The Alternative New Media and Democratic Participation in Malaysia: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Malaysian civil societies have explored the use of new media technology, particularly the Internet, to promote the freedom of expression and participation in local democratic processes. The analytical discussions attempt to shed light on several questions. What are the opportunities and limitations of new media as a civic tool? What has been the impact on freedom of expression so far? What have been the problems? What are the possible future directions and concerns? Discussion of these questions is structured into several parts. The first part introduces the definitions and scope of new media and other concepts as well as theoretical potentials of using new media in civil society. The second section sets the Malaysian scene with a brief survey of the news portals as the alternative media in Malaysia with an analysis of government and the media. The concluding section analyses the use of new media and its relation with democratic participation, and examines the problems arising from this development.

INTRODUCTION

One area of concern for civil society today is the new media. In many places today information is flowing more than ever, thanks to the rapid development of digital technology. Generally, new media is a term to refer to "all multimedia systems whether on-line, on disc, or related to the development of older broadcast or recording technologies associated with text, sound and images" (Pratt, Andy, 2000) New media can be defined as the digital technologies of Internet, either wired or wireless networks. Internet media comprise all forms of computing technologies that transmit data using computer-based applications. The popular ones include emails, website, weblogs, facebook, podcasting, audio and video streaming and online videos. Wireless media comprise a wide range of technologies such as Wifi, WiMAX, PDA, Bluetooth, mobile phones, mobile messaging system (SMS), and personal digital assistants (PDA).

Can new media actually boost democratic participation and change politics in a durable way? In several developed countries, the power of new media has been fully recognized by mainstream politicians. Many candidates in the national elections in the United States, Europe, and Asia, for example used the Internet and mobile technologies in their campaigns. More and more citizens are using new media in the democracy movement.

New technologies have facilitated political changes in the US and Europe. Average citizens in Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia used mobile phone text messaging as well as the Internet in the recent elections that led either to the downfall of the incumbent leaders or changes in the political landscape. Do these developments indicate the dawn of digital democracy? On one hand, the idea has caught the attention of many who believe in the power and influence of information technology to transform our civic live. On the other, skeptics argue that the impact of new media is actually restricted and very gradual because they are simply tools to facilitate participation in various aspects of life.

NEW MEDIA OF COMMUNICATION

One of the trends that may convince citizens to consider using the new media is the rapid penetration of the Internet and wireless technologies. They have now become part of our daily lives. *Internet Usage and World Population Statistics* reports that (March 31, 2009, at http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm) the highest number of Internet use in 2009 is in Asia, where 41.2 % of the world users are from that region

compared to 21% from Europe and 16% for North America. *Internet Usage Statistics* also reports that Malaysia, with 15.9 million Internet users in 2008, achieves 62.8% penetration. Other Asian countries having more than 60% penetration rate by the end of 2008 are Taiwan (66.1%) Singapore (67.4), Hong Kong (69.5%), Japan (73%) and South Korea (76.1).

From the statistics, access by average citizens to digital technologies in Malaysia is comparable to, and in some ways exceeds access in the developed economies. But the use of new media in politics and democratic participation by Malaysian civil society still has a long way to go to match the sophisticated new media strategies that have been adopted in some countries. The potential for further development, however, is clear. Since the 1999 General Elections, more and more Malaysian citizens are using new media in the democracy movement. Ordinary citizens use the micro-media such as e-mail, blog, online video and cell phone messaging to participate in democracy rallies and also use the alternative mass media to express opinions seldom found in the mainstream media.

The mainstream media being used to present a particular point of view have been accused of repressing free speech, avoiding discussing controversial issues, and oversimplifying issues. New media which allow users much more autonomy to create and distribute content than traditional mass media are being considered as the new political force to encourage active political citizenship. The Internet offers new channels of access to the main transactions of democracy namely information provision, voting, deliberation, and group organization.

Many information-based services are also being delivered via new media. Initiatives range from using local government web pages as a more efficient means to make political information available to those who use the internet, to experiments in electronic voting, to encouraging all citizens to use interactive media to organize interest groups and neighbourhood alliances (Tambini, Damian, 1999). The new media also offer mass access and they are user-friendly. Through the new communications protocols, email and other Internet features are made possible. This makes information provision much more flexible and interactive than the traditional broadcasting and print-based media.

MALAYSIAN NEWS PORTALS

Rather than viewing the Internet with suspicion, the Malaysian Government embraces it as part of an information technology (ICT) revolution. In 1996, the government under Mahathir launched the Multimedia Super Corridor project or MSC to provide the driving force for economic growth, and see Malaysia takes its place among the industrialized nations. Along with the project was "Bill of Guarantees" where the government pledges that Malaysia would not censor the Internet except for pornographic sites. Also the government would not police cyberspace, and would not interfere with the freedom of expression over the information superhighway. The policy was introduced to encourage foreign investment to gain the economic advantages of an open-door policy to ICT.

In Malaysia, the rapid expansion of the Internet as a source of news and information began in 1998 in the wake of the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim from the cabinet post of Deputy Prime Minister. A large number of websites appeared on the Internet in support of Anwar. Some estimate mentions that more than sixty such websites were created (Ling, 2003). These websites are characterised by strong pro-Anwar sentiments, and anger towards the authority for dismissing him. Among the most popular were *Anwar Online*, Freemalaysia Laman Reformasi (Reformasi Website), Jiwa Merdeka (Soul of Independence), *Mahafiraun* 2020 (Great Pharaoh 2020), and *Mahazalim* (Great Tyrant). Many of these websites which are anonymously maintained are no longer active. Those which are still actively operating as well as the newer portals are described below.

Malaysiakini.com

Malaysiakini.com is the first independent online news portals with no print editions. Owned by founders Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran, this digital news portal was launched in November 1999. It carries a tagline of "Only the news that matters" and "Go both sides of the story". *Malaysiakini* started very decently covering the 1999 General Election but it gained popularity faster than expected. More than 100,000 visitors were registered daily within nine months of its operation. (Ling, Sharon, 2003). *Malaysiakini.com* presents daily news and views in four languages namely English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. Readers from different races and religions have actively participated in the debate and discussion in the portals. Sensitive subjects and viewpoints deemed taboo by the mainstream media such as racial quota systems, the monarchy, apostasy, shariah law, language, education and migrant workers have generated a new understanding on these issues.

In July 2008, *Malaysiakini* became the most read news website, ahead of *The
Star* and the most popular Malaysian website (Alexa.com). In the 2008
General Election, the website crashed after more than one million visitors
converged into the portal on the midnight for the election result. *Compete.com*
estimates that *Malaysiakini* attracts over 10,000 unique visitors in May 2009.
An analysis of the top Malaysian news portals in June 2009 shows that
Malaysiakini ranked as the fourth most visited sites in Malaysia behind *The
Star, Utusan* and *Berita Harian Online* (Adoimagazine.com).
Malaysiakini.com has been recognised through various awards and accolades
including from the International Press Institute, Reporters Sans Frontiers,
Committee to Protect Journalists, *Asiaweek, Businessweek.*

The Malaysian Insider

The Malaysian Insider is founded by Png Hong Kwang This e-mail address is
being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it and
Sreedhar SubramaniamThis e-mail address is being protected from spambots.
You need JavaScript enabled to view it . Sreedhar is the former chief operating
officer of NTV7. The aim of this news portal is "to create an Internet
newspaper which offers an unvarnished take on events and personalities in
Malaysia". *The Malaysian Insider* covers the issues of the day, politics,
business, lifestyle, sports and entertainment. It hopes that in time more
Malaysians who are concerned for balanced and serious reporting will
contribute their news and views to the portal. Its vision says that with
transparency, promotion of good character and professionalism, the portal will
contribute towards building a country that has the USP (U-unity, S-security
and P-prosperity) to be transformed into a great nation.

The news site runs multiple sections from business to entertainment, but
political news and commentaries dominate attention. While in-house reporters
produces the bulk of the news content, many materials are syndicated from
local mainstream news organizations such as Bernama and *Utusan* as well as
foreign media such as Reuters, *Straits Times* of Singapore, *South China
Morning Post* and the *Economist.* The editorial generally maintains a critical
stance against both the ruling parties and the opposition groups as the
columnists are from diverse background including those holding the party
positions in UMNO, PAS, DAP and PKR. It was rumoured that *The
Malaysian Insider* was linked to UMNO personalities but the allegations were
never proved. Other rumours continue to circulate linking the organization to
other political factions but these too have not been proved.

Malaysia Today

Founded in August 2004 by Raja Petra Kamaruddin, *Malaysia Today* was said to receive 1.5 million hits a day, and was one of the top ten political sites in Malaysia by 2006. (Tan, Joceline, 2006). Raja Petra, a Malaysian royal family member, has posted very critical and sensitive articles in his portal. He was the webmaster of the Free Anwar Campaign website. He stated on his portal that the goal of *Malaysia Today* was to test "how far Malaysia … can honour, respect and tolerate free speech." He also promises no censorship, opening a commenting section for readers to place According to the Wikepedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysia_Today) the website is currently hosted in neighbouring Singapore.

Agenda Daily

Launched in July 2001, this portal was initiated by ImageWorkfield Sdn Bhd and currently managed by Agenda Daily Dot Com. While highlighting independent and non-partisan views as the main agenda, its editorial staff consists of reporters and journalists formerly working with the mainstream government-backed media. The chief editor (Rosli Ismail) and deputy chief editor (Badrul Hisham Abdul Aziz) are both from UMNO-owned *Utusan Melayu*. In 1995 National General Election, Badrul Hisham won a parliamentary seat under the Barisan National ticket and served as a Hulu Langat assemblyman for two terms. Other editors are either former staff of *Utusan Melayu* or *Berita Harian*, another UMNO-backed mainstream newspaper.

RadiqRadio

RadiqRadio is a media portal under the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ). It was launched on 19 March 2006 with a team of eight staff producing a 15-minute news bulletin called Nada Nasional. Introduced as a model for community radio projects, this online content provider offers community programmes that would include documentaries, dramas, music, storytelling, poetry, education and entertainment in Malay or other languages.

According to CIJ director, Sonia Randhawa RadiqRadio focused on content prepared by the community and targeted at the community. CIJ has conducted radio skills training for communities and is relying on these communities to record their own programmes and asked volunteers to contribute specific segments. Its staff will prepare news and analysis. CIJ also approaches community-based advertisers such as the local shops or tuition centres. The business model introduced by RadiqRadio which depends largely on

volunteerism seems to be unsustainable. The last RadiqRadio posting was published on 23 May 2007.

Merdeka Review

Owned by a company called Knowledge Venture, *Merdekareview.com* was initiated on 31 August 2005. It began with a Chinese-language news portal, to cater for the need of the Chinese readers for "a non-partisan, independent, and critical media". In June 2009, the portal launched its Malay language edition with the aim of making the views of the Chinese opinion leaders accessible to the non-Chinese speaking community. Thus, the Malay edition comprises mostly articles which are directly translated from the original Chinese version.

Malaysian Mirror

Malaysian Mirror dotcom is founded by a group of veteran journalists from Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. According to their profile, the investors "comprise entrepreneurs, professionals from various disciplines, including journalists and politicians from both sides of the political divide." Its profile also mentions that they are "an independent entity and shall endeavour to report without fear or favour because the citizenry deserves to know the truth." Launched on 30 June 2009 by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, the *Malaysian Mirror* is run by 15 editorial staff, several of whom are ex-journalists from the mainstream media.

The Nut Graph

Launchd in August 2008, the Nut Graph aims to "provide space for columnists and reader comments from as broad a political spectrum, and from as many sectors of interest, as possible." According to its profile, the portal "believes that both politics and popular culture provide us indicators about the health of our democracy and the directions we may be heading in as a nation." Hence, their tag line: "Making sense of politics and popular culture." For Nut Graph, politics is "not just about politicians, political parties and government but more importantly, it is about the relationships of power among different stakeholders involved in an issue." Hence, the need to "understand the politics of race in Malaysia, for example, or the politics of education, of the environment, of healthcare, of local councils and governments, and so on, so that we can have a fuller understanding about the state of this nation we call home."

The Nut Graph also thinks that "popular culture provides us with an important insight into how Malaysians live, express themselves, intersect and interact with each other, and how we find ways to make sense of what it means to be Malaysian. And because we believe that in a vibrant democracy, artistic expressions are just as legitimate as an official memorandum, we also aim to foreground counter- and subaltern cultures so that our readers can have a richer understanding of what makes Malaysia what it is."

GOVERNMENT AND THE MEDIA

It is generally assumed that the primary function of the mass media in Malaysia, like in other developing countries, is to help the government impart information and disseminate its policies for the betterment of the population in general. This functionalist perspective promoted by the United Nations among the developing countries since the 1960s assumes that the media is a tool of modernization, political stability and national development. The great importance accorded to the mass media has led most leaders to justify their control of the media via a combination of media regulations, political patronage and media monitoring in the name of socio-economic development and political stability. This normative concept of development journalism has been misinterpreted to serve the interests of the ruling elites and to mean that they could take control of the media particularly during political crises.

Legal controls

Control of the media in Malaysia has its roots in the British colonial administration and more specifically, in the anti-communist counter-insurgency campaign, known as the Emergency, around the end of the Second World War. A number of laws are enforced in the name of protecting and promoting law and order, internal security as well as national development. The multicultural nature of Malaysia also provides convenient justification for the state to make use of these laws.

The Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) is a legislation that governs the press industry. PPPA stipulates that all newspapers and regular publications should possess a publishing permit issued by the Ministry of Internal Security, which has to be re-applied annually. The amended PPPA empowers the minister to prohibit the printing, sale, import, distribution, or possession of a publication. The minister may do this if he believes that a publication can threaten morality, public order, security, or national interest, conflicts with the law, or contains provocative materials.

A similar legislative control affects the broadcast media. Television and radio are monitored under the Broadcasting Act, which licenses and controls broadcast activity. The ministers dealing with information and communication have the power to direct licensees in broadcast matters.

The PPPA and the Broadcasting Acts, however, are not applicable to the Internet and thus news portals do not require a permit to set up operations. In line with this, both the Multimedia Bill of Guarantees and the Communications and Multimedia Commission Act 1998 stipulate that the Internet will not be censored. Despite the promise of non-censorship, there are no guarantees that the government will not take action against any website. Other laws such as the Official Secrets Act (OSA), Defamation Act, Seditious Act and Internal Security Act (ISA) will be used by the authorities as a control.

Press Ownership

In addition to legal control, there is also corporate control through a concentration of press ownership in the hands of a few who are linked to the government. Looking at the media ownership pattern in Malaysia, there is an obvious indication of the degree of involvement of the various parties in the ruling coalition (see, for instance, Wang 1998; Zaharom and Anuar 1998; Brown, 2005). In the 1980s, during Mahathir's administration, the ruling party had substantial interests in the mainstream media in all languages, Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil.

Regional papers in Sabah namely *Daily Express, New Sabah Times and Sarawak Tribune are* also under the same pattern with individuals aligned to the ruling parties controlling them. A similar corporate control affects television and radio. The state runs a national radio and television station and opposition parties are rarely given the access to it. The establishment of private channels did little to expand the political base of broadcasting media.

Race Rhetoric

There were attempts by the vernacular newspapers as a whole to provide balanced reporting. However, the reality was such that many of the papers succumbed to promoting the ethnic groups they are representing at the expense of demonizing the opposing parties. The issue of heightened race

rhetoric in the media frequently appears and causes much concern to many people.

ALTERNATIVE NEW MEDIA

Government was seen as the solution but now many realise that government is also part of the problem and might be as much as a liability as an asset to national development. The idea that development takes precedence over democracy has been changed since the past decades. People should be at the center of development and, therefore, their voice should count as much as anyone else's. Also, there is much more emphasis on deliberation to arrive at public decisions and choices. This means dialogical communication through popular participation as proposed by Bourgault and communicative rationality as promoted by Habermas is important, not merely instrumentalist rationality which guided modernization in the 60s. While the mainstream media is being used to promote government's agenda, civil societies are turning to independent and alternative media

Independent Media

The concept of independent media is defined in the 1991 Windhoek Declaration as being "free from governmental, political or economic control." The Declaration also stresses that "the establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press is essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation, and for economic development". Ironically, much of the independent press has come into being largely as a result of conflict, which by its very nature, tends to give rise to the development of alternative media. (Lister, Gwen, n.d., Managing media in Times of Crisis, http: http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/files)

Malaysia does have a small but consistent alternative print media published either by the main opposition parties or non-profit organisations. These include *Harakah,* published by the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), the *Rocket,* published by the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) and *Aliran Monthly*, published by a non-profit organization called Aliran. There are also a number of independent magazines dealing primarily with current affairs, often from a critical point of view. This alternative independent print media saw its circulation soar during the political conflict after Mahathir sacked his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim and placed him behind bars in September 1998. *Harakah,* for example, saw its readership rocketed to more than 365,000 copies during the political conflict from just 65,000 copies (Anil Neto, 2000).

It was also during this conflict that the Internet expanded rapidly as a source of alternative media. In the November 1999 General Election, the opposition parties made deep inroads thanks to the alternative media which has played a major role in the campaign. *Harakah* expanded its English language section, and Websites such as Laman Reformasi (*reformasi* website), *Malaysiakini* and *Harakahdaily* have provided a more independent alternative to the official version of events. Then the 2008 General Election came and showed a shocking result. The ruling government of Barisan Nasional suffered their biggest ever defeat by losing in five states and holding on to a small majority in Parliament. One of the main reason of the defeat is the power of Internet as a source of reliable information for the public. With major newspapers and TV stations controlled by the government, the public have instead turn to blogs and independent news portals for a second opinion on general issues.

Government's Reactions

While the alternative new media has been more tolerated in general, the government has been quick to crack down when it perceives its interests under threat. In 2003 the authority raid on the *Malaysiakini* office which led to the police's removal of all nineteen computers and three servers used by its journalists and personnel. The police made the raid in connection with their investigation of a report lodged by UMNO Youth earlier that M*alaysiakini* had carried an allegedly seditious letter at its website. UMNO Youth had complained that the letter had questioned Malay "special privileges" and contained "false allegations" about the government's treatment of other ethnic groups. They also alleged that the letter had likened UMNO Youth with the Ku Klux Klan, the white-supremacist group. A month before the *Malaysiakini* raid, police detained 10 Malaysians under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for spreading terror rumors on the web.

In 2005, it was claimed that *Malaysiakini* suffered a DoS (denial-of-service) attack during the general election. (Aliran Online, 2003). The government was accused of trying to shut up the main source of election updates. Malaysiakini had been the only medium reporting updates on the opposition's major wins in various states as the mainstream media were more interested in filter the news.

The Barisan Nasional government has tried to control and undermine *Malaysiakini's* status. As an online entity, Malaysiakini does not have a publishing permit which is obligatory for any traditional media organization. However, *Malaysiakini* has been regularly warned that action could be taken

against it for unspecified offences. *Malaysiakini* and other alternative online journalists have also been denied admission to certain official events and press conferences.

In August 2008 a leading political blog was blocked in what was seen as a crackdown on websites credited with contributing to government losses in the general election held earlier. The *Malaysia Today* website was blocked by the country's leading internet service provider, Telekom Malaysia, which is state-owned. The blockage was on the orders of the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, which said comments posted on it were "insensitive, bordering on incitement" (Burton, John, 2008).

Earlier in July 2008, Raja Petra, owner of *Malaysia Today* was charged together with writer Syed Akbar Ali a writer and businessman, with criminal defamation after suggesting on *Malaysia Today* website that Deputy Prime Minister and his wife were implicated in the murder case of a foreign model.

Raja Petra was charged under Section 4(1)(c) of the Sedition Act 1948 with publishing a seditious article titled "Let's Send the Altantuya Murderers to Hell" in his portal on April 25. Syed Akbar was charged for publishing seditious remarks in the comment section of an article. The comment with the heading "It is easy to impress the Malays" was made on an article titled "Malaysia's Organised Crime Syndicate: All Roads Lead to Putrajaya" published by blogger Raja Petra Raja Kamarudin who maintains the website. Aliran on 6 May posted a stong condemnation against the charge saying that "The authorities' action only raises more questions. It raises suspicion that it is meant not only to politically bludgeon Raja Petra but also to make an example of him for the rest of the blogging fraternity and civil society."

In March 2009, eight people were charged over comments posted on a royal website, under laws banning the publication of threatening comments. They are being charged under Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 with "improper use of network facilities or service for making comments, requests, suggestions or other communications which are obscene, indecent, false, menacing or offensive in character". Under Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act. Section 211 it is stated that no content applications service provider, or other person using a content applications service, shall provide content which is indecent, obscene, false, menacing, or offensive in character with intent to annoy, abuse, threaten or harass any person. A person who contravenes this is liable to a fine of not more than RM50,000 or imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year or both, and

shall also be liable to a further fine of RM1,000 for every day or part of a day during which the offence is continued after conviction.

In early September 2009, The Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) called on the CEO of *Malaysiakini* and six of its editorial staff team for questioning following their investigations on the two video clips posted on their site which allegedly breached the Communication and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998. The videos are 'Temple demo: Residents march with cow's head' and 'Hisham: Don't blame cow-head protesters', which the MCMC had ordered *Malaysiakini* to take them down which they refused.

From the government side, The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) are established to promote responsible and ethical Internet practices and positive use of the Internet. In one of its media statement on 31 December 2008 the organisation was "very concerned with the increasing incidence of irresponsible and unethical use of the Internet, in particular, comments made in blogs." It also said that "the Internet is a powerful tool for development but is unfortunately misused by a small number of irresponsible and unethical individuals." It further said that it had always and was presently working in close co-operation with other enforcement agencies in the course of its investigations and that it would like to remind users of the electronic media that any action that constitutes a contravention of the laws of Malaysia in the offline world also constitutes an offence in the online world, including the Internet. In this regard, MCMC reminds the public that stern action will be taken against anyone found contravening the provisions of the Act. MCMC also calls upon parents and guardians to supervise the use of the Internet by minors and young persons in order that they do not fall prey to unscrupulous individuals. Users of Internet social networking sites should also exercise caution on the type of information they choose to post.

At the same time, civil society groups need to raise media consciousness and literacy among the non-government organizations and ordinary citizens. Such awareness is important in alerting the problems of journalistic distortions and also to create critical readership. Given the inclination of the ruling party to keep and use legal control to protect its interests, media advocacy groups, media professionals, civil society groups and others ought to work hand in hand in their pursuit of media freedom and freedom of information.

COMPETITION AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Media houses from newspapers to TV stations are currently struggling to compete and stay relevant. Across the world, amidst a major economic recession, newspapers and TV stations are being hit by declining media circulation and revenues created by stiff competition. Traditional newspaper publishers have been looking at the next avenues for information delivery. Newspapers hoping to retain their readers and survive in the technological age are venturing into the digital world especially online and mobile phone spheres. Some of their increasing competition comes from online publications, professional blogs and social networks including Twitter and Facebook.

The greatest challenge faced by Malaysian media portals, however, appeared not to be the threat of government action, but its commercial and business standing. Many news portals appear to face difficulties in sustaining their operations over a long period of time. Several websites that appeared at end of 1990s are no longer in active operation and have not been maintained consistently. Some have disappeared completely from the virtual world.

Malaysiakini was initially funded by a number of grants from international organizations but when the grant ended towards the end of 2000, it ran into financial problems. At the same time, its advertising revenue also declined due to the economic slump as well as the direct government pressure on those advertising with *Malaysiakini* (Brown, Graham, 2005). *The Nut Graph* was also running out of funds and it was much faster than *Malaysiakini*. In just a year after its launch, the owner was appealing for public donations to stay afloat. Earlier, its investors notified them that they could no longer fund the website operation due partly to the current economic situation. Arukesamy, Karen, 2009). The publisher said that "within the current economic climate, it would be unfair to expect any one group of investors to keep on putting in money into such an enterprise with no guaranteed returns on investment." She added that the company operated on a tight budget of RM80,000 per month and that the present funds would dry up by March 2010.

One of the strategies to face competition, *The Nutgraph* website gives attention to both politics and pop culture, compared to other news sites which are more focused on politics. In terms of presentation, the website uses images that were traditionally not used in news reporting. For example, they presented a budget through a cartoon gallery. According to them, it is "our way of

attracting younger readers to be interested in the news. They also employs creative ways to engage readers on critical issues." (Arukesamy, Karen, 2009).

To support its financial resources, *Malaysiakini* introduced a paid analysis service, and software solutions produced by their technical department. These efforts, however, were not enough and faced with a diminishing advertising revenue as well as dotcom bust, the management launched a RM10-a-month subscription in early 2002. There was a setback initially but the number of subscribers slowly grew and combined with other revenues, Malaysiakini broke even in 2004. In 2008, Malaysiakini's subscription income contributed to over 65 per cent of total earnings. Malaysiakini thus relies on a mix of the subscription and advertising models to finance its operations. (Brown, 2005) Users pay RM150 per year (US$40) to access the daily content, and RM450 per year (US$120) for access to the archived content. *Malaysian Mirror* is said to be owned by several investors. Several ex-journalists from the mainstream media are behind the *Malaysian Mirror* which is run by 15 editorial staff.

The present situation indicates that the new alternative media lacks the infrastructure and the financial resources to provide a comprehensive alternative news source to the mainstream media. Free websites will continue to remain in the red for years to come and they will have to find other ways to finance their operations. Although more competition would make it harder and tougher for the free websites to continue, it is still regarded as good for the industry.

CONCLUSION

Independent media whether print or electronic, is considered as the backbone of emerging democracies. The independent new media need to be as professional and transparent as the governments they challenge. Professional ethics are vital and independent media structures must be clear on their ownership or shareholders. In Malaysia, there appears to be a drive to set up alternative media, although not in a concerted way. This is certainly a positive sign in an environment where the government is still dominating the media. Great steps forward have been initiated in Malaysia through the new media in laying the groundwork for democracy and good governance and promoting press freedom and free speech.

The popularity of the new alternative media testifies to the need that
Malaysians feel for trustworthy news, investigative reports, critical
commentaries, thoughtful columns, free exchanges of opinions, and frankly
written letters. These could be available in the digital alternative media in
contrast with the mainstream media. Information and news portals such as
Malaysiakini has enjoyed a certain level of credibility and esteem in a short
period of time. Despite all the shortcoming and challenges it faces, the new
alternative media has pushed significantly for democratic participation of civil
society.

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