

## **Adaptation and Transformation of the Internet in Malaysia<sup>1</sup>**

Taking an Internet<sup>2</sup>-related topic is like asking for trouble. First, the Internet is an entity which is difficult to grasp: Its history is characterized 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 it 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 globalized context.

Research on the impact of information and communication technology (ICT) on political systems 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 proven 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, Rodan 1998).

In this respect, Malaysia, an economically rapidly developing country under a competitive authoritarian regime (Levitsky and Way 2002), makes up for a rewarding case study because it can neither be seen as a liberal democracy, nor as a fully authoritarian state (Case 2004) 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

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an updated extract of my 2001 M.A. thesis comparing Malaysia's media policy regarding 'old' and 'new' media.

<sup>2</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.

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.

### ***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 realized 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 globalizing 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).

In 1996, development on another brainchild of Mahathir began the so-called “Multimedia Super Corridor” (MSC) project. 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” (Ronchi 2009: 297) were being emphasized. 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 (Wong 2000). 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 won't 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 major incidents were the publications of the cartoons of Prophet Muhammad in 2006, 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>. Selective punishment seems to indicate, however, that even within the mainstream media, some publications have more freedom than others.<sup>4</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

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<sup>3</sup> "Second Sarawak daily suspended", <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/47490>

<sup>4</sup> This applies on one hand to Chinese and English language papers which are given more leeway in publishing (although the difference is usually minor due to ownership by BN component parties). On the other hand, cases in which the 'invisible line' was crossed, UMNO-controlled newspaper were shown more leniency than non-UMNO-controlled papers. Whereas no action was taken upon false reports of Utusan Melayu which resulted in an opposition MP being detained under the ISA (see "Kok sues Utusan, Chamil for RM30mil", <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/94744>), a report of China Press over the impending resignation of the Inspector-General of Police, Musa Hassan, was met with harsher reactions: The Home Ministry was vehemently denying the report only to confirm the news a few days later, with the only difference being the time of the resignation. Nevertheless, China Press was threatened with a suspension and had to publish a front-page apology for its "inaccurate report" and was told only thinly veiled that the editor-in-chief was to be suspended for two weeks. Cases like this of course further add to self-censorship even on issues that are usually not deemed 'sensitive'. See "Ministry shoots China Press show-cause letter", <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/126454>; "Hisham confirms Musa on way out", <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/126598>; "IGP quit row: China Press threatened with suspension", <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/126652>; "2-week suspension for China Press top editor", <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/126954>

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 then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim for alleged corruption and homosexuality. 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 (see Abbott (2004) for a more detailed account on the impact of online information exchange on the *reformasi* movement).

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. It 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 the company 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 police 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 realized that this would not be beneficial for its reputation – especially with such little effect – so similar actions have not occurred yet again. Actions are now usually targeted against outspoken individuals who are subsequently sued for leaking “official secrets”, sedition or defamation. In this context, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) – which was designed to be more of a media regulatory body – has been also given the task to “monitor blogs and websites that touch on the people’s sensitivities” in cooperation with the Home Ministry and the Information, Communication and Culture Ministry.<sup>5</sup> According to a ministry official, the monitoring of issues and postings that contain “seditious contents on sensitive issues to incite anger and hatred” had been going on long before the existence of blogs.<sup>6</sup>

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

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<sup>5</sup> “Eye on blogs, websites touching on sensitivities”, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/123371>

<sup>6</sup> “Ministry to probe blogs that ‘cross the line’”, New Straits Times, 2 February 2010.

The first changes were acknowledged by the ruling elite in the aftermath of the Sarawak state polls 2006, where Barisan Nasional suffered a distinct blow. Then 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>7</sup>, even mainstream newspapers started to quote MalaysiaKini in an effort to gain extra credibility.<sup>8</sup>

The elections in March 2008 became a watershed as BN did not manage to retain its two thirds majority in parliament for the first time since independence. In light of this development, the strategic impact of online media in all its variety could no longer be denied. Information Communication and Culture Minister Rais Yatim even argued that “[R]eaders will most likely shift to the Internet for news if the traditional media continue with their old style of presenting news based on what the editors feel that people should read or use the media as a propaganda tool.”<sup>9</sup>

Although the use of blogs, websites and news portals was not the only – and maybe not even the strongest – reason why BN suffered such a heavy blow, the government-aligned parties were then quick to jump on the online bandwagon. At first they applied rather inept top-down approaches, but after a while the government managed to regain some of the lost grounds in cyberspace, last not least due to prominent political figures such as former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad who chastised not only the political opposition, but also his hand-picked successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

## ***Changes and Challenges***

At first glance, this would support the assumption that ICT poses a threat to authoritarian rule, following the logic that economic liberalization leads to greater freedom of expression which in turn facilitates the process of democratization. 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 localized content and adapted to local needs in the region could not be found for a long time.

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 ICT something new comes out in the end that resembles local settings.

### **1. 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

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<sup>7</sup> “SUPP chief hears it loud and clear”, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/51367>

<sup>8</sup> Tamil Nesan, 30<sup>th</sup> May, 2006, p. 1

<sup>9</sup> “Rais gives sobering advice to traditional media”, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/123142>

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 could be 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, which might cause serious damage to the Penang Bridge. As a result, even university Universiti Sains Malaysia's staff who lived 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.

Despite this, the government began using SMS as a means to transmit information quickly, for example in case of natural disasters: In case of such a scenario, village heads in remote areas in Sarawak were hooked up to the state disaster operations control centre to receive alerts via SMS in order to inform the population of impending natural disasters.<sup>10</sup>

SMS messages also circulated in January 2010 in the aftermath of several fire-bombings of Christian churches in Malaysia after protests against a High Court decision that allowed Christian newspapers to use the Malay-Arabic word "Allah" for God. What began as speculation turned out to be true later on: That the number of fire-bombings was higher than those three occasions that were officially acknowledged in the beginning. Still the Inspector General of the police, Musa Hassan, warned that those spreading "rumours" over the arson attacks can be arrested under the Internal Security Act: "I have also received SMSes that vehicles with crosses and rosaries had been vandalised in the Klang Valley. All these are mere rumours".<sup>11</sup> Threats like these show how serious the government takes these rumours and their spreading via electronic media. Interesting, however, is the reliance on 'old' media to counter the allegations. The belief in the persuasive power of the print media, for example, is unshaken.<sup>12</sup>

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

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<sup>10</sup> "Report on natural disaster through SMS", <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/123024>

<sup>11</sup> "IGP: Stop the vicious rumours", The Star, 8 January 2010.

<sup>12</sup> See for example the rumours about Terengganu Menteri Besar Ahmad Said's expected resignation and the refuting by Hishamuddin Hussein: "Ignore SMS on Terengganu MB resignation: Hishamuddin", New Sunday Times, 13 March 2010.

## 2. Demand beyond 'western-liberal' content

Websites like MalaysiaKini would fit perfectly into a positivistic perspective on the influence of ICT 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 for several years, 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>13</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>14</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 specializing 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 such as "Harakah" might be language: Quality sites in Bahasa Malaysia are still outnumbered by English sites, even in Malaysia. That might explain why pages offering information in this language will have a much higher potential readership compared to pages in English where there are many more competitors.

## 3. Forum for the 'blackened-out' and marginalized

In a society where controversial discourses are frowned upon, web-based forums and 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, marginalized or 'blackened-out' can get the opportunity to escape their isolation and participate in discussions. For example, websites like Jeff Ooi's "Screenshots" but also MalaysiaKini's "Vox Populi", Harakah's "Letters" section or social networks like Facebook are giving readers the

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<sup>13</sup> "IFC: Sikap pasif kerajaan bela umat Islam dikesali",  
[http://hdaily01.harakahdaily.net/v2/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2348:ifc-sikap-pasif-kerajaan-bela-umat-islam-dikesali&catid=1:utama&Itemid=50](http://hdaily01.harakahdaily.net/v2/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2348:ifc-sikap-pasif-kerajaan-bela-umat-islam-dikesali&catid=1:utama&Itemid=50)

<sup>14</sup> "Sisters In Islam tidak ada hak bercakap atas nama Islam",  
[http://www.harakahdaily.net/v2/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=506:sisters-in-islam-tidak-ada-hak-bercakap-atas-nama-islam&catid=1:utama&Itemid=50](http://www.harakahdaily.net/v2/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=506:sisters-in-islam-tidak-ada-hak-bercakap-atas-nama-islam&catid=1:utama&Itemid=50)

chance to voice their opinion or read those of others or shore up support for political protest.<sup>15</sup> Public forums like these enable readers to create and participate in their own discussions and discourses beyond the limits set by mainstream society. Of late, and with rising bandwidth, so-called “Web 2.0” applications like Youtube have become popular as means for disseminating opinions or to simply vent out anger. The critical rap video by student Wee Meng Chee (nicknamed “Namewee”) has probably created most publicity in this respect: In 2007, Wee performed a mock version of Malaysia’s national anthem in frustration over his feeling of marginalization as a Chinese Malaysian which was watched by more than half a million viewers in the following weeks. This resulted in a controversial debate that even had politicians demand for the revocation of his citizenship and Wee being probed for sedition.<sup>16</sup>

Of course discussions in these forums 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” 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 fractious view of Malaysian society compared to the all-smiles image painted by mainstream media and thereby also helps local readers to spot the fault lines in the present system.

As mentioned earlier, the government has begun to look more closely at what happens in blogs and forums. For example, cases of criticizing the royalty over various issues have led to prompt police and legal action against the authors with usually prompt court decisions in favour of the royalty.<sup>17</sup> The government tries to apply the full range of “offline”-laws in order to somehow control these otherwise marginalized voices.<sup>18</sup>

In an ironical twist, former Prime Minister Mahathir, the man who used to fight online media such as MalaysiaKini for more than six years during his tenure had to rely on the same distribution channel after he retired. Still a vocal critic of certain government politics and especially his successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, he no longer had access to the mainstream media who were willingly publishing his statements before. Facing the same kind of blackout as his political opponents, he first turned to alternative online media such as MalaysiaKini for extensive interviews to reach his audience and is now operating his own blog, with a substantial readership in the Malaysian cyberspace. While he is more close to the present prime minister, Najib Abdul Razak, and suggests to other bloggers to “follow his lead and stick to facts if they want to stay on the right side of the law”<sup>19</sup>, his continuous online publishing demonstrates – 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?

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<sup>15</sup> See for example the critical rap video by Wee Meng Chee (nicknamed “Namewee”) the emergence of protest groups on Facebook against racial remarks of government officials: “More than 1,500 join ‘Say No to Nasir’ Facebook group”, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/123600>

<sup>16</sup> “Rapper’s citizenship will not be revoked”, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/71319>

<sup>17</sup> “Blogger surrenders over comment”, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/122789>

<sup>18</sup> “Hisham differs with Rais over blogger’s fate”, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/123069>

<sup>19</sup> “Dr M: Blog like me to avoid arrest”, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/123028>



## **Conclusion**

The cases mentioned in this paper show various ways in which ICT in the Malaysian context were 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 marginalized 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 localize its content after realizing 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 scrutinize 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 cafes for more than just playing online-games 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 55.9% (Economic Planning Unit 2008), 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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