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# Social Media, Power and Democratisation in Malaysia: Weapons of the Weak?

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## ■ Introduction

Daniel Lerner (1958) wrote that new (information) communication technologies (ICTs) would transform ‘traditional societies’ irrevocably. They would lead to progress, modernity and development and for a while, this view was highly influential – but it stagnated and culture became the retarding force against this radical change. Some fifty years later, we have once again become enamoured with new technologies and its transformative effects. New technologies could remake the market and render global commerce at a click of the button, with trade conducted on a 24/7 basis daily. Politically, it became the new medium for organising with its role amplified, e.g. the new social media was seen as playing a defining role in the Arab Spring (Gelvin, 2012; Mason, 2012; Castells, 2012). It is clear that new media played an important and even critical role but such a reading is teleological; it fails to recognise the structural dimensions of society enabling such technologies. More importantly, it denies people the key and very significant role of agency and its effect on political change (Howard and Hussain, 2011; Khosrokhavar, 2012; Ramadan, 2012; Zurayk, 2012).

In Malaysia, the new alternative social media often is ‘politically contentious’ and “challenges dominant ideologies and attempts to democratise public discourse” (George 2005, p. 904). It has been credited with the rendering of a new alternative voice that democratises political space in Malaysia (Nain, 2002; Abbott, 2004; Mohd. Azizuddin, 2005; Raslan, 2008; Yeoh, 2008; Pepinsky, 2013; Weiss, 2013b; Tapsell, 2013) and is decisive in determining the electoral outcome (Zahiid, 2013; Ganesh, 2013). For example, many of the *Bersih*<sup>1</sup> rallies and demonstrations in Malaysia and globally were linked through Facebook with information circulated freely. The anti-Lynas demonstration over the

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<sup>1</sup> *Bersih* is a coalition of non-governmental organisations focusing on electoral reforms, and organised two very large rallies in 2011 and 2012 respectively.

possible dangers of processing of rare earth minerals in Kuantan is another example (Bacon, 2012). Indeed, the advent of new media enables freer, more open and vibrant discourse to be articulated and heard (Tan & Ibrahim, 2008; Tapsell, 2013; Weiss, 2013c). Tapsell (2013) and Weiss (2013c) both claimed that the opposition coalition were able to use social media more extensively and effectively, a point which has been conceded by the ruling coalition in both the 2008 and 2013 elections. Analysts and commentators celebrated the ‘political tsunami’ (Tan & Lee, 2008; Liew, 2009) and heralded this form of ‘new politics’ (Weiss, 2009; Maznah, 2008) as the opposition wrested control of five state governments and denied the ruling coalition its two-thirds majority at the Federal elections in 2008. In GE13, although they won only the state governments in three states, the opposition increased its overall representation and even polled better than the ruling coalition, accounting for 52 percent of the popular votes to the ruling coalition’s 48 percent.

In this article, I examine the critical role attributed to new media in Malaysia's growing democratisation. Proponents of new media have argued teleologically that new media is transforming Malaysia's political landscape and culture (Raslan, 2008; Yeoh, 2008; Mohamad Azizuddin and Zegeni, 2010; Pepinsky, 2013; Wess, 2013b; Tapsell, 2013). They suggest that in offering alternative news and space, this also produces an informed and democratic Malaysian polity. New media certainly creates and enables new forces, cooperative efforts and coalitions; they present challenges to existing political institutions and enable opposition forces to develop new tactics and strategies as they seek to erode the political hegemony and legitimacy of prevailing governmental discourses. Indeed, many recent commentaries on democratisation, particularly on the Arab spring (Ray, 2011; Howard and Hussain, 2012) and elsewhere (Castells, 2012), have privileged this rather unstinting democratic flattening of the world.

However, I argue that the effects of new media need to be contextualised, since the historical and structural realities of Malaysia cannot be neglected and must be integrated into such analyses. As such, I start off with a brief discussion of the democratic efficacy of new social media. In order to examine the impact of new media in Malaysia, the nation's historical and social context is discussed before I trace the effects of new social media in recent political events in Malaysia.

In interrogating the role of new media in Malaysia, I carried out fieldwork in two major urban centres; Penang and the Klang Valley. In total, I interviewed 18 users and practitioners of new media, including journalists, politicians, activists and academics. In doing so, I seek to weave their insights into the discussion and how these views also allow us to better frame and evaluate the role new social media plays in Malaysia's transformation. While new social media in Malaysia (and elsewhere) is an important tool in enabling greater political liberalisation, to singularly attribute it to the formation and development of a new democratic political culture is more of an assertion and neither the new media and its links to democracy in Malaysia is both apparent and inevitable. Whilst suggestive of such linkages, new social media certainly provides apertures and spaces through which political space is and can be enlarged. But liberalisation and democratisation, while often seen as 'Siamese twins' are not one and the same, and clearly while there is greater contestation, greater political liberalisation in Malaysia the terms and sites of contestation in Malaysia remain circumscribed and continue to be subjected to a racial desideratum. The ethnic cleavage remains critical and until there are fundamental changes with regards to this, such friction will continue to play a key role in Malaysian politics, and those promoting democratisation effects via technology need to provide more substantial arguments for such claims. Further, as democratisation and political liberalisation are not the same scholars

seeking a greater understanding of democratisation need to have a better grasp of historical and structural realities and not be swayed by seductive and potentially transformative promises of new social media.

## ■ **The New Information Technologies as Change Agents**

The development of new ICTs has had a significant impact on businesses, government and the wider public. Enthusiastic proponents of ICTs (e.g. Toffler, Negroponte) see cyberspace as a veritable hothouse of virtue: equality, inclusion, friendships, community, democracy and the list goes on. Cyberspace enables 'the end of history' (per Fukuyama) and an 'end to ideology' (ala Daniel Bell), and a new Athenian democratic space will emerge from these unfettered interactions between individuals, their software, modem and copper (Barbrook & Cameron, 1997; Hudson, 1997; Shirky, 2008). Manuel Castells similarly sees the new ICTs and the tools engendered, the new social media, as enabling social movements to communicate the emotions of outrage and facilitates the switch from collective emotions to collective action (Castells, 2012: 11-17) energising or inducing new social revolutions (Castells, 2012; Wilson and Dunn, 2011).

In Southeast Asia, Wong (2001a) had shown that mobile phones, texting and the Internet have all been employed to organise and rally protesters (see also Rodan et. al., 2005; Jayasuriya and Rodan, 2007; Gomez, 2004; Wong, 2008). Others argued that these technologies allow “previously marginalised or even new parties to emerge and compete with established players” (Chadwick, 2006, pg. 148). It also enables activists to go beyond their geographical borders and established global transnational movements and communities (Pole, 2009). Individuals and communities are now able to challenge both the content and

distribution of media and information content, enabling a more level playing field between governments and individuals.

These 'new' technologies have evolved and today, a new suite of web-based tools, Web 2.0. or social media, has spread and transformed into an interactive and affective communication medium globally, linking up diverse groups of people on a global scale. Indeed, these technologies not only affect political communication and institutions but also shape and engender new norms, rules, procedures and practices (Kietzmann, et. al., 2011). It also enables a social and supportive networked environment through which 'psychologically disempowered spectators will feel their political efficacy increase...by contributing to and learning from a much richer online public debate' (Chadwick, 2006, pg. 149). With minimal resources, individuals can now write, produce and define the news (Perlmutter, 2008). In particular, blogs have become a powerful medium for political mobilisation and connecting with the electorate.

Web 2.0 or social media is a suite of Internet based applications that enable greater interaction and application through user generated content. This 'new' media is inexpensive, easy to use and has changed forms of communication and interactions among individuals. They offer users "an immediate, horizontally linked dialogic space... a structure that is closer to conversation than any other traditional news medium" (Woodly, 2008, pg. 110). Users now become both content producers and consumers (Bruns, 2008; Rosen, 2006), engendering greater 'democratization' of knowledge and information (Perlmutter, 2008; Poole, 2009). Because of this, it has a greater reach and is readily expressed as podcasts, wikis, blogs, news portals, Internet forums, Facebook or Twitter posts, creating a public sphere to communicate news and information. These forms of social media allow the audience to access information, send messages,

upload videos, photographs and texts, and to offer views or opinions. It also facilitates deliberation of critical issues, and can provide nearly instant commentary on televised events (Keren, 2006; Poole, 2009). Cross-links and chained text networks also enhances this reach. Since 2003, blogs have broken, shaped and spinned off new stories, becoming important sources and sites of information. Mainstream television, print and audio media too increasingly draw on and report from these forms of media (McIntosh, 2005).

Not surprisingly, a number of people have seen these new technologies and tools as changing the flow of power in the media landscape, and therefore in society. As such, it is inevitably democratising (Beers, 2006; Gilmour, 2004), a ‘liberative’ technology “needed in order to realise freedom and self-government” (Deuze, 2003, pg. 211; see also Diamond and Plattner, 2012). These new technologies “allow for distributed connectivity and information sharing and cooperation” (Dennis, 2007: 32) affecting not only political communication and institutions but also shaping and engendering new norms, rules, procedures and practices in a networked society (Castells, 2012; van Dijk, 2006). It also enables a social and supportive networked environment through which ‘psychologically disempowered spectators will feel their political efficacy increase...by contributing to and learning from a much richer online public debate’ (Chadwick, 2006, pg. 149). With minimum resources, individuals can now write, produce and define the news. Individuals, as such, are now able to challenge both the content and distribution of media and information, creating a more equal playing field between governments and individuals (Keren, 2006; Castells, 2012; Diamond and Plattner, 2012).

In authoritarian regimes, this also accords and affords users anonymity and because people now feel that they are beyond the purview of any social and/or government control, they are also more readily to vent their anger and/or

frustration, as well as views and opinions (Kulikova and Perlmutter, 2007; Perlmutter, 2008; Moyo, 2009). Technology, as such, is appropriated, used strategically to bypass restrictive publications or licensing laws and regulations, and politically to support information sharing and facilitating social and political space (Castells, 1996; Hill and Sen, 2005; Steele, 2009; Warkentin, 2001; Wong, 2001, 2008). In this formulation, these analysts see a transcendental capability in new media, enabling a connected, informed, equitable and democratic space. The question remains: how does this relate to democracy? The matrix of market rules and mantra of market populism may have pushed the concept of ICTs for democracy along but clearly, it is a little premature to proclaim ‘the end of history’ or sound the death knell on structural inequalities. Even Bill Gates has reminded us that networks and technologies cannot and ‘will not eliminate barriers of prejudice or inequality’ (Gates, 1995: 251). ICTs do not and cannot guarantee democracy. Democracy remains a highly contested process, requiring the mobilisation of social forces of power and control (Jordan, 1999; Wong, 2002; Hindman, 2009)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Virilio (1993) has suggested that we are in the midst of some kind of technological transition. But this movement, he argues, is not one towards greater democracy. For him, it is more totalitarian in spirit and character, led by technological elites, reminiscent of a class acting in and for its own interests. Because they control the production, distribution and consumption of these new technologies, they are also simultaneously rewriting the history of these new technologies. As a result, they are able to command, baffle and seduce people with the mysteries and liminality of technology. In such a context, we are only able to exercise our individuality, freedom and democratic right via a consuming decision. Democracy is thus ‘emptied of all of its substance’ (Mouffe, 1988: 97).

## ■ Malaysia: the Context

Malaysia is a former British colony with a population of 28 million people over which 50 percent are Malays, with the Chinese accounting for 26 percent and Indians 8 percent and others constituting for the remainder. A multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, Islam is Malaysia's official religion and according to its constitution, all Malays are Muslims. Since its independence, Malaysian politics has been dominated by this 'racial arithmetic'. During British colonial rule, the politico-religious position of Malays was preserved and enhanced via the development of a centralized religious authority to oversee Islamic matters - Islam provides the locus of security for Malay identity and power (Roff, 1967). It is impossible to imagine Malayness without Islam and Malaysia without an authoritatively defined Malay nation (Shamsul, 1996).

In its early post-colonial phase, Malaysia was guided by an 'electoral pact' accommodating different communal interests. This arrangement privileged continuing Malay political hegemony, the preservation of Malay rights and privileges, and favoured Malays in the formulation and execution of policies. Declining economic fortunes, social disparities and growing Malay resentment led to the disastrous 1969 racial events and a realignment of the Malaysian political process. Malay political supremacy was entrenched, with the New Economic Policy (NEP) promulgated in 1971. The NEP marked a turning point in Malaysia's political economy. Through an export-oriented industrialization path and a programme of social re-engineering, the Malaysian state inadvertently spawned a new culturally, affluent and socially confident Malay middle class (Wong, 2007).

Malaysia, albeit a constitutional democracy, has been called a 'semi-democratic' state (Case, 1993), 'softly authoritarian' (Means, 1996) and many democratic

rights have been severely curtailed including freedom of association, freedom of expression and media freedom. Despite this seemingly authoritarian *telos*, there is a multi-party electoral system, a wide range of civil society organisations within the country and political debate that is robust and lively. These organisations significantly widen the circumscribed public sphere unlike many countries in the region, and offer the possibility for socio-political reform and change.

The 2012 Freedom House survey gave Malaysia a score of 63 out of 100 (100 being the worst score) and ranked it 144 of 197 countries. In 2013, Malaysia scored 4 out of 7 in its political rights ranking. The lack of press freedom is a structural one. In the media industry, there is a strong pro-government position. Media ownership by political parties and politically connected business individuals e.g. *The Star* (a major English daily) is owned by the Malaysian Chinese Association, and *The Straits Times*, *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia* (the latter two being the major Malay newspapers) are owned by the leading coalition partner, UMNO, which constricts press freedom. Malaysia's mainstream media is, "by and large ...ideologically aligned with the state, readily embracing their nation-building role, and recognising the government of the day as the legitimate interpreter and trustee of the national interest" (George, 2006, pg. 49; see also Anuar, 2000; Abbott, 2011). As such, it is highly improbable and unlikely that mainstream media would be critics of the government<sup>3</sup>. Journalistic culture in Malaysia also tends to be self-censoring

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert Gans (1979, pp. 51-61) in *Deciding What's News* suggest that even in the 'west', the news uphold 'moderatism', and that it is the perspective of the powerful and the elite that hold sway in the media.

and editorial veto and 'quiet warnings' have all become part of the media landscape (Hilley, 2001)<sup>4</sup>.

## ■ The New ICTs, Malaysia and *Reformasi*

While there is a range of alternative media and publications in Malaysia, e.g. the *Aliran Monthly*, the *Rocket* and *Harakah*, government control, including the need for an annual publishing licence granted by the government, has meant that their readership and reach is controlled and managed by the state. These restrictions have meant that the alternative media audience is relatively small and confined to urban-based elites (Mohad. Izwan & Boo, 2013). Alternative views and discourses were severely circumscribed but soon changed with the advent of the electronic media. The advent of the Internet has disrupted the Malaysian political landscape – through the Internet, Malaysians can now readily access information through independent news sites and other web-based platforms<sup>5</sup>. This came about because, the Malaysian government sought to economically transform the country via a high-tech development strategy in the 1990s (Wong, 2003a, 2003b) whereby the government, in a bid to attract foreign investors, guaranteed the free flow of information on the Internet. Clearly the Malaysian government did not see the Internet as an instrument of freedom and democracy or a weapon of one-sided control and domination. It was, according to the government, a tool to promote strong economic growth with neutral impact at best. Therefore, the Malaysian government's approach towards the Internet can be regarded as ambivalent (Castells, 2001).

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<sup>4</sup> Graham Brown (2005) is less pessimistic in his analysis. He cites protests by media staff to takeovers as well as persistent vocal protests against legislations impacting on press freedom and a more active National Union of Journalists as indicators of a growing dissent.

<sup>5</sup> Many Malaysian activists would remember *soc.culture.malaysia* and the email posts by the late M.G.G.Pillai via his *sangkanchil* mail outs.

In 1998, the Internet as a source of information and news in Malaysia became critical, especially after the sacking of then deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim and his call for social and political reforms. *Reformasi* as a movement was born. Anwar's dismissal, his arrest, defiance and call for reforms became a site of contentious struggle and the manifestation of contentious politics, especially when its proponents sought to marshal a heterogeneous mix of social, civil and political activists to express their outrage against a perceived sense of injustice and rampant corruption (Noor, 1999)<sup>6</sup>. As these concerns built up and Malaysians searched for credible sources of information (Rodan, 2005), alternative news websites were soon sprouting up in support of or against Anwar (Abbott, 2004). These sites provided coverage of Anwar's rallies and demonstrations and offered activists an opportunity to have their voices heard and issues articulated (Abbott, 2004; Rodan, 2005; Weiss, 2006). Although proponents of the new media came from diverse backgrounds with different agendas, they shared a common purpose – to partake in greater information sharing, communication and challenge the perceived injustices and authoritarianism in Malaysian political institutions. Many of these websites and portals were anonymously maintained but there was certainly solidarity, and hyperlinks between these sites further reinforced these ties (Allan, 2006;

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<sup>6</sup> Farish Noor perhaps best described Reformasi: “It is precisely because of its lack of exhaustive content that the concept of reformasi has become so effective as a tool for political and ideological confrontation... (its) openness and unfixity prevents any attempt to foreclose or fulfill its promise in narrow and exclusivist terms that would spell an end to its pluralistic and democratic potential” (noor, 1999: 6, 13-14). *Reformasi* has become a rallying cry. More importantly, it has come to signify many things. It can be seen as a counter-movement aimed at trying to promote and enable greater social reform and democratisation within Malaysia. It can be read as a critique of the Malaysian development project, one distinguished by rampant corruption and stalling economic growth contrary to the earlier articulated vision of rapid economic growth, nationalist vision, strong leadership and continuing prosperity. Because it is an ambit claim, *Reformasi* is able to straddle the differences and unite the different ethnic groups in Malaysia and disparate social and political groups. As such, *Reformasi*, Welsh argues, provides a bridge, a coalitional capital enabling and deepening further cooperation between the different groups.

Perlmutter, 2008). Thus, resources were mobilised and constituencies were enlarged, enabling a critical mass to form, grow and develop.

By far, the most significant development on the Malaysian Internet landscape has been that of *Malaysiakini*. Launched in November 1999, *Malaysiakini* is the first independent online news portal in Malaysia, and came into being by exploiting the guaranteed censor-free and controlled digital highway as stipulated by the Malaysian government (Wong, 2001a). Since then, it has been the standard through which alternative media sites are assessed. Its independent and gutsy reporting on ‘dangerous’ and previously ‘taboo’ topics<sup>7</sup> brought immediate domestic and international support. This persona (challenging the authorities) and leveraging of the lack of, or more relaxed, controls enabled it very quickly to become a platform and avenue through which dissenting and ‘heretical’ views and challenging authoritarianism could be raised and challenged. In enabling the genie of repressed authoritarianism to be released, *Malaysiakini* unwittingly emboldened many Malaysians and many sought to further enlarge both social and political space through the web, contributing through discussions and debates online. Soon, websites were sprouting up which provided coverage of Anwar’s rallies and demonstrations and offered activists an opportunity to have their voices heard and issues articulated (e.g. ‘*laman reformasi*’, ‘*maha firaun*’) during the *Reformasi* period. Although coming from diverse backgrounds and possessing different agendas, these activists shared a common purpose – to partake in greater information sharing, communication and challenge perceived injustices and authoritarianism in Malaysian political institutions. Many of these websites and portals were

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<sup>7</sup> Issues such as *bumiputra* (indigenous peoples) affirmative action policies, religion, cronyism, press freedom, corruption, environmentally-destructive and mega projects, human rights, salacious affairs now all permeate the blogosphere in Malaysia. I don’t want to give readers the impression that all bloggers are political; indeed, individualistic and business sites still dominate this sphere.

anonymously maintained but there was certainly solidarity, and linkages between those sites further reinforced these ties. Thus, resources were mobilised and constituencies enlarged enabling a critical mass to form, grow and develop.

This ‘new’ freedom saw the growth of other on-line and web-based media platforms. News portals followed suit e.g. *Free Malaysia Today*, *The Malaysian Insider*, amongst others which sought to offer an alternative voice in their reporting, and later, blogs such as the highly successful and sometimes dissenting, *Malaysia Today*<sup>8</sup>. Opposition party politicians also adopted and embraced this technology and platform, seeking to convey information and provide access to voters (Rosyidah, 2010; Surin, 2010). Malaysian authorities have rounded up several suspected dissident webmasters but state actions have largely been ineffectual. The new ICTs and their web platforms effectively enable “routing around laws against freedom of assembly”, as well as spatial constraints. Moreover, these sites are no longer bound by licenses and their circulation is no longer limited (Tang, 2006: 9).

The number of blogs increased rapidly between 2000 and 2004 and now allow for even greater participation, as users are also now content producers, effectuating an empowered voice. For most Malaysian netizens, new ICTs have promoted and prompted intense discussions about identity, democracy and human rights. One of the social activists and bloggers interviewed noted that “it has enabled things to become more interesting and interactive”. Even pro-government media activists interviewed lamented the rather restrictive and controlled nature of the local mainstream media.

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<sup>8</sup> Other good examples include: Aisheman ([www.aisheman.org](http://www.aisheman.org)), Screenshots, Haris Ibrahim’s The People’s parliament (<http://harismibrahim.wordpress.com/author/harisi/>), Aizuddin Danian’s Volume of Interactions ([www.aizuddinandanian.com/voi](http://www.aizuddinandanian.com/voi)), Lucia Lai’s Mental Jog ([lucialai.org](http://lucialai.org)), Ahirudin bin Attan Rocky’ Bru ([www.rockybru.com.m/](http://www.rockybru.com.m/)), Susan Loone ([sloone.wordpress.com](http://sloone.wordpress.com)) and many others.

New media has opened up a political divide between the government and the governed, and has engendered greater participation. All of the interviewees confirmed that this development is emancipatory as there is a greater chorus of voices that can be heard. It has also allowed greater political consciousness and participation although not all are enamoured with this newly found freedom. Supporters see it as an alternative medium for views and news that would otherwise remain unheard and unwritten. New media have become digital weapons of dissent and used as a safety valve where both voices of the weak and hidden transcripts of Malaysian politics can be heard and acted out<sup>9</sup>. Arguably, this has contributed to a flatter and more open political space in Malaysia.

## ■ The New Media, Oppositional Politics and Changing of the Guard?

Ibrahim Sufian (2008), commenting on the 2008 elections wrote, “(c)ampaigners from the ruling party failed to comprehend the corrosive nature of the content of material being transmitted on the internet and by secondary information networks on their legitimacy and standing in the eyes of the electorate.” He also wrote of the extensive use of new media, its ubiquity and its continuing role and influence in Malaysian politics. These alternative media

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<sup>9</sup> In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott (1990) uses the term *hidden transcript* for the critique of power that goes on offstage, which power holders do not see or hear. According to him, there are different systems of domination, including political, economic, cultural or religious and they all have aspects that are not heard that go along with their public dimensions. In order to study systems of domination, careful attention needs to be paid to what lies beneath the surface of seemingly evident, public behaviour. In public, those that are oppressed appear to accept their domination, but they often tend to question their domination offstage.

platforms enjoy average daily hits of over 200,000, are inter-linked and pose a real challenge to mainstream media (Surin, 2010; Tan and Zawawi, 2008; Steele, 2009; Rodan, 2005; George, 2005; Brown, 2005) and by 2004, was now part of Malaysia's political vocabulary. In 2008 and 2013, it amplified voices of dissent and anger against the Malaysian government for its failure to address pertinent issues such as the economic management of the country, inflation, corruption, escalating crime rates and playing of the 'racial card'.

The number of web users has since increased significantly, rising from 15 percent to 59 percent of the population in 2008 and about 67 percent in 2012. Many are using mobile phones, with a 2008 report placing this phone penetration at 97 percent (MCMC, 2008). Broadband penetration rate was about 63 percent, 12 million Malaysians were on Facebook and 470,000 used Twitter in 2011 (*The Star*, 3 February 2012). Clearly, this access, the ubiquity of mobile phones and accessories, its cheapness, immediacy, as well as the relative lack of government control and censorship, has made social media an increasingly fertile and attractive tool for political communication, information sharing and mobilisation. Blogs provide information enabling agendas to be set and built, are interactive and can therefore be empowering and are also a powerful means of facilitating collective mobilisation (Perlmutter, 2008). Not surprisingly, opposition groups and activists have seen blogs and other associated social media platforms as critical empowerment tools. Their network links have amplified their voices and allowed for more effective and quicker dissemination of information (Yeoh, 2010; Tan and Zawawi, 2008).

In February 2014, I interviewed a range of new media practitioners in both Penang and the Klang Valley over a two-week period. Eighteen people were interviewed, with their views on the role of new media tabulated (Tables 1 and 2). I also asked them about their use of new media, the particular platform they

used and favoured, as well as the proportion of time they typically spent on them (Table 3). As can be gleaned from Table 3, a significant proportion saw the new media as providing an alternative voice and even playing a critical role as both a watchdog and critic of the government. There is also a significant proportion (33 percent) who saw the need for this new platform to “provide accurate information”. Of interest is perhaps that most do not participate in the social media milieu politically or see themselves as being solely politically driven (Table 3).

**Table 1: Interviewees and their professional background**

Profession	Number	%
Journalist	4	22
Researcher/Academic	2	11
NGO Activist	2	11
Bloggers	4	22
Politician	2	11
Businessman	2	11
Lawyer	1	6
Consultant	1	6

**Table 2: Interviewees' View on the Role of the New Media**

<b>Role of new media</b>	<b>Number</b>
<b>To provide accurate information</b>	6
<b>To provide alternative voice</b>	6
<b>To criticise the government</b>	4
<b>To offer personal views</b>	3
<b>To contribute to democratic debate</b>	3
<b>To be a watchdog</b>	5

**Table 3: Interviewees and their Usage of New/Social media**

Activities	Social media			
	Facebook & MySpace (%)		Other Social media (YouTube, blogs etc)[%]	
	Sometimes	Always	Sometimes	Always
To socialise with friends	30	70	30	15
To play games	35	30	30	15
To watch movies, tv shows and listen to music	35	55	35	30
To contact family members	40	40	340	30
To find new friends	35	35	35	30
To seek information	40	45	35	40
To share political views and have discussions	35	30	25	15
For education purposes	40	35	35	30
To discuss work with group members	30	30	25	20
To find out what others are doing	40	30	25	20
To inform friends about activities	40	35	30	15
To share feelings with friends and others	35	30	25	15
To highlight/support certain issues	35	25	25	15
To advertise business	20	20	25	10
To share own content	30	40	25	15

Academic analysts have argued that blogging, Facebook, YouTube and new social media have a particular seductive and alluring appeal for those who argue for greater participation and democratisation. By default, they enable users to both consume and produce knowledge and information, enabling regular and even multi-site dialogue between users, hosts and readers. It fosters a sense of community, connectivity between the virtual and the real. The network enabled through the hyperlinks further amplifies this sense of belonging and community. Tang argues that when they use new social media, Malaysian bloggers are effectively “routing around laws against freedom of assembly”, as well as spatial constraints; and they are no longer bound by licenses and their limited circulation anymore (Tang, 2006, pg. 9). And yet, this is not readily apparent in the interviews I conducted. Whilst political, most of the interviewees do not view the media platforms as merely a political tool, and in fact use it for contacts with their friends and families.

In my discussion with oppositional groups and groups, it is clear that they employed a range of digital strategies – songs, films, video-clips – which were widely circulated via various social mediums, including YouTube postings. Even one pro-government blogger readily admitted that the government has not been able to match the opposition and that it appears that satire and fun were the new trends in social media. Indeed, new technologies allow the opposition to frame their concerns and issues, bypass the mainstream and any government control to communicate their messages e.g. in Teresa Kok’s recent Chinese New Year video clip which were shown on YouTube and are readily accessible<sup>10</sup>. The clip drew criticism but also widespread support, clearly

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<sup>10</sup> Teresa Kok is a leading member of the opposition Democratic Action Party. Her video, which was posted during the Chinese New Year caused great controversy as many pro-government forces were highly critical of the video and a ‘reward’ for punishing her was also issued. Ironically, the police investigated Teresa Kok but not those that placed a bounty on

reinforcing the view that new media can play a powerful mobilising medium for opposition candidates particularly in rallying its troops and affording them possible avenues to educate, organise and bypass traditional institutions of political power.

These new media practitioners have now become the “thought leaders for a new generation” in Malaysia (Tam and Zawawi, 2008, pg. 92). “(P)olitical parties” (and mainstream media) no longer “have’ the monopoly on electoral campaigning” and bloggers and users of new media are now active agents engendering “shifts in power relations” in the country (Yeoh, 2010, pp. 14, 12). Bloggers drafted a People’s Declaration – calling for democracy, judicial reforms, a free press, greater transparency and accountability, national unity, equitable and sustainable development amongst others – which was supported by opposition parties in 2008, is one such example of this shift in power relations.

Not surprisingly, a number of analysts have attributed the success of opposition parties in Malaysia in 2008 to the widespread use of these new technologies (Tan and Zawawi, 2008; Welsh, 2008; Steele, 2009; Gong, 2011; Ufen, 2009; Mohad. Azizuddin and Zengeni, 2010; Weiss, 2011). Gong (2011) claimed that blogs were significantly beneficial for opposition candidates and indeed, some prominent bloggers were elected as opposition politicians (Weiss, 2009) for example Jeff Ooi, Tony Pua, Teresa Kok, Hannah Yeoh, Elizabeth Wong, Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad amongst others. Abdullah Badawi, then Prime Minister of Malaysia, commented on the aftermath of the 2008 elections, acknowledging the ‘alleged’ potency and power of this medium, conceding that the BN lost the ‘cyberspace war’ (*New Straits Times*, 26 March 2008).

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punishing Teresa Kok but at the same time, its use of satire enabled its audience to frame it within the wider political discourse.

## ■ Reviewing the Role of the New Media

Mohamad Azizuddin and Zengeni (2010, pg. 13) argue that new media were important instruments in the 2008 elections and could strengthen the democratisation process and public deliberation in Malaysia. Whilst it may well be true in 2008 that social media and new ICTs played an important role in enabling a mass ‘consciousness’ and a sense of community and belonging, it would be churlish to attribute the success of the opposition to it alone or even that it is responsible for the development of a democratic culture in Malaysia<sup>11</sup>. There are clearly many reasons for the shift in voting towards the opposition in 2008. Pepinsky (2009) claimed that the ruling regime was rejected by non-Malay voters who favoured secular opposition parties. Historically, there was significant residual support against the ruling regime but the issue of voters favouring either communalism or secularism is harder to prove. Be that as it may, a critical analysis would show that issues arising in the lead-up to the 2008 elections revolved around cost-of-living concerns (rise in prices of everyday necessities, particularly fuel prices), everyday insecurity (seemingly escalating crime rates), religious tolerance<sup>12</sup>, idealistic concerns around corruption and

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<sup>11</sup> This is an important point but beyond the scope of this paper. If democracy is merely about voices being heard, then the new social media is certainly that in Malaysia but if we seek a more deliberative and civic form of democracy, it certainly is not. There are, in many postings abusive comments and a total lack of disrespect and regard for people. As such, it is not a ‘deliberative’ space and tolerance is not an important attribute. Rather new media and the Internet is seen as just a platform for providing alternative news, rather than a platform for critical engagement and independent reporting and thought.

<sup>12</sup> The Lina Joy, Moorthy, Nyonya Tahir cases as well as the destruction of Indian temples, in particular, incensed local non-Malay communities who saw an increased and muscular ‘Islamisation’. Many felt that Islamic laws and/or norms were not forcefully imposed on non-Muslim communities. Abdullah Badawi, then prime minister, was seen as failing to act against these extremist elements but rather abetted their quest, causing much anguish amongst non-Malays and their representatives (Maznah, 2008). In January 2006, non-Malay cabinet ministers who raised concerns over this veer towards greater Islamisation were snubbed, chided and rather publicly humiliated by UMNO, the dominant party in the government and had to retract. Arguably, this provided the genesis for their punishment at the 2008 polls – their failure to exact some form of effective defence of non-Malay rights.

money politics, changes in opposition parties' strategies and of course, the role of new media (Welsh, 2008).

In the lead-up to the 2008 March elections, there were significant protests against the government. The first was in September 2007 when members of the Bar Council took to the streets and protested against apparent corruption in the country's judiciary. The second – the *Bersih* rally over electoral reform took place on 10 November 2007, and the third, the *Hindraf* rally on 25 November 2007. Just a week before electoral nominations, images of supporters of *Hindraf* demanding the release of their detained leaders and family members being tear-gassed and water-sprayed were widely circulated, reverberating through the Malaysian polity and also sparking off global demonstrations (Yeoh, 2009). Collectively, these protests broke the psychological shackles of fear of demonstrations and protests in Malaysia, emboldening latent political discontent – the beatings, the gassing and the water-hosing of protesters and demonstrators were captured via new media (e.g. YouTube video clips, Facebook, cell-phones recording of images and sounds, SMS messages and blogs) and reverberated through the Malaysian polity. The visual images, the ensuing government heavy-handedness, public concern over the everyday managed to convey and portray a crisis in governance – one dominated by widespread corruption and the lack of equity and social justice for its citizens, providing the tipping point for an electoral backlash. The incumbent government had “failed to deal effectively with issues such as... UMNO arrogance and excesses, economic scandals, rising cost of living, crime and corruption” (Saravanamuttu, 2008: 39).

Most social media tend to emphasise speed, immediacy, accessibility, readily legible and identifiable causes/issues and information conveyed are invariably short news and sound bites requiring not careful deliberation and consideration

but rather an affirmation and/or acquiescence of what has been communicated. An objective and critical analysis would show that these same technologies and an urban tech-savvy populace supporting the opposition were already in place in 1999 and 2004 and yet, the BN was able to ward off oppositional challenges quite readily<sup>13</sup>. What is true is that the political landscape and parameters have changed; there was no going back to the pre-*Reformasi* period. Malaysians were now increasingly vocal, wanted social and political reforms and change. A political shift had occurred and there was certainly the beginning of a crisis of hegemony (O'Shannassy, 2009). In 2008, the return of Anwar Ibrahim to the political fray further energised the opposition and arguably provided the catalyst enabling oppositional forces, both physical and on-line to march in tune against the government. Political spaces were hooked and linked up, with oppositional forces working across time, ethnicity and space to effect a change.

New media and the online sphere offers and enables a zone of engagement and contention for Malaysians seeking to contest the ruling coalition's hegemonic rule over information and the broader spectrum of Malaysian politics. This is an important development and seems to offer Malaysians an avenue for an outpouring of rage and at the same time, an *abertura* of hope, organising new possible imaginaries and vocabularies. Alone, it is questionable whether online media can transform and effect change and it is therefore important to realise that real change also depends on linkages with broader social and political reform movements. Such changes are contextual, specific and depend on the complexities of any given situation, and cannot be pre-determined. As Agre (20002: 314-316) argued, "political activities on the Internet are embedded in larger social processes, and the Internet is only one element of an ecology of media...(because) the Internet has its effects only in the ways that it is

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<sup>13</sup> The 2004 elections saw Abdullah Badawi and the BN returned with a larger majority. This is attributed to his perceived positive image as reformist, open, more inclusive and tolerant.

appropriated, and it is appropriated in so many different ways”. Any reading of the new (social) media and ICTs as democratising Malaysia or any society must therefore be critically interrogated and questioned.

## **New Media and Democratic Participation**

While governments have their coercive apparatuses, to rule, however, by employing these security and coercive tools alone may not be as effective; there needs to be some form of rule through consent. David Held (1989) has suggested that citizens may tolerate and practise some form of ‘instrumental acquiescence’ as long as the government is able to deliver the benefits of growth and development. It is clearly important that consent is linked to performance legitimacy. In the case of many authoritarian regimes, this performance legitimacy is delivered through economic growth and development. When economic growth stalls, these regimes find themselves confronting crises of legitimacy. The 1997 Asian financial crisis was one such manifestation and it affords civil society actors and agents political opportunities for change, reform and transformation (McAdam et. al., 1996). In these contests for change, social media have become increasingly salient. They can and have facilitated both institutionalised political participation e.g. online protests and political movements, a point of which over 90 percent of those interviewed readily conceded to. In Malaysia where there is a relatively weak civil society, virtual society becomes an important space for the expression of diverse views, “battling out political confrontations and as a locus for pushing government accountability” (Tumber, 2001, p. 21). One female social activist notes that apart from engendering ‘alternative voices’, the new media also “creates communities and provides a platform for advocacy and inclusiveness”. This leads to a greater form of ‘democratic participation’.

Some commentators have argued that “the small and fringe parties stand a better chance of inter-party competition with the major parties on the Internet (and social media) than they do in traditional media and they are able to reach a larger audience” (Margolis et. al., 2003, pg. 58; Perlmutter, 2008). Rachel Gong (2011) commenting on political candidates during the Malaysian elections recognised that such blogs and other media usage extends their reach and influence, arguably gaining more votes for them. This effect is, however contextual and there is the need to recognise that new media are really a multi-interactive site into which the state, the market, civil society, culture of contention and democracy, all feed and are also affected by. Therefore, it cannot be divorced from the social realities- national and institutional – impacting on it. Malaysian bloggers are primarily urban-based and well educated<sup>14</sup>. Blogs generally tend to be mostly written in English, and are individualistic and personal, ranging from individual meanderings and pontifications to explicit social and political commentaries. This intimate and individualistic streak, Sunstein (2001) warns us, can have unintended effects – it can make us more insular and closed. According to him, new social media also tend to be self-selective, seeking out fellow travellers on the web both as affirmative, self-reinforcing and egoistic rituals (Maynor, 2007).

In Malaysia, Surin (2010: 202) has noted that activists and subscribers to new media tend to see them as being purely oppositional, offering only alternative oppositional discourses. This ‘narrow-casting’ of issues, for her, detracts from the broader issue of good, professional journalism and the quest for greater accountability. All the journalists interviewed shared this sentiment, with one arguing for the need to recognise journalistic ethics, to report the facts and the

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<sup>14</sup> All participants interviewed see social media penetration rate as not high and merely confined to the upper and middle class in major urban areas.

news rather than ‘incite and excite’. Whilst recognising that journalists cannot be completely detached or ‘self-righteous’, one prominent online journalist interviewee proclaimed that this “can be self-serving, not good for democracy and...(that as journalists) it is not just about platforms”. For him, critics bemoan the lack of a democratic space but in reality, it is an ‘illusion’ as even the prime minister ‘can be scolded’. For him, this clearly shows the prevalence of some form of space and freedom of expression.

Some of the interviewed bloggers also agreed that for many of these ‘activists’, the new media opened up new political space, enabling new voices to be heard but without ‘objectivity’. According to a few of these interviewees, some of these views are so one-dimensional, resembling ‘brainwashing’ and propaganda, leading them to question whether such political consciousness is ‘good’ for the wider society. The venting of these frustrated, pent-up voices can often be vitriolic and visceral, which can ‘suppress’ alternative views. One politician interviewed for example, believed that such practices are not acceptable, while the responsible party should be banned and punished.

George (2006) has also forewarned us that the ubiquity of the Internet and digital technologies do not simply result in greater democratisation but that prevailing social and political structures are important as they affect social and political practices (George, 2007; Tan and Zawawi, 2008). Online democracy is therefore not always democratic in political practice, and “it would be a mistake to fetishize the new and assume that the Internet is the only medium worthy of study” (George, 2007, p.895). Similarly, we should not confuse ‘access’ with an active transforming agent within society. One prominent blogger commenting on this democratic aspect of the new media succinctly puts it: “there is no democratic culture but there is freedom of expression’. A few others commented on the lack of ‘maturity’ amongst Malaysians and that

unfortunately, there is “no contestation of ideas and reason” or “serious exchange of views” on new media platforms. The same blogger, an ex-retiree, further argued that new media have been positive in facilitating greater information and democracy, showcasing its educational potential. However, there is, as he notes, “a lack of leadership”, those with a moral cache able to transcend the ‘us and them’ mentality and possessing the ability to recognise and respect the “dignity of difference”.

Still, new media have had effects, particularly in the last decade during the 2008 elections and beyond. It levelled the playing field for those who challenged existing authorities, raised awareness, consciousness and even mentally jogged participants to question, engage, dialogue, mobilise and help the opposition win elections. It has also circumvented the heavy hand of censorship by providing an alternative source of information, and an avenue for the outpouring of angry, frustrated feelings, thoughts and observations. These ‘hidden transcripts’ when refracted through the ‘new weapons of the weak’, enabled new mobilisations, creating new imaginaries via their many media platforms which facilitated “timely and contrapuntal informational flow” (Yeoh, 2010: 12 -14). However, it is important not to overestimate its effects. Rodan (2005, pg. 17) argues that the Internet and new ICTs have no inherent subversive ability but become important and gain traction when there are organised political forces best able to leverage its potential advantages (see also Weiss, 2006; Wong, 2001a). In the case of Malaysia, this is even more apparent, especially when political articulations for rights and freedom via new social media remain narrow and rather elitist. For example, in their survey, Tan and Zawawi (2008) found that the majority of Malaysians prefer personal journals, with only 6 percent running a socio-political blog. Moreover, the latter tend to be well educated, urbanised and generally from the middle or upper class. Race and language further

complicate the blogosphere as linguistic and ethnic silos still define much of social media engagement.

Despite this, new social media and technologies in Malaysia enable communities, mobilise people (as seen in the *Bersih* 2.0 and 3.0 rallies) ensuring the crossing of ethnic and religious divides, and even forming ‘new’ communities such as the gay community. The psychological, practical and political aspects of new social media are important and help us to contextualise and understand the nature and intensity of record-breaking protests in Malaysia over recent years, but this may not be sustainable. This could arise from attention deficit or because sustained, long-termed political engagement is not possible (due to time or prior commitments). Also, despite subscribing to blogs and other forms of social media, most Malaysians remain passive agents and actors. During GE13, cyber-rumours, profanities, intemperate language and name-calling were part of the frenzied campaigning process, contrary to characteristics of a decent and mature democracy. Objective reporting online was also an exception (Loo, 2013; *The Star*, 3 May 2013).

Political observers argue that there is a real shift amongst the populace as well as a generational and rural-urban divide (Raslan, 2013). Malaysia has irrevocably become a more open and democratic two-coalition system (Weiss, 2013c). Weiss suggests that the outcome of the “GE13 signals a new phase in Malaysian electoral history” and that this move towards the opposition “indicates a new order” with the advent of a permeable two-coalition system in Malaysian political and electoral history (Weiss, 2013a: 33; see also Weiss, 2013c). Portrayed as such, it could be argued that Malaysia was moving

incrementally towards greater political liberalisation (Eisenstadt, 2000)<sup>15</sup>. Malaysia's experiences certainly resonate with the observations of that "once something (liberalization) has happened... a general mobilization (the resurrection of civil society) is likely to occur" (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; 48). This refrain has been echoed by analysts of the Malaysian political scene, and as one puts it, "there are indicators that Malaysia is undergoing a protracted transition from electoral authoritarianism towards electoral democracy" (Ufen, 2013: 3), and that this process is unstoppable.

## ■ Concluding Remarks

By the end of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Malaysia had changed considerably. Its society and economy has been transformed, permeated and suffused by global forces. Through export-led industrialisation, Malaysia has become a more urbanised society and there is a growing Malay urbanised middle and business class (Gomez, 2004; Wong, 2007). Interestingly, an increasing number of anxious, urbanised middle-class Malays are embracing PAS and articulating their group interests through this Islamic-refracted party (Wong, 2007). These new socio-economic realities have created new actors, engendered new interests and prompted new sites and repertoires of contention and opposition. It is likely that these conflicts would be more extensive and intense. The opposition has sought to craft a multi-ethnic-based coalition committed to social justice, human rights and greater democratic freedoms, and new media is helping to enable the delivery of their message. There is greater voter choice differentiation and for

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<sup>15</sup> Whilst there appears to be greater inroads made by the opposition in gaining electoral ground, some of its more 'liberal' and 'progressive' voices e.g. Mohamad Sabu, Dzukefly Ahmad, Husam Musa and Salahuddin Ayub lost. UMNO's progressive Saifuddin Abdullah also lost in his bid for political office. This begs the question whether this phenomenon is an aberration or an indication of a closing of progressive Malay and Muslim voices. If it signals the latter, the future does not look as promising.

the first time in Malaysia's history, there is also the possibility of a viable two-party coalition system. Many commentators have suggested that new media and their role in the political fallout of the events since 1999, and in particular, the aftermath of 2008, is nudging Malaysia towards a discovery of the end of ethnic politics, and towards greater democracy (Weiss, 2006; Maznah, 2008; Pepinsky, 2009; Tan and Zawawi, 2008; Mohd. Azizuddin and Zengeni, 2010).

Such a correlation between democratic efficacy and the new media is somehow reductive and discontinuous – it ignores the structural dimensions of the country where ethnicity remains writ large and is an important factor in electoral politics. New media certainly have played an important and even strategic role in political oppositional campaigning, enabling opposition parties and groups to access new opportunities to make their case, inform the electorate, frame their concerns and allows them to be heard and/or read. This is an empowering process for many and arguably engenders greater civil and political participation in Malaysia. It has also enabled alternative voices to be articulated and heard but this discourse remains shaped by Malaysia's prevailing political culture and vocabulary.

New media appeals to the Malaysian public and offer them the opportunity to try to effectuate greater political and democratic change in the country. Elitism and communalism, however, still dominate the Malaysian blogosphere and as such, it cannot perform a simple-across-the-board campaigning function, being moderated by the wider societal and institutional structures in Malaysian society. Nonetheless, cyberspace has shown its potential and ability to create and provide a quick, innovative and efficient means of sharing experiences, information and ideas. It also aids in mobilisation and enabling new and alternative forms of interaction and 'electronic civil disobedience' e.g. email protests, Facebook-like posts, and seemingly allows Malaysians to feel that they

are empowered and plugged into a global movement, albeit focused on Malaysia.

At its most potent new media bring together online and offline efforts of political reformist movements in Malaysia and their role in further democratising the Malaysian polity remains unfinished. The Internet and other web-based technologies certainly have engendered greater discourse and play two important roles in advancing and framing contentious politics: as an instrument and as a space. It has afforded greater access to tools which protestors and demonstrators now utilise to convey their messages. Its second role is to enable and provide a space to engage the public and generate public pressure. Together, they are seen to be democratic 'weapons of the weak'. The impact of new media and communication technologies in promoting democracy in Malaysia, however, is not uniform nor can it be easily explained. They have certainly increased the visibility of government actions (and mis-actions or lack of action), allowed social activists to resist and mobilise and created more democratic space and democratic communities. However, like many other 'democratising' countries, usage of new ICTs is still largely the domain of elites, the articulate and relatively well-off. The digital divide remains real and central and in many of these democratising countries, people still struggle with the notion and culture of democratic citizenship practices underpinning democracy.

While new media afford greater political opportunities (McAdam, 1996) and channels possible alternatives, the outcome for greater democracy cannot be assumed and is, therefore, not guaranteed. In Malaysia, it has brought oppositional voices out into the public domain, enabled mobilising and networking potential while framing issues for contention and discussion (George, 2006; Abbott, 2001). As its effects percolate within Malaysian society, it has also affected Malaysians' responses to both government-controlled

mainstream media and threats of governmental repression and coercion. The opposition's media platforms enabled more theatrical and phantasmagorical political representations, affording the opposition wider and greater reach and penetration. All in all, new media can be seen to be synonymous with what John Downing (2001) has called 'radical' – linking up social movements, public participation and political space. Keane (1988) sees this process as contributing to the pluralisation of power relations of civil society. An alternative voice and greater plurality does not, however, always lead to democratisation. Having both an alternative and diversity of views online does not necessarily translate into a democratic culture and/or a democratic practice.

Jodi Dean points out that new media, "protect a fantasy of unity, wholeness or order, compensating in advance for this impossibility"; they are "invested with hopes and dreams with aspirations to something better". For Dean, this is a technological fetish and fails to account for the broader structural factors impacting democracy and change (Dean, 2005: 63). As she elaborates, it's not that people are not informed but rather don't 'participate effectively' (Dean, 2005: 63). Dean and others have also noted that networked communication and political activism engendering political change are not coterminous, and whilst it offers the pleasure of an inter-connected world of like-minded souls, this only "provides a respite from the vagaries of the real world". Effecting change is more than having a wireless connection and the ability to transmit such messages (Shirkey, 2004). Context and structural conditions are relegated to a subset of secondary import, if not erased, and therein lies the blind spot of this technological drive for democracy and change. New social media and the world they inhabit, whilst celebrated for its freedom, alleged cosmopolitanism and boundary less world imagines and represents the world. However, this is a fictive construct and nothing like the 'real' world, which is criss-crossed by everyday conflicts, negotiations, interpretations, collusions, power, cabals,

transgressions and myriad forms of actions and resistances. In other words, following Zizek (1997) and Dean (2005, 2009), despite a possible political latency, new and social media render us inter-passive and depoliticised, since they seduce us to believe that the virtual is real and that our participation in this virtual plane is enough. Hence, our participation, if any, is to contribute virtually, and if not, maybe attend a few rallies but not engaging in the political process where indeterminacy and deliberation intersect. Political change requires breaking with and through these fantasies engendered by new media, which are consumed so pleurably. More direct action to change socio-economic conditions and realities is needed.

New social media have been influential in setting counter-agendas and escalating political debates through analyses of political issues and enabling support for progressive political forces. Democracy is, however, a fraught process and involves deliberation, dialogue and an openness and tolerance towards difference. Being plural and alternative without being tolerant can result in intolerance and distorted discontent, which facilitates a rather authoritarian practice and discourse. New media as such cannot in itself ensure democracy and greater deliberation. Indeed, in most cases and which is certainly true in Malaysia, there are no engaged debates and common points of reference. Instead, there is political rigidity, excessive partisanship, factionalism and the tendency to overpower and dominate. If they exist, debates are either diffused or one-dimensional, thus lacking the political valency so necessary for political change and democracy to be fostered.

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