

Conference Paper

Internet's only as Good as Its Users

Eric Loo

Honorary Senior Fellow (Journalism), School of the Arts, English & Media
 Faculty of Law, Humanities, University of Wollongong, NSW 2526 Australia

Abstract

The 'democratizing' influence of the Internet is only as effective as the political culture and the people's readiness to actively use the medium for meaningful engagement, as well as a mainstream media that is capable of being a watchdog on those in power. To achieve the democratic potential of the Internet, (a) we need to develop best practices in socio-political blogging; (b) the basic principles of ethical journalism - transparency, accuracy, accountability, fairness, verifiability - should apply to blogs that claim to provide readers a space to engage in free and honest intellectual exchanges; and (c) the Internet as a tool to instigate fundamental reforms is only as effective as its users, and the environment that allows users to generate new knowledge and critically engage in the political process.

Corresponding Author: Eric
 Loo; email:
 eloo@uow.edu.au

Received: 09 April 2017

Accepted: 17 May 2017

Published: 12 June 2017

Publishing services provided
 by Knowledge E

© Eric Loo. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the ICoSaPS Conference Committee.

1. Background

Do not listen to rumors. Don't talk to strangers. I remember these routine whispers in 1969 in the schoolyard, coffee shops and at home. We were told the wrong word uttered would land you in jail. That caution was certainly real to a Form Two kid, haunted by stories of people attacked by rioters on the streets, outside cinemas, churches, temples. Each story embellished and sounded bloodier than the one before.

For a week after May 13 in 1969 in Penang, Malaysia I witnessed my father and other folks -Chinese, Indians and a few Eurasians - shuffled off to the cemetery for their nightly watch outside our village with metal pipes, bamboo spears and improvised tools of defense - just in case Malays from the nearby *kampung* attacked us in the dark. That was a very long week to a 14-year-old who slept with his school shoes on, just in case.

Do not spread rumors. This may not hold true today among Malaysian internet users, the millennials, who wouldn't know much about the 1969 race riots, until the book *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969* [5] was reviewed in Malaysiakini, a news portal which I write an occasional column. The book is a reminder for the millennial bloggers of what it was like to grow up in an environment of institutionalized fear and manufactured inter-racial distrust.

 OPEN ACCESS

Much has changed in what Malaysians can openly talk about today. The silent majority now have a channel to sneak in their political dissent, which they could not in the past without risks of being detained for interrogation by the authorities. The state has certainly sued critical bloggers and Twitter users for defamation - and in some cases for destabilizing the public order - under the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998. *(The government is considering amending the CMA to include: registering political blogs and websites, increase in penalties for offences related to undesirable content, broader power for the Internet regulatory body - the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) - to take down online content without proper oversight).*

The most recent case is the online news portal, Malaysiakini, for publishing selected Your Say articles on the Prime Minister in 2014; The Malaysian Insider for two stories on former Menteri Besar of Selangor in June 2016; and recently, private citizens) for various posts on the death of PAS spiritual leader Datuk Haron Din.

In an environment where the government explicitly dictates what the people can receive, access or publish online, how can social-political bloggers respond? This leads to my first point - the challenges Malaysians face daily as Internet users:

1. Dealing with falsehoods and conspiracy theories, and being more exposed to data but becoming less informed.
2. Trapped in the 'echo chambers' - we curate sites that we agree with, consequently we polarize our views of the world.
3. Simplifying complex issues in 140 characters, jumping to conclusions in short commentaries to stay in the short news cycle.
4. Becoming more reactive in posting Tweets and short messages than reasoned reflection and civil conversations/dialogue.

To address these challenges: We need to develop best practices in responsible socio-political blogging to fight off the government's interference in free expression on the Internet. Think before Tweeting or posting messages on social media. Sounds like common sense. But common too, and understandably so, is the people's righteous indignation and fiery reactions to the impunity that Malaysian politicians and their sycophants have long enjoyed for their racialized public statements, corrupt dealings and abuse of power.

We should, however, recognize that the Internet is not beyond regulation for obvious reasons: to protect intellectual property rights, to curb child pornography, piracy, frauds, racial and religious vilification, identify thefts, bullying and so forth.

We should also recognize that there's a darker side to the Internet. It tends to make quiet / reserve people very outspoken. The Internet provides a channel for extremists to spread their politics. For example, the propagation of ISIS ideology. The Malaysian

Home Ministry had reported that 75 percent of ISIS recruitment in Malaysia happened through the social media. The Brookings Institution (Washington DC) in a report (April 21, 2015) noted that: "Estimates of the number of Malaysian fighters in ISIS vary from between 60 to almost 150, depending on who you ask. The high end of these figures approximates the number of Indonesian fighters that are also believed to be in Syria and Iraq. Yet the population of Malaysia is barely one-tenth that of Indonesia. In other words, Malaysians seem to be joining ISIS at a higher rate than Indonesians." [3].

Considering that 70 percent of Malaysian households are connected to the Internet, and Malaysians are generally active social media users, ISIS have easy access to vulnerable sections of the population (students in particular). A local paper reported that "In March 2015, ISIS released a two-minute video on YouTube (which was later taken down by YouTube) titled "*Cahaya Tarbiyah Di Bumi Kilafah*" (Education in the Caliphate) featuring at least 20 Malay-speaking boys, possibly including Indonesians. The footage depicted the youth attending religious classes and engaging in weapons training in ISIS-held territory in either Iraq or Syria [4]. ISIS is now recruiting females. For instance, a 26 year-old doctor, by the name of 'Shams', reportedly a Malaysian, allegedly traveled through Turkey to Syria in February 2014 to enter into an arranged marriage with a Moroccan-ISIS jihadist. She runs a micro-blogging and social networking website (Tumblr) 'Diary of a Muhajirah' of her life in Syria.

Yes, in countries like Malaysia where the government usually interferes with the media coverage of national affairs, where the mainstream media are unapologetically pro-government – socio-political bloggers tend to hide behind the mask of anonymity. Here, it's easy to build an online community of anonymous like-minded venting their dissent and anger. Anonymity and avatars unfortunately tend to undermine one's credibility. Like-minded talking to each other, echoing and affirming each other's views of the world is as detrimental to obtaining new knowledge and arriving at the truth as the failure of pro-government mainstream media in fulfilling its public service function as the people's watchdog. Whether the socio-political and economic progress in Malaysia is better served by an independent adversarial media or a pro-government media is a matter of perspective. It comes down to the media doing what's right by the people, not those in power. This applies to socio-political blogging.

Relationship between the media (and socio-political blogs) and government is naturally in constant flux - sometimes contentious, sometimes supportive. Dire consequences arise when the media become singularly pro-government or pro opposition. Whether the online community in countries like Malaysia with their first-person reportage and partisan commentaries will be able to take us where the mainstream media are unable or rather unwilling to remains to be seen.

Here's the fundamental question. Is the Internet in fact polarizing and closing our mind to views that challenge our beliefs? It will be if we fall into the 'echo chamber'. This happens when we Google for information and data to reinforce our views. Algorithms are customized to give us information we agree with based on our keyword search on controversial topics like same sex marriage, climate change, 1MDB scandals, anti-Trump, anti-Clinton campaigns in the US presidential elections.

Having said that, while the politically engaged continue to use the Internet to confront and question the corrupt governance at many levels of government, it's gerrymandering, and discriminatory policies, we should be mindful of developing best practices in tailoring the commentaries towards achieving positive change. No fair-minded Internet users should accept the state's interference in the online communication space. Even the United Nations Human Rights Council has passed a non-binding resolution in June this year that condemns countries that intentionally take away or disrupt its citizens' internet access.

I recognize that in competing to get noticed, to attract readership and raise external funds to sustain their online ventures, bloggers can and do get caught up in anonymously propagating their own ideologies, venting their anger, generating provocative postings - one more sensational than the other before - to stir controversies, the same motivation that drives gutter journalism usually plays out in socio-political blogs and social media.

What's verifiably true or merely thought to be true, conspiracies, manufactured dissent, deceptions, misrepresentations, plagiarism - these can all slip through the cracks in poorly managed socio-political blogs. Which leads to my second point: The basic principles of ethical journalism - transparency, accuracy, accountability, fairness, verifiability - should apply to socio-political blogs that claim to provide readers with an alternative space to engage in honest intellectual exchange.

Blogs have certainly led to breaking stories in the media. Journalists who trawl through the blogosphere, Twitter and other social media channels for story ideas and angles know that amidst the anarchic chatters are the occasional insights into issues that matter to the people. The Malaysian authorities have even hired tech-savvy content sweeper to track the blogosphere to get a picture of what's important to different sections of the communities, and, through their cyber-troopers and trolls have injected the government's agenda into the blogosphere. These cyber troopers are coordinated at least in part by the New Media Unit (NMU) (*Unit Media Baru*), a division of UMNO Youth. They may be bloggers, Tweeters, Facebookers who comment and respond to online postings on pro-oppositional sites. Their main role is to disseminate information about the government 'transformation agenda' and challenge oppositional views.

The need to develop a set of blogging etiquette akin to public service journalism is self-evident. In the absence of a formal code, I would suggest that the elements of ethical journalism should apply to social political blogging:

1. With the exception of countries with repressive regimes where bloggers face security risks and repercussions for their anti-government views such as in the Arab world, in parts of Asia, (Committee to Protect Journalist, 2015) or whistle blowers exposing socio-economic injustices and state corruption, socio-political bloggers should identify themselves in their by-lines (like journalists do in their stories). Bloggers should stand by what they write, and impress on their readers that the facts, opinions and claims in the articles are verified and checked for factual and contextual accuracy. True by-lines show the blogger's accountability for what they write. While anonymity or take-identity gives the politically oppressed and victims of abuse more freedom to speak up, it should not be used as a front to troll, bully, slander, incite hatred or vilify others by race, gender or religion.
2. Interpretations of community issues and commentaries should be supported by providing relevant hyperlinks of key concepts in the commentaries to reliable and authoritative sources for context, corroboration and verification.
3. These common-sense principles would lead to greater accountability and accuracy in the blogs. Ultimately a blogsite is only as credible, reliable and authoritative as the sum of bloggers who honor the principles of ethical public service journalism, civil dialogue, free expression and freedom of the press.

Assuming that Internet users have a clear sense of purpose in engaging online for social change, to what extent have we used the Internet to agitate for political reforms? This leads to my third point: Internet as a tool to promote fundamental reforms is only as effective as its users, and the environment that allows users to generate new knowledge and critically engage in the political process.

Internet as an enabler of participatory democracy is based on the premise that "reliable, equitable and affordable connectivity exists". The majority of the countries in Asia and the Pacific, however, still have not reached that point yet, according to the 2016 report by UN-ESCAP (Economic Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) on the state of ICT in Asia. High-income countries – HK, Japan, Singapore - have achieved higher growth rate in broadband penetration than countries like India, Indonesia and Pakistan.

The purpose for which the Internet is being put to use, and the disparity in Internet accessibility (infrastructure and language use, for example) challenges the common assessment of the Internet's power to democratize the media system and public institutions in the case of Malaysia these range from instituting meritocracy and academic

freedom in the higher education sector to revoking media laws and ensuring open, free and fair elections. (In the Freedom House survey of World Freedom 2016. The report notes: "The (Malaysian) government engages in legal harassment of bloggers, activists, academics, students, lawyers, and journalists who post critical content, charging them under defamation laws, the Official Secrets Act, and the Sedition Act, all of which include imprisonment as a possible penalty." [2].

Indeed, the experience of Internet users in Iran, Indonesia, China, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, Bahrain, Turkey is different from users in Japan, South Korea, and the West. For example, my keyword search for 'Tiananmen Square', 'Tank Man', 'Falun Gong' and 'Tibet' when I was in Beijing, Shanghai, Kunming in October 2015 came up with non-political information, such as tourist sites. Authoritarian governments have in place strategies to deal with Internet savvy users' ability to get around the state censors.

For instance, Malaysiakini have in the past been attacked by DDoS - Distributed Denial of Service - in their critical coverage of political corruption. DDoS attack involves using a large number of computers (government cyber troopers) to flood Malaysiakini's servers with 'dud' traffic, causing a traffic jam which denies access to legitimate users. This usually happens during the Bersih protests when Malaysiakini - commonly seen as anti-government - is the only news organization that largely covers the protests live.

The Malaysian experience shows that increased Internet penetration has only provided an illusion of progress, which does not necessarily mean improvements in the level and neither substance of the national conversation nor greater freedom of the press. Are Malaysians perhaps being overly optimistic with the Internet's capacity to foster greater "people power" following the flood of alternative citizen reformasi-oriented web sites in the late-90s?

Whether interconnectivity necessarily leads to effective grassroots' participation in the political process - for instance in Malaysia - is still open to question. In reality, the average citizen's priorities, and the state's agenda are shaped more by tangible economic outcomes than *reformasi* goals.

From my observations, the Internet in Malaysia has primarily been used for e-commerce. For example, the Multimedia Super Corridor established in 1996 in a "Special Economic Zone and high-technology business district" was "designed to leapfrog Malaysia into the information and knowledge age ... to attract companies with temporary tax breaks and facilities such as high-speed Internet access and proximity to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport".

The MSC embodies the government's version of modernity represented by technological advancement, incremental growth in "e-commerce" and foreign investments in the MSC. E-commerce yes. E-government in terms of reducing bureaucracy paperwork - yes. But E-democracy - no, judging from numerous cases of dissidents being

hauled up under the security laws for allegedly spreading anti-government views and mobilizing street protests for open, free and fair elections.

Despite the government's assurance that the Internet will not be censored under the MSC's Bill of Guarantees, the state continues to control and influence the medium through licensing bureaucracies and application of libel and national security laws through its less-than-independent judiciary. Content regulations place the onus on providers to ensure that what is communicated online do not break the law, thus compelling providers to become indirect censors to avoid prosecution.

The state can and do use the Internet to track dissidents, activists and throw them in jail (for instance in China, Egypt), or to garner public response to a coup attempt, like in Turkey, when President Erdogan used Facetime to call on the public to resist the military coup in July this year. In response, thousands took to the streets to oppose the military coup. Ironically, President Erdogan had three years earlier (June 2013) once described social media as the worst menace to society when thousands of protesters mobilized via social media (Twitter) and took over Istanbul's main square to demand his resignation.

(The protests started off as "a sit-in protest to save an inner-city Istanbul Taksim Gezi Park from having to make way for a kitschy Ottoman-style shopping centre, rapidly snow-balled into the largest and most violent anti-government protests that Turkey has seen in years". The mainstream media, controlled by Erdogan's government, largely failed to report the protests. About 3.5m people of Turkey's 80m population estimated to have taken part in about 5,000 protests across the country on other political issues - from press freedom, media censorship, violation of democratic rights to authoritarianism and growing Islamism of Erdogan's government - stemming from the Taksim Gezi Park sit-in protests).

The notion that the Internet in Malaysia naturally fosters solidarity of political activists (e.g., Bersih 5.0) is impeded by the top-down power structure and state control of the multimedia communication platforms via its security laws and Official Secrets Act. The Internet is indeed a double-edged sword. The Internet enables participatory democracy as well as entrenches authoritarianism (through disinformation and propagation of pro-government and pro-establishment views).

For Internet-driven democracy to succeed in countries like Malaysia there must be a citizenry that is prepared to face the consequences of protesting in the streets, and speaking out, and a mainstream media that is willing and able to forge a democratic culture. I recognize that in the Malaysian mainstream media environment, editorial decisions are sometimes constrained by potential prosecutions by the state under the Printing Presses and Publications Act. In some cases, newspapers are shut down, for instance *The Edge Weekly* (which I write occasional column) was suspended for three months in July 2015 for its critical coverage of the 1MDB scandal. *The Heat* (which I also write for), a weekly newspaper, was also suspended for three months in December

2013 for its expose on the Prime Minister's lavish expenditure on travels and consultants, and his wife for using government jet for personal use.

When people look at politics as being of lesser importance than economic imperatives, and have a vague concept of community living, and keep their counsel when they disagree or not speak out if they have a point of view, how could they transform the public culture even if the Internet opens the door to freer communication and exchange of information?

We commonly assume that the Internet motivates users to search for new information that challenges their deep-seated beliefs so as to arrive at 'new' worldviews. We assume that Internet users do naturally engage in productive political discussions, join advocacy groups for worthy causes or read news stories that change their outlook on the world. In reality, this assumption is open to question. Just think how many hours do you spend a week using the Internet to engage in productive communication or post comments to advocacy websites compared to posting social messages on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram? I'm inclined to think that the main attraction of the internet to the average user is more about convenience in accessing information, shopping and banking online, socializing, and entertainment than critically advocating for social change and political reforms.

To conclude, whether the Internet is effective or not in planting the seeds of participatory democracy hinges on the extent of community interest and participation in public affairs, which are not particularly high in countries like Malaysia, for instance, and the preparedness of the state to recognize the Internet as a tool to foster participatory democracy rather than just as a tool for economic growth.

While the Internet is not beyond regulation, when the state resort to suppress dissenting views on the Internet for the sake of maintaining public order, national security and race relations, when the online community know for a fact that the government's control of the internet is to primarily protect their power position and to cover their corrupt governance and racial policies, we should respond, and respond according to best practices principles, because the Internet is only as good as our purpose for using it - to organize and mobilize for social change and fundamental reforms, to engage in civil, reasoned reflection, to expand public discourse and to test our ideas with those who don't agree with us.

References

- [1] Committee to Protect Journalist, (2015). Retrieved October 31, 2016, from 10 Most Censored Countries: <https://cpj.org/2015/04/10-most-censored-countries.php>.
- [2] C. Sterling, Encyclopedia of Journalism, SAGE Publications, Inc., 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320 United States, 2009.

- [3] J. C. Liow, (2015, April 21). Brookings. Retrieved October 31, 2016, from Malaysia's ISIS conundrum: <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/malaysias-isis-conundrum/>.
- [4] Malaysian Digest, (2015, March 18). Retrieved October 31, 2016, from Are You Scared Of Bombs? – Malay Speaking ISIS Children Answer In Video: <http://www.malaysiandigest.com/frontpage/29-4-tile/546102-are-you-scared-of-bombs-malay-speaking-isis-children-answer-in-video.html>.
- [5] K. K. Soong, May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of, 1969., Petaling Jaya, Suaram, Selangor, 2007.