# Impact of the Internet and New Media on the Malaysian Elections



Tan Tarn How
Arun Mahizhnan
(With the research assistance of Fadli Fawzi)

Institute of Policy Studies

# CONTENTS

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Malaysian general election in 2008 was a watershed event in the country's political history. The ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, while it won the election, lost a two-thirds majority it had maintained over four decades. The stunning losses for the incumbent and the gains for the Opposition have been characterised as a political tsunami. The question now frequently raised is whether the Internet caused the tsunami.

The purpose of this report is to assess the role and impact of the Internet and other new information communication technologies during the Malaysian elections. This report is also intended as an additional input in the review of Singapore's own new media landscape, especially its regulatory regime.

The study offers the following findings:

Malaysia has a very different regulatory system for the Internet. The Bill of Guarantees ensures that the Internet is not censored. There are no special laws governing the Internet other than those that exist in the offline world. There are also no special laws laid out just for electoral purposes. This liberal legal environment has spawned a plethora of websites, blogs, podcasts, videocasts and emails on the Internet, and allowed for virtually unfettered communication among the public. Though Malaysia does not enjoy a very wide penetration rate for the Internet, the secondary penetration through the re-transmission of Internet content through mobile phones, VCDs, printouts and word of mouth reached an exceptionally wide audience. The fact the mainstream media was almost entirely under the control of BN and did not provide a reasonably fair coverage to the Opposition, and the fact the government was seen to be inefficient, ineffective and corrupt, drove the public to the new media and made the latter more influential than it would otherwise have been.

The biggest impact of the Internet and the mobile phone was not, however, as a mere communication channel but in their network effect. They made individuals aware that "I'm not alone in this", emboldening many to contemplate voting for the Opposition and empowering others to act in concert. Thus the Internet was not the main cause of the tsunami, but it certainly added to the tsunami effect through its network power.

The second most interesting finding is that the usual fear that an unshackled Internet would produce widespread chaos and violence did not materialise. Experienced commentators believe that Malaysians are learning to use the new media with circumspection and restraint.

Third, the ruling coalition's failure to understand the real power of the new media and engage it effectively and productively cost BN heavy damage in credibility and electoral success.

However, the most potent causes of the electoral losses for the BN lay, as they often do, in the offline realities, such as poor governance, corruption, ethnic inequality and religious tensions.

In comparison, Singapore has a highly rated "good government" and a very restrictive regulatory regime for the Internet as a whole and especially for electoral purposes. However, when one examines the rationale behind this regulatory framework, it becomes apparent that there are a number of internal contradictions and inconsistencies. Even without reference to the Malaysian election experience these need to be resolved in order to make the system rational and sustainable.

To the extent the Malaysian experience is relevant to Singapore, the way the Malaysian public conducted itself in the cyber world suggests that the probability of rational and judicious use of the new media is not beyond the ken of the Singapore public. Certainly, the notion that people who are sensible and responsible online would behave irrationally or irresponsible once they go online was not borne out at all in Malaysia — the online world very much mirrored the offline one. There is no reason that the same would not apply in Singapore.

However, if there were to be serious abuse, there are sufficient offline deterrents and mechanisms to retrieve the situation from the brink of disaster.

In any case, when a state is faced with only a limited control over the new media, the smarter option is to, first, build and strengthen the social immune system rather than continue with an arcane and unenforceable and hence unsustainable control system, and second, engage the new medium.

Jailing citizens for fear that they will abuse the new media is becoming, as Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew cautioned "a quaint, a quixotic, esoteric appendage of the world."

# INTRODUCTION

> "Blogs don't worry me."
> — Zainuddin Maidin

> "We made the biggest mistake in thinking that it was not important."
> — Abdullah Badawi

The speaker of the first statement was not a Minister of Agriculture or a Minister for Transport. He was no less than the Minister for Information in Malaysia. A man who ought to have known. He was speaking before the start of the Malaysian general election in 2008, discrediting the Internet as something "used mainly to book budget airline tickets and get entertainment news."[1]

The speaker of the second statement was the Prime Minister of Malaysia, admitting a grave error of judgment at the end of a disastrous election in which his ruling party, though it won the election, lost a two-thirds majority for the first time since 1969.

The outcome of the Malaysian election held on March 8, 2008 has been characterised as a political tsunami because of its extraordinarily unexpected level of opposition gain in the popular vote and parliamentary seats. The question now frequently raised is whether the Internet caused the tsunami. Some would say yes, that indeed it was the main cause and some would argue that the Internet was merely a channel through which the tsunami flowed. Others hold positions between these two diametrically opposite views.

The purpose of this report is to assess the role and impact of the Internet and other new information communication technologies (ICTs) or new media during the Malaysian elections. This report is also intended as an additional input as Singapore reviews its own new media landscape, especially its regulatory regime, to offer useful comparisons with a neighbour whose political, economic and social history and current practices have a high relevance to Singapore.

The report was commissioned by the Advisory Council on the Impact of New Media on Society (AIMS) on March 4, 2008, to be completed within a month. Due to limitations of time and resources, this report confines itself to the events and contents that gained prominence during the period between the announcement of the election on February 13 and the polling day on March 8. Also because of the limitations, the report relies heavily on interviews with key players and media coverage rather than on extensive first-hand surveys.

---

[1] "'Blogs Don't Worry Me,' Says Zainuddin Maidin," *New Paper*, February 17, 2008.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In assessing the impact of Internet and other ICTs on Malaysian elections, this report attempts to address the following specific questions:
- What was the role and impact of the Internet, the mobile phone and the VCD on the outcome of the election?
- What was the interplay between ICT and non-ICT factors that shaped the outcome of the election?
- Did a relatively unregulated ICT environment succumb to its viral, disinformational dangers, and what was the overall effect on the elections?
- What are the implications for Singapore?

## SCOPE OF RESEARCH

Given the limitations of time and resources, the scope of research has been confined to the following specific areas:
- The period between the announcement of election on February 13 and polling day on March 8.
- Content created by political parties, candidates and citizens; and platforms such as blogs, news websites, online forums and YouTube.
- Content channelled through Internet, mobile phones and VCDs, and related print activities.

## METHODOLOGY

Although extensive surveys of representative samples of the Malaysian electorate would have yielded more rigorous data and analysis, given the limited time, we feel the following provide a reasonable basis for our assessments:
- Review of materials on the Internet and in SMSes
- Interviews with academics, analysts, bloggers, news website editors, politicians and ordinary voters
- Review of media and academic literature

# INTERVIEWEES

Altogether, 30 people were interviewed for the study:

Academics

| | |
|---|---|
| Azmi Shahrom | University of Malaysia |
| Shamsul AB | Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia |
| Baharuddin Aziz | Universiti Teknologi MARA |
| Mohammed Zin Nordin | Universiti Sains Malaysia |
| Wong Chin Huat | Monash University |
| Tricia Yeoh | Centre for Public Policy Studies |
| Gavin Khoo Kay Pheng | Gerakan think tank SEDAR |
| Ooi Kee Beng | Institute of Southeast Asian Studies |
| Farish Noor | Nanyang Technological University |
| Kannan Loganathan | HELP University |

Politicians/ Party insiders

| | |
|---|---|
| Lee Hwa Beng | Malaysian Chinese Association |
| Tony Pua | Democratic Action Party |
| Jeff Ooi | Democratic Action Party |
| Aasil K Ahmad | Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party) |
| Nathaniel Tan | Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party) |
| Shahrir Abdul Samad | United Malays National Organisation |
| P Ramasamy | Democratic Action Party |

Bloggers

| | |
|---|---|
| Raja Petra Kamarudin | *Malaysia Today* |
| Haris Ibrahim | *People's Parliament*, also an activist |
| Ahirudin Attan | *Rocky Bru,* also head of National Alliance of Bloggers |
| Zan Azlee | *Fat Bidin* |
| Leong Joo Ti | *What A Lulu*, also an activist |

Activists

| | |
|---|---|
| Tengku Nazaruddin | Get An MP campaign |
| Ambrose Poh | Get An MP campaign |
| PS Nathan | Get An MP campaign |
| Malik Imtiaz Sarwar | Human rights lawyer |

Media professionals

| | |
|---|---|
| Steven Gan | *Malaysiakini* news website |
| Chang Teck Peng | *Merdeka Review* news website |
| Jacqueline Ann Surin | *Malaysia Votes* news website |
| Zainon Ahmad | *The Sun* newspaper |

# BACKGROUND

## The 2008 Election

The 12th Malaysian general election was held on March 8, 2008. Parliament was dissolved on February 13, and nominations were taken on February 24. State assemblies other than Sarawak's were also dissolved and their elections took place on the same day as the federal parliamentary election. The incumbent 13-party Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition included coalition leader United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and heavyweights Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The main Opposition parties were the Democratic Action Party (DAP), the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR).

Among the election issues were the leadership of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, inflation, crime, governance, corruption, independence of the judiciary, free and fair elections, racial equality and multiracialism, and the mainstream media. The Opposition also campaigned on the platform of denying BN a two-thirds majority in the Federal Parliament.

In all, there were 222 parliamentary seats and 505 state assembly seats. Opposition parties won 82 seats, or 37 per cent of parliamentary seats, while BN secured the remaining 140 seats or 63 per cent of the seats. It was the first time since the 1969 election that the coalition did not win a two-third majority, which meant it could not amend the Constitution at will. It was also its worst result since the first polls in 1957. The Opposition won five of the 13 state legislatures, compared to only one in the last election in 2004. The results were considered a shattering setback for Badawi and his government.

## Mainstream Media

In 2007, Malaysia ranked 124 out of 169 countries in the Reporters Without Borders 2008 press freedom index, compared to 92 in 2006 and 113 the year before. All of the major mainstream newspapers, television and radio channels are owned by the component parties of the Barisan Nasional, by their proxies or by entities friendly to the coalition. For instance, the four Chinese-language dailies and the English-language *The Star* are owned by interests close to the Barisan Nasional's Malaysia Chinese Association. The Tamil-language dailies, including *Malaysia Nanban* and *Makkal Osai*, are also in the hands of companies controlled by the Malaysian Indian Congress or their leaders.

The biggest press group, Media Prima, is owned by Malaysia Resources Corporation Berhad which has close ties with the ruling UMNO and the government. Its stable includes *New Straits Times*, *Berita Harian* (the second biggest Malay-language

paper), *Malay Mail*, *Harian Metro* and the *Shin Min Daily News*. It also owns four terrestrial TV channels. According to one report[2]:

> Media freedom in Malaysia has been a myth at least since Mahathir temporarily revoked the licenses of the English language *The Star* and the leading Chinese daily, *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, in 1987. From then, the industry has toed the government line and shied away from reporting controversial issues. Publishers are caught in a tight spot because of the annual license renewal by the Ministry of Home Affairs. The Printing Presses and Publications Act also has draconian regulations on sedition that can be broadly interpreted. Generally, licenses can be revoked without room for review, and have been.

The government regularly gives instructions to the mainstream media about what to report or reprimands them when they step over the line. In June 2007, a directive was also given to private television and radio stations not to report speeches given by the Opposition.[3]

During this election, interviewees said, papers were told not to give positive reports to the Opposition parties, or even report the issues brought up by speakers at election rallies.

Some papers such as the English-language *Sun* and the Chinese-language newspapers were more daring than the rest. They skirted the line by reinterpreting the directives, especially towards the end of the election when they sensed the swing towards the Opposition. Opposition candidate Tony Pua of the Democratic Action Party noted for instance that the *Guang Ming Daily* featured him prominently on its front page and wrote about the crowds flocking to his rallies and his personal life, while ostensibly obeying the instruction not to tell readers about the issues that he had raised. For the many who did not have Internet access, the Chinese newspaper coverage, however limited, was one way of learning more about the candidates in their constituencies.

## The Internet and Mobile Phone in Malaysia

The government has said that the Internet is hugely important for the country and its development. Like in many other countries, Internet usage has shot up over the last few years. According to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, the agency in charge of the development of ICT, there are 12 million users of the Internet in a population of 24 million. Subscriber penetration is almost 20 out of every 100 persons, and has been growing rapidly.[4] Internet use is most prevalent among the young and the urban population. Among the older and rural sections of the population, however, traditional media continues to be their main source of information. Mobile phone penetration is over 80 per cent. It is understood

---

[2] Jed Yoong, "Malaysian Newspaper Forced to Shut Up," *Asia Sentinel*, February 22, 2008, retrieved from http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1061&Itemid=31.

[3] *Malaysiakini*, "Opposition Muzzled — Here's Black and White Proof" June 29, 2008.

[4] According to the Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission, http://www.skmm.gov.my/

the VCD player penetration is high among households, though no statistics are available.

## The Internet Regulatory Regime

Unlike Singapore, Malaysia has no special regulation for the Internet in general or for the period of elections. The regulatory regime in Malaysia is very different from Singapore in that it allows party political activities as well as individuals' political activities through the Internet both before and during election time. Unlike in Singapore, there are no bans on podcasts, videocasts and films of political nature at any time. This allows for a wide variety of political expressions in form and content to be made through the Internet.

The lack of specific regulation in Malaysia has allowed extensive use of the Internet (and mobile phones) by parties and individuals to engage in political campaign activities.

The freedom of the Internet in Malaysia is enshrined in a Bill of Guarantees written in 1996 at the inception of MSC Malaysia (formerly known as the Multimedia Super Corridor), a project aimed at boosting the country's global information and communication technology (ICT) industry. One of the 10 articles in the Bill states that government promises to "ensure no Internet censorship". Since the Mahathir government introduced this pledge, he and Badawi had kept to their promise.

Though by Singapore standards there were numerous occasions to shut down many Internet-based sources including *Malaysiakini*, they were allowed to carry on in Malaysia. Like Singapore, general laws of the land apply to the cyberspace, such as those concerning crime or defamation. Since then, a number of these cases have occurred, including several suits for defamation, one in which a blogger was detained for five days of questioning for breaching the Official Secrets Act and another interrogated by the police for insulting the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, degrading Islam and inciting hatred and violence between the races. Some of these cases have been dropped or are on-going.

Reportedly, the only successful suit of online defamation so far was decided in March 2008 when the High Court in Kedah state ordered Raja Petra Kamarudin (who owns the blog *Malaysia Today)* to pay four million ringgit to the state-run Universiti Utara Malaysia and its vice chancellor for publishing an article in 2006 alleging plagiarism.

The court also ordered a newspaper run by the Opposition, PKR, to pay RM3 million for reprinting the article on its website. In the past, the government has harassed the online daily, *Malaysiakini,* with verbal threats to its staff and searches of their homes.[5] Ironically, the man first responsible for such harassment — Mahathir himself — has been singing the praises of an independent Internet ever since he has been marginalised by the mainstream media. Last year, the government threatened to force all bloggers to be registered, but eventually dropped the idea.

---

[5] Reporter Without Borders, "Report on Internet Censorship in Malaysia," October 13, 2004, retrieved from http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=10785

# FINDINGS

## Penetration and Its Two Meanings

The official Internet penetration rate refers to the proportion of the population that has online access. We refer to this as primary penetration. However, the ultimate reach of the Internet is much wider than what the primary penetration rate reveals. The multiplier effect, or what we call "secondary penetration", refers to the phenomenon in which people who are not connected to the Internet get to learn about materials on the Internet through other media, such as friends, family, mobile phones, VCDs, printed and photocopies materials, ceramahs (Malay for election rallies), and even the mainstream media. For example, during the election, SMSes were circulated, which referred people to content on the Internet. One such, which made the rounds just before polling day, said: "See video clip of young Khairy making love www.atnikahiary.blogspot.com. She Malay?" (The website and clip were real, but person depicted in the poor quality video appeared not to be that of Khairy Jamaluddin. Khairy was an UMNO candidate and son-in-law of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.)

Videos were also downloaded from the Internet and distributed on VCDs. This helped to spread the message to the rural areas where ownership of VCD players was much more prevalent than access to computers and the Internet. Videos made by the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) on the demolition of Hindu temples as well as of its public rally were widely distributed not only online via YouTube and other video sharing websites, but also by VCD.

People who had Internet access but might not go online often or use the Internet for political information might first learn of an issue via a watching a VCD. This was a strategy adopted by PKR and PAS. Once the person's interest is piqued, he or she may go online to look for similar material. Raja Petra (of the blog *Malaysia Today*) said that when he spoke at ceramahs, the way in which the crowd reacted to his words showed that they knew at least some of the things that originated from the Internet. When he asked whether such and such a thing was "correct", the crowd would respond by shouting "Correct, correct, correct." The phrase was used by lawyer V. K. Lingam in a YouTube video of him allegedly trying to "arrange" for certain judges to be promoted.

For those who did not have access to the Internet, online articles were printed by friends, family members and also political parties such as PKR and PAS. Among those which were distributed were articles by Raja Petra and also by DAP adviser Lim Kit Siang (who has one of the most popular blogs in Malaysia). An interviewee said that photocopied articles of Lim's blog articles were even sold, though we were unable to confirm this. Bloggers like Raja Petra and Haris Ibrahim (of the blog *People's Parliament*) who had been marginalised by the mainstream media were also known to most of the audience in the ceramahs, a strong signal of secondary penetration.

Mobile phones and SMSes were also an important medium of communication. Parties and candidates used the SMS to send out general information about their election platform and candidates as well as more specific information about the locations of ceramahs.

On polling day, they also asked voters to report suspected electoral fraud by calling the hotline of Bersih, an electoral reform civil society group. One party that relied heavily on SMS was PKR. It said it sent out over a million SMSes, adding: "We also sent SMSes nationwide that were broadly consistent with our main campaign messages. Messages were sometimes modified depending on whether we sent to Chinese, Indian, Malay, urban or rural recipients. Messages could be focused on parliamentary constituencies, state assembly constituencies, or even sub-units (polling districts) that were in closest proximity to particular communities or in close proximity to campaign events."

The close segmentation and targeting of audiences reveal the sophistication with which the Opposition used the mobile phone data it had obtained from various sources.

On polling day, voters also received SMSes telling them about alleged phantom voters at certain polling stations and urging them to go and prevent any wrongdoing. After the results were finalised on polling night, Opposition parties also sent round an SMS urging people to remain calm and stay home rather than go out and celebrate for fear of creating clashes with the authorities or with other groups of people.

The forwarding of SMSes received ensured that there was rapid and widespread dissemination of many of the messages throughout the population. On polling day, the mobile phone service providers reported an increase in traffic of between 14 to 31 per cent compared to the average, though it is not clear if the entire part of the increase could be attributed to the election.[6]

The cameras on mobile phones were also widely used as devices to capture information that would later be uploaded to blogs and sites like YouTube.

Besides videos of the police crackdown on Hindraf and Bersih demonstrations before the election, many videos were also taken and posted online of speeches at ceramahs. Some ceramah videos, such as those featuring Anwar Ibrahim or his daughter Nurul Izzah, enjoyed high viewership, often reaching over 50,000 views. The ceramah video of DAP candidate Tony Pua was seen over 104,000 times. Some commented on the video saying that they decided to vote for him after watching it. It is interesting to note that the ceramah videos of Jeff Ooi, who in contrast to Tony Pua, stood in a less urban constituency, did not enjoy that many views in comparison, often hitting only 20,000 or so. Hindraf also put up their VCDs on YouTube with the title "Makkal Sakti GE 2008" (Makkal Sakti means People Power). A video of a Hindraf demonstration on November 24, 2007, received over 282,000 hits.

---

[6] "Surge in SMS Traffic on Election Day," *The Star*, April 30, 2008.

All in all, the Internet, SMSes, VCDs and printed materials formed a positive feedback loop, a virtuous circle with voters being funnelled from one medium to another and then back again. There was a network and chain-reaction effect, so information was disseminated very quickly, and often reached a person from many different sources (people often received the same message from different friends or family members if not from the originator itself) and via different channels (either through email, SMS or word of mouth).

It is useful to point out that even within the Internet, we can talk about penetration of an issue, that is, the extent to which it received attention from the rest of the online world. The networked, connected nature of the blogs and the news websites, with their links and cross-referencing, allowed an issue to snowball from one site to reach many others. For instance, Leong Joo Ti, an activist who volunteered to be Tony Pua's election agent, pointed to a *Malaysiakini* interview with BN incumbent Chew Mei Fun and DAP's Pua, published as both text and a video. Chew gave terse replies to questions posed by the *Malaysiakini* while Pua acquitted himself well with carefully thought-out answers. Leong said, "It helped people realise that, as caring as Chew Mei Fun may be, she was, to put it very kindly, quite shallow in her thinking. I think that helped many fence sitters decide where to put their cross." The article made its rounds via email, and was referred to by many blogs, including Pua's own blog and *People's Parliament.*

## Characteristics of the Internet

The Malaysian political Internet is a chaotic multi-faceted creature, a reflection of both the medium as well as the multiple-pluralities of the offline world. In this sense, there are many "Internets" in Malaysia. The entities on the Internet can be classified by many criteria:

- **Language**

  The English-language Internet was the predominant space where the national conversation on issues took place. The most influential blogs and content were found in this language sphere. This is probably because English is still the *lingua franca* for political discussion between the different races. Though most non-Malays have been obliged to study Malay in school, their proficiency in that language to discuss political issues is still more limited compared with English. A measure of the relative quantitative importance of the English and Chinese can be seen in the blog of Lim Kit Siang. The English-language version of his blog received over 2,000 comments for some posts, while his Chinese-language barely managed just a few dozen comments at most.

  The Malay-language cyberspace was the next most lively. Like the English-language Internet it also lacked homogeneity in content, though there was more pro-government Malay-language content than English-language content, which tended to be overwhelmingly anti-government. The independent Malay blogs did not seem to have someone with the organisational ability of social activist Haris Ibrahim (*People's Parliament*) or blogging activist Ahirudin Attan (*Rocky Bru*), or the popularity of Raja Petra

(*Malaysia Today*). More telling were the tags of solidarity. Little logos such as those for the Bloggers' United and the People's Declaration movements were absent on the Malay blogs but found on many English-language blogs. (Bloggers' United is an online effort to rally the bloggers against government harassment and censorship, and the People's Declaration is an articulation of what people want from the government.) Ideologically, Malay blogs were also not as united with a common rallying cause as were the English blogs. If there were issues, they tended to reflect the discontent with Khairy and Badawi. The "Malay-based" parties such as PAS and UMNO (and also to a certain extent the multiracial KDR) were also prominent players in the Malay-language Internet. Interestingly, the Wikipedia entries on Hindraf differed greatly for the English and Malay versions. The English entry was largely sympathetic to Hindraf, playing up the detentions of its leaders, whilst the Malay one was negative, playing up its alleged links to the Tamil Tigers.

The Chinese-language Internet was also diverse, though not as rich in content. There were a small number of forums. The most prominent "political" website in Chinese was *Merdeka Review*, a professionally-run news website. Its readership was about a fifth of the multilingual *Malaysiakini.*

There were hardly any Tamil blogs, but because of the widespread discontent among the Tamil community, further fuelled by the rift among the three Tamil language newspapers (with at least one clearly against Samy Vellu, president of the Malaysian Indian Congress, or MIC), the Tamil community had lost much faith in the MIC by the time of the election.

It should be noted that many websites and blogs were multilingual. *Malaysiakini* uses all four of the common languages (English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil). *Malaysia Today* and many other blogs such as *Kickdefella* had both English and Malay blog posts. Blogger-politicians like Tony Pua and Jeff Ooi wrote not just in English, but also Chinese and Malay.

- **Credibility and professionalism**

At one end of this spectrum where the professional news websites. Besides the websites for the mainstream papers such as *New Straits Times*, *The Star*, *Utusan Melayu* and *Nanyang Siang Pau*, there were alternative news websites such as *Malaysiakini*, *Merdeka Review* and *Malaysia Votes*. *Malaysia Votes* was specially set up for the election.

*Malaysiakini* was the most established and well-known of these. Founded in 1999 during the Reformasi movement started by sacked Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, it has 10,000 subscribers that bring in RM1 million in revenue a year. It is profitable, and its editor Steven Gan told us that its subscribers included government ministries. The letters page and TV section of the site were free. Some 120,000 people visited the site a day. When it made access free in the week leading up to polling date, its numbers almost doubled to 200,000 visitors daily. On the night of the election, 500,000 people visited it every hour at its busiest and 3 million for the whole day, pulling down the site temporarily. The reason for the surge was that RTM, the public

broadcaster, was for some reason slow to report the election results, while *Malaysiakini* provided almost instant updates. Academic Farish Noor, who was in Kota Bharu at the PAS headquarters on that night, said that because of the delay in delivering the news on RTM, he had to log on to *Malaysiakini* to keep the party members abreast of developments.

*Merdeka Review* was the Chinese-language, professionally-run news site that was started three years ago and was bankrolled by well-to-do Chinese education activist and lawyer Ngeow Yin Ngee. Access was free, and revenue came from advertisements, an online shop and web services provided to small businesses. It had six editorial staff who were former newspaper journalists and three non-editorial staff. It was not profitable. It carried eight to nine new articles a day typically. Its editor-in-chief Chang Teck Peng said that there were 19 new articles published on polling day. Its content was general news and not confined to Chinese community issues. It received about 10,000 unique visitors a day, rising to 19,000 during the campaign, and peaking at 260,000 on polling day.

*Malaysia Votes* was, according to its website, "a free news site that was created with minimum resources to cover the 2008 general election." Its creators are three experienced journalists who were planning to set up a news portal. When the election was announced they ended up being side-tracked into setting up this temporary resource that promised to deliver "news on the elections that would not gain either the attention of or fair coverage from the traditional media in Malaysia." Jacqueline Surin, one of its three editors, said the site received 61,000 page views and 18,000 unique visitors in the first week beginning on February 20, 2008. The site strove to be non-partisan, that is, less anti-government than *Malaysiakini* and *Merdeka Review*.

In the middle ground were the blogs that were run by individuals or groups of individuals. These included those that offered scoops and exposes, such as *Malaysia Today*, arguably the most popular political blog. It was run by the well-connected Raja Petra, a member of the Selangor royal family. His blog was informative but controversial and sometimes incendiary. Its reliability was often open to question, many interviewees said. Nevertheless it was widely followed because of its take-no-prisoners yet intelligent style of writing and the interesting content. Raja Petra was last year questioned by the police following a complaint by a minister that his blog contained writing that insulted the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, degraded Islam and incited hatred and violence between the races. But no action was taken against him on that occasion. On another, he was fined for defaming a university vice-chancellor, as mentioned above.

Other prominent blogs include those of Jeff Ooi and Ahirudin Attan, which also had their share of exposes and scoops over the last two years. The two were jointly the target of a defamation suit by *News Straits Times*, an incident that led to the formation of the National Alliance of Bloggers, which sought to protect bloggers from such actions. There were also numerous other bloggers of less broad appeal, but whose influence cannot be underestimated because they drew content from the superstar blogs and also drove traffic to them. The

most interesting content and blogs therefore benefitted from a network effect through links and cross-referencing between blogs. Among the political blogs are: *Kickdefall*, (http://kickdefella.wordpress.com), *MageP's Lab* (http://www.skthew.com); *Speak Squeak Roar* (http://polytikus.com); *Shanghai Stephen* (http://shanghaistephen.blogspot.com), *Can You See It* (http://kudaranggi.blogspot.com), and *The Ancient Mariner* (http://cyusof.blogspot.com).

An interesting difference between the blogs in Malaysia and Singapore is that only a very small proportion is anonymous, probably because the propensity to file defamation suits is less evident in Malaysia and probably also because there is generally a more tolerant as well as a less efficient political system there. Overall, there is also the guarantee that the Internet cannot be censored.

Besides the blogs, there were other new media platforms such as online forums and chat-rooms. Because of their quick and dirty nature and the anonymity of participants, the discussions on them were often not very thoughtful. Some interviewees said emotional, racist and incendiary comments were the staple of some of these forums and chat-rooms. This almost subterranean world of chat-rooms might have drawn their topics from national political issues, but did not add to the national-level discourse in terms of influence.

- **Technology platforms**

  Besides blogs and news websites, platforms such as Facebook and MySpace were used by Opposition members such as Anwar Ibrahim, Nurul Izzah Anwar, Lim Kit Siang, Teresa Kok, Jeff Ooi and Nik Nazmi, and Barisan Nasional candidates such as Mukhriz Mahathir and Lee Hwa Beng. Anwar had over 3,000 friends on Facebook, while Mukhriz had slightly over half that. The oldest candidate, 89-year-old Maimun Yusuf, who stood unsuccessfully as an independent, had a Facebook site (with 300 friends) and her own bilingual blog. She is not technologically literate, and the website was set up by her supporters. YouTube, Flickr and other media-sharing sites were also extensively used by candidates.

- **Wide or narrow focus**

  Websites also varied in the breadth of their focus on issues. The narrowly focused ones include Hindraf (Hindu rights), Bersih (electoral reform) and *Get An MP* (discussing which MP is suitable for a constituency). There is even an anti-Hindraf site called Hindraf Watch (http://www.hindrafwatch.com). Others deal with a range of issues and include general blogs such as *Rocky Bru, Disquiet* (by human rights lawyer Imtiaz Malik), *What A Lulu* (by activist and DAP volunteer Leong Joo Ti) and *Malaysia Today.*

- **Party political, partisan or neutral**

    Political parties used the Internet extensively, though the Opposition by necessity, in light of tight control of the mainstream media by BN, were the most avid deployers of the medium. Individual candidates also used the Internet, setting up blogs and social networks via Facebook and MySpace. Some of them also set up collective blogs, such as the quartet of DAP candidates in Petaling Jaya (http://dapforpj.org/). Most civil society and activist blogs were "neutral" in principle, but because of their choice of issues such as corruption, equality and electoral reform, ended up being anti-government in effect. Some blogs, mainly those by man-in-the-street voters were non-party political but obviously partisan, and were unafraid to in declaring their support of one party or another. Unlike in Singapore, Malaysians are allowed by law to promote or campaign for individual candidates or even parties.

## Uses of the Internet/Mobile Phones/VCD

The Internet and other technologies like SMS and VCDs were used in a variety of ways during the election:

- **Information**

    The overt control of the mainstream media by the dominant coalition meant that a significant amount of fair and relevant information was not getting to the voters. Obviously, news of the Opposition was also not given adequate space or time. The Internet helped to fill the gaps. News websites such as *Malaysiakini* and *Merdeka Review* brought news to the electorate, the more significant of which is coverage of the Opposition parties, the candidates and the issues that they raised. These online news services levelled the playing field. *Malaysiakini* was aware of its role in this respect, and in a brilliant move made the subscription-based site free for a week leading up to polling date. On polling night itself, the website was faster in bringing the news to the people than the mainstream media, which appeared to have intentionally delayed the relaying of the results to the people. Both *Malaysiakini* and *Merdeka Review* saw a huge surge in page hits as a result.

    Blogs also let candidates send their messages out, and also acted as a conduit to a wider audience for articles from the online news media. Activists, through their blogs, kept voters informed about happenings on the ground as well, in terms of candidates and their activities, and the issues that were important.

    The Internet was also an important source of user information, in particular, broadcasting the venues of the ceramahs and the candidates that were slated to speak. In this area, SMSes were especially useful, and their easy forwarding function allowed people to be kept informed till the last minute about where they could go to hear the candidates make their case. Jacqueline Surin, an editor of news website *Malaysia Votes*, said the Internet gave people access to different perspectives on the same thing: "Writing news no longer belongs to the establishment media. With the numerous websites,

people can now have multiple readings of a piece of news beyond the propaganda. What is more, they can put out their own reading, and more quickly than the mainstream media."

- **Disinformation**

  Political opponents, as to be expected, also exploited the Internet by disseminating disinformation. It is, of course, difficult to tell if some of the false information sent out was really misinformation o0cx (unintentionally misleading) or disinformation (intentionally misleading). Among the known examples of disinformation were the aforementioned SMS about the Khairy sex video, SMSes that gave wrong locations for ceramahs, an SMS that asked people to go late in the afternoon to vote because it was claimed that the polling centres were crowded in the morning (the intention here being a deliberate attempt to make some miss the 5 pm closing time for polling stations). It is not clear whether an SMS about phantom voters amassing at certain centres was real or false. In the case of the Khairy video, what seemed to have happened was that some people looked it up on the website and established that it was not likely to be Khairy, thereby quickly squelching the rumour. There was also the website *Azalina Wild Wild Wild* http://www.azalinalesbian.blogspot.com/, which alleged that Azalina Othman Said, now Tourism Minster, was a lesbian. The smear blog was started just before the election and was no longer updated after she was returned unopposed on nomination day.

- **Opinion and discussion**

  The Internet was widely used as a platform for publishing opinion and for exchange of opinion. Blogs have built-in mechanisms to facilitate discussion through their commenting facility. The most popular blogs sometimes attracted hundreds, even thousands of comments for each post. Many of the comments were long, several-hundred-word mini opinion pieces in themselves. Online forums and chat-room also facilitated discussion, although their anonymity and shoot-from-the-hip nature did not encourage quality debate. It should be noted, however, that named bloggers were not necessarily better as some of them too were guilty of the same practices.

  New sites such as those of *Malaysiakini* and the online website for mainstream newspaper *Utusan Melayu* also had forum facilities or letters pages that allowed readers to offer their views. Even the SMS was harnessed as a tool for debate, despite its limited length. One which was sent out by KDR used a quote from Raja Petra's blog in *Malaysia Today*:

  > Raja Petra: UMNO is more Islamic & dangerous than PAS. Who breaks ur temples? Who put 5 in ISA? Who declare M'sia Islamic country? Who snatch dead bodies? Who kill in police custody? Who create bumiputra? Who break family using syariah law?...Who use khalwat to spy on people? Who implement Islamic policy in schools? It is BN. For 50 yrs they

brainwashed us to think that they are moderate. They are the extremists.

It is interesting to note that the SMS referred to an article on the Internet, in this case the blog *Malaysia Today*. Another, sent to only Chinese voters went like this:

Anwar's msg: I was beaten & jailed for 6yrs; time to move on, stop abuse of NEP & create a fair economic policy for all Malaysians.
PM's msg: I'm not sleeping.

Bloggers also endorsed certain candidates or parties. For instance, Li Tsin of *Speak Squeak Roar* said she endorsed Opposition candidate Badrul Hisham Saharin, while *The Ancient Mariner*'s Yusof Ahmad told readers why he would vote for the Opposition.

- **Organisation**

The Internet was also used as a tool for organisation, allowing geographically dispersed groups to communicate and to do so without being online at the same time. *Get An MP* activists said that the Internet enabled them to be more efficient in their activities. Indeed, without the Internet they would not have met and come together towards a common cause.

- **Mobilisation**

The Internet and mobile phones were critical tools for mobilising people, for example, to urge them to attend ceramahs or to vote on polling day. A typical KDR SMS, giving the time and place of a ceramah where Anwar Ibrahim would be speaking, read:

Ceramah Perdana Anwar Ibrahim: 23/2/08 10:30mlm. Markas PAS Pmtg. Ara, Sg.Bakap (Dekat Psr Mlm). Hubungi: 012*******. Harapan Baru Untuk Malaysia www.anwaribrahim.com

Li Tsin, author of the blog *Speak Squeak Roar*, also urged voters to wear yellow, the colour of the Bersih movement. She wrote:

Got this forward mail from a colleague. Apt, eh?: WEAR YELLOW TOMORROW PEOPLE!!! :) AND CATCH THE LAST FEW CERAMAH'S TONIGHT! Let it ring true on Saturday – wear your yellow and vote for change.

SMSes were also used to ask people not to do certain things. As mentioned above, the SMS was used to discourage Opposition supporters from organising post-election victory parades for fear of that such celebrations would spark off unrest. The message sent out was "Stay calm, stay cool, stay home."

- **Recruitment**

  The Internet was used as a recruiting tool for volunteers. Tony Pua revealed that the DAP received more volunteers than it needed, a rare luxury, largely because of the effectiveness of the Internet as a medium to reach out to the public. Both he and Jeff Ooi first met their election agents through the Internet.

- **Fundraising**

  Unlike in Singapore, Malaysia allows candidates to canvass for funds on the Internet. The most successful candidate in terms of donations received via an online appeal was Jeff Ooi, who stood in Penang. His appeal garnered over RM130,000 from people all over the country and also from outside Malaysia who remitted money via Internet banking and by PayPal. Ooi won the contest in the end.

  It is interesting to note that the constituency he stood in was not a very urban area. Indeed, very few people recognised him as a blogger. Ooi said during the campaign it was the face-to-face meetings and door-to-door canvassing as well as the rallies that enabled him to bring his message to the voters, and not the Internet. The twist to this is that although his constituents were not wired, the donors to his campaign were, thereby allowing him to use the generosity of one group of urbanised, connected Malaysians to underwrite the expense needed to win over a group of rural, technologically unsophisticated citizens.

  Another candidate that successfully raised funds online was Tony Pua, who ran in the urbanised Petaling Jaya Utara. As with Ooi, the party only provided him the usual RM10,000 allocated for each candidate — mostly for banners and posters — a fraction of the RM100,000 to RM150,000 needed to run his campaign. Pua said: "Relative to the Barisan Nasional, we are tiny in terms of the money the party has. But in this election, because of the Internet, we are able to raise many times more than in the past." He revealed that he raised nearly RM50,000 himself, a third of what he spent for the whole campaign, while the party raised a few hundred thousand ringgit. "This avenue for raising funds is important for a penniless party." Donations to Pua ranged from RM50 to RM5,000, though the bulk were from RM100 to RM200.

  Candidates also asked for donations during the rallies. Urban and hence more affluent voters were able to give more, but less so those in the rural wards. Badrul Hisham Shaharin, a candidate from PKR who eventually lost to UMNO bigwig Khairy Jamaluddin in Rembau, said that for him the online donations were a life-line. As in the case of Ooi, many of the contributors were from outside his constituency, including Malaysians based overseas. Badrul said, "I cannot solicit funds via ceramah as most of the Rembau constituents are not well-to-do." He managed to garner over RM 20,000 via the appeal on his blog (http://chegubard.blogspot.com).
  Even the conservative PAS decided for the first time to raise money online. PAS treasurer Dr Mohd Hatta Ramli was quoted as saying, "It is not as successful as we would have liked, but at least we are trying." Thus the Internet levelled the playing field to some extent for the Opposition, which had less

access to establishment funds and to big donors who presumably did not want to be seen to be anti-BN. Whether the field would tilt back in favour of the ruling coalition if they were also to solicit funds online is an unanswered question, though their candidates probably had more than enough for the RM100,000 to RM200,000 cap on election spending for state assembly and national assembly candidates, respectively. The online donation drive also allowed the Opposition to ride on grassroots support, evidenced by the many number of donations that were small in value.

- **Whistle-blowing**

The whistle-blowing function of the Internet was a subset of its use for informational purposes. During the period of the election itself, there did not appear to be any cases of whistle-blowing and exposes of wrongdoing. A possible candidate of this was the SMSes on polling day warning of phantom voters and of busloads of army personnel who were being ferried to polling stations. One such SMS read:

> Latest news!!!...Urgent and act now!!!...5K army votes to Bkt Bintang, 15K to Bt Kawan, 8K to Sg Siput, 7K to Pekan, 3K to Kulai…Here is our 1st mission to hit one of the unfair general elections…pls fwd to 20 friends. Tell the whole world tonite…

We are unable to verify the truth of these SMSes.

It was largely in the last two years or so leading up to the election that the Internet came into its own as a tool for publishing and then widely disseminating news of government excess, wrong-doing, corruption, bad governance and other scandals. The VK Lingam video was first posted on the Internet by Anwar Ibrahim after he received it from a source. Raja Petra also exposed a number of scandals, including the alleged purchase by Abdullah Badawi of a jet for personal use and the compensation allegedly paid to a private company for cancelling the second Causeway bridge project. Other instances of poor governance exposed included one concerning debts allegedly exceeding US$1 billion (RM3.9 billion) incurred by the Port Klang Authority over a failed free trade zone, and another over the inflated compensation paid by the government to a company that built highways.

Pictures and videos of excessive use of force by the police during the Bersih and Hindraf protests also gave the lie to mainstream media accounts favouring the authorities. Pictures of Abdullah Badawi napping at meetings "branded" him as a Prime Minister who was sleeping on the job. The series of revelations about corruption, cronyism, mendacity and general incompetence sowed a mood of discontent that the Opposition exploited during the three weeks of the election. These issues eventually made their way into the mainstream media, which needed to salvage some of its own credibility by publishing them.

## Government, Mainstream Media and Alternative Media

The government's and the BN coalition's tight rein on the mainstream media, together with the exposes found on the Internet seriously undermined the credibility of mainstream newspapers and broadcasting stations in Malaysia. During the Bersih demonstrations for electoral reform in November 2007, the mainstream newspapers were told not to cover the planned event other than to report that the police would act sternly against participants, said Jacqueline Surin, who was then a newspaper reporter. On the day of the protests, which were attended by several tens of thousands according to some estimates, "we were told to write that there were only 4,000 protesters in the demonstration," she said. When pictures of the huge crowds who had turned up were published in blogs and on online news websites, the discrepancy between official accounts and the truth was made instantly and dramatically obvious. Pictures and videos on the Internet of the use of water cannons and tear gas against the peaceful protests also highlighted the inordinate response of the authorities.

In certain cases, the mainstream media in the end had to back-pedal by reporting unflattering news about the Barisan Nasional government because it was untenable to completely ignore what people were talking about as a result of the Internet. This improved its credibility somewhat. The relevance of the Internet to the national conversation, and the relatively greater trust placed in it by citizens, rose in step with the decline in the relevance and perceived trustworthiness of the mainstream media. As mentioned above, the low credibility suffered by the mainstream media did not happen suddenly during the polls. It was dented bit by bit over the previous two or so years during which the exposes started to appear on the Internet and received wide circulation. The cover-ups and the silence of the mainstream media made the Internet relevant, because the Internet became the only source of such news.

During the election, the newspapers continued to be overwhelmingly pro-BN. An initiative set up to monitor media during the election, organized by the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ), Writers Alliance for Media Independence (WAMI) and Charter 2000-Aliran, reported that the mainstream newspapers slanted coverage towards the Barisan Nasional[7]:

> The major print media continue to toe the line of the incumbent government, formed by the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, in their election coverage by allocating the majority of stories and spaces for their candidates. The bias towards BN effected a significant amount of news and news spaces being dedicated to BN candidates — their background and what they said, as well as the portrayal of imminent electoral victory for BN. In contrast, issues that are of interest to the voters — analysis of the parties manifesto, the track record of the party, issues with the Indian community — were given very little space. After the candidates, other main issues covered were chiefly the questions of the new Penang chief minister and attacks on the oppositions.

---

[7] "Utusan Tops as the Most Pro-BN Paper," *Aliran*, March 29, 2008, retrieved from http://www.aliran.com/elections/

Among the six newspapers covered, the order of the percentages of space dedicated to pro-BN stories is as follows: Utusan Malaysia at 82 per cent, Malaysia Nanban at 70 per cent, Makkal Osai at 66 per cent, The Star at 63 per cent, New Straits Times at 60 per cent, and the Sun at 43 per cent.[8] Interestingly, Makkal Osai, which is yet to get a new publication permit for 2008, also has the highest percentage of space for pro-Opposition stories at 23 per cent.

Zainon Ahmad, political editor of *Sun,* said of the mainstream media: "I think we behaved disgracefully. But we have been behaving disgracefully every election. Every year the ISD organises a seminar for newspaper editors. What else can you say when you are in the ISD? Last time, I spoke of the need for the rakyat (citizens) to be informed, otherwise how can they make the choice? It was the last time that I was invited."

It must be pointed out that during the elections, newspapers and television continued to be important sources of information. One study, carried out jointly by *The Star* and International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), found that the newspaper was still the principal choice of media for Malaysians as their source of news and information, despite the rising popularity of Internet usage.[9] "Generally, the poll revealed that Malaysians have doubts about information published on the Internet," IIUM researcher Syed Arabi was reported as saying. This sentiment was also echoed by interviewees Lee Hwa Beng (an MCA candidate who lost his seat) and Shahrir Samad (an UMNO candidate who retained his seat).

Academic interviewees also acknowledged that a lot of the information found on Internet was of dubious accuracy, but pointed out that the scepticism was not surprising and was a healthy phenomenon. Most people seemed able to discern that a *Malaysiakini* news report was more likely to be true than a posting on a random blog or comment on a forum. However, they added, this did not mean that people trusted what they read in print or watched on television more than the material they saw on the Internet.

In any case, as the discussion above on penetration suggests, voters were getting first- or second-hand information that was very damaging to the government as a supplement to the "news" they were getting from the mainstream media, and it is based on this aggregate exposure, together with that from other sources of information, that they made their decisions.

At the end of the day, voting Opposition does need not necessarily mean that voters are *for* Opposition but could very well be *against* BN — a kind of protest vote. Nonetheless, what the Internet could do was to connect and mobilise the individuals against BN in a way that trumped the mainstream media's attempt to mobilise the voters for BN.

---

[8] The articles were classified into three categories: pro-BN, pro-Opposition and neutral.
[9] "Newspapers Still the Preferred Choice," *The Star,* March 2, 2008.

Also a survey carried out by Baharuddin Aziz of Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) found that although only 30 per cent said they were influenced by the Internet during the election, the Internet ranked only behind ceramahs in terms of *influence*, and ahead of television and newspapers. This study, based on a random and representative sample of 1,300 people in Peninsular Malaysia — the results of which are still being analysed at the time of the writing of this report — showed that 80 per cent of people were "sensitised to issues" because of the Internet. "It is no longer the case that only the mainstream media sets the agenda," Baharuddin concluded. His survey followed two similar studies in the 1999 and 2004 elections. Interestingly, he said, the 2004 election was the one among the three in which people relied most on mainstream media and were least likely to seek out alternative sources of information such as the Internet or ceramahs. At that time people were happy to accept Abdullah Badawi as the new Prime Minister and where willing to give him a chance to institute reforms. Once they had made up their minds, they did not feel they needed alternative sources of information. In 2008, there was widespread unhappiness over a wide host of issues leading up to the election, so people wanted to find out more so as to help them decide how to vote. As the mainstream media was seen to be biased, they turned to the Internet and ceramahs for alternative and new perspectives.

The government's dismissive attitude and persecutory actions towards the Internet in general and bloggers in particular also had the opposite effect to its intention of undermining the credibility of the online world and of curbing online dissent. Bloggers were derided by various Cabinet ministers as liars and stupid. The Internet was also dismissed as a tool "to book airline tickets and get entertainment news". The assertions were so far or far enough from reality that they backfired. The defiance of bloggers against government actions also increased rather than diminished their popularity and credibility. If the authorities were suppressing it, then it must be true and be worth reading, seemed to be the reaction from the public. The government also threatened to register bloggers as a way to prevent anonymous postings. But the issue was badly managed and half-hearted. When the government U-turned on its initial plans, it also lost credibility. The bloggers emerged emboldened and with an enhanced reputation.

The way that the government positioned itself and its ally, the mainstream media, *against* the Internet was especially problematic in several ways. First, its actions in one respect — the harassment of bloggers and news websites, and the fact that it had a Web presence — contradicted its position that the Internet belonged to the unhinged fringe of society. Second, it closed the door to engagement with Netizens, though it must be admitted that the government would have had a hard time winning over them in the light of the reality that it was just not a very good or honest administration. Third, when the government decided to engage the online world, for example, the Abdullah Badawi website for citizens to send in their complaints, it was too little, too late. Fourth, the form of its engagement was only single-pronged, and involved only getting onto the Internet. It neglected to engage the existing online players, that is, the alternative news websites and the bloggers, and refused to talk to them, and by doing so, failed to get its word in and its message across.

## Opposition and Civil Society

Malaysia has a highly developed civil society. The civil society causes covers not only narrow (though important) political issues, such as Hindraf and its fight for Hindu rights and Bersih's drive for electoral reform; they also addressed more general issues of governance, such as the People's Declaration, a statement of voters' wishes in terms of governance and the future of the nation that was created by Haris Ibrahim of *People's Parliament* blog. These civil society groups were largely "oppositionist" (as many civil society movements are) rather than being of the Opposition camp — they were "neutral" in that sense. Their causes could be embraced by any party, and indeed, some of them, such as the People's Declaration initiative, sought the support of every party, including the ruling coalition. P S Nathan, of Get An MP, an initiative to evaluate the candidates in certain constituencies, said: "We tried to remain a citizens' initiative, so when some people wanted us to back Tony Pua from the start, we said no. Tony was willing to be evaluated by us, but Chew Mei Fan [the Barisan Nasional candidate] turned us down. So we came out to back Tony Pua."

As it turned out, the blogs and civil society would show their non-partisan character after the election, when they turned their scrutiny to — and severely criticised — the newly elected Opposition MPs and to state assemblies under Opposition control. During and before the elections, the Opposition very strategically aligned themselves with civil society and bloggers. This enabled it to fight the ruling coalition on two fronts, one on their own as Opposition parties, and other through the civil society. Most of the Opposition parties, for instance, signed up to the People's Declaration, in contrast to the Barisan Nasional, which refused to have anything to do with it.

## Mindset Effects

The most profound impact of the Internet in the election was bringing about a mindset change in the electorate, according to many of the interviewees. They identified a "I am not alone" effect, namely, that it made people realise from what they read online that they were not the only ones thinking in a certain way. It was not just the blog posts, but comments by ordinary people in the blogs that made many people feel they were not alone.

The solidarity they found on the Internet helped to strengthen their initial, sometimes tentative, feelings into stronger convictions. It also emboldened them in several ways: to discuss those feelings with those online, to bring these feelings up with friends and families, to decide to vote in a different way, or perhaps even to make them realise that they ought to vote rather than stay at home. Our interviewees pointed out that in the past many people also felt dissatisfied with the government, but because there was no way to confirm whether they were held by other people besides their immediate circle, people resigned themselves to the status quo either for fear of reprisal or because they felt alone and helpless.

Middle-class voters were especially apathetic (despite the vibrant civil society); this time the Internet was instrumental in rousing them because of the "I am not alone" effect. They started believing that things could be different if they did something,

even if it was something as simple as discussing politics or to vote as they wished openly and without fear.

Finding kindred spirits on the Internet strengthened the conviction of some people that they could play a part in the outcome, even if they were not geographically near to the actual scene of the action. As noted above, Jeff Ooi's support in terms of donations to his campaign kitty came from all the country, and even from Malaysians overseas.

Bloggers also rallied round one another following the threatened crackdown on the Internet and the suing of Jeff Ooi and Ahirudin Attan by the *New Straits Times* for defamation. There was a sense of safety in numbers. Although many still chose to be anonymous, bloggers became less afraid of letting their identities be known. That boosted the accountability and credibility of the blogosphere. This can be described as the "I am not afraid to say who I am" effect.

The effects described above are in essence network effects, and are testament to the true power of the Internet to connect individuals across space and time and to create something anew from these connections that is more than the sum of its parts. The Internet here is not just informative, but also transformative.

An additional effect that interviewees identified was the "media literacy" effect. Exposure to online materials seemed to self-educate Internet users about what they could believe and they ought to discount. One interviewer noted for instance that most people took racist comments online in their stride, and would either rebut them or discount them as utterances of crackpots or extremists. In other words, people learnt to tell the noise from the signal. Whether it is described as a form of desensitisation (to material that is inflammatory, for instance) or sensitisation (to what is worthy of one's attention), it made for a better response to the Internet's potential.

## "Bad Internet" Lost to "Good Internet"

Two types of content can be found on the Internet, "desirable" material which is helpful to rational, democratic discourse on the one hand, and "undesirable" material which is extremist, incendiary or false and subverts rational democratic discourse. The "bad" Internet exists in Malaysia as it does in any society, and is a reflection of the reality on the ground. The question is whether the "bad" Internet grows to a point of overwhelming the "good" Internet.

One area of major concern was inflammatory speech on race and religion. Would it gather momentum and lead to polarisation of the population and engender even greater extremism? Would it spill offline and lead to a breakdown in law and order in the form of riots or other crimes? The fear was that Malaysia would erupt into racial riots like it did in May 1969. Racist speech existed on the Internet in Malaysia, and was most prevalent in chat-rooms and online forums. On popular blogs, such as those of Raja Petra Kamarudin and Lim Kit Siang, race matters were often discussed. When Lim asked for a boycott of the swearing-in ceremony of the new Perak Mentri Besar, for instance, there were many strong criticisms of him on his blog, commenting on the racist overtone of his position. Yet the language used was

level-headed and arguments logical. The comments in the *Malaysia Today* blog on issues such as whether Muslim Indians should be considered *bumiputera* were often heated, and would descend into name-calling. Although the blog was not moderated, there had been occasions when Raja Petra had to censor certain comments that he thought were seditious and which were brought to his attention. He said:

> Sure we promise freedom of speech, but if the comments from some people are seditious, I have to take them out. And if they persist we block them. We have blocked a few, and they would accuse us of being hypocritical about freedom of speech. Then later they would say they are sorry and because they wanted to post comments again.

> But we censor only from time to time. We hope that through education, people will understand the limits we should work within. The solution is not to use legislation. Malaysia has used fear of arrest as a tool, but it doesn't stop people from hating one another, and only stops people from openly doing it. So we need to find other ways to build tolerance. People need to be courteous and also listen and understand that every race has its grievances. The Chinese feel they have been persecuted and discriminated under the NEP, but what has happened is that with debate they also understand that the Malays also feel the same thing. Chinese thought that every Malay person supported the NEP, but now they have found out that only a minority did. Then they understand that our values are all the same.

Of the 30 interviewees, only one said he feared that things might go the wrong way. Activist Ambroise Poh said: "I think it is possible to get inflamed if extremism gets out of hand, if racism becomes the dominant force." Nevertheless, he had become more hopeful because "I do believe that if the UMNO Malay extremists try to fan the flames, then the Keadilan and PAS Malays will come to counter that." The other interviewees believed that Malaysia has left or is leaving that page of history. They believe, like Raja Petra, that society would grow as it debated and that people would find common understanding, perhaps even common cause. They saw evidence that under the circumstances found in Malaysian society at present, moderating forces appeared to operate such that extreme voices tended to get drowned out or be marginalised by more centrist and rational voices. As stated above, the "media literacy" effect also serves to blunt the consequences, if any, of extremist and irrational speech.

In the same way, disinformation was also present but was overwhelmed by the volume of information. Just as new media was used to disseminate false information, it also worked the other way round as a quick and effective medium for countering disinformation with fact, many interviewees said. Assertions were not taken at face value, and would be checked by some people, who would then correct any falsehoods. Indeed people were tuned in to the possibility of disinformation. One example given and already mentioned above was an SMS on polling day, which asked people to go and vote in the late afternoon as to avoid the crowds in the

earlier part of the day. This was seen by people as an attempt by the originators of the SMS to crowd up the polling station so some people would not be able to cast their vote by the 5 pm deadline. The result: many people went to vote early instead. Here again the argument made by interviewees was that the sheer advantage of the positive effects of true information coming through the Internet far outweighed the problems caused by disinformation.

The antidote against the "bad" Internet in Malaysia was, interviewees said, Malaysia's social immune system. None of the interviewees believed that because undesirable content was inevitable on the Internet, it warranted censorship, except in the case where existing offline laws such as sedition and defamation came into play. Indeed, a few said that the government could have sent a signal by bringing to court the most serious cases of seditious remarks that were aimed at inciting hatred and violence. There were several aspects to the social immune system. First, people were not so easily fooled or so easily taken in by whatever they read. Even if they were and reacted strongly, they had shown that they would not just take to the streets. The protests of Hindraf and Bersih were peaceful in nature. So were the small number of protests, including one by Malays in Penang following the remark of the Opposition Democratic Action Party leader and Penang's new Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng that his party would dismantle the New Economic Policy. The reason that violence had become unlikely was related to the second point, namely, that Malaysia had become a middle-class society that had a stake in social stability and law and order. Even more importantly, the middle class was not made up of Chinese and Indians only but also by a large number of Malays as well. It had become less a question of Malays versus the rest, than the good versus the corrupt and the incompetent. They were likely to iron out differences by argument and even peaceful protests, rather than resort to violence and rioting. The rising middle class was also more educated, another reason that they would not go on the rampage, interviewees added. The third point was that Malaysians had had the time, since 1969, to learn how to manage their differences in a non-violent way, even when emotions ran high.

## DISCUSSION

### Singapore Positions

In order to assess the relevance of the Malaysian experience to Singapore, it would be useful to make a brief reference to Singapore government's position on new media and the elections in Singapore. Perhaps the most comprehensive articulation of its views on this subject could be found in a report from *The Straits Times* on April 15, 2006, under the heading "New Media, Same Rules". Using that report as a basis for comparison with the Malaysian elections in 2008 and the role Internet played there, the following section addresses some key issues raised in that report.

In the report, it is noted that the Singapore government considers politics as a "serious business" and holds that political campaigning "should not be turned into infotainment, where the line between fact and fiction gets blurred, and people get worked up emotionally without understanding the substantive issues." It also holds that people have to take responsibility for what they say and should not remain anonymous. Facts must be ascertainable and arguments examined. Voters should not get carried away by emotions in the heat of the moment. "This is the basis on

which we run elections and politics in Singapore, and this is how we have crafted our rules," said the Minister for Information and the Arts, Lim Boon Yang, in the same report.

The government does not allow dissemination of podcasts, video casts, or even party political films and videos. It argues that "the impact of watching a video is very different from reading something in cold print. Political videos may be presented as objective documentaries, but are in fact slanted propaganda to draw attention and score political points."

Another limb of the government's argument is that as the Internet is "ubiquitous, fast and anonymous," once a false story or rumour is circulated on the Internet, "it is almost impossible to put it right." Despite its usefulness, the government contends, the Internet "is chaotic and disorganised, with many half-truths and untruths masquerading as facts." This position on the Internet contrasts with another position the government takes (in the same report) in response to questions on foreign-based websites and bloggers dealing with Singapore issues. In those cases, the government holds that "Singaporeans must … exercise judgment and avoid being taken in by those with an axe to grind or who are out to promote a hidden agenda."

Such views about the Internet had led the Singapore government to enact special regulations that deal specifically with Internet election advertising. The new legislation provides a "positive list" of what political parties may do but prohibits anything beyond the list. In essence, it allows for a minimalist use of the Internet by the parties and candidates but they are not even permitted to ask the recipient of an email or SMS to "forward, re-transmit or further publish" it. The regulation also completely disallows any solicitation for election funds.

Even before a comparison with the Malaysian situation is made, it is important to note a number of inherent contradictions and inconsistencies in the above views.

First, the government does not make clear why politics has no place for humour or satire which may pass for infotainment and why that should make politics any less serious. It is, indeed, a common practice in most countries where politics is taken very seriously.

Second, while it is arguable that the impact of watching a video is indeed different from reading cold print, it is not sustainable that only videos could be slanted to score political points, as in fact many partisan print media do the same, even if without the same claimed visceral impact. Interestingly, on a subsequent occasion when a video of Opposition leader Chee Soon Juan was banned, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew had commented to *Time* magazine "Well, if you had asked me, I would have said, to hell with it. But the censor, the enforcer, he will continue until he is told the law has changed. And it will change... "[10]

Third, the contention that once a rumour starts in the Internet, "it is impossible to put it right" is moot. It is true that the Internet has the capacity to spread information

---

[10] "Exclusive Interview: Lee Kuan Yew Reflects," *Time*, December 12, 2005, retrieved from http://www.time.com/time/asia/covers/501051212/lky_intvu5.html

instantaneously to a huge number of people and can indeed create a significant reaction. But it is equally arguable that counter measures can be taken as swiftly and as widely. In fact the larger the number of people affected, the greater the chances of counter measures because more people have the power to engage in such efforts. Ironically, it is the state-controlled mainstream media that can often get away with "half-truths and untruths masquerading as facts" because no one has the power to challenge or overcome them. Yet no one has seen fit to suggest keeping politics out of mainstream media.

Fourth, the government seems to have a schizophrenic view of the Internet in that when it comes to foreign-based websites and bloggers dealing with Singapore issues it exhorts Singaporeans to use their judgment to distinguish between wheat and chaff and it assumes that the same people cannot exercise the same judgment when it comes to local politicians.

Finally, despite all its flaws, the government has been most proactive in pushing the use of Internet in all sorts of public activities on the basis that the public can handle those flaws and yet it seems to have a particularly pessimistic view of the public's capacity when it come to politics.

Overall, the Singapore government's position on the Internet and the elections contrasts sharply with the Malaysian government's position which places no special restrictions on the Internet and in fact "ensures that Internet is not censored" in any way, as promised in its Bill of Guarantees. However, it should be noted here that in both countries, offline laws such as defamation, sedition and violation of official secrets apply to the online world as well. A case in point is the defamation suit filed against Raja Petra, one of the most famous bloggers in Malaysia. In fact, such prosecutions of offending individuals are a clear sign that the Internet in Malaysia is not a "Wild, Wild West" territory, where anything goes. However, there is one important difference between dealing with mainstream media and new media users. In the case of new media, there are those who are prepared to face court action and even bankruptcy, because they are committed to their individual causes or are just plain reckless. So it is rather more difficult to keep them reined in, unlike in the mainstream media domain in these two countries, where stakeholders with much more to lose, are far more careful in taking financial or political risks.

## Malaysian Election Experience

The experience of 2008 Malaysian elections portrays a very different picture of the Internet world from Singapore's vision. Malaysians are not averse to treating politics with much humour and seeing it as part entertainment and part serious engagement. In their mind, it is not a binary phenomenon. There were numerous satires, in visual, aural and textual formats, on the Internet about Malaysian politics and yet they did not seem to have diminished the seriousness of the electoral process. If anything, commentators agree this was one of the most seriously debated elections in recent memory in Malaysia. The government and the public also seem to have taken the alleged special effect of visuals — as different from print — in their stride. To be sure, the Hindraf videos and similar materials did find much traction among a large segment of the public and yet there were no reports that they led to undue chaos, ethnic clashes or religious strife among the public.

There was also a significant amount of racial and religious tensions in Malaysia before the election and it did manifest itself in new media content. Emails, blogs and SMSes did speak of ethnic cleansing, demolition of temples and body snatching episodes. There were also instances of disinformation as well as misinformation. However, the fear that these unbridled expressions would lead to major ethnic and religious violence just did not materialise. The public, on the whole, seems to have adjusted itself to the vagaries of the new media. As pointed out earlier, the "good" Internet played an effective role in countering the effect of the "bad" Internet. Malaysian political commentators and academics made the point that the Internet space in Malaysia is maturing over time and with practice. The user public is acquiring a new level of media literacy that is equipping them to deal with the complexities of the new media. They were not easily "carried away by emotion in the heat of the moment" by what they received through the new media. The social immune system, which is very much in play in developed democratic societies, seems to be taking root in Malaysia too. It should also be noted here that long before the advent of the new media, Malaysians have been discussing ethnic and religious issues much more openly — albeit with some deleterious consequences — than Singaporeans do because of domestic constraints. In a sense, this point reinforces the view that the Internet very much reflects the offline world rather than creating a world of its own, very different from the other.

The Malaysian experience also shows that the fear of the "viral effect" of damaging content was mitigated by the viral effect of opposing or alternative messaging. Even in cases of "last minute" attacks, there were counter measures to minimise their effect. In other words, it is actually no different from mainstream media in many other countries where the "good" and the "bad" compete for attention, within the limits of prevailing legal constraints. Even with mainstream media, it is not always possible to prevent publication of damaging content, but the post-publication punishment has been a serious deterrent to indulgent practitioners. The new media users will have to face the same punitive regime if and when they cross the red line.

There is one area where the difference between Malaysia and Singapore needs more research before making any assessment: fundraising through the Internet. It is not clear to us what kind of mechanisms the Malaysian government have to make sure that illicit or undesirable sources do not enter Malaysian politics and influence the domestic agenda. Singapore has long worried about "black operations" in media and has been vigilant about foreign funding in media and politics.

## Inter-Relationship Between Mainstream Media and Alternative Media

It is now almost universally accepted that the ruling Barisan National and the mainstream media did themselves a great disservice by demanding and accepting, respectively, near total control of the mainstream media and playing crude and crass propaganda games with the public. The mainstream media had become so unreliable that the public was driven to alternative media and the new media provided it with enough grist to accelerate the process of condemning the ruling coalition to a humiliating electoral outcome.

However, it was not just in the provision of alternative information that the new media contributed to this process. Much more importantly, it led to an unprecedented mindset change in Malaysians, which was possible mainly due to the inherent nature of the new media. It was the network effect of the Internet and the mobile phone that outweighed the mainstream media efforts to mobilise public opinion in favour of BN.

It is for this reason that while it is not at all accurate to say that the new media was the main cause of the political tsunami, it would be equally inaccurate to say that the new media had minimal effect on the electorate except to serve as a communication channel. While the underlying causes such as bad governance, anger against corruption and ethnic inequality certainly would have delivered a severe blow to Barisan Nasional, the tsunami, was most likely made possible by the swift and sweeping network effect of the new media. On the other hand, no amount of network effect could uproot a ruling party if there were no major grievances on the part of the electorate, which is reflective of the Singapore situation.

In a way it is the utter lack of understanding of the dynamics and the power of the new media that misled the former Information Minister of Malaysia to make those naive statements dismissing the impact of Internet, while betting on the credibility of compliant mainstream media. It was also the ill-advised decision by BN to ignore bloggers and not to engage the new media in a robust and sustained way that yielded much ground to the Opposition, which simply turned out to be the savvier user of the new media. The new replacement for Information Minister said as soon as three days after he took office: "Bloggers' views cannot be ignored. We've overlooked their roles and failed to understand their feelings."[11]

In concluding the observations on the Malaysian election experience with the Internet and other new media, the following need to be highlighted:

- The Internet, mobile phone and VCD, have all become powerful tools of political communication. They have lost their innocence of being mere entertainment ticket booking tools as the former Information Minister imagined.

- They have the capacity to be used not only individually but also in concert with each other, which makes for a formidable force in networked communication.

- More interestingly, even where new technologies do not reach directly, the old fashioned printouts carrying messages conveyed by new media have proven to be highly effective — reinforcing the point that communication tools have a tendency to connect seamlessly and that state control cannot make them divisible.

- While the mainstream media was commandeered by the state and powerful party interests, the ordinary citizen had become empowered by the new media and was able to mount a massive counter-campaign.

---

[11] "New Information Minister says he won't muzzle bloggers", *Malaysia Today,* retrieved from https://www.malaysia-today.net/new-information-minister-says-he-wont-muzzle-bloggers/

- The very nature of the new media to empower and interconnect ordinary individuals by the thousands induced mindset changes that would have been hard put to achieve by mainstream media — it liberated and democratised the voting public.

- The abiding lesson for the powers that be was that the new media should neither be censored nor ignored but fully engaged. The new media genie is out of the bottle and it is not going back in.

- Perhaps the most difficult truth to swallow would be that controlling the mainstream media in a way that it is prevented from telling the truth or reflecting the sentiments of the people is no longer a smart option.

## Implications for Singapore

There are obvious differences between Malaysia and Singapore. First, political power is almost entirely concentrated in the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) in Singapore, whereas in Malaysia, that power is much more diffused. Despite Barisan National's seeming dominance of the political landscape, political power has been shared among component parties of the rainbow coalition, the Opposition parties, the royalty, and the judiciary, the academia and the civil society whenever they were allowed to operate independently. Thus it has been much easier for PAP to create and maintain political hegemony than it has been for the BN. The consequent control the PAP could impose, through its government, on the Internet and its ability to achieve a chilling effect on its opponents is also starkly different from the BN's, which has had to contend with a plurality of power bases both within and outside the party.

Second, the good governance aspect of this discourse is also very different between the two countries. If good governance means competent leadership, correct policies and clean government, then it is widely believed that Singapore enjoys good governance through the PAP and that Malaysia suffers from the poor governance of the BN. In addition, Malaysia's endemic corruption is in striking contrast to Singapore's remarkable cleanliness. Through clean and good governance, Singapore has avoided most of the problems Malaysia faced at the hustings. It also obviated the need for the public to turn to alternative media for airing its grievances.

Third, though mainstream media in both countries is tightly controlled by the government, there are significant differences. In Malaysia, the government control intersects with control by individual parties of their own stable of mainstream media. Furthermore, the control and propaganda approaches in Malaysia are far less sophisticated than in Singapore. However, it should be noted here that in several surveys, Singaporeans have consistently rated the local media as less credible in its political coverage than in other aspects, in which it has received high ratings.[12] This lack of credibility of the mainstream media has certainly driven many people to the Internet for alternative sources of information. An IPS study (forthcoming) on the impact of the Internet on Singapore's 2006 elections clearly shows that, as with

---

[12] Kuo, E.C.Y., Holaday, D. & Peck, E., *Mirror on the Wall: Media in a Singapore Election* (Singapore: AMIC, 1993); Hao, X., The Press and Public Rrust: The Case of Singapore, *Asian Journal of Communication*, no. 6 (1996): 111–123.

Malaysia, whenever the mainstream media resorts to overt control and propaganda, the new media gains in currency and credibility.

Given these prevailing conditions, the question arises whether the current Singapore Internet regulations should be changed at all? Do Singaporeans really need or want a free Internet?

First, if the current regulations are primarily based on the government's world-view of the Internet as expressed in the above cited report by *The Straits Times*, then the internal contradictions alone warrant a review of them.

Second, if the near total freedom of Malaysian alternative media and the Malaysian election experience are anything to go by, the progressive approach would be less rather than more control. While one swallow may not make a summer, the long and deep common history of the two countries and the major similarities of their polity make a compelling case for comparison. The lesson gained from Malaysia is that less is better. Every single person interviewed for this project also confirmed that the fears of chaos and violence through Internet-mediated misinformation and disinformation did not materialise in Malaysia.

Third, the comparison of the two countries is inevitable and it does not bode well for a world-class "Intelligent Nation" to be unfavourably compared to what many Singaporeans consider a "not-so-intelligent nation". Furthermore, the notion of an Intelligent Nation that is somehow dumb in handling political expression would be a rather sad commentary on its people. They will have to be convinced why they cannot enjoy the freedoms their closest neighbour and fraternal twin can.

Fourth, the current control regime is unable to weed out the truly virulent and poisonous material from the Internet and yet Singaporeans have not been unduly affected by it — which begs the question why they would behave differently with normal political debate?

Fifth, there is also the question of what can really be regulated and what cannot. Given the fact that no single state can unilaterally censor the Internet, it is only collective, multi-state effort that would yield meaningful results. One can expect such cooperative efforts in combating, for example, child pornography, terrorism or hate speech. Hardly any such cooperation would be forthcoming for limiting local political speech. Finally, there seems to be a certain fission even within the usually monolithic government position on censorship. In April 2007, at a dialogue with the Young PAP members, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew was reported to have said that with the prevalence of the Internet, censorship is just not practical any more.[13] In fact, he had made a similar statement way back in 1998 in a speech in US[14] which made some impact on the then prevailing censorship regime and loosened up the control instinct. Recently he has been making more such statements on Singapore censorship. At the 2007 meeting he was more emphatic: "… all this censorship and so on makes no sense to me. You are on the Internet 24 hours, broadband. We're going to have Wi-Fi throughout the whole city. We cannot stop this."

---

[13] Peh Shing Huei, "Adjusting to the realities of a globalising world", *The Straits Times*, April 23, 2007.
[14] "Impact of new media on politics", *The Straits Times,* October 31, 1998; "Media will stay different", *The Straits Times,* November 2, 1998.

## Engaging the Internet

The better alternative to "stopping" the use of the Internet in certain ways seems to be active engagement of it. Given that the state can only exercise limited control over the Internet and given that an alternative media can be created from outside of Singapore and used to influence Singaporean audiences, it seems prudent to prepare them to navigate it rather than shielding them from it. Neither the Malaysian option of ignoring or belittling the Internet nor the Singaporean practice of suffocating political speech will serve the public well in the long run. As has been the experience in much of the developed world, the public can and must learn to cope with the vagaries of the Internet. Likewise, the government and the political parties have to learn to use the intent to engage and counteract what they consider to be undesirable.

There are two ways that a government or party can engage the Internet. First, it needs to establish its own Web presence with two-way communication and other interactive functions. Both the Singapore government and major political parties are already doing this. An interesting example is the p65.sg collaborative website by PAP's young parliamentarians. However, at the moment the engagement is neither broad enough, in that not enough MPs and even ministers are using it; nor deep enough, in the sense that there is not enough effort made to use technologies such as RSS feeds, either for government press releases, or for p65.sg. This first kind of engagement allows a government or a party to talk *to* the Internet. The other kind of engagement is to talk *with* the Internet. This means reaching out to and conversing with credible and respected bloggers and other entities such as online news sites. The PAP is already trying to do that with its members going round to rebut criticisms openly or anonymously. (There are several reasons why this has only worked to a limited extent, but they are beyond the scope of this report.) To be sure, this sort of engagement, which is the online equivalent of engagement offline with civil society, is not easy, especially for a government not used to being asked tough questions (like Singapore's) or which is not doing very well (like Malaysia's). A useful insight was provided by UMNO's Shahrir Samad. He said engagement allows the government to be plugged into conversations on the Internet so that it knows what is being said, and also it is no longer a stranger when it wishes to take part in that conversation beyond being a listener. The Malaysian experience provides a contrast in effective engagement between the Opposition and the Barisan Nasional. The Opposition parties and candidates were on the Internet talking to the electorate directly and with bloggers and online media. Barisan Nasional just did not do enough of either.

Laws are necessary to keep the Internet clean but they alone are not sufficient to make it strong and healthy. When the Internet community is allowed to engage in conversations with each other even on sensitive subjects, there is a strong likelihood that they will learn to negotiate with each other instead of heading towards violence or chaos. If the Malaysian experience — given the strong similarities between the two countries' polity — could be an indicator, there is a strong prospect for sobriety and temperance. As Raja Petra observed in his blog, different ethnic groups did have poor opinions of each other and did hurl insults at each other on the Internet but, overall, they kept a cool head. There were also enough voices of reason and

moderation. In Singapore there seems to be a readiness to assume that the worst will happen without an equal readiness to anticipate that the best can happen too.

The suggestion here is not to open up the floodgates of the Internet overnight and declare a free-for-all on the Internet. The transition from near total control to near total freedom on the Internet obviously will have to be carefully calibrated and managed. The public needs practice to get it right and it will make mistakes along the way — just like our politicians, professionals or preachers. The state should resist its nanny instincts to jump in straight away and instead let the ordinary players settle the score among themselves.

## What If?

Despite all the above arguments, there is still a legitimate concern: "What if it does go wrong?" — indeed a most frequently asked question. As with most things in life, the possibility of going wrong is always there — except that because cars can skid, bridges can collapse and political leaders can make mistakes, we do not avoid driving cars, building bridges or electing politicians. The more relevant question is not about possibility but probability. The track record so far is that the average Singaporean has a good head on her/his shoulder most of the time. Second, in the event something does go wrong, there is a whole retinue of counter measures that Singapore government and public can employ, as discussed above. Third, the complete avoidance of risks could only drive the risks abroad or underground and in both such cases, it would harm not help Singapore, and given the general uncontrollability of the Internet, the state can do little to overcome it. It would seem better to deal with an enemy you know than one you don't.

Lastly, perhaps the most important question:  What has Singapore got to lose if Singapore continues to "stop" the Internet? There is one answer worth taking seriously:

> If we stop this, we stop the progress. You either go with the world and be part of the world, or you will find that we become a quaint, a quixotic, esoteric appendage of the world.

> — Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew

**ANNEX**

## Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor Bill of Guarantees

As part of its commitment to ensure the success of MSC Malaysia Status companies, the Malaysian Government promises to fulfil the following Bill of Guarantees:

1. Provide a world-class physical and information infrastructure.

2. Allow unrestricted employment of local and foreign knowledge workers.

3. Ensure freedom of ownership by exempting companies with MSC Malaysia Status from local ownership requirements.

4. Give the freedom to source capital globally for MSC Malaysia infrastructure, and the right to borrow funds globally.

5. Provide competitive financial incentives, including no income tax for up to 10 years or an investment tax allowance, and no duties on import of multimedia equipment.

6. Become a regional leader in intellectual property protection and cyber laws.

7. Ensure no Internet censorship.

8. Provide globally competitive telecommunications tariffs.

9. Tender key MSC Malaysia infrastructure contracts to leading companies willing to use the MSC Malaysia as their regional hub.

10. Provide an effective one-stop agency – the Multimedia Development.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Newspaper articles**

*AsiaMedia*. "Opposition overcomes media hurdles." March 11, 2008.

*Associated Press.* "Malaysia's Cash Starved Opposition Seeks Online Relief From Election Donors." March 3, 2008.

*Associated Press.* "Malaysia's New Information Minister Says He Won't Muzzle Bloggers." March 22, 2008.

Au Yong, Jeremy. "More Politicians Taking Their Campaign Online: But Reach of Internet Mainly Confined to the Middle Class." *The Straits Times*. February 20, 2008.

*BBC*. "Seeking Re-Election, Malaysian Leader Denies Sleeping on the Job." March 3, 2008.*Bernama*. "E Campaign on the Rise." March 2, 2008.

*Bernama*. "People Trust Print, Electronic Media as They are Credible, says Zam." March 2, 2008.

*Bernama*. "Street Smart Boys Take Over Penang's Leadership." March 11, 2008.

*Business Times* (Singapore). "Campaigning Spills Into Cyber Space." February 29, 2008.

Centre for Independent Journalism. "Ministry Keeps *Makkal*, *Oriental* in Suspense Over Permits." February 21, 2008.

Chow, Kum Hor. "Malaysia: Umno Officials 'Behind Seditious Postings'." *The Straits Times*. July 27, 2007.

*Malaysia Today*. "Of 'Badangs' and 'Blogoticians'." February 28, 2008.

*Malaysia Today*. "Cyber Activism, the New Frontier." March 3, 2008.

*Malaysiakini*. "Opposition Muzzled — Here's Black and White Proof." June 29, 2007.

*Malaysiakini*. "Dr M on Why We're Not Feeling Good." March 7, 2008.

*Malaysiakini*. "Long Live the E-volution!" March 12, 2008.

*New Straits Times*. "Cyber Troopers Battle for Voters." February 17, 2008.

*New Straits Times*. "Election 2008: Putera MIC Goes Online." February 20, 2008.

*New Straits Times*. "Changing Voting Trends Among the Young. March 1, 2008.

*New Straits Times*. "They All 'Ad' Up to Inform Electorate." March 2, 2008.

*New Straits Times.* "Election 2008: Weave the Web for 2013." March 6, 2008.

*New Straits Times.* "Cyber Clout." March 16, 2008.

*Reuters.* Bloggers Test Their Popularity in Malaysia Election. February 26, 2008.

*Reuters.* "Malaysia opposition win shows power of cyberspace." March 9, 2008.

*South East Asian Press Alliance.* "Election Results Reflect Voters' Demand for Democratic Reforms and Freedom of Expression, says SEAPA." March 12, 2008.

*The Economist.* "The Perils of Modernity." March 13, 2008.

*The Edge.* "Internet to Swing Votes?" February 21, 2008

*The Edge.* "Net Value — Cyber Wars." February 26, 2008.

*The Edge.* "What Role did New Media play in GE '08?" March 12, 2008.

*The Star.* "PAS Launches Net-Based TV Broadcast. February 25, 2008.

*The Star.* "Newspapers Still the Preferred Choice." March 2, 2008.

*The Star.* "Appealing to the Net Generation." March 4, 2008.

*The Star.* "Parties Campaign Through YouTube." March 5, 2008.

*The Star.* "BN: Don't be Taken in by Anwar." March 5, 2008.

*The Star.* "Denial Syndrome Must End." March 14, 2008.

*The Star.* "Information Minister Talks About Bloggers, Politics and the Middle-Class." March 20, 2008.

*The Star.* "The Davids who Beat Goliaths." March 16, 2008.

*The Star.* "Surge in SMS Traffic on Election Day." March 30, 2008.

*The Straits Times.* "Winds of Change Blow, But Softly." February 29, 2008.

*Today.* "My Biggest Mistake." March 26, 2008.

*Today.* "Did Bloggers Really Create the Tsunami?" March 29, 2008.

Yeoh, Oon. "How Should Bloggers be Classified?" *Malaysia Explorer*, May 6, 2007.

*ZDNet Asia.* "Bloggers Crackdown May Hurt Malaysia." September 6, 2007.

**Academic Articles**

Baharudin, Aziz. "The Role and Influence of the Internet and SMS on Voters in the Malaysian General Elections of 2004". Institute for Research Development and Commercialisation [IRDC], UiTM.

Baharudin, Aziz. "Democracy.com: The Role and Influence of the Internet on Voters in the Malaysian General Elections of l999". Bureau of Research and Consultancy [BRC], UiTM.

Chang Teck Peng. "Letting the Wolf in: Lurking Challenge to the Pluralism of the Chinese Media in Malaysia." *Journalism Asia 2005*: 19–24.

Chang Teck Peng. "News Websites as Windows of Opportunities to Alternative Source of Information: Malaysian Experiences".  Paper delivered at New Media and Social Transformation: Conference and Workshop, organised by Hong Kong In-Media and Master of Cultural Studies Programme, Lingnan University, December 9–10 2005, Hong Kong.

George, Cherian. *Contentious Journalism & the Internet: Towards Democratic Discourse in Malaysia & Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and University of Washington Press, 2006.

Merdeka Centre. (2008, March 12). 12th General Elections — Observations on Issues, Voting Directions and Implications.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS