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# **Adaptation and transformation: “The Internet”<sup>1</sup> – an alternative challenge to authoritarianism? A short Malaysian case study<sup>2</sup>**

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Taking an internet-related topic is like asking for trouble. First, “The Internet” is an entity which is difficult to grasp: Its history is characterised by its ever-changing purposes: Developing from a military structure in Cold War times to a scientific web of special interest information where people could exchange all sorts of very (and not so very) important information, to a gigantic market place with the possibility to develop into an all-encompassing network of all the above combined.

Second, a blatant positivism from Negroponte (1996) to Friedman (2005) with which “The Internet” was perceived, has accompanied it in all those stages of development, making it difficult nowadays – where most of these promises have been failing – to come to a sober, yet fair perspective.

And third, what’s so alternative about “The Internet”? It is governed by an US-American statutory body, using technology and standards developed in the Western hemisphere, where also most of its users and websites come from and thus can hardly be described as “alternative” in terms of ownership, control, content or communication patterns.

Despite the difficulties, this paper argues that there are ways in which “The Internet” can be a tool in the context of challenging authoritarianism. Examples will demonstrate that there is not necessarily a hegemonic relationship in which ‘the North/West’ will inevitably prevail over ‘the South/East’. While economic aspects have been the driving force behind its propagation, its fast and extensive spread has also provided means for groups, movements and discourses to claim part of a new (more or less) public space. The content, codes and communication, which originate from a primarily “western” context, have partly been adapted, transformed and replaced in line with local requirements of the people using these media. This can pose a challenge to dominant power structures, hegemonies and paradigms and result in a counter-current with significant effects within a local as well as a globalised context.

Research on the political impact of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tends to focus either on liberal democracies or outright authoritarian regimes (Kalathil and Boas 2003). The assumption that “ICT poses an insurmountable threat to authoritarian rule” has not been proved by political science scholars. On the contrary there is a growing body of evidence that “authoritarian regimes are finding ways to control and counter the political impact of Internet use” (Kalathil and Boas 2001: 2, see also Rodan 1998).

In this respect, Malaysia, a semi-democratic, rapidly developing country, makes up for a rewarding case study because it can neither be seen as a liberal democracy, nor as a fully authoritarian state like China or Cuba, both countries that exert a high level of control over all sorts of communication technologies.

This paper will examine the use and impact of ICT in Malaysia as well as its change and adaptation. The following sections will describe the motives of the government in embracing ICT at quite an early point of time, what was the impact on society and how society and civil society actors reacted towards and made use of ICT and “The Internet”.

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is clearly defined, on a technological level, what the Internet is and what it is not, public perception and usage of the term “The Internet” varies widely. In this text, I will use the specific medium or technology wherever possible and refer to “The Internet” only in reference to the aforementioned generalization.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is an updated extract of my 2001 Master’s Thesis comparing Malaysia’s media policy regarding “old” and “new” media. It was presented at the workshop on “Alternative Globalisation” at Humboldt University on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2006.

## Information and Communication Technology as a catalyst for growth

In 1991, then-Prime Minister Mahathir in a speech to the Malaysian Business Council unveiled what is now called “Vision 2020”, a kind of “road map” (Minges and Gray 2002) for the future economic progress of Malaysia towards a fully developed society. He realised back then that “in a world of high technology Malaysia cannot afford to lag behind. We cannot be in the front line of modern technology but we must try to catch up at least in those fields where we may have certain advantages”. Under pressure from a powerful globalising economy after the end of the Cold War, he admitted that “we simply have no choice but to be more lean, more resourceful, more productive and generally more competitive, more able to take on the world” (Mahathir 1991: 7).

As a consequence, in 1996, another brainchild of Mahathir, the so-called “Multimedia Super Corridor” (MSC) project, started to develop. Its aim was to provide the technical and educational framework in order to leapfrog Malaysia in three phases into leadership in the Knowledge Economy (K-Economy) by the year 2020. Although it can be conceded that the relatively early focus on a knowledge-based society was a visionary approach at a time when many western countries didn’t pay much attention to this matter, economic requirements were the central arguments. In advertising this 50 x 15 km sized area of former palm oil plantations near the capital Kuala Lumpur, “advantages” like “Competitive costs of doing business”, “Ready access to Asia-Pacific markets” or “Firm commitment from the Malaysian Government” (Multimedia Development Corporation 1996) were being emphasised. In addition to this, an investor-friendly environment was provided: “Core areas in the MSC with high-capacity global telecommunications and logistics networks” were created and the government offered “secure cyberlaws, strategic policies; and a range of financial and non-financial incentives for investors” in order to woo foreign and multinational companies. To a certain extent this has been achieved, companies like Intel, AMD, DHL and Infineon have set up their regional headquarters or major plants to make use of these benefits and the government hopes that through spill-over effects and cooperation, local companies will be able to strengthen their position.

To evaluate whether the MSC or Malaysia’s approach to become a knowledge-based society has been a success or failure is beyond the scope of this paper, but it should suffice to show that it was primarily economic motives that led the government to implement this strategy.

## The impact of “The Internet” on the media system

Even though Information and Communication Technology can exist without freedom of expression, information and communication, limitations in these fields result in a competitive disadvantage. Usually companies don’t have to worry about the extent of freedom of speech for example in an authoritarian state as long as the investment climate is not adversely affected. But they *do* worry about the security, integrity and reliability of their own communication streams and worldwide data-access to relevant information. Any censorship measure or interference would be detrimental to investor interests and thus amount to a locational disadvantage.

In the Malaysian context, the media system and policy is more complex than in fully authoritarian states where it is evident what can be printed and transmitted and what not. Malaysia does not have a censorship agency that controls newspapers on a daily basis or TV news before transmission. It is a combination of several measures that allows the government to claim to guarantee freedom of speech and press (at least formally) and still have effective control over what is being published and transmitted through the press and TV: Almost all major TV stations and publishers are – directly or indirectly – owned by government parties. The law (for example the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984) requires companies, to obtain a license from the Home Ministry before publishing anything and have it renewed every year. Since the risk of having the license not renewed poses a substantial economic risk, most media companies will not dare to cross the invisible line of what can and cannot be said. From time to time someone will inevitably cross this line and the subsequent banning is meant to serve as a lesson for others. The last incidents were the publications of the caricatures of Prophet Muhammad, which were shown indirectly in the newspapers *Sarawak Tribune*, *Berita Petang* and *Guanming Daily*.

While *Berita Petang* and *Guangming Daily* were suspended for 14 days, the *Sarawak Tribune* had to cease publication indefinitely as their articles could “harm public peace and security”.<sup>3</sup>

For a long time, this licensing system has ensured that the mainstream media will not publish anything that runs contrary to the government’s interest.

This, however, does not apply to publications in the World Wide Web (WWW): In the “Bill of Guarantees” – a commitment given by the government to ICT-investment companies – it is clearly stated that there will be no Internet censorship (Multimedia Development Corporation 1996). And although it is quite possible to implement censorship measures through Internet Service Providers in order to limit access to unwanted content (as practiced in China, with Google and Yahoo being the latest examples), to do so would damage the government’s credibility in international business matters and therefore reduce Malaysia’s attractiveness as an IT-hub.

One reason why the government did not push for the same restrictions in the WWW as in print media and TV could have been the limited impact the WWW had in the mid-nineties: With few people owning PCs and having Internet access at that time, this was hardly seen as a threat. Discussion forums, like the famous *Sang Kancil* mailing list created by Malaysia’s first online journalist, the late MGG Pillai, was limited to an interested intellectual elite.

The first significant example of the impact of ICT on politics was the *reformasi*-movement in combination with the sacking and arrest of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. In an unprecedented move, media reports swung from praising Anwar to denouncing him within 48 hours and an almost complete blackout of statements defending him soon followed.

The lack of confidence in those reports made people look out for alternative sources of information: Websites previously carrying dull glorifications of Anwar Ibrahim turned into mouthpieces of his struggle for justice, publishing statements, speeches, photos and up-to-date news. Because of slow and relatively expensive internet access, this information would have been limited to a few chosen ones, had those people not become multipliers by downloading, printing and distributing this information among their friends and relatives. This combination of ‘old’ and ‘new’ media effectively countered the hegemony of government-controlled and – influenced media.

During the height of the Anwar trial in 1999, *MalaysiaKini* was the first non-partisan online-newspaper to enter cyberspace. They managed to publish a daily set of news articles which covered topics, neglected or blacked-out by mainstream media, reflecting their slogan “News and views that matter”. The shift towards a subscription-based system provided them with the necessary resources to hire also full-time journalists. Adhering strictly to journalistic principles like separation of news and comment, it gained credibility beyond those *reformasi*-sites, which had their own limited scope and agenda.

With *MalaysiaKini*’s popularity rising, the government thought about ways to counter its influence. The dilemma was that any technological measures would have run counter to the Bill of Guarantees, so “offline” laws were used to intimidate the staff: One reader’s letter published on the website which supposedly incited hatred was given as the reason for a raid launched against *MalaysiaKini*’s office. Several servers and PCs were confiscated, but the website was offline only for a few hours: Soon after that, mirroring servers all across the world brought the service online again. The government then realised that this would not be beneficial for its reputation – especially with such little effect – so similar actions have not occurred again.

Still, it is not clear what kind of “invisible” measures the government and related agencies have taken on several occasions. As a small example from my own experience in the days of the Anwar crisis in 1998, I witnessed content filtering of e-mails at *Universiti Sains Malaysia* (USM) containing the word “Anwar” or “Ibrahim”. E-mails that included these words took several hours to be delivered even to fellow students in the same network, probably a result of pre-delivery screening by authorities. As the filter was rather unsophisticated, inserting spaces in those words was enough to see the mails passing through without any delay. Still, the question remains what kinds of actions are nowadays being taken concerning matters and topics deemed suspect by the government.

<sup>3</sup> “Second Sarawak daily suspended”, [<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/47490>].

But despite public denunciation by prominent ruling politicians that online media like *MalaysiaKini* are “biased”, “unfair” and “destructively criticising”, they realise that the information accessible through them has changed the perception of the people and their expectations towards serious news reporting.

Just a few weeks back, in the aftermath of the Sarawak state polls 2006, where *Barisan Nasional* suffered a distinct blow, Deputy Information Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi conceded that: “voters were now better informed with the existence of sophisticated communication facilities. The popularity of a candidate in the print or electronic media was no longer a guarantee of victory”<sup>4</sup>. Even mainstream newspapers now quote *MalaysiaKini* in an effort to gain extra credibility (*Tamil Nesan*, 30<sup>th</sup> May, 2006: 1).

## Changes and Challenges

At first glance, this would support the assumption that ICT poses a threat to authoritarian rule, following the logic that economic liberalisation leads to greater freedom of expression which in turn facilitates the process of democratisation. There are good reasons to question this: ICTs are commonly used, but not as widespread as ‘old’ media in order to have large-scale effect; access requires a technological infrastructure available mainly in urban areas only, thus – in the case of Malaysia – lacking influence in the rural Malay strongholds; and reliable resources in the WWW with localised content and adapted to local needs in the region are hard to find.

However, there are three developments which I think deserve further exploration because they differ from the common perspective on ICT and show that through adapting and transforming “The Internet” something new comes out in the end that resembles local settings.

### *Adopting technology, keeping communication patterns*

As in many repressive systems, public confidence in media reports in Malaysia is relatively low and people try to read between the lines. This creates room for a wide spectrum of speculation and interpretation on current issues. Information received by relatives, friends or friends of friends has generally a higher credibility than what can be read in the papers or seen on TV even if it cannot be verified. Furthermore, rumours and word-of-mouth have a long history of being a medium to transmit messages. With the advent of modern communication channels like e-mail and SMS, the dissemination of unofficial news has become extremely fast as has been seen on several occasions. One example was a rumour in 1998 that Indonesians were stocking up on *parangs* (machetes) and planning to riot in the Chow Kit area of Kuala Lumpur. The ‘information’ reached people in K. L. within hours through SMS and e-mail, making them rush to the supermarkets to buy rice and supplies, recollecting similar events in 1987 and 1969. The official denials in the newspapers only worsened the situation because it appeared that where there was smoke there must be fire. When nothing happened after a few days, the situation calmed down and to demonstrate action a few “poison-pen writers” were presented as scapegoats and arrested.

Another occasion was the 2004 tsunami which hit Penang more destructively than anywhere else in Malaysia. Considering the media’s information too slow and too scarce, people feared the danger of a second wave that might hit the island and assumed that the government would keep back information in order to prevent panic. A few days later, a rumour spread via e-mail and SMS that a second wave was going to hit Penang in the afternoon, probably causing serious damage to the Penang Bridge. As a result, even university staff at *Universiti Sains Malaysia* living on the mainland were allowed to return home even though it later turned out that there was no warning or evidence whatsoever from meteorological or geophysical institutions.

Although there is a multitude of sources available on the WWW to crosscheck the information in question, there is too little critical approach to verify it. As can be seen in these examples, new com-

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<sup>4</sup> „SUPP chief hears it loud and clear”, [<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/51367>].

munication channels are being adopted and become the vehicles for existing patterns of communication that existed long before.

### *Demand beyond western-liberal content*

Websites like *MalaysiaKini* would fit perfectly into a positivistic perspective on the influence of “The Internet” in authoritarian states, instilling the value of freedom of speech and open-mindedness in readers. The cases where these stereotypes are not fulfilled according to a western-liberal manner are often ignored. One of these examples is the party organ of the Islamic party PAS, *Harakah* (lit. movement). Technically a newspaper for party members only, it boosted up to 377,000 readers nationwide in November 1999, shortly before the general elections, attracting also non-Malays and non-Muslims with its politically critical news coverage. After being curtailed to an ‘offline’ publishing frequency of twice a month instead of twice a week in 2001, *Harakah* intensified its online presence to come up with a daily news section to counter the loss of influence in the print sector, making it one of the most influential alternative news sites together with *MalaysiaKini*.

The difference between the non-partisan *MalaysiaKini* and *Harakah* comes to light when party matters – and especially PAS’ stand on Islamic issues – are affected: Controversial topics such as the plan for an Inter-Faith Commission are struck out in their entirety<sup>5</sup>, Islamic women’s rights movement ‘Sisters in Islam’ is denied the right to speak in the name of Islam because they are supposed to be “uneducated”<sup>6</sup> and critics of PAS’ Islamic state concept are frequently chided.

This is not to deny or belittle PAS’ importance and contributions as a major opposition party or its achievements in the states it has governed, but to demonstrate that there is significant demand for content embodying non-liberal-secular values. This also casts doubt on the assumption that the overwhelming influx of western-sourced content will inevitably lead viewers to embrace liberal ideals and ethics, thereby neglecting, rejecting or ignoring one’s own beliefs and values. The number and popularity of web-portals specialising on Islamic topics is also supporting this.

One reason why there seems to be such a demand for this kind of content and the popularity of websites like *Harakah* might be language: Sites in *Bahasa Malaysia* are scarcely found on the WWW, so those pages offering information in this language will have a much higher potential readership compared to pages in English where there are many more competitors.

### *Forum for the ‘blacked-out’ and marginalised*

In a society where controversial discourses are frowned upon, web-based forums and web logs (“blogs”) can provide a useful tool to discuss and exchange arguments without having to fear repression when voicing opinions that are deemed – in the Malaysian context – “sensitive”. People and opinions that have been sidelined, marginalised or ‘blacked-out’ can get the opportunity to escape their isolation and participate in discussions. For example, websites like *Jeff Ooi’s Screenshots*<sup>7</sup> but also *MalaysiaKini’s* “Vox Populi” or *Harakah’s* “Letters” section are giving readers the chance to voice their opinion or read those of others. This enables them to create and participate in their own discourses beyond the limits set by mainstream society.

Of course these discussions are not always completely rational and would probably not meet positivistic expectations of mature interaction enabled through the use of ICT. Some of these forums do, however, provide interesting insights especially the comment-wars on controversial topics. All the government talk about “racial harmony” and “religious tolerance”<sup>8</sup> becomes at least doubtful when readers speak their minds under the veil of (pseudo-) anonymity, showing racist and intolerant attitudes. This resembles a much more authentic view of Malaysian society compared to the all-smiles

<sup>5</sup> “IFC: Sikap pasif kerajaan bela umat Islam dikesali”, [[http://www.harakahdaily.net/v06/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2348&Itemid=28](http://www.harakahdaily.net/v06/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2348&Itemid=28)].

<sup>6</sup> “Sisters In Islam tidak ada hak bercakap atas nama Islam”, [[http://harakahdaily.net/v06/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=506&Itemid=28](http://harakahdaily.net/v06/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=506&Itemid=28)].

<sup>7</sup> “Screenshots”, [<http://www.jeffooi.com/>].

<sup>8</sup> V. K. Chin: “Mahathir’s formula offers progress and prosperity”, [<http://www.bn.org.my/cgi-bin/readers/article/article3.html>].

image painted by mainstream media and thereby also helps local readers to spot the fault lines in the present system.

In an ironical twist, former Prime Minister Mahathir, the man who used to fight *MalaysiaKini* for more than six years, prevented their access to press conferences of the government and had to face their critical reporting, is now turning to them. He himself is being sidelined now for heavily criticising the present government on a number of issues and no longer has the option of speaking his mind in the government controlled newspapers. So by giving an extensive interview to *MalaysiaKini* readers,<sup>9</sup> he was not merely showing his disappointment over certain issues, but rather demonstrating – voluntarily or not – the need to push for a more independent media system. If even the former most powerful politician cannot voice his opinion in the officially sanctioned media, who else could?

## Conclusion

The cases mentioned in this paper show various ways in which “The Internet” in the Malaysian context was used, adapted and to a certain extent transformed according to local demands beyond its economic component, the main reason for its promotion by the government. Although these examples are far from sufficient for a general evaluation of the impact of ICT on Malaysian society or (semi-)authoritarian regimes, they do provide starting points for further exploration. ICTs are not the “steroids” Friedman wants them to be, but it is important to note that even though the whole technological framework, the vast majority of content and the communication patterns have a ‘western’ origin, they are neither static nor ‘forcing’ the user to accept a certain point of view. They rather offer possibilities to counter dominant discourses by giving marginalised or ‘blacked-out’ sections of society a platform. In a context like Malaysia, where the language barrier, a restricted media framework and a limited audience creates demand for websites catering for those interests, chances are that people will make use of this.

It is also worth noting how ‘global players’, politically and economically, are reacting to this demand: Music channel MTV for example has begun to localise its content after realising that its ‘one-size-fits-all’ program doesn’t sell well everywhere on the globe, especially in more conservative societies like India, Indonesia or Thailand (Santana 2003). This demonstrates that despite the economic power of these companies and their possibility to create demands and cultural standards, cultural preferences can create enough pressure to have them adapt to local realities.

A problem not to be underestimated – also in the West – and which needs to be addressed in order to enable people to be in control rather than being controlled by ICT is to educate users to become a mature and critical ‘online-audience’. Especially the ability to scrutinise information acquired through the WWW where sources are difficult to verify is something that needs to be learnt in a society with a ‘guided’ media system. Encouraging children to use internet-café’s for more than just playing P2P shooters like “Counterstrike” and instil them with media competence is another task ahead. Furthermore, in order to have a significant effect on society as a whole, Internet access and usage need to encompass a much broader section of society. Even though the number of internet users in Malaysia seems to be quite high with around 10 million people (CIA 2006), these are most probably located mainly in urban areas whereby rural folks face the risk of being on the wrong side of the digital divide.

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<sup>9</sup> “Why did he talk to Malaysiakini?”, [<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/51465>].

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