New Media: Online Citizen Journalism and Political Issues in Malaysia

Rani Ann Balaraman[1]*, Nor Hazlina Hashim[1], Hedhir Hasno[1], Faridah Ibrahim[2] and Lawrence Arokiasmy[3]

[1]*School of Communication Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia*
[2]*Faculty of Arts, Communication and Education, Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur, Unipark Suria, Jalan Ikram-Uniten, 43000 Kajang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia*
[3]*Department of Management Studies, Faculty of Business & Information Science, UCSI University, No 1, Jalan Menara Gading UCSI Heights, 56000 Cheras, Kuala Lumpur Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

Media and politics are inseparable; media play an important role in depicting the political lanscape within a country. It is well understood that in Malaysia, political parties are in control of mainstream media. Journalists are prone to write within the boundaries of the law that enforces a leash on the freedom of press. This causes a biased form of reporting where political issues are concerned. This may well also be one of the major reasons in the rise of various online media that are taking over the tasks of conventional journalists in this country, one of which is the advent of citizen journalism that consists of ordinary citizens writing about happenings around them. They, however, are without journalistic background and some, if not all, write based only on experience and interest. The question that arises as a result of this is: Does the emergence of citizen journalism carry enough influence to change the Malaysian political landscape?

Keywords: Media, politics, mainstream media, acts, citizen journalism

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of various websites and weblogs is regarded in Malaysia as the birth of alternative media. New media or alternative media, depending on what one wants to call it, is one of the main media that can reach or penetrate the international community, especially after the spread of

internet websites, fora, blogs and e-mail. However, new media are diverse and not easy to define (McQuail, 2010, p.36).

The term 'new media' has been used since the 1960s and has covered without limiting the ways and methods of developing and diversifing the use of communication technology (McQuail, 2010, p.39). 'New' is defined as the means of transmission by cable, satellite and radio that enhances the ability to send communication. It also includes methods of storing and retrieving, including personal video recorders, CD-ROM, CD-ROM, DVD, iPod etc. (McQuail, 2010, p.39). Most technologies that are described as new media nowadays are digital by nature. However, new media does not include television programmes, films, magazines, books or paper-based publications (Bilal Ghaith, 2010). Its defining characteristics are digitality, interactivity, hypertextuality, sharing and virtuality (Lister *et al.*, 2003, p.3).

In the wake of the development of globalisation and information communication technology around the 1960s, the Internet has become a media that is alternative to mainstream media such as television and radio (Nur Azween & Nidzam, 2008). One revolution from alternative media is citizen journalism. Citizen journalism is a new phenomenon in the field of journalism and is more widely studied by researchers in the field of science, politics, sociology and other fields (Rulli Nasrullah, 2012).

Media in Malaysia

Conventional media in Malaysia are owned by political parties or individuals who have their own agenda to present to readers. According to Wang (2001), there is close relationship between the press and the political parties of the ruling coalition in the country. Smeltzer (2008) stated that most of the media in Malaysia may, in fact, directly or indirectly be owned by members of the ruling party or enjoy the political support of the economic elite. In fact, the Malaysian media are largely owned or indirectly controlled by the 14 political parties that form the ruling Barisan Nasional (Kenyon & Marjoribanks, 2007).

However, the remaining balance of other print and broadcast media in Malaysia are controlled by billionaires of politics in Peninsular and East Malaysia. Media policies in Malaysia are also under the spectrum of control of the state government and the traditional media serve as the voice of the government to show their political power (Dafrizal *et al.*, 2011). The focus of this not only limits the range of perspectives presented, but even allows the government to manipulate media coverage.

On the other hand, traditional media in Malaysia are governed by a number of Acts that directly contribute towards citizen journalism, made up of people who do not have a foothold in conventional media, but can participate in news reporting by taking advantage of the Internet. The motive of control of the media is based on the need to prevent or control subversive political reasons or moral culture, to combat cyber-crime and

to protect national security. However, the types of control being employed are such as content filtering, legal restrictions, control of infrastructure, economic way and self-censorship (McQuail, 2010, p.44).

By looking at what was outlined by McQuail, the Malaysian government uses the Acts of law to restrict the media in Malaysia. Implementation of these laws directly control the print and broadcast media in Malaysia as books and printed media are generally easy to monitor and block (McQuail, 2010, p. 43) compared to online publications. Content filtering is carried out by the Malaysian government for publications and broadcasts on the grounds of moral and cultural values.

However, most of the Acts have failed to prevent the emergence and movement of online media including online citizen journalism in Malaysia. It is difficult to expect that the extent of the government's ability to monitor the activities of Internet users in Malaysia (Tong, 2004) could be extensive. There are various laws enacted by the government to stop the advance of the people involved in online media such as the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, the Digital Signature Act 1997, the Postal Services Act 1991, the Computer Crimes Act 1997, the Copyright Act (Amendment) Act 1997, the Telemedicine Act 1997 and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Act 1998. The objective of establishing these laws was to serve as a framework for the supervision and restriction of communications and the multimedia industry in this country.

Citizen Journalism Malaysia

As the news industry is controlled entirely by the government, it is only natural that the people as much as possible try to find alternative ways to distribute and get news from a new perspective. This has led to a variety of news channels and various titles that are given to the work of individuals who take to citizen journalism such as network journalism, citizen media, public journalism, participatory journalism (Moeller, 2009), grassroots journalism (Gillmor, 2004), open source journalism (Bentley, 2007), democratic journalism (Baase, 2008), guerrilla journalism (Case, 2007), street journalism (Witschge, 2009), audience material, mixed media, collaborative journalism, community journalism, pro-am collaboration, crowd-sourced journalism, interactive journalism, networked publishing, bridge media and random acts of journalism (Kelly, 2009). There are other titles such as community media, user-generated content, new media, digital journalism and social networking (Moeller, 2009).

Although each title has its own definition, the titles have the same functions in the area of communicating information to readers. Citizen journalism is associated with freedom of the press because of the nature of writing and developing stories freely and originally without restriction, and every citizen who works as a freelance journalist reporting on their favorite beat. The Internet is used by these journalists as a platform to reaching all of these intents and purposes.

The National Union of Journalists Malaysia (NUJ) provides the definition of journalist as a person who performs the tasks of journalism in reporting of news or events, but these new medaa individuals are neither full-time nor professional journalists. They are present at the scene or the scene of the news when no other newspaper reporters are at the scene. The definition also refers to a person who collects information on an incident and provides news online to the media or newspapers, but online journalists do not have a fixed salary (Chew, 2012).

Malaysian citizen journalism is actively developing online. However, the phenomenon of online citizen journalism in Malaysia can be thought of as being still new, looking for stability and trying to compete with traditional media, including electronic and print media. In terms of mainstream media, citizen journalist functions are seen as vague and are appreciated only after trained mainstream medis reporters fail to procure news. For example, during the mini-twister incident that occurred in Mata Air, Jejawi, Perlis on 30 October 2010, the front page of The Star newspaper published photographs taken by one of its readers, Ng Hock Hoo. Not only did Ng contribute to the image of the event, but was also able to provide a recount of the incident that was shared with the newspaper's readers from all over Malaysia (The Star, 2010). There are also newspapers such as *Sinar Harian*, a community newspaper that contains lots of local issues, that welcome readers to contribute stories about their community for publication. These include news, events and educational news and local sports.

Not only is the broadcasting industry in this country at the same level as the print media, it also does not have a wide range of materials produced by the community. The broadcast media only broadcasts audio sent by readers of scenes such as accidents, fires and natural disasters if the incidents recorded by trained journalists fail them in some way. However, there is a programme called U-Journalist on the news channel *Astro Awani* (Channel 501) that broadcasts news produced by the audience. The programme is intended to attract the younger generation on various current issues that get attention from inside and outside the country. Viewers are welcome to become citizen journalists by submitting views and interviews on video.

It can be surmised that traditional media, either print or broadcast, in Malaysia only accept contributions by citizen journalists as the situation may warrant. However, contributions of online citizen journalists are more prominent if they come without any restrictions throughout the publishing process and if standards maintained are as rigorous as those used for traditional media.

Online citizen journalism in Malaysia has been explored in depth by the news portal, *Malaysiakini*, since 2007. *Malaysiakini* collaborated with the International Centre for Journalists in the United States (US) to initiate a programme to train people to function as effective

citizen journalists in this country. The programme was the brainchild of the CEO of *Malaysiakini*, Premesh Chandran (CJ. MY, 2013). A citizen journalism news portal page known as CJ.MY is the first citizen journalism news site in Malaysia that officially allows people living in Malaysia to share and contribute information.

Research Question

Malaysian citizen journalists, with guidance from CJ.MY, have been consistently producing news in Malaysia since 2007, by an average of 5 news items per day and 100 news items per month. However, according to the CEO of CJ.MY, Maren Perianan (2013), when there are major issues such as those related to the country's political situation or social issues such as the haze, the production of news for the month rises dramatically.

The two research questions explored in this study are: What kind of political news is favoured by citizen journalists in the country? and Is the writing of new online media practitioners able to bring about change in the political landscape of Malaysia?

RESEARCH METHOD

Two methods were chosen to discuss the issue of citizen journalism and politics in Malaysia i.e. content analysis and in-depth interview. The content analysis of 288 news samples were taken systematically by day, week and month from the web pages of CJ.MY. News items were taken on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays on the first and third weeks, while on the second and fourth weeks, news items were taken on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. This system continued for each month of the year 2011 and 2012. News items on Sunday could not be studied because there were fewer citizen news reporters contributing items on Sundays. In addition, the news of the day was not consistent. This was because citizen journalists, who were mostly volunteers, preferred to gather news during weekends and then write the news the days after.

News items were chosen each day at random i.e. they were chosen from citizen journalists from across the country regardless of who had written it and where the events had happened. This allowed researchers to do a content analysis based on fair and impartial or prejudiced against a party or an issue and thus affect the conclusions of the study.

The sample for the study was purposive; this explains why CJ.MY was chosen as a case study. Research on citizen journalism only focused on the CJ.MY web page because news items on this site were written by citizen journalists and the journalists were authentic sources as well as had a consistent message. In addition, CJ.MY was selected also due to the number of stories that were studied in large numbers, as the researchers needed a site that could provide the necessary number of news articles.

The second method used was the in-depth interview. Interviews were conducted with five active citizen journalists who

write and contribute for CJ.MY consistently every week. The five citizen journalists also hailed from different parts of Malaysia and were very interested in writing on a variety of issues that typically occur in Malaysia.

The logic behind the choice of this method was that the citizen journalist phenomenon is still new and academic writing in this area in Malaysia is scarce. Therefore, interviews conducted were to collect relevant data pertaining to citizen journalism in this country in order to offer more understanding. According to Boyce

and Neale (2006), in-depth interviews are useful when researchers want to explore new issues in depth.

FINDINGS

Frequency of Major Themes and Sub-Themes in CJ.MY

A total of 16 themes outlined in the review of the frequency of issues were contained in news generated by citizen journalists in CJ.MY. Studies have shown that political news ranked seventh in terms of main themes and eighth as sub-themes with each recording at 7.3% and 4.8%, respectively.

TABLE 1
Frequency of Major Themes and Sub-Themes in CJ.MY

Theme	Frequency of major themes	Frequency percentage for major themes	Frequency of sub-topics	Frequency percentage for sub-topics
Social issues	40	13.9	29	10.1
Welfare	33	11.5	39	13.5
Crime and public safety	31	10.8	14	4.8
Education	27	9.4	23	8.0
Politics	21	7.3	14	4.8
Culture	21	7.3	27	9.3
Environment	20	7.0	13	4.5
Activities of women / men / children	15	5.2	37	12.8
Entertainment	12	4.2	17	5.9
Sports	12	4.2	10	3.5
Religion	12	4.2	25	8.6
Food	8	2.7	13	4.5
Opinion	8	2.7	6	2.0
Health issues	7	2.4	10	3.5
Economy	7	2.4	8	2.8
Other	7	2.4	3	1.0
Total	288	100	288	100

Source of Political News by Citizen Journalists

The main theme was important topics discussed in the news generated by citizen journalists while sub-topics were political news that were embedded in other key topics; for instance, the headlines of the story may have referred to political discourse although the event was a dinner, which happened to have been attended by a politician.

Content analysis of 288 news items in CJ.MY showed 68.5% of political news generated by citizen journalists were sourced from various factions of the opposition i.e. political parties like DAP, PAS and KEADILAN while news generated from government leaders came from parties such as UMNO, MCA, MIC, GERAKAN, PBB, SUPP, PPP, PBRS, UPKO, PBS, SPDP, PRS and other Barisan Nasional component parties. News was also sourced from independent parties that stood alone without joining the government or the opposition like PSM.

TABLE 2
Frequency of News Sources

Sources	Frequency	Percentage
Top government leaders	2	6.0
Top opposition leader	6	17.0
Head of the branch / division of government	3	8.5
Head of the branch / division opposition	5	14.2
Member Associations / Organisations / NGOs Pro government	2	6.0
Member Associations / Organisations / NGOs Pro opposition	6	17.0
Regular member parties of government	1	2.8
Regular members of opposition parties	7	20.0
Unaffiliated	3	8.5
Others	0	0
Total	**35**	**100**

A total of 17.0% generated political news items was sourced from events involving top leaders of the opposition. Opposition leaders refers to party leaders of opposition parties who held government positions in the state. Sources from the ruling government party leaders who had positions in the party or state government numbered only 6.0%.

Citizen journalists also received news from sources from among ordinary members of opposition parties and the government. Usually, issues highlighted by ordinary members of parties reflected discontent with top leadership of the parties. CJ.MY also received news sourced from members of societies, associations and NGOs who were either pro-opposition or pro-government. Issues highlighted by these groups were in terms of objecting to certain policies and activities organised by opponents. For example, members of associations, organisations and NGOs may not have been satisfied with the activities or issues raised by the ruling government.

News sourced by branch chiefs or heads of division tended to focus on local activities organised among ordinary party members such as briefings of the party's policy to members and events carried out around the area led by heads of branches. News items also came from branch chiefs who took the opportunity to express pent-up emotions or suppressed opinions. A percentage of 8.5% of members of the public provided comments and views on several issues of note.

Types of News Produced by Citizen Journalists

When viewed from a smaller angle, citizen journalists covered a lot of news generated from talks and speeches by opposition leaders. Talks and speeches by opposition leaders were from various parties and were aimed at debating relevant issues that touched on Malaysian political life.

In addition, citizen journalists were also fond of writing about events attended by politicians. The content analysis showed that events involving ruling political leaders were usually formal in nature. News regarding the opposition mainly revolved around news related to banquets that aimed to raise funds for the party or small gatherings organised at the branch level of the political parties. These included opposition programmes that focused on addressing the public through speeches only.

Citizen journalists also tended to write on public opinion related to politics. Journalists would raise local political issues and seek the opinion of the local community i.e. locals who showed interest in politics as well as those who did not.

Citizen journalists were also seen to be interested in holding interviews with opposition leaders regarding various issues such as party planning, future direction of the party and other issues relevant to Malaysian politics and life in general such as the rising oil prices.

TABLE 3
Types of Political News Frequency

Types of political news	Frequency	Percentage
Talks / speeches by government leaders	4	11.4
Talks / speeches by opposition	14	40.0
Interviews with government leaders	1	2.9
Interviews with opposition leaders	3	8.5
Opinions on political issues	5	14.3
Political events	8	22.9
Political critique and opinions	0	0.0
Others	0	0
Total	**35**	**100**

DISCUSSION

The results showed that citizen journalists focused on other issues and were less interested in writing about political issues, especially politics related to the government. The percentage of political issues written by citizen journalists was very small and most of the issues written about concerned the opposition. Interviews with citizen journalists showed that their reports focused on news that was largely ignored by traditional media.

Citizen journalists felt the government had received a lot of attention from traditional media. Citizen journalists considered themselves responsible for writing and delivering news concerning the opposition to readers whom they felt were not getting balanced news from traditional media.

Citizen journalists also noted that their presence at a political event was by invitation from the local community or from political leaders themselves. Citizen journalists attended any event to which they were invited. However, most of the invitations were extended by the opposition and the opposition event organisers.

This was because the contribution of citizen journalists was recognised by the opposition. The ruling government, on the other hand, paid them little attention because they did not recognise citizen journalists as valid journalists and so focused their attention on reporters representing traditional media.

However, the news generated by citizen journalists was derived merely from what they had seen and heard, no more. Citizen journalists tended not to write critical comments or opinions related to the programme or speech of any party. Citizen journalists only served to record what had happened, bringing this to the attention of the reader.

Political news by citizen journalists was also too localised and grassroots-based, tending to highlight trivial issues. However, citizen journalists did occasionally write about big issues.

Citizen journalists preferred to use sources from the opposition. Among the answers provided included: leaders of the opposition both at the top or at the grassrootd level were more approachable and happy to give feedback online or face to face.

The opposition has also been said to have taken the opportunity to publish news in various media including online media because they rarely got the attention of traditional media. Opposition groups have said they wanted to make information available to the public by whatever means and would also respond voluntarily when approached by members of the media.

On the other hand, the government was said to not have interest in the new media. This included online media, which the government believed was open to prejudice and capable of distorting and tarnishing its image as well as that of the parties represented. Members of the ruling government were described as not easily available for information because of obstacles in terms of public protocol. Furthermore, members of the ruling government were more likely to better trust traditional media than online media.

CONCLUSION

The study showed that although political writings by citizen journalists are a mere handful, they did contribute in terms of providing information to readers about what was happening in the world of national politics from the grassroots to the reader. Citizen journalists also gave space to readers to express and form opinions from the point of view of the readers themselves.

Their contribution could give a new twist to the political landscape of the country as readers are presented with the news related to the opposition as well as the government from various angles, namely, from the point of view of the grassroots, the nation as a whole, political and community leaders as well as activists ans all who care to speak out. Citizen journalists also publish news that was more transparent in nature and did not favour any group or political party.

This is a new concept for Malaysian politics because in traditional media of this country provides only members of the ruling government and their interest groups the opportunity to share and promote their dogma. Traditional media rarely provide opportunities for people at the grassroots level and represetatives from the opposition to address matters of national concern. Traditional media also tend to avoid publishing news that is critical of the government.

However, citizen journalists should be more balanced in their reporting by including more news related to the government and by writing articles or news in a more objective manner. Writing in a more objective manner would give more positive impact to the country's political landscape. Although citizen journalists are transparent in conveying political issues, they must also be bolder in writing political investigative news. They should raise the dignity of citizen journalists and citizen journalism in this country to a level that is as powerful as that in the West and in other Asian countries.

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