

## The internet's political impact and the penetration/ participation paradox in Malaysia and Singapore

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It verges on tautology to say that internet use depends on internet availability. Obviously, the former will not occur in the absence of the latter. However, it is quite another thing to claim that there is a simple linear relationship between availability and use. It is conceivable that, once the diffusion of a communication technology has reached a certain critical threshold, every additional unit of that technology does not generate improved use, either quantitatively or qualitatively. The use to which any given level of technology is put may depend on other, non-technological factors. Accordingly, a country with lower penetration levels of a medium may, paradoxically, exhibit superior utilization of that medium than a country with higher penetration.

This proposition is illustrated by comparing two neighbouring countries in Asia that implemented early and aggressive programmes to roll out public access to the internet, Malaysia and Singapore. These two states introduced the internet to their populations at about the same time, and within broadly similar regulatory regimes. Malaysia, being the larger and less wealthy of the two countries, has predictably achieved significantly lower levels of internet penetration than Singapore. In 2000, Singapore had 32 internet users and 48 personal computers per 100 inhabitants, while Malaysia had 17 and 9, respectively. In absolute terms, Malaysia was five times as populous as Singapore but had only three times the number of internet users: 4 million versus 1.3 million (ITU, 2001, 2002). In 2002, Harvard University's Center for International Development released the results of a study ranking 75 countries' preparedness and potential to participate in a networked world. The 'Networked Readiness Index' placed

Singapore at number eight, the only country outside North America and Europe in the top ten. Malaysia was ranked number 36 out of the 75 (Kirkman et al., 2002).

Given these starting conditions, one might expect Singapore to show greater online activity than Malaysia. This study focuses on one kind of online participation: politically contentious journalism – journalism that, in the tradition of the radical alternative press, challenges dominant ideologies and attempts to democratize public discourse. Although this is just one type of online activity, it has particular theoretical importance, given that one of the main predictions made about the internet since its arrival has been that it will democratize communication. In line with this prediction, both Singapore and Malaysia have groups that have taken advantage of the internet to engage in hitherto impossible, or at least difficult, forms of contentious journalism. However, the paradox is this: it is technologically inferior Malaysia that is home to the significantly superior contentious online media. Malaysia's main alternative websites reach more than 100,000 people; Singapore's measure their visitors in the thousands, or hundreds. Malaysia has at least three alternative sites employing full-time staff; Singapore has none. Malaysia's leading sites produce daily news updates; in Singapore, a website can consider itself on a roll if it adds a new article once a week. On every yardstick one can think of, the level of contentious journalism on the internet is inversely related to the technology's penetration in these two countries.

Analysing the penetration/participation paradox will help refine our theories about the internet's impact. Research on the internet and its democratizing potential has tended to assume, perhaps based on its global reach, that its effects will be uniform and homogenizing. Hence, the misplaced confidence with which scholars have ventured into this field of enquiry with large-scale quantitative analysis. One example is Richards' (2002) inconclusive attempt to link internet connectivity with the state of human rights. Richards examines data from 73 countries and finds no support for the hypothesis that greater connectivity correlates positively with improved government respect for human rights by increasing international information flow. Grasping the penetration/participation paradox would have helped one see that such a hypothesis has little theoretical basis to start with. A second example is the Harvard study cited above. Its stated aim is to assess 'countries' capacity to exploit the opportunities offered by ICTs' and 'map out factors that contribute to this capacity' (Kirkman et al., 2002). The researchers acknowledge that network infrastructure is only half the story; equally important are 'enabling factors' that affect a country's capacity to exploit existing networks and create new ones. However, they take a narrow view of such enabling factors, focusing on indicators directly related to technological diffusion, such as the integration of ICTs into schools. Examining the Malaysia–Singapore case will show that some of

the most important enabling factors are far removed from the technologies under investigation. Instead, they include traditional social networks that help to organize online dissent, and the motivation to use available technology in creatively political ways. This article describes the penetration/participation paradox in the Malaysia–Singapore case, explains the paradox and, finally, suggests implications for theory-building about the political impact of new communication technologies.

### **The Malaysia–Singapore case**

Malaysia and Singapore are neighboring states that in recent decades have experienced sustained periods of rapid economic growth and political stability. They were British colonies until 1957 and 1963 respectively. The post-war colonial period was marked by fierce communist insurgency that was forcibly put down through various emergency measures. Early in their independence, the two countries also experienced ethnic riots. The nationalist parties that have led their countries to independence and controlled politics ever since were thus endowed with both the tools for controlling insurgency and a hypersensitivity towards organized dissent. Both countries have parliamentary systems based on the Westminster model. While both governments have subjected themselves to elections at the constitutionally mandated intervals, neither has seen the need to limit its power substantially between those elections. Malaysia and Singapore are not constituted as liberal democracies with deep civil liberties and failsafe checks against the abuse of government power. The executive dominates the legislative and judicial branches of the state. Dissent is forcibly dampened, and opposition parties and interest groups are routinely hampered in their efforts to organize and mobilize. Much of this control is effected through laws and regulations inherited from the colonial authorities. These include a licensing system for the press and the requirement of permits for public gatherings. Thus, although the two countries have regular multi-party elections, they lack some key democratic features. Larry Diamond (2002) calls them ‘electoral autocracies’, while William Case (1993) uses the label ‘semi-democracy’. (For general accounts of the two countries’ history and politics, see: George, 2000; Loh and Khoo, 2002; Mauzy and Milne, 2002; Milne and Mauzy, 1999.)

Although the two governments have impressive instruments of coercion at their fingertips, it is not the case that force and the threat of force are the main means of maintaining order. Instead, the two states appear to be backed by a significant degree of consent on the part of the ruled. Part of this is accounted for by the people’s ‘instrumental acquiescence’, to use Held’s (1989) term, based on their not-unfounded faith that the governments will continue to deliver rising standards of living. In addition, there

is also evidence of a normative consensus at work, maintained through the state's ideological domination. The sources of hegemony are formidable, presenting a genuine challenge to insurgents (Chua, 1995; Hilley, 2001). The governments have drawn upon the legitimating power of elections, which have at least been free and fair enough to attract the continued participation of all major opposition parties. Of course, the two states' illiberal features constantly pressure their legitimacy. While they do not deny that civil and political rights matter, they usually frame such claims as Western in origin, excessively contentious, and opposed to Asian values that are said to emphasize consensus and harmony. 'Asian' democracy, for which former prime ministers Mahathir Mohamed of Malaysia and Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore were key spokesmen, stressed economic and social rights instead. Both governments add that they are in favor of moving towards greater political openness, but insist that such reform must be incremental and carefully managed. Hegemony is also constructed around the idea of nation-building. The idea evokes a sense of collective purpose, to fight common threats and work towards common goals. The main threat is that of social discord in their multi-ethnic societies. The positive goal of nation-building is rapid socio-economic development.

The two regimes have not been immune to political strains of either a long-term or short-term nature. Two will be highlighted here because of their prominent roles in motivating the contentious journalism that surfaced on the internet. One critique can be described as liberal-democratic in orientation, questioning the lack of civil liberties, press freedom and government accountability, in terms that would sound quite familiar to Western ears. A second line of criticism has been directed against a style of modernization that is seen as culturally and spiritually impoverishing, elite-oriented and – in Malaysia's case – corrupted by money politics and cronyism. This is in particular the line of PAS (Parti Islam Se Malaysia, or the Islamic Party of Malaysia), Malaysia's opposition Islamic party, but it is also the gist of the criticism of the Chinese-language lobby in Singapore.

State control of mass media is a central part of the political system in both countries. Government regulation operates at two levels. The first is that of media content: the stories that comprise the news and the information on which those stories are based. Various laws allow the government to impose prior restraints on publication, post-publication punishments and penalties for the acquisition of official information. The second level is that of media access: who owns and operates the means of media production. Licensing laws and accompanying regulations are used to keep media within the control of the establishment even if formally in private hands (see, for example, Hachten, 1989; Seow, 1998; Wang, 2001; Zaharom, 2000).

The internet's introduction in the mid-1990s represented a fundamental discontinuity in this decades-old approach to media management. It became

the first medium that citizens of either country were allowed to use for mass communication without first having to secure a government license. The internet's perceived economic value dominated the authorities' policy formulation, subordinating the goal of political control that historically shaped media policy. It was not the first time that the governments had to balance economic and political objectives in media policy-making. However, when dealing with print and broadcast media, the authorities had been able to tailor their political interventions narrowly, such that these actions did not smother their largely pro-market economic priorities. In contrast, the internet was not as amenable to narrow tailoring. Rather than abandon their economic dreams for the internet, the two governments decided to tolerate a lesser degree of political control than they were accustomed to, and that continued to prevail in their treatment of other media (George, 2003).

This qualitative shift in the media regime enabled the flowering of dissenting communication on an unprecedented scale. Like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, the Malaysians and Singaporeans who use the internet as a medium of mass communication have created a bewildering spectrum of websites and mailing lists. They range from individuals drawing ego gratification from placing personal home pages in cyberspace, to government departments and corporations pursuing publicity and profits. This study is concerned with a small subset of these users: individuals and groups who practice contentious journalism. Contentious journalism is defined here as the reporting and commenting on current events with at least some intention of serving a public purpose (the 'journalism' half of the definition), and with the explicit objective of challenging the authority of elites in setting the agenda and forging a national consensus (the 'contentious' half of the definition). To obtain a general picture of contentious journalism in the two countries, the author read media reports, surfed the web and spoke with media activists. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with editors of four of the most prominent websites that were engaged in contentious journalism. The interviews were conducted between 2000 and 2003, in the course of the author's doctoral dissertation research.

The first Malaysians and Singaporeans to use the internet for communication resembling contentious journalism were participants in the open online forums *soc.culture.malaysia* and *soc.culture.singapore*, and their South-East Asian precursor, *soc.culture.asean*. Postings on these newsgroups, which predated the worldwide web, occasionally ventured into free-for-alls on politics and current affairs. The birth of the web inspired the publication of amateur online magazines, probably starting with Singapore's *Sintercom* in 1994. In early 1996, opposition parties began entering the web. One of the first professional journalists to exploit the disintermediating power of the internet – bypassing media organizations to

reach readers directly – was Malaysian writer M.G.G. Pillai, who launched his *Sang Kancil* mailing list for political news and commentary in 1997.

In Malaysia, 1998 was a watershed year. Mahathir's shock dismissal of his popular deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, sparked a political reform movement, which in catalysed an explosion of activity on the internet. Dozens of sites sympathetic to the movement were launched that year. A year later, an anti-defamation committee of the ruling UMNO (United Malay National Organisation) party identified more than 40 websites that it said were being used to slander the government and its leaders. Most of these sites became dormant after 2000, when Anwar lost his court appeals and started his prison term. Much of the content on some of these sites was indeed crass and outlandish. However, there were also instances of independent journalists who tried to provide more responsible and professional contributions in the heat of the protests. They included Sabri Zain's eyewitness accounts in his online 'Reformasi Diary', and Saksi, which carried the work of some of the country's best-known independent writers. Sites established a year or more after the Anwar sacking took this more professional tack. These included *Malaysiakini* and *Harakah Daily* in late 1999, and *Agenda Daily* in 2000. The social reform movement, *Aliran*, launched a website with daily updates to supplement its monthly print magazine. Malaysian online journalists continue to innovate. One shortlived experiment was *Radiq Radio*, the country's first alternative radio network, which used the web as well as broadcast transmitters in nearby Indonesian islands to deliver its independent news programs.

In Singapore, a search by a team of sociologists over four months in 2000 found 82 Singapore-based or Singapore-related political websites providing alternatives to dominant discourses (Ho et al., 2002). The researchers grouped the sites into five categories. First, there are the sites of registered opposition parties. Second, some sites promote freedom of speech, including that of Think Centre and the personal sites of opposition politicians. Third, several civil society groups maintain sites promoting legal and regulatory reform in their specific areas of concern, including nature conservation, women's issues and gay rights. Fourth, there are religious and linguistic groups claiming fairer treatment, including the banned Unification Church (the 'Moonies'), and a Speak Dialect Campaign resisting the government's promotion of Mandarin among Chinese Singaporeans. Fifth, some sites are internationally oriented but use Singapore as a base to escape persecution at home. These include the official website of the Bahais of Iran, and the Falun Gong of China. Among these sites, two older ones that fit our definition of contentious journalism are Singaporeans for Democracy and Singapore Window. Both are anonymously edited, but are believed to be run by Singapore dissidents who are in exile in Australia. The Singapore-based Think Centre has a relatively higher

profile. Another prominent site is Fateha, which has challenged the elite's claim to represent Singapore's Muslim community.

Comparing the contentious websites of the two countries reveals a striking difference in the degree to which the internet has served as a site for participation in contentious discourse: the Malaysian projects are more developed, organized and impactful than the Singaporean ones. One measure is their periodicity – an important factor for alternative media that deal with current affairs and want to challenge the ideological hold of mainstream media that produce daily output. None of Singapore's contentious sites are updated daily. The most prominent ones sometimes let several days, or even weeks and months, go by without uploading any new content. In Malaysia, Malaysiakini, Harakah Daily and Aliran Online are all updated daily. The main reason is that they have full-time staff, which the Singapore sites do not. This is a second measure of the intensity with which the internet is being exploited. The internet's accessibility to non-professional producers of content is certainly a virtue in democratic terms, since it widens access to the public sphere. However, it is hardly a positive sign if the medium can sustain *only* non-professional participation, as appears to be the case in Singapore. A third measure is the degree of internal organization and networking within the movement. The independent journalists who run the contentious websites in Malaysia have organized themselves in associations such as KAMI (Kumpulan Aktivistik Media Independen), and engage in lobbying for press freedom through alliances such as Charter 2000. Singapore's media activists have no such organizations. Fourth, consider the reception of these sites. Malaysia's leading contentious websites register more than 100,000 visitors a week. Singapore's most prominent sites get only a few thousand visitors at most.

### **Different regulations, similar opportunity structure**

At first glance, differences in internet regulation seem to provide a sufficient explanation for the penetration/participation paradox. The two governments diverged in their regulatory responses to online dissent. In 1996, Singapore implemented a licensing scheme that required political sites to register themselves with the authorities. The following year, Malaysia announced a no-censorship guarantee for the internet. The Malaysian authorities at the time were trying to attract investors to its proposed Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), which would serve as Malaysia's bridge 'from the Industrial Age to the Information Age', Mahathir said (*New Straits Times*, 1996). Consumed by this vision, the Malaysian government began issuing assurances that its well-known proclivity for censorship would not leak into the internet or its beloved MSC. Speaking in California in January 1997, Mahathir promised investors

that the MSC would have 'the world's best soft infrastructure of supporting laws, policies, and practices', including a 10-point Multimedia Bill of Guarantees. One of its guarantees read: 'Malaysia will ensure no censorship of the Internet.'

However, it would be historically inaccurate to argue that the Multimedia Bill of Guarantees was the decisive difference between Malaysia and Singapore. First, it was not the case that the Malaysian guarantees granted internet users any kind of blanket immunity from the country's security laws. If someone presented seditious or libelous content to Malaysian audiences, action could be taken under existing laws that applied to broadcast and print media, for example. Such reminders and threats were issued frequently, usually by officials from the information ministry or the home ministry in charge of security. Second, activists could never be sure how long the government would honor the no-censorship guarantee. Officials occasionally raised the specter of reviewing the policy. Invariably, officials from the multimedia ministry – the champion of IT and the MSC – would subsequently come out with reassurances that the government's policy of openness remained intact (see, for example, *Bernamea*, 2000). Activists knew that it would be Mahathir's own preference that would rule the day, and just what he would decide was clear only in hindsight. While his precious MSC was clearly a pet project that he did not want to jeopardize, he certainly had not abandoned his authoritarian instincts. Indeed, he was named by the Committee to Protect Journalists as one of the world's 10 greatest enemies of press freedom for three years in a row from 1998.

Across the border, Singapore's content regulations dispensed with liberal pretensions, but in practice the regulatory environment was similar to Malaysia's. Like Malaysia, the Singapore government refrained from blocking political websites. Singapore had its own grand IT ambitions. In 1992, the government launched its IT2000 masterplan, painting the vision of an 'intelligent island' in which IT would permeate every aspect of the society, enhancing national economic competitiveness and improving the quality of life of its citizens (Jussawalla et al., 1992). IT2000 was succeeded by the Infocomm21 Masterplan, which aims to develop Singapore into one of the top five Information Societies in the world. The internet became central to this vision, and the government came to define the 'digital divide' as 'the gap between those who are Internet savvy and those who are not'. Hence, the goal for personal computers and the internet was 'ubiquitous adoption', rather than limiting it to a 'small privileged group' (Yeo, 2000). Aware of the need to show the world that it was IT-friendly, the Singapore government took pains to stress that its content regulations were directed at pornography and not political censorship. Singapore blocked access to exactly 100 pornographic sites as a symbolic gesture, but declared that it was not banning any political site. The

licensing rule was an administrative procedure to impose accountability, and not a means of preventing anyone from setting up a website.

In effect, therefore, Malaysia's and Singapore's regulatory regimes are more similar than different. Both governments refrained from imposing prior restraints on internet communication, making the internet considerably more hospitable to contentious journalism than print and broadcast media, both of which are subject to discretionary licensing. On the other hand, neither government disavowed post-publication punishment as a legitimate response to contentious online journalism. On the contrary, both governments made clear that writers and publishers in cyberspace would enjoy no immunity from prosecution if they broke the laws of the land. Both lived up to this threat. In 1998, Malaysian authorities arrested four individuals for spreading rumors on the internet about knife-wielding Indonesians rioting in a Kuala Lumpur neighborhood, which led to panic buying (Pereira, 1998). In 2003, police confiscated Malaysiakini's computers for in the course of investigating its publication of an allegedly seditious letter (Lau, 2003). Singapore's first prosecution of an individual engaged in political expression on the internet took place in 2001. A man was arrested for allegedly posting an inflammatory article on the Singaporeans for Democracy website (*Straits Times*, 2001). A second case involved Fateha.com, a site purporting to be the genuine voice of Singapore's Muslim community. The authorities threatened to charge its editor with criminal defamation for articles critical of senior establishment figures, but he fled to Australia before investigations were complete (*Straits Times*, 2002). In both countries, media activists are no strangers to police questioning and credible threats of arrest.

Thus, the distinctions in the two countries' formal internet regulations do not amount to a significant difference in the political environment for online dissent – or what social movement scholars call the 'political opportunity structure' (McAdam et al., 1996). Contentious online journalism in Malaysia and Singapore has many of the attributes of a social movement. The groups within it engage in political contention from the margins of the polity, in this case by using the internet to disrupt the state's control over information and ideas. There are also signs of a sense of common purpose. Although representing diverse origins, the groups have a shared interest in democratization of political communication and access to the public sphere. Social solidarities are evident, both within and between the groups. Within each project, activists take advantage of social networks to mobilize resources and enlarge their constituencies. Solidarities between groups are expressed most clearly in the hyperlinks through which they promote each other. While the websites of commercial news media strive for 'stickiness' – keeping eyeballs within their virtual walls and away from other online news sources – alternative sites liberally direct visitors to like-minded sites within the movement. Decades of

theorizing within political sociology have in recent years coalesced into a useful framework for the study of social movements. In this so-called 'political process' perspective, a favorable political opportunity structure is just one of the necessary ingredients for social movement activity. The others, according to this perspective, are resource mobilization and cultural framings (McAdam et al., 1996). These dimensions offer more satisfactory explanations for the superior development of online journalism in Malaysia compared with Singapore.

### **Mobilizational and cultural factors**

Social movement projects harness various networks to mobilize the resources they need to get things done. Online journalism projects rely on two kinds of network. Computer networks are, by definition, indispensable for online projects. But they clearly do not determine the level of activism – if they did, Singapore's superior IT networks would result in superior online activism. It is the second type of network, the social kind, that may play a much more decisive role. These networks provide manpower, funds, ideas and moral support. The relevant social networks here are political parties, civil society groups, non-government organizations, and other loose groupings of activists and supporters within the same ideological boat as the journalists running the online projects. Malaysia has an appreciably broader political society and thicker civil society than Singapore. Media activists in Malaysia can therefore plug into social networks that their counterparts in Singapore can only dream about. For example, Malaysia's number one alternative site, *Harakah Daily*, is run by the country's largest opposition party, the Islamic Party PAS. Singapore has no contentious website remotely as successful as *Harakah Daily* because it does not have an opposition party like PAS – formidably organized, well endowed and strongly ideological.

Similarly, Malaysia's 25-year-old human rights NGO, Aliran, has no peer in Singapore. Aliran not only runs its own website, but is also a key newsmaker providing alternative content for an independent website such as *Malaysiakini*. In contrast, when Singapore's Think Centre wants report on human rights in Singapore, it has to rely on less detailed and less frequent reports from overseas, or try to do its own investigations, for which it lacks resources. Aliran is also a prime mover in the Charter 2000 movement for media reform. Around the same time that Charter 2000 was launched, a group of Singaporeans embarked on a similar initiative, dubbed the Media Watch Committee. Barely a year later, before moving beyond the planning stages, the group announced that it was giving up; partly because it had failed to raise money from foundations, but also because key individuals were no longer available to play leadership roles

(Sivakkumaran, 2001). In contrast, Charter 2000, took off immediately and has not looked back. By March 2003, Charter 2000 had been endorsed by 29 organizations, including the Malaysian Trade Union Congress, the Human Rights Society of Malaysia, Sisters in Islam, and professional groups such as the Independent Media Activists Group. Charter 2000 has lobbied for the repeal of repressive press laws, and protested against cases of government intervention. It has helped organize an annual petition calling for greater press freedom, which in 2002 carried the signatures of more than 900 mainstream and independent journalists. Charter 2000's momentum, compared with Singapore's stillborn effort, is perhaps best explained by the involvement of established organizations. Aliran initiated the project, and drew on its experience in lobbying for reforms in other fields. The existence of so many other like-minded organizations meant that the movement for media reform could progress with much longer strides than Media Watch's individual-by-individual approach.

Another important set of social networks for contentious online journalism is *offline* alternative media. Note that some of the most significant political websites in Malaysia, including Aliran and Harakah, did not start from scratch, but were online versions of pre-existing newspapers and magazines repressed by the government. Harakah Daily rides on a profitable fortnightly tabloid, *Harakah*, which was published twice a week until the government stepped in and revised its licence. Aliran Online grew out of the organization's monthly magazine. In contrast, other than one or two small and infrequent opposition newsletters, Singapore had virtually no independent political periodicals before the internet was introduced. They existed under the British, but died out under the PAP (People's Action Party). Pre-internet Malaysia had several, published by opposition parties, NGOs and independent journalists. Contentious online journalism was therefore able to draw on these print media's resources, including writers, editors and allied groups. One important resource that should not be overlooked is sheer imagination and gumption. Creative thinking and willpower are cultural resources that are transportable across media channels. The social movements literature refers to these resources as 'repertoires of contention' – collective memories of how to use limited resources to challenge more powerful opponents (Tarrow, 1998). Thus, contentious journalism begets contentious journalism.

Besides political opportunities and networks for resource mobilization, social movements require cultural frames that imbue activists and followers with the right combination of moral outrage and sense of efficacy that makes concerted, sustained contention thinkable and desirable. It was noted above that it was Malaysia's political instability in 1998 that provoked an escalation of online dissent. This may be another decisive difference between Malaysia and Singapore. Singapore did not suffer the effects of the Asian financial crisis in 1997 to the degree that Malaysia did. Nor did it

go through a political crisis that significantly eroded the legitimacy of its ruling regime. The Singapore government relied less on overt coercion during those critical years, which in turn limited the amount of public outrage that mobilizers could count on. In the course of the Reformasi protests in Malaysia, dozens of activists were detained without trial under the Internal Security Act – a piece of legislation that Singapore also possesses, but has not used against political dissidents since the 1980s. Most shocking to Malaysians was the detention of the former deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, and his trial for sodomy and corruption. Anwar was beaten while under detention and emerged with a black eye – a domestic and international public relations disaster for the Mahathir government. Through this crisis, the mainstream media took a predictably pro-government line, to the point of eroding their credibility and losing as much as a third of their readership.

This is not to suggest that the PAP is any less control-minded than Malaysia's ruling party. The difference lies in the ways in which controls are exercised. Both governments rely heavily on prior restraints on political expression, including media licenses, permits for public meetings and the registration of societies. Effective prior restraint reduces the need for after-the-fact punishment, which is invariably uglier and more public. Leaders on both sides know this, but Singapore applies behind-the-scenes prior restraints more systematically and more efficiently than Malaysia. The result is that, since the 1990s, there have been fewer instances of brutal repression in Singapore than in Malaysia. The point is illustrated most clearly by Singapore leader Lee Kuan Yew's comments about the Anwar affair. Mahathir's harsh actions against his former deputy had been severely criticized by Western and even neighboring governments. Asked for his opinion, Singapore's senior minister (SM) did not join the chorus of condemnation or question Mahathir's motives, but instead put it down to a tactical error. According to *The Straits Times*:

SM Lee said that Dr Mahathir had made several errors of judgment in handling his former protégé's case. Among these was arresting the politician under the Internal Security Act shortly after his dismissal from government in September 1998.

When they met in Davos in January 1999, SM Lee asked Dr Mahathir: 'Why did you arrest him under the ISA?'

'And he told me he did not know that Anwar was going to be arrested under the ISA. The Police chief had acted on his own authority.'

'It never should have been that way, it should have been a straightforward criminal charge.'

The next disaster was the assault on the jailed politician by former top police officer Tan Sri Rahim Noor. The Malaysian leader said that he would not have obtained any benefit from an assault on Anwar.

'I agreed, but these are things that have been done and I am afraid he has paid very dearly for it. My sympathies are with him.' (Pereira, 2000)

The spectacle of two authoritarian leaders having a heart-to-heart on how best to handle their political enemies is both chilling and revealing. The exchange shows their common appreciation of the need for restraint in the exercise of repression, but also the Malaysian regime's relative lack of success in achieving the required finesse. Malaysian intellectual Chandra Muzaffar (2002) agrees that there is an efficiency gap between Singapore and his own country. 'Here, they are not as efficient in control, which works to the advantage of dissidents,' he says. Independent journalist M.G.G. Pillai, a Malaysian who has also worked in Singapore, puts it more colorfully: 'Singapore civil servants know how to push the buttons. Malaysian civil servants don't know where the buttons are' (Pillai, 2002).

In addition to differences in state capacity, Case (2002) sees differences in elite structure: Singapore has a stable and cohesive elite, which has systematically channeled social forces into non-contentious grooves; while Malaysia's elite is more internally competitive – note that the government is run by a coalition, and not a single party; and witness the periodic contests at the very top, most dramatically the Mahathir–Anwar rift. As elite factions jockey for power, they are more inclined to concede some democratic space and organizational autonomy to the opposition and civil society.

### **Towards grounded analyses of impact**

The above analysis suggests that the differences in the development of contentious online media in Malaysia and Singapore can be explained by factors that have nothing to do with the technology. Neither the level of internet penetration nor internet regulations explain why Malaysia is so much more advanced in online dissent. Instead, pre-existing real-world networks played a key role, together with a political crisis that disrupted the political consensus and motivated Malaysians to search for alternative avenues for political communication.

This analysis has important implications for the way we study the political impact of the internet. First, it should be clear by now that internet penetration levels tell us little about the likely impact of the technology. One key reason is that internet use is woven into a web of multiple media and face-to-face interactions that either dampen or accentuate the technology's impact. The very idea of an 'internet user' is misleading. In reality, internet users show no exclusively loyalty to the medium. Instead, people are technologically promiscuous. This is obvious from all close-to-the-ground case studies of radical internet use, especially in less industrialized countries. In the celebrated case of the Zapatista movement in Mexico, for

example, Subcomandante Marcos depended on mainstream newspapers to carry his internet statements (Knudson, 1998). Serbia's B92 relied on foreign radio stations (Ferdinand, 2000). In Indonesia, activists mobilizing against President Suharto distributed missives through email and the web, which were downloaded at public internet kiosks in cities and near university campuses, printed out and then photocopied for mass circulation in hardcopy form (Hill and Sen, 2000). This sort of two-step flow – from the internet, through print-outs, to the street – has also been observed in Tibet, where internet use is even less widespread (Bray, 2000).

Thus, it should not be surprising that even if the vast majority of people in a country have no computers or internet access, the technology can have a significant impact if it is in the right hands (or wrong ones, as the case may be). Although this is abundantly clear from case studies, the lesson has not been adequately internalized by quantitatively minded analysts for whom penetration rates give the illusory comfort of firm ground. What in fact matters is not the overall or average level of internet use in any quantifiable sense, but the qualitative success with which agents of change exploit specific aspects of the technology within a broader offline strategy. Seen in this light, the fact that Malaysia has the more vibrant internet journalism scene, despite enjoying lower levels of internet access than Singapore, appears less paradoxical.

The principle of technological promiscuity also suggests that internet use will always be contingent, with people trying to use new media for objectives that cannot be met through old media. The less press and personal freedom people have, the more attractive the internet looks as a safe site for anti-government political expression. Thus, part of the reason for the flowering of alternative sites in Malaysia is the fact that print and broadcast media lost credibility during the Anwar affair. Similarly, when researchers analyzed more than 2300 messages in 41 newsgroups devoted to individual countries, they found that the newsgroups for less-democratic countries contained more messages expressing opposition to individual policies, politicians or the government as a whole. Among Asian countries, for example, the newsgroups for Burma and China each contained more than 20 percent anti-government messages (many of them presumably from people outside those countries), compared with under 5 percent for India and the Philippines, which enjoy much greater press freedom (Hill and Hughes, 1999).

The inverse relationship between technological availability and technological application in Malaysia and Singapore is only paradoxical when one starts out with fundamentally misconceived notions about the relationship between media and society. It becomes less surprising when one properly appreciates that communication technologies are not 'independent variables' appearing from out of the blue, and that their forms and functions

are shaped by the societies that absorb them, even as they influence those societies. Thus, Malaysia's more fertile social and ideological ground allows media activists to make limited technological capital go a longer way. Although the technology has played a transformative role, the real stars of the piece are social actors contesting on an old-fashioned terrain. As the president of the National Endowment for Democracy has noted: 'The governing principle here is the power of human ingenuity – if a technology is available, people will find ways to use it, even in the most difficult circumstances' (Gershman, 2001). There is thus room for human agency, resulting in a complex and dynamic contest to which the internet has added new dimensions.

It also follows that if the internet's role is always contingent, the quest for macro-level generalizations about the internet's political impact may continue to frustrate. Does the internet democratize communication? This is one of the big questions that has guided a decade of inquiry within media studies, political science, sociology and other disciplines. The above analysis suggests that the relationship between new media and political actors is far too dynamic and interdependent to be reduced to simple causal statements. The less democratic the society, the more attractive the internet looks as an emancipatory medium – but the more likely radical internet use will be blocked or punished. Furthermore, the internet cannot be treated as an independent variable. The technology has been and will continue to be shaped by political and economic forces. The outcome is 'not up to the technology itself', as one scholar puts it (Papacharissi, 2002). If context matters at least as much as technology, then literature on 'the internet' cannot provide the only, or even the most important, intellectual guideposts. Accordingly, there is much to be gained by suspending our enthusiasm for the technology, and instead treating the contentious journalism of the web as belonging to certain families of phenomena that have been analyzed by scholars since well before the internet came into vogue.

Good social science strives to move from particular towards more general knowledge, to use the facts we know to learn about facts we don't. However, analysts should abstract and infer only after they understand the history and culture around the facts, lest they make simplifications that are wrong. Recent literature reviews have acknowledged that the scholarship about the internet and society thus far has tended to rush prematurely to test broad, law-like hypotheses about the internet and democracy. Thus, it has been argued that the way forward requires 'more nuanced and circumscribed understandings of how internet use adapts to existing patterns, permits certain innovations, and reinforces certain kinds of change' (DiMaggio et al., 2001). Another review notes: 'This subject of inquiry is still at the stage where we can learn most from detailed ethnography and participant observation' (Howard, 2001).

The present article has avoided variable-oriented, probabilistic research in favour of a case-oriented approach adopted geared towards comprehending diversity and causal complexity. It has demonstrated that social and political context matters when analyzing the impact of new communication technologies. As important as the internet has been for contentious journalism, it does not explain significant features of the movement. Of course, online journalism would not develop in the total absence of the technological infrastructure. However, beyond a certain threshold, human ingenuity and mobilization takes over. At that point, the critical factors seem to be the motivation for radical applications of the technology, and the involvement of social networks of organizations and individuals.

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