media had the potential to challenge the state's monopoly and hegemony in politics and governance (Banerjee, 2004).

Thus, the paper has two aims: To examine how the Internet has influenced the Malaysian political landscape and the communication strategies of politicians and their parties. The researcher interviewed 19 politicians, bloggers and media consultants from BN and the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) over a period of three months. The findings revealed that new media, especially Web 2.0, have expanded the public sphere and enabled more Malaysians to participate in the democratic process, through information dissemination, mobilisation or crowd-sourcing and fund-raising. Politicians need to be interactive, responsive and accountable to their more politically-aware constituents. Nevertheless, the cyber-war between BN and PR has led to the online circulation of lies, half-truths and gossip, causing confusion and disinformation which affects the quality of democratic decision-making for the polity.

## **2. Review of Literature**

### **2.1. Press Freedom, Public Opinion and the Spiral of Silence**

The idea of a free press first came due to commercial and economic changes in the late 19th to 20th centuries. The media should not espouse a singular view or state propaganda only; any centralised media control represents loss of freedom. This idea is linked to the free market (Curran, 2000) and marketplace of ideas where contradicting views compete for public attention without state interference (Zaller, 1996). The media is a public space for groups and individuals to express their views; it is through public exchange of argument and counter-argument that truth eventually emerges (Mill, 1859, reprinted 1974). Habermas (1991) said that free and wide-ranging expression of opinion is integral to the functioning of a public sphere. Thus, the global, largely unregulated Internet is a symbol of the modern free press which allows for diverse opinions.

Public opinion is often assumed to be the majority view freely formed through rational evaluation of arguments in the public sphere. In modern mediated world, public opinion is often represented indirectly through polls, a necessary and efficient measurement method in mass society. The introduction of regular general elections initiated the rationalisation of public opinion (Herbst, 1991). Society's sentiments assume heightened importance and are expressed via mass media, public forums and interpersonal channels. Public opinion can also impact power relations, said Noelle-Neumann (1984). Her spiral of silence theory argues that fear of isolation causes people to follow the perceived majority opinion, making them less willing to express their own views. However, when they perceive their opinion is acceptable, they are more likely to express it.

### **2.2. Information Access, Interactivity and Accountability**

The Internet is often said to dramatically enhance democratic processes and practices due to its ability to facilitate access to vast information. Previously, elite gatekeepers and institutions of power monopolized and controlled traditional media, with citizens being passive information

recipients. Knowledge was owned and disseminated in an unequal hierarchy but the Internet's non-hierarchical feature broke this barrier and equalised global information sharing. Robles (2001) said that the Internet's real transforming effect was its breakdown of the information hierarchy.

The Internet also offers potential for greater exchange and deliberation, enabling people to be more interactive by creating new networks of information. People bypass traditional media gatekeepers to obtain information directly about political, social and economic life (Press & Williams, 2010) as well as communicate, connect and deliberate online directly with governments, parties, social movements and political leaders (Negrine, 2008). The Internet's full interactive potential restores some political power to the people as they are now part of politics, policy- and decision-making (Bailey, 1999). Internet users shift from being recipients to information providers with instant feedback opportunities; anyone with basic online access and limited skills can become an information producer by creating web pages, and participating in chat rooms, discussion forums and interactive sessions. New media have been setting the political agenda, influencing political behaviour and triggering participation, a hallmark of democracy.

New media has enhanced the media's Fourth Estate watchdog role by keeping government and political institutions accountable through monitoring their activities and investigating possible abuse (Curran, 1991) as citizens lack resources to check on their leaders (Iyengar & McGrady, 2007). This is because new media growth in the 21st century has resulted in the emergence of the Fifth Estate, which includes bloggers, citizen journalists and social media who report via the Internet and related digital media. Scholars claim that the Fifth Estate supports democracy as it adds additional accountability pressures on the government, politics and other sectors (Dutton, 2009; Newman, Dutton & Blank, 2012).

### **2.3. Networking, Cyber-Communities and Crowd Power**

New media is useful for mobilisation in terms of networking and recruitment. Unlike Web 1.0 with its limited linear features, Web 2.0 facilitates interaction, discussion and links with groups and individuals via interactive and overlapping networks (Anderson, 2007). Bloggers disseminate information and gain followers who forge new communities that may be spurred to take offline action (Weiss, 2012). A study by Kluver and Soon (2007) on Internet and online political communities in Singapore found that political parties and political expression groups use hyperlinks to create and forge alliances with each other, forming like-minded communities. New media technology enables Singaporean political groups to circumvent certain controls to advance their cause, which they may not be able to fulfill in the offline world due to stringent rules and regulations, resulting in "a subtle form of cyber-activism" (Kluver & Soon, 2007, pp.258-259).

Web 2.0 allows individuals, not just political parties or organisations, to gain access to crowds; this bottom-up capacity is a potential threat as it implies an alternative mobilising source (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). Democracy is about numbers and crowd power is a powerful political tool (Canetti, 1962) that can be easily mobilised using interactive Web 2.0 environments (Cox, 1999). The Web user's inter-connectivity and embeddedness is vital to reaching the online community and building a network of participants. As each person joins the network, there is an additional

member to communicate with (Klemperer, 2006); and as it grows in size and value, it contributes to educating and informing society, fulfilling to some extent, the notion of a networked society which Castells (1996) suggested would be a social outcome of the Internet. In addition, Web 2.0 has the ability to harness not just crowd power but its collective wisdom (O'Reilly, 2005).

#### **2.4. E-Democracy: Development and Obstacles**

Positivists and determinists believe in the Internet's potential to bring about major changes and transitions in democracy. As a key social institution, new media play a critical role in information dissemination and public participation (Banerjee, 2004). Rudolph and Lim (2002) said the increased availability of information meant that more people could be more informed. Light (2000) said new media allow greater democratisation of the information transmission as users bypass stringent structures of political organisations and scrutiny of government authorities. The Internet, with its open access to any form of specialised knowledge, is said to represent a new form of egalitarian democratic ideal. Governments, political parties and leaders, and social movements can bypass traditional media to reach individuals or each other directly (Negrine, 2008). Only when citizens can access news about the political process, parties, candidates and programmes, can they make rational choices and efficiently participate in decision-making. New media also provide a sphere for debate and discussions and are effective channels for voicing public opinion.

Fenchurch (1994) noted that new media could emerge as a "major tool for democracy" as they create conditions for e-democracy. The Internet enables people to vote, obtain information on government policy and/or interrogate their representatives, effectively becoming active democratic citizens. Staton (1994) said, "Modern communications technology can provide the means to broadly educate and enlighten citizens, to engage them in discussions of the public good and the means to achieve it, and to empower citizens in their quest for self-determination." Negroponte (1995) and Rash (1997) argued that the many-to-many communicative Internet network could renew direct democracy. Political and public sphere theorists (Dryzak, 2000; Norris, 2000; Putnam, 2000) highlighted the Internet's potential in enhancing social capital and promoting a stronger direct and deliberative democracy. Optimists see technology as a means of revitalising the public sphere (Iyengar & McGrady, 2007) by providing direct and immediate access to political views and enabling people to follow events and participate in politics. Studies showed that new media have made traditional journalism more publicly responsive, with participation extended to bloggers and citizen journalists (Allan, 2006; Fenton, 2010; Gillmor, 2004; McNair, 2006; Pavlik, 2001).

Critics, however, pointed out that socio-political, technological and economic factors have mitigated and restricted the Internet's full potential in political discourse and practice (Banerjee, 2004). Early enthusiasm has been replaced by more sober or pessimistic assessments of the Internet's potential for the reconnecting the political elite to citizens. Sceptics warned that new media are not a panacea as the public sphere model of politics and public deliberation had never existed beyond small, elitist collectives (Benhabib, 1992; Calhoun, 1988; Fraser, 1992; Habermas, 1996). Democracies today are large and complex, with multi-layered systems of government, civil society and a "multi-dimensional policy space" (Bennett, 2003; Crouch, 2004; Dalton, 2004; Hay,

2007). There were also inherent theoretical difficulties within democracy that could not be solved by new media (McLean, 1989). For example, in the proportional representation system, electoral system manipulation such as gerrymandering and mal-apportionment can affect the result.

The most dramatic illustration of the link between new media and politics is the cyber- or e-protest (Street, 2001). Technology enables political movements to mobilise people to join protests, sign an electronic petition or share information with friends. "Hacktivists" can conduct digital protests using cyber-sabotage to create "electronic civil disobedience" (Street, 2001). However, willingness to sign an electronic petition does not mean people are willing donate or attend a demonstration. Morozov (2009) coined the term "slacktivism": Digital activities that feel good but have no impact on society or politics. People think they have done their part by clicking their mouse, which could lower offline participation.

Another obstacle is the fact that people sample selectively, often limiting exposure to agreeable news or sources and walling themselves from incompatible topics and opinions (Sunstein, 2007). This reduces engagement with alternative views and undermines shared public forums (Sunstein, 2007), resulting in a less informed and more polarized, fragmented electorate of "group ghettos" and the development of well-organised "smart mobs" (Rheingold, 2002). People may become more isolated, surfing alone instead of being involved in the community, weakening social and civic engagement. Furthermore, the assumption that citizens want to use the Internet to consume news and engage with politicians is a fallacy (Davis, 2010); not all Internet users are interested in politics, preferring business, games and entertainment.

Digital divide is another barrier to political participation (Bonfadelli, 2002; Golding & Murdock, 2000; Hindman, 2008; Jensen, 2006; Lusoli, Ward & Gibson, 2006; Norris, 2001). Although Internet connection and website numbers have increased, most parts of the world do not have access as distribution is concentrated within groups in certain areas. Unequal Internet access has affected civic empowerment (Albrow, Anheier, Glasius, Price & Kaldor, 2008; Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2009). The Internet can become politically significant only when most citizens have access, thus large-scale digital connection is a pre-condition to new media becoming a democratic instrument. In Asia, there are also linguistic barriers to Internet use due to the wide variety of local languages and dialects, with English being spoken by a small minority of the population (Banerjee, 2004). Most are still marginalised as their languages have not become Internet friendly.

Media outlets in most democracies are privately-owned and market-driven, so any idealised notion is questionable (Calhoun, 1992; Curran, 2002; Garnham & Calhoun, 2007; Sunstein, 2007; Thompson, 1995). Other than publicly-funded media, most corporations focus on profit, not on facilitating wide access, engagement and deliberation. Parties, politicians and government institutions have also been slow to adopt new media as tools for deliberation, using it mainly for service delivery and an additional one-to-many promotional medium (Chadwick, 2006; Gulati, 2004; Jackson, 2003; Jackson & Lilleker, 2004). Public engagement becomes more promotional and rhetorical, rather than substantive (Edelman, 1964; Wernick, 1991).

While the Equalisation Theory proposes that new media equalise the electoral playing field by enabling smaller, marginalised political parties and groups to compete with major political parties and interests on an equal basis in cyberspace, the Normalisation Theory by Margolis, Resnick and Wolfe (1999) proposed that larger organisations can dominate cyberspace due to better financing and resources. Parties gaining most from new media are those already powerful and politically active (Ward & Vedel, 2006). Instead of creating a more equitable political culture, new media reinforces “politics as usual.”

## 2.5. Internet Politics in Malaysia

New media’s political impact can be analysed from three aspects: information, identity-building and mobilisation (Weiss, 2012). Firstly, new media has broken traditional media’s monopoly by disseminating previously inaccessible news. Alternative online news websites, blogs, tweets and social networking sites enable some form of basic investigative journalism (Weiss, 2012). Secondly, new media allow citizens to adopt new collective identities: cognitive, moral and emotional connections with a broader community, category, practice or institution (Poletta & Jasper, 2001). Malaysian cyber-communities can transcend ethnic and religious barriers, and successfully build bridges across socio-political crevasses. Lastly, groups can also be mobilised in terms of networking, recruitment, agenda setting and action (Weiss, 2012).

The Malaysian government has a two-pronged approach to deal with new media: making better use of tools and cracking down on online troublemakers (Weiss, 2012). After being caught off-guard at the 2008 GE, BN leaders focused on establishing their online presence through websites, blogs or social media, using Twitter and Facebook to court young voters; they also developed online e-government portals for citizen action, input and service delivery (Mohsin & Raha, 2006-7). In 2010, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) Youth chief, Khairy Jamaluddin, hosted a “tweetup” with his followers; in 2011, Prime Minister Najib met his online friends for tea.

The second strategy is cracking down on dissident media activism. Politicians and ordinary Malaysian Netizens have been detained, charged and sentenced under various laws for various online content posted. The Internet on its own is unable to subvert authorities; but when used by an organized force, it can help push for effective change (Rodan, 2005). New media spurs political action when people become inspired to move into offline action; it enables them to be aware of key issues, offering ways to mobilise and boosts campaign reach and efficacy. However, it may not transform the communal structure of Malaysian politics due to linguistic silos: mono-lingual blogs and online news websites (Weiss, 2012). New media could just be another area of political contest (Liow & Pasuni, 2010).

## 3. Methodology

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews from January to March 2013 with 19 respondents: Six politicians from BN and PR; seven socio-political bloggers and six media consultants. In-depth interviews are useful qualitative techniques to answer the why and how questions (Rubin, Rubin,

Haridakis & Piele, 2010) and understand the respondents' experience, knowledge and perspective that are central to the research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The researcher identified them based on her observations of their media use and their reputations as Net-savvy communicators. Selected interviewees had the relevant fountain of knowledge due to their expertise or knowledge in a skill or discipline or involvement in a scene or critical events. Snowball sampling was used by asking the interviewees to recommend other potential respondents. The researcher used partially-structured interviews as the objective was to understand the respondents' frame of meaning and viewpoints. Partially-structured interviews gave the researcher and respondents a framework but allowed the freedom to explore new areas. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. The researcher identified key elements and recurring themes in the data and categorised them. Using grounded theory analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), also known as the constant comparative method, the categories were compared and re-categorised until saturation point was reached.

Other than in-depth interviews, the researcher also observed the political communication process during the 13th GE from nomination day on 20 April to polling day on 5 May, 2013. During this period, the researcher monitored online communication such as online news portals, Facebook and Twitter postings. She also examined offline communication by attending various rallies and events in the Klang Valley organised by BN and PR, and collected campaign material such as pamphlets, brochures, booklets and newsletters to analyse the content.

## 4. Findings and Analysis

### 4.1. Democracy, Press Freedom and Public Sphere

The media's role in a liberal democratic structure is to provide a political forum for citizens to choose their political representatives as well as a platform for them to publicise their concerns and claims (Street, 2001). The findings confirm many earlier studies that traditional media in Malaysia have not been performing their proper democratic function due to BN control and bias against the opposition. BN politicians and socio-political bloggers have easy and wide access to traditional media; one media consultant said that the BN government should have greater access as it needs the media to explain and implement policies for the people's benefit. The Centre for Independent Journalism's (CIJ) "Watching the Watchdog" report found that traditional media were pro-BN in the 2013 GE. Clearly, traditional media have not fulfilled their role in providing a political forum for citizens to make informed political decisions or groups to publicise their concerns. They create political hegemony by reflecting the government's ideas while ignoring alternative voices.

PR politicians and bloggers, in contrast, experienced blackouts, limited or negative coverage in traditional media, especially during the 2013 GE. Restricted access to traditional media means that opposition parties had to resort to buying advertising space, printing party newsletters and utilising new media. The Internet in Malaysia allows diverse ideas, views and opinions to flourish as contradicting views compete for public attention (Zaller, 1996) in the online free marketplace of



ideas (Curran, 2000). Such public exchanges of argument and counter-argument enable the truth to eventually emerge (Mill, 1859, reprinted 1974).

Thus, new media have become a functioning public sphere as they allow many voices to emerge, thus reflecting the diversity of ideas. CIJ's study on media coverage during 2013 GE found that online news portals were more objective compared to traditional media as it gave equal coverage to BN and PR, both in terms of quantity and quality. New media are now a platform for alternative voices; opposition politicians successfully use them to circumvent tight controls over traditional media and circulate information alternative to BN doctrine.

This research found that initially, PR politicians and bloggers were a step ahead of their competitors in using new media for communication due to limited access to traditional media. However, findings showed that BN, with its deep pocket resources, is trying to "normalise" the Internet and dominate online media, similar to the offline environment where it monopolises traditional media. There appears to be some evidence that supports the Normalisation Theory as BN, to a certain extent, seems to be succeeding in the cyber-world with PR losing its previous online advantage. BN's online progress is the result of the engagement of cyber-troopers, bloggers and social media activists to create content and chatter to support them. A pro-BN media consultant said he was asked to handle his party's new media unit, which consists of Facebook and Twitter users, as well as bloggers. He said the unit has trained more than 2,000 people, 20% of whom are active online.

Online advertising is also another strategy. During the 2013 GE, BN's advertising expenditure increased dramatically as it outbid and outspent PR for online advertising on Facebook or Google, which helped it to recruit more followers and increase online reach as the promoted posts were shared among their network of family and friends. PR was unable to match BN's financial muscle when it came to online advertising, and their cyber-soldiers consisted mainly of supporters and volunteers dedicated to the cause and motivated by ideology.

Based on this premise, it appears that new media may not be an agent of change as previously thought. However, this presumption does not take into account other offline factors. More financial resources are needed to set up real-world media organisations, such as newspapers, television or radio, compared to online. Licences are needed to operate traditional media outlets in Malaysia, which is not necessary for online media. Thus, opposition political parties are able to operate their own online television and radio stations such as Ubah.TV (DAP) and Hijau.FM (PAS). Lower online entry costs reduce the entry barrier for the participation of minority groups, social movements and individuals, especially for smaller, resource-poor political parties.

It is submitted that new media is another area for political contestation but minority voices are still able to find a space to operate in there. There is some form of Equalisation Theory in Malaysia because new media enable minority voices to appear and compete with the majority in the public sphere, something almost impossible if there were only traditional media. Opposition politicians, political parties, bloggers and civil society groups have flourished and grown in tandem with new media development as the Internet has helped them to improve organisation, mobilisation,

information dissemination, fund-raising and internal communication. Marginalised groups and individuals now have a new media platform to advance their movements by circumventing government-controlled traditional media and directly disseminating their agenda and information to the public, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers.

#### 4.2. Public Opinion and Spiral of Silence

This study found that prior to the advent of the Internet, politicians and political parties had slow and limited feedback about their policies, often six to 12 months later at meet-the-public forums. Feedback from traditional media on various issues and policies was also limited as communication was mainly one-way. Today, politicians obtain instant feedback via new media and use them to gauge public opinion. One politician uses Twitter to “gauge how people feel about a certain issue.” He said, “It’s a testing ground ... for certain issues, I’m not sure whether ... I should fight for the issue or not. So I just test it out, gauge it, then I decide ... it helps me also to decide what issues that I should be focusing on.” In fact, the government had to reverse certain policies, for example, scrapping the ceiling rebates on smartphones due to public uproar. New media are catalysts that allow issues to surface, facilitators that amplify and shape public opinion. This is a positive development as they keep authorities, government and politicians on their toes.

However, despite the presence and use of new media, there has been little change on major policies such as water supply, transportation, religion, education and electoral reform. Structurally, power still lies with the authorities that control all major arms of government. The study found that some civil society groups successfully used new media to champion their cause and create public awareness but were unable to pressure the government to agree to structural changes; actual success in reversing or amending crucial policies requires other ground strategies.

The study also showed that online chatter is not necessarily indicative of ground sentiment. Netizens are mostly urbanites below 40; their concerns may differ from other age groups living in less urban areas. Hence, the question is whether online public opinion represents all voices in Malaysia. It is submitted that politicians ought to supplement their online feedback with information from grassroots and community leaders to obtain a complete picture. Nevertheless, cyber-public opinion is still important for politicians and parties when crafting out policies as it reflects views from a segment of society that is politically aware and knowledgeable.

New media has enabled minority opinions to break out of the spiral of silence because it reduces the fear of isolation. Before the emergence of new media, these were often side-lined and received very little space in traditional media. Pro-opposition bloggers especially, could not find any space in traditional media to air their views. However, with new media, they have a chance to receive public attention; with Netizen support, people feel encouraged to speak up in public instead of behind closed doors. One blogger said new media has been essential in helping him spearhead his social movement. He added, “Without ... new media, Facebook ... Twitter ... blog, there’s no way we would be able to get the ... message out effectively.”

This study shows that new media has enabled minority voices to emerge in the public sphere, not just online but also offline. Before the Internet emerged, minority opinions were often sidelined and received very little space in traditional media, but with new media minority views have an equal chance of receiving public attention. Online competition has resulted in traditional media to include minority voices cater to public demand for an objective and unbiased media.

### 4.3. Accessibility, Media Impact and Power

Traditional media are a valuable resource for authorities to maintain their interests and restrict alternative voices. However, this power is being challenged by new media. Opposition politicians and bloggers in this study said they were more reliant and adept at using new media due to limited access to traditional media. Almost all respondents credited new media as a factor that helped the opposition make huge gains during the 2008 GE. One blogger said that “in the 2008 General Election, you saw more people politically aware and conscientized [sic] ...” BN was then over-confident about its traditional media control and ignored new media. Another blogger recalled, “There was [sic] very few blogs supporting the government ... at that time and the opposition took full advantage ... [and] used the alternative media to the maximum.” The BN has since caught up after the 2008 GE, said one politician, adding that, “it’s a [sic] equal share of the [online] media now ... Now it’s 50-50.” Prime Minister Najib has the most number of Twitter followers, he said.

Online competition has caused traditional media to be more open to non-establishment views. Opposition PR political leaders participated in radio talk shows and newspaper vendors were more willing to distribute party newsletters. This trend continued in the 2013 GE with some private traditional media adopting the “balanced coverage” business model to compete with pro-government media and increase revenue. Malay-language newspaper Sinar Harian accepted an advertisement from opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP), while radio station Business FM (BFM) and cable TV Astro Awani gave room to alternative voices. It made good business sense to cater to public demands for unbiased and objective news reports as this distinguished them from competitors and attracted audiences. The Internet has pushed traditional media to evolve out of its comfort zone.

It is argued that media liberalisation impacts politics. When PAS was invited to participate in televised debates, this caused a power shift in the party as media attention propelled the moderate, non-ulamak, Western-educated leaders who could speak confidently in public to the forefront rather than the less sophisticated local grassroots ulamak (religious) leaders, said one politician.

### 4.4. Direct Communication, Interactivity and Engagement

With online advancements, politicians now deal and interact directly with citizens via new media. People bypass traditional media by using new media to communicate, connect and deliberate online directly with governments, political parties, social movements, political leaders and actors (Negrine, 2008). Individual citizens have created new networks of news and information such as Media Perak’s blogger network. Blogger 5 built up his cyber-community through his readers and

followers. He said, "So normally we'll ... share the same ... thinking. And that helps me feel this camaraderie ... So if ... I write something and then somebody whack[s] me, I have friends who ... support me." Politicians can also be part of social media networks created by neighbourhood communities to keep track of their constituency.

Communication is now increasingly two-way as online conversations transition from blogs to social media. Voters expect politicians to interact and engage with them; one blogger actually tweeted a Member of Parliament (MP) to test his responsiveness. He said that the MP would reply every time; the MP would say, "I'm busy at the moment, but I've taken note and it will be duly dealt with." The blogger added, "... now I know for myself that this guy is actually using social media and he's using it well. He might be busy but he responded ... This I respect. That's the way it should be." Politicians cannot hide behind their ivory towers as people expect them to be available to answer queries and address issues. Social media facilitates greater public involvement and reduce social distance, making the politician more engaged with the public.

They also expect politicians from both divides to debate on issues as well. In the run-up to the 2013 GE, online and offline debates between politicians from both sides attracted a huge audience. A BN politician said he participated in an online debate with a PR state assemblyman and was surprised that his opponent "ran away halfway through the debate [as] he didn't respond to some of the questions." The politician said that at first, he was afraid to participate as he was unsure how it worked; his opponent was also a better orator. However, when the results were announced, he was jubilant and said the online debate gave him a chance to inform people about the government's initiatives and achievements, which was what his constituents were interested in.

The study showed that the Internet's full interactive potential has restored some political power to Malaysian citizens who are now part of politics, policy- and decision-making. However, the impact is only on minor issues such as the removal of the RM500 rebate ceiling cap for smartphone purchases. On major policy issues such as water, transportation, religion, education and electoral reform, there has been little change despite new media use. Structurally, power still lies in the authorities which control all major arms of government. Civil society groups like Bersih 2.0 have successfully used new media to create public awareness of electoral issues but have had minimal success in pressuring the government to agree to all of its eight demands such as cleaning up the electoral roll. It has only succeeded in pressuring the government to one of its demands, which was the use of indelible ink during elections. The Internet empowers citizens to use it for publicity and awareness creation about their cause but success in reforming, reversing or amending crucial policies requires other ground strategies.

#### **4.5. Cyber-Communities, Crowd Power and Funding**

Web 2.0 encourages even greater public participation as anyone can produce, edit and share content on sites like Wikipedia, YouTube or Facebook. The Internet user is a co-producer or produser (producer and user). This is clearly evident from political memes – images, video or text – that were modified or created by individuals using applications such as MemeGenerator (<http://memegenerator.net/>) that spread rapidly over social media in Malaysia; some of which

can be found at the Malaysia Memes Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/Malaysiamemes>). Anyone with basic computer literacy is able to create his or her own website, blog, social network pages and videos. This gives ordinary people a chance to join the political discussion and ensures that cyber-space is not just dominated by government or political parties.

People became creative at editing and creating videos. Long videos were shortened into three to four minute clips; video parodies were created. Controversial Malaysian rapper Namewee collaborated with others to create an election video entitled "Wake Up!" (Vinod, 2013). Individuals wrote articles about their experience as overseas voters, Election Commission officers or polling agents (Hoe, 2013; Lim, 2013). Social media were used to start a viral campaign Jom Balik Undi (Come Home to Vote) that urged overseas Malaysians to return home to vote or register as postal voters. One initiator said they wanted to emulate successful social media campaigns such as Obama's 2008 election and the Arab Spring to galvanise Malaysian expatriates' support and solidarity with Malaysians at home ("Malaysians plan 'Jom Balik Undi' campaign," 2013). People posted pictures of their support at <https://www.facebook.com/JomBalikUndiMalaysia> and stated their reasons for voting in the 2013 GE. Web 2.0 is about harnessing the power and wisdom of the crowd (O'Reilly, 2005) which makes it a powerful political tool because democracy is about numbers (Canetti, 1978).

Crowds can be easily mobilised through interactive Web 2.0 environments (Cox, 1999). Anyone can gain access and mobilise a crowd, not just pressure groups, political parties or organisations. One example was the Malaysian Spring during 2013 GE, initiated by architect Ng Sek San, who said people felt alienated and disconnected from the political and democratic process for too long. He added, "The simple gesture of making a flower and planting them in the street is the first step to get them involved. It is something for people to do, for communities to come together at this time of political shift." Political parties, bloggers and civil society groups like Tindak Malaysia (TM) have used the Internet to recruit supporters and volunteers for projects such as voter education and registration campaigns. TM are active social media users with Facebook and Twitter accounts (<https://www.facebook.com/TindakActionMalaysia>) as well as a website and an online forum (<http://www.tindakmalaysia.org/home-2>; <http://www.tindakmalaysia.com/forum.php>). They created voter education videos to guide people, especially first-time voters, through the voting process, that were circulated widely through social networks, as well as offline voter education sessions and training for polling and counting agents that were publicised widely online. TM must be credited for having successfully recruited people via social media to become polling and counting agents as well as trainers. From just a few people concerned about Malaysia's socio-political situation, TM evolved into a key civil society group through its innovative Web use. It is not surprising that governments are concerned that such crowd-mobilising ability by individuals through online means could erode their grip on power.

Web 2.0 also facilitates crowd-funding for individuals and organisations, which typically raises funds through small amounts of money from a large number of people, usually via the Internet. In Malaysia, opposition parties and some bloggers have also used crowd-funding successfully. For example, opposition MP Tony Pua managed to raise more than RM200,000 to fund his defence in

his legal suit with Syabas, a private company that supplies water to households in the state of Selangor. Civil society organisations like Bersih 2.0 and bloggers have also received funds and donations. Web 2.0 also supports traditional fund-raising activities like dinners by publicising such events so that it reaches out to more people as compared with traditional sources.

#### **4.6. Accountability and Watchdog Functions**

The study found that new media is performing a better Fourth Estate role compared to traditional media. Online news portals like Malaysiakini and The Malaysian Insider are publishing stories that traditional media dare not print due to licensing renewals. For many urbanites, online media are the new mainstream and the market has responded positively with the number of Internet news portals increasing. The Fifth Estate contributes to the watchdog role as socio-political bloggers monitor the political scene and contribute exposés and articles. Often, they provide leads which online and traditional news media pick up to investigate further. Even ordinary people can be watchdogs, such as the video which exposed judicial fixing. In 2002, a businessman accidentally recorded an eight-minute video clip on his mobile phone of a prominent senior lawyer's conversation about the manipulation of judicial appointments by Malaysia's top leaders through political intermediaries and business cronies. The video clip, which was leaked online, resulted in a Royal Commission of Inquiry being set up to investigate the matter.

Thus, politicians and parties have to be alert at all times. They are not just being observed by the media; ordinary people are also looking at them and can expose any wrongdoings they see. One media consultant said, "If ... you do something bad and somebody does find out, there is a possibility you end up on the Internet." Citizens today demand more accountability. This puts greater pressure on politicians who will find it hard to avoid answering difficult questions. Previously, government agencies and political parties could hide many things as there were fewer watchdogs. People rarely questioned traditional media news during pre-Internet days as there were no other avenues to check. Today, people do not take what they read at face value, often using new media to verify any information. One blogger uses his mobile phone to access Parliament's website and check Hansard to confirm that the MP's statements were reported accurately by the media. Another blogger stated that people today are more sceptical and check the background of any politician. "If you have any skeletons ... they'll find it, trust me," he said, adding that political parties have to be careful about the candidates they select for elections. One consultant added that if there are allegations about the politicians, party leaders have to answer to the public.

#### **4.7. Cyber-Warfare**

According to Mill (1859 reprinted 1974), the media is a public space for groups and individuals to express their views so that truth eventually emerges through public exchange of argument and counter-argument. However, the study found that both BN and PR used cyber-troopers to conduct cyber-attacks and cyber-warfare; influential socio-political bloggers wrote articles supporting either BN or PR. During the 2013 GE, cyber-troopers identified and targeted opposition "soldiers"

to discredit and derail their messages, thus reducing impact and influence. UMNO's new media unit had a network of bloggers, cyber-troopers and social media users whose purpose was to counter pro-opposition new media content.

This study found that the online public sphere was rife with manipulation, exaggerations and distortion of information for political agenda; one respondent participated in a radio forum where a panelist justified the use of purposeful disinformation to ruin a person's reputation. The respondents spoke about the dissemination of half-truths and gossip via new media, in addition to false information, visuals and photographs, often causing misperceptions, emotional distress and confusion. Truth often becomes the casualty in a cyber-war and low-quality information affects the competence and rationality of citizens to make informed decisions.

Vulgarity, insults and foul language are more prevalent online than offline due to editorial gatekeeping. One politician said he ignores people who name-call him; he does not engage them as their intention was to make him feel like "shit" and a "useless fella." Online anonymity reduces inhibitions; people are more likely to name call when they cannot physically see each other. Another politician said online abuse happens because "everybody wants their few minutes' worth of attention and glory by blasting. It's a blast culture now. When you blast, you gain ... notoriety for being a 'blaster.'" Whistle-blowers benefit from anonymity but this power can be abused, harming innocent victims. The credibility of anonymous bloggers and reliability of information is suspect because no one can identify or locate them.

One consultant said that social media manipulation occurs through the use of fake accounts and followers, which misrepresent the actual impact and influence of politicians. Online news media services such as Malaysiakini have been hacked and disrupted due to Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, making news access difficult for Malaysians. Independent news portal Digital News Asia (DNA) said there was evidence that certain Internet service providers (ISPs) interfered with access to alternative news portals and Opposition content in cyberspace (Yapp, 2013).

Thus, the suggestion that new media are a better public sphere to serve the "free marketplace of ideas" is still left to be seen. The media are supposed to educate the public on the meaning and significance of facts they encounter daily as good democratic decision-making is linked to quality information in the media. Citizen competence and rationality is important because the inability to make informed choices affects the legitimacy of democratic elections (Dahl, 1989). However, instead of being more enlightened, online users, bombarded with lies, half-truths and gossip, may become more confused. It is submitted that new media have disorientated citizens instead of empowering them with knowledge to aid their political decision-making.

#### **4.8. Media Regulation**

While there have been calls to regulate the Internet, the respondents had mixed views. Those in favour of regulation argued that content control is needed as multi-racial, multi-religious Malaysia faces ethnic and religious clashes if everyone is allowed to post online without restrictions. Prime

examples are hate speech relating to race and religion. Malaysia experienced racial riots in 1969 which led to the suspension of Parliament for almost two years.

The respondents feared that Malaysians are not sufficiently media-savvy. Unlike the traditional media's editorial gatekeepers, the free-for-all laissez-faire online environment allows anyone to post anything, which may result in chaos and anarchy. One blogger felt that Malaysia needs laws due to its multi-racial nature. He said, "So we must have these laws to make sure that people don't incite hatred. I think even in ... America ... there's ... hate laws, which you must have because we ... live in a multi-racial community," he said. The online world is problematic as "anyone can say anything they want" due to lack of control, he said. Hate speech which could incite riots should be controlled, he added.

The cyber-war between BN and PR has caused confusion; politicians, civil society and online news portals have faced cyber-attacks and harassment. Hence, there is a case for some Internet regulation, especially on hate speech and defamation. Free speech is never absolute; its boundary ends where it tramples on fundamental liberties and rights of others or affects law and order. However, such rules should be as minimal as possible for democracy to flourish. Some respondents felt that there are sufficient laws to regulate the Internet.

Online anonymity makes it difficult to trace and identify troublemakers who use proxy servers and hide behind cyber-walls that only experts can crack; there are also legal jurisdictional obstacles. Even with laws and regulations, enforcement is another issue. One media consultant said online controls are impractical as Internet Protocol (IP) addresses for blogs can be traced but not for Facebook and Twitter.

Instead of government top-down laws, self-regulation might be a better model for online media. For example, the Malaysian advertising industry practises self-regulation through its Association of Accredited Advertising Agencies of Malaysia (4As). Such moves raise ethical standards and instill confidence among the public, thus avoiding more restrictive laws being introduced into the cyber-world. Also, one should not under-estimate crowd or collective intelligence (Levy, 1999) or wisdom of the masses. Society is aware of out-of-bound (OB) markers and Internet users would not hesitate to act on any wayward members. Peer pressure could be more acceptable to Netizens than authorities regulating the cyber-world. Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that racial riots could erupt due to provocative statements. Other than outrage and criticisms, there have not been any actual racial or religious riots that were attributed to online content.

#### **4.9. Political Communication Strategies**

The findings indicate that digital media is an essential part of political communication but not the main strategy as there is still a digital divide in Malaysia. Findings in this study showed that online media are more effective in reaching out to certain demographics, i.e., urbanites less than 40 years old. To reach rural areas especially in East Malaysia, traditional media such as television and radio are more suitable, said one media consultant. A blogger who compared Internet coverage in Malaysia and the 2008 GE results found that BN lost in areas with 3G coverage. Digital divide is an



issue in Malaysia, which is why online newspaper Malaysiakini has been trying to apply for a printing licence to reach sectors not covered by new media.

It is submitted that different media strategies are needed for rural and urban settings as voters have various concerns, needs and media dependencies: One size does not fit all. Political communication has to be multi-pronged, using online and offline media as well as on-the-ground interpersonal communication to fit the situation and achieve the desired end result. The study found that BN's control of traditional media meant it had an avenue to disseminate its campaign messages to the public, which was why it focused on low-key *ceramah* kelompok (cluster rallies) and door-to-door visits during the 2013 GE. Such small gatherings enabled the candidate to interact directly and personally with voters to clarify any doubts or questions; in turn, these became opinion leaders and disseminated the message to others.

In comparison, PR organised large mass rallies to explain their manifesto as they wanted to draw people away from traditional media. On-the-ground interpersonal communication was important to introduce new "parachuted" candidates to locals in contested areas. Competition from hundreds of other contesting candidates during general elections means that it is difficult to obtain media coverage. Not everyone is connected online, which is why politicians and parties still need to work the ground. Online popularity also does not guarantee actual votes as Netizens are not necessarily constituents. However, they are able to sway public opinion on issues and hence, important political stakeholders. Ignoring them would be detrimental as BN found out in 2008 GE.

Language is another critical factor when it comes to Internet reach; most online content is in English but many Malaysians are not fluent in this language. One Malay-language blogger observed a difference between English- and Malay-language blogs. He said, "English blogs is [sic] more on ideas. They talk about what is democracy, what is poverty ... [whereas] Malay blogs will talk about, will show a person or a family who is poor," he said, adding that the challenge was to digest ideas in English-language blogs and present to the Malay blogosphere in a simplified, easily understood manner. To bridge this language divide so that ideas in the English-language online world can enter into the Malay-language arena, some bloggers scour the former for ideas and write articles in the latter so that Malay-speaking Netizens will have access to views and issues that they do not usually encounter. One blogger wrote informally in dialect instead of formal Malay as that helped to connect him to more people, especially youths. People have a "schema," he said, and the use of formal Malay gave the impression of being "too academic" and less approachable.

Others have their blogs translated or re-written into Malay so that the Malay-speaking online community can receive alternative news to the current narrative that is propagated by the BN-controlled traditional media. For the Internet to achieve its full potential in politics, bloggers must reach the masses in their *lingua franca*. If they interact only with those who share the same language and beliefs, they are trapped in their own enclaves or silos. Bloggers and Internet users will not be effective if they preach only to the converted.

However, not all politicians have adapted to the cyber-world, especially those over 45, who struggle with using new media. These digital adoptees outsource by employing others to manage

their Internet communications. Having technical skills does not mean that one is able to manage cyber-content. One blogger remarked, "And ... there's a big ... gap ... [between a] young guy trying to portray as a matured politician." It is suggested that politicians should be more personally involved in their online communication and engage those with political maturity to manage their online persona carefully to ensure congruency with offline identities.

Politicians need to exercise caution about what they post online; anyone can tweet but the key is how and what one tweets about. Limited understanding of cyber-culture, cyber-values and Netiquette can cause social media crisis. Some politicians have been accused of using racist language or passing sexist comments on social media. They have to be careful as any political faux pas on social media can go viral very fast. One politician was asked by his Twitter follower to compare the suitability of BN and PR candidates for elections at a certain constituency and he tweeted about the PR candidate's pregnancy. When she found out, she accused him of being a male chauvinist. The same politician has had police reports lodged against him when he tweeted about the state government's dress code for billboard models.

As digital natives, younger politicians are very comfortable in the cyber-world and can easily connect with Netizens. However, this does not necessarily correspond to actual votes. Other external factors need to be considered: Demographics, psychographics, political structure as well as socio-economic conditions. One politician observed that due to time constraints and long work hours, urban voters prefer to use new media to connect with their political representatives, while ground contact is more important to rural voters. Politicians in large urban constituencies find it hard to connect personally with the huge voting population, which is why they use media, traditional or new, to reach as many as possible, especially during elections when coverage is limited. Although mediated communication seems impersonal, it is submitted that urban politicians can still use new media to create a personal connection with their constituents if they individually reply to online messages; such virtual contact creates a digital bond despite lack of face-to-face interaction.

This study's findings suggest that conversations are now occurring on social media rather than blogs or websites, which are mainly used to issue statements or archive events. People prefer two-way communication, both engagement and discussion, which is why social media are now used for publicity, promotion and political persuasion. One media consultant manages social media crises by getting a team to participate in the conversation and steering its direction towards resolving the issue in the client's favour. It is argued that the old method of bombarding people with information is passé and ineffective as Internet users who experience information overload may become disinterested and switch off completely, ironically resulting in messages not reaching the target audience.

#### **4.10. E-Democracy: Development and Obstacles**

Fenchurch (1994) suggests that new media can emerge as a major tool as they have created conditions for electronic democracy. This study found that new media have impacted the electoral and voting process in Malaysia. One politician highlighted the fact that voters can check their

particulars and status through the Election Commission website, as well as identify phantom or non-voters. Reports of voting lists and insider information have also surfaced online, instead of being swept under the carpet.

However, the study found that selective sampling of news exposure and “walled” exists in Malaysia: The “silo effect” where people confine themselves to news similar to their worldview to avoid cognitive dissonance. Facebook users associate with likeminded people and timeline newsfeeds allow news and information that users are interested in while ignoring the rest. One blogger said that Internet connection did not guarantee political exposure as he had encountered people who, despite having online access, were unaware of political issues as they paid more attention to their business, job or industry.

The study found that some inherent structural difficulties cannot be solved by new media. In the proportional representation system, electoral system manipulation such as gerrymandering and mal-apportionment can affect the result. This was evident in 2013 GE: BN formed the government with 60% of parliamentary seats despite winning only 47% of popular vote. Online media hype does not necessarily reflect ground reality. The researcher observed that Netizens who followed and contributed to the virtual hype during the 2013 GE believed that a new PR government would replace BN; when the results were announced, many were disappointed. Virtual hype was an urban phenomenon that did not translate to ground votes in more rural areas. It is argued that slacktivism and online information dissemination by keyboard warriors via social networks has limited effect on political activism; actual political change cannot occur unless people are motivated and inspired to participate in offline ground activities. The Internet is not a panacea for inherent problems in democracy despite claims that it has improved the process.

Although there have been criticisms that the Internet has had minimal impact on formal, institutionally-based democracy as it was neither widening nor deepening political participation nor engagement between citizens and political leaders, this was not necessarily the case in Malaysia because new media have played a significant role in transforming the political environment and enabling political actors to challenge the status quo by increasing the level of citizen political participation. New media have also enlarged the restrictive public sphere of traditional media, allowing more alternative voices and views to emerge. However, despite being an important stakeholder in Malaysian politics, there are many other factors that need to be in place before any political change can occur such as the political and electoral structure, demographics, psychographics as well as the socio-economic climate.

## 5. Conclusion

Previously, elite gatekeepers and institutions of power monopolised and controlled the centralised traditional media, with citizens being passive recipients of political information, which was how BN became the longest-serving elected government in the world that is still in office. Opposition parties were unsurprisingly early adopters of new media as a means to circumvent tight controls over traditional media and challenge the official narrative. They used new media successfully in

the 2008 GE, which resulted in BN parties and politicians being caught off-guard and flatfooted by the opposition's circulation of online information and political propaganda. BN has since learned its lesson and now has massive online presence to match the opposition; its many cyber-troopers are trained to engage in online psychological warfare. PR lost its Internet dominance as BN acclimatised to politics in cyberspace; both are now competing for the online audience.

The Internet's interactive Web 2.0 platform allows for greater deliberation and exchange between politicians, journalists and citizens, who are now more politically aware, involved and interactive due to exposure to online information. It is argued that politicians and parties are evolving from the normal one-way, top-down form of communication into two-way interactive mode of communication. New media's architecture, especially Web 2.0, encourages Netizens to immediately respond with feedback, instead of just being passive information recipients. Politicians and parties have direct access to voters and vice-versa; they have to be more responsive, transparent and accountable to their constituents who are now vocal, assertive and demanding of their political representatives. The Fourth and Fifth Estates, consisting of online media and individual Internet users, closely monitor their performance. Voters often question politicians and their parties' policies and platform, and demand debates between political opponents to evaluate their stands on various issues.

However, there has been little change on major policies such as water, transportation, religion, education and electoral reform, although the government has adjusted or reviewed some minor decisions due to strong negative feedback from citizens. Structurally, power still resides in the BN government. Non-governmental organisations have had some success using new media to create public awareness about their issues, but structural change and political reform are still limited due to gerrymandering and mal-apportionment in the electoral system. The Internet empowers citizens so that they can use it to publicise and create awareness about their cause, but success in political reform requires more than just awareness. New media are just an enabler to help citizens push their agenda forward; to succeed in reversing or amending crucial policies, citizens need proper offline ground strategies as well.

Blogs and social media resemble soapboxes for people to air their views, observations, and vent their frustrations. New media are a digital public sphere with diverse views in the marketplace of ideas; they are a platform for political discourse unlike the controlled traditional media. However, the cyber-war between BN and PR has caused lies, half-truths and gossip to circulate, leading to confusion and disinformation. This affects the quality of democratic decision-making as citizens are not able to make informed decisions without proper information and discussion. Consequently, some supported greater legislative control of cyberspace, believing that Malaysians are insufficiently mature to handle the free flow of information. However, it is argued that it would be retrospective to clamp down on new media. The Internet's de-centralised structure also makes it difficult for any government to fully control its environment; any attempt to regulate the Internet can be seen as a move to stifle free speech, an essential part of democracy.

In summary, this case study shows clearly that the advent of the Internet has led to complexity in the political process as politicians and political parties learn to deal with the autonomous new

media which the Malaysian government is struggling to control. Other than managing interpersonal ground campaigns and traditional media, Malaysian politicians face additional pressure as they navigate the murky online political environment, often making mistakes and dealing with social media crises. New media is akin to a genie released from its bottle as politicians, political parties and the public strive to manage its use and impact.

This case study shows clearly that new media use in Malaysian politics is largely neutral and does not guarantee greater democratic freedom, at least for now. The Internet's role is to ignite and encourage alternative ideas to grow and flourish in the public sphere. External factors such as the structure of the electoral system and political institutions still play a part in determining whether such ideas find fertile ground in the polity who can ultimately bring about political change via the ballot box. New media in Malaysia are another political tool: They can reform the process or maintain an existing regime.

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