An Exploratory Study on the Impact of Political Blogs on Citizen's Participation in Malaysia Political Activism

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Abstract: Interactive blogging activities have revolutionised the means of exchanging and disseminating political information, insights and opinions on an everyday basis and have enabled the emergence of social networks among the bloggers. This study shows how and why Malaysians are using political blogs. Malaysia has been experiencing significant change in political communication. The research is grounded in theory which argues that democracy is best served by a public sphere where competing visions of the future can be expressed and subjected to debate without skewing or censorship to fit the agendas of dominating parties. This research involved interviews with political blog writers in Malaysia from both government and opposition parties. These interviews highlighted the information sharing, social networking, political agenda setting and political development within Malaysian politics that has resulted from blogging. Blogs are playing a role in changing the traditional political landscape and fostering social networks based on political activism, resulting in increasing participation. From this a modified theory of citizen communication mediation is proposed. These modifications incorporate the added value of web 2.0 applications attracting more people to political interest and activism and incorporate the development of the use of social networking in interactive civic messaging. Both, it is argued here have contributed to increased participatory political activism in Malaysia.

Key words: Politic, blog, information, network, participation

INTRODUCTION

The Internet and the development of social media have facilitated a wide and popular acceptance of blogs as form of communication. However, this deliberative policy of infusing technology into Malaysian society impacted in 2008, ways the government had not anticipated. The influence of political information posted on the Internet is believed to be one of the factors that contributed to the unprecedented results of the 2008 election. In 2008, the opposition party alliance relied on the Internet as a new information tool, one that proved to be effective in politics in the United States (Brown, 2005). One of the key elements in this new use of technology in the election was blogging. This research focuses on understanding political blogging in Malaysia in terms of what it involves and evaluating its impact. The objectives of this research are:

- To explore the effects of political blogs on citizen's participation in Malaysia's politics
- To investigate Malaysian's social networks resulting from their blogs activities and how they serve as a platform for political activism

Literature review: There is increasing literature on blogs as an influential source for news and information (Drezner and Farrell, 2004; Dutton and Shepherd, 2006; Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005; Lerman and Ghosh, 2010; Johnson and Kaye, 2016). The use of blogs is also considered to be a powerful force for democratization because it enables communication and collaboration which goes beyond geographical barriers on a massive scale (Papacharissi, 2007). Blogs referred as a traditional diary in which the author records the events that happen in their daily life and keep it in blogs as their personal dairy where it can be viewed by the blog's readers

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(Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005; Nardi *et al.*, 2004; Herring *et al.*, 2004; Huang *et al.*, 2007). Blogs, in their original form, tended to be associated with individuals who used sites to offer personal reflections on events or issues (Gunter, 2009; Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016).

Blogging is sometimes viewed as a new grassroots form of journalism and a way to shape democracy outside the mass media and conventional party politics. The writers or developers of blogs are called 'bloggers' and their activities in blogs are labelled as the 'blogosphere' which includes opinions, experiences, facts and questions. Previous research found that the features that attracted bloggers and readers to the blogs are the links to other blogs, webpages and forums (Drezner and Farrell, 2004; Johnson and Kaye, 2016). The research added that the content of a blog depends on its writer and whether they acted as news aggregators or posted their personal diaries or used their blog as a political soapbox (Ekdale *et al.*, 2010).

Five motivational factors for blogging are identified (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016), to seek information, to provide commentary, to participate in community forums, to document daily life and to express oneself. Among the activities of political bloggers are informing readers, checking the media and engaging in political advocacy (McKenna and Pole, 2008).

The use of Web 2.0 among Internet users facilitates creativity, information sharing and collaboration. An early definition was given by O'Reilly (2005) who described it as the idea of mutually maximizing collective intelligence and added value for each participant by dynamic information sharing and creation. Web 2.0 also as incorporating the Internet platform, user-generated content and with an emphasis on social networking (Wakefield and Wakefield, 2016).

Blogs have emerged as a powerful medium in many countries as an effective means of connecting with the electorate (Couldry *et al.* 2016). In the 2004 US presidential election, blogs were used for political campaigns and became common tools for politicians to communicate with citizens (Borders and Kirk, 2005) with an emphasis on young voters (Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005). After the terrorist attacks in the US on 11th September 2001, the first politically oriented blogs emerged as an alternative source of information. Later, the political bloggers in the US raised awareness concerning American domestic and foreign policy issues and political elites started to adopt bloggers in their political campaigns (Kerbel and Bloom, 2005). Blogs have played
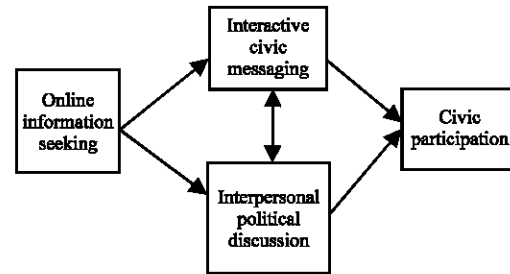

Fig. 1: Adopted model of communication and civic participation

a major role in determining how Malaysians choose their candidates (Tang, 2009). Their impact was commented in the daily newspapers immediately after the latest election in Malaysia by several government leaders who urged government ministers to have their own blogs as well.

In Malaysia, the usability of blogs has grown as a medium for political information; it has deliberative potential to influence citizens to participate in political activities. Malaysia is a country that has recently been increasing its exploration in the use of blogs as a way to influence citizens in political participation. The use of online news consumption leads to increase face-to-face political talk, ultimately bring in public participation (Couldry *et al.*, 2016; Shah *et al.*, 2005). Consequently, political blogs are used as a public forum for discussing the community, candidates, policy and voting.

In this study, the model of communication and civic participation by Shah *et al.* (2005) has been chosen as the conceptual framework, building on the theories outlined above Shah *et al.* (2005) argues that sharing political perspectives electronically and contacting political elites through the use of online media may contribute directly to engagement.

In this study, the model of communication and civic engagement by Shah *et al.* (2005) was adopted (Fig. 1). This model argues that sharing political perspectives electronically and contacting political elites through the use of online media may contribute directly to citizen engagement.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

An exploratory study is a valuable means to find out what is happening to seek new insights to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light (Colin, 2002). The purpose of using exploratory research is to examine

a little understood issue or phenomenon to develop preliminary ideas and move towards more refined research questions by focusing on the "what" questions.

Qualitative methods are usually used in gathering evidence that reflect experiences, feelings and judgements about individuals. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) a priority for one type of data or the other, depends on the interests of the researcher, the audience for the study and what the researcher is seeking in the study.

Data collection strategy involved interviews with fifteen prominent political blog writers from both the government and the opposition parties. The political bloggers who were interviewed are politicians and supporters of political parties who own or maintain blogs. Table 1 represents a list of political blogger. The interviews were done to understand how their writing in blogs influenced and/or were intended to influence citizens to participate in political activities. These political bloggers have developed their own political blogs to write about political issues from 2007 until 2009. The data collected from interviews is significant in giving a clear understanding of the research done by blog writers, the applications used and the process involved in posting political articles in blogs to readers.

Each interview began with self-assessment or reflection of the bloggers own perception of their position in society. This was done to enable the interviewees to adopt their own perspective (Neuman, 2006) and allows them to explore their perspectives and perceptions (Daymon and Holloway, 2002). Interviews should attempt to understand the world from the subject's point of view Kvale (1996) to unfold meaning of people's experiences and to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations.

In this study, each semi-structured interview was conducted with the political bloggers to explore the way blogs give effect to citizen's participation in political activities. Interviews are accepted as means of data gathering (Anderson, 1987) and have been used in a number of academic researches. Interview is an essential tool in educational enquiry because the respondent's preconceptions, perceptions and beliefs are in an inescapably important part of the backdrop of social interaction (Scott and Usher, 1996). The close interaction in interviews enables the researcher to explore complex issues in detail and allows the researcher to provide clarification to probe and to prompt (Andrew and Dowling, 1998). The human instrument through interview applies appropriate data collection techniques, complemented by tacit knowledge to the investigation (Pickard, 2013).

Table 1: List of political bloggers

Blogger category	Code	Gender
Independent blogger	MPBI 1	Male
Politician	MPBI 2	Male
Blog manager to politician	MPBI 3	Female
Supporter of politicians	MPBI 4	Male
Supporter of politicians	MPBI 5	Male
Supporter of politicians	MPBI 6	Male
Supporter of politicians	MPBI 7	Male
Supporter of politicians	MPBI 8	Male
Member of a political party	MPBI 9	Male
Politician	MPBI 10	Male
Blog manager to politician	MPBI 11	Male
Supporter of politicians	MPBI 12	Male
Freelance journalist	MPBI 13	Male
Freelance journalist	MPBI 14	Male

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the interviews with political bloggers has highlighted five main themes:

- Blogs are used in Malaysian politics to provide updated content on political information
- The use of blogs also is creating social networks among the bloggers and readers that focus on politics
- Blogs have been used as political information sources and a medium of communication between politicians and their political supporters
- The political information and discussion in blogs have and are shaping national political issues and discussions
- One of the key reasons for bloggers to use political blogs in Malaysia is due to effectiveness of using and the impact of Web 2.0 applications in blogs

Table 2, presents the summary of the outcomes of interviews with bloggers in the context of the conceptual framework adapted for the analysis of data in this study.

The analysis from interviews with political bloggers shows the activities of bloggers through the information in blogs has, in their opinion and from the admitted reactions of politicians, changed the political landscape in Malaysia. Blogs there provide updated information on politics which the population can sometime not access from mainstream newspapers. The analysis also found that blogs are both sources of new and/or enhanced political information and an additional medium for political communication. The analysis of the blogger interviews shows that blogs appear to play some role in shaping national political issues and discussion in Malaysia. Habermas described democracy as best served by a public sphere where competing visions of the future can be expressed and subjected to debate without skewing or censorship to fit the agendas of dominating parties.

Table 2: The outcomes of interviews with bloggers

Elements in the framework	Outcomes of interviews with Bloggers
Online information seeking (political blogs)	Blogs provide updated information on politics which is shaping national political issues and discussion in Malaysia. The bloggers believe that their blogs are increasing civic participation in Malaysian politics, resulting from the use of a number of messaging systems embedded in the ways the blogs are structured
Interactive civic messaging (active bloggers, internet uses)	Blogs have been used as political information sources and a medium of communication between politicians and their political supporters. The blogs in Malaysia have also become forums where people can challenge the existing political discourse of UMNO. Alternative perspectives on many issues are discussed openly in blogs challenging the status quo. The 'public sphere' Habermas argued was needed for a civil society and for democracy is emerging. Initially there was evidence of coercion that resulted from the early blogs but this has been decreasing. Leaders who are contesting the current discourse are now open about who they are and what they say and their effect has been one that has successfully challenged the incumbent government politically
Interpersonal political discussion (communication)	Blogs is used for articulation of political information. Forum in blog chatroll is also used to discuss political issues that competing visions which has previously been restricted Each of the blogs studied in detail shows how substantial interpersonal communication is developing. The numbers of blogs is growing and they have moved from single stand-alone blogs to those where there are now communities of blogs and bloggers, differentiated by their political ideology and purpose

The interviewees have revealed the opportunities given by blogs to address those competing visions, albeit in the beginning under threats from the legal structures which Habermas (2014) could see as restrictive. The acceptance of blogs as a political tool in Malaysia has gone some way to affect the threats. However, the situation is certainly not completely open and the political discourse of the government is still pervasive in the print media Habermas. Argued that the political public sphere needs input from citizens who give voice to society's problems and who respond to the issues articulated in elite discourse. Malaysian political blogs, it can be argued then, appear to be offering a means of articulation and a forum for competing visions which has previously been restricted.

In addition, information in political blogs has led to the creating of social networking among readers and activists. An interactive communication and interaction is occurring between bloggers and readers and these have strengthened social networking. The blogger network clubs is an example of this social network where programs, political talks and seminars are organized to improve understanding about politics. The blogs appear to help mobilize political activities. These social networks have emerged from blogs as technology, confirming the communitarian model (Dahlberg, 2007) which argues that the power of technology can reinforce existing community ties as well as establish new ones.

CONCLUSION

The new online political forums in Malaysia have initiated in-group interaction and collective political identity construction, leading, in the view of the political bloggers interviewed, to increased community integration and civic participation. This study reveals the potential of blogs as democratizing tools for Malaysian politics. Blogs are able to strengthen the democracy of the country by offering a medium for citizens to understand politics. As the findings show, blogs initiated more political thinking

and participation by citizens. It can be argued then that political parties will benefit with increasing numbers of people become active party members by attending political programs. Political blogs have created a sense of community within bloggers and readers. This has implications for Government policy making.

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