1-1-2019

Encrypted Exchanges: Whatsapp and the Malaysian General Election

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Throughout Malaysia's history, the ruling political coalition of Barisan Nasional has had a hold on the traditional channels by which news has been delivered to the Malaysian people. However, technological development has given space for new forms of media, including WhatsApp. This article recounts the transformation from print news to WhatsApp public groups and analyzes the role media played in Malaysia's fourteenth general election.

Introduction

In Freedom House's annual press freedom scores, Malaysia has been labeled "Not Free" every year since 1994. It has performed particularly poorly in the "Political Environment" category, explained by the 61-year electoral dominance of the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition following independence in 1957 (Freedom House, 2017a). Weak press freedom and a stalled political environment discouraged government criticism by news outlets. Nonetheless, Malaysian journalists have, more recently, been able to circumvent this situation using technology. The fast spread of Internet connectivity, followed by smartphone and social media usage, has given Malaysians enhanced distribution channels for information. Therefore, Malaysia's freedom on the net is substantially higher than its overall press freedom, being considered partly free since 2009 (Freedom House, 2017b). These digital frontiers swarmed with anti-government opinion after the exposure of the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal, a multinational operation that siphoned about $4.5 billion from a Malaysian public development fund into the pockets of Prime Minister Najib Razak and associates. Leading up to Malaysia's fourteenth general election (GE14) in 2018, these alternate media conditions culminated in a victory against Najib and BN, signaling a freer, more effective Malaysian press.

The story of media consumption in Malaysia reflects an escalation of accountability among those in power—over time, the media landscape changed as new platforms led to greater information spread. Put simply, as Malaysian media advanced technologically, there was more room for political dissent. At the start, traditional media, such as daily newspapers and cable television, dominated the news cycle and were almost exclusively run by United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the largest member party of BN.

Before anything was printed or aired, there was ample time and procedure in place to make sure no anti-government news would be shown. Around the time of GE12 in 2008, independent media had its first chance to compete for the attention of Malaysians. Blogs and other independent online news sites complicated, but did not destroy, the monopoly of state-run media. To combat its lost territory, BN strategically limited press freedom through tactics such as sedition lawsuits, while carefully conserving a notion of press freedom ahead of GE13 in 2013. Media development did not stop at simple digital platforms; the development of widespread social media reached Malaysia as Internet penetration increased. After GE13 showed a surprisingly close result that stripped BN of its popular vote majority, it became clear that BN might truly be challenged in GE14 in 2018, emboldening the Najib-led ruling party just as much as it did its opposition. As BN took extreme measures to ensure victory, it peeled back the illusion of press freedom, cracking down in an unprecedented manner. That crackdown backfired because the Malaysian media landscape had become dominated by WhatsApp, a notably encrypted messaging app, which Malaysians used without fear. Viral discussion on WhatsApp of the 1MDB scandal, with Najib at its center, was the climax, and there was nothing he could do to control it. The reach of information allowed Malaysians to take control of their democracy and oust BN in GE14, ending the reign of a historically anti-press government.

Barisan Nasional's Hold on Traditional Media

Before the advent of the Internet, Malaysia relied on two government-controlled channels to receive its news: cable television and print newspapers. Both run on a regimented 24-hour cycle, making it simple to set up procedures to censor content. Hata Wahari, the former president of the National Union of Journalists Malaysia (NUJ), exposed UMNO's routine of media control after he was fired from the longtime UMNO-controlled newspaper *Utusan Malaysia* in 2011. When asked about political influence, he said, "As a journalist with *Utusan* for 16 years, I know that instructions are given every afternoon" (Reporters, "Fired..."). Daily publications, such as *The Star*, *New Straits Times*, and *Berita Harian*, all of which are known to be friendly with BN (Sulong), operated similarly. This news protocol let the government dictate what news was reported and exactly when the news would appear. Eventually, the media landscape evolved, and as 2008's GE12 approached, mainstream pro-government news began to falter. The *New Straits Times*, the country's oldest newspaper still in print, had its average daily circulation fall nearly every year from 1993 to 2007, resulting in an approximate 22% overall decrease (Media...). During the same time, Malaysia's population rose 37%.

Traditional forms of media lost popularity as the digital world expanded, making the Internet a more attractive news source. From 2000 to 2010, Internet penetration shot up from 21.4% to 56.3% (United...). The media mix consumed by the average Malaysian swayed toward new media because of the need to search for additional information on subjects about which traditional media refused to elaborate (Alivi et al., p. 19). Founded in 1999, *Malaysiakini,* the country's most prominent independent news site, was receiving 3 million monthly page views by 2007 (Kenyon and Marjoribanks, p. 110). Technological growth was not the only factor in this shift, though. The political status quo was evolving in ways that threatened the government, which responded by limiting the press, making traditional news sources less trustworthy and even less attractive to Malaysians.

Starting in 2007, in a GE12 environment that yielded an opposition's first concrete attempt to gain ground on BN, the state overtly exercised its power to limit the opposition. That year, *Malaysiakini* released an obtained copy of a letter from the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) that ordered all private television stations not to broadcast opposition speeches ("Opposition..."). The political pressures BN faced, and its choice to clamp down on them, were reflected in Malaysia's score in the Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders. Malaysia's world rank in the index, which was an average of 106th from 2002 to 2006, has dropped to

138th from 2007 to present (Reporters, Press Freedom Index). One disturbing trend in BN's behavior around 2007 was its willingness to retaliate against and, in some cases, harass the independent press. Until that point, most of the upfront censorship consisted of nudging mainstream media away from anti-government topics. But after independent digital journalism gained popularity, Science, Technology, and Innovation Minister Kong Cho Ha signaled in 2006 that legislation needed to be introduced to silence bloggers, who were "disseminating disharmony, chaos, seditious material and lies" (Reporters, "Government…"). Two years later, the MCMC ordered major Internet service providers to block access to one of Malaysia's most prominent independent news websites, *Malaysia Today*, under the Communications and Multimedia Act, citing "national interest" (Reporters, "Authorities…"). Again, BN did its best to vehemently discourage journalists from presenting alternate viewpoints.

Simultaneously, the digital realm was leveraged for government support. It was harder for the government to respond to and suppress criticism online, but it ultimately held certain advantages online from its organized position and size. In terms of the business model for digital news, ad revenue and multi-channel dissemination of information are requirements to successfully capture an audience. These necessities come easiest to established news giants and conglomerate groups, which have the name value and reach to fit a genuinely 24/7 business model. The Malaysian media giants that owned the BN-friendly newspapers, such as *The Star*, *New Straits Times*, and *Berita Harian*, stepped into the digital age by consolidating through mergers and acquisitions (Tapsell, "New…"). Their head start occurred while independent media entities had trouble just getting started trying to reach readers at the same pace. *Malaysiakini* has been twice denied a printing license, striving for the same multichannel positioning as other media groups, even after winning a landmark freedom of expression case on the matter ("Despite…"). In one sense new digital developments had increased transparency in a media environment that needed it, but the system was still rigged. At the same time, a

slim win by BN in GE12, without a two-thirds majority for the first time since 1969, signaled forward progress.

Spreading Dissent via Social Media

In 2008, Malaysia had 800,000 Facebook and 3,429 Twitter users. By 2013, 13.2 million Malaysians were on Facebook and 2 million on Twitter (Gomez, p. 96). GE13, like GE12, had introduced a new electoral media environment. This change came at a time when the opposition had gained momentum, promising an even more competitive race. But BN was ready to counter the opposing views shared on social media by getting tougher on journalists. Instead of just threatening reporters and implying legal trouble, it started to take concrete action against them. Authorities held a blogger in jail in 2012 under the Official Secrets Act, attempting to turn a simple defamation case into a matter of state security (Reporters, "Blogger…"). Social media presented a unique challenge to government censorship, and BN's fear of how quickly opposition voices could now spread showed in its actions.

However, BN found ways to score its own political points using social media's reach by leveraging its established size and budget, as it had done with new media. In the first half of 2013, BN's advertising expenditure, which included online election advertising for the first time, totaled an unusually high $162 million. This spike was driven by Najib's office, which multiplied its spending fivefold from the previous year. By April 2013, BN's investment in social media proved successful; Najib had 1.46 million Twitter followers, with opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim well behind at 267,000 (Gomez, pp. 99–100). It was a matter of organization: the opposition's momentum was distributed compared to BN's concentration on making Najib its unified figurehead.

Najib's strong brand was also enhanced through traditionally controlled news, including the *New Strait Times,* which promoted his promise to increase cash handouts. Ahead of GE13, Najib handed out an estimated RM11 billion ($3.6 billion) over the course of an 18-month scheme (Grant). The multichannel success BN was enjoying from

prominent social media to complimentary legacy publications starkly contrasted the struggles of government-harassed independent news sites. To avoid looking anti-democratic, BN adopted a similar handout strategy to pacify press freedom complaints. BN amended the Printing Presses and Publications Act and cut the Internal Security Act, entirely (Tapsell, "New…"). These concrete steps appeared substantial because the relevant legislation had forced publications to hush anti-government rhetoric. However, when BN moved harshly back toward censorship after narrowly winning GE13, it was clear its purpose had been to gain votes.

On February 25, 2015, *Sarawak Report*, a niche news site founded by independent British journalist Clare Rewcastle Brown, released a bombshell piece entitled "HEIST OF THE CENTURY - How Jho Low Used PetroSaudi as 'A Front' To Siphon Billions Out of 1MDB!" This release started Rewcastle Brown's journey to uncover a scandal in which billions of dollars were elaborately funneled through a national company, whose mission was supposed to be strategic economic development, into investments diverted to Najib and his associates. The accusation was a direct attack on Najib, who was alleged to have personally received $681 million (Rewcastle Brown, *The Sarawak*…, p. 279). The government-controlled media largely refused to report on the 1MDB scandal, and those that did were met with a slew of attacks designed to discourage investigation. Three editors from *Malaysian Insider* were arrested for alleged sedition in March 2015 after pursuing the story. Even Rewcastle Brown, who is based in London and has familial connections to former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, was targeted. In order to continue pursuing the story, she withstood repeated cyber-attacks on her website, smear campaigns run against her by hired Malaysian media groups, and even an arrest warrant (Rewcastle Brown, *The Sarawak*…, p. 319). Now recognized as one of the largest international financial scandals in modern times, 1MDB signified a turning point for Malaysian media. The government's intentions to control the media in relation to the scandal were put on display.

With the intensity of an even more competitive GE14 approaching and the 1MDB scandal threatening his popularity, Najib was no longer prepared to give the illusion of a free press. He attacked digital freedoms using his vast social media following, lobbying public opinion with calls for "information from legitimate sources and not third-party news portals or online blogs that might have hidden agendas" (Rewcastle Brown, *The Sarawak*…, p. 225). Furthermore, in May 2017, a year before GE14, the MCMC launched Sebenarnya.my, a portal for Malaysian citizens to report falsehoods and check clarifications to combat false news. In just 6 months, the site received over 15 million hits ("MCMC's…"). Non-political clarifications were most common, but some announcements made closer to GE14 read more like propaganda, for instance, "Beware of False Information Dissemination by GE-14." In addition, BN made its greatest threat to press freedom by fast-tracking an anti–fake news bill into law in April 2018. The law's broad definition and harsh punishment of up to 6 years jail time and/or a maximum fine of RM500,000 ($129,500) was a clear attack on the media (Tapsell, "The Smartphone…," p. 23). Less than a week before GE14, BN weaponized the law to investigate opposition rival Dr. Mahathir Mohamad regarding his publicly stated suspicion that someone had sabotaged a private plane he was meant to take (Ananthalakshmi and Latiff). The public took note of this effort and the general appearance that the closer GE14 approached, the more desperate BN became.

WhatsApp's Prevalence in Political Discussion

A major way Malaysians discussed their opinions on GE14 issues such as 1MDB was through smartphones. Digital communication in Malaysia has ballooned beyond the urban hubs of Kuala Lumpur and Penang because Internet access via smartphone has reached many rural areas. The percentage of adults with Internet access in urban areas stayed stagnant from 2012 to 2017. The same measure grew from 24.2% to 57% for rural counterparts. In 2018, the MCMC reported that around 90% of Malaysian Internet users were using

a smartphone (Tapsell, "The Smartphone…," pp. 12–13). WhatsApp, specifically, has become a key facet of everyday life in Malaysia for communication with friends, family, coworkers, and businesses. Most importantly, WhatsApp has become an arena for digital news. Of all researched countries in the 2018 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, Malaysians showed the highest percentage of news consumption on WhatsApp in a given week at 54% participation, with Brazil next at 47%. Both countries, along with others whose citizens frequent WhatsApp for news, have something else in common: expressing political views online could lead to trouble with their authorities. The Reuters report explained this correlation by noting the encryption WhatsApp secures its messages with provides a place for safe political expression. With little faith in news overall, ranked 34th out of 37 countries by Reuters, Malaysians have been looking for entirely new media formats (Nic et al., pp. 11–13, 16). That is why WhatsApp public groups are so important. Although it was never the intention of the app, public groups have been used, at times, to establish independent "newsrooms." A WhatsApp public group is a messaging channel that anyone can join,[1] as opposed to invite-only private groups that are typically created for friends or family. Public groups are communities for discussion, including ones that focus on politics.

To appreciate the impact of political WhatsApp public groups on the news cycle, it is important to understand how political conversations play out in these groups. A technical paper published by social computing researcher Josemar Caetano and colleagues in 2018 provided a breakthrough on this topic by characterizing 270,000 messages and 7,000 users in WhatsApp public groups, some politically focused and some not. This research is relevant to Malaysia's media environment because it was done in Brazil, a country whose citizens also say they cannot trust traditional channels and have an extremely high adoption of WhatsApp for news. The results depict an interesting system in which political WhatsApp groups appear substantially different from non-political groups. By statistically classifying the

messages into groups labeled "sessions," the researchers found sessions in political groups have more messages, more participating users, and longer durations compared to non-political ones. This disparity is reflected in the average amount of time between messages: 2.8 minutes for political versus 12.4 minutes for non-political. Despite the clear evidence for greater engagement in political groups, looking closer at the data shows that the greater activity is concentrated among the few most engaged members (Caetano et al.). The most active users moderate discussions, with passive users only chiming in when a relevant topic prompts their expertise or opinions. Caetano and colleagues liken the collaborative format to talk shows, with hosts and an audience, which have sprung up organically in response to unreliable facilitation of news on real TV.

As Brazilian citizens have turned to WhatsApp to supplement a similarly restrictive media environment, the conditions surrounding Malaysia's GE14, labeled a "WhatsApp election" (Tan, "It's…"), suggest it was influenced by WhatsApp communication, including similar political talk shows. Ross Tapsell, an expert on Southeast Asian media, who researched on and lurked in WhatsApp public groups ahead of GE14, confirmed that political operatives were aware of how important WhatsApp groups were to swaying public opinion. UMNO, for instance, through its IT Bureau, created infrastructure via WhatsApp to disseminate information from the state level down to village levels and grassroots communities. Tun Faisal, Chairman of the UMNO Youth New Media Unit, said, "Previously we relied on blogs and Facebook, now the communication infrastructure of WhatsApp is core business" (Tapsell, "The Smartphone…," p. 16). Tapsell also shared findings on what ordinary Malaysians chose to discuss as topics of rumor and conversation. Of course, 1MDB was central to debate. As awareness spread of the aggressive tactics deployed by BN to keep the scandal covered up, those tactics started to backfire. Angry, skeptical Malaysians were not pacified by government handouts this time. Focused on the country's financials, some users Tapsell observed believed that government funds, such as those raised by the

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[1] Up to 256 members.

vastly unpopular goods and services tax (GST), were being used to pay back bonds 1MDB had borrowed to finance the bogus "investments" of the company. Others suspected the GST helped fund Najib's wife Rosmah's shopping sprees. BN could not contain the viral nature of such accusations. An anonymous government social media campaigner told Tapsell that trying to deny them "just leads to more negative comments, so we stopped trying" (Tapsell, "The Smartphone…," p. 19). Thanks to WhatsApp, it was a popular opinion among everyday Malaysians that they were being stolen from and silenced, and they were prepared to act. BN was ousted in the election by a convincing margin, reinforcing that this "WhatsApp election" had altered Malaysia's electoral paradigm.

Analysis of a Post-GE14 Media Environment

When visiting shortly after the election, I asked locals, ranging from regular citizens to think tank researchers, about the future of Malaysia's media. It was hesitantly suggested to me that legacy government-controlled publications might increase their legitimacy because of Mahathir's campaign promise to repeal a number of repressive media laws (Tan, "Dr M…"). Less than 2 weeks after being elected, Mahathir seemed to change his mind. He was condemned by Reporters Without Borders after he publicly said the Anti-Fake News Act would not be scrapped entirely, but instead amended. All things, he said, including the press, had a limit to their freedoms (Deloire). Eventually, Mahathir and Pakatan Harapan (PH) did follow through in August to start the repeal process in the House of Representatives. However, the Senate, in which disgruntled members of BN still own the majority, voted 28-21 to reject the repeal, saying the bill needed amending not removal (Venkiteswaran). As of now, the law stands, although the attempted repeal should signal the current administration has no intention to enforce it. It also remains to be seen whether PH is serious about fulfilling its promises to repeal the remaining acts, which may not have made headlines like the Anti-Fake News Act but have caused greater harm in the history of Malaysian media. Even in a post-BN era,

progress is clearly slow.

With long-term decline and bureaucratic amendment processes, traditional media may be running out of time to regain legitimacy. Malaysians have begun to ignore mainstream media, only trusting the news 30% of the time. Even TV3, the free-to-air channel that almost half of Malaysians tune into in a given week, has the lowest brand trust among viewers compared to other top news sources. Yahoo! News is currently the country's most trusted news brand, and *Malaysiakini* leads all competition as 44% of Malaysians use it weekly (Nic et al., pp. 131–32). Additionally, according to digital traffic rankings from web analytics compiler Alexa, *The Star Online* is the only traditional news site in the top 50. *Malaysiakini*, along with social and blog sites like YouTube, Facebook, Blogspot, and WordPress, ranks well ahead ("Top…"). While they serve many purposes other than news, these sites have clearly captured a great market share of digital users; 72% of Malaysians use social media as a source for news compared to 57% for TV and 41% for print publications (Nic et al., p. 132). These figures suggest a possible future without the need for mainstream media even if it does repair trust.

At the same time, there is some truth to what the Anti-Fake News Act stated as its goal. There has been a worldwide rise in misinformation because of how easy it is to share eye-catching news on social media. A 2017 study found false news is 70% more likely to be reshared on Twitter (Vosoughi et al., p. 1149), which, like Facebook and YouTube, algorithmically displays content based partly on how much engagement it gets. Malaysia's news distribution environment is headed in a slightly different direction because, in addition to those platforms, it depends highly on WhatsApp, which has historically chosen not to filter and order content. Yet, if false content is being shared in WhatsApp chats, the consequences remain. To fix the root of the problem, Malaysia will need a dependable set of outlets, mainstream or independent, that can be trusted as content is distributed through WhatsApp. In order to do its part to achieve this, the government's first and foremost goal must be to convince its citizens that the press

can operate free from state influence, without fear of retaliation. This will never happen until the antiquated legislation that threatens journalists and publications is removed. In the history of Malaysian media, reporters have been targeted at every step because these policies were used as ammunition. If PH wants to represent prosperity for Malaysians, it needs to fulfill its campaign promises to repeal these problematic laws—from the Anti-Fake News Act to the Sedition Act.

Malaysian journalists and broadcasters must also take the brave step forward of demanding their freedom to report the truth. This should consist of not only asking important questions and scrutinizing government positions while reporting but also challenging structure and policy. A joint statement from a united set of journalist groups exemplified this mission, proposing the formation of a Malaysian Media Council Journalists Alliance to represent Malaysian journalists. The message responded to the stated intention of the government to set up a Malaysian media council without consulting journalists or the public. The statement added, "We also believe that any effort towards the creation of a media council will be futile if it's not in tandem with the repeal and/or amendment of certain repressive laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984" ("Journalists'…"). This statement is a prototype of how the press itself can do its part. In conjunction with governmental action, journalists' exertion of power gives Malaysia a chance to legitimize its mainstream media.

Alternatively, trust might be put in the social platforms themselves, which have been under increased scrutiny to take responsibility for the role they have played in spreading misinformation. WhatsApp responded by debuting a fact-checking service in April 2019, implemented in time for voters to verify discourse by sending in tips leading up to India's national elections. Despite this representing a first attempt by WhatsApp, and by no means a committed long-term solution, the company said it would also be populating a database of the rumors to learn from the data set going forward (Ravikumar). By completion of the month-long election in the world's biggest

WhatsApp market by volume, the company had received 75,000 verification requests and was seeing trends in duplicate or related claims (Chaturveti). This attempt proves that in addition to governmental policy, WhatsApp and other social media companies will have a big stake in how democracy plays out in future Malaysian elections.

Conclusion

After decades of a familiar pattern in which Malaysia's ruling government suppressed journalists and exercised control over media channels, new technologies have disrupted the status quo. At each step in the changing media environment, BN took advantage of its money and/or stature to combat the chance that innovation would give a voice to dissenters. When the country's Internet penetration spiked ahead of GE12, opening up room for independent platforms, government-owned publications consolidated through mergers and acquisitions to outsize competitors in the digital arena. When Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube became the dominant media ahead of GE13, the government's advertising budget funded a concentrated push to increase Najib's Twitter base. And when WhatsApp finally gave Malaysians a place to safely discuss politics ahead of GE14, new legislation was introduced that threatened to jail those who shared arbitrarily assessed misinformation. Although the tactics changed over time, it was always about preventing the spread of information. Now, with a new government for the first time in 61 years, Malaysia can finally ask itself how it may repair its broken media environment.

What trajectory should Malaysia take to ensure the health and freedom of its press—including legacy publications, newer independent sites, personal blogs, and social platforms—at this turning point in its history? Currently, Malaysia has a weak mainstream media but a strong independent media that has leveraged WhatsApp to keep the public informed without becoming part of the mainstream. In Malaysia's alternate media environment, WhatsApp provides superior distribution channels because its encrypted messages allow people to speak freely about political issues without any interference or

surveillance. With these conditions, especially after a miraculous democratic victory by PH, it is worth considering whether Malaysia should bother to prioritize centralized, mainstream media, including outlets that have been used as a tool of corruption for so long. Regardless of what direction is pursued, it is of vital importance to abandon the oppressive Anti-Fake News, Sedition, and Printing Presses and Publications Acts. These potential legislative steps, in conjunction with further investment in democratic integrity by WhatsApp and other media companies, give Malaysia a chance to become a model for how a historically restricted press may one day thrive.

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