# Information Propagation and the Forces of Social Media in Malaysia

Fauziah Ahmad, Chang Peng Kee, Normah Mustaffa, Faridah Ibrahim, Wan Amizah Wan Mahmud & Dafrizal

School of Media and Communication Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Selangor, Malaysia

E-mail: zuhair@ukm.my

## Abstract

New media or social media in the globalised world progress along with new technology, facilitating the acquirement of new and prompt information. Technological advances provide more control over the media and the means to acquire information from the media. Both social and global media play a crucial role in times of conflict and crisis to construct reality to form public opinion. News in mass media is constructed because there is demand for current and accurate information and the mass media does not stand in a vacuum. Indeed, the media stands in the midst of social reality full of enthusiasm, self-interest, conflict and multi-faceted facts. Audience now received information from channels that are reachable and they are comfortable with and this is in line with the new media. Media has been regarded as a part of a nation's strength that works through ideology that raises the audience's conscience on a group of powerful individuals. It is a powerful tool to create space to represent ideologies, to dissemination information and to spread discourses among the locals. Thus, this conceptual paper will show the forces of social media that is able to raise the audience's conscience on their rights to gain knowledge and information and, subsequently, to create space to represent ideologies, to disseminate information and to spread discourses amongst them.

**Keywords:** Information propagation, Social media, Global media, Public opinion

## 1. Introduction

There are literally thousands of internets and satellite channels of alternative news that can be easily accessed. This phenomenon has created a space where the democratization of media and information can materialize, simultaneously creating a curious and an informed society. In many developing countries, the role of media is shaped to fulfill local needs. In Malaysia, the role of media is shaped not only to disseminate information and as educators as envisaged in the government's policy, but also as a guide to walk hand in hand with the government's aspiration and policy to be able to sustain and survive in the media industries. Wright (1986) asserted that communication is a crucial element for human and society to exist. Every society, primitive or modern depends on communication to create a bridge among humans to be able to live together, to carry on the legacy and regulations and to cope with changes that happened in the physical environment.

## 2. Social Media in Malaysia

The development of the internet technology has revolutionized the new technology Web 2.0. or social media. This social media has gained global attention as an interactive and affective communication media. It is a global integration process that is able to form a global society through mediation and acculturation where values and common language connects the world political economy in an international network system. And this process involves the support of technology innovation and user acceptance. McLuhan (1964) has metaphorically said that the world has shrunk to be a 'global village' and is getting smaller and has become almost borderless. This is made possible through the development of technological communication that allows fast and effective trans-border communication (Samsudin A. Rahim 2003).

Web 2.0 or social media is Internet based applications that enable greater application through user generated content. It has changed forms of communication and interactions among individuals. The application through user generated content has transformed users to be content producers from content consumers supporting the democratization of knowledge and information. Basically, social media comes in the form of podcasts, social blogs, weblogs, news portals, internet forums, facebook, Twitter, etc to create a public sphere to communicate.

Having public sphere elements, these forms of social media are very interactive and dynamic that is able to channel news and information. These social media allows audience to access information, to send messages and to offer views and opinions and to deliberate over critical issues.

Through these social media, consumers are able to upload videos, photographs, texts comments and the like forming a highly interactive cyber sphere. Social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter etc, have allowed consumers to be interactive to chat, to exchange information and also to be persuasive. As such, consumers do not anymore have to feel at odd or frustrated with government control media as the existence of social media have created a more democratic milieu to voice out opinion or to vent anger. At the click of the button consumers are able to channel out opinions to get chains and chains of feedback, globally for that matter.

<Insert Table 1 Here>

Malaysians are opting for online news for faster and constant updates, as seen by the 35 percent growth in online newspaper readership over a year, reaching one million readers. But the traditional print medium is still popular as nine in ten readers still obtain their news from newspapers. Nielsen Media Index indicated that Internet users increased to 21 percent in 2008 with almost 4 in 10 users spending between one to two hours on the Internet every day. Email, surfing and information gathering are familiar traits among Malaysians, but the more popular activities among netizens are online TV/music/games (47%), message/chat/blogging (45%) and reading newspaper/magazines (35%) shows the least. 90% of Malaysian use Facebook as their prime social media network. 5.14% Malaysians visit YouTube while another 1.97% frequent the latest media network Twitter. MySpace being one of the favourite among Malaysian a few years back is in 6th place and continue to lose its popularity.

## 3. News/Information Propagation and Social Media

Social media has become one of the most powerful platform to express sentiments, emotions, opinions, grouses, stupidity and intelligence and others that fall under the category of information that are being said and shared which could be read or accessed by people now and in the future. New media in the globalised world progress along with new technology, facilitating the acquirement of new and prompt information. Technological advances provide more control over the media and the means to acquire information from the media. News in mass media is constructed because there is demand for current and accurate information and the mass media does not stand in a vacuum. Indeed, the media stands in the midst of social reality full of enthusiasm, self-interest, conflict and multi-faceted facts. Audience now received information from channels that are easily reachable and they are comfortable with and this is in line with the new media. Thus, the main concern of this paper is to highlight the forces of social media and the extent news and views are propagated through them.

The world has witnessed the Falklands War in the 1980s, the intifada of the 1980s, the Gulf War of the 1991, the Israel-Palestinian War and the Afghanistan War in 2002. And of much recent the world witnessed the infamous 9/11 attack on the soil of America, the attack on Iraq in 2003, accused of harboring weapon of mass destruction, the attack on Mumbai, India, the sporadic bombings in Pakistan and the ultimate bombing that saw the demise of President Benazir Bhutto and not forgetting the Bali bombings in Indonesia. The recent reporting of smaller accounts of attack took place sporadically around the globe such as the subway bombing in Japan, the train and bus bombing in London and bombings in some major cities around the globe. But the seemingly no ending struggle is on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict which has been going on for years. And now the eye of the world is focusing on the Arab Spring; Global reporting of international news is increasingly important in the context of contemporary world order and the new media ecology. This statement is based on the world events that have happened around the globe and dramatic transformation undergone in the last decade in the relationship between social media, public opinion and political leadership.

Apart from news and images on crisis, other urgent news are also explored and portrayed to the public; the case of starving children in Somalia, the refugees in Kosovo, cyclones, hurricanes, tsunami and earthquakes. Social media has become an intrinsic part of everyday lives. Audience relied on media in quest of truth and the media need the audience are exposed to almost all modes of media, and the media are driven to benefit the audience daily. Thus, media coverage plays a crucial role to inform people of what is really happening on ground zero. Audiences are continuously finding means and ways to get first hand information. The media revolution, the electronic communities and interactive technologies have provided a new sphere of public discourse, a new generation and negotiation of reality and a new democratic will. Social media has placed the democratic norms of security, freedom, equality and community on national agendas allowing voices in society to be heard and to integrate public opinion and will and subsequently for the government to act upon.

In 2011, eight West Asia nations has been invaded with a new wave of conflict that urges the formation of a democratic administration system. After years of being shackled under a dictatorship regiment, the Arab world is standing up to claim for a democratic system. The uprising that started in Tunisia has spread to other neighbouring Arab nations. All eyes are focused on this region to get latest, reliable and accurate information and this conflict has become the headlines both on radio and television as well as the new media. Audience were rushing to get the true picture of what has hit those countries no less to offer sympathy, aid and to seek for lessons to learn. News is supposed to be a true statement and first hand information on events that is able to attract a major portion of the audience as the audience has a high level of curiosity and thirst for information. As an example, the uprise in Egypy saw Hosni Mubarak's regime shutting down the internet to cut swift information amongst their activist and normal citizens, being aware that the audience depend very much on the communication network to move to receive information and to propagate ideologies as written in a blog that wrote;

> Internet access has been cut and restricted today. The Washington Post compared the crackdown to one that occurred following the disputed elections in Iran in 2009...The Egyptian shutdown, if continued Friday, could be the most drastic move against anti-government activities' use of technology since the Iranian government cracked down on protests in 2009... A US state department spokesman Philip Crowley expressed concern about the internet restrictions.

Current situation echoes the main comments that were made during the New World Information Order debate in the 1980s where distorted, negative treatment of the Third World in the Western media is transferred to the Third World itself because of the latter's dependence on the Western news agencies. Third World leaders complained that the Western news agencies are disrupting the free flow of news, distorting the realities of the developing nations and are presenting negative images of the Third World. They often give too bias reports and too heavy items on war and poverty, illiteracy, riots, antics of nation leaders and social disruption. Various studies on the coverage of international news agencies found that majority of the news about foreign countries highlighted were of negative directions while the agencies' countries of origins were more positive (Faridah Ibrahim, 1984; Faridah Ibrahim and Rahmah Hashim, 1996; Mohd Rajib and Faridah , 1996; Faridah Ibrahim, 2000; Faridah Ibrahim and Mohd Safar, 2005).

In tandem with social media, print media gives no less important role in the reporting of news in Malaysia. Amitav Acharya and Arabinda Acharya (2007), De Nelson (2004) and Gershmann (2002) as cited in Dafrizal Samsudin and Faridah Ibrahim (2010) in their study on war news framing in the print media asserted that the ASEAN region is seen as the second front in the war on terrorism. It is perceived that the ASEAN region is infested with the terrorist group the Islamic Council or known as *Jemaah Islamiah* (*JI*), the Abu Sayyaf group from the Phillipines and the Mujahideen Group (KMM) from Malaysia. Despite these perceptions, Malaysia came out as active expressing views against terrorism. Malaysia, Indonesia and the Phillipines are among the ASEAN countries which is still facing the issues of terrorism and war on terrorism. Malaysia will not be last to respond on these aggressive acts of terrorism and it will always become the focus of Malaysia's international news though Malaysia relies heavily on international news agencies. And with this stance, having its own policy on how to respond to the issue of the war against terrorism, Malaysia has joined to be part of the US campaign on war against terrorism to show that Malaysia is not harboring any terrorists.

Social media evidently has a huge potential for democratization (Faridah Ibrahim 2010). No wonder, Jurgen Habermas (2006) argued that the Internet can have a subversive effect on intellectual life in authoritarian regimes, and threaten to bring down the regime itself. An obvious evident is the uprising of Middle Eastern people or popularly called The Arab Spring in March 2011. Democratic revolutions are not caused by new information technologies. New information technologies helped through the course of democratic revolutions. To curb the spread of further breakdown in Egypt in March 2011, the ruling government tried to bring down the internet but to no avail. The internet has not been the only means of communication. There are many more features of public sphere to get connected to. An online media quoted that an Algerian woman demonstrator said that Algerians were able to mobilise in large numbers in the past without the need for social media. Before the emergence of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube and the likes ten years before, they managed to mobilise their revolution. During the demonstration in Tunisia, (*angryarab.blogspot.com/2011/11/demonstration-in-tunisia.html*) the country saw half the internet users are on Facebook as a reprisal for the restrictions placed on traditional media. Sultan Suood Al Qasimi, an Emirati writer had an Egyptian warn him to stop tweeting about the withdrawal of police from certain districts of Cairo during the Egyptian breakdown in fear of the panic his tweets could spread. In

Doha, Shadi Hamid, director of research at the Brookings Doha Centre alleged that social media is required for revolutions to succeed and there is no doubt that it helps. (*en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011–2012_Syrian_uprising*)

Another recent incident is the July 9th 2011 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, demonstration called Bersih 2.0, parroting Web 2.0, a rally seeking reform of the country's electoral system in Malaysia. A Facebook petition calling on Prime Minister Najib Razak to quit has drawn over 200,000 backers, highlighting the role of social and new media in Malaysia's restrictive free speech environment. One contributor to the page wrote: "The world is full of multimedia and electronics; the things we so call camera and videocam ... And photos and videos were already being uploaded on the Internet. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter have played a major role in motivating some of the demonstrators in the run-up to the rally, which went ahead despite a police ban and lockdown imposed on sprawling Kuala Lumpur on the eve of the July 9 protest". The demonstration organizer, Bersih 2.0 -- a coalition of 63 NGOs (non-government organizations) that wants changes such as updated electoral rolls and a longer election campaign period -- has its own Facebook page attracting a similar number of "likes" as the page urging Malaysian Prime Minister Najib to step down, with 190,000+ fans at the time of this posting. Along with online news sites such as Malaysiakini and Free Malaysia Today, social networks have helped get around partisan coverage by newspapers close to the government to counter distorted coverage of reporting pro-government.

Free Malaysia Today, a free and independent news portal in Malaysia, uploaded on 30th June 2011, prior to the July 9th 2011 demonstration Bersih 2.0, had its headline news 'News portals may face more online attacks.' Social media watchers alleged that alternative news portals and activist blogs will face more cyber attacks as the Bersih rally gets closer. Centre for Independent Journalism programme director Chuah Siew Eng said that these cyber-attacks were a norm during politically challenging times such as political elections and demonstrations. As in the Sarawak election case in April 2011, alternative or non-pro-government media, namely, Sarawak Report and online news portal Malaysiakini crashed due to incessant Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) as the event approach. Internet service disruption is a normal case to deny access to the internet so that words and messages cannot float through and information is cut off by 'unknown persons' but is more likely to be from the pro-government individuals and to be politically motivated. At worst, the government agency Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) may send out warnings to alternative media not to make things worse or quote national security reasons or seek legal justifications. This is a form of cyberterror online that aims to undermine consumers of public sphere.

Attack on the social media internet is a form of cyber terror that is normally politically motivated if not for personal or organizational satisfaction. This is a new identified public sphere attack trend that is used to overwhelm servers of websites like government networks, military websites, institutions, academia, private business systems, public utilities, airlines, banking systems which can be the cyber terrorists' potential targets. It is a modern media warfare that revolutionizes the social media to attack websites, to coordinate propaganda campaigns, to disseminate information and create influence. Cyber attacks are normally launched remotely where authorities would find difficult to identify the perpetrators and from where attacks are launched. It is a norm that when the current ruling government is suppressed, news organization becomes more vulnerable to censorship and official news management. In retaliation, alternative media use the internet to reconstruct distorted news as they claimed to be. And this is the reason why the Hosni Mubarak's regime shut down the internet for fear of propagation of ideologies leading to further reprisal among its citizen.

Three years earlier, Malaysian voters had delivered an unprecedented blow to the ruling BN in the 12th general election on 8 March 2008. The severe losses of the incumbent coalition – five (out of thirteen) state governments (states of Kelantan, Kedah, Perak, Penang and Selangor), eighty-two seats in the 222-seat national Parliament, with 50.6 percent popular votes compared to 49.4 percent received by the opposition, and a major swing against the non-Malay component parties within the multi-ethnic coalition – this election marks a new political chapter in history of Malaysian electorates. The loose alliance of Pan-Islamic party (PAS), Democratic Action Party (DAP) and People Justice Party (PKR) then formed a coalition called the Pakatan Rakyat (PR, People's Alliance), used to be known as Barisan Alternative (BA), soon after the election in order to coordinate policy through the decision-making from the top leadership especially for all states won by the opposition front.

Koh (2008: 25) concurred that one of the crucial determinant to cause such 2008 general election result was the new social media of the Internet. On 25 March 2008, the Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi admitted, at the opening of Invest 3 Malaysia 2008, that the BN government lost the online war in the general election. He asserted that:

> *We didn't think it was important. It was a serious misjudgment. We thought that the*
> *newspapers, the print media, the television were important but young people were looking at*

> *text messages and blogs. (The influence of alternative media) was painful. But it came at the right time, not too late. (New Straits Times, 25ᵗʰ March 2008)*

It is clearly that it was the social media that made a swing through to influence the 2008 general election result. Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani & Knocks Tapiwa Zengeni (2010) asserted that in the 12ᵗʰ general election in 2008 in Malaysia, social media was the main instrument in promoting democracy. It opens up options and channels for people to comment, condemn, persuade, discuss and deliberate on political issues to influence election results. The public sphere has given the social media a warrant to overrule the elements of censorship and allow for more freedom of voice and action.

## 4. Conclusion

Nobaya and Samsudin (2008) asserted that technological advances provide more control over the media and the means to acquire information from the media. In multi-ethnic Malaysia, the effects of globalization can be felt with the emergence of alternative media providing all kinds of information; from the good to the bad, from the accurate to the inaccurate. Newfound social problems have also mushroomed – the irresponsible dissemination of rumor-mongering by bloggers and other 'alternative voices'. Massive information, misinformation and disinformation via the mass media are challenges for Malaysian media practitioners because they are detrimental to local values and culture.

Both social and global media play a crucial role in times of conflict and crisis to construct reality to form public opinion. New media in the globalised world progress along with new technology, facilitating the acquirement of new and prompt information. Media has been regarded as a part of a nation's strength that works through ideology that raises the audience's conscience and awareness on a group of powerful individuals. It is a powerful tool to create space to represent ideologies, to disseminate information and to spread discourses among the locals. Elihu et al. (1974) asserted that media functions as an environmental surveillance and it is a response to human cognitive desire for shelter and to feel safe through communication and information where media active users are said to be actively depending on mass media to be alerted of incidents occurring around them and in the environment.

## References

Abbas Al Lawati. (2011). Social media played role in facilitating Arab Spring, 18ᵗʰ May. Retrieved 17ᵗʰ July, 2011, from: m.gulfnews.com

Beers, D. (2006). The Public Sphere and Online, Independent Journalism. *Canadian Journal of Education,* 29(1), 109-130. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/20054149

Dafrizal Samsudin & Faridah Ibrahim. (2010). Framing of 'Terrorism' Issues in Indonesia: A Study of Two Malasyian Mainstream Newspapers. *Journal of Media and Information Warfare*, Vol. 3.

Faridah Ibrahim. (1984). *Image of Superpowers in two Malaysian Dailies.* MA Unpublished thesis. University of Missouri-Columbia, USA.

Faridah Ibrahim & Rahmah Hashim. (1996). *Images of Women and Human Rights: A Content Analysis of Malaysian Media during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.* Paper presented at the IAMCR Conference in Sydney, Australia, August 19-22, 1996.

Faridah Ibrahim. (2001). The Blurring of Lines Between Traditional Media: A Look at the Influence of Internet Malaysian Newsroom Decision-making Process. In Rahman Hashim in Internet in Malaysia. Bangi: Communication Department, UKM.

Faridah Ibrahim and Mohd Safar Hasim. (2005). *The Usage of News Sources in Print and Broadcast Media.* Bangi: Penerbit UKM.

Faridah Ibrahim. (2007). *Stereotyping by the media: Implications for South-South Nations.* Paper presented at SSIG Forum on "Organised by South-South Information Gateway (SSIG), Ministry of Information, Malaysia, Nikko Hotel, KL, 25 January.

Faridah Ibrahim. (2010). Press Freedom and Ethics With Accountability: Premises and Constraints. Paper Presented At International Conference Cum Workshop On Free And Responsible Journalism Organized By South-South Information Gateway (Ssig), Ministry Of Information, Communications And Culture Malaysia Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan 27-31 January 2010.

Gamson, W. A. (1984). *What's news: A game simulation of TV news.* New York: Free Press.

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organisation of experience.* New York: Harper & Row.

Gunter, B. (2009). Blogging private becomes public and public becomes personalized. *Aslib Proceedings: New Information Perspectives,* 61(2), 120-126.

Habermas, J. (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans., T. Burger. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hallahan, K. (1999). Seven models of framing: Implications for public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research,* 11(3), 205-242. http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjprr1103_02

Kamalipour, Y. R. & Snow, N. (Eds.) (2004). *War, media and propaganda: A global perspective*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

Koh, L.C. (2008). Was this the election made on the Internet? *New Straits Times*, 12 March, p. 25.

Lee, P. (2011). News portals may face more online attacks, Upload June 30th. Free Malaysia Today. Retrieved 17 July, 2011, from: www.freemalaysiatoday.com/

Mainstream Media Continues to Lead Malaysia's ... - Nielsen - Malaysia. Retrieved 17 July, 2011, from: my.nielsen.com/news/20081023.shtml

*Malaysia* Press, Media, *TV*, Radio, Newspapers - *television* ..., Upload 16th April 2011. Retrieved 20 July, 2011, from: www.pressreference.com

Measuring Peace in the Media: Vision of Humanity. Upload 18th May 2011. Retrieved 17 July 2011, from: www.visionofhumanity.org/info.../measuring-peace-in-the-media

Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani & Knocks Tapiwa Zengeni. (2010). Democratisation in Malaysia: The impact of social media in the 2008 general election. Paper was presented to the 18th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Adelaide.

Norris, P. Kern, M. & Marion, J. (2003). *Framing terrorism: The News Media, the government and the public*. New York and London.

Protests in Egypt - as they happened | News | guardian.co.uk

Top Social Networking Sites in Malaysia and Asia Pacific. upload August 14th 2010. Retrieved 27th February, 2012 from: http://humanwebsite.com.my/blog/top-social-networking-sites-in-malaysia-and-asia-pacific.html

Vreese, C. H. de. (2005). News framing: Theory and typology. *Information Design Journal + Document Design, 13*(1), 51-62.

www.guardian.co.uk/news/blog/2011/.../egypt-protests-live-updates, Upload 28 Jan 2011. Retrieved 28th February, 2012.

Yong Lai Fong & Md Sidin Ahmad Ishak. (2010). Covering Religious Conflict in Malaysia: How Sin Chew Daily Framed the Lina Joy Controversy. *Journal Pengajian Media Malaysia*, 12(2), pp. 11-22.

Table 1. Top 8 Social Media Sites In Malaysia (July 2007 to June 2008)

| Social media | Percentage |
| --- | --- |
| Facebook | 90.15% |
| Youtube | 5.14% |
| Twitter | 1.97% |
| StumbleUpon | 0.71% |
| Digg | 0.68% |
| MySpace | 0.63% |
| Reddit | 0.24% |
| Other | 0.47% |
| Total | 100% |

http://humanwebsite.com.my/blog/top-social-networking-sites-in-malaysia-and-asia-pacific.html (2010)