The Role of Independent Online Media: Managing Contentious Political Issue in Malaysia

[Presented by: Rosyidah Muhamad]
The Internet plays a significant role in construction of the notion of the public sphere in Malaysia.

The mass media in Malaysia directly and indirectly controlled by the BN coalition.

With the emergence of the new online media, new opportunities are provided for Malaysian society seek alternative information.
Examine on the role of the online newspaper and the print newspaper by focus on their roles in the development of the so-called ‘Allah issue’.

Is the online news better than the print newspaper in Malaysia in construction of the public sphere?
The Allah issue

An incident in which the Home Minister forbade the Catholic Church to use the word Allah in its newsletter, the Herald.

The Church successfully challenged the order in the court then the Malaysian government announced an appeal on the ground that the use of the word Allah might result to racial conflict.
The reactions provoked reflected a dispute among Muslims and non-Muslims.

The issue became more critical after few churches were attacked as well as a small prayer room for Muslims also being attacked.

The issue not only a religious matter but also involved political agenda; between UMNO and PAS
Theoretical Framework

The public sphere: a venue for a free flow of public discussion and exchange of views that able to influence political action for the deliberative process.

According to Habermas (1989), the ideal condition for rational communication and deliberative base on 3 main rules:

A) Open to all participants
B) it would be free
C) all participants would be equal status
Lincoln Dahlberg (2001) identified 6 characteristics of Habermas public sphere:

A) Autonomy from the state and economy power

B) Exchange and critique of reason moral practice validity claims

C) Reflexivity

D) Ideal role taking

E) Sincerity

F) Discursive inclusion and equality
Figure 8: Malaysia Media Ownership Chart

Barisan Nasional

Ministry of Finance

UMNO

MIC

MCA

Media Prima

NSTP Group

Maika Holdings

Huaren Holdings

Nanyang Press

Sinchew Press

Nanyang Siang Pau

The Star

Harian Metro

Berita Harian

New Straits Times

Malay Mail

Big Tree Media

Utusan Malaysia

Fly FM (Radio)

Hot FM (Radio)

One FM (Radio)

TV 3

NTV 7

8 TV

TV 9

RTM1

RTM2

Ministry of Information

Maxis (Mobile)

Astro/Measat Satellite

Jaring (ISP)

TM Net (ISP)

Telekom Malaysia

Guang Ming Daily

Tiong Hiew King

Ananda Krishnan
Laws and Regulation

- The Printing Press and Publication Act 1984
- Broadcasting Act 1998
- Seditious Act 1948
- Official Secret Act 1972
- The Internal Security Act 1972
Online Media

- No specific laws to control the content of the Internet as in the print media
- During Mahathir era, the Bill of Guarantee of non-censorship in the content of the Internet was formulated.
- The Internet was introduced in Malaysia in 1995 but the online activism stated gained attention in 1998 – the sacking and jailing of former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim.
Many *reformasi* websites emerged and able to reach million hits.

However, all these websites were slowly decreased and most of them no longer active.

In 1998, 191 websites; In 2003, 22 active sites.

Only very few websites are maintained and still survived today such as *MalaysiaKini*. 
Method

- A content analysis of news items from two news organisations, one from a print newspaper, *Utusan Malaysia* (UM) and an online newspaper, the *MalaysiaKini*.
- The entire coverage in the month of January 2010 (1-31 January 2010) was initially subjected to content analysis.
- Each article was coded based on the coverage of the issue, affiliation of news sources and evaluation and interpretation of the issue by the media.
Frequency of Actors quoted in the MK and the UM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Print Media (UM)</th>
<th>Online Media (MK)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ruling Coalition</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition Coalition</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judiciary</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experts</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinary Citizens</td>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
<td><strong>296</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Position of news

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Print Media</th>
<th>Online Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agreement</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreement</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The MK provides specific columns, *Vox Populi* and *Your Say*, for the ordinary citizens to contribute their ideas in response to the news stories.

In relation to the requirement for public sphere describes by Dahlberg (2001), the results show some evidence
Autonomy from the state and economy power’

- no obvious affiliation between readers and state controls.

- The MK was established by two individuals and it is not affiliate with any political institution, and without any ideological commitment. In contrast, the UM was a mouth piece of government.
sincerity

For example, Hibiscus, commented with lengthy post, 184 words, explaining with rational arguments supported by sufficient and convincing evidence.
Matthew wrote,

“My fellow Christians, we have all along believed in Lord Jesus, not ‘Allah’. So, for God sake, for sake of peace….please let us drop the usage of ‘Allah’ from our publication. Please respect our Muslims brothers, whom we have living harmoniously with them for so many years, without troubles…”
According to Habermas (1996), media should include diverse viewpoints, presenting dialogue from different perspectives as well as encouraging citizens to participate in the discussion along with the practise of quality of deliberation (Bennett, Pickard et al. 2004)
The evidence presented here seems to lend that the online MK is an effective communication space compared to the print UM in terms of fitting the normative requirements of the public sphere for the deliberative process.