The Impact of Social Media in Social and Political Aspects in Malaysia: An Overview

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Abstract

Social media plays an important role in this digital era. It helps people to communicate instantly by ignoring the geographical distances and time. Social media has changed the Malaysian sphere in all aspects of life. This paper examines the impact of social media in the social and political aspects, specifically in Malaysia. Social aspects cover basically on how social media helps Malaysian people to communicate with each other. Political aspects discuss the changes brought by social media to the political landscape of Malaysia.

Key Words: Social media, social aspects, political aspects, communication

1.0. Introduction

In this conceptual paper, we would like to analyze the impact of social media on Malaysians. The impact of social media is discussed from the perspectives of socializing among Malaysians and the changes that it had on Malaysia's political environment. We are going to evaluate the current situation in Malaysia, where people believe that social media facilitates people to get connected (or disconnected!) in this modern era. The paper starts with a brief introduction on the evolution of social media, statistical information on the usage of social media in Malaysia and followed by a discussion on the impact of socializing and the rapid changes in the political arena in Malaysia due to the usage of social media.

2.0. Social Media

The invention of the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) is the most sophisticated creation of human to date. WWW can be defined as a techno-social system that enables humans to interact based on technological networks. "*Techno-social system refers to a system that improves human cognition, communication and co-operation*" (SarehAghaei, Mohammad Ali Nematbakhsh & Hadi Khosravi Farsani, 2012, p.1). Co-operation among humans can only be materialised through communication, where, communication's precondition is cognition. There are lots of developments in the web and its related technology for the past 20 years or more. WWW is invented by Sir Timothy John "Tim" Berners-Lee. Web 1.0 is the first generation of web which is a read-only web and a system of cognition. Business organizations use Web 1.0 for disseminating the information to people. The first generation of web allowed the people to search and read the contents or information, whereby the information is "pushed" to the people. Web 2.0 is a read-write web, where the available technologies in Web 2.0 as a web of communication enabled a large group of dispersed people to interact with each other. Web 2.0 is more on the "share" information. Web 3.0 as a web of co-operation is a semantic web which reduces the tasks and decisions that need to be performed by human, using machines by providing machine readable contents on web (Sareh Aghaei, et al., 2012). Refer to Figure 1.0 for the evolution of Web from Web 1.0 to Web 3.0 in terms of their applications and the number of users across the globe.

In this paper we will further look at the communication impact of social media on people; as such we will focus on Web 2.0.
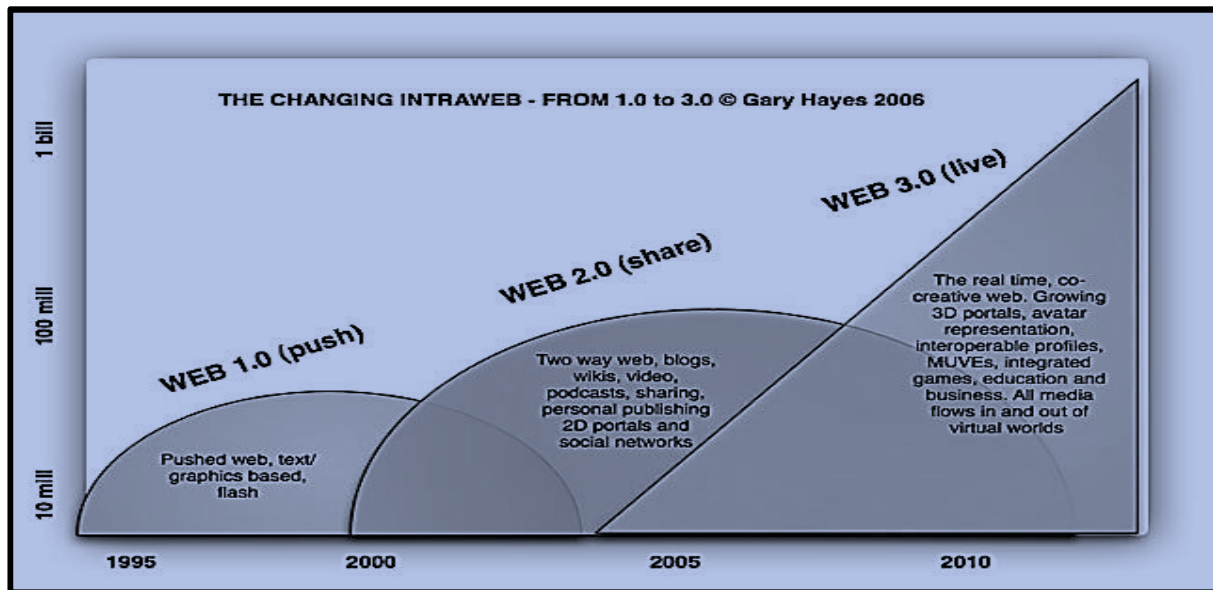

THE CHANGING INTRAWEB - FROM 1.0 to 3.0 © Gary Hayes 2006

Figure 1.0: Evolution of Web
(Source : http://www.personalizemedia.com/wp-content/uploads/2006/08/web1to3.jpg,
Retrieved March 12, 2013)

Afendi Hamat, Mohamed Amin Embi & Haslinda Abu Hassan (2012) stated that the popularity of social networking sites prove that online information sharing among the people has entered to a new level as it has penetrated to the social and personal levels. People are almost instantly able to share the information in any mediums: documents, photos and videos. According to Fauziah Ahmad, Chang Peng Kee, Normah Mustaffa, Faridah Ibrahim, Wan Amizah Wan Mahmud & Dafrizal (2012), p.71, social media or web 2.0 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.*"

Safurah Abd Jalil, Khaizuran Abd Jalil & Azmi Abdul Latiff (2010) stated that the applications categorized under Web 2.0 enable users not only to retrieve information but moreover let the users to "*contribute and own information as well as share, collaborate, and communicate with each other*". The rise of Web 2.0 is closely linked with the increasing popularity of social media across the globe and everyone acknowledges the importance of social media. Internet and social media usage in Malaysia is skyrocketing and Malaysians are embracing the social media. According to Internet World Stats, as for 2012, Malaysia's total population is 29,179,952. From the total population, 60.7% or 17,723,000 are Internet users. Facebook subscribers in Malaysia account for 46.6% or 13,389,520 people.

According to Kemp (2012), 90% of Malaysian Internet users have access to social media sites. Malaysians are considered as 'very friendly 'online as they have the highest average number of friends on social networks in the world. Malaysian Facebook users have an average of 233 friends which is nearly 80% higher than the global yardstick. Malaysians also prefer to surf the Internet than to watch television, and they are spending twice as much time on their online activities. 80% of Internet users in Malaysia stream online video content each month and 51% have an active YouTube profile. With the popularity of social media growing steadily in Malaysia, it is expected that one third of the country's Internet traffic is caused by social sites. According to Factbrowser (a compilation of statistics collected by various sources) citing Burson-Marsteller (2012), Malaysian netizens view social network sites 14 billion times every month. Factbrowser citing comScore (2011) stated, YouTube accounted for 67% of all online videos viewed in Malaysia.

From more than11 million peopleage 15 and older who accessed Internet, 92.4% visited Google sites. Factbrowser citing Nielsen (2011) also stated that the most active Internet users fall in the age group of 20-24 years where almost 57% of them regularly use the Internet and spend about 22.3 hours online per week. The popularity of social media in Malaysia is ever growing. Figure 2.0 below shows the usage of five popular social media channels in Malaysia for 2011.
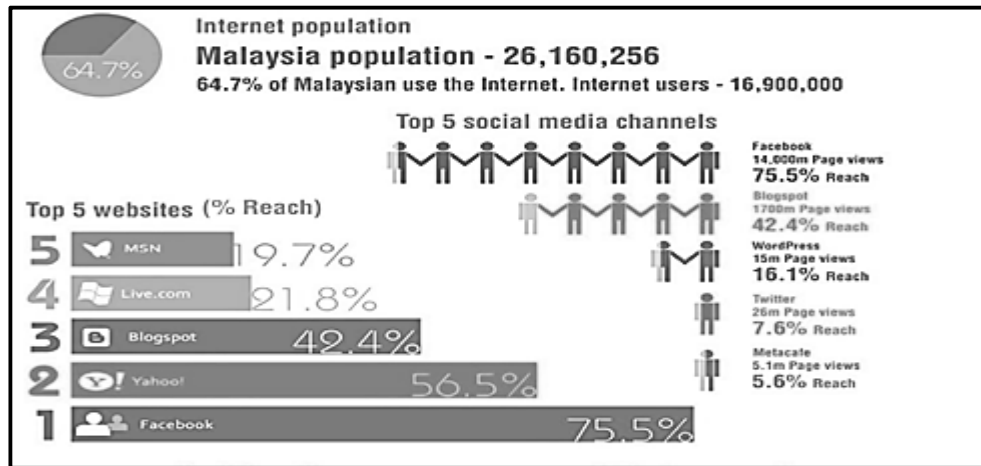

Figure 2.0: Top 5 social media channels in Malaysia in 2011
(Source: Burson – Marsteller, 2011)

3.0. Social Media in Socializing Aspects of Malaysian

According to Safurah Abd Jalil, et al. (2010), a research conducted on 98 undergraduate students in the age group of 18-23 years found that the majority of respondents used Facebook and approximately half of those surveyed acknowledged that they use Facebook every day. Besides Facebook, video sharing applications are also used every day by these respondents. The main reason respondents in this survey used the social networking sites are for socializing with friends and to search for information. The respondents agreed that social media influenced them in the following aspects: communication, entertainment, language and learning. Based on the findings, the researchers conclude that "*social media complemented the mass media and they were part and parcel of the youth's daily communication and life*".

According to a survey conducted on Malaysian university students' perception and use of these social networking sites for informal learning, it was found that more than 40% of the respondents agreed that they spent more time socializing on social networking sites than for learning academic related matters. About 36% of participants disagreed while 21.90% were unsure about this. Since social networking sites were designed for socializing purposes it is nothing unusual for the respondents to use the social networking sites for socializing (AfendiHamat, Mohamed Amin Embi & Haslinda Abu Hassan, 2012).

A survey conducted among Klang Valley (Malaysia) youth showed that about 90.21% of respondents said that communicating with friends and keeping each other updated within their social circle is the main reason for the usage of social networking sites. The second most stated reason is for entertainment (79.72% of respondents). This is followed by developing relationships (59.61%) and developing an online personality (36.12%). About 28.11% of the 562 respondents surveyed answered that on average they spent more than 3 hours daily on social networking sites, 24.2% of the respondents spend between 1-2 hours, and 14.95% of the respondents spent between 10 to 30 minutes while only 5.16% spent less than 10 minutes on social networking sites (Wong FeiMun, Lean Mei Li, & Prasana Rosaline Fernandez, 2011). Another study revealed that Malaysians spent about one third of their online time in social networking sites. Furthermore, Malaysians are increasing the importance of social networking sites in their social life as the central activity (comScore, 2011).

Although the social media connects people across the globe instantly with affordable costs but there are still drawbacks especially in the aspect of socialization among 'real' human. The excessive use of the Internet has caused other social and health problems for Malaysians. Malaysia has the highest number of obese people and the sixth in the whole Asia. As of 2011, about 15.1% of Malaysians aged 18 and above are suffering from obesity.

The statistics also showed that more than 2.6 million adults were obese. Over 477,000 children below the age of 18 years are suffering from obesity. The Malaysian Health Minister, Datuk Seri LiowTiong Lai said this is based on statistics from the National Health and Morbidity Surveys. Liow also correlated the rising obesity issue among Malaysians with the use of "exciting electronic gadgets and instantaneous communication" (Nicholas Cheng, 2013).Malaysians aged 18 and above formed the highest number of Internet users in Malaysia. The usage of social media has certainly changed the way Malaysians socialize and spend their free time. The social media addiction has caused more Malaysians to spend their time idly in front of their computers and to limit their physical activities. Another issue that needs to be considered is the quality of communication on social media. Social media indeed has brought the communication evolution to the next level. Social media makes it possible to interact with people around the globe within a few clicks. The space (with a few exceptions where lack of communication technology exists) is no longer a factor that prohibits communication to take place. But the question that needs to be addressed is: "*Do Malaysians really communicate with each other*?"

Communication is the essence of life for human. Human communicate for the sake of surviving. The genuine communication is our only connection with other human (Tardanico, 2012). Social media helps people across the globe to communicate instantly. Social media plays a major role as a facilitator in the process of communication. Not only does social media helps people to interact with others, it also enables each individual to become a 'journalist' or 'writer' as it enables everyone a chance to view their ideas, opinions, and suggestions without limitations. A message from an individual could be broadcasted across the world in the shortest possible time to the widest audience at a reasonable price in the easiest way which is totally hassle free. According to Biswajit Das and Jyoti Shankar Sahoo (2011), social networking sites facilitate the needs of human to stay in a clique and to form a community. The features available in social networking sites enable the people to communicate and socialize with each other by sending emails, sharing messages, photos, and videos. Social networking sites facilitate people to stay connected with people be it family members or friends just by clicking a few buttons. Citing Facebook statistics the authors said that one of the popular social networking sites, Facebook, with more than 500 million users is the third largest country in the world after China and India. On an average a Facebook user has 130 friends. According to BBC (citing a study conducted by research firm TNS), Malaysians have 233 friends in their social networks and this is the highest in the world.

Malaysians spent more time on their social network sites with their faceless friends than in real life. The statistics in the preceding discussions showed that Malaysians are a lot friendly and are engaged for long hours in their social networking sites rather than in person with their offline family members or friends.It is common in Malaysia where people are busy updating their status on Facebook or other social networking sites in the presence of their family members or friends. People tend to share each and everything about themselves on the social networking sites rather than have a real talk with their family members or real friends. People are busy bridging social relationship with the online community at the expense of losing the bonding that exists in the offline community. More research must be done to ascertain this hypothesis. But is staying connected in the virtual world really sufficient for people living in the real world?

Communication can be categorized as verbal communication and non-verbal communication. Both verbal and non-verbal communication is essential in delivering a message. According to Ruben & Stewart (2006), non-verbal communication is more prominent than verbal communication when a person is trying to form a first impression or when the actions contradict words. A well-known researcher, Albert Mehrabian suggested that only 7% of our communication consists of verbal communication and the remaining 93% comes from non-verbal communication. Hence,

> "Total Feeling = 7% verbal impact + 38% vocal impact + 55% facial impact"

Although some researchers disagree with the above figures but it is a fact that non-verbal communication plays an important role in human interactions. Eye contact, tone, gesture of someone indicates or proves the authenticity of the message communicated by human beings. Social media hides the real nonverbal communication and replaces that with smiley faces, symbols and etc. With 93% of the communication relieved from human beings are we really connected through the so called powerful social media which enable us to communicate with a single click? Will human be able to communicate effectively among themselves without non-verbal communication? Borrowing what Martha Graham said "*The body says what words cannot*."

4.0. Social Media in Malaysian Politics

Social media played a major role in Malaysian people's life, including in the aspects of politics. The political platform changed in Malaysia due to the strong presence of social media. In 2008 election, the government of the day (Barisan Nasional), which is fully backed by mainstream media of Malaysia, suffered unprecedented losses (lost the states of Penang, Selangor, Kedah, Perak, and Kelantan) to opposition's loose coalition of Democratic Action Party (DAP), People Justice Party (PKR) and Pan-Islamic Party(PAS). To acknowledge the power of social media, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, admitted on 25th March 2008, that the government of the day, BarisanNasional had lost the online war with the opposition in 2008 election due to misjudgement on the power of social media. Furthermore, he added that at that time (2008 election), as the previous elections, Barisan Nasional gave more priority to traditional media and tend to ignore the importance of social media, which eventually lead to the painful losses (Fauziah Ahmad, et al., 2012 ; Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani & Knocks Tapowa Zengeni, 2010). The loose coalition of opposition, fully utilize the social media to achieve the unexpected victory.PAS, a political party which always takes traditional approach heavily used the social media to reach their targeted audience (Nuraina Samad, 2013).The traditional media is always in favour of Barisan Nasional as they are controlled or owned by mostly people related to Barisan Nasional (Kalinga Seneviratne, 2007) and it can be said that opposition has little access to traditional media to disseminate their views to potential voters.

Social media continuously played a major role in disseminating the information or sharing opinion to date. Social media played a major role in organizing rallies in Malaysia. No one could deny that the success of Bersih 1.0, 2.0 and 3.0 were due to the role played by social media to publicize the events. With limited exposure on the traditional media, opposition depends on the social media to organize events, disseminate information, to gather, etc. After the 12th election in 2008, both the government and opposition acknowledge the importance and the impact of social media in Malaysia. Both parties were actively seen participating in the online wars through Facebook, twitter, and blogs. The popularity of leaders was measured with the number of likes in Facebook or the number of followers in their twitter account. It is asserted that social media did reshape the political landscape in Malaysia.

According to Safurah Abd Jalil, et al. (2010), blogs or web log "is a personal frequently updated web page with a set of archived posts in a reverse-chronological order (latest first)." The rapid growth of social media in a developing country such as Malaysia leads to greater democratization as Malaysians from walk of life are able to share their opinion and disseminate information to a wider audience. During officiating ceremony of Malaysia Social Media Week 2013, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, the prime minister of Malaysia acknowledged the fact that the 13th general election which must be held in 2013, is considered as Malaysia's first "social media election" (Yvonne Lim, 2013). Unlike his predecessors, the premier is known as a social media savvy as he is an avid user of Facebook and Twitter. According to Nuraina Samad (2013),the premier has 1,310,676 followers on Twitter and his Facebook page with 1,366,187 likes and constantly uploaded with postings of his photos and events. Furthermore, his 1Malaysia blog also has a huge number of followers and is always updated with the latest information.

The power of social media in disseminating information and communication is a known fact. Politicians use social media to update their events or communicate with their supporters or the common folks. But the unlimited and uncensored Internet access enjoyed by Malaysians turned social media from a communication or sharing tool to propagate lies, slanders, statements that caused racial tensions and lewd videos or pictures of political leaders on the social media. The ruling and the opposition party used the social media as a tool to smear their opponents.

5.0. Conclusions

Social media usage in Malaysia is skyrocketing. Indeed social media changed the Malaysian life especially in terms of socializing aspects and Malaysian was acknowledged as one of the heaviest users of social media in the world. Social media changed the static political state to a more dynamic one as the uncensored Internet gives opportunities to both politicians as well as people of Malaysia to express their opinions. In recent times, one can see how the introvert Malaysian people becomes extrovert while expressing their displeasure on certain topics generally on Internet and specifically on social media. Social media empower the people and provide a golden opportunity to express their views, suggestions and opinions on any topics.

Social media should be considered as a double edged sword as it has its own drawbacks if it is used excessively. Social media brings some negative influences to the people when they try to replace the real world relationship with online relationship. Social media not only can be used to express views and disseminate information about one but it also can be used to propagate lies, and slanders to ruin other people's personality.A comprehensive study should be done to assess the impact of social media on all levels of people in Malaysia in terms of all their aspects of life.

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