

‘The Right to Information’: A Malaysian Political Blog Readers’ Perspective

Norraiha Zakaria, Abdul Rahman Othman

Abstract—Political blogs are one of the pivotal alternative communication channels for political news in Malaysia. Many have argued that the mushrooming of political blogs nurtures the effective realization of human rights in the country. The paper studies the ‘Malaysian political blog readers–human rights’ relationship by exploring these questions: Has traditional mainstream media become obsolete with the rise of political blogosphere? Why do blog readers visit political blogs? A survey was conducted and the findings revealed that traditional mainstream media is still a pertinent source for political news in the country. Apart from acquiring the latest political updates quickly and at anytime, blog readers compare the news published in political blogs with the ones reported in traditional mainstream media. This suggests that freedom of information is deemed as one of the prime motives for Malaysian blog readers clinging to political blogosphere.

Keywords—Freedom of information, Human rights, Malaysian political blog readers, Malaysian political blogosphere.

I. INTRODUCTION

BLOGS began to emerge in the Malaysian internet domain at the beginning of the 2000s. The term ‘political blogs’ refers to blogs that discuss or disseminate social-political issues whereas political bloggers are those who blogged about these issues. ‘Political blogosphere’ denotes the web of interconnections between and within all political blogs. The infamous 1998 dismissal of Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim is the stimulus that triggers the booming of political blogs in the country [1]. Opposition bloggers, bloggers with different views, and blog-readers employ political blogs to upload photos, eyewitness accounts, and extended viewpoints that are often shunned by traditional mainstream media (i.e. local TV, radio and printed newspaper). The utilization of political blogs by the opposition resulted in the *Barisan Nasional* coalition government to lose five states and the two-thirds parliamentary majority in the 2008 General Election [2]. Although *Youtube*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Google Plus Hangout*, and other technologies have infiltrated the internet, political blogs continue to be one of the significant communication platforms in Malaysia.

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According to the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), 28.2% of the 29 million Malaysian hand phone subscribers used their mobile phones to access the internet while 17.6% accessed social networking sites [3]. Internet with mobile phones, internet at home, internet at work place, hot spots, and government community access (e.g. *Kampung Tanpa Wayar*, Community Broadband Centers) enable political bloggers to update, disseminate, and communicate news/information engaging blog readers anywhere, at anytime instantaneously.

Democracy is defined by, among other things, freedom of speech and freedom of expression. The user friendly and readily accessible features of blogs have transformed political blogs into commanding tools for democratic development in the country. This could be seen in the BERSIH 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0 rallies publicized by the political blogosphere. The ‘quiet’ publicity has brought about tens of thousands of demonstrators flocking the streets in Kuala Lumpur on 2 November 2007, 9 July 2011, and 28 April 2012. Whether the BERSIH rallies were illegal or undemocratic unlatched other debates [4] and exceed the scope of the paper. If political blogs have given the Malaysian publics the ‘eyes’ and ‘voices’ for them to exercise these democratic rights, these new found freedoms ought to be investigated further. The paper analyzes the ‘political blog readers–human rights’ link by probing into: Has traditional mainstream media become obsolete with the rise of political blogosphere? Why do Malaysian blog readers visit political blogs?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies on Malaysian blogosphere have associated blogs with democratization. However, empirical studies to support and quantify the connection between political blog readers and human rights are still lacking. When dealing with Malaysian blogosphere, it is impossible to miss the work of Tan and Ibrahim (2008) [5]. Their study is often referred to as the first in the country that has attempted to map out Malaysian blogging phenomenon. Although they have taken into account blog readers’ perceptions, their analysis is limited to blog readers’ affiliations with political parties, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other societies.

Smeltzer (2008) on the other hand, acknowledges that there exists a debate between the roles of new media and traditional media [6]. She has highlighted that some scholars have viewed the new media as lacking expertise, financial resources, labor power and credentials compared to the traditional media. Even though she has illustrated on the new media–traditional media debate, her work has focused solely on bloggers’ perspective.

The political blog readers' viewpoint is nevertheless left untouched.

Many have considered the views of the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad are still sharp. His work, *Blogging to unblock* (2008) mainly criticizes his successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's administration [7]. But, his criticism is merely a replica of his thoughts that have been published in his blog, *Chedet*. The same can be said about A. Kadir Jasin (2006) [8]. Like *Blogging to unblock*, *Blogger A. Kadir Jasin* is also a compilation of his critical thoughts on socio-political issues that have been published earlier in his blog, *The Scribe*. Since both authors are prominent political bloggers in the country, it is understandable that their published works have also zoomed in their thoughts from the political bloggers' lens and not political blog readers' perspectives.

Gong (2009) on the other hand, has conducted her systematic research to study the effect of blogs from a social setting [9]. Her study has revealed that Malaysian bloggers are five times as likely to win an election compared to non-bloggers. However, Gong's work too is confined to bloggers' standpoint only.

Unlike Tan and Ibrahim, Smeltzer, and Gong who have adopted surveys and/or interviews as their research methods, Ahmad, Mohamad, Abu Hassan, Pawanteh, Ahmad, and Aziz (2011) have capitalized on focus groups [10]. After reviewing several major laws and regulations surrounding Malaysian blogosphere, they have explored the level of awareness of Malaysian laws among bloggers. Despite differing method, their study has concentrated on bloggers and not political blog readers' perspective.

Most studies have focused either on blogs or political bloggers. But, bloggers are not the only stakeholders in political blogosphere. Recent study conducted by Bidin and Mustaffa (2012) has shed a new light in the 'blog readers-human rights' connection [11]. Both authors have dissected a portion of blog readers' population by investigating youth perceptions on blogs credibility. Their study has shown that 74% respondents viewed blogs' contents as credible. If false or inaccurate information retrieved from blogs is accepted at face value, it could precipitate serious security repercussions in the country. Their work has opened up a new dimension that demands further explorations.

Smeltzer (2008) [6], Gong (2009) [9], and Ahmad, Mohamad, Abu Hassan, Pawanteh, Ahmad, and Aziz (2011) [10] have argued that the mushrooming of political blogosphere nurtures the effective realization of human rights in the country. However, they have eluded political blog readers in their studies. Hence, a study on the political blogosphere-human rights dimension that focuses on the perspective of political blog readers is significant yet fundamental to enquire into.

III. METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted between December 2010 and August 2011. The survey targeted 200 respondents with a receipt success of 544 respondents. Though the survey

questionnaires were prepared in Malay and English languages, all respondents have participated in the Malay language survey. Table I states the demographic profile of the survey respondents.

TABLE I
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

| Response Categories | Count | Percent |
|------------------------------|-------|---------|
| <i>Age</i> | | |
| <20 | 3 | 0.6% |
| 21-30 | 269 | 49.4% |
| 31-40 | 202 | 37.1% |
| 41-50 | 54 | 9.9% |
| >50 | 16 | 2.9% |
| <i>Gender</i> | | |
| Female | 238 | 43.8% |
| Male | 306 | 56.2% |
| <i>Race</i> | | |
| Malay | 445 | 81.8% |
| Chinese | 29 | 5.3% |
| Indian | 43 | 7.9% |
| Others | 27 | 5.0% |
| <i>Academic Achievement</i> | | |
| Lower than SPM | 4 | 0.7% |
| SPM | 23 | 4.2% |
| Certificate/Diploma/STPM | 469 | 86.2% |
| Bachelor Degree | 19 | 3.5% |
| Masters | 12 | 2.2% |
| PhD | 15 | 2.8% |
| Professional Qualification | 2 | 0.4% |
| <i>Location of Residence</i> | | |
| City | 413 | 75.9% |
| Sub-urban/rural | 131 | 24.1% |

Note: The weighting of the data may result in rounding discrepancies or totals not adding

As shown in Table I, the majority of the respondents (471 or 86.5%) fall between the age range of 21 and 40 years. 12.8% or 70 respondents are between the age range of 40 years and above, and 0.6% or 3 respondents are between the age range of 20 years and below. The gender divide is almost equally split with 43.8% or 238 respondents are females and 56.2% or 306 respondents are males. On ethnicity, the Malay ethnic formed the majority with 81.8% or 445 respondents whereas 18.2% or 99 respondents are non-Malays. The Chinese, Indians, and other *Bumiputra* ethnic groups make up 5.3%, 7.9% and 5% respectively. Judging from the academic achievements category, the major bulk of respondents is somewhat educated. 86.2% or 469 respondents have achieved the Certificate/Diploma/*Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia* (STPM). 4.2% have achieved the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) followed by 3.5% Bachelor degree, 2.8% PhD, 2.2% Masters, and 0.4% professional qualification. Only 5% or 4 respondents achieved lower than SPM. Most of the respondents (413 or 75.9%) are predominantly residing in the city while the remaining 131 respondents or 24.1% in sub-urban/rural areas.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Has Traditional Mainstream Media Become a Passé with the Rise of Political Blogosphere?

The rise of political blogosphere has generated the assumption that local TV, radio and printed newspaper, i.e. the

traditional mainstream media has lost its appeal to the Malaysian publics and thus has become obsolete. Fig. 1 demonstrates that this assumption is erroneous. 490 respondents (90.1%) claimed that local TV is one of their current political news/information sources. 453 respondents (83.3%) selected printed newspaper and 289 respondents (53.1%) ticked radio as their sources for Malaysian current political news/information. The internet houses, among others, the webs of interconnection between and within political blogs. Though readily accessible, only 71.5% (389 respondents) chose the internet. This figure is slightly lower than local TV and printed newspaper. Another source of current Malaysian political news is paid/satellite TV that broadcast foreign news stations' views. It recorded the lowest percentage with 48.5% (264 respondents). Since the traditional mainstream media is government controlled, many believed that freedoms of speech and expression via local TV, radio and printed newspaper are somewhat restricted [12], [13]. Ironically, this belief does not translate in Fig. 1. Local TV and printed newspaper, though presumed as government's propaganda tools, are still the two leading sources of Malaysian current political news/information in the country.

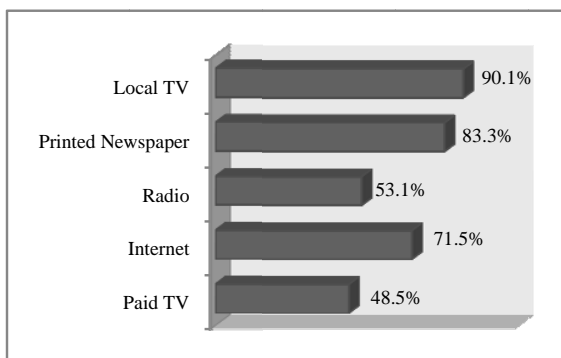


Fig. 1 Sources of political news

The study then segregated those who opted for traditional media (local TV/printed newspaper/radio) from those who selected new media (internet/paid TV) and those who picked both media (traditional and new). As portrayed in Fig. 2, only 23 participants or 4.2% embraced solely the new media as their source for Malaysian current political news. 126 respondents (23.2%) relied on just traditional media and 395 respondents (72.6%) depended on both traditional and new media. There is a wide gap (19%) between those who picked the new media from traditional media. Fig. 2 suggests two things. First, the majority of the respondents relied on both traditional and new media as their sources for current Malaysian political news/information. Second, despite traditional media is monopolized by the government, it has not become a passé. Instead, it is still a pertinent source of Malaysian political news.

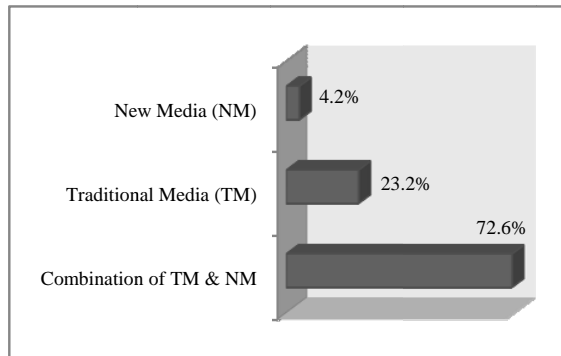


Fig. 2 Types of political news sources

B. Why Do Political Blog Readers Visit Political Blogs?

The study then specifically embarked on political blog readers. In order to gauge the respondents' awareness of the existence of political blogs in blogosphere, the respondents were asked whether they have heard of and visited any political blogs. As illustrated in Fig. 3, the majority of the respondents are not naïve with regards to the existence of political blogs. 470 or 86.4% responded that they have heard of political blogs. A faction of 74 respondents or 13.6% claimed that they have not heard of political blogs. Although 470 respondents have professed that they are aware of the existence of political blogs, 76 of them opted not to visit these blogs. Hence, the percentage of those who have responded 'yes' to the question 'have you visited any political blogs' shrinks by 14%. By admitting that they have visited political blogs, 72.4% or 394 respondents can be categorized as political blog readers.

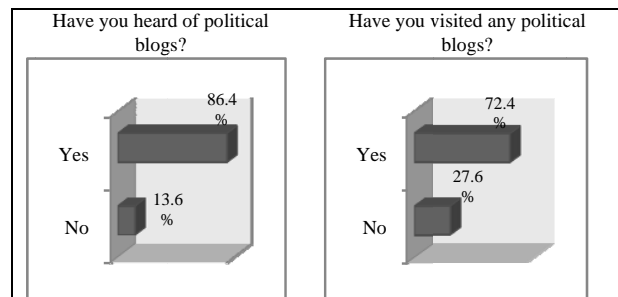


Fig. 3 Awareness of political blogs

The 394 identified political blog readers were asked further why they visited political blogs. Their reasons were rooted out in Fig. 4. Basing on the percentage (74.4%), 'to assess information anytime' and 'to obtain latest updates and news' championed the reasons why political blog readers visited political blogs. With 28.9%, 'to be excited or entertained' is the least reason why they visited political blogs. The reasons, 'to get a wide variety of viewpoints' (73.9%), 'to obtain information not reported by other media' (73.6%), 'to obtain alternative viewpoints' (66.8%), 'to obtain unbiased viewpoints' (64.2%), and 'to compare with other media' (62.9%), might decipher why political blog readers cling on to political blogosphere. Also, the results shown in Fig. 4

indicate that political blog readers visited political blogs not so much on freedom of speech or freedom of expression, but, rather for freedom to obtain/acquire political news/information. This could be seen at the high percentages of the first top twelve reasons compared to the low percentages of the seven reasons at the bottom. 'To decide on important issues' (56.3%), 'to judge personal qualities of politicians' (53.8%), 'to feel involved in national politics' (37.3%), 'to let my opinion be known' (37.1%), 'to use as basis in discourse with others' (33.5%), 'to be in contact with light-minded people' (32.2%), and 'to be excited/entertained' (28.9%) could be lumped as freedom of expression or freedom of speech. Whereas the top twelve reasons, 'to assess information anytime' (74.4%), 'to obtain latest updates and news' (74.4%), 'to get a wide variety of viewpoints' (73.9%), 'to obtain information not reported by other media' (73.6%), 'to find specific information' (73.1%), 'to assess information quickly' (70.6%), 'to obtain information easily' (69%), 'to know actions taken by politicians' (68.8%), 'to obtain alternative viewpoints' (66.8%), 'to obtain unbiased viewpoints' (64.2%), 'to view politicians stance' (63.5%), and 'to compare information with other media' (62.9%) could be grouped as freedom of information. Clearly, the high percentages are insinuating that one of the prime motives of political blog readers clinging on political blogosphere is due to freedom of information.

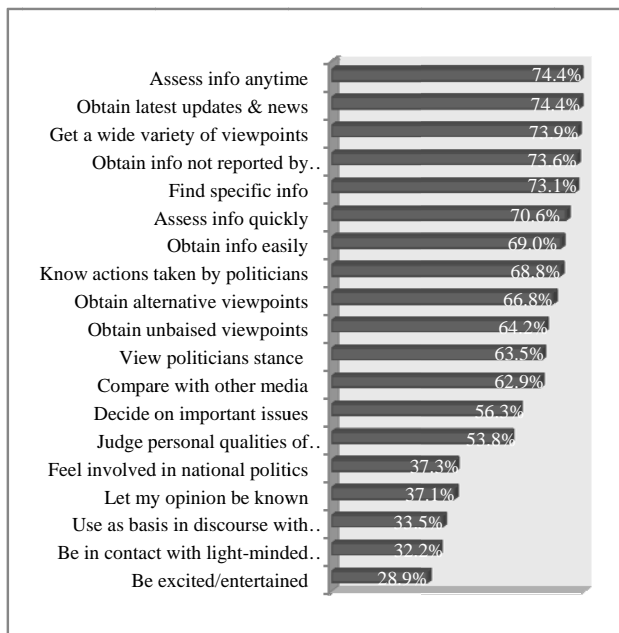


Fig. 4 Reasons for visiting Malaysian political blogs

V.CONCLUSION

The mushrooming of political blogs no doubt nurtures and enhances the realization of human rights in the country. Contrary to the popular assumption, traditional mainstream media has not become obsolete with the rise of political blogosphere. In fact, both traditional and new media are used

as the sources of Malaysian current political news. Though political blogs have given political blog readers the 'eyes' and 'voices' for them to exercise their democratic rights, political blog readers visited political blogs not so much for freedoms of expression or speech. Instead, they embraced political blogs more for freedom of information, i.e. the right to know.

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