ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Investigating the use of Social Media Among the Young Urban Middle Class in Malaysian Politics, and its Potential Role in Changing the Nation’s Political Landscape

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to examine a relationship between the usage of social media and its potential role in changing Malaysian political landscape. Online survey was conducted amongst 130 respondents that comprise Malaysia’s young urban middle class population aged between 21 and 40 living in the Klang Valley. The findings suggested that social media has played and will continue to play a significant role in transforming Malaysia’s political landscape. To the young urban middle class segment, it has opened up their democratic space and this fits in with their expectations to express their views and feelings freely over the handling of the country’s political issues by the present administration. In short, the “government supported” mainstream media is perceived as not providing a balanced coverage in comparison to social media which the young urban educated Malaysians seek out to satisfy their curiosity for information and freedom in discussing issues deemed too sensitive in the mainstream media.

Key words: Social media, young urban, middle-class, Malaysian politics, political landscape.

Introduction

The past ten years saw the vast development and evolution of social media tools such as the Short Messaging System (SMS), Blogs, Flickr, YouTube, LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter creating a worldwide phenomenon. Today, Facebook and Twitter have turned into significant social media tools, not only for socially-related purposes but more importantly, for political objectives. Being the most popular social media device for communication, in 2011 Facebook recorded more than 640 million users worldwide, followed by Twitter with 200 million tweets per day (www.google.com). As such, it is not surprising that users of these latest communication channels have become aware of its influence at inducing and persuading people to act or do something, particularly in altering a country’s political system.

Although there has been continuous discourse on the growing popularity of Facebook and Twitter as social media devices in Malaysia and other parts of the world, particularly in the country’s political debates, there has been mixed opinions on its significance and influence in shifting the political landscape of the country. Some scholars in the field of social sciences believe that social media has proven itself to be very powerful in altering the political setting of nations whilst a number others are skeptical on its effectiveness. In fact, some even argued that these new media has damaged the hard work of the government at democratization and is useful only as a government instrument to stifle opposing views towards its agenda.

This paper is based on an exploratory study aimed at investigating the use of social media among the young urban middle class in Malaysian politics, and its potential role in changing the nation’s political landscape. It attempts to establish whether social media tools and their networking capabilities have become an agenda for political engagement and whether these tools are perceived as a political instrument.

Social Media’s Influence as a Political Media Instrument:

One cannot help but make history and past experiences a guide to better understand why certain situation
came about to being what it is today. It is by enlightening ourselves with lessons from the past that we can predict and anticipate what is to become of our future. Tracing back the earliest use of social media as an instrument for political discourse, Philippines President Joseph Estrada was said to have held “the text-messaging generation” responsible for his downfall as a leader of the Philippines in 2001. In 2004, the Prime Minister of Spain, Jose Maria Aznar was ousted by means of street demonstrations which were prearranged by way of text messaging (Garfield, 2009).

Additionally, the 2009 “Twitter Revolution” as an event in Moldova which saw the widespread use of twitter to coordinate protests against the Moldovan elections. In 2010, a majority of the protesters involved in the Red Shirt uprising in Thailand, utilized Twitter and other forms of social media to take over downtown Bangkok for days although a number of them endured death during the turmoil while they were being dispersed by the Thai government (Shirky, 2011).

Nevertheless, the first great social media campaign that has been quoted in many recent studies on social media is the 2008 Barack Obama, United States (US) presidential campaign (Woods, 2011). In the US where social media is widely used in politics, it was meant to provide a channel to create better and transparent communication between the electorates and politicians. When managed well by a politician, it can be employed to win over supporters, and in Barack Obama’s case, the historic success of his campaign was evidenced by the number of innovations he initiated to engage potential voters (Carpenter, 2010). During the election, Obama played a crucial role to bring in social media into his political campaign. Apart from Blogs, he used social media networking sites which include Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Twitter, furnishing the greatest political campaign ever, and putting the first black president into the White House.

In fact, the utilization of social media to goad for social change is widespread in many other countries particularly in the politically dictatorial regimes. It is in these countries that “citizen journalists” and “netizens” or “internet activists” take it upon themselves to place pictures, videos and feed images to streaming websites with the ultimate aim to bring down the existing government and replace it with what they describe as a “more democratic leadership”. Katz J.E et al (2004) indicated that the internet as an effectively dominant technological discovery has turned the citizens to be competent at opposing the world around them. As it stands, the emergence of social media, citizen journalism and blogs have helped disseminate and filter information and in Iran for instance, “these individuals used social networking sites such as YouTube and Flickr to bring multimedia out of the distressed country through Twitter and status updates in Facebook to spread videos virally” (Parr, 2009), which led to the people’s revolt against its government. Other noteworthy events that marked the impact of the widespread use of social media in prompting political and social change are the Arab uprisings in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt. The successful uprisings by citizens in these countries have been famously referred to as “Twitter Revolution” and “Facebook Revolution” (Reporters Without Borders, 2011).

Discussion on the growth of social media in Malaysia will not be complete without some mention of the expected consequence to the social, cultural and political effects of globalization which began back in the mid-1980s during the time where the internet medium has yet to take off. The conflict of religious and traditional values with the government’s modernization and technological programs persisted and prevailed when internet arrived in mid-1990. The emergence of this new medium in Malaysia brought along new “Western-oriented” ideological thoughts such as right to freedom of opinion and expression, which eventually made it convenient for those unhappy with the government to express their political thoughts freely.

This development in the mid-90s also came along with a resurgence in the political culture of democratization and freedom of speech amongst Asia’s middle class population, the educated group of white-collar professionals, managerial and administrative workforce who are relatively privileged in employment and income terms (Abdul Rahman, 2002), in comparison to the working class population. As a result to the new developmental modernization that is associated with Western democracy and globalization and the government’s liberalization policy on online media, the internet medium became the focal point of Malaysia’s young urban middle class community in expressing their discontent towards the “one-sided reporting and control” of the local traditional media which sided the government.

This dissatisfaction led to serious political reactions in 1998 which shocked the nation. The sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim during this year left the country with a political crisis which saw thousands of young middle class demonstrating on the streets of Kuala Lumpur in support of Anwar. It was during this time that the internet produced more than 50 websites (Woodier, 2008) that backed the opposition leader and blamed the government and the government-supported mainstream media. With the mounting involvement of the internet medium among the young middle class, the new media became a cyber meeting place for opinions, rumors and political discourse, although accuracy of the information exchange could not be verified (Wong, 2000). As a result of the popularity and influence of internet sites and news portals, the
November 1999 general elections became the opening year where the cyberspace was used as an important medium for election campaigning between both the government and the opposition political parties. As a consequence, results of the November 1999 general elections demonstrated that although the ruling government maintained its two-thirds majority in parliament and managed to stay united, the win was one of its lowest over the years. Other than the impact of internet, one of the factors could be due to the dissatisfaction of the middle class group towards the lack of the ruling government’s earnest effort in relation to political and economic reforms, and human rights policy (see Torii, 2003). Realizing this situation as something that must be addressed, in October 2003 the government under the leadership of the comparatively moderate Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who took over from the more commanding Mahathir’s 22 year rule, made promises for democratic and economic reforms which resulted in the ruling National Front coalition gaining a landslide victory in the 2004 Malaysian general elections. This major win, which yielded 92 percent government control in parliament, is a far cry from the slim margin it gained in the 1999 elections (Liew, 2006). Taking into consideration this development, it is perhaps safe to presume that despite the increased use of internet websites, blogs or SMS, Malaysian youths then, in particular its young urban middle class group were concerned on prodding the government to reform its existing policies. As evidenced by the results of the 2004 general election, they seem to have hopes of greater freedom and empowerment as promised made by Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. As Abdul Rahman (2001) asserted, it seems that whilst those members of the new middle class supported democracy, they were also oriented to the maintenance of law and order and therefore did not necessarily oppose state authoritarianism.

Nevertheless, as the growth and popularity of social media escalates in tandem with the demands for more political and social reforms by its young urban middle class, rumblings and discontentment on the government’s promises for better governance, transparency and accountability became the order of the day in cyberspace. Consequently, in the 2008 general election, the government lost its two-thirds majority in parliament and for the first time since its 55 years of rule, five states fell into the hands of opposition parties. Scholars and journalists attributed this shocking lost of government seats to the opposition to the massive use of social media tools by the electorates (Fama and Tam, 2010), particularly the supporters and sympathizers of the opposition parties. Steele (2009) further pointed out that the success of five opposition bloggers in the election who were subsequently elected to Parliament “seemed to spell an unambiguous victory of the power of online media.”

After the unexpected 2008 event, three years later Malaysians went on to witness the increased use of social media in political discourse when on July 9, 2011, a few thousand demonstrators turned up in the centre of Kuala Lumpur to demand electoral reforms from the government. This protest was known as the Bersih 2.0 rally. Bersih which means clean in the Malay language comprises an alliance of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and civil-rights organizations that demands the electoral system cleaned up to ensure that all parties are given an impartial chance of winning elections. They declared that the electoral system thus far was supportive towards the ruling government. Less than a year later, on 28 April, 2012 as a reaction to the coalition’s argument that the government has not fulfilled their demands for a clean electoral system, the Bersih 3.0 was unleashed and thousands of youth and the middle class, protested on the streets of Kuala Lumpur and other parts of the country. Clearly, this is an apparent indication of the power of social media, as efficaciously utilized by the Bersih 3.0 organizers to effectively influence the tech-savvy young urban middle class to join hands in their bid “to bring about a stronger system of democracy supported by honesty and inclusion”. Despite all the reactions, the questions that arise are: if Malaysia’s young middle class are influenced by the social media tools and consequently participate in politically related activities, to what extent is their use of the social media for political purposes? The next question that follows is, does the use of social media in political discourse fulfill the needs of Malaysia’s young urban middle class? Finally, since urban middle-class activism in Malaysia is seen as a call for protest towards the existing administration, how vital is the role of social media for these young Malaysians in reviewing or changing the country’s political landscape?

Taking into account the capability of social media in engaging young Malaysians to gather for a common cause, this exploratory study attempts to investigate and establish the powerful capability of social media, particularly its penetration level and its openness that influences the involvement of Malaysia’s young middle class in their attempt to review or even change Malaysia’s political landscape.

It is hoped that the findings of this preliminary study would provide clear directions for further research in the area to add to the current but scarce resources on the subject.

Research Methodology:

In line with the subject being studied, a quantitative research method using the internet survey technique amongst Malaysia’s young urban middle class respondents between the age of 21 and 40 was conducted between May 15 and June 10, 2012. As indicated earlier, since this is a preliminary study, it involves only 130 respondents who were selected using the purposive sampling technique who completed the online questionnaire on a voluntary basis. They comprise white collar office workers and professionals, both male and female, and of
three major ethnic groups of Malays, Chinese and Indians as well as a few from other ethnic groups living in
Klang Valley. The final sample comprised a slightly imbalanced distribution of 44% males and 55% females and
ethnicity (57% Malays, 25% Chinese, 9% Indians and 9% others). It must be emphasized that due to the small
sample size and the limited accessibility of sampling data, the findings of this study is only based on simple raw
data information and can only be generalized to the population for those who fulfill the above mentioned
characteristics within the Klang Valley area. In short, it can act as a guide for a more comprehensive and
representative research in the subject. Also, this study employed the SurveyMonkey online survey software.
This software computed results that combined scores based on the responses to the questions.

Findings:

On the issue of the extent of social media usage in politics among the young urban middle class in Klang
Valley, as expected Facebook championed the list (95%) followed by YouTube (70%) and blogs (61.7%). These
were the most popular social media platforms which respondents frequent for political news, discussions and
engagements. In terms of frequency of engagement in political discussion, about 45% were active participants
while 53% have posted political news online and about 45% does it frequently (31% quite often and 13% very
often) (see Charts 7, 8 and 9). These figures alone demonstrate the obvious attention of a significant number of
respondents towards the country’s political background. With regards to whether they post politically related
videos online, about 45.2% said they have (see Chart 10). Clearly, the usage of social media among a sizeable
percentage of Malaysia’s young urban middle class to discuss and engage in politics is developing into a norm.

In the study’s second objective which attempts to find out whether the use of social media fulfills the needs
of the young urban middle class, by and large the results suggest that social media does satisfy the wishes of the
respondents in that they get news a lot faster (strongly agree: 56%; agree: 34%) than mainstream media (see
Chart 12); 61 percent disagree and strongly disagree (see Chart 13) that the information and news they get from
online sites are not as reliable as those from the mainstream media; and 59% disagree and strongly disagree (see
Chart 14) that they are able to voice out their political views and opinions in the mainstream media and be
assured that they get published. This is further emphasized from the responses on two other questions relating to
the mainstream media. Firstly, they strongly agree (25%) and agree (44%) that their need for a much more
balanced reporting and coverage on the country’s political issues is fulfilled through the use of online media (see
Chart 15) and secondly, they disagree (29%) and strongly disagree (30%) that the mainstream media gives them
the freedom to think, explore and debate on matters concerning the country’s political issues (see Chart 26).
Additionally, a notable 86% (35% strongly agree and 51% agree) see the need to use social media to explore
political issues.

The third objective of the study is aimed at finding out the potential of social media in altering the country’s
political landscape. Charts 23 through to 34 summarize the results based on the questions posed. As depicted in
Chart 24, 86% (49.0% strongly disagree and 27% disagree) opposed the idea that the country’s mainstream
media is balanced in their reporting and coverage, regardless of whether it is supported by the government or
otherwise. This response is confirmed when 76% (41% strongly agree and 35% agree) approved that social
media is a reliable source of political news in the country as compared to the mainstream media.

Interestingly, with regards to their view on trustworthiness of the social media, a decent 39% were neutral,
although a total of 53% (39% disagree and 14% strongly disagree) find it trustworthy (see Chart 18).
Nevertheless, 94% (see Chart 26) were of the opinion that social media when combined with other political
tools can be a powerful tool to help transform the country. Additionally, in Chart 27, 76% of the respondents
(41% disagree and 35% strongly disagree) believe that social media has the capability to promote free speech
and democracy. Again, 82% (see Chart 28) were of the opinion that social media through various social
networking sites has the potential to increase political engagement.

As expected, when asked whether social media has played a large and effective part in mobilizing support
for people to attend the recent BERSIH 3.0 rally, as Chart 30 demonstrates, 94% consented. Other than the
respondents’ perception on the issue of social media’s potential in transforming the country’s political landscape,
a number of questions were asked on their participation in politically related activities in the social media.
Referring to Chart 33, slightly more than half (25% strongly agree and 32% agree) that, they have joined online
groups to rally against a particular issue during the past year. Lastly, 34% of the respondents (see Chart 34) state
they have either worked/am working voluntarily or otherwise for a particular interest group during the past year.

Discussion and conclusion:

The use of social media for political purposes is true to both politicians and citizens of Malaysia. This has
manifested in recent years and is showing no signs of slowing down. Evidences of this exploratory study clearly
suggests that social media is indeed capable of influencing the politics of Malaysia. As the findings suggest,
while Facebook, YouTube and blogs are major social media platforms actively used by the young urban middle
class, almost half of them however, are heavy users and are actively involved. The fact that they engage regularly in online political exchanges by way of discussions, posting political news and videos illustrates the significance of social media use in Malaysian politics among the young urban middle class. As indicated by Rainee and Horrigon (2007), this phenomenon is certainly not surprising as young educated people are moving away from newspapers and other traditional media as a source of political information and towards the social networking sites in the internet. Looking at the massive use of Facebook, YouTube, blogs and other sites, one cannot deny the immense influence these social media platforms wield on the thinking of the young urban middle class, especially on political issues.

The study’s findings also reveal that social media has proven to satisfy the needs of the young urban middle class for reasons expected of the young minds. The news they get from the social media platforms are not only faster but many among them also perceived that the news and information as more reliable than the mainstream media. Undoubtedly, with Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and blogs turning into essential media outlets that offer more agreeable perspectives, these media options have provided the young urban middle class with exposure of political news and information that goes beyond what the mainstream media can provide. Furthermore, as Marcus et al. (2000) posit, politics often give way to emotional reaction, particularly for those with strongly held political beliefs. They may keep away from media outlets that they perceive as creating negative feelings towards them and that they believe as being imbalanced in the coverage of news and information on politics. As an alternative, they would look for and explore media outlets that can provide an avenue to express their freedom to deliberate, discuss and argue on political issues (see Mutz and Martin, 2001). In other words, social media matches with their personal thoughts and inclination towards politics and this strongly held personal beliefs are more likely to influence their decision on which media outlets they want to engage in. Obviously, social media outlets would be their choice as Facebook, blogs, Twitter and YouTube are accessible and personally relevant to them. This is further supported by Jonas et al. (2005) who conceive that when probing for the latest information, people often prefer previously held beliefs, expectations, or desired conclusions.

Nonetheless, although social media has effectively succeeded in changing the political landscape of four famously quoted “Arab Spring” Middle Eastern governments of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen in 2011, one cannot equate this situation with Malaysia as the socio-economic situation and environment are quite different. Although the Bersih rallies that were held in Malaysia saw the participation of a large number of young urban middle class to demand for a more democratic space from the government, it is to our mind not meant to start a revolution like what happened in the “Arab Spring” countries.

However, despite Malaysia’s impressive economic record and well-planned vision to be a developed nation by 2020, these events are certainly an eye-opener to the present government administration wherein the young urban middle class have become more forceful than before in demanding for their needs and wants for more free speech and fair elections. Undoubtedly, social media’s primary involvement has demonstrated the capability of these young Malaysians at organizing an immense and speedy reaction, effectual retrieval of information, making connection for the purpose of attaining freedom of speech and embarking on joint action for a common cause. The currently popular Facebook and Twitter, social media tools like blogs, email and other networking sites have certainly been perceived as safe sites for anti-government political expression capable of changing the character of political campaigning. On the other hand, although one can safely assume that social media has the capability to significantly transform the politics of a country, it is important to emphasize that social media has yet to prove its mettle in countries where there is no change in leadership (see Shirky, 2011) such as that of Iran, Malaysia and Thailand.

Existing literature and studies focusing on social media’s influence in Malaysia so far also found differing views and conclusions in its role and extent of its impact at changing the political landscape. Many of the more recent work use the last general election as a benchmark and these studies carried out by a number of researchers including Azizzuddin and Zengeni (2010), Fama and Tam (2010), Khoo (2010), Chin and Wong (2009), Maznah (2008) and Ibrahim (2008) point to social media as the contributing factor to the opposition winning five states in the 2008 12th General Election. Based on this, their conclusion is that social media indeed has the capability to influence the politics of Malaysia. Taking a slightly different view, Gomez and Han (2010) while acknowledging that social media has demonstrated its potential in the last general election in Malaysia, insist that its impact in the election outcomes is “inconclusive” with no significant changes, stressing on the need for a longer term assessment by looking at future elections.

Regardless of the conclusion made by various scholars, none of them deny that social media is very much ahead in terms of its effectiveness at political campaigning and disseminating information to the public as compared to the mainstream media. As Chin and Wong (2010) asserted, with social media, there is finally a platform for people to voice their discontent. Meanwhile, in “Press Freedom, New Media and Political Communication in Malaysia – A Society in Flux”, Knirsch and Kratzenstein (2010) conclude that social media has a great influence on the political communication in the country and that its use is growing relentlessly. In furtherance to this, Liow and Afif (2010) eloquently describe social media as “the norms and values of independent journalism” that became a threat to the government. Clearly, with the events going on in almost
every country of the world, one can infer that as long as the internet networking sites continue to exist, liberated from censorship and rule of law, there is bound to be greater democratic change. In fact, one can presume that the government has acknowledged internet and social media as the most workable resource for information of which the mainstream media will not be able to match. Certainly, they are taking every effort to take advantage of the internet media in wooing the “independent-minded” young urban middle class whose political loyalties are still interchangeable.

Regardless of the conclusion made from the arguments put forth, considering the limitations of this exploratory research which has been mentioned earlier, it is pertinent to note that there is certainly a need for further research to gain more conclusive evidence in establishing social media’s crucial role in Malaysian politics.

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