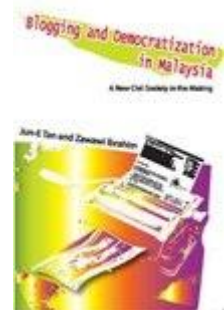


# M/C Reviews - Media Studies: Blogging and Democratization in Malaysia

Reviewed by Julian Hopkins

[\*Blogging and Democratization in Malaysia: A New Civil Society in the Making\*](#) is the first book to discuss blogging in Malaysia in detail. It draws upon a survey completed in late 2006, interviews and observations, and it is a unique record of the early moments of social-political blogging in Malaysia. There is also a timely postscript to the book that discusses the overall impact of blogging on the ‘political tsunami’ of the Malaysian general elections in 2008.



The first chapter provides a brief history of blogs, and some of the earlier research by writers including Blood and Herring; it then discusses their potential as a “democratic medium” (4), particularly as an alternative media, and argues that bloggers and journalists have complementary roles—as opposed to being locked in a “duel to the death” (7).

The second chapter focuses on the relationship between the media and Malaysian “pseudo-democracy” (9), highlighting the relevance of the “developmentalist” (12) discourse that posits a pay-off between stability and economic progress on the one hand, and democratic and human rights on the other. Legislative restrictions on the media are explained, as well as how the ruling parties exercise control through the direct or indirect ownership of the major media outlets. Developing out of the *Reformasi* upheavals of 1998, when websites and email were deployed in opposition to the government, and because it does not print on paper, a highly successful online news website *Malaysiakini* has been able to bypass some of these restrictions; thus the Internet is described as the “final frontier for freedom of speech” (18).

Chapter three examines the slim pickings of previous research on the Malaysian blogosphere, and notes the apparent prominence of political blogs in Malaysia compared to other Asian countries. Quoting from newspapers, the authors detail “the increasingly fraught relationship between control-minded ministers and bloggers” (20). In 2007, legal action by a major English-language broadsheet and related individuals against two prominent social-political bloggers sparked the formation of the National Alliance of Bloggers (All-Blogs). This is a very interesting episode of which Tan had direct experience, and is recounted in some detail. The debates amongst bloggers that these moves engendered are recounted, as well as details of other cooperative endeavours such as blogger meetings, blog awards, or charity events. Also noted are the increased means for bloggers to make money through blogs.

Noting that the Malaysian blogosphere “is by no means a homogenous community” (34), chapter four starts to detail the results of the online survey to which 1,537 blog readers, including 852 bloggers, responded. The picture that emerges is of mostly young and ethnically Chinese respondents; educated, middle or upper-class occupations; and avid blog readers who prefer blogs to newspapers, and prefer personal diary-type blogs to SoPo blogs. Political commitment is assessed: 89 per cent were not affiliated to any political organisation (40), but nearly all intended to vote. Those interested in SoPo content were mostly older and male. The bloggers reflect similar demographics, but a lesser proportion of them prefer to read social-political blogs, and only 6 per cent have social-political blogs. ‘Personal experiences’ was the overwhelmingly popular choice of self-description for blogs and most update three or more times a week, in English.

With an important reminder that blogs are not a panacea for systemic deficiencies in democratic institutions, chapter five opens by stating that “Blogging as an instrument for democratization is only as effective as the civil society behind it.” (49). Interviews show that the social-political bloggers explicitly see themselves as role models with an educative role, enabling the presentation of more critical viewpoints and providing a space in the blog comments for open political debate. The significance of blogs as an alternative channel of information is demonstrated: the head of an opposition party, who would normally struggle to have his voice heard through the mainstream media, garnered a daily audience of 4,000-7,000 readers; bloggers are used as a back channel by unnamed influential figures in industry and politics to leak stories; and there are also some documented examples of blogs having initiated public debate and remedial measures by the government. That this bothers people in power is suggested by evidence of intimidation of bloggers from police as well as unidentifiable sources. The ubiquitous call for “responsible blogging”—aptly described as “an ambiguous code of ethics which many have talked about but none have actually defined” (55)—is discussed, and the authors identify two fundamental aspects: checking facts and revealing identity. Results show that more than half of the bloggers do not check facts, and about half use pseudonyms. In spite of this, bloggers tend to trust blogs more than the mainstream press, but the foreign press is the most trusted.

The sixth chapter gives examples of the government clamping down on bloggers in the period before the 2008 elections, and recounts examples of bloggers rapidly mobilising support, and organising ad-hoc gatherings in response to police action. The importance of the comments in blogs was highlighted when a blogger was arrested because of a comment left in his blog; in a countermove, a police report was filed against the Prime Minister because of objectionable content in comments on his website. Additionally, rumours were rife of ‘cyber-troopers’ who were believed to be paid by the ruling party to leave comments and/or to act as *agents provocateurs*.

In effect, there are two conclusions to this book—the first, offered in the conventional manner; and the Postscript, which is able to deal with the actual context of the 2008 general election. In the conclusion, the three goals of the work are outlined as: firstly, “to understand the composition of the Malaysian blogosphere and its readers” (78); secondly, to see whether blogs are being “used as a platform for enabling civil liberties” (*ibid*); and thirdly, to assess blogs’ actual influence on the political/public agenda. The main argument is that blogs offer a clear opportunity for greater freedom of information, and potentially democratisation. There is a clear and vocal minority of bloggers who make moves in that direction; these are mostly journalists, politicians or civil society activists. However, overall political indifference remains prevalent amongst bloggers: “an ethnicized or racialized view of society remains overwhelming [and]... the possibility of developing a more inclusive – and thus more democratic – terrain of political struggle is deeply compromised” (79). The relevance of the digital divide, the negative impact of government anti-blogging propaganda—which may also paradoxically increase the profile of certain bloggers—and popular inertia towards political participation are highlighted as relevant factors. “What needs to happen is the translation of the interactive energy captured by the Internet into the making of a vibrant civil society and, crucially, viable and effective opposition parties.” (81). It may be that, with blogging, the genie of free information has been let out of the bottle, but it remains to be seen whether it can have a decisive effect.

The Postscript makes an important point that not only blogs, but also SMS, email, YouTube and even Facebook were important in breaking the monopoly of the media by the government. Even though the digital divide was present, there was also the ‘ripple effect’ whereby revelations and discussions on the Internet spread to non-Internet users by the distribution of printouts and CDs. Again, the complementary but non-decisive contribution of blogs is noted: six bloggers overall were elected to public positions, but they benefited from party organisation and media exposure in various forms; blogs helped to mobilise and publicise *ceramah*—public gatherings—but these

articulated issues that were already of concern to voters (corruption, inflation, etc.), rather than necessarily setting the agenda. Here more attention is paid to particular affordances of the blog as a medium. The bloggers as “proactive agents” (93) are able to challenge the dominant discourse and articulate broader issues to interested citizens. By sharing personal experiences and thoughts, the regular readers can begin to identify more with the blogger and even engage in a conversation with the blogger and other readers via the comments. This enables “personalized and interactive synergy ... between certain social-political bloggers and their readers.” (p.92) which assists their emergence as “thought leaders” (93).

*Blogging and Democratization in Malaysia: A New Civil Society in the Making* is an invaluable resource for anyone interested in blogging in general, as well as its political aspects. It has a wealth of primary data, drawn from a large survey and in-depth interviews, some of which are reproduced in full as appendices. It is also unique in Malaysia and possibly worldwide, in terms of the detail provided and fortuitous events that occurred during its conception and fed into the research. It could however benefit from more comparative discussion, for example drawing upon the works done in relation to liberal and conservative bloggers in the USA. It could also have engaged more with debates on the meaning of ‘democracy’ as such. Especially with hindsight, it is clear that the social-political bloggers had different concepts of acceptable democratic practices—after the upset of the 2008 elections, some bloggers were vocal in arguing for a greater use of detention without trial, and there has also been a pro-government/anti-government alignment of blogs.

Readers looking for a discussion of the blog-as-medium, and related issues of sociotechnical systems, or technology as agent/actant, will not find much here in terms of theoretical debate. Neither does it problematise the terms ‘blogosphere’, ‘community’, or ‘civil society’. However the authors do well to emphasise the socially embedded nature of social-political blogging in Malaysia, and avoid jumping on the ‘netopian’ bandwagon or falling into the real/virtual dichotomy that has plagued much research on Internet phenomena.

[\*Blogging and Democratization in Malaysia: A New Civil Society in the Making\*](#)  
(2009)

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[SIRD \(Gerukbudaya\)](#)  
ISBN: 9789833782536  
153pp MYR25.00

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Readability version 0.5.1