

"NEW MEDIA CONFIGURATIONS - CHANGING SOCIETIES? CURRENT RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTH ASIA, SOUTHEAST ASIA, THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA"

Poster Session

Eva Eichenauer (M.A. student, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany)

„Language, mass media and democracy: A Malaysian case study“

Abstract

Malaysia is commonly referred to as a semi-authoritarian democracy with a highly controlled media landscape. Yet, in recent years, this assumption has been increasingly challenged by the growing impact that the Internet has had on media productions. Not since the massive political changes that have taken place during and after the “Arab spring” the Internet has been perceived as a key tool for disseminating information and creating alternative realities that contest the coverage of national press agencies or state-controlled media. In Malaysia, too, the Internet has widely been seen as a key force behind the political changes triggered by the elections in March 2008, often referred to in Malaysia as a “political tsunami”.

Following Niklas Luhmann's systems theoretical approach, I argue that media construct reality and serve to create shared knowledge as a basis for individual and collective communication and action. The creation of different and alternative realities through mass media is essential in democratization processes (Luhmann 2000). Through a comparative media analysis, this paper examines the media coverage of the print dailies Utusan Malaysia and The Star as well as the online news site Malaysiakini on the “Allah issue” that gained momentum in early 2010, when the High Court allowed Christians in Malaysia to use the term Allah for addressing God in their religious services and publications. This paper offers interesting empirical findings for pluralist contestations of reality, since both English- and Malaysian-language as well as on- and offline media were included in the analysis. Although one might assume that because of the highly controlled print media, Malaysia's realities are challenged only via “online dissent”, this study suggests that Malaysia's linguistically plural public sphere offers multiple re-presentations of reality even within the highly restricted context print publications operate in. Hence, this paper argues that, even though technological innovations do offer spaces to create alternative realities, in a multi-lingual national context as in Malaysia, the interrelation between language and news content is an even more crucial element of constructing shared knowledge and collective identities.