Shaping Predisposition Political Expression among Youth in Malaysia through Facebook

Nur Shazana Rani[1]   Awan Ismail[2]   Mohd Sobhi Ishak[3]

Dept. of Communication, Sch. of Multimedia Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia

Abstract

The proliferation of information technology has led to a unique cyber world that paved the way to a borderless communication space between communities. The advent of social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkdIn, and others causes the spread of a belief or doctrine in the cyberworld without requiring the communities to interact face to face. The phenomenon has instigated varied reactions among the public especially youths who are using social media to express their political opinion. Therefore, this study seeks to examine Malaysian youths' perception towards the national political climate through social media which is Facebook. The method of study is through field observation and in-depth interview with youths aged between 15 to 30 years old. This study utilises the Media Dependency System Theory introduced by Ball-Rokeach (1985). The study concludes that youths are predisposed to use Facebook as the stage for political expression. This finding is supported by the interview with the respondents that showed youths' predisposition to use social media, frequency of news source, and events criteria as the reasons for them using Facebook as a political stage.

Keywords: Youth; Facebook; Media Dependency System Theory; political expression, social media

1. Introduction

The history of technology and communication in Malaysia in beginning focused on the development of the organisation and record, data, and file management administration system before moving on to the field of research and communication (Andan Hussein & Kamaliah Siarap, 2000). The widespread use of Internet has made workflow management easier and inadvertently disseminated various government policies and plans to the people (Latiffah Pawanteh & Samsudin A. Rahim, 2010). In other words, the use of information and communication technology in the country has developed along with the development of the country's communication technology policy and is still going strong today.

Now, the emergence of new media has become an important channel for the dissemination of national policies. The nature of new media which uses devices such as video, audio, weblog, and social media is valuable as an agent of communication because it is accessible, user-friendly, and cost effective (Dizard, 2000). New media is more predominantly used by consumer groups rather than traditional media such as print, broadcast, and interpersonal media (Siti Ezaleila & Azizah Hamzah, 2011). Furthermore, new media has been said to successfully create and interactive and inclusive community.

An online communication phenomena that is fast gaining popularity today is social media, especially Facebook. This situation makes it easier for indivuals to express their opinions on political issues in the cyberspace. In Malaysia, this new dimension becomes a catalyst for the cyber community to share opinions and contributes to online political participation. Today, internet-based democracy has opened a new communication channel between communities to exchange opinions and spread information. Habermas stated that logical thinking and dialogue culture are what encourage discourse in cultivating a democratic public (Papacharissi 2009). According to Habermas, there are two condtions that must be observed for an ethical discussion which are maintaining respect for others and observing politeness when talking. This is because the patterns of thought behaviour on a person and language use are also facing a new medium with the existence of cyberspace. However, cyberspace has become significant in its role as a medium to express opinions on the ruling sect.

The new media has become popular among youth today because of its information democracy system. This is because new media is seen as an unconstrained online source for the growth of political ideas among youth. This statement is in line with the opinion of Himelboim et al (2012) who among others said that with of the internet, political interest among youth has increased because there is the growth of ideas among the users of the internet itself. Noris (2003); Tkach-Kawasaki (2003); and Samsudin A. Rahim (2010) said that there is a significant relationship between political activity and new media users and this relationship is based on the continuation of offline to online communication between users.

Malaysia's open sky policy especially in information and communication technology has been seen to have an impact on the existence of non-authority zone (cyber) like Facebook, blogs, Twitter, and Wordpress for people to have their say. In fact, the amalgamation of information technology and information dump has attracted social media users to share their information and opinions on political issues, leading to an increase in political participation among youth, which can be considered a threat since it is open to misuse by people who seek only to further their own agenda.

This progressive younger generation seeks reformational change for a better society and country. Therefore,

their youthful idealism becomes the catalyst for activism that is becoming more controversial and negative. As a result, negative sources which authenticity could not be proven are capable of shaping readers' perceptions and influence some people's opinions. The perception of expressing opinions about the government has manifested into writing form to attack certain quarters through social media.

Therefore, the space for information information democracy especially through new media has increased participation among users especially youths. In line with research done by Mohd Fuad Mat Jali & Junaidi Awang Besar (2012) who found that youth selection habits are different than adults because adults are more interested in reading daily newspapers, watching news, listening to news on the radio, etc. Holt et. al (2013) said that the internet medium is being used as a platform for political participation by youth. He said that youth political participation refers to youth behaviour or activities that have an impact on a country's political landscape. The effects include change in the legislation and enactment of public policies in the country. Additionally, online political participation among youth also has the potential to indirectly influence the public in making their choice on policymakers in a country.

Thus, the variability and frequency of internet use among youth have opened up an avenue of research into the perception of political issues and willingness to participate in political discussion on social media among youth. From the perspective of Media Dependency System Theory, the goals of an individual and the internet's ability to fulfil those goals may have an influence on user activity in the online environment. This research will focus on looking at the predisposition of some youth to express their political opinion on Facebook while others refrain from it, and to look at their willingness to participate and interact on political issues in social media.

Research Questions
Some research questions have been outlined for this research which are:
1. What is the youth's perception of the political climate on Facebook?
2. How is their perception of the political climate and shape their willingness to express their political opinion on Facebook?

Research Objective
The general objective of this research is to explore why some youth choose to express political opinion while others choose not to. Specifically, the research objectives are:
1. To see the extent of youth perception on the political climate (volume and tone of political discussion) on Facebook.
2. To identify the youth's perception of the political climate and their willingness to participate in political expression on Facebook.

2. Literature Reviewed
2.1 Social environment for political talk
Much attention has been given to factors that encourage political discussion, especially factors that lead to the discussion involving different political viewpoints (Mutz, 2006). Research that have been done on the extent of public discussion on politics and how different social situations influence the content of the discussion have shown mixed results (Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005; cClurg, 2006; Wyatt, Kim, & Katz, 2000). Some ethnographical research have found that political discussion is difficult to do and rarely done (Eliasoph, 1998), while other research found a high rate of casual political talk (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1987; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999). One of the reasons for this disparity is that some social situations encourage political discussion while others are the opposite. Social pressure to maintain peace by encouraging individuals to be friendly makes political discussion a risk, especially if there are differing partisanship and opinions (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Klofstad, Sokhey, & McClurg, 2013; Mutz, 2006). Even though many theories of democracy highlighted the importance of exposure to different viewpoints as democratic practice, the variability in online discussions is frequently seen as a negative indicator in political talk (Klofstad et al., 2013), and in some form, can inhibit political participation and create more disagreement (Knoke, 1990; Mutz, 2006; Nir, 2011). Most of the information on variability discussion networks come from studying groups who socialise face to face and interest-based communities (e.g., Eliasoph, 1998; Mutz, 2006; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009; although see Kim, 2011). Even though there are many studies on the use of social networking sites (SNS) by activists (Bode, Vraga, Borah, & Shah, 2014; van Laer & van Aelst, 2010), there is still a shortage of research on the functions of SNS as a place for political talk. Thus, this paper will give a short summary on how sites such as Facebook are more suitable for political talk compared to other, more easily understood contexts.

2.2 Facebook is an appropriate platform for politics
Bode et, al. (2013), has invented the concept of "political SNS use" or the use of political social media network that means using social networking sites for political purposes like displaying their chosen political party or

becoming a fan of a political figure. According to them, the use of political social media network is unique to social media and is different from other online political participation because it not only enables individuals to exchange information, they can also display any affiliation they have with any political parties. In fact, the tendency of social political media network use has lower costs and barriers, and its location in social media further differentiates it from traditional political participation.

The research by Mutz (2006), for instance, stated that online media enables individuals to participate with others with the same political opinion and at the same time this participation in a homogeneous commentary 'echo chamber' will further encourage political participation. For example, during the 2003 Iraq war, those who feel that their opinion is different from the mainstream media have turned to the internet to obtain information and as a source of discussion and expression that eventually led to anti-war activism (Hwang et al, 2006). Therefore, the internet is seen to have widened the influence of political expression and as place where individuals may seek information. Expressing opinions in the public sphere, as seen in the political social media, has uniquely influenced youths to participate more, compared to the traditional political situation.

Weinstein (2014), meanwhile, stated that social media is a platform that enables someone to display their own persona as it allows users to control and change the presentation of their self as anyone they want. For the younger generation who consider their political expression or participation as an integral part of their self identity, political expression on social media has become a way for them to accurately show their desired self image, in line with their offline image and values. According to Marwick & Boyd (2011), youths, especially those involved in offline political activities will bring aspects of this identity into their online lives by posting about issues that they care about in social media. However, worries about negative reactions may cause youths including those who care about political issues to refrain from airing their opinions in the online sphere. Kim & Geidner (2008) found that users with high political behaviour in social media scored high marks in the civic responsibilities and related self efficacy matrix, while Vitak et, al. (2011) found that political action in Facebook is closely related to offline political disagreement. Therefore, political expression on social media may strengthen a person's self-identification as a political actor.

3. Methodology

In this study, the researcher has chosen to apply a qualitative method which is the in depth interview. The purpose of a qualitative interview is to explain the meaning of the main theme and understanding it in relation to the phenomena being studied (Kvale, 1996). For the purpose of this research, the researcher uses semi-structured questions in the interview process with the informants to get more accurate and specific information. The researcher goes through the questions based on interview with the informants. Other than questions related to disagreement, this study was also developed to see the difference in political talk. This study involved youths aged between 15 and 30 years old who consists of Facebook users that display partisanship tendencies towards either the government or opposition. Informant selection involves youths who can specifically give an overview on their exposure to political issues and their reaction towards political content posts on Facebook. The interview process invoves audio recording which was taken with the informant's consent. The researcher uses thematic analysis to identify the coding patterns appropriate for the interview process.

4. Results
4. 1 Research Finding

The collection of research data was done using face to face interview. The researcher asked general questions on the respondents' background as a preface to the interview. Then the interviewer studied and talked about the content of the respondents' Facebook page to have a wider perception on the presentation of their opinion on the political climate on Facebook. The interview questions are based on the research objectives which are to discover important elements for identifying their perception of political content on Facebook.

The themes that have been identified are social media faftor, news source frequency, and the event criteria that have been analysed by the researcher to have answered the research questions. All the informants have given their feedback and given what the interview required during the session.

4.2 Social media factor

The research findings showed that there are issues that can easily become viral among the public with a platform like Facebook. Furthermore, all the informants admitted that Facebook is a source for political information that are rarely openly discussed in mainstream media. The Facebook platform is a fast and convenient way for informants to discuss political issues or to obtain and share information. Political issues are no longer confidential issues that are only discussed by certain groups, since Facebook has given its users power to freely air their ideas. Facebook usually spontaneously posts information without being asked by users because the application that allows information sharing among users in Facebook itself is free. The openness seen in Facebook has allowed the political expression process to be fully observed by the users.

4.3 Frequency of news source

Informants 1, 2, 7, and 8 rely on Facebook every day as a source for current news. Furthermore, they also use Facebook to get news on politics. Facebook becomes a platform to process political information faster. The political information in this alternative media comes with picture or video evidence which can sometimes be difficult to see in the mainstream media, which is tightly controlled by those with their own agenda. Informants were more inclined to believe information from Facebook to answer their questions on the political crisis that has swept the nation. Evidence in the form of pictures and video are enough to give a picture of the political phenomena in the country.

4.4   Event criteria

All the informants are interested in political issues and information that serves alternative ideas for the public to get their political information through Facebook. Basic issues in the country attract the public's attention and these issues will become more interesting if openly discussed on Facebook. Whatever issues or events that occur inside or outside of the country will quickly be discussed on Facebook. The question of the authenticity of the issues is not a fundamental question since the issues that are debated will become true with the sharing of information from the public. Informants can keep their conviction on an issue or other wise and this all depends on the information source that can be found on Facebook's newsfeed.

Discussion and conclusion

Results from the analysis showed that the youth mindset that contribute to them expressing their opinion on the government or opposition through social media which is Facebook is influenced by the change in the structure of the society that is driven by education that raises awareness on consumerism, human righta, and use of technology. Indirectly, this also proves that the cyberspace is seen as increasingly important and relevant for youth to express their opinions and collect opinions on the government or opposition. It is clear that the obvious and implied connection between realities of technology and media use with the social realities of the society on political issues had permeated the political landscape in Malaysia. The youth's acceptance of the new media characteristics has inadvertently driven the use of the media as an information source that provides the fastest information on political issues.

As a conclusion, the Facebook phenomena among youth have proven the existence of freedom of speech in social media in order to fight for their right and to fulfil their wants and needs. This research has helped explain the phenomena of new media use in the country's political landscape and explain its role as a stage for youth to express their political ideas. The purpose of this research medium is to refer to the role of the new media in influencing the youth's participation in politics. Basically, the idea of political participation can influence readers to join in the online political stage. The researcher hopes this paper has given a clear picture on the use of new media and politics among youth.

References

Andan Hussein & Kamaliah Siarap. 2000. Penggunaan teknologi komunikasi-informasi di kalangan ahli akademik di Malaysia. Jurnal Komunikasi; Malaysian Journal of Communication 16: 119-130.

Baek, K., Holton, A., Harp, D., & Yaschur, C. (2011). The links that bind: Uncovering novel motivations for linking on Facebook. Computers in Human Behavior, 27(6), 2243–2248.

Bakshy, E. (2012a). The 2012 election day through the Facebook lens. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook-data-science/the-2012-election-daythrough- the-facebook-lens/10151181043778859> Accessed 12.08.15.

Bakshy, E. (2012b). Rethinking information diversity in networks. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook-data-team/rethinking-informationdiversity- in-networks/10150503499618859> Accessed 12.08.15.

Bode, L., Vraga, E. K., Borah, P., & Shah, D. V. (2014). A new space for political behavior: Political social networking and its democratic consequences. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 19, 414–429.

Bode, L. (2012). Political information 2.0: A study in political learning via social media (Doctoral Dissertation).

boyd, D. (2011). Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), Networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social networking sites (pp. 39–58). New York: Routledge.

Bumgarner, B. A. (2007). You have been poked: Exploring the uses and gratifications of Facebook among emerging adults. First Monday, 12(11).

Corrado, A. C., & Firestone, C. (1996). Elections in cyberspace: Toward a new era in American politics. Washington, DC: Aspen Institute.

Dizard, W. Jr. 2000. Old Media New Media, Mass Communication in the Information Age. New York: Longman.

Eliasoph, N. (1998). Avoiding politics: How Americans produce apathy in everyday life. Cambridge, MA:

Cambridge University Press.

Eveland, W. P., & Hively, M. H. (2009). Political discussion frequency, network size, and ''heterogeneity'' of discussion as predictors of political knowledge and participation. Journal of Communication, 59, 205–224

Fernandes, J., Giurcanu, M., Bowers, K. W., & Neely, J. C. (2010). The writing on the wall: A content analysis of college students' Facebook groups for the 2008 presidential election. Mass Communication and Society, 13, 653–675.

Festinger, L., & Thibaut, J. (1951). Interpersonal communication in small groups. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 46, 92–99.

Gil de Zuniga, H., Jung, N., & Valenzuela, S. (2012). Social media use for news and individuals' social capital, civic engagement, and political participation. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 17, 319–336.

Himelboim,I., Lariscy, R. W., Tinkham, S. F., & Sweetser, K. D. 2012. Social media and online political communication: The role of interpersonal information trust and openness. Jornal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media 56(1): 92-115.

Holt, K., Shehata, A., Strömbäck, J. & Ljungberg, E. 2013. Age and the effects of news media attention and social media use on political interest and participation: Do social media function as leveller?. European Journal of Communication 28(1):19–34.

Huckfeldt, R., & Sprague, J. (1987). Networks in context: The social flow of politicalinformation. American Political Science Review, 81, 1197–1216.

Hwang, H., Schmierbach, M., Paek, H. J., Gil de Zuniga, H., & Shah, D. (2006). Media dissociation, Internet use, and antiwar political participation: A case study of political dissent and action against the war in Iraq. Mass Communication & Society, 9(4), 461-483.

Kim, Y., & Geidner, N. (2008, May). Politics as friendship: The impact of online social networks on young votes; political behavior. Paper presented at the annual convention of the International Communication Association, Montreal, Canada.

Kim, Y. (2011). The contribution of social networking sites to exposure to political difference: The relationship among SNSs, online political messaging, and exposure to cross-cutting perspectives. Computers in Human Behaviors, 27, 971–977.

Klofstad, C. A., Sokhey, A. E., & McClurg, S. D. (2013). Disagreeing about disagreement: How conflict in social networks affects political behavior. American Journal of Political Science, 57, 120–134.

Knoke, D. (1990). Networks of political activism: Toward theory construction. Social Forces, 68(4), 1041–1063.

Kwak, N., Williams, A. E., Wang, X., & Lee, H. (2005). Talking politics and engaging politics: An examination of the interactive relationships between structural features of political talk and discussion engagement. Communication Research, 32, 87–111.

Kvale, S. (2006). Dominance through interviews and dialogues. Qualitative inquiry, 12(3), 480-500.

Latifah Pawanteh & Samsudin A. Rahim. 2001. Internet usage among adolescents: patterns of an emerging lifestyle in a changing media landscape. Dlm Jörg Becker & Rahmah Hashim (pnyt). Internet Malaysia, hlmn 105-119. Bangi: Department of Communication, UKM.

Litt, E. (2012). Knock, knock. Who's there? The imagined audience. Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 56, 330–345.

Marwick, A. E., & boyd, D. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. New Media & Society, 13(1), 114–133.

McClurg, S. D. (2006). Political disagreement in context: The conditional effect of neighborhood context, disagreement, and political talk on electoral participation. Political Behavior, 28, 349–366.

Mohd Fuad Mat Jali & Junaidi Awang Besar. 2012. Pembangunan sosioekonomi dan pandangan belia terhadap isu semasa di kawasan Parlimen Batu, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia Journal of Society and Space 8(2):67 – 76.

Mutz, D. C. (2006). Hearing the other side: Deliberative versus participatory democracy. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Nir, L. (2011). Disagreement and opposition in social networks: Does disagreement discourage turnout? Political Studies, 59, 674–692.

Östman, J., & Ekström, M. (2013). Information, interaction and creative production: The effects of three forms of Internet use on youth democratic engagement. Advance online publication. Communication Research

Papacharissi, Z. (2009). The virtual geographies of social networks: a comparative analysis of Facebook, LinkedIn and ASmallWorld. New Media & Society, Vol. 11, No. 1-2, 199-220 at January 19, 2010.

Samsudin A. Rahim. 2010. Media, demokrasi dan generasi muda : analisis keputusan pilihan raya umum ke-12. Jurnal Komunikasi; Malaysian Journal of Communication 26 (2): 1-15.

Severin, W.J and Tankard, J.W (2001). Communication Theories: Origin, methods, and Uses in the Mass Media. 5th ed. United States: Longman.

Shah, D. V., Cho, J., Eveland, W. P., & Kwak, N. (2005). Information and expression in a digital age: Modeling

Internet effects on civic participation. Communication Research, 32(5), 531–565.

Siti Ezaileila Mustafa & Azizah Hamzah. 2011. Media Baharu yang Baharu: Trend Penggunaan Jaringan Sosial dalam Kalangan Pengguna di Malaysia. Jurnal Pengajian Media Malaysia 13(2):93-110.

Thorson, K., Vraga, E. K., & Klinger-Vilenchik, N. (2014). Don't push your opinions on me: Young citizens and political etiquette on Facebook. In J. A. Hendricks & D. Schill (Eds.), Presidential campaigning and social media: An analysis of the 2012 campaign (pp. 74–93). Boulder, CO: Oxford University Press.

Valenzuela, S. (2013). Unpacking the use of social media for protest behavior: The roles of information, opinion expression, and activism. American Behavioral Scientist, 57, 920–942.

Valenzuela, S., Park, N., & Kee, K. F. (2009). Is there social capital in a social networking site?: Facebook use and college students' life satisfaction, trust, and participation. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 14, 875–901.

Van Laer, J., & van Aelst, P. (2010). Internet and social movement action repertoires: Opportunities and limitations. Information, Communication, and Society, 2010, 1146–1171

Vitak, J., Zube, P., Smock, A., Carr, C. T., Ellison, N., & Lampe, C. (2011). It's complicated: Facebook users' political participation in the 2008 election. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 14, 107–114.

Weinstein, E. C. (2014). The Personal Is Political on Social Media: Online Civic Expression Patterns and Pathways Among Civically Engaged Youth. International Journal of Communication, 8, 210-233.

Wyatt, R. O., Kim, J., & Katz, E. (2000). How feeling free to talk affects ordinary political conversation, purposeful argumentation, and civic participation. Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 77, 99–114.

Wojcieszak, M. E., & Mutz, D. C. (2009). Online groups and political discourse: Do online discussion spaces facilitate exposure to political disagreement? Journal of Communication, 59(1), 40–56.