

Reproduced from *Power Games: Political Blogging in Malaysian National Elections*, by Hah Foong Lian (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016). This version was obtained electronically direct from the publisher on condition that copyright is not infringed. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the prior permission of ISEAS Publishing. Individual chapters are available at <<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>>

POWER GAMES

ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute (formerly the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are the Regional Economic Studies (RES, including ASEAN and APEC), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS).

ISEAS Publishing, an established academic press, has issued more than 2,000 books and journals. It is the largest scholarly publisher of research about Southeast Asia from within the region. ISEAS Publishing works with many other academic and trade publishers and distributors to disseminate important research and analyses from and about Southeast Asia to the rest of the world.

POWER GAMES

Political Blogging in
Malaysian National Elections

HAH FOONG LIAN

First published in Singapore in 2016 by
ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614

E-mail: publish@iseas.edu.sg

Website: bookshop.iseas.edu.sg

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

© 2016 ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

The responsibility for facts and opinions in this publication rests exclusively with the author and his interpretation do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of the publisher or its supporters.

ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Hah, Foong Lian.

Power Games : Political Blogging in Malaysian National Elections.

1. Elections—Malaysia.
2. Internet in political campaigns—Malaysia.
3. Social media—Political aspects—Malaysia.
4. Internet—Political aspects—Malaysia.
5. Social media—Political aspects—Malaysia.
6. Political participation—Malaysia.

I. Title.

JQ1062 A95H14

2015

ISBN 978-981-4695-28-2 (softcover)

ISBN 978-981-4695-29-9 (e-book, PDF)

Typeset by International Typesetters Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>List of Abbreviations of Political Parties</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	1
Chapter 1: The Cultural, Social and Political Fabric of Malaysia	21
Chapter 2: Trends in Social Media Use in Malaysian Cyberspace	55
Chapter 3: A Political Marketing Tool and a Network of Cyber Battles	87
Chapter 4: Psychological Warfare and Leadership Change	115
Chapter 5: Negotiating Political Reform and Change	147
<i>Conclusion</i>	173
<i>Bibliography</i>	187
<i>Index</i>	197
<i>About the Author</i>	205

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book, which is an updated version of my PhD thesis submitted to the University of Canterbury in New Zealand in 2012, is the result of a seven-year-long journey that gave me the opportunity to meet various groups of people whose support and assistance were invaluable towards its publication. Sparked by my initial curiosity into the political use of online media and its democratic appeals, the course of this research has shaped my perspectives about the blogosphere. To the many different groups of individuals I encountered in my journey, my deepest gratitude goes to them.

I am, firstly, grateful to the bloggers and other participants in the political blogosphere for their patience, understanding and input in providing genuine and honest information to help me make sense of the online environment. The hours of interviews and some repeat meetings helped to clarify the information documented in this book. Additional research and interviews were necessary to explore the use of online media in the 2013 election upon submission of my PhD thesis. For this I would like to record my gratitude to Monash University Malaysia for providing some financial support which enabled me to re-visit the bloggers and interview other online media users in the blogosphere during my short teaching spell at the establishment. Currently, as a teaching staff of Curtin University Sarawak, my thanks go to my colleagues at the Media, Culture and Communication Department for giving me the time and space to complete this work.

Last but not least to my friends and family who supported me in this endeavour, which, at times, seemed unending. Many thanks to my family for the unquestioning faith in me when I first embarked on this journey in 2009, and my friends Hwa Mei Shen, Suhaini Aznam, Yeoh Joo Ai and Lee Bee Phang for their unwavering support throughout this project.

ABBREVIATIONS OF POLITICAL PARTIES

BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
DAP	Democratic Action Party
PGRM	Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Movement Party)
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Islamic Party of Malaysia)
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party, formerly Parti Keadilan Nasional or National Justice Party and became PKR after merging with Parti Rakyat Malaysia or Malaysian People's Party, formerly Parti Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia or Malaysian People's Socialist Party)
PR	Pakatan Rakyat (People's Coalition, an opposition coalition)
PSM	Parti Sosialis Malaysia (Socialist Party of Malaysia, formerly Parti Rakyat Malaysia or Malaysian People's Party)
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation

INTRODUCTION

The twelfth Malaysian general election held on 8 March 2008 was, in many ways, a “watershed in the country’s history” (Ooi K.B, 2008, p. 6). For the first time since 1969 the Barisan Nasional’s (BN) obsession for a two-thirds majority in Parliament had finally been thwarted. The opposition saw a fourfold increase in the number of its parliamentary seats, up from 20 in 2004 to 82 in 2008.¹ The widespread victory for the opposition in urban areas was evident from it winning 10 out of 13 parliamentary constituencies in the Federal Territory.² The 2008 polls also witnessed the successful election of at least 20 parliamentarians who kept and maintained a blog at that time (Hah 2012). The unprecedented outcome saw the opposition parties for the first time presenting a united front by challenging the ruling regime to straight contests in Peninsular Malaysia.³ The informal cooperation of the opposition, involving the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) saw it, for the first time, being swept into power in four states — Selangor, Perak,⁴ Penang and Kedah — commonly known as the urban, western, industrialized corridor of Peninsular Malaysia.⁵ The PAS also retained its majority in Kelantan in the 2008 polls. Described as a “political tsunami” (Gan 2008), the result of the 2008 election was far removed from that of the one in 2004 when then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi annihilated the opposition. In 2004 the BN won 198 out of 219 federal seats, or 90.4 per cent of the total number of parliamentary constituencies it contested.⁶

The new political landscape endorsed at the polls in 2008 prevailed after the country’s thirteenth general election, which was held on 5 May 2013.⁷ The ruling coalition’s dream of regaining its traditional two-thirds majority and to win back the states of Penang, Selangor and Kelantan remained

elusive. The electoral performance of the BN slid further as the opposition secured 7 more parliamentary seats. Out of a total of 222 parliamentary constituencies contested in the 2013 general election, the opposition captured 89 federal seats while the BN won 133 seats.⁸ However, the ruling coalition managed to re-capture Kedah state and held its grip on Perak.

Politicians, political observers and analysts, including media practitioners, were quick to point to the role of new information and communications technology (ICT) — in particular the Internet, blogs, YouTube videos and short messaging services (SMS) — as significant tools in providing leverage to the opposition during the 2008 election campaign (Abdul Rashid 2009; Gan 2008; Suhaini 2008; Tan 2008). The new technologies were deemed to have provided more advantageous campaigning methods for opposition political parties⁹ because of the tight media control by the ruling coalition. The online platform was, thus, said to have enabled opposition political parties, which were getting little mainstream media coverage, to reach a wider audience, including young voters (Abdul Rashid 2009).

Other media scholars went further by declaring that the online media were important instruments for promoting democracy and could strengthen the democratization process and public deliberation in Malaysia (Mohd Azizuddin and Zengeni 2010, p. 13). This is amidst an environment where Internet usage has been on the rise. Statistics showed that utilization of the Internet grew from 15 per cent in 2000 to 62.8 per cent in 2008.¹⁰ By 2009 it had increased to 65.7 per cent. Usage, however, took a slight dip to 60.5 per cent by 2012.¹¹ The popular use of the Internet contributed to the idea that the online platform was becoming a channel for alternative views that received little coverage in the tightly controlled mainstream media. As a channel for alternative information, the Internet can have a democratizing effect by enabling the free flow of information and allowing spaces for public deliberation (Mohd Azizuddin and Zengeni 2010). Political analyst and blogger Khoo Kay Peng was also of the view that the Internet heralded an era of liberalization which could bring about a more level playing field for the opposition, turning opposition support into votes at the ballot box (Tan 2008). The idea was not lost on then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi when he openly acknowledged that ignoring the blogosphere had led to the ruling coalition's defeat in many of the constituencies it contested in the 2008 election.¹²

Convinced that the online media had an impact on the 2008 election results, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) resolved to take the virtual sphere seriously in preparation for the 2013 national election. Prime Minister Najib Razak, who replaced Abdullah Ahmad Badawi for the

top job in April 2009,¹³ took the initiative to engage bloggers and social media practitioners. In an interview for this book, journalist-blogger Ahirudin Attan remarked, “The Prime Minister himself [Najib Razak] became a big Facebooker and Twitterer.”¹⁴ Described as a “web-savvy PM” (Ahirudin 2009, p. 82), Najib set up a personal homepage called 1Malaysia to write about his activities and respond to readers’ comments and inquiries. Soon after, the youth wing of UMNO set up the Unit Media Baru (New Media Unit) to enhance the party’s online presence in order to counter the opposition in cyberspace. Ahirudin Attan in an interview for this book explained that one of the first tasks of the Unit Media Baru was to multiply the number of bloggers and, “when Facebook and Twitter became big, they went there”.¹⁵ In a separate interview for this book, then Unit Media Baru chairman, Tun Faisal Ismail Aziz,¹⁶ lamented that UMNO had “no representation, no presence at all and no one to counter the opposition” in 2008. The then newly instituted Unit Media Baru, under the auspices of UMNO Youth, was given the task of maintaining and building UMNO’s online presence through the use of blogs, Facebook and Twitter.¹⁷ With the establishment of Unit Media Baru, the new technology became a part of the party’s machinery to proliferate the use of social media, particularly Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, among UMNO members in the 2013 electoral campaign¹⁸ and to promote its political messages to the voting public.

UMNO’s online efforts appeared to have peaked with the declaration by Najib Razak that the 2013 general election will be a “social media election”.¹⁹ His announcement came just months before the election was held on 5 May. The prime minister had by then garnered a following of one million on Twitter and some 1.2 million likes on his Facebook page. The number of likes on the prime minister’s Facebook page had reportedly outnumbered those of UMNO’s political enemy and opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim.²⁰ Enthusiasm over the use of social networking sites seemed to be further fuelled by statistics which registered the total population of Facebook users in the country at the end of 2012 at 13.5 million.²¹ Of this total Facebook population, 9 million users are deemed to be potential voters.²² A survey on household use of the Internet by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2011) revealed that over 80 per cent of users in all states were using the online platform for social networking. The numbers clearly demonstrate a crucial need to dominate the cyberspace discourse and set the social media agenda in order to stay ahead of political rivals during a general election. Efforts channelled into the online platform, however, did not seem to have generated the much-desired results at the 2013 polls for the ruling coalition.

On the other hand, the opposition appeared to have dominated the blogosphere in 2008 and the public discourse on social media in 2013. Based on the success of the opposition coalition in the two general elections, it would seem that the online platform had worked favourably for the Pakatan Rakyat (PR). The blogosphere in 2008 was overwhelmingly anti-government and the opposition seemed to have found a winning formula to connect with the young urban voters on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter in 2013. According to DAP assemblyman Lau Weng San, in an interview for this book, the party leadership had instructed all DAP elected representatives aged forty and below to create active Facebook and Twitter accounts in order to engage with the young voting public.²³ Although the PR did not formally coordinate their social media messages with their partners, issues of public interest would be tagged to the Facebook or Twitter accounts of other like-minded members to ensure that their messages would reach a wider audience. In an interview with Pandan MP Rafizi Ramli, who was also the director of the PKR's election strategy for 2013, he explained: "A social media strategy is about reaching as many people as possible with one message."²⁴ Ensuring that their messages went viral was a key component of their online campaigns.

This brings us now to the heart of this book, which aims to unpack the much-touted democratizing effects of the online media. To this purpose the book explores the capabilities of the new media and investigates the manners in which individual actors were employing online tools to achieve their goals and objectives at a particular moment in an election. It examines the use of new media at the intersection of social and political realities, the cultural practices and the social and political affiliation and aims of individual actors, including the social ties that subsequently emerged. The objective is to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the extent that new media can enrich political life and bring about new ways of campaigning. It is thus crucial to examine the interrelationship between the device or online platform and its usage within the social and political realities at particular moments in an election.

Using an alternative lens this book brings together theoretical frameworks about the media, democracy and the field of journalism for a more thorough examination of the role of the online platform in national elections. It is guided by the political economy approach to the media,²⁵ Habermas's notion of the public sphere, and the social determinism perspective to understand the extent to which blogging could enrich political life and bring about new ways of campaigning. Concepts such as news slants, framing and priming and citizen journalism are also relevant for the discussion here.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY APPROACH TO NEW MEDIA

There are some central concerns of the political economy approach that are relevant to the subject matter of this book. First is the importance of contextualizing the use of blogging and social media within a particular social and political environment.²⁶ Issues relating to the tight control of the mainstream media, existing legislation that stifles public dissent and free speech, and non-censorship of the Internet provide the specific social and political contexts to understand how the new media can be viewed as having democratic potential. For example, blogging is deemed to have democratizing effects in relatively authoritarian societies ruled by regimes that suppress the free flow of information (Keren 2006; Kulikova and Perlmutter 2007; Lim 2009; Moyo 2009). The use of blogs to provide alternative information largely ignored by the mainstream media has also been described as facilitating free speech and promoting the voices of marginalized groups (Perlmutter 2008; Pole 2009). To a certain extent the online platform holds a degree of democratic appeal as an avenue for free expression.

Second, the question of blog and social media ownership is of key relevance to the topic of this book. This aspect of ownership is guided by the work of Allan (2006), who examined the online phenomenon of citizen journalism by investigating key information such as the individuals behind the activity within a historical and contextual perspective and matters relating to sources of funding. The issue of funding in Malaysian cyberspace may be elusive for researchers wanting to follow the surreptitious money trail of paid bloggers and cybertroopers, but some of the interviews conducted for this book do point to the different methods of direct and indirect payment.²⁷

The interrogation thus focuses on a deeper assessment of the individuals behind the blogs and Facebook pages, the individuals' backgrounds and previous work experience. It also examines the political affiliations of the individual actors and the dominant discourse being propagated in cyberspace. These are key areas for examination because the online media can be dominated and appropriated by political and cultural elites to reinforce particular viewpoints, as propounded by Cammaerts (2008, p. 368) or serve the ends of the dominant elite (Herman and Chomsky 2002, p. xi). Focusing on the individual actors can provide vital information about how cyberspace can be used to promote particular ideologies of certain political elites during the elections.

HABERMAS'S NOTION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Certain aspects of Habermas's notion of the public sphere are useful in analysing the extent to which the new media can create spaces for deliberative democracy. The central theme of Habermas's public sphere that is of great relevance here concerns the ability of all citizens to take part in debates on matters of general interest in an unrestricted fashion (Habermas 2008). This raises the question of a digital divide in terms of a particular section of society that has better access to digital media.²⁸ The issue of a digital divide in the Malaysian context is central because such a gap can determine the level of participation in free speech, public deliberation and levels of engagement for political action.

With information being regarded as the core of the public sphere in a democratic society, the type of information generated in the blogosphere also becomes relevant. This is in particular reference to whether the online platform can improve the quality of public debates. This notion is linked to the process of "refeudalization" of the public sphere, which Habermas (2008, pp. 28–29) speaks of. In the context of modern media, the process of "refeudalization" refers to how information is manipulated by spin doctors or public relations experts, including advertisers and corporate-controlled media, which can obstruct public reasoning, thus reducing the ability of citizens to take part in rational debates (Webster 2006, pp. 161–62). The result is a potential for information to be manipulated and slanted for the benefit of prevailing political and economic forces (p. 161).²⁹

Examples of media manipulation are clear from the seminal work of Thompson (2000) and Entman (2007). Thompson (2000) highlights the changing nature of communication media, resulting in a rise in mediated political scandal, while Entman (2007) argues that news slants and biased views can be propagated in the media through agenda setting, framing and priming. The agenda setting function of the media refers to how the press is "stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Cohen 1963, p. 13). It serves to focus public and government attention on a particular issue by providing it coverage which leads to "what is accepted as the public agenda" (McCombs and Shaw 1972, p. 152). When the media move beyond the function of telling the public what to focus on and begin to tell the audience members how to think about an issue, with particular reference to the public assessment of political leaders, those functions are seen as framing and priming (Kuypers 2002). Defining framing as "the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular

connection” (p. 164), Entman (2007) argues that the process can influence the manners in which audiences interpret a particular event or personality. In short, the process can push its target audiences into thinking, feeling and deciding in a certain way (Iyengar and Simon 1993; Price et al. 1997). These communication theories reflect scepticism over the ability of the media to provide information for the public good.

With reference to the formation of public opinion, social engineering in the media can be reflected through the lens of media agenda setting, priming and framing theories. As such, the framing of media texts can lead to predictable priming and agenda setting effects on audiences (Entman 2007, p. 163). This, he argues, potentially positions priming and framing as “tools of power” (p. 163) for influencing public opinion, which has significant implications for political power and democracy. The political communication scholar argues that the media can sway the distribution of power through news slants and bias. He concludes that officials favoured by the news slant can become more powerful without worrying about whether the voters may reject them while those who are not framed favourably will “become weaker, less free to do (or say) what they want” (ibid., p. 170). It is, thus, the interest of this book to examine the extent to which social media can become a tool to sway public opinion in the Malaysian context and the manners in which the actors have made use of the online platform to change public perception in the elections.

THE SOCIAL DETERMINISM APPROACH

This approach provides a dialectical dimension to an understanding of new information and communications technology and its impact on democratic practices by employing the idea of “social shaping and social consequences” (Lievrouw and Livingstone 2002, p. 8). The approach pays close attention to the dynamic relationships made possible through online platforms, the practices adopted to use the new media to transmit information and the social arrangements that emerge out of these practices (ibid.). In this respect it provides an understanding of the unique moments in which the new media are used in distinct ways to achieve a particular purpose, within which specific social ties can emerge. Sharing some commonality with the network society³⁰ thesis, the social determinism approach focuses on the circumstances and manners in which social ties can be forged out of the use of the new media within a particular social and political context. More specifically, it investigates the dynamic relationships and interdependencies of the device or instrument used to communicate or pass on information, the actions

that people adopt to convey the information and the social arrangements or organizational forms that grow out of the device and actions (Lievrouw and Livingstone 2002, p. 7). The focus is on the three elements³¹ — device, practice and social arrangements — to understand the possibilities of the new media in transferring information, how individuals use the instrument or device as a resource to communicate or share information with others and act based on the shared information and meaning (ibid., p. 7). In other words, consequences of new information and communications technologies are also regarded as the result of human actions and decisions and not only caused by the technology itself. Through the use of online tools, social arrangements are consciously formed to achieve a specific political goal in the elections.

It is essential here to provide some understanding of the term “network”³² to appreciate its significance in the social determinism approach. Networks have been identified as consisting of three elements — nodes, ties and flows (Barney 2004, p. 26). Ties connect one node to at least another node (or a person to their friend), while flows are the information or communication (for example, gossip) that pass between and through them along the connection (or ties). This model of a network underpins the understanding of network society (ibid., p. 179). The word “network” has also been used to describe the blogosphere in terms of how it can present itself as a “classic social network” (Tremayne 2006, pp. x–xii) or become a “networked phenomena” (Drezner and Farrell 2004, p. 7), in which social ties or networks are established through blogrolls and hyperlinks. However, this perspective of network theory provides the understanding of connectivity emerging incidentally with the notion of a serendipitous network that is “not consciously designed ... unplanned, uncoordinated” (Raab and Kenis 2009, p. 199). The two scholars instead argue that increasingly networks are consciously formed to achieve a specific goal instead of creating unplanned and uncoordinated connections that do not have a particular objective. Examining how individual actors were connecting with each other and forming ties could provide a deeper understanding of the sort of network that was formed to achieve a particular political goal at various junctures in the elections. This book argues that the network formed by a subset of bloggers in Malaysia appeared to have developed in a manner similar to the way ties were established before the advent of the Internet. Thus, examining how individual actors were connecting with each other provides a deeper understanding of whether new ways of engagement were being created with the use of the new media.

THE INQUIRY

Adopting a more nuanced approach, this book attempts to examine two overarching questions pertaining to the role of the online media in the 2008 and 2013 Malaysian elections. Firstly, it attempts to examine the extent to which the new media can enhance liberal democratic practices in an election and, secondly, it aims to evaluate the extent to which the online platform can contribute to methods of campaigning in an election. It must first be clarified here that in this book the term *liberal democratic practices* refers to the right to free speech and expression of ideas and thoughts, the right to take part in public debates and the right to free association and movement. Some may argue that these liberal democratic practices are based on Western traditions, but it must be acknowledged that they are also enshrined in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia. Moreover, many of the participants in this research articulated those rights as being afforded by the new media.

The study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to make sense of the Web phenomenon. This is because the book is interested not only in the “what” question but also in “how”, “when” and “why” the individual actors took on specific roles.³³ The study employs content analysis³⁴ as a quantitative research method to track the pattern of blog use in the 2008 and 2013 elections. In-depth interviews were conducted with socio-political bloggers who were actively maintaining and keeping a blog in 2008. Follow-up interviews were conducted with the same bloggers to obtain their perspectives on the use of Facebook and Twitter, which featured prominently in the 2013 election. Key political actors who were social media operators for the 2013 election were also interviewed for this book.

Some of the research questions pertaining to democratic practices and the enhancement of political life were examined through a content analysis of socio-political blogs³⁵ in the 2008 and 2013 elections. The objective behind the use of content analysis was to obtain an overview of the pattern of blog use and a profile of the actors who were actively keeping and maintaining blogs. The analysis helped in identifying the role of bloggers in providing democratic space for rational public discussion, for mobilizing political action or keeping readers informed of electoral campaigns. Some of the political actions examined in the content analysis included the mass protest rallies of the Hindu Rights Action Force³⁶ (or Hindraf) and Bersih,³⁷ and the use of blogs to encourage readers to vote in the 2008 general election. It also assessed the positive or negative tone that bloggers took when composing

their blog postings to obtain a glimpse into the type of information being propagated in cyberspace. Another key aspect of the content analysis was to determine whether the Web activity could generate public discussions; this was achieved through a content analysis of the comments of readers. A comparison with socio-political blogs created after 2008 was made to identify the similarities and differences in content between the two national elections. Soon after the 2008 election, hundreds of new blogs were created to promote messages for the ruling and opposition coalitions. The blogs were also linked to the respective Facebook pages and Google Friend Connect platform to boost their online presence.

With the changing information and communications technology, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were more commonly used in the 2013 election, while blogging was considered to be “yesterday”³⁸ soon after the conclusion of the 2008 election. The blogs and Facebook pages of the 2013 electoral candidates were examined to compare with the trend in blog use in 2008. Similarly, the blogs and Facebook pages of partisan bloggers and individuals who were members of non-governmental organizations were analysed.

In-depth interviews were conducted to facilitate a closer examination of the research participants in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds, their work and life experiences, including their political affiliations, the social ties they forged through blogging, the dominant discourse propagated, and the ways in which blogging was used to achieve a particular goal in electoral politics. The interviews also explored the question of “power” and influence the individual bloggers wielded within the blogosphere. In-depth interviews with thirty socio-political bloggers were conducted in Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Penang between 25 February and 4 May 2010. The interviews covered four separate sections, starting with basic information about the bloggers’ backgrounds, their political blogging activities in general, blogging activities during the 2008 general election and their relationship with their readers and other bloggers. The first section of the interview contained closed-ended questions regarding the background of the bloggers, such as age, ethnicity, religion, language, social or political affiliation, occupation, educational level, computing skills, number of blogs they set up, their involvement in political parties or non-governmental organizations, and reasons for blogging, pseudonymously or otherwise.

The other three parts of the interview involved semi-structured particularly open-ended questions which required the bloggers to give their opinions about their activities.³⁹ The semi-structured interview questions also acted as a sort of checklist to ensure that the same areas were covered

in the interviews with all the research participants. The second and third parts of the interview were aimed at obtaining the bloggers' perspectives on their blogging activities. The questions here were also related to the content analysis of the respective blogs. The last part of the interview attempted to explore the relationships of bloggers with their readers and other bloggers. This sought to examine the dynamics between the bloggers and their readers and with other bloggers, including the possible spillover of their offline tensions to their online activity or an enmeshing of online and offline efforts by the bloggers.

Some of the socio-political bloggers interviewed in 2010 were revisited in 2013 and 2014 for a follow-up assessment on their use of blogs, Facebook and Twitter in the 2013 election. Only half of the thirty bloggers responded to this request for an additional interview. New interviews were also conducted with key individuals who actively campaigned through social media in 2013. Among them were Rafizi Ramli, who was the director of strategies for the PKR in the 2013 election, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, an active blogger who was instrumental in ensuring the Internet in Malaysia was given its non-censorship guarantee, UMNO Youth's Unit Media Baru chairman Tun Faisal Ismail Aziz, who was actively involved in the use of social media for UMNO/BN during the 2013 election, and active journalist-blogger Ahirudin Attan.

The analyses saw the classification of the thirty socio-political bloggers into three relatively distinct groups — politician-bloggers, partisan bloggers and civil society bloggers. The ten politician-bloggers interviewed for this study were individuals who contested the 2008 election and kept a blog at that time. The partisan bloggers were made up of ten individuals who were political party members and who were actively blogging in 2008. Finally, the group of ten civil society bloggers consisted mainly of bloggers who did not belong to any political party but who were involved in non-governmental organizations and were generally anti-establishment. The three groups of relatively distinct bloggers portrayed different patterns of blog use to reach a particular goal at defining moments during electoral politics. They exhibited different ways of using the Internet within particular social and political environments during the elections.

The interviews provided insight into how the democratic potential of the online platform may have been compromised at particular moments during the 2008 election. They indicated that the Internet could be appropriated by former media and political elites in order to promote a particular discourse in the blogosphere. They revealed that blogging was used to promote political scandals of rival politicians by painting certain national leaders in a

negative light. The interviews also pointed to the use of blogs for purposes of propaganda in 2008 when a sub-group of the partisan and civil society bloggers established ties to manage the flow of blogosphere information in order to shape public perception towards certain national politicians. One of them described the attempt as a form of “psychological warfare”.⁴⁰ The manner of blog use was also a reflection of the prevailing political culture of *surat layang* (poison pen letters), providing a window on the intense factional politics within the dominant Malay political party of UMNO.

Using social media to promote a particular discourse was also evident in 2013. The blogosphere in 2013 was a distinctly partisan one in which bloggers would openly announce their party affiliation or leanings. This was, in part, related to the prevailing political landscape of 2013. In 2008 this was less the case. A similar practice was the use of social media to promote or revile rival politicians. Facebook pages of politicians contesting the election promoted messages that eroded the image of rival parties and leaders. Some were in the form of scandals while others were in the form of public interest issues that projected the incompetence of the ruling coalition in governing the nation.

A key observation that emerged in 2013 was the phenomenon of paid bloggers, or cybertroopers, on both sides of the political divide. This occurred alongside a massive increase in the number of pseudonymous blogs that were used to highlight scandals of rival politicians. The term *UMNO cybertroopers* was used to refer to bloggers paid by UMNO to disseminate information that could harm the opposition’s reputation. On the other hand, the term *Red Bean Army* was used to describe paid bloggers of the opposition coalition. Straight answers pertaining to the allegations of paid bloggers were difficult to come by, except through anecdotal accounts and confirmation by UMNO leaders.

Within an environment of stringent media control through ownership and strict regulations, blogging could become an online tool for political mobilization and free speech. The pattern of blog use among the group of politician-bloggers to mobilize readers to participate in political action such as public rallies or voting in the elections demonstrated the capacity of the new media for this purpose. However, the in-depth interviews showed that the group of politician-bloggers did not rely on the Internet during the campaigning periods in 2008 and 2013. The interviews demonstrated that they were selective in the ways they used the online platform at particular junctures in an election because of the wider institutional and societal structures, the specific goal they wanted to achieve at a particular moment in an election and the problem of the digital divide in the country. The

use of blogs was especially significant as a political marketing tool in the lead-up to the elections and after the polls of 8 March. However, during the thirteen-day campaigning period, most of the politician-bloggers revealed that blogging was not a major platform for campaigning. Similar observations were made in the 2013 election, where interviews with some of the candidates revealed that they neglected their Facebook pages and blogs during the campaigning period.

The group of civil society bloggers revealed that they were using the online medium to facilitate the free expression of ideas and the setting up of blog campaigns to put forward their demands on the government, mainstream media and the opposition during the 2008 election. Similar uses of blogs and Facebook pages were recorded for the 2013 election and a sub-group of Barisan Rakyat (BR) bloggers was established to support the opposition campaign in cyberspace. However, it was found that the online media were limited in generating public discussion because some of the civil society bloggers were suspicious of the comments made by others on their blogs. State control through stringent regulations on individual freedom had also created a culture of fear among this group of bloggers. The fear of prosecution and defamation suits saw many of them creating anonymous Facebook pages which they used to exercise their free speech, while others stopped blogging to avoid legal entanglements.

SOME WEAKNESSES OF THE RESEARCH

Firstly, it must be acknowledged that the politician-bloggers were made up mainly of opposition politicians. This reflects the fact that the 2008 election saw greater activity in cyberspace by opposition politicians than by those of the ruling coalition. However, efforts had been taken to interview bloggers from the ruling coalition to explore their online use in the 2013 election. Interviews with former Unit Media Baru chairman Tun Faisal Ismail Aziz, journalist blogger Ahirudin Attan, Dr Mahathir Mohamad and pro-UMNO bloggers provided an account of the use of blogs and social media by the ruling coalition in the 2013 election.

Secondly, this research focused primarily on blogs and social media written in English and Malay. It has excluded Chinese and Tamil blogs because of the author's inability to read Chinese or Tamil. The book may have lost out in the study of the processes of blog use and the dynamics involved in the publication of Chinese and Tamil blog postings. However, it must be noted that the political environment in Malaysia is in the domain of the Malay community. Moreover, many Malay bloggers are proficient in

English. So it may be more pertinent to study the Malay and English blogs for a clearer picture of the online platform in electoral politics in Malaysia.

BOOK OUTLINE

Chapter One contextualizes the media and the rise of the Internet within the cultural, social and political-economic environment of Malaysia. The aim is to show that although the online media can become a democratic tool for the free expression of ideas in a tightly controlled environment, it also mirrors the social and political realities of the country. It begins with a short history of the race-based politics and policies in the country, a discussion of the culture of patronage that develops out of the dominance of Malay politics with UMNO holding power and a political culture of *surat layang*. It outlines the media environment tightly regulated by stringent laws and the complex web of the ruling regime's interest in the industry. The chapter provides an understanding of the use of the Internet during the *reformasi* days of Anwar Ibrahim and the counter-*reformasi* efforts of UMNO. Here, it also highlights the term *cybertroopers* to discuss the emergence of paid bloggers, indicating that a culture of patronage in the real world seems to have spilled over into cyberspace.

Chapter Two attempts to understand the patterns of blog use and the questions of ownership and control by examining the people behind the blogs and the prevailing discourse on the blogosphere in the 2008 election. The content analysis provided evidence that the majority of bloggers were highly educated professionals and that many of them were media and political elites. It revealed a blogosphere that was overwhelmingly favourable to the opposition. Critical frames were generally targeted at leaders of the BN coalition and its administration and they were specifically directed at the then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. As social media took prominence in 2013, this chapter explores the use of blogs and Facebook pages for the purposes of political marketing and changing public perception in the election.

Chapter Three is an attempt to show that the particular circumstances and the aim of politician-bloggers can shape the ways online activity is practised in elections. It presents in-depth interviews with the group of politician-bloggers, who revealed a limited use of blogs during the official campaigning period in 2008. It discusses several factors which made blogging less appealing during the campaigning period. However, blogging became an important political marketing tool in the lead-up to the elections. It also documents the efforts of some of the politician-bloggers in using social

networking sites like Facebook and blogs for the cyberspace battle in the 2013 election. It concludes that the function and role of blogs could not be assumed to be homogenous across the board and there were limits to the much-touted democratic appeals of the online tool.

In-depth interviews with the group of partisan bloggers, presented in Chapter Four, explore the use of blogging for the purposes of propaganda. It discusses how this online tool was used as a form of “psychological warfare” aimed at changing public perception towards the ruling elite in the lead-up to the 2008 election. The blog campaign, set up by a subgroup of partisan and civil society bloggers through the formation of the “band of brotherhood”,⁴¹ also known as the “band of bloggers”,⁴² was aimed at character assassinations of certain leaders of the ruling regime by highlighting political scandals. It was executed by deliberately flooding the blogosphere with information that could discredit the reputation of the national leadership. Secret meetings were held to draw up arrangements to target particular personalities. Tracing the political affiliations of members of the band of brotherhood revealed the possibility that a blog campaign could be appropriated by former media and political elites. Similar methods to manage perception and coordinate the information flow were employed online during the 2013 election. The follow-up interviews revealed the various strategies adopted to shape public opinion and how certain bloggers were sought out to form a network of like-minded individuals to try to set the online agenda.

Chapter Five discusses the online practices of the group of civil society bloggers who were able to exercise their right to free speech and make demands on the government, mainstream media and the opposition. However, the online tool was limited in generating public discussions because some of the bloggers were suspicious of the comments made by others on their blogs. It also details how some of the civil society bloggers established ties with the band of brotherhood, but a collapse in the loose coalition saw mounting suspicion and mistrust in cyberspace. The malaise appeared to continue well into the 2013 election. This chapter, thus, captures the much-heralded democratic potential of the new media but it also highlights the limitations.

To conclude, the book argues that the online media can open up a space for free speech and, at times, facilitate wider debate in a relatively authoritarian society. Online connectivity permits the formation of a network of alternative or dissenting views. At the same time, the online landscape is heavily shaped by factors such as the powerful prevailing media and political elites and the existing culture that regulates societal and political

life, including the particular social and political moments in an election. The online platform also brings new ways of campaigning for politician-bloggers in electoral politics, but this platform is influenced by the wider institutional and societal structures in society. It is a significant political marketing tool but it does not facilitate deliberative democracy. The online media, thus, do not have a simple across-the-board function of promoting liberal democratic practices and transforming new ways of campaigning in electoral politics. As Internet and new social movements researcher Chris Atton cautioned, “It would be mistaken to consider blogs as a homogenous phenomenon” (Atton 2004, p. 55).

Notes

1. *Financial Daily*, 10 March 2008, p. 12.
2. *New Sunday Times*, 9 March 2008, p. 12.
3. However, straight fights did not reach fruition in Sabah and Sarawak. This was partly because of the different dynamics of East Malaysian politics. In Sarawak in the 2008 election the BN won 30 out of 31 parliamentary seats while the ruling coalition won 24 out of the 25 constituencies it contested in Sabah (Loh 2009, p. 14).
4. The opposition’s victory in Perak was short-lived. Online news portal *Free Malaysia Today* reported that, in February 2009, BN regained the state after four assemblymen “defected” and became BN-friendly lawmakers. The four were from the DAP and PKR. The DAP “defectors” were Keshvinder Singh (Malim Nawar) and Hee Yit Foong (Jelapang) while those from the PKR were Mohd Osman Jailu (Changkat Jering) and Jamaluddin Mohd Radzi (Behrang). See *FMT News*, 11 September 2012 <<http://www.freemalysiatoday.com/category/nation/2012/09/11/peraks-defected-4-keen-on-contesting/>> (accessed 8 February 2014).
5. *New Sunday Times*, 9 March 2008, p. 2.
6. *Aliran Monthly*, 2004 <<http://aliran.com/archives/monthly/2004a/3g.html>> (accessed 8 February 2014).
7. Parliament was dissolved on 3 April 2013. The Election Commission fixed 20 April as nomination day while polling was set for 5 May. This resulted in a fifteen-day campaigning period for the country’s thirteenth general election. See *The Star Online*, 10 April 2013 <<http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2013/04/10/GE13-Polls-on-May-5-EC-announces/>> (accessed 10 December 2014).
8. Election Commission of Malaysia, “Statistik Keputusan Kerusi Parlimen Yang Dimenangi 2013” [Statistical results of the parliamentary seats won in 2013] <http://resultpru13.spr.gov.my/module/keputusan/paparan/5_KerusiDR.php> (accessed 3 December 2014).

9. *Malaysiakini*, 12 March 2008 <<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/79677>> (accessed 30 December 2011).
10. Internet World Stats, “Malaysia: Internet Usage Stats and Marketing Report”, 2010 <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/my.htm>> (accessed 7 July 2010).
11. Internet World Stats, “Internet Users in Asia”, 2012 <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>> (accessed 4 February 2012).
12. *New York Times*, 25 March 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/25/world/asia/25iht-malay.1.11396684.html>> (accessed 26 December 2011).
13. Office of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, “Biography of Dato’ Sri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak”, 30 April 2011 <<http://www.pmo.gov.my/?menu=page&page=1926>> (accessed 8 December 2011).
14. Interview with Ahirudin Attan of the blog *Rocky’s Bru*, Kuala Lumpur, 10 November 2014.
15. Ibid.
16. After the 2013 election Tun Faisal Ismail Aziz was replaced by Ibduillah Ishak as UMNO Youth’s New Media Bureau chairman (Azman 2013).
17. On 27 November 2013, UMNO Youth’s Media Unit Baru was renamed Biro Media Baru, translated as New Media Bureau (Azman 2013).
18. Requesting anonymity during an interview for this book, an UMNO leader, who was coordinating efforts with other BN coalition members to promote their presence online for the 2013 general election, revealed that their Chinese partner, the MCA, was too fractious to focus their energies in cyberspace, while it was easier to have joint efforts with their Indian partner, the MIC.
19. *Malaysian Insider*, 27 February 2013 <<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/najib-election-2013-first-social-media-election>> (accessed 3 December 2014).
20. Ibid.
21. Politweet.org, “Census of Facebook Users in Malaysia, Dec 2012”, 16 January 2013 <<http://www.politweet.wordpress.com/page/6/>> (accessed 3 December 2014).
22. Ibid.
23. Interview with politician-blogger Lau Weng San, Petaling Jaya, 28 April 2010.
24. Interview with politician-blogger Rafizi Ramli, Kuala Lumpur, 25 November 2014.
25. A main concern of the political economy approach to media and communication focuses on issues of ownership, the economics of how media contents are produced, circulated and consumed, and the existing laws and regulations of the state in order to examine how people experience media and how media shape the world (McChesney 1998). Another important aspect examines how the communication system and content can affect existing class and social relations (ibid.). This book, thus, adopts certain key elements used to study the

- media to examine the role of blogs, such as the particular social and political context of blog use, laws and regulations, and, more importantly, the question of blog ownership and the connections of blog owners to political elites.
26. The political economy approach to blogging is also reflected in the work of Atton (2004), who focuses on the significance of historical, economic, political, social or cultural aspects. The emphasis demonstrates a rejection of a dichotomous understanding and the need for a more multidimensional approach. In similar ways, Dahlgren (2009) uses the term “culturalist approach” (p. 5) to describe the significance of themes like meaning, identity and practices to understand the impact of media on democracy. The practice examined in this book addressed the people behind the socio-political blogs and the manners in which the Internet was used to assess its democratic potentials.
 27. For more, see Chapter Four of this book.
 28. The issue of access, or lack thereof, to new information and communication technologies constitutes another aspect of the political economy perspective in seeking to understand the outcomes of new media in contemporary societies (Nicholas 2003; Dijk 2006; Tsatsou 2011). This is because the unequal distribution of resources causes unequal access to digital technologies, which can result in unequal citizen participation in society (Dijk 2006, pp. 178–79).
 29. Such observations are also evident in the works of McChesney and Scott (2004), who highlight the emergence of media conglomerates controlling publications and broadcasts, while Herman and Chomsky (2002) point to the use of the media as a propaganda tool that represents “powerful societal interests that control and finance them” (p. xi).
 30. The network society thesis argues that social, political and economic practices in modern society are ordered around the network form, which refers to “flows between nodes connected by ties” (Barney 2004, p. 27). The way in which society is organized through media networks is gradually replacing or complementing face-to-face communication (Dijk 2006, p. 240). It has also blurred traditional forms of interpersonal relations or mass communication in contemporary society (*ibid.*, p. 28).
 31. The understanding of social shaping and social consequences (Lievrouw and Livingstone 2002, p. 9) is also reflected in the work of Barney (2004, p. 43) who considers four factors — the essence or spirit of technology, the technological design, situation and use — in analysing technological outcomes in contemporary society. Technology, in his view, is deemed not neutral and is not developed or used in a vacuum (Barney 2004). This is evident in the fact that the basic design of the Internet “determines what people can and cannot do” (Lessig 1999, p. 59) through the use of “code” (Barney 2004, p. 51). The “code”, according to Lessig (1999), supports the anonymity or identification of Internet users and their activities, which gives rise to debate over issues such as privacy, liberty, surveillance and regulation. Although the

- analysis focuses on the device itself, it also pays particular attention to the social, political and economic environment in which the technologies are developed and the ways they are utilized.
32. The word “network” has been used in a number of different academic disciplines, originating from computer science, to the social sciences and new media studies (Gane and Beer 2008). The word “network” subsequently took on a social context when sociological research began to focus on how the digital communication systems are connecting individuals (*ibid.*, p. 27). Other researchers later emphasized the need to trace the associations in order to take into account the complex and dynamic connections made between individuals and the digital communication systems (*ibid.*, p. 31). This becomes a point of interest when the political bloggers were actively making connections with other bloggers in order to use the online media to achieve a particular goal in the Malaysian national elections.
 33. The context of this study is the 2008 and 2013 general elections in Malaysia, thus helping to situate this research within a particular social and political context.
 34. Content analysis, widely used in communication studies, is a research technique that is able to make “replicable and valid inferences from data to their context” (Krippendorff 1980, p. 21). Although the content analysis method has been known as a research technique to study the print and broadcast media, it is also a popular tool for new media research. Numerous communication studies on political blogs have used content analysis as a tool to assess various perspectives of the Web phenomenon (Kalstrup and Pedersen 2005; Bichard 2006; Stanyer 2006; Albrecht et al. 2007; Trammell 2007; Wallsten 2007; Hargittai et al. 2008; Koop and Jansen 2009; Wright 2009). These studies examined blog postings or press releases found on the blogs as the unit of analysis, which, in turn, described or identified the multiple roles of blogs in political communication. Similarly, this study attempts to analyse the postings of the socio-political blogs to help in describing or identifying their role in providing democratic space for rational public discussion, for mobilizing political action or keeping readers informed of electoral campaigns.
 35. Socio-political blogs included for examination in this book were those that contained postings discussing public interest issues such as human rights, corruption, the electoral system, political parties and scandals of political leaders. Some of the blog postings included in this study were in the form of text, cartoons, photographs and YouTube clips. Blogs that discussed personal matters such as shopping, hobbies, restaurant reviews or family were excluded from the study.
 36. The Hindraf public rally was held in Kuala Lumpur on 25 November 2007, to protest against the unfair treatment and economic backwardness of the Indian community in Malaysia (Waytha Moorthy 2008).

37. The Bersih public demonstration was held in Kuala Lumpur on 10 November 2007, to demand a free and fair election. It was led by a grouping of sixty-four non-governmental organizations and five political parties (Ooi K.B., 2008, p. 11).
38. Interview with Ahirudin Attan of *Rocky's Bru*, Kuala Lumpur, 10 November 2014.
39. The unstructured interviews could provide "greater breadth" in an attempt at understanding "the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any prior categorization that may limit the field of inquiry" (Fontana and Frey 2005, p. 706).
40. The term was used by partisan blogger Syed Azidi Syed Aziz in an interview in Kuala Lumpur on 22 February 2010.
41. The term was used by politician-blogger Jeff Ooi during an interview for this book conducted in Subang Jaya on 27 February 2010. Ooi spoke about the ties and cooperation which members of the grouping had established when they were united in the common goal of bringing down the regime of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi during the 2008 election.
42. Other pro-UMNO bloggers called it the "band of bloggers". One blog identified some of the personalities involved and carried a graphic that read "Liberty, Freedom, Justice". For more information, see Big Dog, "Band of Bloggers", *The Thirteen Million Plus Ringgit Guy Rambles* (blog), 28 February 2007 <<https://bigdogdotcom.wordpress.com/2007/02/28/band-of-bloggers/>> (accessed 9 April 2015).