

NOT THE MSM?

A snapshot of the Malaysian life, Yorais and all that

The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of the personality,' the phony spell of a commodity.

—Walter Benjamin, 1936

SINCE THEIR EARLY days, Malaysian blogs have become important symbolic and practical tools for politicians of all stripes, as well as cutting edge marketing platforms for leading brands – from the Prime Minister to cosmetics companies, having a voice in the blogosphere is *de rigueur*. The recent statements by Information, Communication and Culture Minister Rais Yatim recall earlier alarmist statements about blogs, and the reminder that ‘certain blogs and web-sites’ are being monitored allows us to suppose that Facebook and Twitter have now also come under the watchful eyes of the Home Ministry.

At this point we may ask – while technophile digerati tout Twitter (aka microblogging), location-based technologies and

‘augmented reality’ as the future – does the mainstreaming of blogs presage their obsolescence? Also, given the influx of political and commercial interests into the blogosphere, will blogs become phony reflections of their past, as Benjamin predicted of the early ‘cultural industry’ of Hollywood?

THE AUTHENTIC BLOG

Blogs are characterised by opinionated analyses and/or the sharing of personal stories; older posts slowly disappear from view and through repeated visits the reader gains a sense of the ‘person behind the blog’. Crucially, readers can also leave comments and receive direct feedback from the blogger: this reinforces the sense of the blogger as a real person for participants in the dialogue, as well as for the passively observing ‘lurkers’. In this way, blogs are a unique medium that are structurally ‘one-to-many’, but often experienced as ‘one-to-one’.

As opposed to institutional sources of information, the personalisation of the blog

thus creates an aura of authenticity, wherein bloggers have become trusted personal guides in the ocean of information that lies ‘out there’ – on, and off, the Internet.

THE REAL VIRTUAL LIFE

The misleading dichotomisation of ‘real life’ as opposed to ‘virtual life’ is a pervasive misunderstanding of online behaviour. For example, the great majority of bloggers are not anonymous – this is because blogging extends offline social life online, and benefits from one cannot accrue to the other if a stable identity does not connect them.

This integration was also demonstrated in the ‘split in the blogosphere’ that occurred after the last elections: bloggers interested in removing Abdullah Badawi no longer had common objectives with those who were dedicated to removing the governing coalition altogether. Their common blogging practice no longer united them, and the politically contingent nature of the ‘blogosphere’ was thus demonstrated. However, we should not dismiss all ‘Social-Political’ (SoPo) bloggers as self-interested agents with political axes to grind. It is clear that the ease of access to blogging continues to enable previously marginalised voices to have wider participation in public debate,

providing a checking function on mainstream stories, and spearheading innovative practices – for instance, using multiple media across platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter.

Overall, blogs *per se* have had two particular impacts on the Malaysian political public sphere: by letting Malaysians see people speak out, they symbolically challenge hegemonic self-disciplinary practices, and they provide a space for interested citizens to practice public debate in a relatively risk-free environment.

LEVERAGING AUTHENTICITY IN THE MARKETPLACE

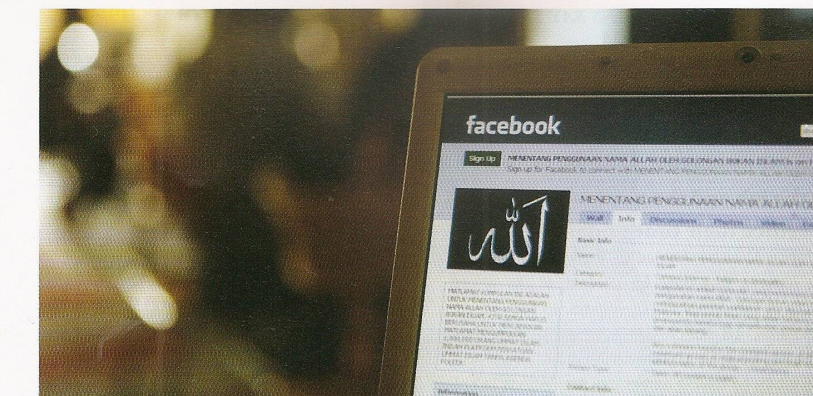
It is also important not to fixate on SoPo blogging – more than 90 percent of an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 Malaysian blogs are about daily events, hobbies and interests, or serve as support for various professional activities. These bloggers are usually younger, urban, Malaysians: they use blogs for socialising, for attracting attention, for venting, and for learning from others – in other words, they use blogs to complement their social life in ways that are little different to how previous generations used their social networks.

The 'Personal', or 'Lifestyle', blogs of the diaristic genre have more recently become a significant component of marketing campaigns that target a younger population who have mostly abandoned the traditional media. 'Word of mouth' is known to be the most trusted source of information for buying decisions, and the personalised relationship of the reader to the authentic blogger is leveraged for financial gain. Leading brands pay bloggers a few hundred to a few thousand ringgit for 'advertorials': now a fixture of a small minority of high-traffic blogs, advertorials are paid blog posts written in the distinctive style of the blogger that promote a product or service.

THE MAINSTREAMING OF BLOGS

Advertorials developed out of the spontaneous reviews of products or services, recounted as part of the bloggers' shared daily experiences. Mostly autodidacts, bloggers combined the analogue skills of writing and social networking with various forms of 'digital literacies' – using HTML code, social media, cameras, Google, and so on. In this way, bloggers developed common codes of behaviour, and relatively small groups clustered on and offline, brought together by their shared social-technical experience.

Now, about ten years after the first blogs emerged, there is a clear 'power-law' distribution with 'A-list' blogs attracting the most attention in a self-reinforcing cycle similar



Opposite page Internet users surf at a cyber cafe in Kuala Lumpur August 7, 2009. Malaysia considered setting up an Internet filter, similar to China's delayed 'Green Dam' project, in a move the opposition said would stifle dissent and industry officials warned would hit investment.

Above A Facebook account entitled 'Against the use of the word Allah by non-Muslims' is seen at an Internet cafe in Putrajaya January 5, 2010. More than 61,000 Malaysians protested online over a court ruling allowing a Catholic paper to use the word 'Allah' to describe the Christian God.

to the 'rich get richer' effect. This means that a blogger starting today will find it more difficult to either have their political opinions heard, or achieve some of the lifestyle advantages accruing to the 'blogebrities'.

Does this mean that a 'golden age' of blogs has past, and we are now faced with increasingly mainstream blogs that reflect, rather than challenge, dominant practices and ideologies?

Possibly, yes. On the other hand, just as the producers of blogs have developed their digital literacies, the audience also need to develop new 'media literacies'. Blogs have exposed the restricted nature of the Malaysian mainstream media, but the more accountable and professional editing processes of the latter have also become more appreciated. As different media proliferate, we need to become proficient at consuming each one with the proper pinches of salt. One of the most powerful aspect of blogs, the comments, can become a guarantor of sorts for blogging authenticity: if you see a comment you appreciate on a blog post, take the time to click on the commenter's blog link. On their blog, you might find an engaging post, or another trenchant comment, and find yourself clicking again. Meandering through the heartfelt and creative expressions of bloggers is the best way to discover the best and the worst of blogs, mirroring serendipitous offline life and combating embedded hierarchies of attention.

Ignoring online activity is not an option. Having an online presence is fast becoming a necessity for the middle and upper classes – social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, or LinkedIn (who offer you the opportunity to 'Control your professional identity online') are effective tools for this purpose. It is clear that the Internet has be-

come a social technology inextricably intertwined with the future of our society, and blogs offer an opportunity to glimpse into the social skills that will be required as the 'digital natives' move up the generational ladder. Having personally owned domain that connect with others via an open social networking platform is my vision of the future of social networking, and blogs teach the crucial digital literacies that will be used in the same way that people use clothes, phones and other expressions of culture: taste to navigate the performative strategies that organise our public life.

In an environment where novelty often seems to be prized higher than utility, blogs can easily be seen as 'so last year'. It is true that blogs are losing ground to social media such as SNSs and Twitter which are better at maintaining the 'ambient awareness' of one's social network of 'weak ties', but blogs are more suited to individual expression and thicker interpersonal interaction. In addition, they are more likely to lead their users to tinker with the platform, and thus learn more about the underlying technologies that are the architecture of the Internet. As such, bloggers are likely to lead innovation and be more prominent in the future 'mediate publics' that cohabit the integrated on and offline spheres. Given the proliferation of blogging in Malaysia, it is a cultural resource that will continue to prove itself to be of considerable value to Malaysia and, as such, should be encouraged and engaged with in a productive manner by our leaders, education providers, and community as a whole. ■

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