A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET, MALAYSIAKINIL.COM AND DEMOCRATISING FORCES ON THE MALAYSIAN GENERAL ELECTION 2008

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (Media Studies)

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This thesis argues that the role played by the independent news portal (INP), *Malaysiakini.com* has expanded since 2007 in Malaysia’s political culture, enriching the country’s traditional public sphere with new democratic features. It has helped to speed up democratic action by enabling oppositional viewpoints, and has shifted the traditional media landscape towards greater diversity, and the possibility of changing the government in power.

The thesis uses Malaysia’s 2008 General Election (GE2008) as the case study to illustrate the power of *Malaysiakini.com*, particularly at election times. Malaysia’s GE2008 almost caused the defeat of the Barisan Nasional (BN), which had been in power for fifty one years. With a less than two-thirds majority in the Federal Parliament, it lost five out of the thirteen states to the Opposition, Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

It will be shown that the Internet’s impact in Malaysia is partly caused by the raised expectations of the ‘Internet Election’ era, where electoral conduct in some countries during the period of 2004-2010 was impacted by greater Internet access. As the national elections in the US (2004, 2008), UK (2010), and Singapore (2006) were called ‘Internet Elections’, Malaysian commentators used the same term about GE2008. This claim is discussed in this thesis through comparison.

The thesis also argues that the popular success of *Malaysiakini.com* led mainstream media journalists to rethink news-gathering practices and that the competitive nature of, for example, *Malaysiakini.com*’s use of trained citizen journalists and networking with NGOs that was used to help produce the news. The thesis uses the concept of informationalism to discuss the emerging forms of news production, which transformed people from being simply INP consumers to becoming active information distributors.

Further, the thesis argues that *Malaysiakini.com* enabled greater political participation and focussed opposition to government; and that *Malaysiakini.com*’s roles as a site of resistance, and its pastoral power have helped to increase Malaysians’ political engagement through active online participation and political activities.

The thesis methods are qualitative: It uses textual analysis of *Malaysiakini.com*’s news and a selected mainstream media online news website, *Utusanmalaysia.com*, to provide evidence of the INP’s influence. In-depth interviews with media practitioners and other observers of the 2008 election period (scholars, NGO representatives and policy makers), identify a range of key perspectives on Internet regulation, major differences in news reporting, the key issues of public concern, and judgements on the INP.

The thesis concludes that *Malaysiakini.com* played a significant role in generating democratic elements in Malaysia during GE2008. Post-election, mainstream media news reporting changed to reflect the INP’s; challenges the ruling government were generated by a new network, the Third Force (consisting of middle class, Opposition parties, youth and university students, NGOs and civil society movement); and the government became more aware of issues to do with ‘the rise of the people’.
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I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institutions and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University’s digital research repository, the Library catalogue and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

Selected data from the thesis has been discussed in conference papers (at ANZCA, Adelaide, 2012 ‘Independent News Portals Vs. Mainstream Media: Experiences and Practicalities in Electoral Reporting’ and ANZCA, Perth, 2013 ‘Malaysia’s Online Democracy in Action- The case of Malaysiakini.com’; and at MediaAsia, Osaka Japan, 2012) and as part of the co-authored journal article: ‘Looking Back at Malaysia’s GE2008: An Internet Election and Its Democratic Aftermath’ which is in Appendices.

SARASWATHY CHINNASAMY
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This thesis is dedicated to the most important person in my life, my late much-loved mother, Madam Chandira, who passed away five years ago with lung cancer. To this day, I miss her presence. My heartfelt thanks also go to my respected father, Mr. Chinnasamy, who has been my source of inspiration and strength.
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<td>INP</td>
<td>Independent News Portal</td>
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<tr>
<td>BN</td>
<td>Barisan Nasional Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>UMNO</td>
<td>United Malays National Organisation</td>
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<td>MIC</td>
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<td>PPPA</td>
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<td>ISA</td>
<td>Internal Security Act 1972</td>
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<td>OSA</td>
<td>Official Secret Act</td>
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<td>MCMC</td>
<td>Malaysian Communication Multimedia Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>PM</td>
<td>Prime Minister</td>
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<tr>
<td>DPM</td>
<td>Deputy Prime Minister</td>
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<tr>
<td>MDeC</td>
<td>Multimedia Development Corporation</td>
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Having been a broadcast political journalist from 1999 to 2005 in a public broadcast network in Kuala Lumpur, I have been exposed to the challenges of news reporting, be it parliamentary reporting or government news coverage. Practising a journalistic career in Malaysia is often constrained by the censorship policies of the Ministry of Information. The accepted practice for many years has been that news has to be in favour of, or promote, the government’s welfare. It was rare that news content served the ‘watchdog’ aspect of journalism familiar to free press democracies, or focussed on all the problems that ordinary people experience.

I left broadcast journalism in 2005 and became a journalism academic teaching subjects such as ‘Issues in Modern Malaysia’. My professional interest in the local political events encouraged me to observe the country’s political challenges. I discussed examples of contemporary cases of corruption in lectures.

From 2006 onwards I noted a wide range of commentaries criticising the government on blogs. The government ordered a clampdown on websites posting these commentaries. During this period large rallies and protests (Bersih and Hindraf) occurred in the country, gaining world attention. Online, political disclosures occurred through the INP, Malaysiakini.com. Various forms of government anomalies were exposed, such as abuses of power, corruption cases, sex scandals, cronyism, misconduct in the judicial system, and mishandling of religious matters – issues neglected by mainstream media, operating under government influence and tight legal restrictions. Continued disruptions also affected the economy and the cost of living in urban areas increased. Oil prices rose along with unemployment (Asli 2008). As a result of disappointment with the BN government, and frustrations about bread-butter issues, rallies and protests sparked a more varied public agenda.

One of the biggest public rally movements was the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih 1.0), which held its first public protest on November 10, 2007. It was conceived of as a movement for electoral reform and the fair conduct of elections. The government mishandling of this rally, with water cannon and tear gas, was condemned by many Malaysians and the international media.

A similar treatment was later given to another large-scale rally movement, the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf), organised by the Malaysian-Indian ethnic community to pressure for equal rights and opportunities for the minority groups. The rally took place on November 25, 2007, in order to submit a petition to the British High Commission against the ruling government.

Two months later, Malaysia’s federal Parliament was dissolved on the 13 February 2008, in accordance with the country’s rules on national elections. Thus a campaigning period was declared on the 24 February 2008 and the 8th of March 2008 was set as the 12th Malaysia GE2008.

The ruling government experienced an unexpected upset by losing five out of thirteen states to the Opposition, and almost losing its two thirds majority in the Parliament. The GE2008 result was a watershed moment for the country, with increased support for the Opposition parties (DAP, PKR and PAS). A resurgence of PR (Pakatan Rakyat/People’s Alliance Party) followed, and Anwar Ibrahim’s popularity grew. Civil society and NGOs movements also
grew. These were mostly young and middle class people vocal and active in presenting the people’s problems, and networking strongly with Malaysiakini.com. Throughout this election, Malaysiakini.com gained greatly in popularity when compared to the mainstream media.

After I left Malaysia in 2009 for further study, I read about rallies and protests in Malaysia, from Bersih 1.0 to Bersih 2.0 in 2011, and Bersih 3.0 in 2012. These represented a shock wave of changes illustrating how people’s determination to express their political opinions towards the government was gaining momentum. Reports of these events sustained my view that accounting for how the INP, Malaysiakini.com had played a part in igniting social and political mobilization in Malaysia was an important task to undertake. The GE2013 result confirms that political events are continuing to demonstrate that what began in GE2008 is still developing.