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Adoption and use of Facebook among Malaysian political representatives

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Abstract

The study evaluates the extent Members of Parliament (MPs') effort of political communication with their constituents might contribute to deliberative democracy. The paper finds that MPs' approaches to Facebook are conditioned by specific personal aims for a strategic marketing channel rather than a communication channel with their constituents. In conclusion, MPs were able to legitimize their roles by demonstrating their services as parliamentarians or representatives.

Keywords: Social, Media, Facebook, Political, Representative.

Adopción y uso de Facebook entre representantes políticos de Malasia

Resumen

El estudio evalúa la medida en que el esfuerzo de los miembros del Parlamento (MP) de comunicación política con sus electores podrá

contribuir a la democracia deliberativa. El documento encuentra que los enfoques de los diputados a Facebook están condicionados por objetivos personales específicos para un canal de marketing estratégico en lugar de un canal de comunicación con sus constituyentes. En conclusión, los parlamentarios pudieron legitimar sus roles al demostrar sus servicios como parlamentarios o representantes.

Palabras clave: Social, Medios, Facebook, Político, Representante.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last general election in 2018, voters in Malaysia rejected the long-serving Barisan Nasional (BN – National Front) by choosing the opposition Pakatan Harapan (PH – Alliance of Hope). The victory and replacement of the BN with the PH was the first time the latter party had been in power since Malaysian independence in 1957. In the last two general elections in Malaysia, 2008 and 2013, the election results already signaled the near breakdown of the ruling BN. In 2013, the opposition coalition was able to deny a two-thirds majority to the ruling BN and won 50.8% of the popular vote compared to the BN's 47.38%. There was a significant swing in the popular vote away from BN. Many political observers noted that the swing in votes was partly due to public calls for change toward a more transparent and accountable government. This was as a result of social media and digital platforms, which played a major role in transforming information into either true or fake news.

Malaysia's internet penetration has continuously risen since 2008, climbing from 70.0% in 2015 to 85.7% in 2017. Malaysia's smartphone penetration rate also increased from 97.5% in 2015 to 97.7% in 2017, with over 40% of the country's 15 million voters below the age of 40 owning a smartphone. They are digital people who receive news almost exclusively via social media. Malaysian newspapers, especially the Malay and English newspapers that traditionally report domestic political news, also witnessed a drastic drop in circulation, from 1,147,126 subscribers in 2008 to 890,446 in 2012 (AUTY, 2005). This pointed toward Malaysians accessing news online.

Moreover, during the last two elections, the general election in 2013, the Malaysian opposition coalition (PH) was credited with using social media to overcome mainstream media owned by the BN government. The mainstream media was dominated by the BN. Much of the mainstream media in the country is owned directly or indirectly by entities linked to BN (KARLSEN, 2012). There are also few regulations in the country the freedom of the media. As such for the BN to ensure that the media is used to facilitate its political goals. Thus, in the 2000s, with the availability of social media, the opposition started to direct access to the public for political campaigns. The opposition used this opportunity to broadcast videos and news for their political campaigns. As a result, the public has become less deferential to and more skeptical about the ruling government, BN. The elected representatives or members of parliament (MPs) were also affected. To

some extent, they have lost some of their authority. According to Mohd Azzizuddin, the failure of the BN to win the popular vote in the 2013 general election was partly due to social media being extensively used by the opposition PH (CHADWICK, 2007).

For all these reasons, one might expect MPs to embrace Facebook, Twitter and other Web 2.0 technologies in order to tackle voters. Theoretically, these technologies could help MPs to inform the public and communicate their messages, making use of these media in diverse forms. Through the Internet, politicians can broadcast more information about political news, policy interests, voting records and contact details. They can engage innovatively through direct interaction with voters in order to create a new style of personalized, accessible and ongoing relationships. The Internet has created opportunities to restructure communication between MPs and constituents and has led to an increase in potential and, in some cases, motivation for MPs to communicate online. More importantly, with the growing diffusion and popularity of the Internet for political discourse in Malaysia, it has become important to assess to what extent the Internet contributes to e-representation in the country.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used content analysis of Facebook sites, deploying a quantitative approach. A survey of MPs' Facebook use during the 13th

Parliament was conducted. The Malaysian Parliament's website, http://www.parlimen.gov.my/eng-DewRakyat_AhliDewan.php, was used as an authoritative source of information. The sample consists of all the MPs elected in the 13th Parliament (n=222). Additionally, the Google search engine and the Nut Graph website were accessed to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the list. Quantitative data were collected by systematically counting and recording statistically (LEE, 2017).

The analysis involved scrutiny of MPs' Facebook behavior in the month of October 2017. This month is outside the election period and is a suitable time for coding the online activity of MPs on Facebook. After identifying the accounts associated with all MPs, the total number of postings in every MP's Facebook account during October 2017 was considered as an index of participation.

The second part was related to examining the comments section and a content analysis method was applied to do so. The content analysis is done by quantitative means. The quantitative approach is a statistical one, focusing on patterns such as the frequency of posts or comments. Many studies of political communication use content analysis to assess issues related to the Web (ENLI & SKOGERBØ, 2013). They also use postings on blogs, news in online newspapers and information on party websites to identify the potential of the Web to contribute to democracy. Therefore, this study analyzed political

postings and also comments by readers and replies by MPs for political discussion.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Globally, the use of Facebook for online political participation has greatly increased. Around 19 million Malaysians (out of 31 million people) had a Facebook account in June 2017, while the number of Internet users was 24,554,255, which was 78.8% of the population. A few studies suggest that most people are using Facebook to seek information, mobilize and share political views (GIBSON & WARD, 2009). FRANCOLI & WARD (2008) argue that Facebook is the most suitable social medium that is accessible for the majority of people, offers easy access to information, and is an opportunity for political expression and political action.

Thus, some studies show that Facebook is more powerful than traditional media (GROMPING, 2014). Facebook has also been used to mobilize people to participate in protests (the BERSIH movement). Like many other forms of social media, Facebook provides similar features such as information provision, and also the greater speed for the interactive medium of online discussion. With this feature, Facebook shows a significant role in the formation of information and also interactivity (PUSPITASARI ET AL., 2019).

Malaysian MPs are also not excluded from a great presence on social media as tools for communication. Rosyidah found that 40% of Malaysian MPs had operational blogs in 2011. In the observation period of this study, in October 2017, many blogs were already not active. Most of them had shifted to Facebook and Twitter. During the study, 161 MPs – 73% – had Facebook accounts and 130 MPs – 59% – had Twitter accounts, out of a total of 222 MPs in the Malaysian Parliament. This shows that Facebook is clearly more popular than Twitter among Malaysian MPs.

The widespread use of Twitter and Facebook among Malaysian MPs is also part of a general trend worldwide, where Facebook and Twitter have become a key communication channel for politicians. However, there are differences in which types of social media are preferred in different countries. Similarly, in Denmark Facebook is also more popular compared to Twitter, while in Australia, Facebook and Twitter are almost equally popular. As noted by Macnamara and Kenning, 70% of politicians were active on Facebook and 45% had a Twitter account during the Australian general election in 2011, whereas in the 2013 general election, 81% of MPs had Facebook accounts and 76% had Twitter accounts (GOMEZ, 2014).



Figure 1: Facebook accounts by political party

Figure 1 shows the different parties represented in the Malaysian Parliament, as well as the percentage of each party's MPs on Facebook. It shows that DAP MPs were the highest users of Facebook. This is not surprising, as a previous study also showed that the DAP was the most active party in adopting information technology (IT). Malaysian parties are very serious about using the Internet and all have embraced IT in their organizational development (see Table 1). For the opposition parties, the Internet is important as it is the only channel through which they can reach a sizable number of voters. The DAP utilizes IT as a way of promoting the national interest and its own agenda. It adopted the slogan IT For All as a national policy objective in April 1997.

The DAP also put much effort into promoting IT for its own members. The party started with a mailing list group, Bunga Raya, which was used to communicate with members and voters. This was a quick and convenient way of disseminating information and organizing forum discussions among party members. However, it was suspended for some time before the party set up its website in 1996. The opposition PKR argues that the electoral system and media bias have worked against it. Accordingly, the opposition parties felt they needed to use this new technology to overcome the domination of mass communication channels by the BN. They thought that by using the Internet, the opposition and the ruling party would be on an equal footing.

Table 1: Political parties’ websites

Political Party	Year of Establishment	URL
Ruling Coalition		
UMNO	2001	http://umno-online.com
MCA	1997	http://www.mca.org.my
MIC	2000	http://www.mic.org.my
Gerakan	2000	http://www.gerakan.org.my
PBS	1997	http://www.pbs-sabah.org
Opposition Coalition		
PAS*	1999	http://www.pas.org.my
DAP*	1996	http://www.dapmalaysia.org
PKR*	2004	http://www.keadilanrakyat.com
Other Opposition Parties		
Malaysian People’s Party (PRM)	2008	http://partirakyatmalaysia.blogspot.com
Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP)	1996	http://www.sapp.org.my
Malaysian Socialist Party	2003	http://www.parti-sosialis.org

Comparing political representatives, the former Prime Minister Najib Razak, Khairy Jamaluddin and Hishamuddin have a very high number in UMNO. However, the number could not represent all representatives in UMNO as it was imbalance between the high profile representatives and not (see Table 2). UMNO is the party with the lowest number of MPs with Facebook accounts. While the highest

number is for the DAP, even high-profile DAP MPs such as Lim Kit Siang, Lim Guan Eng, and Tony Pua do not have a high number of followers.

Table 2: Number of friends on Facebook

	No. of Friends on Facebook
BN-UMNO	
Najib Abdul Razak	3,293,417
Ahmad Zahid Hamidi	146,768
Mustafa Mohamed	543,146
Khairy Jamaluddin	1,165,397
PAKATAN HARAPAN	
Anwar Ibrahim (PKR)	1,587,348
Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (PKR)	904,435
Mohamed Azmin Ali (PKR)	178,213
Rafizi Ramli (PKR)	624,563
Lim Guan Eng (DAP)	407,796
Lim Kit Siang (DAP)	334,002
Tony Pua (DAP)	314,975
Abdul Hadi Awang (PAS)	333,124
Tuan Ibrahim Yuan Man (PAS)	198,364

For example, Najib Razak, in particular, shows dedication to his networking site. He demonstrates that the potential of networking sites extends beyond virtual space, by inviting his supporters (Facebook

friends) to mobilize together in the real world to support him. Najib is taking the first step, as Obama did during his 2008 campaign, to translate his online networking into meaningful real-world networking. His blog, 1Malaysia, explicitly states that the website is intended to provide a free and open forum to discuss the things that matter deeply to us as a Nation. Through it, he wants to facilitate citizen-elite deliberation in Malaysia, to hear the public's views on government and policy. He also asked continuously response from readers regarding the national budget proposal for every year, thousands of people commented.

3.1. Political postings

The main focus of this study is to analyze the extent to which MPs use Facebook to post news and communicate with their voters. It is also able to study to what extent Facebook contributes to representative democracy for a well-functioning democracy. Through Facebook, citizens can communicate with their MPs/representatives by exchanging opinions on particular issues on MPs' Facebook accounts. Citizens also are informed from various sources, which is essential for their participation in a political process to be a true form of representative democracy. It is also important to consider the legitimacy that VILLALOBOS (2018) points out:

When a ruler reaches the control of the power that the political right gives him through the organs of legitimacy, that base his exercise in democratic terms, it means that he submits in an unrestricted way to the limits that the same power consecrates for its materialization. (pag. 8)

In order to develop an understanding of how MPs use Facebook as a venue of public discussion, each post was coded.

For politicians to communicate with citizens on Facebook, they have to update their status on their Facebook account or pages. Here, politicians can make posts that are shown in the news feeds of all their followers or friends. Most posts can be words, pictures or also links to YouTube. The total number of posts made by the 161 MPs with a Facebook account during the month of October 2017 was 5338. However, not all of these posts were political posts. Some were promoting MPs' daily activities and personal posts. Only about 28 MPs solely posted their daily activities on their Facebook page, constituting 1651 posts. These MPs concentrate on their constituency in their Facebook account, and most of their content involves political work. They sometimes write about their weekends, but only if they attended events of a public nature. They report on their daily activities with constituents and a diary-like style has emerged.

4. CONCLUSION

This study is a contribution to the question of whether Facebook represents a unique opportunity for politicians to reach more people than they ever could before. MPs could directly reach out to voters, mobilize supporters, and influence the public agenda. Facebook also provides a means truly to understand constituents while opening a public dialog on issues through direct and two-way engagement. In doing so, Facebook could help to realize the ideal of e-representation and also help to understand the online behavior of Malaysian MPs.

The study shows there were varying trends among MPs using their Facebook accounts. Only 28 MPs used their Facebook accounts to show visitors, particularly their constituents, their daily work as representatives. In this way, MPs were able to legitimize their roles by demonstrating their services as parliamentarians or representatives. Moreover, they were also able to promote themselves as hard-working representatives of their constituencies (JACKSON, 2003; JACKSON & LILLEKER, 2011). Other MPs, 73 in total, just promote the sharing of content from other social networking sites – blogs or Twitter or any online news. This style enables many visitors/readers to participate in political discussions and is an avenue for them to give opinions on political issues. Even though a reasonable number of MPs actively practice the sharing of information and thus stimulate political discussion, MPs still do not join in the discussion. This study, however, has demonstrated that not all MPs utilize Facebook to

support their representative function, especially communicating with constituents.

The findings also reveal that the highest number of posts was created from external sources, without any commentary from MPs. Sharing external sources can raise the level of knowledge and increase the variety of views, and thus be conducive for representative democracy. In addition, the direct flow of information from politicians to the general public avoids any filtering of information. As such, MPs' personal opinions provide new sources for their arguments, as in Lim Kit Siang's case. The content analysis further reveals that the opinions and links to external sources provided in MPs' postings focused primarily on partisan politics and political marketing.

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