Chapter 10

Alternative Media Bridging the Digital Divide in Malaysia: Case Study of Sarawakreport.org

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes the burgeoning role of new media in the Malaysian political sphere. The chapter descriptively analyzes the role of Sarawakreport.org, a blog formed by the former Prime Minister of the UK’s (Gordon Brown’s) sister-in-law, Clare Rewcastle Brown, in an endeavor to challenge the Chief Minister of Sarawak in his incumbency. The government used its economical, coercive, and political power to repress the symbolic power of the new media, which transgresses boundaries, space, and time. This chapter concludes that the BN (Barisan Nasional) won its two-thirds majority legitimizing its control over Sarawak, but its loss of popular votes suggests the symbolic power is of concern for the ruling regime and legitimizing its rule seems to be a serious problem.

INTRODUCTION

The internet has been accredited as a political space across the globe. Nation states such as South Korea (Joyce, 2007), US (Lawrence et al., 2010) and Britain (Aeron, 2009) has felt the presence of the Internet as a political force. Even in highly restrictive regimes such as Burma (Chowdhury, 2008), Russia (Lysenko, 2010) and Ukraine (Goldstein, 2007) the venom of the internet was felt. In most instances, the blogsphere was the most prominent feature of the internet and the mass mobilization people were inevitable.

While some contend that it is generally a misplaced judgment that the Web 2.0 is increasingly attracting the younger generation (Kisane, 2009), others have argued that while those interested in politics is increasingly engaging themselves, but those disfranchised previously are pulling away further (Aeron, 2009). There are several factors

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contributory to the polarization process, causative by the characteristics of the internet and the blogosphere.

These factors are due to the plethora of information available on the internet and consumers tend to gravitate to sites and issues that are of similar interest and beliefs as them. Similarly blogs tend to provide links to other blogs that are of parallel to their inclinations (Himelboim, 2010). Lawrence et al. (2010) compliments these findings by suggesting that political blogs tend to polarize readers and increase tendencies of mobilization efforts, especially left-wing bloggers.

As Zenko (2011) clearly states in his article for the Foreign Policy on the Future of War concluding interviews and surveys done on experts, he states that ‘the most dangerous [threat] continues to be the Internet which is as anarchic as it is democratic. Our vulnerabilities with respect to the Internet are almost as great as the advantages we derive from our internetconnectedness.’ Internet connectedness has been argued to play imperative role on increased polarization and influence on the ‘imagined community’ (Mate et al. 2006). The author wishes to clarify that the ‘imagined community’ of nations via the internet is not a puerile area of study. In an attempt to redefine anthropological studies of blogs as e-ethnography, Varisco (2009) claims that there is no singular Muslim identity existent on the Internet. Muslim orientated blogs are precariously dependent on national resemblances and ethnic cleavages.

Fernandez (2010) in his study of the by-elections in Malaysia and the internet’s role ascertains that new media plays an important role in Malaysian contemporary political arena. Sarawakreport.org that was formed by Clare Rewcastle Brown would be used as analogy for the purpose of this study. This study would also attempt to analyze the outcomes of the Sarawak State elections held in April 16 2011, to provide explanation whether the Internet was successful in becoming a ‘political space’ for the displaced. While most of these studies tend to on the democratization possibilities of the blogosphere in particular, investigative journalism (Steele, 2008) others tend to focus on its collective identity and political mobilization capabilities. This study attempts to particularly analyze the democratization process of blogosphere where the rural and urban divide is wide and the democratization outcomes it produces with special reference to the ballots.

THE PRESENCE OF SOCIO-POLITICAL BLOGS IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia is a country that is widely accepted as a competitive democracy among. The internet decisively played an important role during the recent General Elections (GE) held in 2008. While some accused the internet, others have accredited it for the outcomes of the GE 2008 (Steele, 2008; Fernandez, 2010; Chin, 2009; Abdul, 2009). It is unjust to inscribe in this volume that the GE 2008 was the first incidence of the Internet or blogs making inroads in the Malaysian political domain. According to a survey conducted on journalist and preferred avenue of choice information, a majority of respondents or figuratively, 68% read 3 or more blogs regularly and 37.8% used Facebook as a source of inspiration for news (Intelectasia, 2010).

Russian bloggers have likened blogs to ‘kitchen debates’ of Soviet times, where major forum discussions were held in kitchens (Yekaterina, 2008). As Yekaterina (2008) adequately contends that the blogosphere is flourished with a glut of blogs that tends to cover a wide range of ideals and motivations. The reader endeavors to surmount the best blog like the mindboggling advertisements we are constantly exposed to, or metaphorically described as choosing the best rose in a pocket full of posies. Indulgence on the burdening question of why blogs have burgeoned in Malaysia serves fruit for thought.

Fernandez (2010) contends that there were two waves of cyberpolitics in Malaysia. Others have detailed accounts on the burgeoning of blogs