



Sweeping the Unclean: Social Media and the Bersih Electoral Reform Movement in Malaysia

Merlyna Lim*

Canada Research Chair in Digital Media & Global Network Society, Carleton University, Canada

Abstract

In this article author investigate how social media was utilized and appropriated in the electoral reform movement in Malaysia called Bersih. By identifying and analyzing roles of three dominant social platforms in the Bersih movement, namely blogging, Facebook, and Twitter, author reveal that social media is both the site and part of the contestations of power. Social media is integral to the shaping of Bersih movement's imaginaries, practices, and trajectories. As a social and material artifact, every technological platform such as blogging, Facebook, and Twitter has its own socio-political properties that postulate distinctive roles and limitations for its users.

Keywords: Malaysia; Bersih; Politics; Blogging; Social media; Facebook; Twitter

*Corresponding author:
Merlyna Lim

✉ merlyna.lim@carleton.ca

Canada Research Chair in Digital Media & Global Network Society, Communication & Media Studies, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON K1V8N3, Canada.

Tel: 6135202600

Received: August 05, 2016; **Accepted:** September 16, 2016; **Published:** October 15, 2016

Citation: Lim M. Sweeping the Unclean: Social Media and the Bersih Electoral Reform Movement in Malaysia. *Global Media Journal*. 2016, 14:27.

Introduction

It was 1.45 pm in Kuala Lumpur. The Light Rail Transit (LRT) station at Pasar Seni was unusually busy. A crowd of thousands, mostly young, walked towards the Dataran Merdeka, a historic square once a focal point and cricket pitch for the British colonial presence in Malaysia. Wearing "Bersih 3.0" T-shirts, some of which were green, they looked high-spirited. Along the walk there were some young men handing out free bottles of mineral water. Various slogans were shouted: "Bersih! Bersih! We want fair and clean elections! Reformasi! Reform!"

After more than twenty minutes of walking, the crowd was forced to stop. Apparently the road was blocked by about 100 riot police. One of the Bersih leaders told the crowd to sit down and let the Bersih leaders proceed to Dataran Merdeka. The protesters followed the order briefly but they quickly became restless. Many started walking to multiple directions. A small crowd was walking towards the Masjid Jamek LRT station, five-minutes walk away from Dataran Merdeka, and soon the crowd grew larger and larger.

At 2.15 pm, the Masjid Jamek station had become over crowded. At 2.34 pm, Bersih chairperson Ambiga Sreenevasan took a megaphone and announced that the rally had been a great success telling the crowd to disperse. The insistent crowd responded by chanting: Dataran! Dataran! The chanting turned to panic when a warning shot was fired and tear gas was deployed. People

screamed. Smoke was everywhere. It started looking like a war zone.

The excerpt above is taken from a field-note author wrote while observing and 'experiencing' the Bersih 3.0 rally in Malaysia on 28 April 2012. Author saw the crowd in green Bersih 3.0 T-shirts. Author heard people chanting. Author saw protesters dispersed as the police started firing tear gas canisters and water canons. People cheering, loud gunshots, smoke rising, the crowd screaming, author witnessed them all. Yet, author was not 'there'. Author did not physically experience any of these. Being 9,000 miles away, author was sitting in front of my computer with multiple windows opened on the monitor screen. Author saw the six-hour protest journey, from 1 pm to 7 pm, developing over time from multitudes of tweets, links, photos, and videos transmitted from the streets of Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Johor Baru. The impressive amount of live reporting made a real time observation possible. Within 24 hours, there were over 300,000 tweets, 2,000 YouTube videos, and 300 relevant blog posts posted online. This could possibly be one of the most recorded popular protests of the year.

Coming from the Malay word for 'clean', Bersih is a popular name for "The Coalition of Free and Fair Elections" attempting to reform the electoral system in Malaysia by addressing pervasive

electoral misconducts to sweep any 'unclean' practices to ensure free and fair election. Many credited the first *Bersih* rally in 2007 as a major contributing factor to a shift in the political landscape in the 2008 election where the ruling coalition *Barisan Nasional* failed to obtain a two-third super majority for the first time since 1969. The third and the largest rally, *Bersih* 3.0 in 2012, just a year before the next election, can be credited for not only mobilizing the highest voter turnout in the Malaysian history but also with the relative success of an opposition coalition *Pakatan Rakyat*. Although the ruling coalition still secured the majority of seats, the opposition won 50.9% of the popular vote (SPR, 2013). By the time of writing this article, *Bersih* movement just held its fourth mass rally, *Bersih* 4.0, on August 2015, calling not only for a clean election but also the resignation of Prime Minister Najib Razak.

Beyond *Bersih*, the use of digital media for political activism in Malaysia has a long and impressive trajectory. It began with the use of the pre-social media internet during the *Reformasi* (a Malay word meaning 'reform' in English) movement in 1998 [1,2] that took place concurrently with a similar movement in Indonesia where the internet also played a substantial role [3,4]. Malaysian *Reformasi* movement refers to the movement that began in the wake of the former Prime Minister, Mahathir bin Mohammad's controversial dismissal of his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, in September 1998. This movement called for social and political reforms that opposed Mahathir's 'cronyistic' responses to the financial crisis [5]. Since the late 1990s, Southeast Asia has been among places with the most vibrant digital activism. The world history of digital media and political activism that started with the 1994 Zapatista uprising [6,7], however, has predominantly centered on North America, Europe, and, recently, the Middle East, marginalizing stories coming from the Southeast Asian context [1].

In this article, author examine and contextualize the role(s) of the internet and social media as being manifested in the on-the-ground activism and embedded in the contour of societal changes and transformations. The main method used in this research is online/offline observation that involves 'hanging out' in both non-geographical (online) and geographical (in Kuala Lumpur) spaces. Online observation was conducted by joining online communities (e.g. *Bersih* Facebook pages/groups) and subscribing to top Malaysian socio-political blogs and news portals (they were selected based on their ranks on Alexa.com). Field notes were written as narratives of observations and the texts of relevant online communications were recorded electronically. Author also collected Twitter and Facebook data, especially during the *Bersih* 3.0 rally, to augment my field notes and to specifically analyze the patterns of usage of these tools prior and during the rallies.

Media technologies have always been part of social movements. Insurgent movements would naturally embrace the medium that suits people most. Malaysia is no exception; every single major wave of protests in Malaysia is associated with lively alternative media. In the early 20th century, Malay journalists, poets and essayists played important roles in radicalizing the Malay majority and developing the anti-colonial sentiment against the British Empire. In the 1998 *Reformasi*, the opposition group made an intensive use of online alternative news to contest the ruling regime. Social media therefore is an obvious media of

choice for the twenty first century urban activism such as the *Bersih* movement. In examining and contextualizing the roles of social media in Malaysian politics through the case of *Bersih* movement, my main question is: What role did social media play in the formation and development of the movement?

In the following section I offer a brief historical overview of the internet development its entanglement with political activism in the country to help contextualizing the role of social media in the *Bersih* movement.

Online Activism in Malaysia

The history of the internet in Malaysia begins in 1990 when Jaring, the first ISP (Internet Service Provider), was launched. In 1995, TMNet, the Malaysia's second ISP, was born, followed by a growth of internet hosts in 1996. Since then there has been a steady rise in internet access for both commercial and residential uses. As of June 2015, Malaysia's broadband household penetration rate is 70.4% with 23 million users representing 77.6% of the population [8], a tremendous gain from only 3.7 million in 2000 [9].

The Malaysian government has always been an enthusiastic supporter of the technology from the beginning and has invested enormously in the internet infrastructure. The Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), a 'cyber region' located in the south of Kuala Lumpur, was established in 1996, the MSC as a "global center for multimedia technologies and content" and "its aims was to 'leapfrog' Malaysia from the Industrial Era to an Information Era" [9]. In spite of its unfailing support for the development of the internet, the government continues to feel ambivalent about its political and social significances. It has always been torn between the desire to promote the technology for economic prosperity and shield its citizens from being exposed to 'unwanted information'. Meanwhile, the history of online activism in Malaysia can be traced back to 1995, when the technology emerged as the platform for free discussion in the country's otherwise tightly controlled media environment. While Malaysian law allowed for strict controls of print media since 1984, the government decided not to censor the internet. A provision of the Communication and Media Act (CMA) in 1998 explicitly states that nothing in the Act "shall be construed as permitting the censorship of the internet" (Article 3). In practice, however, the internet is not free. The government can use other media-related and libel law against any parties who have different voices than the authorities. Examples of such laws: 1960 Internal Security Act, 1967 Police Act, 1966 Societies Act, 1971 Sediton Act, 1972 Official Secrets Act, 1984 Printing Presses and Publication Act and the 2012 amendment to the 1950 Evidences Act, Section 114A.

The political usage of the internet in Malaysia was notable in the 1998 *Reformasi* movement when it became the principal means of communication among activists and an alternative source of information and news for Malaysians [10]. Although the movement did not lead to any regime change, it gave birth to Malaysia's online activism and rejuvenated civil society activism in the country [10,11]. *Malaysiakini*, the country's most progressive and powerful alternative online media, was founded during the *Reformasi* in 1999 and survived both political and financial struggles to establish its place in the national media landscape. In

March 2015, *Malaysiakini* was ranked 14th most visited website in Malaysia while the pro-government *Star Online* ranked 15th (Alexa.com). Also founded during the *Reformasi is Harakah Daily*, an online news outlet for the oppositional party, Parti Islam seMalaysia, which quickly became the most sophisticated and content-rich partisan website [12]. Other prominent ones include: a website of a pro-justice NGO *Aliran.com*, a human right website *Suaram.net*, and various websites of the *Hindraf* (Hindu Rights Action Force), a coalition of NGOs who advocate on behalf of Malaysia's (largely Hindu) Indian community [13]. By facilitating the emergence of these alternative media, the internet "allows for the creation of community of interest ... [that] is directly related to the reconstruction of the off-line community of the Malaysian nation" [14].

In 2000, following the imprisonment of a *Reformasi* movement leader Anwar Ibrahim, streets protests were virtually disappeared. The decline of *Reformasi* as a street activism, however, did not coincide with the decline of online activism. Pro-reform activists continued using the digital media space as their *subaltern counterpublic* space, an alternative space to the dominant *bourgeois* public sphere to cultivate *hidden transcripts* to communicate, deliberate, post and spread information online [15]. The alternative online media sphere continued to "ground its online activities in everyday politics" [16], paved the way for the emergence of the blogosphere activism in 2002 and provided the basis and ingredients for the making of *Bersih* movement. Here author argue that two decades of Malaysian online-offline activism since 1990s provided a groundwork for the relative success of present day *Bersih* movement.

The *Bersih* Movement

Bersih is an alliance of 62 non-governmental organizations seeking to reform the national electoral system officially formed on 23 November 2006. The call of *Bersih* can be summarized in eight points: clean the electoral roll to be free from irregularities; reform postal ballot system to ensure that all citizens are able to exercise their right to vote; use of indelible ink; free and fair access to media; 21 days minimum campaign period; strengthen and reform public institutions to act independently, uphold laws, and protect human rights; stop corruption; and stop dirty politics. The first four points were put forward in 2007, the rest were added in 2011.

Bersih's focus on electoral reform is largely related to the fact that in the last forty years Malaysia has been ruled by the National Front or *Barisan Nasional* (BN), the world's longest ruling coalition, led by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the world's longest ruling party. Under BN's leadership, Malaysia's economic development had been outstanding and the middle-class population is growing rapidly. Its economic development, however, is not followed by political change [17]. BN bases its political legitimacy upon outstanding economic performance and popular sovereignty gained from winning the majority of electoral votes, even though multiparty elections were far from fully free or fair [11]. Until the 2008 Elections, BN's performance had been strong where in every single election it always gained about two third (or more) of the popular votes. For *Bersih*, consequently,

electoral reform is seen as a pathway toward changes in politics and society.

The long domination of BN cannot be separated from the issue of race and ethnicity. As a multiracial society, Malaysia is divided along racial lines. BN was originally conceptualized as a confederation political parties-the United Malays National Organization, the Malaysian Chinese Association, and the Malaysian Indian Congress-representing three main ethnic groups in Malaysia, namely Malays, Chinese, and Indians. BN adapted the colonial practice of racial politics, 'divide-and-rule', to keep apart various ethnic groups politically, economically, and socially and to justify its image as the guardian of social and racial harmony [18]. The racial riot of 1969 haunts the Malaysian psyche and it is frequently used in general elections to discourage people from exercising their electoral choice. In the official record, the Sino-Malay sectarian violence that broke out on 13 May 1969, occurred in the aftermath of the 1969 general election where the opposition parties won against the ruling coalition Alliance Party, a former name of BN.

While *Bersih* defines itself as a non-partisan civil society movement, its prime supporters are the three main Malaysian oppositional political parties-Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), Democratic Action Party (DAP) and *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR), which together formed the opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat (PR), meaning 'People's Pact' or 'People's Alliance'. *Bersih's* development, in some ways, goes hand in hand with the emergence and trajectory of PR. Arguably, *Bersih's* relatively successful multi-ethnic mobilization cannot be separated from the involvement of PR. While the movement itself has not been successful in ushering Malaysia to a post racial era, *Bersih* leaders and activists continuously attempted to go beyond a racial division in mobilizing their supporters.

Public protests were a rarity in Malaysia. In 1998-1999 there were some sparks of street activism with the emergence of *Reformasi* movement; and, yet, the authorities successfully cracked them down. Since 2000, the Malaysian streets had become sterile, apolitical. Except the anti Iraq protests in 2003, there was no major protest took place in 2000 to 2006. The 2007 *Bersih* rally and subsequent street protests that followed (such as *Hindraf* rallies, Repeal the Internal Security Act rally, the Occupy Dataran) had turned this upside down. The first public demonstration in November 2007 drew about 40,000 participants [19]. The second rally in July 2011 still drew about 50,000 protesters, despite being deemed illegal by the government who combated the protesters with the riot squad, tear gas, and street arrests [20]. Marked by road blockages, riot police, tear gas, and water canon, the 2012 *Bersih* 3.0 rally drew around 150,000 to 200,000 protesters [21].

In the face of government's crackdowns and criminalization, the movement turned out to be increasingly popular and became a significant social and political force in Malaysia. More than just a movement for electoral reforms, *Bersih* also contributed to the increase levels of political participation among young urban Malaysians, as reflected in the 2013 General Election's voter turnout. More importantly, even though BN secured a majority of seats (60%) to form the federal government, it gained a mere 47.4% of the popular vote while the oppositional coalition, PR,

won 50.9% [22]. For BN, this was the worst election result since 1969.

The use of social media for political activism in the context of *Bersih* should also be understood vis-à-vis government's control over public gatherings in physical spaces. While the constitution grants freedom of assembly and association, it provides for restrictions deemed necessary in the interests of security, public order, or morality, often through the use of the 1967 Police Act. This act defined a public assembly as a gathering of five or more persons that required a police permit. Just months after the *Bersih* 2.0 rally, the government amended the Police Act. The new act, the 2012 Peaceful Assembly Act (PAA), was drafted to replace Section 27 of the Police Act, which means police permits for mass assemblies is no longer required. Organizers, however, must notify the police within 10 days before the gathering date and the police will respond to the notification while imposing restrictions and conditions [23]. The PAA also bans any assembly in the form of street protest and any gatherings within 50 meters of 'prohibited places' such as airports, petrol stations, hospitals, railway stations, places of worship, and schools. Critics called the PAA 'undemocratic' and perceived it as more restrictive than the previous Act. With such restrictions, mobilizing public protest was extremely discouraged. Due to limitations and barriers from using physical space, *Bersih* activists turned to digital space for planning and mobilizing the rallies as well as expanding and sustaining the movement. Despite the ban, *Bersih* rallies continued to take place publicly, on the streets and in the squares.

#Bersih on Social Media

Bersih had embraced digital media since it was established in 2006. Over ensuing years, however, its digital media operations have undergone an evolution. At the beginning of its development, *Bersih* made use of websites, blogging, and YouTube as its main tools for deliberation and mobilization, with intermittent uses of Flickr. Blogging was a natural choice as *Bersih* was formed during the peak of Malaysian political blogging. The incorporation of YouTube and Flickr in 2006, as well as Facebook in 2008 and Twitter in 2011, unsurprisingly, followed the surfacing and popularity of these tools among Malaysians, especially the Malaysian youth.

Many social networking tools are uniformly called 'social media'. Nonetheless, each is a particular social and material artifact with its own socio-political properties that postulate distinctive affordances and limitations for its users. Each, therefore, might contribute a unique set of roles for the *Bersih* movement. What are these roles? In order to answer this question, instead of treating social media as monolithic, author examine how each of the three dominant platforms, namely blogging, Facebook, and Twitter, interacts with and contribute to the movement. Author do so by tracing the roles of these platforms in shaping the movement from its genesis through its successive developments to its unfolding as interconnected events over a period of time.

While not discussed individually, Author also recognize the importance of YouTube and Flickr. In *Bersih* movement these platforms were generally used as placeholders-though most popular YouTube videos could generate voluminous comments-

-for videos and photos, some of which were subsequently disseminated through blogs, Facebook, and Twitter.

Blogging

The role of blogging in the *Bersih* movement cannot be separated from the continuous existence of the contentious blogosphere in Malaysia since 2002 [24]. Most Malaysian blogs were not political, but many top bloggers were. A 2007 survey by *Sabahan.com* [25] identified 9 out of Malaysia's top 50 bloggers as political bloggers. My further examination revealed that 8 out of these 9 bloggers were critical of BN. The *Bersih* movement itself was partially born out of social interactions within the Malaysian political blogosphere. Among top bloggers there were *Bersih* leaders and prominent activists such as Anwar Ibrahim, Lim Kit Siang, Jeff Ooi, and Raja Petra Kamaruddin.

Labeled as 'citizen journalism', blogging is perceived as a powerful medium to positively transform politics, civil society, and mainstream media [26]. Gillmor [26] argues that by allowing the audience to participate in the production and dissemination of information and to engage in discussions and debate free from the gatekeeping practices, blogging provides an avenue for a new form of grassroots journalism and contributes to the plurality of voices. However, others argue that political bloggers' ideological biases tend to promote polarization [27]. Indeed, research in the American [28,29] and Iranian [30] contexts show that blogging community appeared to be polarized along party or ideological lines. Research on the blogosphere in Indonesia [31] and Saudi Arabia [32,33], however, reveals more nuanced and complex pictures. In these context, blogosphere is neither a novel public sphere where rational communicative discourse take place nor an ideologically driven polarized sphere. But, rather, it is a sphere with plurality of voices, allowing for differences, nuances, and even counter-hegemonic voices to collectively emerge.

The early Malaysian blogosphere was not an ideal public sphere founded on rational-critical discourse [34] where everyone is an equal participant as envisioned by Gillmor [26]. However, instead of being fragmented and/or polarized along the party or ideological lines, the early Malaysian blogging community was united by its opposition to the ruling elites. From 2002 to 2007, the blogosphere was both a vital space for online dissidents and a place where the Malaysian government exercised its hegemonic power. Despite the government's crackdown and arrest of blogger activists, the Malaysian blogosphere continued to be politically vibrant. By 2007, the Malaysian blogosphere had developed to new opportunities for citizen activism. The blogosphere facilitated activists to discuss and identify the 'repertoire of contention' [35] - which refers to the set of various tools and actions available to a movement-and issues that were important for publics. The years of political conversations that thrived in the blogosphere had enabled a *brokerage* [35] that allowed people to organize and assimilate their experiences and deliberate beyond existing political boundaries. Civil society in Malaysia was typically characterized as being divided along ethnic lines. Blogging, however, brought together otherwise disconnected Malaysian activists and concerned individuals with different ideologies (e.g. Islamist, secular, or liberal) and backgrounds (e.g. Malay, Chinese,

or Tamil/Indian) and thus contributed to the expansion of the reformist network. Blogging provided a complementary site, vis-à-vis a physical site, for reformists to cultivate alternative, or even radical, *imagination* that led to the birth of the *Bersih* movement.

With the peak of the blogging popularity, the 2007 *Bersih* rally was largely socialized and mobilized online using websites and blogs. Unsurprisingly, Malaysian bloggers were geographically clustered, with over 60 percent of them were located in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor [36]. Ulcny's [37] study estimated that "500 to 1000 bloggers constituted the active Malaysian [sociopolitical] blogosphere, with a small, very active core of 75 to 100 bloggers. The first *Bersih* and Hindraf rallies in 2007 were the most popular topics in this sphere, generating 1080 posts and 1527 posts respectively [37].

During the course of the movement, blogs were heavily used before, during, and after the big rallies. An official *Bersih* website was used to amplify and extend traditional communication efforts in conventional mode of action (e.g. press release). *Bersih* participants made use of their personal blogs to mobilize campaigns and to report from the streets in an effort to counter state-controlled media interpretations of the events and capitalize on any conflicts or incidents in the protests (such as the arrest or the abuse).

In the 2007 *Bersih* protests, mainstream media painted a negative portrayal of a group of activists running *amok* in the center of Kuala Lumpur and caused bad traffic problems [38-40]. The *Bersih* movement was labeled as illegal, forbidden, and even prohibited by the (Islamic) faith (*haram*) [38,39]. Bloggers countered the coverage by posting their own pictures of the peaceful marches alongside video clips from Al Jazeera and BCC exposing the police's heavy-handed actions against demonstrators.

A similar incident happened in days after the *Bersih* 2.0 rally in July 2011 when the Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein released a statement that there was no 'police brutality' and that action would be taken against online media and bloggers if they had posted false reports [41]. Despite the threat, thousands of bloggers responded to this statement by contemporaneously posting photos and YouTube videos to create a visual archive of the 'brutality' of the riot police. Alternative media portals such as *MalaysiaKini* and *Harakah Daily* supported this collective action of bloggers by further amplifying their voices through their media coverage. By so doing, the bloggers were not only successful in countering the government's narrative they were also triumphant in generating public sympathy and making it difficult for the government to target any individual blogger. By generating alternative discourse, *Bersih* bloggers challenged conventional political and media authorities. The symbiosis between activists and blogosphere resulted in a new form of engagement, an online civic space that was both subversive and empowering and helped reformers to define and construct meaning for the movement's participants.

"Social movements start from [the] ability to imagine" [42]. In societies where dissents are repressed, such as in Malaysia, "power is exercised through the propagation of dominant socio-political imaginaries that leave no space for alternative, radical

imaginaries to develop" [43]. To radically depart from the dominant imaginary of socio-political project of the state, as being reinforced by the ruling party, Malaysian reformists needed "sites for narratives of resistance to be created, communicated, and practiced" [44]. In the absent of physical non-hegemonic civic sites, the blogosphere emerged as one of the sites where the reformists imagined and re-imagined the possibility of the future that was different than what was forced by the state. The state's imagined project to envision an alternative, different, and more desirable future. Blogging is useful to generate conversations among bloggers and blog readers. It is, however, limited in its capacity to facilitate more horizontal interaction and to diffuse information and grow networks. In its successive developments beyond the *imaginaries*, social movement needs to incorporate other tools than just the blogosphere.

Facebook

With the popularity of social media, in 2008 *Bersih* started incorporating YouTube and Facebook into its communication and mobilization strategy. Facebook was the second most visited site in Malaysia after Google. The first Facebook page of *Bersih* 2.0 titled "*Bersih* 2.0 [Official]" was created only 17 days before the rally day, on 22 June 2011, and within two weeks it attracted more than 190,000 fans. It functioned mostly as a central news desk where *Bersih* supporters posted and checked on updates, announcements, photos, and videos. Beyond *Bersih* 2.0 rally, *Bersih* movement maintains its existence on Facebook by establishing *Bersih* 3.0 as well as *Bersih* 4.0 pages. The latter was created in September 2013 to support the 'future' fourth *Bersih* rally held in August 2015. The first and 'official' *Bersih* 2.0 Facebook page, though, continues to maintain its dominance in terms of total number of fans and activity level.

The *Bersih* case shows that Facebook served four major functions. First, *Bersih* activists used Facebook to connect with large social networks, especially the youth population. In 2008, over 50% of Facebook users in Malaysia were under 25 [43]. Facebook infrastructure allows conversations to happen in all one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many levels, making it easy to diffuse information in multiple overlapping networks and to mobilize across diverse publics. Additionally, it encourages sharing, interacting, and diffusing information in multiple and overlapped networks. Here, Facebook enabled the rise and expansion of weak-tie networks to "unlock and expose interpersonal networks to external influences individuals in distant networks" [44] thus facilitating the spread of information to the masses and increasing *participation* in the movement.

Second, Facebook helps the *organization* of the movement by facilitating a consensus decision-making on simple and practical issues. For example, when the *Bersih* activists' request to use Merdeka Stadium for the rally was rejected by the Merdeka Heritage Trust (a Malaysian government trust who manages Merdeka stadium and Stadium Negara), the rejection letter was posted on Facebook to solicit quick comments. It quickly generated 344 'likes' and 221 comments nearly all suggesting that the *Bersih* rally take to the streets and stick with the original plan. *Bersih* organizers responded to this request by creating a

simple pool with a question: “Do you agree to keep going with the *Bersih* 2.0 public assembly?” to which 101,345 voted yes while 89,040 voted no. This kind of public decision-making process happened quite frequently on *Bersih* Facebook page. Facebook was particularly important in the preparations leading to the rally. *Bersih* users discussed protest sites, gathering locations (for marching), and sharing maps and information about these places. However, it is important to note that rigorous conversations and in-depth deliberations do not take place on Facebook. Also, there is lack of conversation around complex issues such as ethno-political divides, economic and social policy, judicial system, or human rights.

Third, as it makes it more likely for individuals from different social groups to link to each other, in the *Bersih* case Facebook helped *temporally* bridging diverse publics in interconnected conversations. The bridging facilitated the emergence of communities that transcend boundaries of ethnicity and religions, opening possibilities for mobilization across cleavages. Indeed, both *Bersih* 2.0 and *Bersih* 3.0 exemplify a relatively successful mobilization “bridging sociopolitical cleavages” [11]. Relying heavily on Facebook for its mobilization, the 2012 *Bersih* rally brought a diverse mix of about 200,000 Malaysians to the streets of Kuala Lumpur [21].

However, as manifested in the 2015 *Bersih* 4.0 rally, the unity between various groups was temporal and did not remove racial and ethnic divisions. Unlike previous rallies, *Bersih* 4.0 was dominated by Chinese Malaysian participants. It is estimated that 60% to 80% of the protesters were Chinese [45]. This situation could be linked to the decision of PAS, whose members are predominantly Malay, not to mobilize its members for *Bersih* 4.0. PAS’ formal reasons were that’s “its members would be too preoccupied with preparations for party-related events scheduled to take place in the weeks ahead and that the chosen dates for *Bersih* 4 [...] were inappropriate for being too close to [Independence] Day, August 31” [46]. In announcing its non-participation, the PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang implied that the party was excluded from the planning processes saying that “[...] this *Bersih* 4 is not headed by us. The agenda is not by us, it’s by others” [47]. Regardless what the actual reasons were, the incident demonstrates that while *Bersih* activists were able to utilize Facebook to form a horizontal conversational network bridging diverse groups, it is subordinate to the vertical line of command established within the PAS party. In other words, Facebook facilitated network does enable *Bersih* participants to communicate and interact across party lines and, yet, does not remove the traditional boundaries of party politics or racial dynamics.

It is important to note that the ruling coalition, too, used Facebook in its antagonism to *Bersih*. Among the most active governmental social media accounts is the Facebook account of *Polis Diraja Malaysia* (PDRM) or the Malaysian Royal Police which by March 2016 had garnered 1.8 million fans. In 2011, in its attempt to counter the *Bersih* 2.0 movement, PDRM used Facebook to disseminate a video entitled “Illegal rally *Bersih* 2.0: A police perspective of 9th July 2011” documenting various activities of *Bersih* protesters that were supposedly ‘illegal’.

Twitter

The movement started using Twitter during the *Bersih* 2.0 in 2011 and continued to use it in the *Bersih* 3.0 and 4.0. Unlike Facebook, which was mostly used before and after the protest, Twitter was predominantly during the physical protest on the rally days. Twitter was used to exchange on-the-ground updates and information. Protestors and organizers tweeted on where to go, where to avoid police, places where tear gas and water cannon were deployed, and arrests made. Many tweets came with links to images and YouTube videos taken from the streets. While *Bersih* 2.0 rally produced over 19,000 tweets within twenty-four hours [48], the number jumped to over 300,000 during the *Bersih* 3.0 rally and over 440,000 in the *Bersih* 4.0. Within only six hours on the rally day of 28 April 2012 there were over 58,000 tweets using #*Bersih* related hashtags transmitted online. Similarly, Politweet’s [45]. Twitter data on the *Bersih* 4.0 in 2015 rally also showed a similar pattern. Politweet recorded 583,338 tweets about *Bersih* from 28 July to 30 August 2015, where 76.6% were made during the rally on 29-30 August (Figures 1-3).

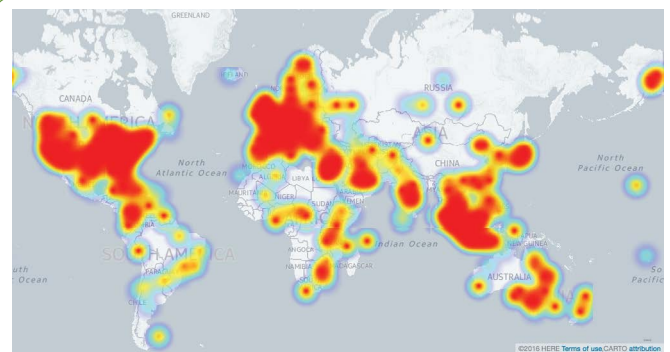


Figure 1 The global heat map of *Bersih* tweets, 28 April 2012, 01:00-7:00 pm.

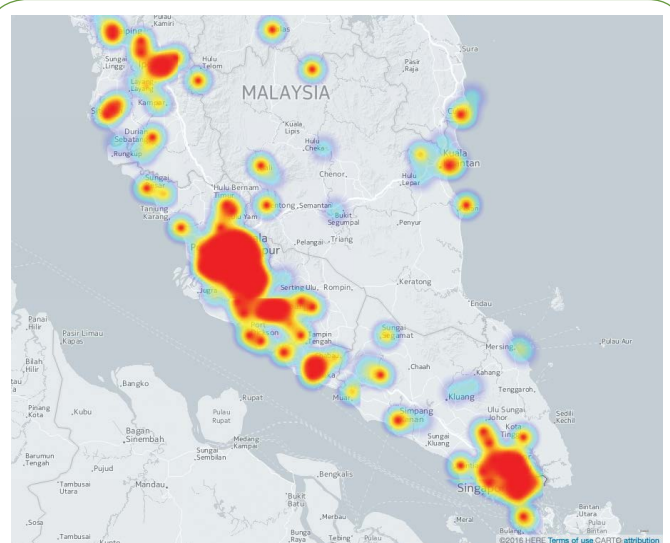


Figure 2 The heat map of *Bersih* tweets in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Johor Baru, 28 April 2012, 01:00-7:00 pm.

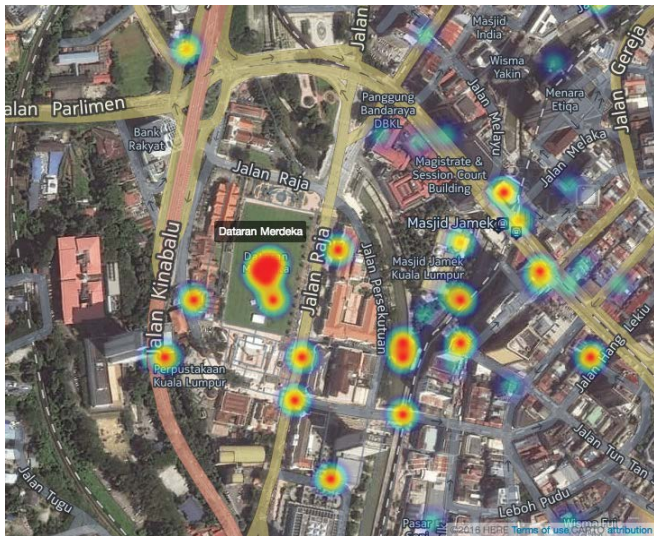


Figure 3 The heat map of *Bersih* tweets in Central Kuala Lumpur, 28 April 2012, 01:00-7:00 pm.

Observably, in the *Bersih* case Twitter primarily served two interrelated and, yet, opposing roles: scaling up the local events to a global scale and, at the same time, intensifying the connection between various locales. Twitter, to a certain degree, helped globalizing the movement. As can be seen in **Figure 1** the pattern of Twitter usage shows that *Bersih* related tweets in the 2012 rally originated from various places in the world. Outside Malaysia, Malaysian diaspora participated in the *Bersih* movement by holding rallies in the cities and countries they resided as part of *Global Bersih* movement. During the *Bersih* 2.0 rally, there similar protests held in 38 locations in 16 countries. The numbers increased in *Bersih* 3.0 to 85 locations in 35 countries. However, a closer look shows that the majority of tweets come from Malaysia (67%), with a high concentration in Kuala Lumpur, Johor Baru, and Penang (**Figure 2**). Similarly, the majority of tweets during the *Bersih* 4.0 rally in 2015, too, came from Malaysia. In 2015, however, Twitter was used more by Malaysians in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor with 48.6% of Twitter users residing in both territories. It is important to note here that Selangor is one of three states won in the 2013 general elections under the Pakatan Rakyat alliance; PK won in Selangor with 79% of the votes.

When we look closer at the geotagging map (**Figure 3**), it is revealed that central Kuala Lumpur generated the highest number of tweets, especially in areas where the masses gathered and protested, around the Dataran Merdeka, Masjid Jamek, and Jalan Raja. There were massive Twitter exchanges about places such as Dataran Merdeka and Masjid Jamek during the protest and numerous references to place and situation such as: walk to, escape, run from, turn right, turn around. As *Bersih* protesters used Twitter with smart phones, digital and street activism in online and physical urban spaces became near seamless and interlocking.

Among the most disseminated tweets were ones that included photos and YouTube videos of the confrontation between

protesters and the riot police in various locales. Twitter was used in particular to render conflicts *visible*, globalizing the spaces of conflict that, otherwise, were local. The *visibility of conflicts* is archetypal to “the capacity of social movements to appropriate spaces of hegemonic production of visibility” [49]. The Malaysian government through the Royal Malaysia Police communication channel portrayed *Bersih* protesters as unclean rioters and law-breakers, and the movement as illegal. By using Twitter with links to images and YouTube videos, *Bersih* protestors delivered an impressive counter narrative. Twitter was used to ensure that the movement would always be connected to imageries of mass protests in the streets, including blockages, tear gas, skirmishes, and police violence and that this visualization would always go national and global. This tactic was effective, albeit temporarily, that the government was left with a serious dilemma: how to simultaneously control challenges to its legitimacy and at the same time tolerate protest in order to appear to meet the basic ideals of ‘democratic’ governance.

It is apparent that *Bersih*'s use of Twitter, especially in combination with YouTube, has expanded the alternative space or a counter-power sphere in the highly controlled media landscape. However, the state and the ruling coalition, too, utilize Twitter as their counter-*Bersih* tool. PDRM, or the Malaysian Royal Police, for example, has a Twitter account to provide updates on policing activities and, in the context of *Bersih* protests, to respond to activists' accusations of abuse. By March 2016, PDRM Twitter account, @pdrmsia, has garnered 144,000 followers. During the *Bersih* 3.0 rally, @pdrmsia delivered “Live from PDRM” tweets every 10-15 minutes to provide its ‘live reports’ from various places in Kuala Lumpur where the rally was held. Responding to accusations of street violence and police brutality during the *Bersih* 3.0 rally, PDRM actively used @pdrmsia to deliver its side of story by releasing selected videos showing the acts of ‘unlawful rioters’.

While Twitter increased opportunities of direct communications and political exchanges, its usages during the *Bersih* protests, however, did not increase the space for political discussions. Twitter exchanges revolve around reporting and war tweeting instead of public deliberation.

Intermodality: Beyond social media

With 74% of the population resides in urban areas [50], Malaysia is largely urbanized. Understandably, social media was selected as the key tool of *Bersih*'s information dissemination and mobilization. However, the movement still needed to reach rural population. With the limited or lack of access to the internet in rural areas, *Bersih* activists utilized other alternative media such as flyers and SMS (Short Messaging Services delivering text messages using cellular phones) in their mobilization repertoires.

To disseminate digital-based information beyond the online realm, *Bersih* activists also initiated a *Balik Kampung Bawa Berita* (bring the news back to your hometown) project, which encouraged Malaysians to share online-based information with their families and friends in the forms of offline soft copies (downloaded files that are accessible offline through portable gadgets), hard copies (prints), and CDs [36]. *Bersih* activists also utilized their corporeal

bodies as a node of information networks by holding traditional *ceramah* (lectures/speeches) in mosques and community centers [50-52].

Here, the *intermodality*, the linkages between the digital media and other types of networks, was significant. The *intermodality* of social media, SMS, flyers, CDs, portable gadgets and physical bodies had elevated the ability of the movement in diffusing its messages and expand its network of activism. In the *Bersih* case, activists used digital media to break the government's control and monopoly over the production of narratives and flows of information. However, it is only through *intermodality* they were able to reach a wide and diverse audience through the cascading of information from the urban to rural areas using digital media and its linkages to other media and communication networks.

Despite activists' attempts to reach rural areas, *Bersih's* main reliance on social media might have contributed to the under-representation of rural individuals and groups in the movements. Arguable, this urban tendency was also reflected in the result of the 2013 General Election, where votes for *Pakatan Rakyat* were concentrated in urban areas while *Barisan Nasional* won most votes in rural areas such as large parts of Sabah and Sarawak.

Conclusions

From the case of *Bersih*, we learn that social media is central to activists' attempt to reform the electoral system in Malaysia by 'sweeping the unclean'-any electoral misconducts and practices. Social media played numerous, differing roles at various junctures and stages of the reform movement's journey. In the beginning of the *Bersih* journey, the Malaysian blogosphere provided space for reformist individuals who shared some radical understanding and imagination of the Malaysian politics, which was a necessary precursor of the *Bersih* movement. In its successive developments, *Bersih* activist incorporated Facebook and Twitter as part of the practices of social movement. My analysis of *Bersih* shows that the scalable networking capability of Facebook and its affordance of horizontal discourse network provided a nascent environment for widening the practices participation and organization of the

movement. Meanwhile, the portability and swiftness of Twitter made it suitable for real-time communication and broadcasting during the actual event. It also helped to scale up the protest event from the local to national and even global level and render the conflict visible.

While opening more possibilities for multiple spaces of resistance and imaginaries as well for extending networks of participation and mobilization, social media also come with limitations. While it served as a fertile ground for establishing the core activist network, particularly by facilitating the *brokerage*, the blogging was limited in its capacity to expand and grow the network of the movement. Meanwhile, my analysis also shows that while the horizontal network structure facilitated by Facebook can increase participation and enhance organization in the practices of social movements, it does not remove the vertical network structure of party politics. Also, the temporal unity facilitated by Facebook does not challenge structural racial and ethnic divisions. For *Bersih* participants, Twitter was a significant tool for sharing and connecting with each other, distributing counter-narratives (vis-à-vis the hegemonic narratives of the state), and globalizing the movement. It, however, falls short in facilitating a deliberative aspect of the movement. Social media helped *Bersih* participants to be the information producers and distributors and, to a certain degree, bypass state's monopoly of production and circulation of information. However, in their attempts to reach and expand their networks beyond the urban population, they needed to establish the *intermodality* of digital media with other media and communication networks.

By identifying and analyzing roles of three dominant social media platforms in the *Bersih* movement, in this article I reveal that social media is both the site and part of the contestations of power. Social media is integral to the shaping of *Bersih* movement's imaginaries, practices, and trajectories. Further, the case also shows that as a social and material artifact, every technological platform such as blogging, Facebook, and Twitter has its own socio-political properties that postulate distinctive roles and limitations for its users.

References

- 1 Postill J (2014) A critical history of internet activism and social protest in Malaysia, 1998-2011, *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 1-2: 78-103.
- 2 Weiss M (2014) Parsing the power of "new media" in Malaysia. *J Cont Asia* 43: 591-612.
- 3 Lim M (2008) Transient Civic Spaces in Jakarta Indonesia, in M. Douglass, K.C. Ho, G.L.Ooi (Eds.) *Globalization, the City and Civil Society in Pacific Asia: The Social Production of Civic Spaces*, London: Routledge pp: 366-396.
- 4 Sen K, Hill D (2005) *The Internet in Indonesia's New Democracy*. London: Routledge.
- 5 O'Shannassy M (2009) Beyond the Barisan National? A Gramscian perspective of the 2008 Malaysian General Election. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 31: 88-109.
- 6 Cleaver H (2000) *The Zapatistas and the electronic fabric of struggle*.
- 7 Russell A (2005) Myth and the Zapatista movement: exploring a network identity, *New Media & Society* 7: 559-577.
- 8 MCMC (2015) *Communication & Multimedia: Pocket Book of Statistics..*
- 9 Rahim SA, Pawanteh L (2011) Democratization of information in Malaysia: A response to globalization. *Asian Social Science* 7: 3-11.
- 10 Abbott JP (2004) The Internet, reformasi and democratization in Malaysia, in E.T. Gomez (ed.) *State of Malaysia*. London: Routledge.
- 11 Weiss M (2012) *Politics in Cyberspace: New Media in Malaysia*. Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- 12 Downing J (2010) *The Sage Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- 13 Pandi AR (2014) Insurgent space in Malaysia: Hindraf movement, new media and minority Indians, *IDPR* 36: 73-90.
- 14 Uimonen P (2003) Mediated management of meaning: On-line nation building in Malaysia. *Global Networks* 3: 299-314.
- 15 Lim M (2014) Seeing spatially: People, networks and movements in digital and urban space. *International Development Planning Review* 36: 51-72.
- 16 Smelter S (2008) Blogging in Malaysia Hope for a new democratic technology?. *Journal of International Communication* 14: 28-45.
- 17 Rodan G (2005) *Transparency and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Asia: Singapore and Malaysia*. London: Routledge-Curzon.
- 18 Leong K (2012) *The Future of Pakatan Rakyat: Lesson from Selangor*. Kuala Lumpur: IDEAS.
- 19 *MalaysiaKini* (2007) 40,000 protest for free and fair elections.
- 20 Boyle P (2011) Huge rally in Malaysia. *Green Left Weekly*, July 17.
- 21 Boyle P (2013) Malaysia: 150,000 rally for people's power. *Green Left Weekly*, January 26.
- 22 *New Straits Times* (2011) Gathering in peace.
- 23 SPR (2013) Election Results of the 13th Malaysian General Elections.
- 24 Tang HW (2009) The networked electorate: The internet and the quiet democratic revolution.
- 25 Sabahan.com (2007) 50 Most influential blogs in Malaysia.
- 26 Gillmor D (2004) *We the media: Grassroots journalism by the people, for the people*. Sebastopol CA: O'Reilly.
- 27 Sunstein C (2002) The law of group polarization. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 10:175-195.
- 28 Adamic LA, Glance N (2005) The political blogosphere and the 2004 U.S. Election. *Proceedings of the 3rd international workshop on Link discovery* pp: 36-43.
- 29 Lin J, Halavais A, Zhang B (2007) The blog network in America: Blogs as indicators of relationships among US cities. *Connections* 17: 15-23.
- 30 Kelly J, Etling B (2008) Mapping Iran's Online Public: Politics and Culture in the Persian Blogosphere.
- 31 Lim M (2009) Life is local in the imagined global community: Islam and politics in the Indonesian blogosphere. *J Med and Religion* 11:127-140.
- 32 Agarwal N, Lim M, Wigand RW (2011) Finding her master's voice. *Proceedings of the 19th European Conference on Information Systems* pp: 898-909.
- 33 Agarwal N, Lim M, Wigand RW (2012) Raising and Rising Voices. *Business & Information Systems Engineering* 3: 113-126.
- 34 Habermas J (1962) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- 35 McAdam D, Tarrow S, Tilly C (2001) *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 36 Tan J, Ibrahim Z (2006) *Blogging and Democratization in Malaysia: A New Civil Society in the Making*. Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.
- 37 Ulcny B (2008) Modeling Malaysian public opinion by mining in the Malaysian blogosphere.
- 38 *Berita Harian* (2007) Demonstrasi jalanan menyusahkan rakyat.
- 39 *Utusan Malaysia* (2007) Perhimpunan haram beri persepsi negatif.
- 40 *The Star* (2007) Road closures, checks cause massive jams in Klang Valley.
- 41 *Malaysia Insider* (2011) Home Ministry to punish media for 'false' Bersih coverage,
- 42 Lim M (2015) A cyber-urban space odyssey: The spatiality of contemporary social movements. *New Geographie* 07: 117-123.
- 43 AllFacebook (2008) Malaysia Facebook page statistics.
- 44 Goldenberg J, Libai B, Muller E (2001) Talk of the network: A complex systems look at the underlying process of word-of-mouth. *Marketing Letters* 12: 211-223.
- 45 Politweet (2015) Response to the race of Bersih 4 protester by Twitter users in Peninsular Malaysia.
- 46 *The Malaysia Online* (2015) The Economist: Silver lining for Najib if non-Malays dominate Bersih 4.
- 47 *Sulong Z* (2015) PAS begins to feel the chill of isolation. *The Malaysian Insider*, August 11.
- 48 Sheriff N (2011) Malaysia's 'silent' awakening. *The Nation*, New York, 17 August.
- 49 Starr A, Fernandez L, Scholl C (2011) *Shutting Down the Streets: Political Violence and the Social Control in the Global Era*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

- 50 United Nations (2014) World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, Highlights. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division.
- 51 Khoo YH (2014) Mobilization potential and democratization processes of the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih) in Malaysia: An interview with Hishamuddin Rais. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 7:111-120.
- 52 Tilly C (2003) *The Politics of Collective Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.