

Local media and digital frontiers: The Malaysian conundrum

Zaharom Nain & Gayathry Venkiteswaran

Observers of the Malaysian media environment will notice two distinctive features of the mainstream media (television, radio, print). First, that there is heavy political party involvement and investment in the media and, second, that there has not been a history or tradition of local or regional media, untouched by the state or national-level political parties.

Indeed, since the forced buy-out of the Malay daily, *Utusan Melayu* (UM), by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in 1961, after a protracted – but unsuccessful – strike by the UM journalists, the sad tale of the Malaysian mainstream media has been one of political party ownership, predominantly by the ruling coalition, *Barisan Nasional* (BN).

This was intensified during Mahathir Mohamad's long tenure (22 years) as Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, from 1981 until 2003. His regime's Privatisation Policy saw Malaysia's media undergoing what has been called "regulated deregulation".¹ It was also during these 22 years that the legal controls on the media were intensified. Amendments made in 1987 to the oft-criticised Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) (1984) resulted in the Home Minister (for a long time a post held by Mahathir) having overall powers to grant and remove the yearly printing licences of Malaysian newspapers and other regular publications.

Broadcasting, too, has faced similar restrictions. For years, ever since the first television sta-

tion was set up in 1963, television and radio in Malaysia was government owned, all operated by, hence being under the control of, the Broadcasting Department of the Ministry of Information. While this has remained the case with television, with there being two state-owned television stations, in 1984, Malaysia's first private television station, TV3, was set up. The numbers may have changed, yet despite the fact that Malaysia now has four free-to-air television stations (TV3, NTV7, 8TV and TV9), all four are owned by one company, the UMNO-linked Media Prima.

Although his has been called a "liberal" (but short) administration (2003-2009), Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Mahathir's successor, did nothing substantial to "liberalise" and unshackle the media. The government political and economic controls remained until the current PM, Najib Abdul Razak, replaced Abdullah in 2009 and promised reforms, including media reforms.

Suffice it to say, despite these promises by Najib, the very few changes that have been made, are, at best, cosmetic. Worse, there have been numerous U-turns, and blatant replacing of old repressive laws with new, more repressive, ones. Now, there are ongoing assertions by Najib's regime that there will be amendments made to the Communications and Multimedia Act (1998) (<http://www.skmm.gov.my/Legal/Acts/Communications-and-Multimedia-Act-1998-Reprint-200.aspx>) to further strengthen the regime's grip on new and social media.

The proposed changes include making it mandatory for internet news portals, blogs and social media accounts to be registered with the regime's Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC). These proposed changes indeed run contrary to the Bill of Guarantees that came with the setting up of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) in 1996.

The Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) and the Bill of Guarantees

Set up in 1996 as "Malaysia's gift to the world", according to the hype that accompanied it, the MSC is considered by many as Mahathir's brainchild to enable Malaysia to "leapfrog" to the future. To at-

tract much-needed foreign investment and expertise into the corridor, the regime designed a Bill of Guarantees allegedly to facilitate MSC's growth. One of these guarantees was – and still is – that the Internet would not be censored. Despite this being easier said than done, with internet news portals like Malaysiakini and the late The Malaysian Insider (TMI) being raided and harassed by the authorities, until very recently, the Internet media and social media have been avenues for wider and more critical discussions and debate.

Indeed, the setting up of the MSC, and the Reformasi period following the economic and political turmoil in Malaysia brought about by the 1997-99 “Asian Financial Crisis” and the sacking and incarceration of Mahathir's deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, saw alternative, web-based news portals emerging, led by Malaysiakini in 1999. Since then, many others have followed suit, the most memorable being The Nutgraph, an analytical web news magazine that, unfortunately, ran out of funds after a couple of good years.

More recently, after constant harassment by the authorities due to their coverage of the 1MDB scandal implicating Najib, the immensely popular the Malaysian Insider (TMI) also met the same fate, after being in operation for eight years (2008-16).

The tide is evidently changing. The Malaysian police force, for example, very recently began openly monitoring Twitter and Facebook messages, with a number of users now having been hauled in and charged, often under the insidious Sedition Act.

Digital (civil) communities

The notion of a local media in the context of digital technologies is an ambiguous one. With tools like social media and applications on mobile phones, the local could be a geographical construct or an ideological one spread across continents. In Malaysia, the Internet boom has provided citizens with the tools needed to circumvent censors and gatekeepers to publish and access information.

Digital journalism: The launch of Sarawak Report website in February 2010 changed the media landscape in Malaysia, as it took on pol-

itical heavyweights and corruption scandals that the mainstream media carefully avoided. Using investigative journalism methods, SR claims to be a “group of citizens and onlookers deeply concerned by the situation in Malaysia with a particular focus on Sarawak.” Founded by British journalist, Clare Rewcastle Brown, with operations based in London, the website has published exposés on the former Chief Minister of the state of Sarawak, Taib Mahmud, related to properties owned internationally, and in recent years, the 1MDB scandal involving the prime minister, prompting other local and foreign media to focus on the stories.

The MCMC has been diligently monitoring SR and has for a while now blocked the site. But, of course, there are ways of getting around such censorship. Malaysians, by and large, are aware of – and do use – these alternative routes. This is what TMI did when first blocked by MCMC, but, in the end, such strategies evidently frightened off TMI's advertisers and potential investors. It is clear that applying both political and economic pressure can have the effects the regime hopes for.

Advocacy media – examples: Despite these controls, the growth of the Internet has benefitted not just the professional journalism outlets, but also interest based groups that produce niche content, often associated with advocacy or social justice. For example, the Centre for Orang Asal Concerns (COAC) – a non-governmental organisation advancing the cause of the Orang Asal through information and legal advocacy - publishes stories and updates that are sometimes produced by the community members on its Facebook page. The stories are local and have include threats posed by illegal logging or land grabbing as well as information related to the rights of indigenous peoples.

In one of its reports, a community member filed a story² about food poisoning in a school that affected more than 40 pupils in Gerik, Perak, on 13 May 2016. In the mainstream media, stories like this would not see the light of day unless there was a bigger outbreak or had affected hundreds of pupils. By being able to use the digital tools, the Orang Asli communities can populate the Internet with information that are important to them. The network of Orang Asal³ communities in Malaysia,

called the Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia (JOAS) have provided trainings for the community members to produce their own media content, ranging from learning to write news stories to making videos and films. At the regional level, these stories also curated and shared via a portal, Indigenous Voices in Asia (<http://iva.aippnet.org/category/news/south-east-asia-region/malaysia/>), set up in 2012 to provide a media platform for issues related to indigenous peoples' rights across Asia.

Among the LGBT peoples in Malaysia, organising themselves into societies or associations through face-to-face meetings is almost impossible, especially if they are practicing Muslims. The digital platforms have allowed them to meet online and exercise their rights to participate in public and political activities and give members of the communities the opportunity to introduce their narratives.

An important element is the digital story-telling and solidarity building that happen in these contexts, whether limited to closed groups or through open spaces, which have often been empowering. The I-Am-You campaign to be a trans ally, organised by Justice for Sisters, is a case in point. It exists online and has allowed for crowd-sourced information and consistent dissemination of information and amplification of messages and news, as well as acting as a resource centre for those who want to know more about gender and sexuality.⁴

Local communities in Malaysia also include migrant workers and refugees, mostly from within the region. Since the mid-2000s refugees from Myanmar living in Malaysia, began setting up

their own media, using blogs as the publishing platforms, which remain free and allow for local languages and scripts to be used. The blogs usually carry locally written information on events and incidents as well as updates on security and raids in their areas around Kuala Lumpur, while also sharing news from and about Myanmar and the democracy movement there.

Flipsides to digital technologies: The potential gains from using digital technologies mean that voices that promote or propagate undemocratic values or conservative politics and gender-based discrimination have taken advantage of the platforms. In Malaysia, the wave of anti-Mahathir websites in the late 1990s and early 2000s and the use of social media by opposition parties and activists in the 2007 Bersih rally and 2008 general elections, have been replaced by a BN-dominated cyberspace,⁵ in addition to its control over the mainstream media.

Users are also confronted with big businesses that own these platforms, such as Google, Facebook and Twitter, which are quickly taking on information curation and inevitably, censorship. So while Facebook has become a de facto publishing site for many small and interest groups, they are subject to commercial rules and standards as well as profit-making considerations that could have adverse effects. States have been known to request companies like Google and Youtube to take down websites, while Facebook and Twitter have moderation and censorship policies that have also been controversial with regards to feminism and human rights based content.



The national Indigenous Peoples network, Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia, along with SAVE Rivers and the national human rights organization, SUARAM, are helping to strengthen an emerging movement of Indigenous People affected by - and opposing - mega-dams in Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia and to bring national attention to the ongoing rights violations at dam project resettlement sites. (Photo: International Rivers).

Postscript

In an interview we conducted with *TMI* founder and editor-in-chief, Jahabar Sadiq, about his experience with the news portal that was closed down after much government pressure, Jahabar asserted that in a country where there was little information, the model of free news website or free information was necessary. Yet it had its challenges as professional journalism cost money.

“People want to be informed, and we were supported by advertising. But when you are purely online, you don’t have the backing of a newspaper or media company with a lot of money. The Malaysian Insider came under the stable of The Edge Media Group for a little under two years before shutting it down on 14 March 2016” he said. “We grew too fast and it was not possible to rely only on Google ads, that would only work if we were a small team, not when you are 50-over people. Will readers pay for us?”, he added.

In February 2016, the government instructed ISPs to block access to the website following a report on the 1MDB, and this cost the news portal its advertisers. “The government accused us of confusing the public. Within one month, the shareholders said we can’t cover the costs and shut us down.”

Even in the age of digital media, unfortunately, it would appear that the bottom line is still crucial, if not determinant. As stated in an earlier piece:

“The ICT industry is a mix of neo-liberalism when it comes to the economics, but with a considerable amount of state influence (ownership) and regulation being retained. Using the excuse of protecting public order, ethnic relations and national security, the regime has demonstrated its priorities to impose controls and restrictions online as well as to conduct digital surveillance. The legal environment that impacts on fundamental civil liberties has been systematically undermined while practices of blocking,

intimidation, and persecution are aimed at curtailing any criticism of the ruling government and institutions, much like the trends in the region. Civil society continues to attempt challenging the restrictions, through local and international advocacy, while independent media outlets press on with questions regarding surveillance and the persecution of individuals.”⁶ ■

Notes

1. Zaharom Nain (1994). “Commercialisation and control in a ‘caring society’ - Malaysian media ‘towards 2020’.” *SOJOURN (Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia)* (Singapore). October: Vol. 9, No. 2. 178-199.

2. See COAC Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/center-for-orang-asli-concerns-coac/keracunan-makanan-murid-sk-rps-dala/1115074978536427>

3. Orang Asal means “Original People” and refers to all indigenous peoples throughout Malaysia. In Peninsular Malaysia, Orang Asal are collectively known as Orang Asli.

4. Gayathry Venkiteswaran, *Freedom of assembly and association online in India, Malaysia and Pakistan: Trends, challenges and recommendations*, 2016, Association for Progressive Communications, http://www.apc.org/en/system/files/Impact_Digital.pdf

5. Oon Yeoh, “The Cyberwar of 2012,” *The Sunday Daily*, 29 July 2010, <http://www.thesundaily.my/node/140196>

6. In the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA) 18 May 2016 <https://www.seapa.org/a-trend-toward-censorship-and-control/>

Zaharom Nain is Professor of Media and Communication Studies and Director of the Centre for the Study of Communications and Culture (CSCC), University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus (UNMC).

Gayathry Venkiteswaran is the former Executive Director of the Bangkok-based Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA). She is currently researching for her PhD at UNMC.