

## Political Deliberation on the Internet: The Malaysian Political Parties' Web Sphere

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**Abstract:** This study examines the role of the internet in shaping political deliberation in Malaysia. The aim of this study is to investigate the extent to which the political parties' websites have contributed to the emergence of deliberative democracy in Malaysia. Specifically, it explores the extent to which the internet has liberalised access to information and opened up new spaces for discussion in a country where most conventional media is controlled by the government and public discourse is restricted. Based on hyperlink analysis, the study finds a complex evolution of the online political information offered to voters. Although, the parties' web sphere have broadened participation in public debate, the data also identify that its role in facilitating and enhancing deliberative democracy in Malaysia is still limited as many political actors continue to control and manipulate information for political purposes.

**Key words:** Websites, political deliberation, political parties, Malaysian politics, information

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### INTRODUCTION

The potential for the internet enabling a democracy renewal of liberal democracy through the provision of a new public sphere or so called deliberative democracy. Many studies have generally either focused on its potential to promote a more deliberative democracy (Dahlberg, 2001) or of specifically on how the structure of the web can enhance democracy by delivering a more networked public sphere. It should be pointed out that not all scholars are optimistic about the potential of the internet in contribute to deliberative democracy. Some scholars caution that the loose network of informal discussions and the overwhelming crowd in cyberspace might not produce the best results for deliberative democracy. Margolis and Resnick argue that the internet has created "politics as usual" and has tended to normalise political activity by reflecting and reinforcing patterns of behaviour and the socio-political structure of "real life" without making any changes in the online space. Norris (2003) notes that political parties' websites do not facilitate public discussion. They use, rather, a top-down model of political participation, since the websites are used only to publicise announcements, not to generate political discussion. Whilst this study will not concern itself with the deliberative democracy debate. It is interested in the notion of the web structurally enabling public sphere within the context of political parties. As such this study will contribute to this scholarship by

providing empirical evidence on the prospects of the web enhancing democracy through facilitating a networked public sphere.

This study uses the case of the web networked strategies by Malaysian political parties to consider whether the web promotes the development of rational public sphere and thus enabling deliberative democracy take place. Habermas (1996) described the normative notion of the public sphere as a democratic space in which citizens can argue and exchange views on problems in order to achieve mutual understanding regarding the common good especially about the role of government. The public sphere is a mediating space between the state and civil society. For Habermas, the relationship between citizens engaged in public discourse and communication is a critical criterion of the public sphere (Habermas, 1996). He idealised the concept of the public sphere to include the following factors: rational-critical discourse; an inclusive public; disregard for rank (social status should not play a role); a space removed from state control and no-one competent to speak should be excluded. This idea projects rational public opinion as both outside state control and an effective check of government misconduct. In this sense, the public sphere mediates and moderates the political atmosphere by including citizens regardless of status and background.

In order to consider whether political parties promote development of a rational public sphere, this study operationalize the term as communication strategies by

political parties that are characterised by interactive communication of political parties in mediating issue of common interest. To visualise the ways in which parties' foster online communication strategies, this study employs the issue crawler software to map incoming and outgoing links that relate to the parties' websites. Given the widespread use of social networking tools, it is important to demonstrate how the discussion about parties occurs through various internet platforms such as blogging portals, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook.

**Political parties and online deliberation:** Though rarely discussed in the context of Malaysian politics, deliberative democracy has been paid much attention by many scholars over several decades (Fishkin, 1995; Habermas, 1996). For them, legitimacy of lawmaking and the government can be achieved through the public deliberations of citizens. Deliberation here basically refers to the rational discourse in which matters are debated in order to achieve understanding of the public issue. It is hoped that the practice of deliberation can be achieved in an arena of public sphere where individuals are able to engage in rational critical discourse free from state control and economic power (Habermas, 1996). Since the emergence of the internet, many scholars have seen it as a tool that could enhance deliberative democracy (Rheingold, 1994; Blumler and Coleman, 2001; Levine, 2003). The internet can facilitate the delivery of a great amount of information without constraints of time or space. It also enables people to engage in two-way communication at affordable cost. Moreover, the internet offers new opportunities to access information without the scrutiny of information-filtering institutions. It also enables more transparency in political institutions. Significantly, the internet has the potential to facilitate public discussion not only among the general public but also among political elites. Through these special characteristics, the internet provides new possibilities and hopes for deliberative democracy to be introduced in semi-democratic countries like Malaysia, where mainstream media have been controlled by government and freedom of expression is limited (Marzuki, 2004). Therefore, it is important to highlight here that this study emphasizes the deliberation potential in non-democratic countries.

A variety of studies investigate how political parties improve deliberative democracy through the use of ICT (Hacker and Dijk, 2000; Kamarck and Nye, 2002). Traditionally, political parties were based on centralized, hierarchical structures and one-to-many communication patterns. The internet provides a new public space in which citizens can connect with each other and parties

have the opportunity to adapt to the decentralised and many-to-many communication. Indeed, parties need to respond to these technological developments as the internet provides unprecedented opportunities for them to win support. This is especially true for those parties that are not in the mainstream. Political parties generally have been seen to be attempting to change their old-style operations to new more citizen-centric approaches. Scholars (Kluver, 2004; Norris, 2003) have pointed out that political party websites have the potential to encourage more people to participate in politics. Moreover, as citizens in a globalised world have become more educated and demanding, their desire also increases for greater involvement in the political process.

Websites are an immensely useful way for political parties to provide large quantities of information about the party's work to a large audience at a relatively low cost. They enable voters to easily access the kind of information that is generally not available in mass media, especially in countries such as Malaysia where opposition parties have limited access to mainstream media channels. Another, key advantage for parties using the internet is its inherent interactivity which allows for greater involvement of citizens in politics by enabling them to communicate with politicians, engage in meaningful dialogue and exchange ideas. Norris (2003) notes that websites potentially also encourage a "bottom-up" interactive form of communication which facilitates discussion and feedback through party websites. This two-way communication makes new ways of information dissemination possible and opens up space for dialogue and thus for political participation.

Another, important advantage of the web which is unique is that it allows the political parties to communicate with voters autonomously. In normal circumstances, particularly in traditional media, communication with voters is mediated through editorial policies and practices. The web, on the other hand, offers the opportunity for parties to convey their message to voters without any intervention. Moreover, voters can then use the website to fulfil their information needs and communicate directly with the party through online forums or emails. In such ways, political parties can create a new arena for the deliberative process and revive the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001). Through such spaces, online communication can increase democratic engagement and reinforce the relationship between political parties and voters. This type of political communication is an important part of deliberative democracy.

Despite this potential, several studies show that most political party websites are simply about the provision of

information and top-down processes rather than political (Stromer, 2000; Gibson and Ward, 2000; Herman, 2001; Ward and Gibson, 2003; Conway and Dorner, 2004). Most studies have found that political parties do not take full advantage of the web and presented their websites in boring or dull (Kluver, 2004). Parties make only limited use of the participatory and interactive features of the web. Often their websites also represent issues in the same way as the traditional media (Norris, 2003), despite a multitude of innovative options available to web designers. In short, most political parties use their websites for disseminating information only and neglect real political (Stromer, 2000; Herman, 2001; Ward and Gibson, 2003). Moreover, political parties been criticized for much focusing on the party symbol and candidate image instead of promoting issue with the masses.

As such this study examines the extent to which Malaysian political parties have used the web to develop interactive social media strategies. It looks beyond the features of the websites in order to access the potential of the parties' websites contributed to the emergence of political deliberation in Malaysia. To analyse this against the background of the deliberative democracy framework, try to visualise the ways in which parties' foster online communication, this study employs the Issue Crawler software to map incoming and outgoing links that relate to the parties' websites. Given the widespread use of social networking tools, it is important to demonstrate how the discussion about parties occurs through various internet platforms such as blogging portals, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook.

**Malaysian political parties and new media:** Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy with a federal parliament. The constitution provides a structure for the separation of powers. In practice, however, the concentration of power is in the hands of the executive and frequently the executive dominates the other two branches of government; the legislature and parliament (Hwang, 2003; Coruch, 1996). Malaysia also practices a multi-party system but in reality it is a single-party system. The dominance of the ruling coalition (Barisan Nasional BN which has ruled for over 56 year's has led to a hegemony of power. The opposition coalition (Pakatan Rakyat (PR) is only slowly developing and has little access to mass media which mostly is under the control of the BN. The mainstream media is a mouthpiece of the BN. Much of the mainstream media in the country are own directly or indirectly by entities linked to the BN. For example, media conglomerate, Media Prima with the government as a major stake holder, controls stakes in the New Straits Times, Berita Harian, Harian Metro, TV3, 8TV, NTV, TV9

and several more radio stations (Zaharom, 2002). The regulations in the country also hinder the freedom and autonomy of media. Well-known laws such as the Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA) 1984, Official Secret Act 1972 (OSA) and Sedition Act 1948 are used to muzzle the media and prevent the media from performing their function of check and balance on government. The BN leaves these structures in place to ensure the press is used to achieve its political goals (Zaharom, 2002).

Opposition parties operate in a restricted environment. In addition to very limited access to the mass media, they required permits from the Minister of Home Affairs (Kementerian Dalam Negeri (KDN) to produce any party publications. The permit is valid for one year and has to be renewed yearly subject to the ministry's approval (Kim, 2001). They also need to apply for a police permit 14 days before they are hold open air rallies (Azizuddin, 2008). Therefore, the internet provided the opposition with an additional opportunity for communication and information dissemination to the voters. Since 1990s, the opposition parties recognized this technology potential and made use of it, especially in the elections.

Generally, Malaysia opposition parties began by using the internet informally for internal communications and externally via 'mailing list group's to communicate with the voters. Formal websites were launched in the 1990s but only for information dissemination (Table 1). The parties used the websites to explain their policies, activities and personalities to the electorate. Gradually, by the mid 90's the way the internet was used in campaigns has ranged from the use of the party websites to the use of blogs particularly among the opposition leaders. Key political figures such as Lim Kit Siang and Anwar Ibrahim launched their blogs with regular updates and multiple posts daily, attracting huge numbers of visitors. Their blogs have links to the formal political parties' websites.

Since the early 2000's opposition parties have also used social media to broadcast videos of parliamentary debates on their websites. Most opposition leaders also have their own Facebook accounts; actively use Twitter, YouTube and also SMS by mobile phone. Despite the opposition's wide use of the internet; it made no major impact in the 2004 general election. Indeed major studies of the 2004 general election (Marzuki, 2004) which saw the BN win spectacularly, did not refer to the internet at all. It was only in the 2008 general elections and after 12 years of internet use, that a clear impact could be seen. Indeed, most observers cited the internet as one of the factors that contributed to the victory of the Opposition parties. The BN consists of fourteen political parties. The most prominent members have the majority of seats in

Table 1: Political parties' websites

Political party	Year of establishment	URL
<b>Ruling coalition</b>		
UMNO	2001	<a href="http://umno-online.com">http://umno-online.com</a>
MCA	1997	<a href="http://www.mca.org.my">http://www.mca.org.my</a>
MIC	2000	<a href="http://www.mic.org.my">http://www.mic.org.my</a>
Gerakan	2000	<a href="http://www.gerakan.org.my">http://www.gerakan.org.my</a>
PBS	1997	<a href="http://www.pbs-sabah.org">http://www.pbs-sabah.org</a>
<b>Opposition coalition</b>		
PAS*	1999	<a href="http://www.pas.org.my">http://www.pas.org.my</a>
DAP*	1996	<a href="http://www.dapmalaysia.org">http://www.dapmalaysia.org</a>
PKR*	2004	<a href="http://www.keadilanrakyat.com">http://www.keadilanrakyat.com</a>
<b>Other opposition parties</b>		
Malaysian People's Party (PRM)	2008	<a href="http://partirakyatmalaysia.blogspot.com">http://partirakyatmalaysia.blogspot.com</a>
Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP)	1996	<a href="http://www.sapp.org.my">http://www.sapp.org.my</a>
Malaysian Socialist Party	2003	<a href="http://www.parti-sosialis.org">http://www.parti-sosialis.org</a>

www.archive.org and interviews with opposition party webmasters

parliament and these are UMNO, MCA and MIC which are all ethnically based organisations. UMNO is the largest political party in Malaysia and the founding member of the BN. It has led the coalition and received consistent majority electoral support through the decades, particularly from the Malay community and this has helped it dominate the political system. MC aims to safeguard the rights and interests of Malaysia's Chinese community and other ethnic groups as provided in its constitution. It, too, has wielded strong influence in Malaysian politics for decades; however its influence decreased during the 2008 general election when the party lost almost half of its parliamentary seats. MIC is the third most important party in the BN and represents the Indian community. MIC began as a multi-racial organisation, led by non-communal members but since it received little support from the wider community, MIC joined the ruling alliance in 1954 and focused on representing the Indian community.

On the other side of the political divide is the opposition coalition PR which was formed following the dismissal and arrest of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim. Its three main parties are PAS, DAP and PKR. PAS is a Malay-based party which in the past advocated the establishment of an Islamic state. In the 1999 general election, PAS made great gains, winning in the two states of Kelantan and Terengganu and making deep inroads in other places in Peninsular Malaysia. PAS became a leading party in a short-lived opposition coalition, Barisan Alternative (Alternative Front) which also included KeADILAN, DAP and Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Party). This encouraged PAS to push for more Islamisation policies, prompting the DAP to leave the coalition after being unable to bridge its differences with PAS. After the 2004 general election, PAS adopted a moderate strategy in order to attract non-Muslim voters and changed its slogan to PAS for All.

Subsequently PAS started to tone down its Islamic-state rhetoric and began campaigning for a welfare state instead. Another prominent opposition party is PKR (Parti Keadilan Rakyat), created out of the reformasi movement. The PKR promotes an agenda with a strong social justice and anti-corruption emphasis. The party targets multi-racial votes and is thus very different from PAS and DAP. In the 2008 general election, PKR formed an alliance with PAS and DAP in order to ensure that these parties did not nominate candidates against each other. Finally, DAP is a non-communal party whose main goal is to achieve a "Malaysian Malaysia". The party's main support base is among the urban Chinese and it still finds it hard to attract support from other ethnic groups. DAP is rooted in socialist ideas and as a secular party does not accept PA'S commitment to an Islamic state. PA'S subsequent moderation allowed the two parties to revisit their cooperation and in April 2008, the parties formed a coalition named Pakatan Rakyat (People's Front).

All Malaysian political parties have embraced IT in their organisational development (Table 2). The ruling BN in particular aims to ensure that Malaysia makes a quantum leap into the digital era without creating a new gap between the "information-rich" and the "information poor". For the opposition parties, the internet is important as it is the only channel through which they can reach a sizeable number of voters. DAP utilises 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. The mailing list group 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 (with the

Table 2: Seed set for the party network analysis

Variables	UMNO	PKR	PAS	DAP
Party Homepage	www.umno-online.my www.keadilanrakyat.org	www.pas.org.my	dapmalaysia.org	
Youth Wing	www.pemudaumno.org.my anwaribrahimblog.com	ulamak.pas.org.my	www.limkitsiang.com	
Women's Wing	www.puteriumno.my srikandikeadilan.blogspot.com www.hannahyeoh.com/	muslimat.pas.org.my		
Party Facebook	facebook.com/mediaummomalaysia facebook.com/PkeadilanR	facebook.com/paspusat	facebook.com/DAPMalaysia	
Party Twitter	twitter.com/umnoonline twitter.com/KEADILAN	twitter.com/DPPMalaysia	twitter.com/dapmalaysia	

domain name <http://www.dapmalaysia.org>). Similarly, PAS started using IT informally in the 1990s but only for communication within the party. Initially, PAS only set up its own mailing list group. In 1998, the Anwar crisis stimulated it to use IT more seriously as an organising tool for demonstrations and rallies. In 1999, the party set up its own website (with the domain name <http://www.partipas.org>). PAS also restructured itself, establishing a department of IT in November 2000. Every year since 2000, PAS has organised a conference and IT workshops for its leaders to enhance their IT skills and to discuss the role of IT in elections as well as in administration.

PKR's online presence is quite different. It began with the reformasi movement. Based on this grassroots movement, a political movement called the Social Justice Movement emerged, led by Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, the wife of Anwar Ibrahim. However, the movement faced difficulties in registering as a political party. In response, the party combined with other small parties and launched the National Justice Party in April 1999, just in time for that year's election. This party was then joined by other opposition parties (DAP and PAS), under the name Barisan Alternatif. Then, in 2003, the National Justice Party merged with the Malaysian people's party to form the PKR. The party's website was created in October 2004 (under the domain name <http://www.keadilanrakyat.org.my>). The communication division consisted of three people in charge of the website. But the party did not depend solely on the website for communicating and disseminating information. They also keep in touch with people about the party's activities by email and SMS.

It is often assumed that Malaysia's opposition political parties were the first to embrace the internet as the opportunity for political communication have greatly expanded with the availability of the internet through the loosening of state-censorship. However, according to [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org), it was the government parties MCA and PBS that were the first to set up websites, in 1997, one year earlier than PAS. In the 1990s, though the government was enthusiastic about embracing IT for the

country, it seems that most parties, including UMNO, saw no advantage to setting up a website. This is understandable given that the ruling party had the mass media newspapers, television and radio through which to convey messages and policies to the public. At that stage the public was still very accessible through the mass media. Nevertheless, both UMNO (in 2001) and MIC (in 2000) eventually also set up websites.

Even though political parties adopted various social media and could have meaningful effect on the way parties communicate with public, yet they are criticized are too often focus on their party image rather than discussing on the national issue. Therefore, it raises the question of whether the internet has potential for a new dynamic political communication between parties and masses.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, the unit of analysis consists of websites belonging to the major political parties in Malaysia. The sample comprises two coalition parties: the ruling coalition, the BN and the opposition coalition the PR. The BN consists of three main parties, namely the UMNO, MCA and MIC. The PR is made up of the PAS, DAP and PKR.

In order to capture the interactive strategies of political party messaging which are quite difficult to quantified, a qualitative analysis of interaction among political parties draws upon a network ethnography approach developed by Howard. This includes the process of using ethnographic field methods on cases and field sites selected using social network analysis". Therefore, web link analysis was added, using free software called "Issue Crawler", to analyse the political party websites in particular. This is a sociological approach technique which focuses on a set of social actors and relations between them. It is an approach for the analysis of social structures that are formally represented as social network. It is able to understand how the structure of a social network can affect individuals and their relationships. As

such it may help to illuminate the effects of social agency and social structure upon social action. Due to the complexity of analysing online discussion on the websites, the web link analysis was used to view the networks created around the parties' websites for their potential to contribute to deliberative democracy. By looking at the incoming and outgoing links that relate to the central party websites, we can see how parties provide opportunities for readers to gain different kinds of information and thus enable them to discuss and debate with others rationally, as well as enable them to critically examine their own position in light of other arguments. If the number of links increases, it should be reflected in a high discourse in public deliberation. Papacharissi (2002) argues that hyper linking is one of the advantages in constructing the public sphere. She points out that because the internet allows for storing and retrieving data, political discussion can occur and can be enriched with links to information.

Web links are not to be conceived of "simply as a technological tool but as a newly emerging social and communicational channel". It is therefore important here to see the extent to which parties link their websites to other websites, especially social media such as blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Investigating the social networking sites that have dialogue boxes as part of their networking might contribute significantly to answering the key question about the contribution of parties' websites to deliberative democracy. This also tells us something about the flow of information between the party's website and other sites and on the dialogic relationship, as effective deliberation might be preceded by dialogue between like-minded actors. As such, web link analysis provides empirical evidence of the web's prospects for enhancing reflexivity through facilitating a networked public sphere.

The web link analysis begins with six parties: UMNO, MCA, MIC, PAS, PKR and DAP. Instead of the UMNO website, other websites listed on the UMNO website and the acknowledged UMNO umbrella organisation were analysed (Table 2). By using five URLs at the beginning of a crawl, I able to identify what I believe to be reasonably complete of the parties' engagement site networks: I constructed a seed set for each of main political parties, including party websites, party wings and the relevance profile on SNS whenever parties link to their official websites. The URLs were pasted and then used to create a 'seed list' that was fed into the free web-based hyperlink analysis software, the Issue Crawler tool developed by Richard Rogers. The Issue Crawler identifies networks of sites based on linkages to, from and among an original list of sites on the basis of co-link

analysis. A co-link is simply a page that is linked to or from at least two of the starting points of that iteration. If a site is added to the list as a result of the co-link analysis, it then becomes one of the starting points for the next iteration. The chart also represents the relative strength of these ties and the centrality of the particular websites and represents the actors and satellites surrounding the home website (Chen, 2011). In this way, it is possible to make judgments about the network of linkages on a particular party website. For example, actors with more arrows are more active in spreading information and therefore considered more useful information providers. The different size of nodes indicates in-link centrality or the total number of links within the network. High in-link centrality in the web graph tends to be a strong indicator of a node's authority within the network.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interpretation of the Fig. 1-4 suggests a number of important patterns in the linkage and navigational paths within the parties' web sphere as well as connection to other sites under the umbrella of the parties. A fundamental difference between the web linkages of UMNO as the ruling party (MCA and MIC failed to produce any network linkage on their websites after a few attempts were made. This was due their networking were too low and no linkage pattern produced) and the opposition parties, PKR, DAP and PAS. The UMNO website is more densely networked connected around the party node which makes the node almost invisible in the network. Meanwhile, for the opposition PR, their nodes were still visible in the network. Taken as a whole, this study also sees signs of a dynamic structure that is quite responsive to external development in the Malaysian politics.

As shown in Fig. 1, the PKR networking has migrated away from the party website onto the online newspaper and the party's social networking site Twitter. The mapped hyperlink network was useful in helping to identify prominent actors. This can be seen in the pattern of web links and the size of the nodes. The pattern for keadilan.org seems unbalanced, as the large hub is the online newspaper, Malaysiakini and Twitter, reflecting their importance in the PKR issue network. As such it explaining how these sites became prominent in this online in this online network is important in understanding the potential, from an empirical perspective. In particular, the presence of a relatively large concentration of links on Malaysiakini indicates that Malaysiakini is referred to by the party as news and opinion resources for the public. The figure shows that

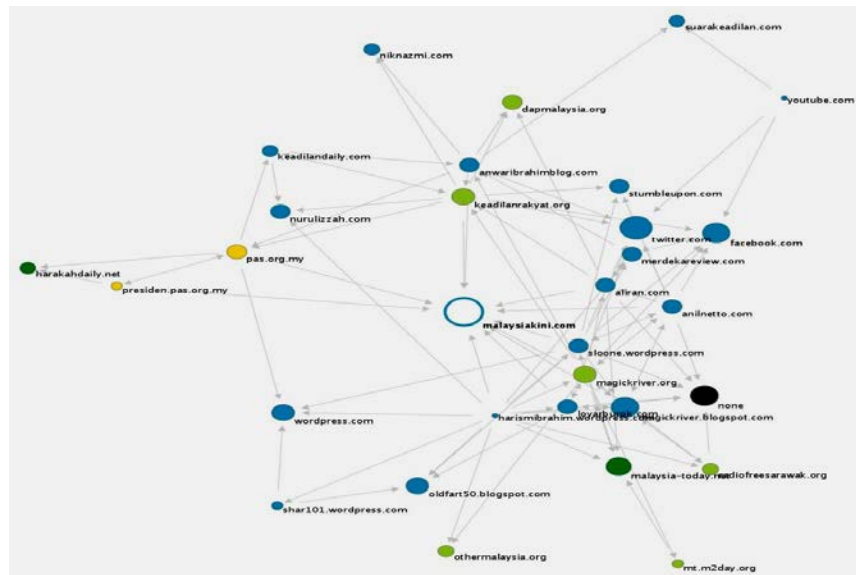


Fig. 1: PKR issue network; Blue = .com-commercial websites including Web 2.0 service and individuals websites; soft green = .org-non-profit organization such as political parties and non-government organization; dark green = .net-news organization; yellow = .org.my-non-profit organization register website in Malaysia

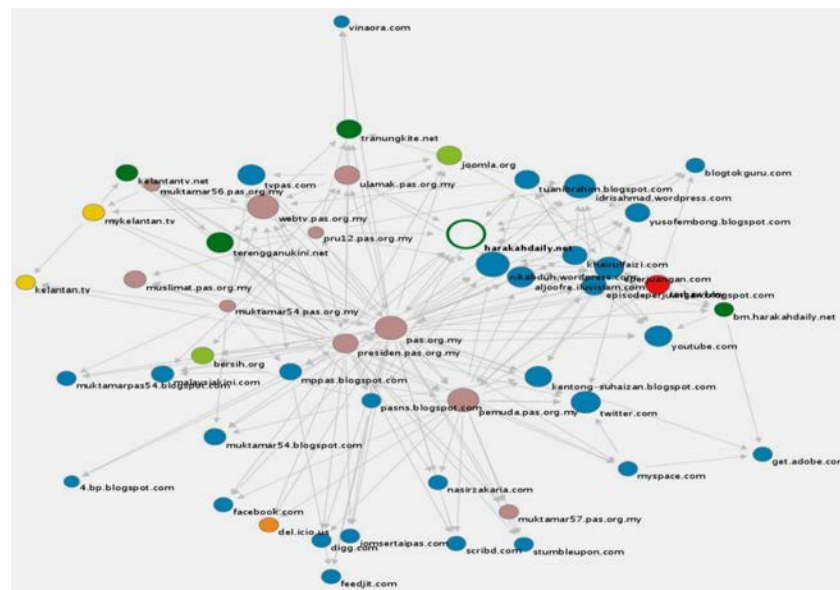


Fig. 2: PAS issue network; Blue = .com-commercial websites including Web 2.0 and individuals websites; yellow = .tv private television organization; Green = .net-news providers; Soft Green = .org-non profit organization; pink = .org.my non profit organizations in which their domain register in Malaysia

the discourse surrounding the party has shifted at least to some degree to an independent site, Malaysiakini which is not under the control of the party. This allows a growing diversity of voices to be heard and could certainly be seen as a good indicator for deliberation to take place. Interestingly too, the large Twitter node

indicates significant authority within the PKR issue network and reflects the reflexivity aspect, being an easy way for people to deliberate. Moreover, the diagram shows PKR making a strong effort to extend its visibility in more informal online areas such as Twitter. By doing so, they attract readers to communicate with the parties,

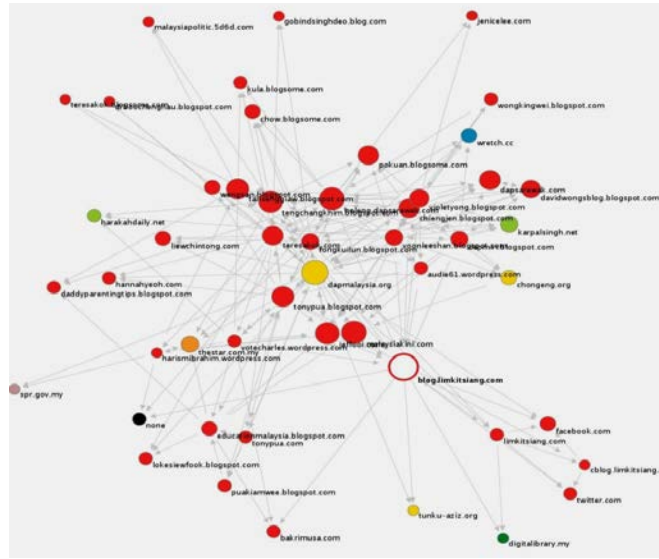


Fig. 3: DAP issue network; red = .com-individuals blogs; Soft Green = .net-news provider and also individual website; yellow = .org-non profit organization such as political parties; pink = .gov.my-government organization

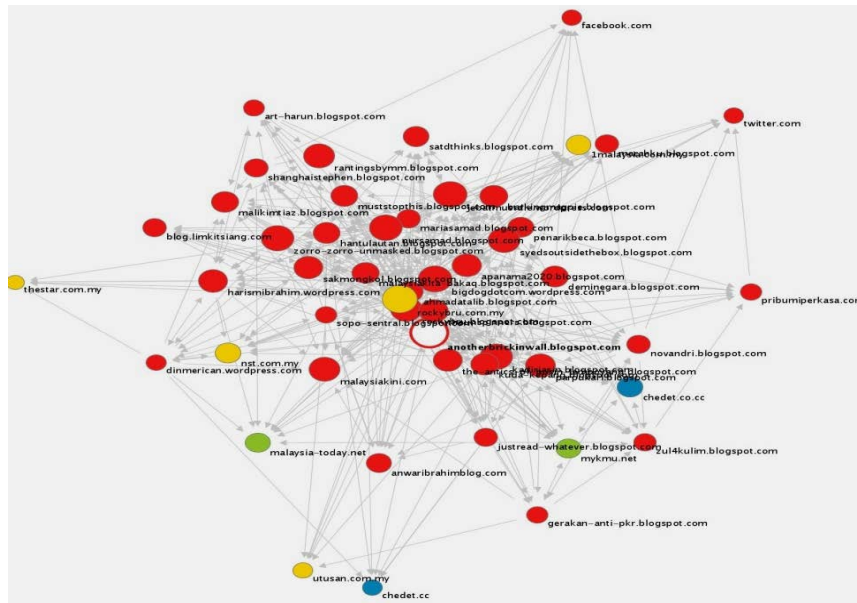


Fig. 4: UMNO issue network; red = .com-individuals blogs and web 2.0 services; yellow = .com.my- news organization; blue = .co.cc-individuals websites; green = .net-news services provider

thereby reflecting emerging elements of deliberative democracy. Other independent blogs constitute significant component of networks, too but are not as important as Twitter and Malaysiakini. For PAS and DAP, networking was centred around the parties (Fig. 2 and 3). Figure 2 shows many arrows going from PAS to other websites under the PAS umbrella such as PAS Youth and

more official party sites that have similar ideologies. This indicates that PAS has put a lot of work into designing the website so that it is linked to many websites within its own organizational realm. It confirms that PAS has tried to create an image of a modern party, using technology and linking its website to various nodes. In addition, the PAS centrality in the graph shows that the web traffic on the



party site remains within the domain established and controlled by the party itself. The social networking sites, Twitter and Facebook, seem to play little more than a supporting role in PAS networking. Harakah Daily, the PA's official online newspaper appears highly important in the PAS network given the size of the node. So as with the PKR, information in an online newspaper constitutes a major contribution to the party's network and thus, it could be posited, helps citizens to receive further information and perhaps debate it rationally. However, it should be noted that Harakah Daily is a party newspaper, under party control. This could deviate from the criteria of deliberative democracy as the information is biased towards the political party. Similarly for DAP, the party appears to have high node centrality in the graph which had large size of node and located centre of the network. This suggest that the DAP official site serves as a core communicator in the DAP networking. Surrounding the party network are DAP politician's blogs including the largest node that is DAP secretary general Lim Kit Siang's blog. It appears that lack of interactive features of the party's site and showing that citizens join discussions through the politician's blogs instead of the party's website. Indeed, the content study indicates that politician's sites represent an active community, especially Lim Kit Siang's blog which receives hundreds of comments for every post. However, the Facebook and Twitter sites are but small nodes, clustered on the right-hand side, apparently playing only a marginal role in the DAP network, as in the PAS network. The party seems to rely on blogs as an alternative critical space for party debate.

It is notable that both PAS and DAP official websites were located centre in the network and surrounding with the nodes was among like-minded nodes. For example, PAS networking includes the party president's websites, the party's official newspaper, the youth and women's wings and a few blogs that support their ideology. Similarly, the DAP networking is dominated by those who support their ideology. For example, the centre node is the blog of Lim Kit Siang, DAP secretary general and surrounding it are DAP MP's blogs, including those of Hannah Yeoh, Tony Pua and Karpal Singh. It is also noticeable that the smallest nodes in the graph are clustered under government official websites such as that of the election commission. For the ruling coalition, only UMNO has a web link while the Issue Crawler came up with no network map for the other coalition parties, MCA and MIC. As shown in Fig. 4, the UMNO network features a dense traffic connected to individual blogs. Near the centre of the graph is a prominent blogger, Rocky Bru, who is considered a leader among socio-political bloggers

and this is surrounded by other blogs. His position near the centre of the network indicates the importance of his blog to the structure of UMNO's issue network. The blog has direct, outgoing links to most key actors in this network, suggesting a high degree of influence in this space. It should be noted that Ahiruddin Atan (A.K.A. Rocky Bru) was appointed an editor of an UMNO-linked newspaper, the Malay Mail, during Mahathir's rule and resigned his post when Abdullah Badawi became prime minister. He then became a blogger and started to post statements critical of Abdullah. When Abdullah was replaced by Najib Razak, he appeared to be restored as a voice of the administration (Bakar *et al.*, 2011). Adding weight to this, on 31 January 2011, the owner of sharpshooterblogger.blogspot.com, Amizudin Ahmad, was sued by the minister of information, Rais Yatim, on charges of spreading hatred and false information on his blog. Amizudin Ahmad defended himself and stated that he took the information from Rocky Bru's blog. Ahirudin Atan was not charged with any offence. Amizun was ordered by the High Court to pay damages to Ahirudin (Baker *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, Ahirudin was then re-appointed an editor of the Malay Mail. On 30 November 2011, the Star Online, an UMNO-linked newspaper, stated that Rocky Bru was a pro-BN blogger. This seems to indicate that UMNO used bloggers as proxy voices. The pattern in Fig. 4 confirms that UMNO connects with prominent bloggers, the so-called cyber-troopers, appointed by the UMNO to counter opposition allegations and possibly to discredit political rivals. In the 2011 election in the state of Sarawak, it was reported that the ruling BN spent RM10 million on cyber-troopers (Thien, 2011).

The trend of bloggers being hired by political parties might lead to information on their blogs becoming more one-sided and biased towards those who control them. They could systematically publish information on scandals, for example, that can tarnish the reputation of political rivals. This occurred during the Hulu Selangor by-election which saw a cyber battle between pro-BN bloggers and pro-PR bloggers. It began with a circulated comment that Zaid Ibrahim, PR's Muslim candidate, drinks alcohol. Two BN bloggers published a photo of him holding a glass of alcohol, then bloggers on the other side, PR located the original photo in their blogs as proof of its authenticity (Thien, 2011). This example shows how blogs can affect how citizens are informed. In this sense, political blogging does not contribute to the deliberative process, because information has been manipulated in order to sway public opinion. It is true that political blogging may provide opportunities for bloggers to express their opinion autonomously and thus offer "a

structure that is closer to conversation than any traditional news medium” (Woodly, 2008), but focusing on political rivals could crucially jeopardise public deliberation in terms of rationality and reflexivity.

### CONCLUSION

The web link analysis shows that except for MCA and MIC, all parties are engaged in political networking. The findings show that although PAS, PKR, DAP and UMNO provide few avenues for direct communication with voters on their own websites, they do offer links to other websites that are more deliberative in nature. In other words, they offer an alternative forum on social media sites for rational critical argument and reflexivity criteria through public discourse, for example through links to blogs, online newspapers and social networking tools. Another aspect of the networking is that it gives parties the opportunity to strengthen their organisation’s role especially in policy-making as well as to stimulate membership activity. Thus, it is seen that the parties are reviving themselves as organisations especially after the 2008 general election.

Social media such as Facebook and Twitter represent a further step from blogs in that they have more interactive features. However with the exception of PKR, the parties do not venture far into these interactive features, though individual politicians do. Political parties appear more inclined to connect with blogs. The web link analysis enriches this picture by showing that parties and blogs often interconnect. Thus, we might expect a certain degree of discussion on several issues from various perspectives, as blogs become a tool for “an immediate, horizontally linked dialogical space” (Woodly, 2008). More importantly, for instance, the densely connected UMNO network with various bloggers reflects potential for public deliberation. But it seems that the bloggers in the UMNO network have been hired by the party. They aim to attack political rivals and the quality of information can be questionable and they often engage in personal attack, character assassination and provocation. The practice of blogging by this group does not contribute to public deliberation. In fact, this practice could contribute to a decline in the public sphere as in the process of “refeudalisation” noted by reference (Habermas, 1996), where information is “spun” to please a certain political elite. This is reflected in the polarisation of online communities, as most people take positions in like-minded communities and will skew information in order to fit in with the group (Sunstein, 2008). Such a situation prevents citizens from possibilities of public deliberation.

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