

BLOGGING AND CITIZENSHIP: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MALAYSIAN BLOGGERS

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Thesis Amendments:

pp.51, 63 – ‘youtube’ should spell as ‘YouTube’.

p.175 –capital G should replace small g in the word ‘Gods’.

p.119, 120, 138 – double quotes should replace single quotes to indicate emphasis

p.142, 144, 157, 159 and elsewhere – ‘personalization’ should be spelled as ‘personalisation’

p.107 – Ju-Li should be spelled as Ju-Li

p.111 Mariani should be spelled as as Maryani

p.62, Fairus should be spelled as as Fairuz.

p.180, 181 – Quran is should be spelled as Qur’an.

p.207 - Eupoen should be spelled as European

p.3 – “politically contentious” was initially referenced as (George 2005; 2006) should read as (George 2005, 2006 & Smeltzer, 2008)

p.51 – Wan et al (2009) should be cited in the reference list as ‘Wan Amizah, Chang, P. K., & Aziz, J. (2009). Film censorship in Malaysia: sanctions of religious, cultural and moral values. *Jurnal Komunikasi*, 25, 42-49’

p.51- Date for Tan & Lee is ‘2013’ instead of ‘1013’.

p.62 – Reference (Sani, 2010) should be (Sani & Zengeni, 2010).

p.119 –Quote from Cottle, (2011, p.649) ‘No matter how spontaneous or seemingly unplanned, they arise from somewhere’ should read as ‘No matter how spontaneous or seemingly unplanned, they arise from somewhere and are informed by preceding grievances and ambitions for change’ (2011, p.649)

p.138 – the phrase “helps to bring into being” should read as “As Cottle explains (2011, p.651), blogging also helps to bring into being a new space for social inclusivity, group recognition and...”

p.161 – Lister (2003) should be referenced as Lister (2003, p.68)

p.12 – The statement “discussion in the public domain on sensitive topics such as race, religion, and Malay rights is legally sanctioned” should be read as “discussion in the

public domain on sensitive topics such as race, religion and Malay rights face legal sanctions”.

p.192 –The sentence “Citizens were reclaiming their rights to participate by questioning the political structures that made politics exclusive to them” should be read as “Citizens were reclaiming their rights to participate by questioning the political structures that excluded them from politics”.

p.21 –the word ‘measure’ is replaced by ‘reflect’

p.24 – the word ‘it’ should replace ‘this notion’

p.38 – “...the word ‘paralyzing’ should replace ‘polarizing’

p.42 – “everyday Malaysians who are trying to define meaningful ways to define their citizenship” should be read as “who are trying to find meaningful ways to express their citizenship...”

p.64 – “ethicized” is correctly spelled as ‘ethnicised’.

p.76 – “Face-to-face interviewing was used as the main method because...” is elaborated with “...the main method for gathering off-line data because”.

p.116 – ‘unwittingly’ should be substituted with ‘unwillingly’

p.118 – “In this sense, politics is made to privilege citizens that are politically partisan” should be read as “In this sense, Malaysian politics privileges citizens that are politically partisan”

p.124 – The word ‘A-list bloggers’, should replace ‘non-A-list bloggers’ as the latter is more relevant to the context given

p.193 – “proposed a more inclusive understanding of the democratic media potential by adopting a citizens’ media approach” should read as “...a more inclusive understanding of the potential of democratic media by adopting a citizens’ media approach”?

P.184 - the phrase “links the politically abstract with people’s everyday lives” should be referenced as (Dahlgren, 2006b p.159) and cited at the reference page as “Dahlgren, P. (2006) The internet, public spheres and political communication: dispersion and deliberation. *Political Communication*. 22: 147-162”

P.33 - Footnote no. 23 should be “Jailing of Ezam slammed as 'politically motivated' August 8th, 2002. Available at: <http://www.malysiakini.com/news/12494>”

Pp.3, 30, 31, 51, 62, 82, 123, 161, 164, 173, 180 - all straight quotes should replace curly quotes.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution.

I affirm that to the best of my knowledge the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Guided by the intention to understand the relationship between blogging and the political transformations in Malaysia, this research study asks ‘How does blogging affect the citizenship practices of the everyday Malaysian bloggers?’ To answer this question, 30 Malaysian bloggers were interviewed and their blogs observed. Focusing specifically on the experiences of the Malaysian citizen bloggers who are not part of the political elites and have been systematically excluded by the established political culture, this research contributes to Malaysian political and media scholarship by capturing and explicating how blogging enables everyday Malaysians to maneuver through the complex dynamics of a contested political culture, democratic media practice and individual life experiences as they are lived at a particular juncture of Malaysian political and media history. The study found that blogging allowed the bloggers to understand and participate in political discourses that are relevant and manifest in their own everyday lives, offering a more participative and deliberative accounts of politics, and an alternative to the established elitist and partisan Malaysian politics. This case is exemplified by how the bloggers in this study were able to negotiate the political by linking politically abstract laws and policies to how these notions are experienced in their everyday through blogging. Despite this new political experience, the study also identified interesting ambiguities in the ways the bloggers still uphold certain established structures such as religion and gendered traditions in their attempt to make sense of and adapt to the changes and conventions that shape their position as Malaysians. Thus, this study proposes that blogging fits into a changing Malaysian political landscape by enabling non-subversive political participation that expresses a desire to belong to a broader and more inclusive culture than the one that presently exists in Malaysia.

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the headline “Apa lagi Cina mahu?”

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ABIM	Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia
AUKU	Akta University dan Kolej (University and Colleges Act)
BA	Barisan Alternatif
BERSIH	Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil (The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections)
BN	Barisan Nasional
CMA	Communications and Multimedia Act 1998
DAP	Democratic Action Party
GERAKAN	Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Movement Party)
HINDRAF	Hindu Rights Action Force
ISA	Internal Security Act
MCMC	Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission
MRCB	Malaysian Resources Corporation Berhad
NEP	New Economic Policy
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
NSTP	New Straits Times Press
OSA	Official Secrets Act
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat
PPP	Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984
PR	Pakatan Rakyat
PRM	Parti Rakyat Malaysia
RTM	Radio Televisyen Malaysia
SIS	Sisters in Islam
UKM	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
UMNO	United Malay National Organization

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This research is about examining and understanding the relationship between blogging and citizenship in Malaysia. Despite being confined to strict legal restrictions, Malaysians are now taking their discourses online and are transgressing the government's stronghold on freedom of speech and expression. Blogging, in particular, enables everyday Malaysians to become interactive social activists and political actors. Therefore, I argue that Malaysia offers a fertile research ground to capture the characteristics of citizens' engagement and participation in political activism through new media. My contention is supported by Atton and Hamilton (2008) who similarly suggest that the media environment in Malaysia, like many other South East Asian countries, offers a fruitful site for the study of media and democracy.

More specifically, this research investigates the relationship between blogging and citizenship through the everyday experiences of the Malaysian bloggers who are not directly involved in state politics. Conceding that the relationship between media and citizenship can never be directly causal (Couldry et al., 2010; Coleman, 2007) this study seeks to invite what Cottle (2011, p.649) in his own study of media and the Arab Spring refers to as 'a more holistic appreciation of the overlapping and interpenetrating ways in which media systems and communication networks have complexly conditioned and facilitated these remarkable historical events'. In the attempt to capture this complex dynamics, I provide in this thesis a contextualized analysis of the many factors that build the blogging-citizenship connection in Malaysia. Amongst other points, I discuss the role of the Malaysian socio-political and media system in shaping the blogging experience as well as the features of the blogging technology that are changing the established Malaysian cultural and political traditions.

1.2 Contextualizing the Problem

Before I explain the research problems that ground this study, I will first provide a background of Malaysia, the Malaysian media, and blogging in Malaysia. This background overview can provide a better understanding of the phenomenon that is taking place while substantiating why research on Malaysian blogging is necessary.

1.2.1 Malaysia

With a population of more than 25 million and a land area of approximately 330,000 km, Malaysia is considered to be one of the new industrialized countries (Bozyk, 2006). Situated in South-East Asia, Malaysia is divided into east and west. Kuala Lumpur, the country's capital, is situated on the west, better known as peninsular Malaysia; the two states in east Malaysia – Sabah and Sarawak – form the Borneo Island. Malaysia is best known for its multi-racial composition which includes the majority Malays and other Bumiputera groups (67%), followed by the Chinese (26.0%) and Indian (7%)¹ ethnic groups. With many races co-existing, Malaysia has myriad cultures, religions and languages. Although it is considered a Muslim country with Islam being the official religion, many other religions such as Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism are practiced in Malaysia. The National Language Act (1967)² sanctioned Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay language) as the country's official language and stipulated that all formal events should be conducted in Malay. English is also widely used, as are other ethnic languages such as Mandarin, Cantonese, Tamil and other native tongues.

1.2.2 The Malaysian Media

Malaysia has a history of media control. Through media laws and concentrated media ownership, the Malaysian Government oversees all the information circulating in the mass media. Media laws such as the Printing Press Act (1984) and Broadcasting Act (1987) limit political discussions in that news or stories deemed derogatory or overly critical of the government cannot be published. Freedom of speech and expression are also limited by laws that stipulate what can and cannot be discussed in public. Sedition and defamation laws restrict freedom of speech and protect political figures from being scrutinized; and laws such as the Internal Security Act (ISA)³ and the Official Secrets Act (OSA) enable the authorities to detain without trial anyone accused of disrupting the country's harmony. The University and College Act (AUKU) prohibit students from being involved in any form of political activity. Hence, Malaysians have been inculcated to accept a culture of political apathy and fear of expression (Loh, 2002; Anuar, 2005). The ownership of media by the government and organizations close to

¹ Department of Statistics Malaysia. <http://www.statistics.gov.my>. Retrieved: 2 September 2012.

² For more on the act: <http://www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.%201/Act%2032.pdf>

³ The Sedition Act and the Internal Security Act (2012) have been repealed in 2012. I will offer more on why the laws are still relevant when I discuss the limitations in the Malaysian media in chapter 3.

the government also limits media freedom largely through management self-censorship. Thus, the media in Malaysia offers limited space for citizens to engage in political discourse. While some forums for political discussions are available in the alternative media produced by opposition parties or non-government organizations, they are often hampered by the media laws (George, 2006).

Although the Malaysian media system has gone through major cosmetic changes since its privatization in the 1980s, it has grown merely in size and not in freedom. For example, Media Prima is the largest media group in Malaysia, owning all the main private television stations and controlling approximately 54% of Malaysia's television viewership, with its closest rival being the pay-television satellite operator, Astro, controlling a market share of roughly 29%. State-owned RTM controls 17% of the market (Lim, 2009). Media Prima also owns the majority of the private radio stations and controls the New Straits Times Press (NSTP), which holds almost half of the newspaper market share in Malaysia, with a daily readership of more than two million (Sani, 2009). Incidentally, Media Prima is a subsidiary of Malaysia Resources Corporation Berhad (MRCB), a government-backed corporation (Gong, 2011).

Opposition and dissenting voices do not have access to the mainstream media. These conditions have served the government well in terms of securing support from the people. Due to the lack of open access to the mainstream media, the opposition parties in Malaysia have resorted to creating their own alternative media. Malaysia's alternative media includes "politically contentious" (George 2005; 2006) professional online newspapers, NGO websites, and journalistic blogs. The primary objective of these alternative forms of communication is to challenge "the consensus that powerful interests try to shape and sustain through the mainstream media" (George, 2006, p. 3). Thus, the alternative media in Malaysia mostly adopts political, oppositional and radical inclinations. The alternative media often finds it difficult to survive due to the lack of finances and barriers to license renewals. The late 1990s saw the advent of new digital technologies. By this time, the alternative media had expanded and incorporated the Internet and digital media, such as compact discs and video discs. Although government control of oppositional media remains tight, the Internet provides a new medium for political activists to convey their message without the need to worry excessively about regulations. This relative freedom exists in 1997 when Malaysia signed the *Bill of Guarantee*. The bill was an agreement

designed to reassure international investors that Malaysia would not impose any censorship on the Internet (George, 2003).

1.2.3 Malaysians Online

As at the end of 2012, almost 19 million Malaysians were online. This accounted for 66% of the Malaysian population (MCMC, 2012).⁴ For the most part, the Malaysian Government has been very serious in its attempt to make Malaysia a regional and global player in information technology (IT). Since the Internet was introduced to the Malaysian public in 1995, many strategic steps have been taken to accelerate its penetration. Public schools have been equipped with computer labs, tax exemptions have been given for the purchases of laptops and Internet connections, and a Multimedia University was built to create Internet-savvy graduates (Bunnell, 2004). Public and private institutions have been expected to incorporate IT technologies in their operations. The government launched its own IT policy whereby all government offices must be online and paper-less by 2015⁵ In 2010, the government launched My E-Government (myEG), a one-stop portal for Malaysians to deal with any kind of government-related services such as the payment of taxes and general summons⁶

The introduction of broadband in 2007⁷ further sealed the Internet as an important component of Malaysian life. Better and faster Internet access has facilitated the boom in e-commerce and online businesses. It has also allowed Malaysians to extract more from the Internet, especially in the form of faster streaming of media content. Hence, Malaysians have become more reliant on the Internet for everyday activities such as the daily news, paying bills or simply catching up with family and friends. On top of that, more and more Malaysians are sharing pieces, if not most, of their lives online. The availability of individual media and social networking sites allows Malaysians to not only extract information or conduct transactions but also to create and contribute ideas, information and life stories. To date, 70% of online users in Malaysia have a Facebook account. In fact, Malaysia has the 5th most Facebook users in Asia.⁸

⁴ Statistics from the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC). Available at <http://www.skmm.gov.my/skmmgovmy/media/General/pdf/Q4-2012-ENG-250213.pdf>

⁵ <http://malaysiatoday.com/2011/11/90-of-govt-services-to-be-online-and-paperless-by-2015/>

⁶ <http://www.myeg.com.my>

⁷ Report on High Speed Broad Band in Malaysia by Ministry of Multimedia and Communications Malaysia. Available at: http://myconvergence.com.my/main/images/stories/PDF_Folder/jan2009/MYC04_all_lowres.pdf

⁸ Facebook in Asia: Latest Stats on Total Users by Country [Quarter 3 2011]. Available at: <http://www.greyreview.com/2011/10/01/facebook-in-asia-latest-stats-on-total-users-by-country-quarter-3-2011/>

1.2.4 Blogging in Malaysia

Among the sites and tools available on the Internet, blogs enable everyday Malaysians to become interactive social activists and political actors. The majority of political blogs express the voices of everyday citizens who represent neither the government nor the opposition parties (George, 2006). Blogs such as *kickdefella*, *jeffooi*, *rockybru* and *Malaysia Today* are some of the prominent blogs that are visited by those who want alternative insights to Malaysian politics. These blogs have mostly been published since 2003 and have achieved blog hits close to one million. Technically, a blog can simply be defined as an online journal, arranged in reverse chronological sequence that facilitates interactive computer-mediated communication through text, images, and audio/video objects. Gurak et al. (2008) offered a similar definition of blogs when they explained that, “at this point in their development, blogs are best described as websites that are updated frequently, most often with links to other sites and commentary on the other sites’ content”

Research by Ulicny (2008) suggested that the potential number of bloggers in Malaysia was in the hundreds of thousands. Ulicny calculated the estimates by compiling the number of blog profiles that had listed their location as Malaysia. By combining the blogger profiles listed in blog hosting websites such as Blogger.com, Wordpress and Typepad, and networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Friendster, Ulicny concluded that the number of Malaysian blogs could not possibly be more than 500,000. A significant proportion of Malaysian bloggers are from the younger generation. A survey by Microsoft Advertising, MTV and Yahoo!⁹ in 2007 found that young Malaysians were active bloggers with close to half (48 percent) spending a portion of their time blogging. A total of 21 percent of Malaysian youth create and update their blogs regularly and this figure is expected to rise.

1.2.5 March 2008 Election

The March 2008 general election has been called a new dawn for Malaysia because for the first time in the country’s history, the ruling Barisan Nasional government won only a simple majority and lost six of the country’s 14 states. The Internet as the alternative media was seen as one of the major contributors to this significant political change. This time around, blogs were

⁹ Malaysian Youth Like Web, Love TV (Synovate, 2007). Available at: http://www.marketresearchworld.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2550&Itemid=48

considered the main political media (Tan & Zawawi, 2008; Koh, 2008; Lim, 2009). Unlike the previous elections, the 2008 election saw a number of opposition candidates using blogs as their main information outlet (Smeltzer, 2008; Gong, 2011). Internet penetration in 2008 was at a high of 59% (www.mcmc.gov.my) and rising. The majority of the audience was a young generation of voters who prior to 2008 were not old enough to vote. This section of the electorate grew up with the Internet, making them more Internet-savvy compared to the generation before them (Lim, 2009; Sani, 2009; Tan & Zawawi, 2008). Moreover, this group grew up exposed to a different political climate, putting them in touch with political systems that are different from Malaysia's. They were able to see the Internet as a ready and easy alternative to the mainstream news media. Because of this, some politicians and academics, as well as the general public, began seeing the Internet as a tool that was liberalizing the new generation, hence changing the country's social and political climate (Tan & Zawawi, 2008; Koh, 2008; Gong, 2011).

Although the Barisan Nasional government managed to stay in power after the 2013 general election; the increased votes and parliament seats won by the opposition parties attest that Malaysians are becoming more informed when they go to the polls and that the internet continues to play an important role in this political empowerment. I will elaborate more on the 2013 election in the last chapter (section 9.5) where I will discuss the outcomes and implications of the latest election and explain why I argue that the 2013 election is continuing the momentum for political change in Malaysia.

1.3 Research Problems

The short history above narrates the developments that are changing the dynamics of Malaysian politics and Malaysian media. The rise of new media technologies such as blogs is challenging the local political and media culture that traditionally limits democratic participation and the freedom of speech and expression. Despite the apparently democratizing effects of blogging on Malaysian politics, I am more interested to identify how blogging is experienced and understood as a form of citizen practice by everyday Malaysians. In order to do this, I have identified three research problems that need to be addressed in an attempt to uncover the relationship between blogging and the experience of citizenship in Malaysia; namely, 1) researching everyday Malaysian bloggers, 2) theorizing the alternative media, and 3) redefining political participation and citizen practice. These problems represent the conditions that have to

be explored in order to make sense of the complexities of the contemporary Malaysian blogging experience in particular and the relationship between the media and citizenship in general.

1.3.1 Research Problem 1: Researching the Everyday Malaysian Blogger

Several research studies have shown how blogs have influenced major political events such as the 2004 US election (Adamic & Glance, 2005), the protest against Fiji's 2006 coup d'état (Lashley, 2007) and the increased citizen opposition against Zimbabwe's dictatorship in 2008 (Moyo, 2011). Researchers have also depicted how blogs influenced the fall of politicians such as US Senator Trent Lott (Chaddock, 2005), Pakistani president Pervez Musharaff (Maqsood, 2008) and US politician George Allen (Burrough, 2007), and the rise of new political bloggers such as the Malaysian blogger, Jeff Ooi (Tang, 2006) and Iraqi blogger, *Riverband* (McCauliff, 2011). Most significantly, there are case studies that show the ability of political blogs to assert pressure for democratic reform in countries like Malaysia (Weiss, 2012).

However, research on the democratic potential of blogging has tended to focus on a small group of A-list bloggers who are well-known, active and have significant readerships. According to Bruns (2008), the term A-list bloggers described the group of bloggers who attract the largest readership and subsequently receive a large number of links back to their blogs. The existence of A-list bloggers indicates the bias of blogging whereby not all bloggers have the same amount of exposure. A-list political bloggers are likely to be professional journalists, political activists or some other kind of unique and educated individual (McKenna and Poole, 2008). Researchers have equated the roles of A-list bloggers to journalists (Johnson and Kaye, 2004), campaign workers (McKenna and Poole, 2008), opinion leaders (Ferrell and Drezner, 2004), new influencers (Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005) and agenda setters (Gill, 2004).

Research on Malaysian blogs seems to follow the trend of focusing on the group of A-list bloggers. In his study on the impact of the Internet on public participation in national politics, George (2006) conducted interviews with A-list bloggers such as Jeff Ooi and veteran Malaysian journalist, Kadir Jasin. Similarly, to depict the democratic potential of the Malaysian political blogosphere, Tang (2006) conducted a case study on the A-list blogger, Jeff Ooi, and charted his rise from an average IT consultant to a world-known political blogger who was once invited to speak about blogging in Harvard together with other international bloggers such as Dan

Gillmor¹⁰ and Oh Yeon Ho.¹¹ The focus on A-list bloggers is also evident in what is probably the first in-depth study on the Malaysian political blogosphere. From 2006 to 2007, June-E Tan and Zawawi Ibrahim (2008) investigated the relationship between blogging and democratization in Malaysia by analysing the bloggers and the blog readers. They used online surveys to gather descriptive information about the blog readers, while in-depth interviews with several A-list political bloggers were conducted to gain insights into how political bloggers experience blogging. Another extensive study conducted by Lim Ming Kuok (2009) provided a detailed look at the historical rise of blogging and its implications for Malaysian politics, especially in relation to the 2008 election. Lim's (2009) study also focused on the general impact of blogging on politics and highlighted the experiences of several well-known A-list bloggers. Although these studies have provided immense information and insights to better understand the Malaysian blogosphere and its relationship with Malaysian politics, a lack of research on the blogging experiences of everyday Malaysians opens a significant opportunity to understand blogging as a democratic media practice.

The justification for this claim is supported by George (2007) who observed that the participatory nature of the Malaysian political blogosphere is contested by the domination of individuals who were political players before they became active bloggers, and who brought with them the ideas and practices of mainstream politics. George gave the example of several A-list bloggers who were members of mainstream groups, such as Kadir Jasin who was formerly the editor of *Berita Harian*, a main Malay daily newspaper; and Akhirudin Attan who blogs with the pseudonym RockyBru, is president of the National Press Club and was previously executive editor of the Malay Mail English language daily. Other prominent bloggers include Marina Mahathir, newspaper columnist and daughter of the former Prime Minister, and Lim Kit Siang, president of the Democratic Opposition Party (DAP), a major opposition party. Even bloggers such as Jeff Ooi who had no prior political experience are co-opted into mainstream politics when they develop a strong following. Ooi is now an elected politician after he ran and won in the last general election on an opposition ticket. Due to their experience and encounters with the country's political process, these A-list bloggers are on a different level to the less prominent

¹⁰ Dan Gillmor is an American technology blogger, writer and columnist. He is also the author of 'We the Media', one of the first written accounts on the democratic potential of blogging and citizen journalism. He can be read at : <http://dangillmor.com>

¹¹ Oh Yeon Ho is the founder of the influential Korean citizen news website Ohmynews. (www.ohmynews.com)

Malaysian bloggers. Their writing may be more popular because they have had professional training and experience. They can provide better insights because they have political and media connections and deeper knowledge and, furthermore, they sometimes adopt a mindset similar to a journalistic, third-person view. Thus, I contend that A-list bloggers in Malaysia are not entirely representative of the many Malaysian bloggers.

Similarly, Wallsten (2005, p. 11) argued that there needs to be more research on ordinary bloggers. As he explained, “studying only A-list bloggers is likely to draw some very faulty conclusions about the who’s, what’s and why’s of this emerging form of political activity”. Therefore, blogging in Malaysia requires an in-depth study of the everyday, lesser-known bloggers. Furthermore, McKenna and Pole (2008) identified that most contemporary research on political blogs tends to provide insights into the material output of the blogs in terms of the political spectacles and the prominence of selected bloggers. In contrast, I find it necessary to look into blogging as it is understood and experienced by the bloggers themselves. I will investigate the blogging experience less in terms of political spectacles or ‘revolutions’ but more as a part of the bloggers’ lived experience. I believe that by doing this, I will be able to capture the complexities and nuances that are important in the bloggers’ negotiations of politics, media and everyday life. I also propose that by looking at the ordinary bloggers, I am pursuing one of the basic tenets of critical media studies by investigating how ordinary people make sense of their position in different junctures of history. This intent is affirmed by Lievrouw (2011) who contends that contemporary media studies is equally interested in examining new social movements that are integrated into daily life through actions based on lifestyle and personal issues, as much as it is trying to make sense of intense revolutionary collective actions.

1.3.2 Research Problem 2: Theorizing the Alternative Media

As I have explained above, the state’s strong control over the media has resulted in the establishment of a significant alternative media industry in Malaysia. The alternative media in Malaysia is usually produced and financed by the opposition parties or NGOs that find their perspectives absent in the government-controlled mainstream media. As such, the alternative media tends to represent contentious politics (George, 2006) that are usually either anti-government or are promoting issues or ideologies that do not conform to the state’s aspirations (Anuar, 2005). Because of its non-conformist inclinations, the alternative media often face legal

restrictions and political intimidation from the authorities (Allan and Thorsen, 2009). Because of the continuous confrontation between the mainstream media and the alternative media, it is generally accepted that when it comes to political coverage, Malaysians are often left with an 'either-or option' (Sani, 2005; Anuar, 2005; Steele, 2009). The mainstream media is accepted as the state's mouthpiece, while the alternative media is seen as the opposition's media outlet. Because of this contrast, the alternative media in Malaysia is often reduced to its oppositional nature and radical inclinations (Sani, 2005; George, 2006).

The availability of the Internet has further reinvigorated the Malaysian alternative media (Gong, 2011). In the early years of the Internet, it was the opposition parties and NGOs that were fully utilizing the potential of online media. If they had previously been restricted from accessing the public, their presence online had enabled them to reach the Malaysian citizenry in larger numbers. As such they were very much maximizing the benefits of the online media to accommodate their lack of presence in the traditional mass media (George, 2003; Smeltzer, 2008). However, while the opposition's use of online media indicates that the Internet has opened a new frontier for the Malaysian alternative media, it has yet to overcome the dichotomized political news media where the alternative is still thought to promote anti-government sentiments (Brown, 2005; George, 2006).

I propose that it is vital to acknowledge that in the Malaysian context, new alternative media users such as bloggers are involved in different levels of change and adaptation when they choose to be open about their political positions. For example, Malaysians are cautious when it comes to politics. Living in a divided society where racial, religious, political and socio-economical lines demarcate the different groups in the society, the public in general has been controlled by laws and regulations and even self-imposed taboos that limit political expression (Netto, 2002). Thus, Malaysians have long been accustomed to keeping any form of dissident private (Loh, 2002). The Chinese and Indian Malaysians who have always been uncomfortable with the Malays' special rights are constantly reminded by the authorities and the mainstream media to contain their dissatisfaction in order to maintain peace and harmony, and avoid racial uprisings like the racial riots that occurred in 1969 (Lim, 2009; Wang, 2001). As such, the non-Malays have been seen as politically less active. The Malays, on the other hand, have been convinced that they should not be too vocal and must be thankful to the government for maintaining their special rights, despite the fact that the Malays are still among the poorest

people in the country (Foley, 2001). Historically, the Malays have also been described as faithful to their leaders and diplomatic in their speech (Daniels, 2005). Therefore, to be open and vocal about one's political stance requires cultural change and adaptation on the part of the individual bloggers.

These individual and cultural changes indicate the potentially unique experiences that may not be radical or oppositional, but are nevertheless significant and pose implications for Malaysia's socio-political tradition. Atton (2004) captured this less subversive and oppositional function of the alternative media when he suggested that new alternative media (which he termed as the 'alternative internet') merges the political and the cultural across various media projects that can either be more political or more cultural. Although Atton focused more on the oppositional quality of the alternative media, he stressed that the alternative media - whether explicitly oppositional or not - combines both creative expression and social responsibility. Building on Atton's theorization, Lievrouw (2011, p.19) offered a more democratic and expansive definition of the alternative new media by proposing that such media "employ and modify communication artefacts, practices and social arrangements of new media technologies to challenge or alter dominant, expected or accepted ways of doing society, culture and politics". When conceptualized this way, alternative media becomes less confined to political subversiveness but is instead seen to reflect and challenge established ways of doing politics and other social and cultural processes that limit the involvement of ordinary people.

The ability to understand and analyse the alternative media as more than just oppositional and radical can illuminate the unique complexities of everyday media experiences and their implications on the wider socio-political environment. While my arguments are based on the Malaysian context, I believe that my interrogation of the relationship between alternative media practices and everyday citizen experiences will also benefit media scholars who are interested in how media use is positioned within the complex dynamics of social structures, cultures and individual agency.

1.3.3 Defining Political Participation and Citizen Practice

Strict laws that limit freedom of speech and political participation have also inculcated Malaysians to have a narrow understanding of politics and participation. State control over political discourses and the strict restrictions imposed on socio-political groups and organizations

inform Malaysians that politics is elitist and dangerous (Loh, 2003). In order to maintain political stability between the multi-racial citizenry, the state often adopts strict laws to assert the fear of instability to discourage Malaysians from being too politically vocal. Discussion in the public domain on sensitive topics such as race, religion and Malay rights is legally sanctioned (Abbot and Franks, 2007). Laws such as the Internal Security Act, Sedition Act and Official Secrets Act limit democratic discourse by allowing the state to curb any forms of political dissidence. The University and Colleges Act disallows Malaysian students from participating in any form of political movement. The Police Act states that any gathering of more than 5 people in a public area must have a permit from the police and that in any situation the police have the right to stop public gatherings (Smeltzer, 2008).

These laws and restrictions have not only allowed the state to penalize open political opposition, but have also taught Malaysians that political participation can be dangerous and that it is exclusive only to a selected few who are partisan and part of the political elites. Thus, the characteristics of a good citizen as proposed by the state are narrowed into accepting the establishment, abiding by the laws and voting in the state-organized election (Allen, 2008). Hence, politics and participation are defined strictly according to the state's definition that emphasizes elitist, partisan, institutional and electoral traditions.

The rise of new media and the ongoing transformation of the Malaysian society are slowly affecting this imposed understanding of politics and participation (Weiss, 2009). The availability of new media technologies has exposed Malaysians to information that can eclipse the state propaganda promoted by the mainstream mass media (Sani, 2009). Alternative information is no longer limited to the information coming from the opposition parties and non-government institutions; rather, the information comes from unaccounted sources that range from international news portals, political pundits and even everyday citizens (Weiss, 2008). As such, Malaysians are now well-informed about local and global politics, and exposed to many forms of democratic participation that may not conform to the ones promoted by the state.

At the same time, as Malaysians become more educated and affluent, they have now found the confidence to break away from the traditional fear of politics that has previously pushed many Malaysians away from participating in politics. According to Loh (2003) and Sani (2009), the new middle class that is educated and skilled has grown cynical about the country's illusion of harmony and equality and is unafraid to support the opposition. Members of the

middle class no longer feel intimidated by the spectre of religious and ethnic instability that has been threatened to arise if the ruling Barisan Nasional Government should lose its right to govern.

Moreover, Lim (2009) argued that Malaysia's young voters between the ages of twenty-one to forty appeared to be impatient with what they perceived as the ruling government's resistance to change. Young voters are aware of what is happening around them and have varied reasons to oppose the government. Young educated Malaysians are now looking beyond racial politics and are concerned with global issues such as good governance, the environment and human rights. This younger generation is also more concerned about their democratic rights to participate and be heard. They are more creative in defining politics and participation. They no longer see partisan politics as the only form of political participation.

Therefore, it is vital to capture these ongoing transformations in the citizenship experience by redefining politics and participation in Malaysia. I argue that the traditional definition of politics and participation that is confined to institutions and elections can no longer explain the citizens' own understanding and interpretations of their own political processes. New forms of media engagement and new found self-dependence have given many Malaysians the confidence to reclaim their position in democratic participation. More than that, they are also shaping their own politics, gravitating towards issues that interest and affect them personally and participating in ways that fit their own life goals and values (Loh, 2003).

A flexible theorization of politics and participation is required to understand how the bloggers in this study experience everyday blogging as a form of citizen participation. I propose that such a theoretical move in explaining the contemporary citizen experience in Malaysia can assist other scholars, politicians and policy-makers to adapt to the current changes and formulate theories, policies and regulations that can accommodate and satisfy this new citizenry. In the process, I will also extensively discuss, scrutinize and problematise the notion of politics and the political in an attempt to contribute to media studies that by evaluating the meaning and value of politics and the notion of being political.

1.4 Research Objectives

The problems I have delineated above guide the main objective of this thesis; that is this to strictly contextualize the relationship between blogging and citizenship in light of the ongoing transformations in the Malaysian media and political system. In my attempt to do this, I agree with Wallsten (2005) and Nardi et al. (2004) who contend that current research has largely ignored the thousands of political blogs that are written by average citizens every day. Thus, relatively little is known about political blogging “by the rest of us” (Nardi et al., 2004). According to Wallsten (2005), the ordinary bloggers are “likely to be hidden in the vast expanse of the Internet” (p. 11). Since the blogosphere is mostly made up of the ordinary citizen, basic questions of the who, what and why must be understood through the experience of the majority (Wallsten, 2005). Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap in the research on the blogging experiences of the everyday citizens by further setting the following research objectives:

- 1) To contextualize the everyday Malaysian bloggers’ citizenship experience
- 2) To contextualize the everyday Malaysian bloggers’ media experience
- 3) To uncover the everyday Malaysian bloggers’ unique blogging experience
- 4) To understand the impact of blogging on the bloggers’ citizenship experience
- 5) To discuss the impact of blogging on Malaysian politics.

1.5 Research Questions

Based on the research problems and objectives identified above, the research study will look specifically at the everyday bloggers who have not been given much media or scholarly attention, with a particular focus on how they blog and how their everyday blogging becomes a citizenship experience. To uncover these lived experiences, I will also consider how macro influences such as the socio-political and media systems contribute to the building of the blogging and citizenship connection. Thus, this research will enquire into the different ways Malaysian bloggers experience citizenship in blogging by asking: How does blogging affect the citizenship practices of everyday Malaysian bloggers?

To foreground the bloggers’ experience and to provide an analysis that will look into the macro and micro factors that build the experience, I also address the following sub-questions:

- 1) Who are the ‘everyday’ Malaysian bloggers?

- 2) How does the Malaysian socio-political system affect the bloggers' citizenship experience?
- 3) What are the bloggers' citizenship experiences?
- 4) How does the Malaysian media system influence the bloggers' citizenship experience?
- 5) How do the bloggers experience blogging?
- 6) How does blogging become a citizenship experience?

1.6 Outline of Chapters

In this section, I provide an outline of the chapters that form this thesis. In Chapter 2, I explicate the unique characteristics of Malaysian politics and citizenship including a short historical background and an overview of the different issues that build and contest the citizenship experience. I explain that the Malaysian citizenship is a contested terrain because basic citizenship rights and responsibilities are not distributed evenly among citizens, and politics and citizenship are defined along ethnic, religion and political lines. I also present recent arguments that indicate the creation of New Politics in Malaysia, whereby the established partisan and elitist political culture is being challenged slowly by the rise of new media and an increased political awareness among young and middle class Malaysians. In relation to these ongoing changes, I consider in-depth the work of Bennett (2007, 2008) who put forward a theoretical framework for examining the emergence of new forms of citizenship practice that are creating what he calls "actualizing citizens" and challenging the ways traditional citizenship and participation are understood.

In Chapter 3, I provide a detailed look into the Malaysian media by outlining media ownership and media laws. I explain that because of the state's strict control over the mass media, the Malaysian political media has become divided into the alternative and the mainstream, leaving Malaysians with a very limited political media. I further argue that because of this dichotomized political media, the Malaysian alternative media is often reduced to oppositional and radical practices. This simplistic reduction becomes problematic when I discuss the benefits of blogging that enable everyday citizens to create their own alternative media that is mostly personal and not necessarily oppositional. I explain this by discussing how blogging has influenced Malaysian politics and how it is significant in the experience of the new politics, as discussed in the previous chapter. To capture this new media experience and its potential impact

on everyday citizenship, I refer to Rodriguez's theory of citizens' media (2001). Citizen's media offers an interpretation of the media-citizenship relationship that breaks away from radical inclinations and fits well with the Malaysian media context.

The methodology for this thesis is presented in Chapter 4. Here, I detail my sampling procedures and the challenges I faced in getting the bloggers to participate in this study. In relation to the data collection, particular attention is given to the appropriateness of qualitative methods especially the use of in-depth interviewing. I also discuss the ethical issues that I faced in collecting data for this study. The subsequent four chapters present my analysis of the data collected in this study.

Beginning in Chapter 5, I introduce the bloggers according to their citizen-type. By employing Bennett's (2007, 2008) conceptualization of the Dutiful Citizen as my benchmark, I construct a typology of citizen-types that best represent the bloggers' citizenship experience. The typology, consisting of citizen categories that I have termed as the Partisan, the Advocate, the Conversant and the Distant, imply political participations that range from the very active to the least participative. I argue that an exclusive understanding of politics and participation limits the citizens' interpretation and practice of citizenship, and ultimately alienates them from what they conceive as an elitist and partisan political culture. I also discuss the relationship between the bloggers' political selves and their media experience. I argue that a politically dichotomized Malaysian media re-affirms the status quo, divides partisan citizens according to their political affiliations, and alienates the non-partisan citizens.

This is followed by a discussion of the blogging experience in Chapter 6. In this chapter, I analyse the blogging experiences by identifying the bloggers' everyday blogging habits and connecting them to the citizen typologies that I detailed in the previous chapter. Here, I establish that when everyday blogging practices are considered as part of the citizenship experience, the blogger-citizens can be grouped into two categories, namely, the Activists and the Diarists. I explain that these blogger-categories are not opposites, but are simply two ways of experiencing blogging. I explain each category by detailing the bloggers' motivations, styles, practices and rewards. I show that while blogging is evidently an extension of the bloggers' political lives, it also enables these bloggers to become engaged in ways that were not available to them in the mainstream and alternative mass media. I also contend that blogging allows for the creation of what Bennett (2008) called "actualizing citizens".

In Chapter 7, I present an in-depth analysis of the blogging experiences of the Activist bloggers. The findings indicate that blogging has facilitated the personalization of politics whereby the bloggers are able to personalize their own understanding and practice of politics and participation. By incorporating Bennett's (2012) conceptualization of the personalization of politics, I explain that bloggers assert themselves as the authority, the centre of politics and the political figure. These bloggers feel empowered to dictate their own versions of issues and politics and are determined to claim that they have influenced policies and political actions. I argue that when contextualized within the Malaysian political culture, such personalized political experience is important in allowing the bloggers to feel included in the system that has previously been understood as exclusive.

In Chapter 8, I present the blogging experiences of the Diarist bloggers. By focusing specifically on the experiences of Muslim women bloggers, I identify that blogging has allowed these women to practice agency by turning their everyday experiences into significant discourses and even collective actions. However, what is unique about these women's experiences is that they justify their blogging and agential practice through the Islamic call to God, or "Dakwah". Because of this, I argue for the women's religious experience to be understood as more than simply a religious submission. I present the narratives of the women to indicate clearly that within their claim for religious duty, they are involved in material transformations that can affect policies and politics. In relation to citizenship, I argue that blogging allows these women to diffuse the notion of the political to include personal, everyday experiences that may have been traditionally considered private and insignificant.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, Chapter 9, I summarize the study's key empirical findings and discuss the contributions this study has made to the understanding of the media and citizenship. I also reflect on the research journey and provide a concise discussion of the applicability of the research in scholarship and suggest several promising areas for future research.

CHAPTER 2: THEORISING AND CONTEXTUALISING MALAYSIAN CITIZENSHIP

2.1 Introduction

Questions of politics and participation are fundamentally about citizenship. As explained in the introduction to the thesis, blogging is changing the ways Malaysians experience politics and participation. In the context of the apparent practice of limited democracy, the concept of Malaysian citizenship needs to be contextualised before it is explained in terms of citizenship theories. Therefore, in this chapter I focus primarily on explicating the unique characteristics of Malaysian politics and citizenship. This is achieved through a short historical background and a general overview of the different issues that build and contest the citizenship experience. I then examine the various theoretical positions on the nature and scope of Malaysian citizenship. I also consider the debates in citizenship theories that focus on the “New Politics”. In this New Politics, the understanding of political participation shifts from its strict institutional and electoral origins to a more inclusive understanding that is contextualised in the citizens’ everyday lived experience. This development in citizenship theory speaks to the ways Malaysians are experiencing a gradual political transformation driven by the availability of new media such as blogging and the re-invigoration of civil society.

2.2 Contextualising Malaysian Citizenship

Malaysian citizenship is very much a colonial inheritance. The British occupation that lasted for almost 200 years (1771-1957) has had a lasting impact on the Malaysian socio-political experience. Malaysia’s multicultural and multi-religious society is in fact a British legacy. Therefore, it is pertinent that a discussion of Malaysian citizenship starts from this historical origin. The state of Malaya¹² was formed for the economic benefit of the British colonialists and was imposed on the population. This meant that the post-colonial state was economically extractive and distanced from society (Milner, 2002). The British left behind the legacy of an ethnically divided society. By the early 1800s, the British demand for labour caused the migration of large numbers of Chinese and Indians to Malaysia. The influx of these workers to

¹² The Federation of Malaya is the name given to a federation of 11 states that existed from 31 January 1948 until 16 September 1963. The Federation became independent on 31 August 1957. In 1963 it was reconstituted as Malaysia

Malaya¹³ meant that the native Malays began to develop a sense of anxiety regarding their social and political position. The British had encouraged the immigration of non-Malay peoples to Malaya with the hope that the growth of Malay nationalism would be curbed. To further this hope, the British purposely kept the Malays (except for the elites) in rural areas, isolated from the Chinese and Indian workers (Milner, 2002; Abbot and Franks, 2007).

Meanwhile, the Chinese and Indian population was excluded from administrative and political office. This strategy was intended to preserve the position of the Malay elites and British colonialists (Hamid, 2007). The large numbers of Chinese and Indians and their uncertain citizenship status in Malaya after World War Two led to the British proposing a common citizenship for all those born or permanently domiciled in Malaya; this was known as the Malayan Union scheme, to be implemented in 1946. The scheme also involved transferring sovereignty to the British away from the traditional Malay rulers, the Sultans. Part of the reason for the Malayan Union proposal was that the British could then count on support for their rule from the Chinese who had benefited from the economic development under the colonialists (Hamid, 2007). However, the strong resistance of the Malays to the Malayan Union scheme meant that it was not put into practice.

The British abandoned the Union scheme and began to draw up a federal constitution with the Malay elites who had led the resistance to the Malayan Union. Malaya was prepared for self-governance with an eye towards eventual independence, which was achieved in 1957. The conditions for independence demanded by the Malays were that they would be culturally and politically dominant. The new constitution recognised special rights for the Malays, and the government granted them certain privileges (Hamid, 2007). As such, the Malays and the indigenous people were grouped together under the label “Bumiputera”. Bumiputera literally translates to “princes of the soil” to denote the status as the original inhabitants of the land, as opposed to the non-Bumiputera, the Chinese and the Indians, who came to Malaya as immigrants (Tan, 2001). Taken as a whole, the Bumiputera group constitutes 67.4 percent¹⁴ of the population – a much larger number than the ethnic Malays. Being part of a much larger Bumiputera group

¹³ Up to Independence in 1957, Malaysia was known as Malaya. It was only on September 16th, 1963 that Malaysia was first named in conjunction with the federation of Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak.

¹⁴ From the Department of Statistics, Malaysia. Available at : http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1215%3Apopulation-distribution-and-basic-demographic-characteristic-report-population-and-housing-census-malaysia-2010-updated-2972011&catid=130%3Apopulation-distribution-and-basic-demographic-characteristic-report-population-and-housing-census-malaysia-2010&Itemid=154&lang=en

significantly expanded the political base of Malay politicians. The privileging of the Bumiputera over non-Bumiputera continues to affect all aspects of Malaysian life; influencing decisions on housing subsidies, student loans and university places (Netto, 2002; Weiss, 2004).

The British also left a legacy of strict legislation. The British common law is the foundation of the Malaysian legal system (Hamid, 2009). Apart from the *Shariah* law,¹⁵ the colonial-inspired laws govern almost every aspect of Malaysian life and this includes several controversial laws that have been used and misused by the ruling government to secure national peace while protecting the elite's power. Thus the British colonial administration left several important legacies to the present Malaysian administration: these include a strong state, an ethnically divided society, and draconian legal restrictions. In addition, as I argue further, the ruling elites often use these legacies to protect their political power by claiming that these conditions are the building blocks to ensure Malaysia's economic and societal development. Kessler (1998) aptly explains this as follows:

The colonial legacy to the post-colonial successor states in Southeast Asia was thus twofold. It bequeathed a strong authoritarian state structure and political tradition, disconnected from any counterbalancing or constraining civil society or tradition of active and participatory citizenship; and, because of the economically extractive purposes for which the European powers constructed these colonial states, these successor states were left in charge of often impoverished societies. Thus local elites often inherited strong State apparatuses that were able to dominate weak societies. (p.51)

2.3 Theorising Malaysian Citizenship

While the colonials set the political tradition of strong state control, contemporary Malaysian political elites have built on the inherited tradition and utilised it to their benefit. Thus, Malaysian politics today is the result of the complex negotiation between an inherited colonial system and an elitist appropriation of that system. To better understand this political arrangement, it is vital to provide an overview of contemporary Malaysian politics. I argue that there are generally two ways to theorise modern Malaysian politics and citizenship. One way is to look at the Malaysian experience through the strict theorisation of the Western, liberal democratic political model, and the second way is to contextualise the deeply entrenched politics and culture that characterizes Malaysian politics.

¹⁵ Shariah is the law of Islam that govern every aspects of Muslim life as prescribed by the Quran and Sunnah (the normative practices of Muhammad S.A.W)

The two theorisations reflect two different perspectives: the former comes from the analytical observation of the Malaysian political system based on universal democratic values such as free speech and individual human rights (Case, 2002; Diamond, 2008), while the latter is mainly derived from the political sentiments established by the ruling government (Mahathir, 2010; Slater, 2003). Although the theorisations offer different understandings of Malaysian politics, I argue that both have strong arguments to define their interpretation of the Malaysian experience, with the difference between the two approaches based in the contrast between political universalism and particularism. From the perspective of the democratic political model, Malaysia is essentially a semi-democratic authoritarian society where democratic freedom is often secondary to state control. On the other hand, from the perspective of the Malaysian political establishment, the Western, liberal democratic approach cannot measure the unique experience of Malaysian politics and, hence the local elite offers an alternative version based on the notion of Asian values.

2.3.1 Semi-Democratic Authoritarianism

Case (1996) considers Malaysia to be the best example of a semi-democracy in South-East Asia. Semi-democracies “are usually presented as a subset of democracy, deviating in some measure from the category's spirit but distinguishable from the ‘pseudodemocracies’ and vacuous ‘electoralism’ that shade into authoritarianism” (Case, 1996, p. 438). They are also “presented as ‘half-way houses’, straddling uncomfortably the democratic and authoritarian categories that tug them in contrary directions”. While semi-democracies “regularly hold elections, thus offering a snapshot of propriety on voting day, they have limited civil liberties beforehand” (Case, 2002, p. 6). In Malaysia, the opposition is hindered and cannot effectively compete, especially in terms of reaching out to the wider electorate as most media outlets are owned by the government and are “restricted in circulating their own party publications” (Case, 2002, p. 7).

Diamond (2008) describes Malaysia as one of the “most successful and self-confident pseudo-democracies”. He notes that Malaysia occupies an ambiguous or disputed space between democracy and overt authoritarianism. Such countries have multi-party electoral systems, with significant opposition. These countries also have some space for civil society and intellectual dissent but individual and associational freedoms are often under mounting pressure, elections

riddled with fraud, or arenas of political opposition and competition constrained by the dominating power of the state. These problems meant that it is difficult to call the system democratic, even in the minimal sense (Diamond, 2008).

Such limited democratic affordances can be exemplified by the way the government in Malaysia controls the electoral process. Although there is an independent election commission, called the “Suruhanjaya Pilihanraya”, it has become widely accepted that the commission works in parallel with the ruling elite (Lim, 2005). The commission was established in 1957 under Article 114 of the Federal Constitution. The intended objective was to allow for the transparent administration and conduct of the electoral process so that it was fair to all competing political parties. However, this does not mean that the credibility of the electoral system is entirely dependent on the performance of the Election Commission, for the electoral process can be controlled and manipulated by the legislature and certain government practices. Legislative interference is not the only factor behind the government’s control of the electoral process. The ruling government has at its disposal a whole array of state resources, including the command of administrative apparatuses, control over economic resources, and the ownership and regulation of the mass media (Putuchery & Othman, 2005).

While the regular occurrence of the elections every 4-5 years might signify Malaysia as a democratic country, government control over electoral processes cannot guarantee that a regular election is the best measure for Malaysia to be considered a democratic country. Instead, such government intervention can confirm that Malaysia is a semi-autocratic authoritarian polity. This view agrees with the observation of Schedler (2002) that “while liberal democracies go beyond the electoral minimum, electoral democracies do not” (p. 37). The electoral authoritarians manage “to get elections right but fail to institutionalize other vital dimensions of democratic constitutionalism, such as the rule of law, political accountability, bureaucratic integrity, and public deliberation” (Schedler, 2002, p. 37) . In other words, elections are used by the state as an “instrument of authoritarian control as well as a means of democratic governance” (Schedler, 2002, p. 36).

2.3.2 Mahathir’s Model of Asian Values

While comparison with the democratic model of citizenship offers a bleak view of the Malaysian experience, the Malaysian Government and several proponents of political

particularism (Mauzy, 1997; Mahathir, 2010) argue that Malaysian politics – as well as the political experiences of many other countries whose historical and cultural contexts are different from those of the Western democracies – must be analysed from a perspective that takes into consideration cultural and historical particularities. Hence, scholars of Malaysian politics and Malaysian political leaders (Hwang, 2004; Sani, 2008) often conceptualise Malaysian politics and citizenship through an Asian perspective. Ideologically, the Asian perspective expresses a preference for systems of government which are underpinned by moral values, social norms and cultural attitudes which are said to be derived from Asian philosophical traditions and historical experiences (Jiang, 2000). The Asian values discourse attempts to establish a set of values specific to Asia, including balancing rights and duties, communitarianism where responsibilities to the family and community have priority over the rights of the individual, a preference for consultation and consensus over contention and litigation, respect for authority, belief in hard work, frugality, a role for religion in public life, and belief in strong family ties (Mauzy, 1997; Kahn, 1997).

The role of Mahathir Mohamad, Prime Minister of Malaysia from 1981 until 2003, in defining Malaysian politics and citizenship is significant. Mahathir's strong internalisation of the Asian values approach was evidenced by his strict, or authoritarian, rule (Slater, 2003; Milne & Mauzy, 1999). Although Mahathir identified Asian values as the driving factor behind Malaysia's economic success, his critics also highlighted Mahathir's free use of the Asian values rhetoric to justify his controversial and authoritarian approach to governance (Abbott, 2003; Hwang, 2003). As a strong advocate of Asian values, Mahathir offered a Malaysian perspective of Asian values that is based on Malay-Islamic culture, which he argued should be protected against the influence of Western values. In his book, *The Malay Dilemma* which was originally written in 1970, Mahathir promoted three fundamental components of "Malayness"; namely, feudalism, Islam, and *adat* (traditional customs) as features that must be adapted to modern needs (Mahathir, 2010). Mahathir rejected the Western liberal notion of human rights that he claimed poisoned Malaysian culture and religious beliefs. Concerned about the influence of Western individualism, and the future of Asian values and traditions, Mahathir accepted the idea of cultural relativism and launched the "Look East" policy in 1982 as a broader campaign against Western values. According to Abbot (2003), the Look East policy reflected Mahathir's admiration of Japan's economic success. He aspired for Malaysia to follow the Japanese example

by creating a sustainable economy. Amongst the outcomes of the policy was Malaysia's venture into heavy industries that led to the creation of Malaysia's own national cars, the Proton in the 1980s and Perodua in the 1990s.

Mendes (1994, p. 3) labelled the Malaysian version of the Asian values as "the Mahathir Model". The Mahathir Model helped to support the government agenda. Stability and enforced social cohesion in a heterogeneous society became internalised as a fundamental core of Asian values and was important in building the Malaysian society (Mendes, 1994). During his 22-year tenure, Mahathir transformed Malaysia from a country whose economy rested largely on the export of raw materials into a modern rapidly-developing nation of highways and skyscrapers with a diversified economy (Wain, 2012). The main elements of the Mahathir Model were strong authority, prioritising the community over the individual, and a strong family-based society. However, the idea that individual rights can be subordinated to those of the community and the state (Mauzy, 1997) has great consequences for civil society in Malaysia. It has become a mantra in Malaysian politics that, in order to ensure the prosperity of the community, a strong state is required. While civil society is important as the space within which people can organise as a balance against the power of the state, they are ultimately considered to be subordinated to the state.

Due to fear of ethnic instabilities in society, along with appreciating the economic benefits that state-led development has secured, many in Malaysia support the building of a strong state (Loh, 2002). They have come to believe the rhetoric of the government that a strong state ensures economic growth and social harmony. However, in accepting the idea of Asian values, Malaysians have been persuaded or coerced to also accept Mahathir's version of governance that essentially re-affirmed, further strengthened and, at certain points, manipulated the colonial legacies of strong state control, racial-based policies and strict legislation.

2.4 Contestations in Malaysian Citizenship

While Asian values have had a developmental impact on Malaysia, the ways in which it has been conceptualised and implemented by the government, especially during the Mahathir period, reveal a major confrontation between the state's enforcement of cultural and social cohesion with citizen demands for human rights and democratic participation. To illuminate this argument, I show that while the colonial legacy is defined by three contesting characteristics –

namely, strong state control, racial/religious segregation, and strict legislation on political participation – the ruling elites often use these legacies to protect their political power by masking these characteristics as Asian values or as the unique traits of the Malaysian society.

2.4.1 Malay Special Privileges

Due to its colonial legacy, politics and citizenship in Malaysia is very much defined along ethnic lines. This condition dates back to the early years of independent Malaya. According to Weiss (2004, p. 143), “Then, non-Malays fought to achieve citizenship within a Malayan political community without precluding their loyalty to the particular ethnic community to which they belonged, whereas Malay nationalists defined the Malay nation and state as synonymous, leaving little space for non-Malays’ citizenship” In the attempt to acquire Malayan citizenship, the Malayan Chinese Association agreed to form a coalition with the Malay nationalist political party, the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), and eventually reached a compromise with the UMNO to acquire non-Malay Malaysian citizenship that ultimately offered imbalanced citizenship rights to the non-Malays. Heng Pek Koon (1996, p. 37) explained that “in conceding (with the) special position of the Malay rulers, Islam as the state religion, Malay as the sole national language, and special rights treatment for Malays—the MCA had, in fact, acquiesced to Malay hegemonic status in the new nation state”.

The dominant political party in Malaysia is the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), which is a Malay-based party. The second largest party is the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), which represents the interests of the Chinese community; this is followed by the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), which represents the Indian community. These three parties were the founding members of the Alliance Party in 1957. In 1973, the Alliance Party became the Barisan Nasional (BN) (National Front) when it took in other smaller parties, most of which were ethnic-based parties (Frisk, 2009). The Barisan Nasional has been the ruling government in the country since independence in 1957, essentially creating a one-party system in Malaysia. There are three main opposition parties: the religious party, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP), and the *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) (People’s Justice Party). The PKR was formed during the reform movement in 1998/99 (see Section 2.4) when then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was sacked and jailed on corruption and sodomy charges that were believed to be trumped up (Anuar, 2003).

Ethnic politics are justified as part of the effort in creating an equal Malaysia in terms of eliminating economic disparities and upholding racial integration. However, efforts such as the National Economic Plan (NEP) are often openly biased towards the Malays and this in turn has produced a political culture that is not only divided but mostly discriminatory (Cheah, 2002). The NEP was a reactionary response to the 1969 racial riot that saw violent racial confrontation between the different ethnic groups, namely the Malays and the Chinese. According to Heng (1996), one of the reasons attributed to the riot was the dissatisfaction among the Malays about what they saw as an imbalance in the distribution of the country's economic growth. At the time, the Chinese monopolised the local economy, while the Malays, who had political power, were far behind economically. As such, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was launched by the Malaysian Government in 1971 to eliminate economic differences amongst the ethnic groups by proposing an ambitious and controversial socio-economic restructuring plan that focused on assisting the Malays to acquire at least 30% of the country's economy. This racially-biased affirmative action saw the creation of many economic programs and privileges such as scholarships, business funds and special loan rates offered only to the Bumiputeras (Foley, 2001)¹⁶

2.4.2 The Islamisation of Malaysian Life

The designation of Islam as the official religion has also divided Malaysian citizens. Since Independence in 1957, Malaysia has seen an increased process of Islamisation promoted by the state. Barr and Govindasamy (2010, p. 293) argued that Islamisation in Malaysia “is basically a variation of the original Malay ethnonationalism, using the nearly complete symbiosis between Malay and Muslim identity as the point of articulation that allows religious nationalism to serve as a cipher for ethnonationalism”. This means that the state's Islamisation project is also an ethnicised structural policy that continues to uphold the Malays' special position through a Malay-Muslim nationalist discourse. If Malay nationalism was the catalyst in the fight against the colonialists in the pursuit for Independence, the state's Islamisation project perpetuates a Malay-Muslim identity to create and maintain the Malays' support for the ruling government. According to Martinez (2001), the Islamic resurgence was never directed at converting non-

¹⁶ Bumiputera literally translates to “princes of the soil” to denote the status as the original inhabitants of the land that consist of the Malays and other aboriginal groups (see Section 2.2).

Muslims to Islam. Rather, it was a political strategy targeted at Malays to adopt a stricter Islamic identity that can bring Islam under the government's control and scrutiny.

Although Islam has been recognised as the official religion since 1957; analysts (Weiss, 2004; Fauzi, 2007; Mohamad, 2010) claim that it was in the 1970s; during the wake of the Global Islamic Resurgence;¹⁷ that the Islamisation project found its footing in Malaysian politics. The ongoing Islamic discourse that was prevalent in the Muslim world revitalised debate about the fundamental questions of what being Muslim is about. Initially, the Islamisation movement was led by Malay university students exposed to the transnational resurgence of Islamic thought, but over time the movement penetrated into major national institutions and took root (Weiss, 2004). This rise of the new Islamic-educated Malays, who were mostly trained in the Middle East, and the influence of Islamic NGOs such as the Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia),¹⁸ asserted intense pressure on the UMNO to prove that it was Islamic. The rise of the Islamic consciousness also entrenched the rivalry between the two main Malay-Muslim political parties, namely, the historically secular-nationalist UMNO, and the more Islamist PAS in the contest to become the Muslim champion. In the wake of the Malay community's religious scrutiny, the UMNO needed to prove that it was more "Islamic" than the PAS. This led Weiss (2004) to argue that the UMNO Islamisation project was less a religious conviction than an invested electoral strategy.

Barr and Govindasamy (2010) argued that by the time Mahathir Mohamad became the Prime Minister in the early 1980s, it was becoming obvious that religious identity had replaced ethnicity as the central element of national identity among the Malays and that the Malaysian society has been systematically Islamised. One of Mahathir's most important strategies in confronting the Islamisation pressure coming from the PAS and Muslim NGOs was to recruit the then student leader and Muslim activist Anwar Ibrahim into the UMNO in 1982. Weiss (2004) charted Anwar's rapid rise through the ranks: elected a vice president of UMNO and head of the party's youth wing within a year; later holding several key ministerial portfolios; and ultimately

¹⁷ The Global Islamic Resurgence refers to the rise of the Islamic political movement throughout the Islamic world in the 1970s, catalysed mostly by the Iranian Revolution and the revival of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Fauzi, 2007).

¹⁸ Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia) was founded in 1971. By virtue of the size and composition of its support and the substantive causes it promoted, it became seen as the most credible Islamist NGO in the country. It operated on the twin principles of dakwah and tarbiyyah – understood as a systematic educational process to build up mankind towards perfecting its role in this world as commissioned by God (Fauzi, 2009).

becoming Deputy Prime Minister in 1993. Together, Anwar and Mahathir continued the Islamisation project by introducing Islamic reforms into the financial sector, establishing Islamic insurance schemes and usury-free banking, strengthening Islamic education policies, stressing the observance of Islamic rituals in official government settings, sponsoring centres for research and teaching on Islam, and enhancing Islam-related programming in the state-controlled media. Weiss (2004) and Mohamad (2010) argued that it was the UMNO-led government's Islamisation policy that began in the 1980s which helped to normalise political religion in everyday life.

As a result, Islam in Malaysia has largely become a conservative, pro-establishment entity that enables the state to manufacture and control expressions of Islam in official and everyday Malaysian life. While Malaysians were led to believe "that this clash over the interpretation and definition of Islam could be confined within the parameters of the Malay Muslim political arena" (Barton, 2002 p. 93), Islam has undoubtedly become a force affecting all citizens. In 1988, the Malaysian Parliament approved constitutional amendments and added Article 121 (1A) (Malaysian Federal Constitution 2006), which reads: "The [civil courts] shall have no jurisdiction in respect of any matter within the jurisdiction of the *Syariah* courts". This initiative to restructure the Islamic legal institutions was followed by all the other Malaysian states. The climax of Islamic resurgence occurred in September 2001 when Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad declared Malaysia to be an Islamic state (Martinez, 2001, p. 474).

The implementation of the *Shariah* law proved to be most controversial to two main demographics, the non-Muslims and the Muslim women. For the non-Muslims, the increased implementation of Islamisation in the political, social and cultural fabric of Malaysian life has gradually affected their livelihood. The Islamisation of education, for example, has seen more Islamic components incorporated into the Malaysian public education system, forcing Muslims and non-Muslims alike to adhere to Islamic knowledge and values (Barr & Govindasamy, 2010). The implementation of *Shariah* law, especially in divorce and religious conversion cases, has also affected and, to a certain extent, angered the non-Muslim communities. In divorce and child custody cases that involve Muslim and non-Muslim couples, the *Shariah* court has the prerogative over the civil courts and this has led to claims of a legal bias against the non-Muslims (Shah & Sani, 2010).

At the same time, the conservative Muslim discourse that has been adopted by the state has further gendered Malaysian life. If the traditional Malay culture was already patriarchal in

the sense that women were assumed to be the followers and not the leaders (Mohamad, 2011), the adoption of the conservative Muslim laws further pushed the gender-biased discourse. According to Othman (2006), in the state's attempt to promote and enforce Islamic morals, it has especially focused on women's rights and their status in the family and society. Such gender-biased discourses can be seen through public rhetoric, policy formation, the media and education programs that push a conservative gender model that represents the ideal Muslim women as an obedient wife and a submissive Muslim. This has resulted in a continuous acceptance of women as being primarily domestic and private.

While the Islamisation project was initially the state's political strategy in combating the Islamisation movement, it has resulted in a complex entrenchment of ethnicity, religion, politics and citizen rights that have ultimately strengthened the status quo while excluding certain demographics from achieving their full potential as citizens.

2.4.3 Strict Legislations

While issues of race and religion continue to define Malaysian citizenship, strict laws are imposed to limit individual rights, critical debates, and autonomous power centres inside and outside the state. These strict laws limit citizens' participation and have created a sentiment of fear about politics among Malaysians (Loh, 2003). These laws, such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) and Sedition Act, are mostly inherited British laws originally used to subdue the communist movement from 1948 onwards, and have been used to detain a range of people, including members of opposition parties, social activists, and members of religious groups. More contemporary laws such as the Official Secrets Act (OSA) and the University and Colleges Act have also been used to curb possible political uprisings.

Internal Security Act (1960)

One of the most widely feared and detested law is the Internal Security Act (1960). Under this law people can be detained with no charge by the Minister of Home Affairs, interrogated, then either released or held for two years under a detention order that can be extended indefinitely. Many of the detainees under the ISA are those regarded as "anti-establishment". In theory, the Act exists to manage inter-communal tensions, but in practice it is used to block political challenges and intimidate critics of the government (Anuar, 2005).

Many opposition leaders such as Anwar Ibrahim of PKR and Lim Kit Siang of DAP have been detained under the ISA. Lim Kit Siang has been arrested twice; the first time in 1969 in relation to the May 13 racial riot and the second time during *Operasi Lalang* (crudely translated as the “weeding operation”) in 1987. The ISA was used extensively during the *Operasi Lalang*, when a massive political crackdown saw 106 politicians and social activists detained. The arrests were conducted under the pretext that the detainees had created racial tension by sensationalising the handling of Chinese schools by the Education Ministry (Hwang, 2003). Anwar Ibrahim has also been subjected to the ISA. In 1974, Anwar, then a student leader, was arrested for leading student protests against rural poverty and hunger (Liow, 2009). The protests were a response to reports that many poor rural villagers were suffering from starvation in a village in Baling, in the state of Kedah. He spent 20 months in jail. In September 1998, Anwar, this time a fallen Deputy Prime Minister, was again arrested for leading a street demonstration against Mahathir Mohamad. Anwar was released from ISA detention after 24 days but was charged with counts of sodomy and corruption for which he was incarcerated for six years (Slater, 2003). The underlying principles of the ISA, such as the ability to arrest without charge and detention without trial are a blatant violation of human rights. The Act gave the authorities extreme power to assert fear and left the fate of citizens at their mercy. Hugh Hickling, the British lawyer who helped draft the ISA in 1960 later conceded that the ISA had become tougher and was open to political misuse by the authorities (in Wu Min Aun 1999):

Since I drafted the original act, the ISA has been tightened up and tightened up until now there's no provision for judicial review. Unfortunately over the years the powers have been abused. Instead of locking up people suspected of organizing violence, which is the phrase used in the preamble to the ISA, it's been used to lock up political opponents, quite harmless people. (p. 269)

Although the ISA was repealed in 2011, it remains relevant in explaining the ways laws have been used to curb political freedom in Malaysia. Having lived with the ISA for the last 63 years, the fear among Malaysians that resulted from the constant intimidation of the Act is still present. The repercussion of the law is still very much evident with many ISA detainees still locked up. The detailed process of the law’s repeal has not been publicly shared. Critics have accused the government of being insincere and claimed that repeal of the law was a cosmetic attempt to win back the government’s popularity (Pasuni & Liow, 2012). Many expect the law will be replaced by another that is equally draconian. In April 2012, a law replacing the ISA was

tabled but, at the time of writing it was yet to be officiated. The law, called the Security Offences (Special Measures) Bill 2012, has been met with criticism because of its provision for a 28-day detention without judicial review and 24 hours arrest without warrant¹⁹

Sedition Act (1948)

In relation to the limitations on critical debates, the Sedition Act (1948), another colonial product, is used to arrest anyone considered to promote feelings of ill will and hostility between different races or classes by questioning any matter, right, status, privilege, or sovereignty established or protected by the Federal Constitution. This includes Bahasa Malaysia as the national language, the special position of the Bumiputera, and the sovereignty of the Malay rulers, and even extends to parliament (Lim, 2009). The Sedition Act specifies that anyone who “does or attempts to do, or makes any preparation to do, or conspires with any person to do” an act with seditious tendency, such as uttering seditious words, or printing, publishing or importing seditious literature, is guilty of sedition. It is also a crime to possess a seditious publication without a “lawful excuse”. The Act defines sedition itself as anything which “when applied or used in respect of any act, speech, words, publication or other thing qualifies the act, speech, words, publication or other thing as having a seditious tendency” (The Commissioner of Law, 2006)²⁰ Critics like Meredith Weiss and Saleha Hassan (2004) allege that the Sedition Act has a vague definition of sedition. They charge that this vagueness allows the authorities to apply and abuse the law in situations that do not serve its original purpose.

In recent times, the law has been invoked to subdue political opposition against the government. For example, Lim Guan Eng, a former Member of Parliament from the DAP, was found guilty of sedition in 1998 for accusing the Attorney General of failing to handle a case where a Chief Minister had been accused of raping a schoolgirl (Hwang, 2003). Consequently, while the Attorney General decided not to press charges against the accused Chief Minister, Lim was charged under the Sedition Act 1948 for supposedly tampering with the process of justice in Malaysia. Lim was also accused of printing and distributing a pamphlet containing details of the case. Lim was sentenced to 18 months imprisonment. He was, however, released after 12 months

¹⁹ New security offences law 'more dangerous'. June 27th 2012. Available at: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/202004>

²⁰ Sedition Act (1948). Published by The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia. Available at: <http://www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.%201/Act%2015.pdf>

in August, 1999. Due to his incarceration, he was disallowed from standing for election to public office for a period of 5 years, making him ineligible to contest the 2004 general election (Hwang, 2003).

In July 2012, Prime Minister Najib Razak announced that the Sedition Act would be repealed and replaced by the National Harmony Act. According to Najib, the decision to repeal the Act was made in order to find a mechanism that could ensure the best balance between the need to guarantee the freedom of speech for every citizen and the need to handle the complex plurality existing in the country. He said the new bill would be more specific in nature and would enable the government to act against anyone using sensitive issues to break up national solidarity. He also stressed that the government would ensure that the provisions of the new Act would not hinder the power to tackle actions that could cause hatred and humiliation or stoke feelings of disloyalty to the King or any ruler²¹. It also covers acts that could create enmity between the races and question any rights, positions, privileges, sovereignty or prerogatives protected in the constitution (Pasuni & Liow, 2012). However, the repeal is seen as a political move by the Prime Minister Najib Razak to gain popularity, with the lengthy conditions set out in the National Harmony Act indicate that the new law will maintain the same restrictions imposed by the preceding Sedition Act²²

Official Secrets Act (1978)

The Official Secrets Act (1978) prohibits a person from obtaining information that is deemed an official secret by the government. The OSA was originally enacted in order to protect the confidentiality of sensitive information that pertains to national security (Hwang, 2003). The main purpose of the Act was to allow the authorities to charge any person or party that might mishandle or misuse protected information. Anuar (2002, p. 151) claimed that subsequent amendments made to the original Act had the “effect of making almost all official documents ‘official secrets’ thus making it illegal for journalists to have access to them”. In 2002, Mohd Ezam Mohd Noor, then youth chief of the PKR was sentenced to two years jail after being convicted of breaching the Act. Ezam was accused of disclosing to reporters details of a probe by

²¹ National Harmony Act replaces Sedition Act 1948. July 11th, 2012. Available at: <http://www.nst.com.my/latest/national-harmony-act-replaces-sedition-act-1948-1.106204>

²² Harmony Act: Tune changed, but not the music. July 13th, 2012. Available at: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/203493>

the Anti-Corruption Agency into International Trade and Industry Minister Rafidah Aziz, and former Melaka State Chief Minister, Abdul Rahim Thamby Chik, in November 1999. To critics (Sani, 2009; Hwang, 2003), Ezam's conviction was a form of political victimisation and a testament to the government's protection of the corrupt practices of ministers and government officials. Lim Kit Siang (2002)²³ claimed that the jail sentence sent the message to the nation and the world that, in Malaysia, corruption was not a crime; rather, exposing corruption was the crime.

University and Colleges Act (1971)

The University and Colleges Act (1971) prohibits Malaysian students, studying locally or abroad, from joining or allying themselves with any political party or trade union or any other organisation without the written permission of the vice-chancellor of their university. There are also limits placed on university staff and local academics regarding their engagement in political activity (Shamsul, 1997).

In September 2010, the Malaysian High Court dismissed a challenge by four students from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)²⁴ against the constitutionality of Section 15(5) (a) of the Act. The four political science students had been found in the constituency of Hulu Selangor during the campaign period for a parliamentary by-election (Malaysian Bar Council, 2010)²⁵ As a result, disciplinary charges had been brought against them by the university alleging they had breached section 15(5) (a) of the Act which provides that no student “shall express or do anything which may reasonably be construed as expressing support for or sympathy with or opposition to any political party, whether in or outside Malaysia” (The Commissioner of Law, 2006)²⁶

In its ruling, the High Court agreed that the restriction imposed by section 15(5)(a) is necessary to maintain discipline among students and to address the potential for disturbance of the life of the student community in institutions of higher learning, which can amount to a disturbance of public order. As the prohibition applied equally to all students, it was held that

²³ Media statement by Lim Kit Siang. Available at: <http://www.limkitsiang.com/archive/2002/aug02/lks1787.htm>

²⁴ Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia or The National University of Malaysia is a public university located in Bangi, Selangor. It is one of five research universities in the country

²⁵ Press statement from the Malaysian Bar Council. Available at:

http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/press_statements/press_release_drop_action_against_the_four_ukm_students.html

²⁶ The University and Colleges Act (1971). Published by The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia. Available at: <http://www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.%201/Act%2030.pdf>

there was no unlawful discrimination. The four students were ordered to pay the costs of the Minister for Higher Education and the Government of Malaysia and those of the university (MalaysiaToday, 2010)²⁷

2.4.4 Limited Opportunity for Political Participation

The legal restrictions on political participation, obviously meant to curb dissent and protect the established status quo, have created a culture of political apathy and fear of political participation (Anuar, 2005; Moten, 2009). The ethnic-based political framework that privileges the Malays has prevented the non-Malays from acquiring a sense of belonging and accountability as equal Malaysians. The Malays are constantly reminded that being privileged means they are indebted to the state, or more specifically the UMNO, and therefore they should not challenge the political patronage that provides and protects their privileged position (Sani, 2009). Meanwhile, the state's Islamisation project has pushed non-Malays and women in general into a conservative moral and religious discourse that has affected their basic rights to equal participation. Despite such political restrictions, the Malaysian citizenry has historically accommodated the state's strong control over their political and even private lives.

Scholars such as Abbot (2003) and Loh (2003) attribute a lack of citizen demands not only to the restrictions imposed on political participation and the fear of legal repercussions, but also on the economic comfort and modern development that the state has managed to maintain. The entrepreneurial values which drive the state have resulted in the middle class being largely consumerist and career-oriented with little interest in upsetting the status quo if this means affecting economic growth. As Kessler (1998) noted, this trend is evident in a number of South-East Asian countries where we are witnessing "the de-politicization of the newly affluent" (p. 54). This class of people measures their success by the amount they can consume. Because the state has led the economic development and therefore provided its citizens with the "good life", the feeling is that the state is owed loyalty and obedience (Kessler, 1998). Loh (2007) argued that Malaysians have a narrow definition of what constitutes being democratic, which they see as the "involvement in legally registered political parties and rejecting participation in multi-party

²⁷ Malaysia Today (28 September, 2010). Available at: http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/press_statements/press_release_drop_action_against_the_four_ukm_students.html

elections conducted regularly and rejecting participation which extends into the extra-electoral realms” (p. 117).

2.5 New Developments, New Politics

Despite the limited freedom granted for citizens’ political participation, ongoing changes have affected the ways citizenship and politics have been understood and practised in Malaysia. In 2003, Loh and Saravanamuttu argued that Malaysia was experiencing a New Politics. According to Loh and Saravanamuttu (2003), New Politics within the Malaysian context referred to the development of a new participatory democracy that was challenging the ethnic and elitist interpretation of Malaysian politics. Loh (2003) specifically categorised Malaysian politics into two realms. The first is the formal electoral and procedural realm of democracy involving the bureaucracy, the executive, the judiciary, the parliament, the electoral process and political parties. Political participation in this formal realm is institutionalised and circumscribed by the Federal Constitution, Acts of Parliaments and other laws. The second realm is the informal realm of participatory democracy that is characterised by the struggles of ordinary citizens, communities, NGOs and other informal groups to create a public sphere that allows for alternative views of development and public participation to be expressed and pursued. Loh argued that it is within this informal political realm that Malaysia was moving towards a new politics of pluralism that challenged the established and institutionalised ethnic politics.

Loh (2003) attributed the development of this new informal participatory politics to the rise of civil groups that were focused on identifying and supporting citizen actions that were mostly related to everyday social actions and not necessarily or directly related to electoral politics. Shamsul (1999) similarly suggested that Malaysia was seeing the development of a new form of politics, one “based on a variety of interest-orientations, beyond class and ethnicity” (p. 7). The new politics was not interested in gaining votes but in creating a space to express discontent with the status quo (Shamsul, 1999, p. 9). Both Loh and Shamsul contended that the political awakening was caused by several developments. The 1998 *Reformasi*, the rise of civil groups and the advent of new media technologies had changed many Malaysians’ perspective on state politics and their own experience of citizenship. More recently, Sani (2009) posited that Malaysia was seeing more democratic changes that were gradually changing the old politics of autocratic democracy practised by the ruling Barisan Nasional that had so far permitted elite

deliberation only. To stay in power, the BN-dominated government had restricted the people's rights to political freedom and controlled dissent and criticism. Several scholars (Sani, 2009; Moten, 2009; Weiss, 2009) have argued that the twelfth general election, held in March 2008, was a significant indicator that Malaysia was moving towards New Politics. The losses sustained by the Barisan Nasional in that election showed that Malaysians were no longer fixated on the idea that only the Barisan Nasional with its strong adherence to Asian values and ethnic politics could provide the best form of government for Malaysia. Sani (2009) also attributed this change to the re-invigoration of civil society and claimed that the advent of new media like blogging and social networking had further facilitated this political transformation. The impacts of these two factors on the emergence of the New Politics are explored in more detail in the following subsections.

2.5.1 Re-invigoration of civil society

Civil society in Malaysia is an important avenue for social and political participation as well as for influencing policy formation and public opinion. According to Sani (2009) and Loh (2003), signs of change started to appear during the *Reformasi* period following the arrest of Anwar Ibrahim in 1998. The sacking of Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister in September 1998 and his subsequent arrest on sex and corruption charges galvanised a new political consciousness among Malaysians, prompting speculation about the prospects for regime change. Anwar's arrest sparked a series of demonstrations against the government in Kuala Lumpur indicating the level of discontent. Building on this, Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah established a new organisation called *Adil* (Justice). The aim of the organisation was to fight for justice, democracy and human rights: it later became the *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) political party.

In the wake of the Anwar case, the ideals of judicial independence, rule of law, freedom of the press, freedom of association, and free speech became common topics of conversation among ordinary Malaysians. These issues, as well as the accountability of the government, transparency in rule, and aversion to cronyism all found a space within the *Reformasi* movement (Moten, 2009). The new political party, PKR, promoted these issues which concerned all Malaysians, not just one racial group or the other. These issues and their lack of ethnic or religious overtones provided the possibility of a multi-ethnic coalition opposition emerging

against the BN: this was called the *Barisan Alternatif* (BA) (National Alternative) and was made up of the PKR, PAS, the DAP, and *Parti Rakyat Malaysia* (PRM). According to Foley (2001), the *Reformasi* exposed ordinary Malaysians to the lack of democracy in their country and an understanding of how this impacted on their rights. As a result, some Malaysians began to take action by joining demonstrations or by supporting alternative political parties outside of the BN.

The *Reformasi* movement was seen as the catalyst for other political and social uprisings. Demonstrations, once unheard of in the streets of Malaysia, slowly became an avenue for citizens who felt that their concerns were not being addressed. The major demonstrations that have taken place since the *Reformasi* included the HINDRAF²⁸ demonstrations that called for better treatment of the minority Indians and the three *Bersih*²⁹ demonstrations held in 2007, 2011 and 2012. The *Bersih* demonstrations called for more transparency in the electoral process. Although the movement has been perceived as being backed by the opposition parties, the increasing numbers of citizens who have participated in the demonstrations through the years is a strong indication of a broader political awakening.

In addition, as Foley (2001) argued, because of the state's preoccupation with staying in power by focusing on narrow political concerns such as economic development and monitoring media practices, many social issues have been left unaddressed. This neglect has provided a solid foundation for NGOs to build their activism and support base. For the Malays, problems such as drug addiction among Malay youth or Muslim women's fight against the *Shariah* courts were not on the state's agenda. Women's issues such as sexual discrimination and the 'glass ceiling' at the workplace began to attract the attention of women's groups such as Sisters in Islam and Tenaganita. For the non-Malays, dissatisfaction with biased policies led many to abandon the state politics that they felt were not benefiting them, preferring instead to participate in social activism that was more relevant to their community. These gaps provided space for NGOs to mobilise to help these people and others left behind by the one dimensional development plan of the state. This NGO movement and the concern of intellectuals and other individuals with issues

²⁸ HINDRAF is the abbreviation for the Hindu Rights Action Force, a coalition of 30 Hindu non-governmental organisations committed to the preservation of Hindu community rights and heritage in a multi-racial Malaysia. In 2007, HINDRAF organised a rally demanding better treatment of the minority Hindu Indians by the Malaysian Government and the British Government.

²⁹ Bersih (or *clean* in Malay) is a coalition of non-governmental organisations that seeks to reform the current electoral system in Malaysia to ensure free, clean and fair elections. It was officially formed in November 2006, comprising leaders from political parties, civil society groups and NGOs. In April 2010, the coalition was relaunched as an entirely civil society movement (Bersih 2.0) unaffiliated to any political party.

of rights and social justice also contributed to the creation of a new form of politics within Malaysia (Loh, 2003). As a consequence, more Malaysians became associated with NGOs. They have been able to find satisfaction in activism that goes beyond electoral concerns. They have become interested in contributing to solutions for issues directly relevant to their everyday lives.

Sani (2009) explained that since the 2008 general election, Malaysia's civil society movement had become stronger due to a change in the hearts and minds of the two major components of the society, namely, the youth and the middle class. First, Malaysia's young voters between the ages of twenty-one to forty appeared to have become impatient with what they perceived as the BN's reluctance and resistance to change. Young voters were aware of what was happening around them and had varied reasons to vote for the opposition. The BN's disconnectedness from young people was most alarming in the case of urban professionals, who no longer believed that the ruling coalition was capable of making a better Malaysia. Young non-Malays could not accept the NEP, believing that it benefited only the Malays, while young educated Malays concerned with good governance, human rights and democratic ideals viewed the UMNO and BN as corrupt. Sani (2009) also argued that the new middle class had grown cynical of the country's supposed of harmony and equality. They were educated and skilled, and thus were unafraid to take a chance on the opposition. The largely urban minority communities had long felt marginalised by the government's long-running affirmative action program. The system guarantees ethnic Malays jobs, free education, cheap housing, tax breaks, and economic favours, all at the expense of ethnic Chinese, Indian, and indigenous people. The system was designed to help the Malays catch up with the rest of the country after independence, but it had turned into a state-sponsored web of cronyism and favouritism for a few selected Malays under the UMNO patronage system, paralysing the country along a racial divide

These developments have further enhanced the viability of New Politics in Malaysia and have resulted in the creation of a new generation of Malaysians who question the strict interpretation of electoral and ethnic politics that they now see as distant and even irrelevant to their everyday lives. According to Loh (in Sani, 2009, pp. 109-110), "We have a new set of voters-middle class, educated, and who are very exposed to global developments, and the use of new technology. Partly because of this new generation of people, they are demanding more than development". Loh also stated:

If you compare Malaysia with neighbouring countries, the government, in a sense has done better than others but this generation demands more than development. And even with development, they want a development that is more sustainable and equitable. And they are also asking, ‘What about our democratic rights? They want more political participation, more consultation” (p. 110).

2.5.2 Influence of New Media

It is evident by the narratives above that New Politics in Malaysia exists in spaces that have been squeezed out from the many political restrictions that limit citizen participation. Blogging, I argue is ideally suited to this new space. Blogs have enabled Malaysians who were previously excluded from the political discourse to participate in public deliberation of issues and politics. They have become able to create and moderate their own media without having to face limitations and intimidations imposed by the state. As such, Malaysians have found it easier to acquire alternative information and at the same time contribute to the political marketplace.

The true impact of these new media is found in the reports and coverage on the Internet that was strong enough to influence people to vote for the opposition parties in the 2008 general election. In fact, the ruling government admitted that one of the major factors in determining the 2008 general election results was the Internet. Then Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi acknowledged that the BN government had lost the online war in the general election. He said:

We didn’t think it was important. It was a serious misjudgement. We thought that the newspapers, the print media, the television were important but young people were looking at text messages and blogs. (The influence of the Internet) was painful. But it came at the right time, not too late. (in Steele, 2009, p. 91)

This experience indicated that the Malaysian citizenry was more sophisticated than the government had anticipated. The effects of development, globalisation, and information dissemination through the Internet had changed the political landscape. Malaysians clearly rejected the idea that the masses were generally simple-minded and easily influenced by the mentality of fear, particularly of racial tension, a mechanism often employed by the government to instil fear of political change in the citizenry.

To further explain and elaborate on the relationship between media, blogging and citizenship in Malaysia, I will focus specifically on contextualising the Malaysian media in the next chapter by explaining in detail how the media and citizenship in Malaysia should be understood in light of this research study. For now, it is suffice to say that new political ideals

and practices have emerged in Malaysia facilitated by a new political awakening, the rise of civil society and the availability of new democratic media. The rise of this New Politics serves as a significant departure point in understanding how blogging can be considered an important citizen practice.

2.6 Narrow Conceptions of Political Participation

While strict laws and political intimidation have limited political participation and citizenship experiences, the emergence of the New Politics indicates that the desire to be engaged and involved in socio-political issues and movements is very much alive among Malaysians. However, the rigid interpretation and enforcement of politics that are mostly confined to the formal electoral realm of democracy (Loh, 2009) have made it difficult to look at how citizenship is really understood and practised by Malaysians. Therefore, I argue that the new forms of politics and participation that has emerged in Malaysia can be better understood, measured and analysed through new conceptualisations and theories of political participation and citizenship. The rise of new politics in Malaysia resembles Dahlgren's (2005) claim that:

Many citizens have refocused their political attention outside the parliamentary system, or they are in the process of redefining just what constitutes the political, often within the context of social movements. Among such groups, the boundaries between politics, cultural values, identity processes, and local self-reliance measures become fluid (Beck, 1997). Politics becomes not only an instrumental activity for achieving specific goals, but also an expressive activity, a way of asserting, within the public sphere, group values, ideals, and belonging. (p.155)

The revitalisation of social activism, including media activism, the aim of which has been to offer citizens the democratic right to communicate, may reflect a shift in the ways in which people's interests manifest themselves, not only in politics, but also in a broader realm (Atton & Curran, 2003). Declining participation in traditional politics may suggest that rather than a downward spiral in all political participation, we are seeing a shift in the ways in which people are politically active (Bennett, 2008; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dalton, 2008). Coleman and Blumler (2009, p. 159) summarised this change as follows: "In the past 30 years participation in formal politics has declined, but citizens are participating much more in informal, nongovernmental, sporadic ways". This mostly signals people's disengagement with and disappointment in party politics and not necessarily their disappointment in all things political. This perception is supported by many current modes of civic engagement that are extra-

parliamentary. Examples are social activism, such as the emergence of the so-called new social movements that often focus on issues that affect people's everyday lives such as the environment and consumer rights (Dahlgren, 2006). Other examples include mass demonstrations, such as protests against the invasion of Iraq and the sovereignty of the corporate banking system (Bennett, 2012).

The youth especially, are no longer engaging in traditional forms of politics and participation. Instead, they are defining politics differently and are finding unique ways to participate. Bennett (2008) noted that young people experience the world of government and politicians, elections and law-making as distant and often disagreeable. As he explained:

The pathways to disconnection from government are many: adults are frequently negative about politics, the tone of the press is often cynical, candidates seldom appeal directly to young voters on their own terms about their concerns, politicians have poisoned the public well (particularly in the United States) with vitriol and negative campaigning, and young people see the media filled with inauthentic performances from officials who are staged by professional communication managers (p.1)

Bennett (2008) suggested that when young people do take political action, it is often in relation to lifestyle concerns that are perceived to be outside the realm of government. Bennett also argued that young people are not so much acting against, or turning away from the state, but are looking beyond it to shape the kind of society they want to live in. This perspective suggests that the state has been replaced by identity, lifestyle and networks as primary influences on political identity. In this view, young people's political identities are no longer formed consciously in support or opposition to traditional political actors and institutions.

The Malaysian experience that I have described above exemplifies Bennett's (2008) interpretation of this new political identity. For young, urban and middle class Malaysians for example, the traditional elitist political culture no longer applies to them. This new generation defines politics and participation in ways that are more meaningful for them. For instance, they are more attracted to participating in civil society and are demanding more accountability from the government (Weiss, 2009; Loh, 2009). No longer are these citizens apathetic to the politics that define their livelihood. Instead, they are becoming more concerned and are more inclined to have a say in the political processes that used to be the exclusive realm of the political elites. These citizens understand politics as more than the abstract participation in institutions, and

elections, and are instead internalising politics as part of everyday life (Dahlgren, 2006), or something that they can meaningfully approach and apply in their day-to-day citizen experience.

2.6.1 Dutiful vs. Actualising Citizens

To uncover the ways Malaysians have begun to engage in new forms of political participation, I draw extensively from Bennett (2008; 2011; 2012) whose work is relevant to the phenomenon under study in the present research. Bennett's conceptualisation of the new politics and his arguments on the emerging forms of citizen participation enables me to delineate and put into perspective the Malaysian experience. Although Bennett's theorisation is mainly based on youth, his contextualisation of new forms of politics and citizen participation is broadly relevant within the contemporary environment. Most notably, Bennett's conceptualisation of the dutiful and the actualising citizens guides my understanding of the citizenship experiences of the everyday Malaysians who are trying to define meaningful ways to define their citizenship experience whilst living within a system that rigidly defines politics and participation.

Like many other contemporary scholars on politics and democracy, Bennett (1998; 2007) has argued against the claim of a decline in civic engagement in favour of a shift towards new forms of political interest and participation, due in large part to the increasing uncertainty of the contemporary social, cultural and economic environment (Bennett, 1998). Consequently, Bennett argues people are employing "independent identity management strategies" (Bennett, 2007, p. 61). They are increasingly reflexive and self-actualising and consequently find greater satisfaction in defining their own political paths (Bennett, 2007, p. 61).

This perspective is in contrast to traditional citizenship practice that could be characterised as "dutiful". The dutiful citizen represents the traditional active citizen whose political participation is very much guided by ideologies, mass movements, and traditional loyalties to particular parties or government support structures. To the dutiful citizen, democracy is strictly confined to the protection of electoral politics. Dutiful citizens refer to the established mainstream media for news and information. I find that Bennett's conceptualisation of the dutiful citizen reflects the ideal citizen desired by the Malaysian state. The Malaysian political culture, informed and inspired by the Asian values concept (Section 2.3.2), has imposed systems and laws that are directed towards the creation of obliging citizens who are willing to put the state's interest above their own. The Malaysian state is electoral-authoritarianism, meaning that,

Malaysians, as dutiful citizens, have been trained to understand politics only in terms of institutions and elections.

Actualising citizens, in contrast, are mobilised in relation to personal political concerns and connect informally to issues through family and friendship groups, lifestyles and identities. Actualising citizens contribute to campaigns at local, national and international levels; undertake a wide range of individual and personalised acts, such as boycotting and ethical purchasing; volunteer at a community level, and contribute to counter-discourses through online publishing (Bennett, 2007). Actualising citizens fit politics and participation to their own understanding and are satisfied by material transformations that can be experienced by and visible to them. This is why they tend to find electoral and institutional politics distanced and insignificant to their everyday life. Bennett found that actualizing citizens are unresponsive to dutiful citizen values, repertoires and actors (2007 p. 62) and are largely issue-oriented. There is a significant connection between Bennett's theorization of the actualizing citizens with the Malaysian experience of New Politics (Loh, 2003; 2009). As proposed by Loh (2009) and Sani (2009), Malaysians are now moving towards a less rigid understanding and experience of politics and citizenship. The experience of New Politics allows Malaysians to experience political participation that is more meaningful in that it is more deliberative, participative, and materially relevant in their own lives.

In short, a dutiful citizen is one to whom political participation is a citizen's obligation and is performed first and foremost via the act of voting. If dutiful citizens communicate their interests through the membership of political parties, for actualising citizens voting is less important than expressing political engagement through acts of personal preference, be it involvement in friendship-based networks or loose networks of communities of interest, both of which can be sustained online (Bennett, 2008). A dutiful citizen is the subject of an information flow that is top-down, from government via the mass media to citizens (Bennett, 2008). In contrast, an actualising citizen, critical of traditional politics and the mainstream media, favours engagement in various (social) media (Bennett, 2008, p. 14).

Bennett's (2008) model offers a framework that can help explicate the confrontation and complexity that surround Malaysian citizenship. On one hand, there is the elitist representation and enforcement of political participation that resembles the ideals behind the dutiful citizen. On the other hand, there is the new emerging politics that is defining political participation that goes

beyond and even outside the parameters of institutionalised and electoral politics; a notion captured by the ideas of the actualizing citizen. Therefore I argue that both the dutiful and actualizing citizens are able to explain the ongoing political transformation that is affecting the lives of the everyday Malaysian bloggers. This dynamic contrast between these apparently different ways of experiencing politics and citizenship capture the reality of a Malaysian political system that is in the midst of appropriating the ideas of New Politics within a very structured tradition of largely elitist and exclusive Old Politics.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on contextualising and theorising Malaysian citizenship. I have shown that the Malaysian state has adopted the Asian value framework that prioritises collective interests over individual rights. However, the Malaysian interpretation of Asian values is often contested by the way the state tends to subordinate individual rights and civil society, leaving a very limited space for democratic participation. Recent developments have seen changes to this rigid interpretation of citizen participation. As such, I have proposed in this chapter that the Malaysian citizenship should be understood and analysed through new conceptualisations of citizenship, particularly the typologies proposed by Bennett (2008). Blogging, with its affordances for participatory and democratic practices, is itself a media practice that challenges the communitarian culture that has been the building block of the Malaysian state, corresponding with this new interpretation of citizen experience. However, to further build on this relationship between blogging and new citizenship practices, it is necessary to also discuss the Malaysian media and theorise blogs and blogging in relation to the Malaysian experience. Thus, in the next chapter, I provide a comprehensive overview of the Malaysian media and conceptualise how blogging may facilitate the new politics explicated in this chapter.

CHAPTER 3: CONTEXTUALISING AND THEORISING THE MALAYSIAN MEDIA

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I continue to explore and explain the emergence of New Politics in Malaysian life by foregrounding the role of the media. More specifically, I argue that while the ways in which the Malaysian media functions corresponds to the contested political culture explained in the previous chapter, the availability of new media is influencing the established tradition. I show that while the state's strong control over the media has limited freedom of speech, expression and participation, emerging trends indicate that Malaysians are consistently challenging media restrictions by finding ways to reclaim the media. The Internet and the new media have become central to everyday Malaysian life and have contributed to new understandings and methods of citizen participation. Blogging especially enables this change by facilitating the realisation of New Politics in terms of allowing citizens to participate in political actions that have more to do with their lived everyday experience as much as the institutionalised state politics. Where Bennett (2007) proposed a contextual and fluid way of looking at politics and participation, Rodriguez (2001) introduced an inclusive theoretical framework of relating media practices to citizenship experience. Through Rodriguez's theorisation of citizens' media, I explain blogs to be more than just an alternative media source. Blogging offers everyday Malaysians the ability to create their own media and satisfy their own need for participation while also contributing to the transformation of citizenship practice in general.

3.2 Theoretical Background

In 1978, Lent used the term "guided media" to describe the Malaysian press system wherein the leaders of the country "admonish mass media, especially broadcasting, to be uncritical of government policies" (p. 72). The rationale was that Malaysia, "being a newly emerging nation, needs time to get on its feet. The mass media, therefore, should provide this by not touching on sensitive issues, by stressing positive and ignoring negative societal characteristics" (Lent, 1978, p. 72). Almost 40 years later, Lent's description is still relevant. Because of this close relationship between the state and the media, international media watchers have often been critical of the state of freedom of the Malaysian media and have been sceptical

of the justifications provided by the state. Indeed, according to Lim (2009, p.88), immediately following Article 10 of the Federal Constitution, which guarantees the right to free speech, is a set of qualifiers that give the parliament the power to impose “such restrictions as it deems necessary or expedient in the interest of the security of the Federation or any part thereof, friendly relations with other countries, public order or morality”³⁰. In imposing such restrictions in the interest of security, public order and even the contested concept of morality, the parliament “may pass laws prohibiting the questioning of any stipulated matter, right, status, position, privilege, sovereignty or prerogative”³¹

Since independence in 1957, the Malaysian Government’s official control over the media has gradually tightened. The official line is that the country is not ready for greater freedom of expression as it would lead to political instability and inter-ethnic unrest, which would undermine economic development (Anuar, 2003). For those reasons, press freedom in Malaysia has been restricted and controlled by the government. The mainstream press depicts the government leaders as having a naturalised affinity with the general populace in terms of socio-economic aspirations and goals. This public declaration of the Barisan Nasional government’s economic successes is elaborated by the media’s calculated tightening and to some extent, closure of access for the other contesting political parties (Sani, 2005). The opposition parties’ stance on some issues and their policies on economic, political, and cultural matters are hardly heard by the electorate. The coverage of the opposition parties by the mainstream media has often resulted in the former being depicted in a negative light (Steele, 2009). In this respect, the mainstream press and other news media were, and still are, instrumental in helping to promote the state’s hegemonic influence over society (Kenyon & Majoribanks, 2007).

3.3 State Control over the Media

Cottle (2011) proposed that a contextualized approach to understand the impact of media on political uprising and political change would need to inquire how state-run media serve to legitimize their political regimes. Concurring with Cottle’s proposal, this study identified that in Malaysia, the state controls the media through two main ways: strict media laws and ownership of media organisations. However, before I discuss these two control mechanisms in detail, I first

³⁰ Article 10 (2). Federal Constitution of Malaysia 1957. Available at: <http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/malaysia.pdf>

³¹ *ibid*

explore two defining moments in Malaysian political history that Malaysian media scholars, Nain and Anuar (2000) identified as major turning points for media policy in modern Malaysia. The 13 May 1969 racial riot and the 1987 *Operasi Lalang* political clampdown exemplified how the state has used political instabilities to strengthen its control over the mass media.

13 May 1969

In 1969, Malaya held its third general election that saw the ruling coalition (the Alliance Party, now Barisan Nasional) lose control of three states (Kelantan, Penang and Perak) and face a tie in Selangor, the state in which nation's capital, Kuala Lumpur, is located (Koon, 1996). The Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Malaysian Peoples' Movement Party (GERAKAN) had gained more votes from the non-Malay voters than the Malaysian Chinese Association. This placed a strain on the relationship between the MCA and the Malay-based UMNO because the MCA was supposed to deliver the Chinese votes to the sitting government. According to official records, the 13 May riot was sparked by provocative speeches made by both the Alliance Party and opposition parties (Nain & Wang, 2004). A day after the 10 May 1969 election, thousands of Chinese supporters of the DAP and GERAKAN marched through predominantly Malay areas in Kuala Lumpur. Malay supporters of the ruling coalition held their own gatherings. Conflicts ensued which led to a full-blown racial riot. By the end of the riot, official figures reported that almost 200 people had been killed, although some estimates put the figure as high as one thousand deaths (Koon, 1996).

The government responded to the riot by calling a state of emergency, dissolving the parliament and forming a temporary administrative body called the National Operation Council. The council concluded that the main reason for the riot was the socio-economic imbalance in the country and it formulated the New Economic Policy. The policy was aimed at eliminating economic differences by imposing economic regulations and national programs to increase the Malays' economic share to at least 30%. The NEP included educational, economic, social and political programs that would support the Malays (Foley, 2001). For example, more local universities were built to accommodate Malay students and more subsidies were given to the Malays to set up their own businesses (Singh, 2001).

Legislation such as the Internal Security Act, Sedition Act and University Act were amended in order to strengthen the "preservation of intercommunal harmony" (Hwang, 2003, p.

107). These amendments significantly curbed freedom of speech and limited the freedom of the press particularly in regard “to the issues of the rights of citizenship, Malay special rights, the status and powers of the Malay rulers, the status of Islam, and the status of the Malay as the sole national language” (Loh & Khoo, 2002, p. 125). In addition to protecting racial harmony, the Printing Presses Bill (1974) stated that local media must not have foreign ownership or support. As a result, most of the vocal newspapers ended up in the hands of the government coalition members. The legislation had a stifling effect on all media. These conditions created a forced co-operation between the newspapers and the government. By the mid-1970s, the media in Malaysia had assumed new roles. In the words of Lent (1978), the Malay media:

No longer fight causes, oppose government policies or think critically; instead, they act as supporters---and even, apologists---for the officials. Malay language media are expected to be at the forefront of the campaigns to propagate governmental programs because the authorities are themselves Malay. Thus, through restrictive legislation, self censorship and ownership patterns, the Malay mass media have been made into nothing more than extensions of government. (p.612)

The repercussion from this singular event permeated all areas of Malaysian life and is still being felt today. It also provided the ruling party with a tangible moment in history which they could present as an example of why voters should continue to support the Barisan Nasional coalition. Loh and Khoo (2002, p. 125) noted that “it is often asserted that under certain trying circumstances the government had to issue emergency degrees” in order to maintain the political stability of the country. However, it is evident that the incumbent government would use the “emergency situation” to its advantage and to consolidate its position and power. In short, the emergency may have passed but the amendments made during the emergency period were conveniently retained for the benefit of the ruling government.

Operasi Lalang 1987

The year 1987 marked yet another defining moment that severely undermined not only the ability for citizens to express themselves freely, but also the credibility of the judiciary. It also further narrowed the gap between the political system and the mass media in the country (Rodan, 2004). A nation-wide political clampdown, code-named *Operasi Lalang*, was implemented in October 1987 under the directive of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. It occurred in the year when the UMNO was experiencing an internal power struggle which

resulted in the party being split into two factions, known as Team A and Team B. *Operasi Lalang* was carried out as a defence mechanism by Mahathir Mohamad and his Team A against the opposing Team B. During *Operasi Lalang*, more than 100 people, including social activists, opposition politicians, academics, human rights activists and social workers were detained (Milne & Mauzy, 1999). Three newspapers, namely *The Star*, *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, and *Watan*, had their publishing licenses suspended (Nain & Wang, 2004, p. 255). They resumed publication in 1988 but the ban and resulting changes in editorial staff created a climate of self-censorship among journalists that is still very much apparent today. Prior to the clampdown, *The Star* was regarded as an oppositional newspaper in the country. The editor of *The Star* reported that he “comes to work every day ready to go to prison. My bag is packed” (Sussman, 2004, p. 276). After the clampdown, *The Star* shifted from its politically oppositional style and re-branded itself as a “social” and “business” newspaper, in the process becoming the most profitable newspaper in the country. Nain and Wang (2004) criticised the re-branded *The Star* as a pale copy of the original newspaper, as it became much less critical and its columnists became more subdued.

In the aftermath of the *Operasi Lalang*, the existing media laws were significantly expanded and the Broadcasting Act was introduced. Under the amended laws, all newspapers in Malaysia required a printing permit granted by the Ministry of Home Affairs. This permit has to be renewed every year and the Home Minister has the control to accept or reject applications for printing permits, as well as to revoke or suspend a permit. The Broadcasting Act also gave the Information Minister full power to determine who can and cannot broadcast and the nature of the broadcast (Wang & Nain, 2004).

3.3.1 Media Laws and Restrictions

The two events above signify how the Malaysian media was legally and structurally transformed by the state to become government supporters. In situations of political dissent, the media is expected to support the ruling government and, if it fails to do so, strict legal actions are imposed. As a result, the mainstream media has been forced to become unconditionally loyalist (Moten, 2009) while the alternative media that attempts to express dissenting voices will face legal penalties. Just as strict laws are used to curtail political participation (see section 2.3.4), there are numerous laws that severely limit freedom of expression. While laws such as the ISA and Sedition Act have also been used to restrict media freedom, in this chapter I highlight four

other pieces of legislation that are detrimental to the media - Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), Film Censorship Act, Broadcasting Act, and, Communication and Multimedia Act (CMA).

The Printing Presses and Publications Act (1984)

The PPPA is the law that governs the printing press in Malaysia. Introduced and passed in 1984, it provides the Home Affairs Minister the “power to grant or withdraw a printing license or a publishing permit” (Loh & Khoo, 2002, p. 128). Under this law, a potential publisher needs a publishing license from the Ministry before starting a newspaper or magazine. The publisher must apply for a new license every year. This creates a climate of self-censorship among Malaysian editors and journalists, especially those publishers who have much to lose considering the high production cost of traditional print media (Steele, 2009). In addition to the power to control the domestic print, the PPPA also requires foreign publications sold in the country “to pay a large deposit which would be forfeited if the publishers did not appear in court to face charges of publishing materials prejudiced to the national interest” (Loh & Khoo, 2002, p. 128).

The government has often threatened to terminate or not renew the license of some critical newspapers from the opposition parties, such as *Harakah* owned by the PAS, *Suara* owned by the Peoples Party, and *The Rocket* owned by the DAP (Brown, 2005). The wider effects of the PPPA on freedom of expression and press, the media, and the development of civil society in Malaysia have been far reaching. This provoked serious domestic criticism of the one-sided coverage by the mainstream news of the Anwar Ibrahim case and the *Reformasi* movement in 1998 and 1999 (Weiss, 2005). In 2000, the BN government did not renew the permits of magazines, including *Detik*, *Tamadun*, *Wasilah*, and a newspaper *Eksklusif* for criticising the government over the Anwar affair and political rights. *Harakah* has reduced its circulation from twice a week to twice a month for party members only and not for the public (Sani, 2005).

Film Censorship Act (2002)

In Malaysia, film censorship is controlled by the Film Censorship Board under the prerogative of the Home Ministry. In 2002, the Film Censorship Act was revised to state that all films screened in Malaysian cinemas must first be certified by the Film Censorship Board. The Board imposed a rating system on all TV programs and films aired in Malaysia. The system

categorized films and TV programs based on different types of audiences. The first category ‘U’ is for general viewing which meant that films in this category can be watched by audiences of all ages and can be screened at anytime. The second category is the ‘PG13’ films that require parental guidance for audiences under 13 and can only be screened between 6.00 PM to 10.00 PM on weekdays and 6.00 PM to 12.00 PM on weekends. The third category ‘18’ is films that can be watched by audience who are aged 18 and above and can only be screened between 10.00 PM to 6.00 AM daily (Rao, 2013).

According to Wan et. al. (2009), most films that are censored by the Film Censorship Board dealt with three sensitive issues which are religious, cultural and moral values. Basri and Alauddin (2003) added that political ideology also plays an important role in film censorship. Films that are deemed to depict Malaysia negatively are banned. Such films include the Ben Stiller directed film ‘zoolander’ which depicted Malaysia as an impoverished and underdeveloped country. In the past decade alone, almost 100 films have been banned from Malaysian cinemas and these included local and imported films (Rao, 2013). Most recently, on July 2013, two Malaysian bloggers, Alvin Tan and Vivian Lee were charged for producing and sharing pornographic photographs in their blog. On October 2012, Tan and Lee shared photographs of them having sex in their blog - <http://alvewiswingers.tumblr.com/>. They also uploaded their sex video on youtube³². They were charged under Section 5(1) of the Film Censorship Act 2002 which states:

No person shall - (a) have or cause himself to have in his possession, custody, control or ownership; or (b) circulate, exhibit, distribute, display, manufacture, produce, sell or hire, any film or film-publicity material which is obscene or is otherwise against public decency.³³

Tan and Lee face a fine between RM10, 000 and RM50, 000, or a maximum 5 years' jail, or both, upon conviction.

Broadcasting Act (1984)

The Broadcasting Act was enacted in response to the privatisation of the broadcasting media initiated by the then Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. When Malaysia’s first private TV channel, TV3, was introduced, the Broadcasting Act was seen as the government’s legal

³² ‘Sex bloggers out on bail’ The Malaysian Insider. July 26, 2013. Available at: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/sex-bloggers-out-on-bail>

³³ Film Censorship Act 2002. Available at: <http://www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.%2013/Act%20620.pdf>

medium to control the emerging private broadcasting channels. The Act allows the Information Ministry to control and monitor all radio and television channels and to suspend or cancel the permit of any private company that broadcasts information which contradicts government policies or the state-sponsored Asian values (see section 2.3.2) (Anuar, 2005). Hence, even with the introduction of private channels and satellite TV technology, political contestations can not appear on any Malaysian television. The initial two TV channels, RTM1 and RTM2, are state-sponsored channels and are under the direct prerogative of the Information Minister, thereby posing no threat to the state (Sani, 2005).

The Broadcasting Act was controversial because it did not specify the parameters in which the Act operates. This gives the Information Minister free control over undefined aspects of local broadcasting (Wang & Nain, 2004). One of the most criticised aspects of the Minister's use of the Act is the implementation of censorship. In 1995, the then Information Minister, Mohamed Rahmat, initiated a strict censorship campaign against what he termed as the media's excessive portrayal of Western images and counter-culture values. He imposed censorship conditions that have been considered as unreasonable and lacking credibility. Among the conditions was the strict requirement for male TV entertainers to have short hair and female newscasters to not show their neck (McDaniel, 1994). With the advent of the Internet and the new media, the Broadcasting Act was no longer able to cover the scope of the expanding broadcast and Internet media. For example, the Broadcasting Act did not have provisions that could ascribe conditions for the licensing of Internet and satellite broadcasters. As such, the Act was repealed in 1998 and replaced by the Communication and Multimedia Act (Lee, 2002).

Communication and Multimedia Act (1998)

The CMA replaced the Broadcasting Act to allow the government to regulate all manner of broadcasting including the Internet. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) is entrusted with the role of promoting and regulating the communications and multimedia industry and to enforce the communications and multimedia laws in Malaysia. Hence it has the power to approve, amend or revoke broadcasting and other licenses (Lee, 2002). The MCMC is also given the task to implement and promote the government's national policy objectives for the communications and multimedia sector. The CMA has some enlightened provisions which protect freedom of expression online, such as

Section 3(3) which states “Nothing in this Act shall be construed as permitting the censorship of the Internet”³⁴ However, the MCMC, under the control the Minister of Energy, Water, and Communication (EWC), has enormous discretionary power to take certain actions against media users (Deibert, 2008).

One example was the MCMC blocking of the *MalaysiaToday.net* website in August 2008 because of commentaries that the MCMC alleged were “insensitive, bordering on incitement”³⁵ The EWC Minister claimed the action was well within his jurisdiction and cited Section 263 of the Act which permits certain actions for the “protection of the public revenue and preservation of national security”. The block was lifted the next day after a public uproar and criticisms by some UMNO leaders who saw the block as negative publicity for the government, which had just sustained a massive loss in the 2008 election³⁶

3.3.2 Media Ownership

Restrictions on media freedom in Malaysia are not only confined to the direct legal control imposed through the many laws and regulations but also through an indirect control mechanism in the form of ownership. This is especially true when much of the mainstream media in the country is owned directly or indirectly by entities linked to the ruling political party. Most notably is Media Prima’s monopoly over the mass media. *Media Prima* is the largest media conglomerate in the country. It is a publicly traded company listed on the Main Board of the Malaysia Stock Exchange. Media Prima controls 43% of the *New Straits Times Press* (NSTP) Group. NSTP is Malaysia’s oldest and largest publisher. Its three main newspapers, *New Straits Times*, *Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro*, have a combined circulation exceeding a million copies per day. Media Prima also controls the private television broadcast sector in the country. It owns and operates four out of six of the free-to-air television channels, TV3, NTV 7, 8TV and TV9. The other two, RTM1 and RTM2, are directly run by the Ministry of Information (Anuar, 2005). According to Lim (2009), Media Prima commanded 50% of TV viewership in the country as of March 2008. Moreover, Sani (2005) explains that anti-monopoly laws against concentration of

³¹ The full version of the act is available at: http://www.commonlii.org/my/legis/consol_act/cama1998289/

³⁵ MCMC chief operating officer Mohamed Sharil Tarmizi confirmed that the block was ordered by the commission. He told Malaysiakini: “It is being blocked because we found that some of the comments on the website were insensitive, bordering on incitement.” Malaysiakini, Aug 27, 2008. Available at: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/88683>

³⁶ ‘MCMC told to unblock Malaysia Today’ The Star, September 11, 2008. Available at: <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?sec=nation&file=/2008/9/11/nation/20080911145128>

media ownership do not exist in Malaysia and this has allowed Media Prima to steadily acquire controlling stakes in most media outlets in the country.

The conglomerate also owns four radio stations, Fly FM, Radio Wanita (Women's Radio), Hot FM, and One FM. In addition, it owns a motion picture company (Grand Brilliance), a recording studio (Ambang Klasik) and several advertising companies (Gotcha, Uniteers, Right Channel, UPD, Big Tree Outdoor). The dominance of Media Prima becomes more problematic because it is a subsidiary of Malaysia Resources Corporation Berhad (MRCB), a government-backed corporation. Major shareholders of both Media Prima and MRCB are known to be supporters of the government, with many of them holding posts within UMNO. This means that through its link with the media conglomerate, the UMNO has a disproportionate amount of influence on the major television, newspaper, radio and advertising agencies in the country (Sani, 2005).

The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the second and the third largest parties in the BN coalition, are also major stakeholders in the media industry. Lim (2009) indicated that the MCA through its investment arm, *Huaren Holdings*, owns over 40% of shares in *The Star* which is the most profitable newspaper in the country. The MCA investment arm also controls over 20% of the Nanyang Press Group which controls local Chinese newspapers, the *China Press* and the *Nanyang Siang Pau*; one of the most established Chinese-language newspapers in the country. Lim (2009) also highlighted that in 2007, the Malaysia-based Sinchew Media Corporation, also a company closely linked to the MCA, announced its intention to merge with the Hong Kong-based Ming Pao Group and invited Nanyang Press Holdings to form a tri-partite venture. The Sinchew Group owns the lucrative Chinese language daily, *Sinchew Jit Poh*, the highest circulating Chinese language newspaper in the country. The merger, realized in 2008, resulted in the creation of Media Chinese International Limited, the largest Chinese language publication group outside of China and Taiwan³⁷

The Indian-based party, the MIC, conducts its dealings with the mass media through its investment arm, Maika Holdings Berhad. It was founded by the current MIC President, M. Samy Vellu who also serves as its chairman. It currently owns the Tamil language newspaper, *Tamil*

³⁷ 'Sin Chew, Nanyang Go Global' My SinChew. April 30th, 2008. Available at: <http://www.mysin Chew.com/node/10747>

Nesan (Tamil News), one of three Tamil language newspapers still in publication in the country (Anuar, 2005).

3.4 The Malaysian Alternative Media

Because of the limited freedom given to voices that do not agree with the establishment, namely the BN government, opposing or alternative views are mostly forced to find or create their own media. The opposition parties and non-government groups have resorted to producing and funding their own media albeit in very limited and contested circumstances. Every opposition party has its own newspaper. The PAS official newspaper is *Harakah* while the DAP and the PKR publish *The Rocket* and *Berita Keadilan*, respectively. As a result, there is the tendency to refer any media in Malaysia that is not philosophically or legally approved by the government as the alternative media (Smeltzer, 2008; Anuar, 2005).

According to Atton (2004), alternative media are those media outside mainstream media institutions and “can include the media of protest groups, dissidents, fringe political organisations, even fans and hobbyists” (p. 3). The alternative media enables ordinary people, without any professional training, to write and report about their experience as citizens, activists, fans or simply as members of a community. As pointed out by Hamilton (2003), alternative media is essentially de-professionalised and de-capitalised, emphasising wider social participation in its creation, production and dissemination than is possible in the mainstream media. Therefore, alternative media is primarily concerned with representing the interests, views and needs of marginalised groups in society through the non-mainstream production and distribution of media messages.

However, Deane (2007) stressed that the dynamics and origins of alternative media in developing countries such as Malaysia are different from those in industrialised countries. In industrialised countries, alternative media normally refers to non-commercial media that is independent of corporate and government control. It is often community media that focuses on minority perspectives and experiences. More specifically, it exists as a response and in opposition to the claims that the mainstream media is an instrument of corporate and elite power to control the people. On the other hand, Deane (2007) also claimed that for most part of Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia, the mainstream media is controlled by the government or by corporations that are closely related to the ruling elites, which results in the media content being

strictly controlled by the state. As such, the growth of alternative media in these parts of the world is largely a response to government control.

Malaysia has a media system that fits Deane's (2007) description. Mainstream media in Malaysia is controlled by the state and hence only serves the government's interest while sidelining critical and dissenting voices in the community. Although there are privately-owned media agencies in Malaysia, they do not offer alternative views because they are owned by corporations that are closely related to the ruling elites (Sani, 2005). The alternative media in Malaysia is mostly anti-government rather than anti-corporate. It also adopts an oppositional and radical stance that is essentially anti-establishment (George, 2006). Explicitly political media especially faces continuous government harassment and often has to distribute its media products illegally. Even individually published new media content is not free from government control. Alternative media producers not only face economic hardship, they may risk imprisonment just for discussing a subject the government considers to be inappropriate (Allan and Thorsen, 2009; Anuar, 2005). Through strict legal control and political intimidation, the state has always been able to curb the potential threat posed by the alternative media.

3.4.1 *Reformasi* and the Rise of the Internet

In the previous chapter, I highlighted how the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim from his post of Deputy Prime Minister in 1998 led to the *Reformasi* movement and catalysed the creation of "New Politics". Anwar was able to turn his political downfall into a movement he called *Reformasi*, or reform against the unjust political system of which he was once a strong proponent. As I have explained, the *Reformasi* was seen as the catalyst for other political and social movements (see Section 2.5). In this section, I continue to discuss the significant impact of the *Reformasi* movement on the Malaysian media system. The *Reformasi* not only exposed Malaysians to the open contestation of the political system that they had been forced to accept, it also introduced Malaysians to a new media frontier in the form of the Internet.

According to Anuar (2005) and Brown (2005), the seeds for using the Internet as an alternative platform to the mainstream media were first sown during the *Reformasi* because at the time the alternative media had expanded and had included the Internet and digital forums. Although government control over oppositional media was tight, the Internet provided a new medium for political activists to get their message across without the need to consider

government regulations. During the peak of the *Reformasi* movement in 1998-1999, numerous anti-government websites emerged, providing news and stories that were not available in the mainstream media (Brown, 2005). Electronic bulletin boards gave the public a chance to discuss and discover other people's opinions. Although Anwar Ibrahim was not the first political figure to be unfairly detained and punished by the government, his story was the first to be openly discussed on the Internet; allowing Malaysians, for the first time, to personally access uncensored political information. Malaysians, who before the *Reformasi* had little exposure to information other than that coming from the government-controlled media, were suddenly awakened by the volume of political information coming from both the government media and the Internet. The use of the Internet was complemented by the use of faxes and copiers that further increased the reach of the news to the wider public (George, 2003).

During this time, new political and anti-government websites mushroomed. George (2003) claimed that at one point there were no less than 40 anti-government websites, including *agendadaily*, *reformasi online*, *laman reformasi*, *reformasi.com*, *freeanwar.com*, *mahazalim*, *Freemalaysia*, *saksi* and many others. Electronic forums and bulletin boards provided a fertile ground for the public to exchange opinions. While existing alternative presses were hampered by licensing and circulation constraints, the same constraints could not be applied on the Internet. As previously mentioned, Malaysia had made an agreement, called the Bill of Guarantee, to convince international investors that Malaysia would not impose any censorship on the Internet in line with the promotion of Malaysia's ambitious IT venture, the Multimedia Super Corridor³⁸ in 1997 (George, 2003).

3.4.2 A Dichotomised Political Media

While it is evident that the restrictions imposed on the Malaysia media have led to the creation of a significant alternative media, it has also resulted in a divisive media system where it is taken for granted that news and information must come from either one of the two categories. Studies on the Malaysian media have often reinforced this dichotomy by referring to the government-backed media as the mainstream and all other forms of political media as the alternative media (Lim, 2009; Anuar, 2003; 2005; Khoo, 2002). George (2005, 2006) further

³⁸ As explained in the previous chapter (Section 2.5.2), the Multimedia Super Corridor is a government-designated zone in Malaysia designed to push Malaysia into the information age. It aims to attract companies with temporary tax breaks and facilities such as high-speed Internet access and proximity to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

explained that the opposition parties' monopoly of the online media indicates that while the Internet had opened a new frontier for the Malaysian alternative media, it has yet to overcome the dichotomised political media wherein the alternative is still accepted as the oppositional media promoting anti-government sentiments. The partisan nature of the Malaysian alternative media is not entirely unique, as alternative media has traditionally been considered as biased and partisan. According to Atton and Hamilton (2008), alternative media are usually partisan and are issue specific because it is their goal to challenge the already biased reporting of the media centre. Alternative media practitioners do not feel the need to repeat the mainstream views. However, despite the accepted bias of the alternative media, I still find the dichotomized understanding that pitches the mainstream media against the alternative media in Malaysia problematic, especially in relation to the rise of new democratic media practices such as blogging.

I argue that this dichotomy undermines the complexities and specificities of the many kinds of democratic media practices that are emerging in relation to the Internet. I propose that new conceptualisations of citizen participation, especially the acts of participation that are non-partisan and come from the grassroots and the everyday citizens, require a more flexible approach to the study of the Malaysian alternative media. Such flexibility enables the relationship between the mainstream media and the alternative media to be understood outside institutional and political terms while also overcoming the misleading belief that the Malaysian alternative media is solely oppositional and radical (George, 2005, 2006). This can help explain and inform other forms of citizen action that are ongoing at the individual level outside the dichotomised construct of the Malaysian political media. This argument is consistent with Atton and Hamilton's (2008) proposal that, despite the very wide range of alternative media practices, the essential goal for all alternative media ventures is to foreground the views of the ordinary people whose views are often obscured by the elite individuals or groups. A limited understanding of the Malaysian alternative media as politically subversive, radical or oppositional confines alternative media to specific political groups, undermining emerging new media experiences that are allowing ordinary citizens to become expert sources.

The distinctive characteristic of the post-*Reformasi* online media is that the new online activism and political discourse are mainly driven by the Web 2.0 technologies³⁹ that enable individuals to have control over their own mass media (Bruns and Jacobs, 2006). Blogging, in particular, is significant in the Malaysian socio-political context as it is considered to be a powerful tool in changing the local political culture (Smeltzer, 2008; Lim, 2009; Hah, 2012). Malaysians are now able to create and moderate their own communication spaces and participate in public discourses without having to succumb to the limitations of a dichotomized political media.

3.5 Blogging and Citizenship

Malaysian blogs are unique because they offer democratic practices based on the freedom of speech and expression in a country where the socio-political structure does not accommodate such practices. The impact of blogs on politics and participation in contemporary Malaysia is further complicated by the fact that blogging promotes interpretations of citizenship that go beyond the conventional collective “Asian values” approach (see Section 2.2.4). Blogs allow individuals or groups to redefine their own understanding of what constitute citizenship and this may differ from the understanding promoted by the mainstream media and traditional alternative media (Smeltzer, 2008). More importantly, the majority of political blogs bring forth the voices of the everyday citizens who represent neither the government nor the opposition parties (Sani, 2009) and are indirectly challenging the political traditions that were mostly confined to partisan and electoral politics

3.5.1 The Malaysian Blogosphere

Although the number of Malaysian bloggers can be large (see section 1.2.4), the focus of scholarly research has tended to be on A-list⁴⁰ political bloggers who compose a small group within the Malaysian blogosphere. Ulicny (2008) found that highly active political bloggers in Malaysia (defined by the number of hits and links) ranged between 75 to 100, while the number of A-list or influential bloggers may be much smaller. Unofficial rankings done using

³⁹ Web 2.0 allows users to interact and collaborate with each other in a social media dialogue as creators of user-generated content in a virtual community, in contrast to many websites where people are limited to the passive viewing of content.

⁴⁰ A-list blogger is a term used to describe a blogger who receives a large readership and subsequently receives a huge number of links back to the blog they write (see Section 1.3.1).

Technorati⁴¹ and Alexa⁴² tags by local bloggers Sabahan.com and blogrevenue.com indicated that out of the list of the 50 most influential bloggers in Malaysia, almost all were ex-journalists and political figures. For example, the most popular blogs in Malaysia according to the ranking were Jeffooi, Chedet.com, RockyBru, Limkitsiang, KickdeFella, Kadir Jasin, SusanLoone, Marina Mahathir, AnwarIbrahim and Aisehman. The majority of these political blogs express political views and opinions that were previously blocked from the mainstream mass media (Tan & Zawawi, 2008). They offer Malaysians insights into the political process that have previously excluded the everyday concerns of many citizens. The free and easy access to this political information is a challenge to a socio-political and media system that has always privileged partisan and elitist forms of participation. These blogs, mostly published since 2003, have achieved hits numbering in the millions and are now changing the Malaysian political environment, threatening the political status quo (Singh, 2009).

3.5.2 Blogs and Political Game-Change

The political impact of blogs became more evident when several political scandals were made public by bloggers and further discussed and debated in the blogosphere. These scandals were publicised online and managed to create public pressure on the authorities to take necessary actions. This exposure of political scandals from the grassroots facilitates a game-change in local politics whereby citizens are able to expose cracks in the political process and push the political elites to admit and correct them. In this sense, the bloggers have been able to go against the elitist political culture that would have allowed these scandals to slowly disappear from the public agenda. Amongst the many scandals that have been exposed by the bloggers, I focus on two significant early scandals that were considered to be the catalysts for later exposures. The so-called “Nude Ear Squat” scandal and the VK Lingam video scandal showed that, despite the authorities’ attempts to downplay these political issues, the bloggers were able to keep them high on the public agenda and forced the authorities to take necessary actions against those involved. I also show that the political impact of blogging goes beyond the exposure of political scandals and this can be seen in the thirteenth Malaysian general election held in March 2008.

⁴¹ Technorati provides real-time search and popularity indexes for user-generated media (including weblogs) by tags or keywords (www.technorati.com)

⁴² Alexa is an online provider of free, global web metrics. It also provides services such as analytics for competitive analysis, benchmarking, market research, and business development (www.alexa.com).

The 'Nude Ear Squats' and Illegal Police Procedures

Among the earliest major scandals exposed on blogs was the “nude ear squats”⁴³ scandal that engulfed the Malaysian police and the Malaysian Home Ministry. What started out as an amateur video circulated online ended up causing the country international humiliation. In November 2005, a video clip taken on a mobile phone that showed a strip down body search of a woman in a police detention centre surfaced on the Internet. The one minute and eleven second video clip recorded on the multimedia messaging service of a cellular phone showed a female police officer apparently ordering a nude female detainee to perform ear squats (Farrar, 2009). The first response that came from authorities was to search for the person who recorded the video on the grounds that he or she had tampered with a police investigation and had released confidential police procedures. Despite the authorities’ attempt to turn the tables on the anonymous video-recorder, the resulting public outcry forced the authorities to initiate a public investigation into police standard operating procedures (Farrar, 2009).

The issue escalated when the media highlighted that the female detainee could be a Chinese national or a local Chinese Malaysian. The domestic controversy suddenly became a potential international relations debacle. The controversy was an embarrassment to the ruling government on two accounts. First, there was the internal argument between the police and the National Bar Council on the legality of the nude squats (Farrar, 2009), and second was the issue of the nationality of the woman in the video. A Royal Commission was formed to investigate the scandal. The outcome indicated that the nude squats were illegal and that the woman in the video was actually a Malay woman and not a Chinese citizen as indicated by the Chinese press. However, the outcome of the investigation came only after the Home Minister confirmed the legality of the nude squats and after Malaysia made an official apology to China. As a result, two newspaper editors resigned from a local Chinese language newspaper for allegedly reporting false information (Anuar, 2005). A 300-page Royal Commission report came out in January 2006 detailing the entire incident and recommending improvements in police procedures.

⁴³ This involved performing squats while touching the ears with the hands.

VK Lingam and the Judicial Crisis

Another political scandal that was publicised by the bloggers was the so-called Lingam-gate video. The controversial eight-minute video clip showed a Malaysian lawyer, V.K. Lingam, on the phone with a high-ranking judge, Ahmad Fairuz Sheikh Abdul Halim. In the video, Lingam and Fairuz were allegedly discussing the latter's appointment as Chief Justice of the Malaysian Federal Court. The 2002 video was initially released on YouTube in September 2007 and soon became a popular blog topic (Gong, 2011). In the video, Lingam was heard saying that he had discussed the arrangement with Vincent Tan, a prominent businessman, and Tengku Adnan, an UMNO politician; both close associates of then Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. The video indicated that the country's judiciary was closely connected with the country's top leaders and their cronies (Sani, 2010). The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the V.K. Lingam Video Clip was formed in late 2007 to investigate an allegation of illegal intervention into the judicial appointment process of Malaysian judges. The Royal Commission eventually published a four volume 2,889-page report detailing the proceedings, statutory declarations and list of exhibits. The Commission concluded that Lingam had, with the assistance of his close friends, tycoon Vincent Tan and Minister of Tourism, Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor, actively involved themselves in the appointment of judges. The Commission acknowledged the tampering of judicial appointments by the ruling government and its private sponsors (Sani, 2010).

These two scandals were among the many other political controversies that were widely discussed in the blogosphere. Despite the mainstream news media's attempts to downplay these issues, the public outcry that resulted from the political discourse going on in the blogosphere could no longer hide the cracks in the Malaysian political process. This indicates that through the open political discourse available in the bogosphere enabled the public to assert pressure on the authorities to be accountable for misuses of political power.

March 2008 and the Rise of the Opposition Parties

In the March 2008 election, the *Barisan Nasional* government won only a simple majority and lost five of the country's fourteen states. While there were a lot of issues such as corruption, the economic downturn and the misuse of laws that made the government unpopular in the period leading up to the election, the size of the loss was unexpected (Moten, 2009). The Internet as the alternative media was seen as one of the major contributors to these losses (Lim,

2009; Leong, 2009; Moten, 2009). Online media and especially political blogs enabled the negative side of the government to be openly exposed. In addition, unlike the 1999 and 2004 elections, the 2008 election saw a number of opposition candidates using blogs as their main information outlet (Tan & Zawawi, 2008). As such, they managed to campaign more broadly and effectively, particularly as they were not given any space in the mainstream media.

In the 2008 election, the opposition groups were finally able to go against the restrictive campaign rules and dodge the virtual blackout by the mainstream media by going online and turning to blogs, news portals, and YouTube. The Web allowed parties such as the DAP, PKR and PAS to reach voters, especially young voters, in their offices and homes (Gong, 2011). As of December 2006, most of Malaysia's 10.3 million registered voters were between twenty-one and thirty-five years of age. This data, compiled by the Election Commission and published in *The Sun* in 2008,⁴⁴ indicates that these voters would determine the results of general elections, and that political parties must target this group to win. It is clear that in the 2008 election the opposition parties targeted and won the hearts and minds of youth voters (Sani, 2009). Compared with the opposition's regularly updated Web-logs, the BN component parties had virtually no Web presence, except for Malaysia's mainstream media via their online newspapers. Google searches on the DAP, PKR and PAS far outstripped those on BN, the UMNO and other component parties. Google searches on PAS and PKR in Malay far outnumbered those in English, and were highest in small cities and towns such as Kuantan in Pahang and Kajang in Selangor (Sani, 2009).

According to Lim (2009), opposition candidates also used the Internet to solicit funds for their election campaigns. In Lim's interview with blogger-politician, Tony Pua, they discussed Pua's campaign for the Petaling Jaya Utara parliamentary seat and Pua explained how he used e-donations as a way to raise funds for his candidacy. Through his blog, Pua managed to collect more than RM10,000 via credit card and online transfers, while another RM20,000 was sent to the Maybank2U account. The target was to raise 50 percent of the amount that election candidates are legally permitted to spend. The law stipulates that parliamentary and state candidates may spend up to RM200,000 and RM100,000, respectively. Pua managed to collect some RM45,000 over five nights from his nightly online political campaigns.

⁴⁴ The Sun, February 28, 2008 'Couple keep the flame burning for the 12th time' Available at: <http://www.thesundaily.my/node/167604>

Lim (2009) explained that during the 2008 election, a prominent political blog, *Malaysia Today* (<http://www.malaysia-today.net>), had around 15 million hits the day after the results were announced, a more than threefold increase from a normal day. The number of hits worked out to be about 625,000 visitors an hour. Pioneer online newspaper, *Malaysiakini*, was so overwhelmed by visitors on polling day that the site broke down. At its peak, the site had around 500,000 visitors an hour, a sharp jump from the 100,000 to 200,000 hits it customarily had per day. In comparison, the website of the mainstream newspaper, *New Straits Times*, received only 970,000 visits for one day, from midnight on Election Day to midnight the following day. This further signified that the Internet-based media had broken the government's strict control over media and political deliberation. The government could no longer disregard the views expressed by the bloggers because they had claimed identifiable political power (Tan & Zawawi, 2008).

3.6 Conceptualising Blogging and Citizenship

These contemporary political and media developments indicate that through blogging, Malaysians were able to reclaim their media and engage in political discourse without having to succumb to the dichotomised Malaysian political media. In doing so, they also challenged the political powers by placing specific issues on the national political agenda and pushing the establishment to take responsibility and be accountable towards the citizenry. In addition to these developments, I offer another route to understand the relationship between blogging and citizenship; that is by looking at how blogging is experienced by the everyday citizens in relation to the emerging ideas of the New Politics in Malaysia.

In light of the contextual discussion provided previously, I propose that the 'everyday Malaysian' refers to a group of citizens who have been accustomed to an ethicised and legally-restrictive political environment. These everyday Malaysians are also familiar with a dichotomised political media in which politics and participation are constrained in terms of traditional partisan and electoral politics. While these contextual circumstances may limit the citizenship experience, I find the ideas of New Politics (see Sections 2.5 and 2.6) that de-emphasise the structural and electoral convention of modern politics enable political participation and the citizen experience to be measured in a more inclusive manner wherein the definition of politics, citizenship and participation goes beyond institutions and traditions.

In order to understand the blogging experiences of the everyday bloggers whose political participation in traditional state politics has been limited by laws and structural intimidations, a consideration of blogging as a form of participation in New Politics can provide a more inclusive way of investigating blogging as a citizenship practice. I consider a theoretical framework that enables an analysis of blogging as a form of citizen practice. Such a framework must also be able to capture the contextual experiences of each blogger to identify how each experience is unique in relation to their participation within the Malaysian experience of New Politics.

As explained earlier (see section 1.3.2) an analysis of democratic media practices in Malaysia must be able to move from the dichotomised nature of the Malaysian media (see Section 3.3). When it comes to the blogging experiences of the everyday Malaysians who may not be entirely political or oppositional, I propose a theoretical framework that is more inclusive and flexible in conceptualising the alternative media experiences that are neither mainstream nor subversive. Such an understanding must be able to accommodate alternative media from a grassroots perspective wherein the media experience and implications can be measured on the micro, individual level, as much as it is able to explain macro, political changes. Therefore, in relation to the research problem and the phenomenon investigated in this thesis, I find the idea of the citizens' media as proposed by Rodriguez (2001) helpful in expanding the understanding and application of the alternative media.

3.6.1 Citizens' Media

Rodriguez coined the term "citizens' media" in an attempt to capture the fluid and complex nature of the alternative media. According to Rodriguez (2001), citizens' media emerges from the need to overcome the oppositional frameworks and binary categories traditionally used to theorise alternative media. Rodriguez argues that the "alternative" in alternative media suggests it is an alternative to something, which traps scholars in binary thinking. This binary thinking fails to capture people's multiple identities and the transformations happening as a result of participating in what Rodriguez called citizens' media, rather than alternative media. Rodriguez claims that citizens' media represents the use of media to achieve empowerment, community cohesion, and express social and cultural identities.

Rodriguez's (2001) citizens' media defines alternative media practice in terms of their role in promoting active citizenship and expression; not in terms of resisting or contesting the

mainstream institutions. Citizens' media is driven by notions of democracy, community and equality, and is created and driven by citizen participation (Rodriguez, 2001). To make sense of the many ways citizens' media can develop and challenge social and cultural meanings in media practice, such practices must be defined exclusively and not as a response or comparison to mainstream practice. More importantly, citizens' media highlights alternative media practices that focus on citizens' creative expression and democratic participation. Rodriguez (2001) proposes an inclusive approach that considers both the production and reception processes that create alternative media in terms of the lived experience of those involved in these practices. A key feature of citizens' media is its focus on the user dimension. Unlike alternative media that is mostly measured and explained through its opposition to the dominant relations of content, production and distribution (Atton, 2004, 2007), citizens' media allows for a more subjective interpretation of alternative media use by making the users' experience and transformation the central focus of measurement and analysis. Citizens' media offers a framework for understanding alternative media practices that may not be intended to resist or challenge established powers and structures. This removal of radical resistance explains the Malaysian blogging experience, and overcomes the dichotomized stereotype of the Malaysian media.

Citizen's media also offers a way to investigate the heterogeneity of alternative media practice. This study of bloggers focuses on the different aspects of the practitioners' lived experience. Citizens' media then results from a complex interaction between people's attempts to democratise the mediascape and their contextual circumstances. This explains why, contends Rodriguez (2001, p. 164), that "it is possible to talk about citizens' media when referring to [very diverse] communication experiences". Citizen's media can become an important site for the creation of citizenship, enabling personal as well as collective participation in the negotiation of social definitions, their identities, cultures and lifestyles. Rodriguez argues that "citizens have to enact their citizenship on a day-to-day basis, through their participation in everyday political practices" (p. 19). Her fluid interpretation of citizenship allows participatory media practices to incorporate social, political and cultural phenomena, something very much related to the Malaysian experience of blogging and new politics.

3.6.2 Citizens' Media and New Politics

When it comes to understanding media use as a form of citizen practice, Rodriguez's (2001) citizens' media was inspired by Chantal Mouffe's theory of radical democracy and citizenship wherein citizenship is defined as the ability to gather forces to shape one's symbolic and material world; not merely on the basis of the liberal tradition. In this sense, the term "radical" refers to the application of democracy to all realms of human life and expression, which contests and renegotiates traditional and classical definitions of democracy. Part of Rodriguez's interpretation of democracy hinges on the idea that democracy involves a constant struggle. She advocates that, "instead of thinking of democracy as an ultimate goal, a final state-of-things to reach, we should look at how democratic and non-democratic practices are being renegotiated constantly, and how citizens' media can strengthen the former, thus contributing to the- although sometimes ephemeral - swelling of the democratic" (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 22). Rodriguez builds on this idea of radical democracy to extend her own understanding of political participation to include traditional forms like voting and protesting, as well as other forms of social and cultural production.

Like the Malaysian experience of New Politics that has redefined politics and participation as more than simply a choice made at the election, citizen's media also refers to politics as any social, cultural or political action that seeks to define the way the world is understood and experienced. Thus, politics and participation are understood as operating on multiple levels, from legislative decisions to everyday practice, and in many forms, from signing petitions to fashion choice. Rodriguez (2001) claimed that citizen's media "adopts a concept of political subject as one who expresses his/her citizenship in multiple forms, including for example, the collective transformation of symbolic codes, historically legitimized identities, and traditionally established social relations" (p. 19). Breaking away from the conventional understanding of citizenship as expressed by voting and protesting, the media is then considered as the everyday site where meaning is contested and cultural codes are negotiated (Rodriguez, 2001).

As such, Rodriguez (2001) noted that the media should not just inform the citizenry, but should also provide a forum for citizens to express their opinions and experiences, expanding the power of the citizen to contribute to decision-making and debate. Media, as an open forum in democratic societies, should also support the exchange and expression of citizens' experiences

and perspectives. Regardless of the medium (print, video, film, radio, television, Internet), content (news, entertainment), and scope (local, national), democratic media systems should be designed to allow and encourage the full participation of citizens in media production. Rodriguez further proposes that citizens' media provides media studies scholarship a way to acknowledge the diverse ways in which media may function as a democratic or undemocratic force in society. Definitions of politics and participation that are based primarily on electoral or procedural practices alone cannot fully describe how the media operates because they ignore the agency of cultural expression, which is active democratic practice through open and direct participation in media production. Thus, a citizens' media practice encompasses and extends the traditional definition of citizenship, by including all forms of politicised human expression by all people.

Moreover, inspired by Mouffe, Rodriguez (2001) assumed "citizenship" to be an acquired political identity rather than a given social status, so identity must be constructed through action. Therefore, citizens are active agents in the construction of their own citizenship. Media can be a vital component in this dynamic by providing citizens the opportunity to express themselves and use the media in ways that transform their own understanding and practice of citizenship. The link between identity and narrative, and between citizenship and action, led Rodriguez to explore citizens' media as the promotion of symbolic processes that allow people to name the world in their own words. It is through this continual shifting of identities and active participation that citizens both challenge and emanate power.

This explains how blogging offers Malaysians more than democratic participation and freedom from institutional and commercial control; rather, it has also become an important site for the creation of citizenship that enables personal as well as collective participation in the negotiation of social definitions, identities, cultures and lifestyles. The fluidity of power as suggested by Rodriguez (2001) is also apparent when Malaysian bloggers are able to defy the collective system they live in and recreate their identity from a mere citizen to an active political actor. Subsequently, this ability to challenge the established media and political culture is a definitive goal of the alternative media that critiques existing ways of subordinating the citizen-audience as mere receivers (Atton and Hamilton, 2008)

3.6.3 Blogging as a Citizen Practice

In sum, Rodriguez's (2001) theorisation of citizens' media allows for a flexible understanding of the relationship between media and citizenship. Her insistence that political participation and citizenship experience should be understood less in institutional terms but more through the media users' contextual lived experience allows for a more inclusive approach to study the media experience of everyday citizens. Within the Malaysian context where participation in institutional and electoral politics can be much contested, a framework for analysing new forms of political ideas and expression is vital for explaining how citizens negotiate and challenge the socio-political culture that shapes their everyday lives. More specifically, citizens' media offers a way of understanding media practices as they are experienced by the users, and allowing those experiences to be interpreted into wider macro and societal terms.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter contextualised and theorised how blogging could lead to the emergence of a new citizenship experience. I showed that the strict control over the freedom of speech and expression has led to the creation of an active alternative media in Malaysia. However, I have also cautioned that since the term "alternative media" has been used to cover almost all kinds of non-mainstream media, the Malaysian media system has often been inaccurately dichotomised. New online media, especially blogging, has enabled everyday Malaysians to create their own media and participate in politics. It is important to acknowledge and capture the impact of this development in media practice in Malaysia. A new conceptualisation of the media must be able to also take into account the changes in politics and participation as discussed in Chapter 2. Thus, I contended that theorising blogging as a form of citizen's media practice (Rodriguez, 2001) can illuminate the relationship between democratic media practices and the emergence of new kinds of politics and citizenship experiences.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The aim to uncover the bloggers' lived experience necessitates the employment of qualitative research. This research tradition provides this study a strategy to capture the bloggers' contextualised lived experiences and enables the researcher to interpret these experiences according to the bloggers' own understanding. Procedurally, qualitative research allows for a non-linear method that disassembles data from the flow of everyday life to be reassembled in the research analysis into a culturally contextual experience (Machin, 2002). Qualitative method not only uncovers varied blogging experiences, it also explores the unique contexts that shape each experience. To explain how I executed this research approach, this chapter presents an overview of the main method, qualitative interviewing, and the secondary sources that informed the analysis. Ethical matters that were taken into consideration in the various stages of the research process are discussed in a reflexive account with a focus on the challenges encountered during the data collection process. The chapter also explains the sampling strategy and the characteristics of the sample, and provides an account of the analysis of the interview transcripts.

4.2 Design of the Study

This research asks "How does blogging affect the citizenship experience of everyday Malaysian bloggers?" This research question is built upon the desire to understand blogging from a citizens' media approach that entails an inquiry into the bloggers' lived experience. Citizens' media stresses that political participation and citizenship are experienced through everyday encounters with the media and are contextualised by other conditions. The concept of the citizens' media is much embedded in the philosophy of cultural studies, a philosophy that, according to Gray (2003, p. 1) is "constitutive and constituted by the 'lived' that is the material, social and symbolic practices of everyday life". Thus, this study required an investigation into the historical, contextual and personal dimensions of the bloggers' lived experience. Equally important is that the research design must be able to capture the bloggers' lived experience as they are understood by the bloggers. This called for a methodology that can contextualise these blogging experiences while exploring the unique cultural contexts that shape each experience.

A qualitative research design provides the best mechanism to preserve the bloggers' lived experience, while also capturing the multiple influences that shape the experience. A qualitative research design also offers a strategy to capture online and offline interconnections that dynamically occur in the blogging and citizenship experience. I agree with Sade-Back (2004) who suggested that research on the use of the Internet must move from being simply virtual to being more comprehensive by integrating the offline and online analyses of a particular Internet use. According to Sade-Back, it is necessary to use data gathering methods that capture the online and offline dynamics in the Internet experience. These techniques are also dependent on the questions that the researcher asks. Since this research is particularly interested in investigating lived experience and socio-political influences, it required the adoption of a qualitative methodology that can develop rich and comprehensive accounts of the relationships between the bloggers' online practices and offline cultural life by "telling it like it is" (Gray, 2003, p. 30)

4.3 A Review of Methodology

Qualitative research has been mostly used in research studies that look into the blogging experiences of a particular group or subculture such as women (McCauliff, 2011), mothers (Lopez, 2009), teenage girls (Davis, 2012), Goths (Hodkinson, 2002), young professionals (Schoneboom, 2007), backpackers (Panteli et al., 2011) as well as studying specific attributes related to blogging such as motivation (Ekdale, 2010), rewards (Gil de Zuniga et. al, 2011), styles (Lowrey & Latta, 2008) and individualisation (Sima & Punsley, 2010).

In studies that look into blogging and political participation at the individual level, multi-site qualitative research that combines online and offline enquiries is not as widely used as a single site approach that either looks at the offline or online experience independently, such as textual analysis that analyses blog content (Hashim, 2007; Macgilchrist & Bohmig, 2012; Shaw, 2012), or case studies that focus on the outcomes of blogging (Moyo, 2011; Berger, 2011). Studies that apply multi-site qualitative analysis tend to investigate blogging and its relationship with new forms of political participation (Mercea, 2012; Secko et al., 2011; Flores & James, 2012). While some of these studies conduct ethnographic enquiries in the form of detailed diaries (Boneito Montahut, 2011) and creating their own blogs (Hodkinson, 2007). The use of a multi-site qualitative approach to uncover the relationship between the online and offline blogging

experience is significant in informing my own research. Based on the research questions, research objectives and the examples provided by my review of other related studies, I adopted a qualitative methodology that allowed me to apply different data collection methods to capture the interaction between blogging, socio-political contexts and unique individual life experiences.

4.4 Data Collection Instruments

Three online and offline data-gathering methods in the form of a survey questionnaire, intensive interviews, and online observation were used. In selecting these methods, I was inspired by classic studies by Miller and Slater (2000) and Hodkinson (2002). While these studies are true ethnographies, their use of a multi-site approach that combined more than one method to identify the interconnection between online media and everyday life reflect the intent of this study. While my own research is interested in looking at blogging and its implications on the bloggers' day-to-day citizenship experience, Hodkinson's ethnography on the Goth subculture focused considerable attention on the ways in which the Internet was used by his participants to facilitate the day-to-day workings of the subculture. Miller and Slater investigated how the Internet was understood and assimilated into everyday life by studying Internet cafes in Trinidad. Their study revealed that although the Internet offered a new form of sociability, it was also responsible for maintaining established social structures. This function helped explain how the Internet strengthened rather than reduced nationalism in Trinidad.

Hodkinson's (2002, p. 4) research employed a range of qualitative methods, which he referred to as "a multi-methods ethnographic approach" that consisted of "participant observation, in-depth interviews, media analysis and even a questionnaire". His work is also interesting in methodological terms due to his status as a Goth himself – and thus as an "insider researcher" – and because of the way in which his study made use of the Internet as both an area of inquiry and a significant research tool. Hodkinson also focused on the Internet as a subcultural space in its own right and quoted from mailing lists and discussion groups as a way of supplementing his interviews and other material. In contrast, Miller and Slater used survey questionnaires to gather the participants' basic demographic and background information, while interviews with Trinidadians at home and abroad were conducted to examine the participants' life experiences. Miller and Slater (p. 22) also actively participated in Trinidadian websites and

discussion groups and engaged in “liming” (that is, ‘hanging around’) in cyber cafes in order to understand the world of their participants.

I have not completed an ethnography due to a different set of objectives to Hodkinson and Miller and Slater. However, the adoption of different methods in their studies inspired my own research design that intends to capture the interconnection between the participants’ online and offline lives. As a result, I used survey questionnaires to gather basic demographics and habitual characteristics of the participants in order to better contextualise the bloggers’ life histories and current position. I also conducted face-to-face interviews to gather the bloggers’ life histories, blogging experience and their understanding of those experiences. Lastly, online observation was conducted to analyse the bloggers’ writings and other blogging activities. Data from the three instruments was analysed together to connect the bloggers’ online practices with their everyday experiences.

4.4.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire contained a combination of open and closed questions. It was used to establish a contextual background for each of the bloggers. It asked for the bloggers’ demographic details such as age, education, race and family history. It also captured their blogging history, habits and practices, including questions about where and when they blogged, the efforts they put into blogging, and how much time they spent blogging.

Administration of Questionnaires

Initially, I planned to email the questionnaires before the face-to-face interviews so that I could gather some basic information about the particular blogger I was about to interview. I also wanted to give the bloggers ample time to fill in the questionnaires without the pressure of having the researcher close by. The questionnaire was supposed to help both the bloggers and I better prepare for the interview session. However, most of the bloggers preferred that I bring the questionnaire for them to complete during the interview. Most claimed that filling in the questionnaire on the computer screen was not very satisfying and that printing it out would be inconvenient. I conceded and brought copies of the questionnaire to the interview sessions. Although this made the interview sessions longer, it proved to be a good alternative as the

bloggers were able to ask me about questions about anything they were not sure of. It also ensured that I was able to collect the questionnaires from each of the interviewed bloggers.

4.4.2 Online Observation

Online observations were carried out for two purposes. It provided me with information for my sampling and enabled me to analyse the bloggers' online behaviour. In her study on the motivation behind the use of blogs, Kaye (2005) used the non-participant method by "lurking around" as many blogs as she could to gather basic ideas on the bloggers' backgrounds and motivations. Similarly, by playing the role of non-participating observer in this study, I observed the bloggers' online activities on two levels. On the first level, I observed in general or "lurked" around the Malaysian blogosphere to gather basic insights into the bloggers' general patterns of expression and online behaviours while identifying potential samples. According to Hine (2000), lurking can be considered a form of covert ethnography. Some virtual ethnographers choose to lurk in online sites (Mann & Stewart, 2004; Kaye, 2005); claiming that this enables an undisturbed picture of the phenomenon they are interested in. Lurking can bypass a major limitation of traditional ethnographic research, namely, the impact the researcher's presence has on people's actions and behaviours. Although there may be ethical considerations in that participants might feel that their privacy has been violated, Lee et al. (2006) contend that lurking is essentially a common online habit. Nielsen (2006) showed that up to 90% of people in online forums were simply reading and not supplying content of their own; thus, researchers who lurk are mimicking this type of participation. However, my use of lurking was focused on background research and was not used for specific data collection. During this initial process of familiarisation with the Malaysian blogosphere, I focused primarily on gaining an overview of the Malaysian blogging scene.

On the second level of observation, I carefully gathered a specific sample group and closely monitored these specific blogs to collect detailed information about the bloggers' online behaviour. Bloggers who were recruited as part of my sample were provided with a consent form (see Appendix A) that indicated my intention to continuously observe their blogs. The online observation was vital for providing me with data that was not shared by the participants during the interviews or in the questionnaires. In their research, Miller and Slater (2000) found that data collected online can provide greater "intimacy" because online participants sometimes pull down

all the barriers compared to their reluctance to share openly in face-to-face interaction. Following that study, I used online observations to chart the relationships between the bloggers' online behaviours with their perceptions of those behaviours. For instance, to look at the bloggers' efforts and motivations to blog, I observed how many times a particular blog was updated and the length of the usual blog post. To look at how the bloggers played their roles, I analysed the bloggers' writing styles and the positions they took when writing about a particular issue. I also observed how the bloggers responded to comments given on their blogs.

My observation sample was confined to the blogs owned by the bloggers I recruited for the study. I observed thirty blogs altogether. This does not include the two blogs owned by the bloggers I interviewed in the pilot studies. I purposely focused on these thirty blogs because my goal for the observation was to match the bloggers' interview answers with their actual blogging practices. The observation allowed me to cross-check the bloggers' interview responses in order to identify whether the bloggers' perceptions of their blogs were consistent with how the blogs were really presented. The observations were made during the time I conducted my on-field data collection in Malaysia (from August 2009 to January 2010). It was important that I limited my observation to this period of time because it represented the bloggers' experience and habits at the particular time where they shared their experience with me. Observing the blogs beyond this specific time may have indicated inconsistencies in the bloggers' experience as they might have had a change in experience and practice. I recorded my observations in several categories based on my review of the literature on blogging practices (Ekdale, 2010; Huang et. al 2008; Schiano et al., 2004), as well as my intention to uncover the bloggers' detailed blogging habits and practices. The observation categories were:

- Blogging habits – This category includes the everyday blogging activities such as how many times the blog is updated, the use of any multimedia contents, the blog layout, unique characteristics of the blog, and enforcement of personal blog rules.
- Writing style – This category includes the kind of language used, the tone of the language (e.g., authoritative, humorous), the use of emoticons, no the length of essays.
- Self-disclosure/representation – This category includes the disclosure of names or other personal information, the words used to represent self (e.g., I, Malaysian, the writer), personal feelings and emotions.

- Interaction with readers – This category includes provision for readers to give comments or contact the blogger, responses to readers’ comments, and other components that welcome readers’ response such as surveys and polls.
- Shared practices – This category includes shared practices that are unique to political bloggers such as the use of certain words or inclinations towards certain opinions.

4.4.3 Interview

Face-to-face interviewing was used as the main method because of its ability to provide detailed accounts of personal experiences. Miller and Slater (2000) and Hodkinson (2002), for example, used interviews to uncover the participants’ life histories and investigate how they made sense of their encounters with the particular media. More specifically, through the interviews, Hodkinson was not only able to put the participants’ life histories and Internet use into context, he also managed to uncover how the two components influence the way his participants appropriate Internet use, such as writing in online journals and participating in bulletin boards as ways of indicating belongingness within the Goth subculture.

I used a general interview guide that provided an outline of questions to be asked. I purposely made a simple guide that was not too detailed so as to allow some degree of freedom and adaptability in managing the interviewees’ responses. Based on the research questions, literature reviews and theoretical frameworks, the interview guide covered three main dimensions that discussed:

1) The bloggers’ life histories – This category of questions provided me with in-depth understanding of the bloggers’ personal background and life experiences that might contribute to their desire to be politically active. It would help to establish the context of the bloggers’ experience. The questions under this category ranged from basic demographic questions to detailed significant life experiences. This category also looked at the motivations behind each blogger’s desire to blog about politics. Based on the literature review, I also sought to find out how the bloggers participated in politics outside blogging and how their media habits related to their existing citizenship experience. Most of the answers to these questions are analysed in Chapters 5 and 6.

2) The bloggers’ everyday blogging experiences – This category of questions was intended to understand how the routine of everyday political blogging becomes a form of citizen activism.

By asking questions relating to the bloggers' everyday blogging experiences, the bloggers would be able to reconstruct their experiences within the context in which they occur. Under this category I mainly asked about the bloggers' everyday blogging practices and routines, and the different roles they assumed when they blogged. I also enquired about the bloggers' communication practices in their interaction with their blog readers. The answers to these questions are mainly discussed in Chapter 6 but are also touched on in Chapters 7 and 8.

3) The bloggers' own understanding of the blogging experiences – This category of questions attempted to tie all the information gathered from the initial categories and make sense of the bloggers' experiences and their own understanding of those experiences. The bloggers were asked to reflect on the meaning their blogging experience offered them. They were also asked about the impact of these experiences on their lives and how it affected their understanding of politics, participation and citizenship. Most of the answers to these questions are explicated in detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

Table 1 below presents a summary of the questions asked in the interviews. Each category was built on several main questions. Each of the main questions was usually followed by many other sub-questions and probing questions that provided a more detailed understanding of the bloggers' experiences. The interviews were conducted in a conversational manner that created some form of comfort and confidence for the interviewee to give more personal and comprehensive answers. With the interview guide in hand, I mostly asked spontaneous questions in a natural flow of interaction. The main advantage of this approach was that it made me more responsive to the interview context and, subsequently, I was able to absorb more reflexive information.

Table 1: Summary and Examples of Interview Questions

Interview Category	Main Question	Sub-Question
Life histories	1. Are the bloggers politically active? 2. Are the bloggers active media users?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the significant events in your life and why? - Are you involved in any community groups? -What is your education background like? - Do you read the newspapers? - What is your media habit like? - Have you always been interested in politics? - Can you share about your family

		background?
Everyday blogging experiences	<p>1. What are the bloggers' everyday blogging practices?</p> <p>2. How do the bloggers interact with their audiences?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When did you start blogging? - When and where do you usually blog? - How long do you usually take to write a post? - Do you edit your posts? - Do you research before writing a post? - Do you know who your readers are? - Who do you blog for? - Do you respond to the comments you receive? - Do you write or report your own political news or analysis?
Bloggers' own understanding of the blogging experiences	<p>1. What kinds of satisfaction/reward do the bloggers receive when they blog about socio-political issues?</p> <p>2. What are the different roles assumed by the average bloggers when they blog about socio-political issues?</p> <p>3. What motivates the bloggers to blog about politics?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How are you rewarded by blogging? - Do you feel responsible for satisfying your readers? - Who are your readers to you? - Do you feel the need to influence your readers? - Do you think the authorities are reading your blog? - Do you think blogging has enabled you to express more? - Do you feel that blogging has empowered you as a citizen? - Does blogging make you feel that you are a better Malaysian? - Do you feel that you are contributing in the country's politics?

Administration of Interviews

The interviews in this research were mostly conducted at venues chosen by the bloggers. The interviews were mostly done at cafes and restaurants, while a few were conducted at the bloggers' home and office. Two interviews with bloggers living in New Zealand and the United Kingdom were done through video-conferencing using the free Web program Skype. The audio and video quality of the interviews was good enough to be audio-recorded. Each interview session was conducted for around one to one-and-a-half hours. I had to make sure that the questions asked were not repetitive and were asked in a steady flow so as to ensure that the interview remained on its course, which also allowed a comprehensive and succinct transcription of data.

As the research was political in nature, I had to make sure that the bloggers were comfortable with the questions asked. At the start of every interview, I reminded the bloggers that while the research was about blogging, political participation and citizenship, I was interested in their individual blogging experiences, as opposed to an explicit focus on their political views and stance. I also reassured them that they were free to not answer any questions that they were uncomfortable with. However, all the bloggers interviewed were willing to participate and tell their story. Most claiming that they were not A-list bloggers⁴⁵ and had nothing to be afraid of. When asked, all the bloggers were willing to have their real name used in the thesis. Their agreement was substantiated by their signing of the consent form which had a provision on participant disclosure with specific reference to the option of using pseudonyms in the final version of the thesis.

Language use was also an important factor in determining the flow of the interviews. Most Malaysians speak “Manglish”, which is a combination of Malay and English. It is a unique Malaysian way of speaking where the English language is mixed with some Malay, Indian or Chinese words. Specific tail-enders such as “ah”, “meh” and “lah” are also used in most conversations. Structurally, Manglish resembles Malay and Chinese in sentence structure and grammar. Dodds (2003) found that Manglish “can be so ‘mangled’ that it hardly resembles Standard English at all” (p. 10). He pointed out that “sometimes there is not even a phrase in Standard English that we can use to replace our Manglish” (p. 11). However, Manglish is usually used as a way of emphasising certain points. During the interviews, I let the bloggers speak in whatever language they were comfortable in, be it Malay, English or Manglish. The use of Manglish gives the data a “local flavour” and it sounded more “natural” within the context of Malaysian society.

During transcription, I edited some of the Manglish sentences that might sound too foreign for non-Malaysians to understand. For example, when asked about the blogging experience, a particular blogger shared:

I *suka* blogging. I get to meet new friends and share my experiences. I don’t talk politics that a lot, u know *lah*... I don’t want to *kantoi* with the government haha... anyway; I’m just a normal blogger. I’m not like the *terer* bloggers like Jeff Ooi or RockyBru.

When transcribed and corrected, the sentence became:

⁴⁵ The A-list bloggers is a group of bloggers who are more well known and have a large blog readership.

I *enjoy* blogging. I get to meet new friends and share my experiences. I don't discuss politics that much (in my blog). You know how it is... I don't want to *get into trouble* with the government haha... anyway; I'm just a normal blogger. I'm not like the *more popular* bloggers like Jeff Ooi or RockyBru.

In attempting to provide the best translation of the bloggers' Manglish sentences. In most cases, I did not change the structure of the sentence. Instead, I translated words that might sound too foreign and might affect the readers' ability to understand the meaning of the sentence. At the same time, I retained some of the Manglish and Malay words that I thought would not have the same meaning if translated.

4.4.4 Email and Telephone Interview

Although I was open to the idea, I did not plan to conduct any email and telephone interviews. However, as my field work progressed, I discovered that some of the interviews were not comprehensive enough and thus the email and telephone interviews were used as follow-ups and add-ons. Email and telephone were the easiest way to get additional data from the bloggers. Telephone and email interviews were mostly done for verification and logistical purposes. The methods were practical alternatives to face-to-face follow-up interviews. Although I did conduct two follow up face-to-face interviews and had also specified in the consent form that there might be follow-up interviews, some of the bloggers had indicated that they preferred follow-up through emails, especially because it allowed them the flexibility of taking their own time in answering the additional questions. The emails were printed out and kept in a file while the telephone interviews were done using a hands-free telephone and were audio-recorded.

4.5 Sampling Methods

Based on their review, Li and Walejko (2008) found that the majority of the research on bloggers employed the non-probability sampling technique because it provides the easiest and cheapest way to sample a large number of bloggers. However, they suggested that to guide the sampling process, it is important for the researcher to specifically operationalise the population of interest. For this particular research, the research population was all political blogs that were written by Malaysians about Malaysian politics. I considered that this specific blogger population could provide bloggers who wrote about Malaysian politics and thus were the group

of bloggers that I was interested in studying. However, since I was particularly interested in non-A-list bloggers, I avoided sampling political bloggers who were already established in the mainstream media such as journalists or political activists who had direct connections with the political elites.

To access the bloggers, I referred to the list of Malaysian socio-political blogs available at <http://sopo-sentral.blogspot.com>. Sopo-central is an initiative of the Malaysian bloggers' alliance to create a directory of Malaysian socio-political blogs. It lists almost all the existing Malaysian political blogs and provides a simple commentary on the blogs' activity status. At the time of sampling, there was almost 600 socio-political blogs listed on the site. However, out of these, only 478 blogs wrote about Malaysian politics, while the rest wrote about specific issues such as photography and health. Almost 80 blogs were inactive which meant that they had not been updated since 2008. Another 45 blogs listed were considered A-list blogs because they were written by well-known personalities and had high levels of traffic according to the blog-ranking site, Technorati. This left the researcher with 253 blogs to sample from.

4.5.1 Sampling Size

In terms of the number of participants, qualitative researches often opt for small numbers that can provide in-depth insights into the central phenomenon or concept being scrutinised. The qualitative approach is not to generalise the sample but to provide a detailed understanding of a few people. Thus, many qualitative researchers do not like to put constraints on the research by giving a definitive number of the sample size. Creswell (2007) suggested that sample size usually differs according to the particular research traditions and depends also on the research objectives and constraints. Creswell proposed that for case studies, five to ten participants should be sufficient; while for grounded theory, the sample size should be about 20-30 people. On the other hand, Bauer and Gaskell (2000) suggested that the upper limit for a single researcher to be able to sensitively analyse is somewhere between 15 and 25 interviews. Most qualitative research has followed this yardstick albeit in different forms of execution. For example, in his study on blogging as a form of personal diary, Brake (2009) conducted 23 individual interviews in order to allow the participants to freely express and raise issues they themselves felt were important to the study. Brake also devised a simple profile of the 23 bloggers in order to classify them into

specific categories and also to contextualise their background in relation to their experience of personal blogging.

While the sampling numbers used in these sorts of studies is good, the numbers are ultimately determined by the research goal which, in this study is to sample a diversity of experiences that show how individuals are bound within what Geertz (1973) considered to be 'webs of significance'. More specifically, Geertz (1973) wrote

‘that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (p.5)

In this sense, the search for meaning is highly contextual and is a result of personal and collective consciousness. Like Brake’s study, this research is interested in contextualising individual blogging experiences and the unique interpretation of those practices. Therefore to capture this diversity in experience and understand the cultural and structural factors that influence them, I approximated my sample size to be between 25-35 participants. However, following the advice of Seidman (2012, p.58) who claimed that “If I were to err, I would err on the side of more rather than less” I interviewed 32 bloggers, including two bloggers who were used as pilot studies, making my sample size thirty bloggers altogether.

4.5.2 Sampling Strategies

According to Li and Walejko (2008), due to its cost efficiency and simplicity of use, self-selection sampling is one of the most widely used techniques for sampling bloggers. The technique can be used to gather participants based on the characteristics of the population of interest. Based on this belief, I went through each blog listed on the Sopo-central directory and identified specific bloggers who fulfilled the basic criteria stated in the population of interest. I tried to approach bloggers with different demographic traits such as race, gender, age and education level. Differences in the demographic background were important because it could provide unique individual stories that allow for complex comparisons of the bloggers’ experience in relation to the research themes.

However, my attempt to conduct self-selection sampling was not successful. I had difficulty recruiting participants at first. Sending email invitations proved to be ineffective. Out of almost 60 emails that were sent out, I received only eight positive responses. Realising that I

cannot depend on emails, I started to rely on snowballing sampling. I started using contacts from third parties by calling on friends of friends who were bloggers as well as friends of the bloggers that I had recruited. This was cautiously done with the consent of the particular bloggers. Before contacting them, I ensured that they had been sufficiently informed by the third party about my research intent and that they had consented to my having their contact information. 24 bloggers were recruited through this method.

4.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted according to the thematic coding technique. Thematic involves recording or identifying passages of text or images that are linked by a common theme or idea. The researcher must then index the text into categories and try to establish a framework of thematic ideas (Gibbs, 2007). This technique required me to identify emerging and recurrent themes and similarities of categories across all the data gathered. The data collected from the questionnaires, observation notes, field notes, journal articles and interview transcripts was codified and categorised according to the specific research themes. I continually refined the categories and searched for relationships between the bloggers' online and offline experiences to systematically integrate the data into a coherent theoretical structure. The qualitative research software NVivo was used to facilitate the analytical process. Generally, the analysis was conducted in a basic four-step process, which started with the first interview (discounting the pilot studies) through to exploring data in NVivo. The steps were conducted as follows:

Step 1: Initial analysis during face-to-face interviews

According to Creswell (2003, p. 190), data analysis “is not sharply divided from the other activities in the [data analysis] process, such as collecting data or formulating research questions” but is instead “an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data, asking analytic questions, and writing memos throughout the study”. In accordance with this, I conducted my analysis concurrently with the first interview. This allowed me to be more aware and able to detect emerging themes and ask probing questions as the interview progressed. Such concurrent, continuous reflection and immediate detection of themes allowed me to roughly identify the data that related to the research dimensions that I was attempting to investigate, namely: 1) the bloggers' life histories, 2) the blogging experience, and 3) the bloggers' personal

understanding and interpretation of the experiences. These dimensions were later used to analyse the different categories proposed by the research questions, which included bloggers' motivations, blogging rewards, blogging roles and the practice of citizenship.

Step 2: Continuous analysis during data transcription

The transcription process allowed me to become more acquainted with the available data. While listening and transcribing, I managed to identify more detailed themes and was able to list probable codings and categories. To ensure that I did not lose any of the information and ideas I collected during this process, I prepared two sets of notes. The first set was individual notes that related to a particular blogger. I named these notes according to the blogger's name such as "BloggerX: note". As I transcribed, I listed all the interesting information about the particular blogger and attached the note to the blogger's transcript. I also listed any probing questions and reflections that I had about the particular blogger on the individual notes. The second set was a general one which I used to collect and combine the data that I felt was falling into specific categories and patterns. I called this note "general ideas and themes". In this second set of notes, I searched for emerging and recurring views, ideas, events or activities that could lead to specific categories that I could work on. I added more information to the notes whenever I discovered it as my transcription of the interviews progressed.

Step 3: Working with the data

The third step required me to carefully read each interview transcript thoroughly to ensure that I became familiar with the data at hand. I constantly compared the data with the two sets of notes that I had taken. At the same time, I imported all the transcribed data into NVivo for further detailed analysis. Despite using NVivo, I continued jotting down notes and identifying ideas and themes that occurred to me at any time, without necessarily referring to the transcriptions. As such, my analysis continued as I worked with the data on NVivo and at hand. In NVivo, I managed the data into specific nodes and sets. NVivo stored references to my coded data in nodes. Thus, a node was made to store any concept, theme, idea or category found in my data. I categorised all the occurring themes into specific codes and imported them into different nodes such as "blogging history", "media laws", "blogging rewards" and many more. I did not limit the number of nodes and continued to create new ones whenever I felt that certain quotes could bring

many interpretations. Similar codes were then bundled up with my own notes and other related data collected from the field and online observations into different sets. In NVivo, a set is a flexible group of items. I used sets to group together any items I considered to have a connection. I also used sets to organise my data and experiment with different groupings of the data. For example, in my analysis of the blogging experiences, I generally categorised the bloggers into two sets that were the activist and diarist. I then worked within each set when analysing the particular category. I also made cross-references and cross-analyses when I tried to compare and contrast the two categories of blogging experiences.

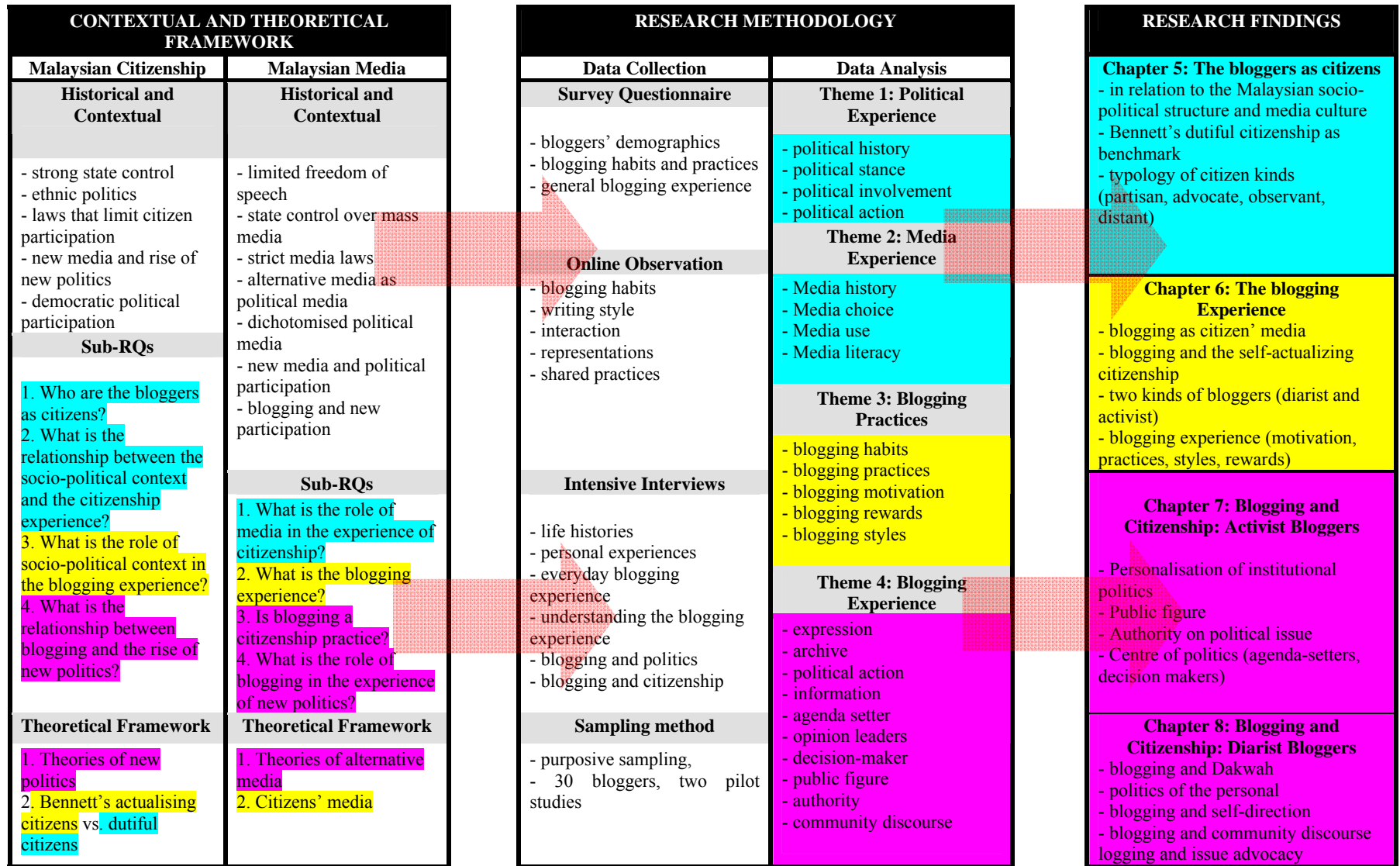
Step 4: Exploring patterns in NVivo

The fourth step involved comparing the themes that I had noted down on my written notes and those I had organised in NVivo. This served as an exercise to counter-check the themes. The themes and subsets were further refined and noted. I then imported all the categories into NVivo for easier management of the data. In NVivo, I started to look for the relationships between the different nodes and sets. NVivo assisted me in continuously finding, scrutinising and rearranging the data and possible relationships. It also allowed me to easily cross-reference my data and identify recurring themes.

4.6.1 Audit Trail of Research Findings

According to Robinson (2003), an audit trail helps establish the credibility of a qualitative research study by providing a record of how raw data has gone through the process of analysis, reduction and synthesis. To reflect on how the methodology discussed above influenced my research findings, I provide in Figure 1 a simple audit trail diagram that summarises all the research decisions and activities that were undertaken throughout the study. In the diagram, I present the contextual, theoretical, methodological and analytical choices that were made in designing and concluding the research project. I indicate in the diagram how my review of the literature and the contextual Malaysian case shaped my sub-research questions and theoretical choices. These questions were then used to design the methodology that subsequently assisted me in identifying my research themes. These themes are discussed, organised and presented in the four research findings chapters.

Figure 1: Audit Trail of Research Findings



Themes and Findings: Politics, Media and Citizenship Blogging Practices Blogging and Citizenship

4.7 Pilot Study

I also conducted a pilot study to test my research instruments and to help prepare for my face-to-face interviews. According to Teijlingan et al. (2001), the term “pilot study” is used in two different ways in social science research. It can refer to so-called feasibility studies which are “small scale version[s], or trial run[s], done in preparation for the major study” (Polit et al., 2001, p. 467). However, a pilot study can also be the pre-testing or “trying out” of a particular research instrument (Creswell, 2007). One of the advantages of conducting a pilot study is that it might give an advance warning about where the main research project could fail, where research protocols may not be followed, or whether proposed methods or instruments are inappropriate or too complicated. My own pilot studies were conducted specifically to test the applicability of the in-depth interviews.

Two pilot studies were conducted in Malaysia, a few weeks before I started conducting the actual interviews. Through the pilot study I managed to get the basic idea of how the interviews should be conducted. I learnt that I needed to always ensure that the interview questions were not redundant and repetitive. From the pilot study, I discovered that certain questions tended to lead to similar answers and could make the interview session counter-productive. I realised that data redundancy could affect with my analysis later on. In response, I reviewed my interview guide and reworded the particular questions. For example, there were two questions that may have sounded similar, namely, “Do you feel that blogging has changed you as a person?” and “Would your life be much different if you did not have a blog?” The first question was supposed to explore the bloggers’ own interpretation of how blogging affected their lives, while the second was supposed to provide a comparison of the bloggers’ life before and after they started blogging. Hence, I reworded the second question to, “Can you share how your life was before you started blogging?” The data from my pilot study was not used for the research.

4.8 Ethics, Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are two interrelated concepts. Validity refers to the accuracy of the research findings from the perspective of the researcher, the participant, or the reader of the research findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Kvale (1996, p. 241) defined validity as an ongoing process of reflection. He stated that validation “comes to depend on the quality of craftsmanship during investigation, continually checking, questioning, and theoretically interpreting the findings”. Reliability refers to the consistency of the research findings in relation to the data collected and its ability to be replicated (Merriam, 2002a). Since the research was conducted in and based upon Malaysia where there are myriad cultural and political sensitivities, it was vital that ethical issues be given significant attention. Although I was born and raised in Malaysia, there were still issues of cultural and political sensitivity that I might not have been aware of. Hence, this research required me to carefully handle ethical and cultural issues that may affect the validity and reliability of the research study.

Qualitative research has always claimed to have high validity due to the data collection and analysis techniques it applies (Creswell, 2007). In an attempt to preserve the validity of the data, this research emphasised the use of intense interviews and participant observation. Interviews can capture empirical categories closely compared to other methods, while participant observation can provide strong evidence of the realities experienced by the participants. Furthermore, this research also closely followed a strict delineation of data analysis. For the sake of validity and credibility, I sought to expose all aspects of the research to continual questioning and evaluation. In addition, I conducted other forms of validity and reliability tests to ensure that my research findings were sound (Merriam, 2002a). These strategies included triangulation, researcher’s position and maximum variation in sample selection.

Triangulation

Since the nature of my study required an understanding of the bloggers’ online and offline experiences, it was natural to incorporate the use of several research instruments. I depended on the interviews as my main instrument, with observations and questionnaires used to complement and cross-check the data. Triangulation is important because consistency between the data collected from the different research instruments can help in determining the validity and reliability. Online observation was initially used to gain some background information on the

bloggers' personalities and habits. Insights from this initial observation were used as a reference in preparing the questions for the survey and the interviews. The survey questionnaires were designed to capture the general experience of the bloggers. They were intended to be distributed before the interviews, mainly to provide more information about a particular blogger, and also helping to tailor the interview questions to the specific bloggers. The use of multiple research instruments could help secure reliability as indicated by the agreement between the data gathered. In addition, the different instruments were used in sequence, wherein the data gathered from one instrument should confirm the previous one as a sign of validity. I conducted the observation method throughout the study. Continuous observation of the bloggers' activities helped me constantly check the reliability and validity of the data I had already gathered.

Researcher's Position

Unequal power relations between the researcher and the researched are part of any kind of research, especially one that involves qualitative instruments such as face-to-face interviews. Kvale (1996, p. 6) explains this situation by indicating that the research interview "is not a conversation between equal partners, because the researcher defines and controls the situation. The topic of the interview is introduced by the researcher, who also critically follows up on the subject's answers to his or her questions". This inequality of power related to my own position, as I was the one who set the topic and flow of the conversation in response to which the participants shared their real thoughts and opinions. Hence, an initial understanding of the bloggers' views collected from the literature review, online observation and survey questionnaire provided me with a contextual understanding that could help combat this issue of power, as it gave me the ability to understand why the bloggers answered the interviews the way they did.

In terms of power relations, there was also the issue of my ethnicity. Being Malay, a member of the privileged ethnic group, may have hindered bloggers from other ethnicities to be genuinely open about their experiences. Ethnicity is a political factor in Malaysia. While the non-Malays are unhappy with the Malay privileges, like any other political discussion, it is rarely debated in the open. Since my research is interested in uncovering how blogging affects the experience of citizenship, ethnicity and politics were vital discussion topics. Hence, I tried to overcome this barrier by reassuring the non-Malays that it was acceptable for them to be open about their views. I did this by informing them at the start that while this research may look

political on the surface, the core of the thesis would be about the individual experience of citizenship. I also had to ensure that I did not assert my own political views at any point. When issues of ethnicity and politics were discussed, I was a researcher and not privileged Malay. To encourage the bloggers to be more frank when giving their views, I posed questions about ethnicity carefully by relating the questions to specific events and also comments given by other bloggers in earlier interviews.

In addition, to negotiate the issue of the researcher's power and ethnicity, I tried to indicate a common standing between myself and the bloggers I interviewed. I did this by highlighting the similarities that I shared with them. For example, many of my respondents were students and I related to this by sharing my own experiences. For the younger bloggers, I asked them to call me "*kakak*", which is an everyday Malay term that means "big sister" and is often used in conversations when referring to women who are older. Similarly, I used the term *kakak* to refer to the female bloggers who were older than me. Although these communications were done outside the interview frame, I felt that by establishing a comfortable relationship with the bloggers, I would be able to create some form of trust.

Maximum Variation in Sample Selection

Since this was a qualitative research study on Malaysian bloggers, I hoped to gain a detailed understanding of the Malaysian experience and since everyday Malaysians come from different groups and backgrounds, I tried to come up with a sample group that reflected the diversity. Moreover, I was interested in uncovering the individual experiences; hence, variation was the key to my sampling goal. Thus, my sample group included bloggers from different demographics, cultures and lifestyles. Such variation can help indicate reliability, as the data collected from the different bloggers can help prove the consistency of my instruments. At the same time, validity can be achieved when bloggers from different demographics and cultural groups provide a range of data that can indicate the variety of experiences as that is basically the goal of the research.

4.9 Explanatory Statement and Consent Form

A major ethical concern arose in relation to the online observation. Since the research adopted non-participant observation, issues such as consent had to be addressed. Clarifying the

role of the non-participant observer is critical especially if the researcher wants to publish certain opinions or quotes (Hines, 2000). As such, I decided to only quote and write about content generated by the bloggers sampled for the intensive interview. Use of data from the other non-participant observations was limited to the background information research.

Another major area of ethical concern related to the cultural sensitivities of the participants. The research is mainly about citizenship and politics in Malaysia. These two topics can be sensitive and even dangerous (see Section 2.4), so I made it clear to the interviewees that they were free to answer the questions only if they felt comfortable. The interviewees were reminded that they could refuse to answer any questions which caused them discomfort or apprehension. The researcher also needed to be alert to any non-verbal cues that might have indicated uneasiness on the part of the interviewees. This cautious management of political topics was carried out not to reinforce the culture of fear or self-censorship, but rather as a responsible step that reflects the political context the interviewees were in. Such a step can ensure the interviewees did not feel obliged to answer questions that they did not feel comfortable enough to discuss.

According to Wimmer and Dominick (2005, p. 83) research encounters with human subjects require documented consent from the participants. For the intensive interviews, the researcher prepared an explanatory statement and a consent form that documented the rights and responsibilities of both the researcher and the interviewee. The researcher also provided a short briefing before every interview session to outline the research goals. In the explanatory statement (shown in Appendix B), I outlined the research details such as the research area, design and goals. In the statement, I indicated the nature and purpose of the research and explained that while the research topic may sound overtly political, the research focus was on the bloggers' blogging experience. In the statement I also provided the contacts of both my primary supervisor and the Monash University Graduate School should the participants need to file a formal complaint regarding the research or my conduct as the researcher. To indicate the authenticity and accountability of the research project, I also provided the project number (CF09/1888–2009001083) indicating that the project had been approved and recorded by the Monash Graduate School. To further reassure the bloggers that their rights and privacy were protected, a consent form was given in which the participants could indicate what can and cannot be done with the information they had shared. For example, the form listed options such as whether they

agreed to the use of their real names or pseudonyms, and whether they allowed the researcher to use the data for other related studies or publications and so forth (Appendix C).

4.10 Conclusion

A qualitative methodology was applied to discover how everyday Malaysians experience blogging about politics and how those experiences influence their understanding and practice of citizenship. I used several data collection methods that included interviews (face-to-face, telephone and email), observation (field and online) and also survey questionnaires to gather data from the bloggers. All in all, I interviewed 32 bloggers in total, with two interviews used in my pilot test when I was at the initial stage of data collection. I also translated and transcribed all the interviews. The thematic coding technique was used to analyse the data for categories of meaning and the themes that recurred. I incorporated the technique in a four-step process wherein the analysis was done before, during and after data collection with the help of handwritten notes and NVivo. For the purpose of validity and reliability of my study, I used several strategies to ensure validity and reliability that included triangulation, consideration of researcher's position and maximum variation in sampling. The next chapter is the first of four chapters where I present the research findings. I present my findings in an orderly manner, showing the bloggers' experience of citizenship and media use in Chapters 5 and 6, before relating the existing experiences with blogging in Chapters 7 and 8.

CHAPTER 5: THE BLOGGERS' CITIZENSHIP EXPERIENCE

5.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters have contextualised the Malaysian socio-political culture and the Malaysian media system. I have explained in detail how Malaysian citizenship is contested in a political system that is heavily partisan, elitist and privileges the Malays (Section 2.4.2). Political engagement and citizen participation are also very much shaped by the country's highly politicised and controlled media system. I have also indicated that in recent times, a new kind of politics has been emerging in Malaysia; one that is shaped by the citizens' increased apprehension about the elitist and ethnicised political culture, and the resulting adoption of a more fluid interpretation of political participation that is mostly derived from personal and individual concerns. I then argued that the affordances of blogging such as the ability to initiate political discourses have further facilitated this development. To support my assumption, I present my research findings in this chapter and the next three chapters.

In this chapter, I provide an introduction to the bloggers studied in this research by describing them according to the different categories of citizens. This categorisation is done through an analysis of the bloggers' political lives and media experiences. More specifically, I analyse the bloggers' own lived experience by looking in detail at how politics and citizenship are understood and experienced in their everyday life. By using Bennett's (2007, 2008) conception of the "dutiful citizen" as the benchmark, the bloggers' own political involvement and media use is compared to the ideals set by the established culture that privileges electoral and partisan politics.

5.2 Contextualising the Dutiful Citizen

In Chapter 2 (Section 2.3.2), I proposed that by adopting the Asian values philosophy, which promotes a definitive understanding of politics and participation as fully collective, institutional and electoral, the Malaysian socio-political system celebrates an ideal conception of a citizen. This figure conforms to the mechanistic structure of a political system that revolves around institutional and electoral politics. The Malaysian political culture, informed and inspired by the Asian values rhetoric has imposed systems, cultural practices and legislation that are directed to the creation of obliging citizens who are willing to put the state's interest above their

individual interests. As argued by Loh (2009), these restrictive conditions have inculcated the Malaysian citizenry to accept a narrow definition of democratic participation that revolves around partisan politics and does not go beyond the electoral realm. The outcome is that politics and participation are strictly confined to rights and responsibilities towards the state and citizenship is defined only in legal and political terms. This traditional conceptualisation of politics and citizenship fits Bennett's (2008) description of the dutiful citizen. The dutiful citizen represents the traditional active citizen whose political participation is guided by ideologies, mass movements and traditional loyalties to particular parties or government support structures. I argue that Bennett's conceptualisation of the dutiful citizen represents the ideal citizen desired by the Malaysian state.

According to Bennett (2008), the dutiful citizen uses the established mass media to access news and information about politics and government. The dutiful citizen does not look for alternative sources and has faith in the information coming from the media and politicians. This adherence to the established news media and an associated low level of media activism accord with the way in which the mass media in Malaysia is used as the state's propaganda machine (Anuar, 2005). Strict legislation that does not allow political dissent or negative portrayals of the government creates a media system that can continuously sustain and even increase the dutiful citizens' inclinations towards the state and their subsequent adoption of the political conventions promoted by the state.

I chose to measure the bloggers' political involvement and citizenship experience against the most traditional and conventional form of citizenship⁴⁶ because, as I have argued, this is how political participation is promoted within the Malaysian political culture. The goal of the analysis presented in this chapter is to identify which kind of citizens these bloggers are, based on their everyday negotiations with the established system that defines their ability to be political and participative. By measuring the bloggers' responses to this conventional version of politics and participation, I hope to identify whether such a strict understanding of politics is still prevalent or whether the new politics (Loh 2003, 2009) – where citizenship and political participation are more fluid and attuned to the citizens' everyday reality - are lived by this group of bloggers.

⁴⁶ Conventional as opposed to new inclusive and participatory forms of politics that consider civic participation as pre-political. See Dahlgren (2006) and Bennett (2008).

In my attempt to identify the relationship between blogging and citizenship, it was vital to first uncover how politics and participation were experienced according to the locally accepted political culture. To do this, I cross-analysed the bloggers' interview responses that relate to three main themes: 1) the bloggers' personal lives; 2) the bloggers' opinions on issues; and 3) the bloggers' media habits. In the interviews (see Section 4.4.3 below), I asked the bloggers to share some personal information such as details about their family, education and professional background. I also included questions that would indicate the bloggers' political affiliations. Questions that asked their opinions and comments on political issues often led the bloggers to share and sometimes declare their political inclinations. I also asked about the bloggers' media habits, especially in relation to how they chose and used the media for political purposes.

5.3 Typology of Citizen-Types

To illuminate the bloggers' citizenship experience, I developed a typology of the bloggers' political lives. I built this typology of four different types of citizen-selves through a cross-classification of the citizens' political experience and media experience. Political experience included the bloggers' political stance and political involvement. The bloggers' political stance revolved around their acceptance, identification and relationship with the existing political regime, and political action uncovered the degree to which the bloggers were involved in political action and activism.

The bloggers' media experience was analysed by reference to two dimensions of experience, media choice and media use. As outlined in Chapter 3 (Section 3.3.2), the Malaysian media operates in two domains – the mainstream and the alternative. The mainstream domain represents the major state-supported mass media, while the alternative media, consisting of many small-scale outlets such as opposition newspapers and websites, represents voices that may not agree with the government (Anuar, 2005). More specifically, the alternative media in the Malaysian context mostly refers to the different types of media used by political groups to challenge the dominance of the mainstream, government-supporting media (Steele, 2009; George, 2003). In relation to this dichotomised nature of the Malaysian media, I operationalised media choice as uncovering the bloggers' affiliations with the mainstream and/or alternative media. Meanwhile, media use was used to uncover what the bloggers did with the media of their choice.

To better explain how these political and media dimensions have shaped the bloggers' own understanding of their citizen experience, I introduce four kinds of citizens that can generally define and describe the 30 bloggers identified in this study. The four citizen categories are the partisan citizen, the advocate citizen, the observant citizen and the distant citizen.

5.3.1 The Partisan Citizen

The partisan citizen here refers to the group of bloggers who were members of political parties and adhered to the agendas of their respective political party. The partisan citizens were active in propagating the ideals of their political party. These bloggers actively participated and took leadership within the established political systems and community structure. The partisan citizen category resembles Bennett's (2008) conceptualisation of the dutiful citizen who represents traditional active citizenship and whose political participation is guided by ideologies, mass movements and traditional loyalties to particular parties or government support structures. Like the dutiful citizen, the partisan citizen understands democracy as strictly confined to the protection of electoral politics.

Seven of the bloggers were categorised as partisan citizens. The majority of the partisan citizens were Malay and male. Out of the 14 Malay male bloggers interviewed in the study, five (or 36%) were highly involved in partisan politics. The only female blogger who was partisan was also Malay, which means she represented 10% of the 10 female bloggers recruited in this study. There was only one non-Malay partisan citizen, indicating that only 12.5% out of the 8 non-Malay bloggers in this study were active in party politics. There was a distinctive racial and gender bias within this category. I attribute this bias to the structure of the Malaysian socio-political system that is inherently gendered and racially biased. As explained in the contextualisation of Malaysian politics in Chapter 2 (See section 2.4), the Malaysian citizenship and political structure place the Malays as the privileged ethnic group provisioned with special political rights (Heng, 1996). The Malaysian socio-cultural tradition is also patriarchal wherein women are systematically relegated to functions in the private sphere and in the home, making it rare for women to directly participate in state politics. Even within the small number of women who are politically involved, they usually promote women's issues and domestic issues rather than state politics in general (Othman, 2006). Therefore, I argue that there is an obvious relationship between the Malaysian socio-political culture and the demographic makeup of the

partisan citizen. It was expected that the privileged Malay male would be more partisan as they have traditionally been seen by the political culture as the primary political demographic (Abbott & Franks, 2007).

While the gendered and racial bias of the partisan citizen can be contextualised within the larger socio-political tradition, the political life of this particular group of partisan citizens can be analysed by their adherence to specific political parties. This group of partisan citizens was open about their political inclinations in the interviews. Three were PAS⁴⁷ supporters, two were supporters of UMNO⁴⁸, and one was a supporter of PKR⁴⁹ Goh, the only partisan Chinese, was a supporter of the Barisan Nasional ruling coalition. Hani, a 45-year old housewife, and Megat Ibrahim, a 21-year old economics student, were both bloggers who I considered to be partisan. They were both open about their political affiliations. Hani was an active Muslimah PAS⁵⁰ supporter and explained that her support for the Islamic political party came naturally since her parents were both active PAS members. She stated:

My parents are avid PAS supporters. My father was nominated for parliament twice and my mother is also active as a Muslimah PAS. Naturally, I followed in their footsteps. Since I was 14 I tagged along to the meetings and when I was 16 I started participating in the meetings.

Hani found being active in PAS the ‘natural’ thing to do, as it was something she was trained to become. From her narrative, it was clear Hani had never been exposed to other kinds or forms of politics. Like Hani, Megat also claimed that his political affiliation was something he developed growing up in a family that actively supported the UMNO:

My whole family is involved in politics. The *Megats*⁵¹ are synonymous with UMNO. Megat Junid. I’m related to him. My uncle is *Ketua Bahagian*⁵², Megat Rafaie. *Ketua* UMNO Teluk Intan. His son is the involved in *Pemuda* UMNO⁵³ Bukit Bintang. His cousin just got elected in the *Pemuda* UMNO exco.

⁴⁷ The Islamic opposition party, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS).

⁴⁸ United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), the racially-based political party that leads the coalition government in power at the time of writing.

⁴⁹ Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) is a multiracial opposition party led by Anwar Ibrahim

⁵⁰ Muslimah PAS is the female wing of the political party.

⁵¹ The *Megats* is a Malay clan that claims to be the descendants of Megat Terawis, the first *Bendahara* or Prime Minister of Perak. The Megats are proud of their ancestral lineage and must have ‘Megat’ as their first name.

⁵² *Ketua* means head or leader, while *Ketua Bahagian* here refers to the UMNO District Head.

⁵³ *Pemuda* UMNO is the youth wing in UMNO consisting mostly of male UMNO members who are 40 years old and below.

Like Hani, Megat Ibrahim was not only exposed to the UMNO but had been actively participating in party politics since he was young. He was born in a family of UMNO leaders. He was proud of his family's political involvement and was even able to identify each family member's role in the party. He explained that during the 1999 election:

I was 11 and was in Parit⁵⁴ with my father for two weeks. We were campaigning, we went to the *ceramahs*⁵⁵, Home of PAS supporters, campaigning... my father invited people to our home...donating rice...flying the BN and UMNO flags.

Although their political inclinations may be different, Hani's and Megat's route to partisan politics were similar. Both were raised to be actively involved in party politics by their families since young. They carried this tradition proudly. When asked about politics, they responded by citing their party's agenda. Hani, for example, internalised the PAS version of religious politics. She took it to be her motivation to be politically involved, believing that:

Politics are important, in a sense that you can't separate politics and religion. Religion determines who we are and politics is what shapes us as individuals. In order to have power we need to be involved in politics, and without it we won't have the means to execute the duties of our religion. It [supporting PAS] has become my own volition; it was part of my responsibility to be involved in issues like these.

For the partisan citizen, party politics is part of who they are as citizens. Hani is an example of how the internalisation of party philosophies informs political aspirations. For her to claim that her involvement in (PAS) politics was a religious duty that defined who she was as an individual says a lot about how involvement in party politics is seen as fundamental to becoming an active citizen. Although the group of partisan citizens included supporters of the opposition and thus were not part of the state's ideal version of citizenry, they were nevertheless what Bennett (2008) considered the dutiful citizen. They understood politics as institutional and felt obliged to participate in political parties, seeing voting and elections as the pivotal democratic practice.

The media experiences of the partisan citizen represented their acknowledgement of the established political culture. For these bloggers who were already incorporated into the mainstream political culture and had total trust in the political party they adhered to, their concern for issues and participation were set by the political party. To them, the party came

⁵⁴ A rural area in the northern state of Perak, Malaysia.

⁵⁵ *Ceramah* in this context can be translated as 'political speeches'.

before the issue. Therefore, their media choice and media use were predetermined. They did not necessarily look for issues, mostly using the media to support their already established political stance.

For the partisan citizen, their media choice was limited to those outlets that supported their political affiliations. As such, the government supporters only used the mainstream media while the opposition supporters only read the alternative media. Each found ways to support their media choice by claiming that the opposing media was biased. They represent what I describe as a limited audience. They did not search for information, nor did they look for variations in media sources; instead, they found comfort in familiarity. The blogger named Zul, a 28-year old aircraft technician and staunch supporter of Anwar Ibrahim and his political party, PKR, explained that:

To me now, I see two types of media; that is the mainstream and the alternative. To me, all the mainstream media belongs to the government and I see that as a tool for government propaganda. Our [Malaysians] only source to know how much the people have suffered is through the alternative media. The reason that I go for alternative media is because I want to know the real story which I think is unavailable in the mainstream media. I believe I cannot trust the mainstream media. Unlike the mainstream media who are sponsored by the government, the alternative media has nothing to lose. So why would they lie [about issues]?

The partisan citizens who were supporters of the opposition equated the mainstream media with the government's media. Although their assumption was not entirely baseless, their support for the alternative media was equally biased. Zul's claim that the "people have suffered" indicated his preconceived political ideas. To him, the people were oppressed and the alternative media was the only media outlet that reported the people's sufferings. He went on to justify that the alternative media presented the "real story" as opposed to the mainstream media which he said he "cannot trust". Despite accessing only the alternative media, Zul did try to appear objective by indicating that he felt the alternative media was less dependent on political beneficiaries. Articulating that the alternative media was politically objective compared to the mainstream media affirmed Zul's political belief that the government is oppressive and that the people need to support the alternative, the opposition. In contrast, Shahrul, a 36 year old ex-writer and government supporter who preferred the English language mainstream media, found objectivity in the mainstream media. He explained that:

You know people have this impression of NST⁵⁶, that they are mainstream [media]. Personally, I feel that NST is not actively pushing the government's agenda. I see it in the Malay papers, I admit that they're very Malay-centric, but so are the Chinese papers. NST and the Malay newspapers are not catering to the same crowd. NST would be catering for the English-reading market, so if you spread out the newspaper of the day, you'll see that NST and the Malay newspapers will have a different take on issues.

For Shahrul to be able to discriminate between the different language-based newspapers and to admit that the Malay newspapers were racially biased indicates he is aware of how the Malaysian media in general is political. It also indicated his way of justifying his media choice as objective. His defence of the New Straits Times may be based on the sentiment that the newspaper is not racially-biased, but, as I explained in Chapter 3 (Section 3.3.3), the NST is clearly part of the mainstream media. The NST and many other Malay mainstream newspapers such as *Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro* are owned and managed by Media Prima, a media monopoly that is partly owned by the UMNO (Lim, 2009). While they may appear to have different reporting styles, their agendas are inclined towards the establishment that sponsors them (Sani, 2009). Shahrul's affiliation with the establishment was further evidenced by his distrust of the alternative media:

They [the alternative media] can't be trusted, the thing about the so-called alternative media, they put themselves out there, they're not anonymous... but most of the stuff on the internet are hearsay, own assumption [laughs]. So you cannot really count on them as facts.

Referring mostly to Internet sources, Shahrul found them to be baseless and mostly personal hearsay. In his dismissal of the alternative media, Shahrul did not acknowledge the different kinds of formal journalistic forms of the alternative media such as the opposition newspapers and independent online newspapers like *Malaysiakini*⁵⁷ Steele (2009), for example, argued that unlike Malaysia's many other political blogs and websites, *Malaysiakini* functions as a traditional news provider that relies on good journalism and objective reporting. Steele even argued that it is the professional norms and values of *Malaysiakini* "rather than the medium of the Internet that is truly challenging the government authorities" (p. 1). Shahrul claims that all forms of alternative media were assumption-based and fact-less hearsay while carefully

⁵⁶ NST is the acronym for the New Straits Times, a daily English newspaper owned by Media Prima, a company loosely linked to UMNO.

⁵⁷ Malaysia's first online newspaper that is often categorised as an alternative media for its reporting that is anti-establishment.

discriminating the mainstream media based on language without considering the media's direct link to the government. His position strongly exemplified that the partisan citizens confined their media choice to suit their political inclinations and used the media as a tool to support and affirm established political conventions, rather than as a medium for political discourse and deliberation.

5.3.2 The Advocate Citizen

I categorised 11 bloggers as advocate citizens. They included nine male bloggers and two female bloggers. Six bloggers were Malay, two were Chinese and three were Indian. Compared to the partisan citizens who were mostly Malay, the ethnic distribution in the advocate citizen category was biased towards the non-Malays. Since the number of non-Malay bloggers in this study was relatively small (eight bloggers altogether), five non-Malay bloggers made up 63% of the whole non-Malay sample group. Six Malay bloggers made up almost 27% of the Malay sample group. As such, I also considered the advocate citizen category to be ethnically-biased. I argue that this bias was also the result of the socio-political system that privileges the Malays. As I indicated in Chapter 2 (Section 2.4.1), many non-Malays feel discriminated against by the political system that offers them an unequal citizenship status. Many people feel alienated by the partisan politics that uphold a seemingly unfair status quo. They usually avoid partisan politics and prefer instead to participate in social activism (Foley, 2001). In Chapter 2 (Section 2.5.1), I also explained that the non-Malays were more interested in joining civil society groups such as NGOs that support the community issues closely related to their lives (Loh, 2003). However, there were only two (or 20%) female bloggers in this group; one Malay and one non-Malay. While I have also indicated that the patriarchal system offers a limited space for women to be directly involved in state politics, it seems that the female bloggers in this study did not see this as a reason to participate in grassroots activism. This was unlike the many non-Malay bloggers who found grassroots politics and civil societies as avenues for participation in response to the systemic political exclusion they experienced. Nevertheless, I do not consider the lack of female participation in institutional politics as evidence of female political apathy. Instead I find that most of female bloggers in this study tended to find participation in more personal ways and this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8 where I analyse the blogging experiences of the Muslim women bloggers.

The advocate citizens were very much involved in social and political activism. However, unlike the partisan citizens who adhered to party politics, the advocate citizen tended to separate themselves from the partisan politics. The advocates tended to see politics as discriminating and serving the elites. Their activism was grassroots and issue-based rather than party-based. They mostly associated with non-government groups and were generally critical of both the government and the opposition. They were motivated by issues that they felt were closer to everyday citizens. The blogger named Dr. Rafick, for example, was a 50-year old ex-army officer who worked in the insurance industry. He was actively involved in numerous community activities. He stated that:

I've done a lot of social work but most of it is invisible to others. For example, I was involved in National Kidney Foundation. When I was in the army, I went to Bosnia, and Cambodia. After the landslide in Bukit Antarabangsa... I was involved in the rescue mission helping the 10000 people who were trapped. I became the spokesperson for the residents there.

Dr. Rafick's social activism exemplified the advocate citizen as he found satisfaction in his involvement with charity work and community service. While he had always been concerned about and involved in social issues, he claimed that politics was not his main motivation:

I consider my strength is in the NGOs and not politics. I don't really have strong beliefs in politics. I always stressed that the country is above politics. The country comes first and the politicians second. The problem today is that the politicians often come first. This is the problem...

Instead, he found politics to be a problem for the country. He seemed to equate politics with the politicians. Dr. Rafick saw politics as an exclusive culture that does not truly serve the people. That is why to him, active citizens need to be involved in social activism, something that is often overlooked by the politicians. Similarly, Stephen, a 42-year old Indian who worked as a club manager, shared Rafick's view on politics:

I am for good governance. I mean look at the big picture. If you look at the number, almost 80% of the people in KL [Kuala Lumpur] are below poverty level with monthly income of below RM3, 000⁵⁸ while taxes and living cost is going higher. You start paying for things once you go out of the house. You never gladly pay; it's always curse and pay. Do the rich people or the politicians know about these things? I am not politically inclined towards any particular group; I'm just for good governance.

⁵⁸ The Government set RM3,000 as the poverty line for the urban poor based on feedback from people living in major urban areas such as Kuala Lumpur. From: <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2009/10/26/nation/4974360&sec=nation>

Stephen was also critical of the country's state of being, seeming to take the grassroots perspective. Instead of referring to issues that were partisan, Stephen was more concerned with the everyday issues affecting everyday Malaysians like him. He felt that the lack of good governance may be preventing people from enjoying a better life. Stephen was an example of an advocate citizen not simply because of his vocal criticism of local governance, but also because of his active participation in social and community activities. He shared that:

I've marched [in protest] for many causes like that one time I marched demanding for education change and got sprayed with chemicals. I mean the police are harassing the wrong people. In other countries, the police will assist you if you want to hold a protest. Like *Hindraf*, I don't care about what they say. Their demands are bullshit, but I respect their rights to march. It's their rights to walk; they have the rights to protest...

Stephen was not simply an armchair critic, as he found ways to fight for his cause. Marching in protest despite having to face potential penalties from the authorities for doing so indicated his serious involvement in social issues. Stephen activist's attitude could be seen in his apparent disagreement with the state's policies that limit the freedom of speech and expression. He found solidarity with the *Hindraf* movement⁵⁹ not because he found them to represent the Indian community or because he believed in their cause but because of his view that, as Malaysians, *Hindraf* should have been given an avenue to express themselves. Despite his obvious political stance, like Dr. Rafick, Stephen preferred not to be labelled political. As such, the advocate citizens were self-styled participative citizens. They considered themselves to be part of the grassroots and they strove to be free from the political elites who they felt operated through and benefited from partisan politics. In short, traditional forms of political participation did not feature strongly among the advocate citizens. Rather, these citizens seemed to retaliate against what they saw as an elitist political culture by demonstrating a common distaste and attaching distinct meanings to the term 'political'.

What was also evident in the experiences of these advocate citizens was that the perception of being non-political did not indicate non-participation. These advocate citizens were very much involved in political action but their participation was often hidden and unrecognised. This is because participation policies that push traditional notions of citizenship – for example,

⁵⁹ HINDRAF stands for Hindu Rights Action Force, a coalition of 30 Hindu non-governmental organisations committed to the preservation of Hindu community rights and heritage in a multi-racial Malaysia. In 2007, HINDRAF organised a rally demanding better treatment of the minority Hindu Indians by the Malaysian Government and the British Government.

dutiful citizenship – emphasise conventional activities (such as voting and dialoguing with elected representatives in managed forums) and tend to view activities that take place outside these normative activities as de-legitimised (Coleman, 2008). As such, the advocate citizens present a challenge to the ideal conception of the dutiful citizen. At the same time, I find advocate citizens to be the unintended result of the policies that push for the ideal dutiful citizen. For citizens who find the notion of the dutiful citizen too restrictive or even elitist, the ability to participate in other forms of activism provides them the opportunity to resist the policies that consider them less political and significant.

When it comes to media experience, the advocate citizens were more open in their media choice. They tended to access different media outlets, both mainstream and alternative. The advocate citizens were often critical of state politics and it was evident that they were also critical of the local media. They found the politically partisan agendas of the local media to be problematic in their experiences as advocate citizens who were motivated by grassroots politics and social activism. One blogger, Firdaus, was a 40 year old bank manager and an economic-activist who regularly volunteered in talks and forums and wrote articles about finance and the economy. He found that the Malaysian media in general offered biased information for non-partisan citizens like him:

I think the media is too political. *Harakah*⁶⁰ is produced by the opposition and its agenda is simply to oppose the government. Even if it is a good news, it [*Harakah*] will still oppose because that is its main purpose. They [*Harakah*] mainly focus on the advices and statements of Nik Aziz⁶¹ Same like *Utusan* and *Berita Harian*⁶² They are created to support the government and justify what ever the government does. There is never anything objective. I put it upon myself to look at the issue, find as many sources and form a balanced opinion. I usually do extensive research before I give my talks or write my articles

Firdaus saw the local media as being too politically divided. The media in his view served the purpose of their political sponsors rather than providing news and information that can enlighten the general public. As such, Firdaus found it essential to be part of a cautious audience who scans different media sources and deliberates on the messages before forming his own view. He discriminated, contemplated and processed the different messages and came up with his own

⁶⁰ Published since 1987, the fortnightly *Harakah* is the official newspaper of Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS).

⁶¹ Tun Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat is the spiritual leader of PAS.

⁶² *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian* are two mainstream Malay newspapers that are very much pro-UMNO (refer to Chapter 3 where I provided details about both newspapers).

analysis when he gave financial advice. Firdaus's relationship with the media was a negotiated one. He used the media for information, despite his apprehension towards the media's political bias, he continued to remain an audience in order to ensure that the issues he cared about were discussed in the media.

Another blogger in the advocate citizen group was Michelle, a 24 year old architecture student based in New Zealand. Although she lived abroad, Michelle was involved in activist programs, especially ones that concerned the wellbeing of the *Penan*⁶³ tribe in Sarawak. She actively blogged about them and the issues that concerned them in online forums. Like Firdaus, Michelle too found the local media divisive. She felt that the media should be given more freedom so that issues which were not necessarily politically partisan could be given due attention. She stated:

I do think that media should be self-regulated and be given the freedom to say what they think is right because now, the range of opinion between the alternative and mainstream media is so wide that it creates a situation where the choice for opinions and information is always either-or. The mainstream is pro BN while the alternative media is mostly pro-*Pakatan*⁶⁴. There is no room for balanced views. I believe more attention should be given to other pressing issues as well like the discrimination against the *Penans* in Sarawak.

Michelle scrutinised the way the media system shaped local politics. She accessed these media but found no objectivity. As a social activist, she found the media discriminated against issues that were important to her, but may not be strictly political. Her interest in the *Penans* motivated her to look for news and information about them in the news media. Michelle was part of a public group that supported the social development of the *Penans*. Her affiliation with this group drove her interest to look for any media coverage that related to the *Penans*. Her failure to find significant coverage on the issue further convinced her that the Malaysian socio-political and media systems were too consumed with partisan politics and did not acknowledge other forms of political actions.

For socially-active citizens like Firdaus and Michelle, their apprehension about the local political culture and their awareness of the way the local media functioned influenced how they constructed their media repertoires and shaped their media habits. According to Dahlgren (2006),

⁶³ The *Penans* are nomadic aborigines living in Sarawak, Malaysia. Even until today they survive as hunters and gatherers. The *Penans* came to international limelight when they resisted logging operations in their home territories which they feared would severely affect their livelihood and ancestral heritage.

⁶⁴ A coalition of opposition parties consisting of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), KeAdilan, and PAS. The coalition was formed in 2008 as a united force to challenge the Barisan Nasional coalition government.

conscious media actions and decisions are amongst the many ways citizens make sense of the structures and systems that surround them and are part and parcel of being a citizen. As such, for the advocate citizens, their continuous negotiation and adaptation of the local media system was a dimension of their everyday citizen practice that defined their being Malaysian.

5.3.3 The Observant Citizen

The main difference between the observant citizen and the advocate citizen is that while the latter is actively involved in socio-political activism, the observant citizen mostly keeps their political views and opinions to themselves. They do engage in political discussions, but such discourses never translate into activist actions. The observant citizens are interested in politics but are not motivated to actively participate. They are mostly non-partisan and find the current establishment bearable. Nine bloggers were categorised as observant citizens. There were seven Malay bloggers and two non-Malay bloggers in this category. Unlike the two previous citizen types, the observant citizen category was not ethnically-biased, with 35% of the Malay bloggers and 25% of the non-Malay bloggers grouped as observant citizens. Gender-wise, four (40%) female bloggers and five (25%) male bloggers were considered as observant citizens. As such, while there were more male bloggers in this citizen group, there were also more female bloggers in the observant citizen category than in the partisan and advocate citizen categories. This make-up further signified that there was a gendered dimension to political participation. The women bloggers seemed to occupy citizen categories that were considered less political in the institutional sense. Although I have explained above that this may be the result of the gendered political tradition in Malaysia that privileges male citizens (see section 2.4.2), I would argue that while these women may have seemed less political, they were not entirely uninvolved. I explain this contention further when I discuss the experiences of these less overtly political citizens in Chapter 8. For now I focus on how this group of respondents understood their political and media experiences.

Adzam was a 38 year old Malay who worked as an office manager and part-time author of romance novels. When asked about his views on local politics, he stated:

I am interested in my surroundings. I read and I pay attention especially near election time but when it comes to politics... it's like... our country has had 50 years of independence. You can ask anyone in this country; do you prefer chaos or harmony? If they [Malaysians] want peace and harmony, they have to understand to not trigger issues

that could hurt others and we (Malaysians) all know that in Malaysia there are many issues that are still sensitive. So don't stir the issue. Leave politics to the politicians.

Adzam claimed that he took it upon himself to be up-to-date on current issues. He paid closer attention to issues and politics near the elections indicating that he did want to make informed decisions. But as an observant citizen, Adzam preferred to "leave politics to the politicians". He was comfortable with the current state of governance. He realised that things were not perfect but, to him, they could be worse. As a citizen he felt that it was his responsibility to not disturb the peace and harmony that he enjoyed. He was not cynical, instead he was simply comfortable. In line with the state's desire for dutiful citizens, Adzam felt that he needed to be more attentive and participative only during election periods. It is significant that, in Adzam's view of politics, his decision to not be actively political was an informed and cautious one. He chose to stay in the background not because he felt hopeless or because he was oblivious; rather, he remained uninvolved because that was his way of being a good citizen.

Ju-Li was a 21 year old Chinese and a final year law student. She was categorised as an observant citizen because, like Adzam, she was aware about political issues. Reading law had exposed her to different issues and crises. She knew about the constitution and the workings of the legal system. She claimed to be very interested in politics and had friends with whom she discussed politics. However, being a politically-aware citizen did not motivate Ju-Li to become more participative. Instead it had taught her to become more careful of politics:

I never really knew that I was interested in politics, until in my first semester [of university]. The first subject I took was constitutional law and we learnt about the judicial crisis in 1988 what happened to Tun Salleh Abbas⁶⁵, ISA⁶⁶... all these issues made me realize what was going on in the country. It made me interested to take notice. I have a group of friends who are also interested in politics as well. We do discuss about the current happenings but usually in discreet. Politics is a very sensitive issue in Malaysia and also not to mention very dangerous [laughs]. I don't really want to get into trouble.

Politics, to Ju-li, could be "sensitive". That is why she preferred to discuss it cautiously. Although she admitted to find politics appealing, she did not want "to get into trouble". Ju-Li's interpretation of local politics as "dangerous" and of participation as "trouble" reflected her understanding of how the Malaysian political system works and of how, as a good citizen, she

⁶⁵ Mohamed Salleh bin Abas is the former Lord President of the Federal (later Supreme) Court of Malaysia. He was dismissed from his post during the 1988 Malaysian constitutional crisis. His dismissal was considered to be the event that triggered a marked reduction in the independence of the Malaysian judiciary.

⁶⁶ The Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA) is a preventive detention law in force in Malaysia that allows for detention without trial (see Section 2.4.3).

need not question the establishment. Like Adzam, Ju-Li's decision to remain discreetly political was a calculated one.

The observant citizen bloggers were well aware of their surroundings. In some ways, they were quite well versed with local politics. They understood that the political culture was not open to dissenting or opposing views and so they drew limits on their own participation as citizens. The observant citizens shared some traits with the dutiful citizens, whereby they accepted and obeyed the established notions of institutional politics and partisan citizenship. But their acceptance was not based on respect and belief in the system. It was a political decision based upon an understanding of how to survive within the established political culture.

Although their main source of information was usually the mainstream news media, they did occasionally access the alternative media for additional information. The observant citizens tended to scan media content with the main intention of keeping themselves up-to-date. To them, reading about issues and making informed decisions was the main form of citizen participation. Mostly, their media choice was personally selective; they would only be motivated to join public groups or participate in community actions if they were directly affected by the issues presented in the media. Another blogger in the observant citizen category was Pradeesh, a 21 year old Indian IT specialist. He described his experience with the media as follows:

I mostly refer to the mainstream newspapers. I do read the online news and other political blogs but I hardly quote them because they are not necessarily trustworthy. I'm not really a big fan of the alternative news because some groups are really using media freedom to good use while others are simply blindly using it, following political trends and spreading unknown ideologies. Sometimes they just want to condemn certain political personality. I prefer to use the media for my own interest, especially IT-related issues. I don't mind doing the extra research because it's [IT] my passion.

Pradeesh admitted to mostly using the mainstream media. His main reason for this decision was that he felt the alternative media was simply too political. From his comments I sensed that he felt overwhelmed by the political issues presented in the media. Instead, he preferred to read about IT, which he felt to be relevant to his life. Pradeesh's preference for the mainstream media may not necessarily have been because he found the mainstream media to be more objective, but because it offered more coverage of topics such as sports, entertainment, lifestyle and science and technology; stories and contents that are not overtly political. The alternative media, on the other hand, was usually focused on explicitly political issues and this was probably one of the reasons why it was less appealing to the observant citizens.

Another blogger in the observant citizen category was Azril, a 24 year old IT officer who taught public speaking at night. Like Pradeesh, Azril was not particularly inclined towards state politics. He read both the mainstream and alternative media. Like Pradeesh, Azril found other aspects of the media more interesting and relatable:

I don't categorize, I read everything. I read *Harakah* a lot and also *Malaysiakini* and also *Utusan Malaysia* and NST. I do read political blogs but I don't look at them as an important source of information. To me politics is not the most important issue. I think there is just too much emphasis on politics. I prefer to read about life. For example, I like photographs. I like pretty pictures with captions, to me they help send the message across and spark new ideas. Other than that I find that video streaming sites are a good base for information. Sometimes I share the pictures and videos with my students. We would then share our opinions and discuss interpretations of the pictures and video. I use this method to encourage different way of thinking and looking at the world...

Azril claimed to not categorise the media; indicating that, to him, the mainstream and alternative media were essentially the same. This could be justified by his apprehension towards the media's emphasis on politics. Azril's media use was unique and interesting wherein he preferred to refer to pictures and moving images as his source of information. This indicated his creativity in using the media. Feeling somewhat frustrated with the conventional media (both mainstream and alternative), he created his own media tradition. He used photographs and videos on his blog as interpretations of life. Together with his students, Azril created a discourse for the media content that he chose. While the discourse may not have led to direct participation in politics or activism, Azril exemplified how a non-partisan citizen is able to negotiate the political media to fit his own understanding and practice of engagement. Like the advocate citizens, observant citizens such as Pradeesh and Azril were able to create their own media repertoires and form their own media experience in their attempt to deal with the local media culture that they felt was too politically partisan. By consciously realising their own media choice and practice, they were essentially making sense of what citizenship meant in their own lived everyday experience.

5.3.4 The Distant Citizen

The fourth category in the developed typology is the distant citizen. Three of the bloggers were categorised as distant citizens. They were responsible and law-abiding citizens. They were generally informed about politics and current affairs but they did not give it much time and thought. They claimed that politics was simply out of their realm of interest, hence making them

distant from state politics. There was an obvious gendered dimension here as only female bloggers were considered to be distant citizens, the least participative type of citizenry. This category was developed for these three bloggers because their political experience was unique and did not fit the observant citizen category. For example, Suraya, a 22 year old law student claimed she was simply not interested in politics:

I don't support any particular political party. I hardly discuss serious issues with my friends. The only time I do so is when I participate in university activities like *Usrah*⁶⁷, the Islamic society in MMU. But mmm... I'm just not that interested in political blogs or politics in general. I do try to make myself more interested in elections and stuff but it's just something that I don't really take seriously...

Suraya was not partisan; she did not talk about politics nor did she find politics appealing. She was acquainted with issues but such interactions were occasional and random. There were political outlets in her everyday life such as her *usrah* group and her study of law but these did not trigger any interest to become involved in state politics. She claimed to have tried to make herself more interested but politics still seemed distant. The second blogger in this group, Aida, was a 30 year old accounts manager and mother of four who shared Suraya's indifference towards politics:

I do read about political issues but I admit that I prefer to read fiction, story books than about politics. I mean I grew up in MRSM⁶⁸, there was never politics involved [laughs]. Furthermore, I fear the backlash I might receive when I talk about politics, even if I do talk about it [politics]; it's always in a very subtle way.

Like Suraya, Aida also claimed to have made the effort to know more about politics. She read about political issues but admitted that other things were more interesting to her. She justified her lack of interest by reference to her academic training in the Malay-majority educational institution (MRSM). While Aida had a point about the likely source of her political apathy, her reason was not all-encompassing. Malaysian students are not allowed to participate in partisan politics, and they are essentially trained to follow the authorities and be apolitical (see Section 2.4.3). However, despite the legal restrictions, political discourse is not entirely absent in schools and universities. Suraya, for example, admitted that there was political discourse going

⁶⁷ *Usrah* is a religious small group discussion that usually involves a moderator and several members. Discussions can be about any topic but are approached from the Islamic view.

⁶⁸ MRSM is the abbreviation of Maktab Rendah Sains Mara; these are government-funded boarding schools meant to provide learning facilities for promising Malay students in local schools. MRSM accept non-Malay students but their numbers are small.

on in her university and that it was she who was not truly interested. As such, I would argue that despite the obvious political limitations that exist in the Malaysian education system, among these distant citizens there was a deliberate resistance to politics that came from personal apprehension. Aida admitted that she found political topics uncomfortable. She feared the response she might receive when talking about politics, and she was afraid that politics may hamper socialisation. Thus the distant citizens' apparent lack of interest in politics is not simply a natural attitude, but results from the exclusive and dangerous connotations that have been systematically attributed to Malaysian politics.

The third blogger in this group, 28 year old Maryani, was not just uninterested; she was pessimistic about local politics. She found politics to be superficial and felt that it was pointless for her to care about it. Maryani was a postgraduate student based in Britain. She stated that:

I have never voted in an election. I used to think that it is my responsibility because I complain about things but yet I do not vote. But I do not feel like registering and voting. To me, the [political] system is already corrupted so why should I vote for something that is not right anymore?

Maryani was pessimistic about state politics and preferred not to participate as she felt her participation would be pointless. She admitted to never having exercised her basic citizen right, the right to vote. Like Aida and Suraya, Maryani also claimed to have some political awareness. She stated that she had initially felt that it was her responsibility as a citizen to vote; this indicated that there had been some effort on her part and that she was aware of how traditional politics works through elections. However, like the other distant citizen bloggers, such effort was simply a justification to remain politically distant. Maryani was cynical and pessimistic of politics; she preferred to let her cynicism justify her lack of interest in state politics. Unlike the advocate citizens who justified their activism through their apprehension about state politics, the distant citizens seemed to do the opposite. Their apprehension and discomfort with state politics were used as justification for their lack of involvement. As such, the distant citizens represented the anti-dutiful citizens, being considered apolitical by the measure of traditional politics.

As distant citizens, these three bloggers were not totally oblivious or insensitive towards state politics. Rather, they were aware and had made some attempt to be engaged; thus, I would argue that despite being understood as distant from state politics, these citizens were essentially

negotiating the local elitist political culture through their own personal vindication. For these distant Malaysian citizens, avoidance of politics is a response to the confines of their socio-political context.

The distant citizens' media experience further attested to this claim. The distant citizens' media choice and media use were mostly influenced by their apprehension about politics in general. The cynical Maryani claimed that she read from both sides of the media:

I read most of the mainstream papers like *Malaysiakini*, *Utusan*, *Berita Harian*, *The Star*, and I also read *Harakah* and *Kosmo*. Apart from that I also read independent paper like Net Graph, it is like *Malaysiakini* but more towards PKR. I read all of them. But if you ask me which one that I trust, I do not think I can trust any of them.

Maryani explained that she was exposed to all media and did not categorise her media choice; she went on to claim that she did not really find the media in general trustworthy. Maryani can be understood as a citizen who wanted the information for the purpose of affirming her distrust in local politics. Maryani had a preconceived distrust of politics and this influenced her use of the media. She did not want to be enlightened as she already had her views figured out. She chose to remain an audience member because reading about issues and politics justified her pessimism about state politics.

Distant citizens can also sometimes decide to stop accessing political information in the media. Aida, for example, claimed that she read from both the mainstream and alternative media. She was able to describe the way the media and the political system were closely linked:

I feel like most of the media companies have to be on good terms with the government to survive, that's why the media is the way it is. I have to read both alternative and mainstream media to get both sides of the story. From a particular news story you can see if the writer is biased. It's the same with *Harakah* and *Malaysiakini*, they each have their own political inclination. I do feel there is simply too much politics going on that sometimes when I get disgusted by it, I just stop reading.

The way in which Maryani and Aida were able to identify how the Malaysian political media is generally divided into two camps indicated that the distant citizens were informed citizen audiences. They generally understood how the media system worked and they were aware of their media choices. All three claimed to read a range of media sources. However, this did not mean that they were interested in participating in state politics. Aida specifically shared that while she accessed different media, when it came to politics she could feel overwhelmed and when this happened she chose to stop accessing the media. The media experiences of the distant

citizens show that the feeling of exclusion from state politics resulted in a negative attitude towards the local political media. In this sense, the distant citizens had a very definitive attitude towards being a citizen. Since state politics was something they considered out of reach, being a citizen merely meant accepting the tradition and remaining law-abiding.

The typology I have presented explains the dynamics that exist between the bloggers' citizenship experience and the influences of the local socio-political and media culture. I have shown that the existing political culture and its supporting media have directly and indirectly created a citizenry that feels confined by partisan politics and, in response have created their own citizenship experience by negotiating and conditioning their own acceptance of the established culture. Table 2 summarises the basic characteristics of each citizen category.

Table 2: Summary of Citizen Typology

Citizen type	Political experience	Media experience
Partisan 7 bloggers - 6 males, 1 female - 6 Malays, 1 Chinese	- Support specific political party - Participate in party politics - Discuss sentiments that support a specific political party	- Either mainstream or alternative media - Affirm established political stance
Advocate 11 Bloggers - 9 Males, 2 Females - 6 Malays, 3 Indians, 2 Chinese	- Support grassroots politics - Participate in issue-oriented activism - Discuss politics from activist point of view	- Both mainstream and alternative media; usually alternative - Critical and have specific cause
Observant 9 bloggers - 5 Males, 4 Females - 7 Malays, 1 Chinese, 1 Indian	- Politically aware - Up-to-date with current and political issues - Randomly discuss political issues	- Both mainstream and alternative media - Try to get balanced information
Distant 3 bloggers - 3 Malay and Female	- Fear and apprehensive of politics - Law-abiding citizens - Pessimistic and cynical of politics	- Usually mainstream - Up-to-date

5.4 Political Exclusion and the Media's Affirmation of the Status Quo

When political participation is assessed strictly in terms of state and party politics, it becomes evident that the citizenship experience becomes exclusive. This can be seen by the application of the typology that uncovered that the partisan citizens were the ones who felt obliged to participate in traditional politics. Only seven out of 30 bloggers resembled the ideal dutiful citizen. These bloggers were members of political parties and regardless of their political inclinations, whether they were pro-establishment or pro-opposition, they adhered to the conventional politics that focuses strictly on governance and electoral involvement. Traditional forms of state-defined politics and participation policies were not engaging for most of the bloggers in this study. Traditional forms of political participation did not feature strongly in the interviews with the non-partisan bloggers. When talking about how they participated, interaction with political parties, unions, members of parliament and other government agencies was rarely mentioned. To these bloggers, politics was only for the partisan and the elite. The non-partisan citizens in this study were critical of the elitist, exclusive and restrictive nature of the established notion of politics and participation.

While the political tradition in Malaysia is ethnicised, it is interesting to note that many of the non-Malays in this study were political and participative. Most of these respondents were categorised as advocate citizens. What is unique about their participation is that they tended to participate in community and political actions that did not conform to the strict partisan tradition. The non-Malays who felt politically excluded as a result of the partisan and ethnicised political traditions found other political avenues that were more meaningful to them. However, a gendered dimension was evident as the female bloggers mostly occupied the least participative citizen groups. If the ethnicised political culture had pushed the non-Malays to participate in other forms of social activism, why were the women bloggers interviewed in this study not doing the same? I propose that there is a significant difference in the way the gendered tradition is accepted as the norm for these women, as opposed to how the ethnicised tradition is considered discriminative by the non-Malays. I offer more on this issue when I discuss the experiences of the women bloggers in Chapter 8.

Subsequently, I find that for the everyday Malaysians, a dichotomised political media that polarises state politics into government and opposition only re-establishes and re-affirms the

existing social order and status quo. For the partisan citizens, the media does this by creating a consistent division between the supporters of the government and the supporters of the opposition through continuous affirmation of existing political divisions. To the opposition, the mainstream media will always be biased. To the government supporter, the alternative media can never be trusted. As a result, political coverage in the news media assists in keeping the partisan citizen in their respective political group, as evidenced by how their media choice and media use were predetermined by the agenda of the political party of which they were members.

Such a dual media framework also offers few options for non-partisan citizens. For the non-partisan citizen, namely the bloggers in the advocate, observant and distant citizen groups, the media systematically pushes them to feel isolated from politics by confining issues and participation strictly to party politics. The close relationship between the media and their political sponsors makes it almost impossible for issues that do not benefit a particular political party to receive media attention. As a result, non-partisan citizens often negotiate their media experience, forcing the advocate citizens to be critical and resistant, the observant citizens to take sides, and the distant citizens to become cynical and disinterested. In short, a divisive media environment does not offer a space for citizens who have other political inclinations and this reinforces their belief that the political system is rigid and exclusive (Couldry, 2006; Dahlgren, 2006).

This finding is in line with the contention by Bennett (2008) that part of the problem with traditional media is that it is designed for dutiful citizens. Bennett argues:

At its (traditional media) best, it is generally information rich, but also filled with the views of officials and government authorities, and it generally lacks much in the way of citizen voices or action ideas. The dutiful citizen is the ideal that dates from the progressive model of objective reporting and informed citizenship that emerged in the United States nearly a century ago. The informed citizen is supposed to take abstract, impartial information and then decide how to apply it. (p.19)

This model does not appeal to the non-partisan citizens. They are sceptical of the media and the media's versions of events. They prefer to assemble and deliberate about information. Above all, they seek information that is attached to the values and activities they know and trust. These citizens are more inclined to seek integrated information that comes with action options, and to participate in the evaluation of information on which decisions about action are based. Thus, I argue that the problem with the Malaysian media culture is not just its limited definition

of politics and participation, but also a lack of opportunities and structures that support citizens' participation in discussion, action or thought about issues of public concern.

This argument also concurs with the outcome of the 30 months (October 2003- March 2006) Public Connection Project conducted in Britain by the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science (Couldry et al., 2010), which aims to provide a qualitatively rich insight into the ways in which people do, or do not, connect with a public world particularly through media⁶⁹ The study was particularly interested in understanding the relationship between people's lives as media consumers and the basis for participation in democratic politics. The study mainly found a lack of social opportunities in traditional media practices for the development of civic talk or action. It did not find any case where there was the sense of collective connection through the media. The project concluded that that citizens' everyday life did not currently afford a context for such interaction. Hence, the missing element appeared to be not the means of voicing civic opinions, but the socio-cultural dynamics of motivating citizens to produce them, as well as the normalisation or "mainstreaming" of such practices in their everyday culture.

It is in this apparent lack of affordances for media engagement and connection in the established media that I consider the democratic potential of blogging to be found. For the partisan citizens who adhere to the established political culture, citizenship experience and media use is very much confined to the particular political sentiment they adopt. Thus, I find that while they may represent the ideal dutiful citizens, their confined media choice does not necessarily promise a possibility for participation. Citizens may be engaged with the particular media they support, be it the mainstream or alternative, but the limited and often partisan sentiment adopted by their media of choice confines their ability to participate in open and objective political discourse. This, according to Couldry et al. (2010), will ultimately normalise such limited discourse as established citizen practice. For the non-partisan, the lack of opportunity to participate in the established media has forced them to negotiate their media choice and to unwittingly accept the media simply as a source of information and not a medium for engagement or participation. In this context, blogging brings a new media experience by allowing these citizens to initiate and participate in public discourses, a democratic affordance not available in the established media and the local socio-political culture. I investigate this

⁶⁹ For more about the project, please go to <http://publicconnection.org.uk/default.htm>.

potential in more detail in the next chapter where I analyse the bloggers' experience in relation to the context of citizenship that I have provided here.

5.5 Conclusion

I argue that despite the exclusive socio-political and media culture, the bloggers interviewed in this study were mostly politically-savvy. They negotiate and customise their own political ideals and involvement to fit a system that has set the parameters of what actions and interests can be considered political. The advocate citizens, for example, were interested in grassroots activism. Realising that their participation did not fit the political convention, they categorised themselves as distinct from politics. They instead claimed to be social activists who through their activism were inadvertently resisting the established political system that they considered discriminative. At the same time, the observant citizens could also be considered politically able. Although they were not involved in activism, they were aware of the local political culture and they negotiated their political stance and involvement according to what they considered to be the best acts of citizenry. Their limited involvement in local politics was a deliberate and informed choice. While the distant citizen group may have been the least interested and participative, they were not entirely passive. They were acquainted with political issues. This group of citizens may have been alienated by the political system but they were not entirely disconnected. They were unresponsive to dutiful citizen values, repertoires and actors (Bennett, 2007, p. 62). They were instead consciously finding ways to be political (or not) on their own terms. Thus, I argue that even if the non-partisan bloggers were categorised as less political in the conventional sense, they were at the very least aware. In the next chapter, I begin to explore and explain how blogging affects these citizenship experiences.

CHAPTER 6: THE BLOGGING EXPERIENCE

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided a typology of citizen types that explains the citizenship experiences of the bloggers in this study. The typology was based on an examination of the bloggers' political involvement in state politics and the bloggers' media use. I argued that the Malaysian socio-political and media systems have directly and indirectly created an exclusive and dichotomised version of politics. In this sense, politics is made to privilege citizens that are politically-partisan. Citizens who are involved in party politics tend to feel more responsible and motivated to participate in active citizenship, while the non-partisan citizen tend to feel alienated by the system. I have also established that only the partisan citizen category fits Bennett's (2008) conception of the dutiful citizen, while the other three types of citizens - the advocate citizen, observant citizen and distant citizen, feel excluded by the Malaysian political culture. In response to their exclusion, these groups of citizens develop different ways of dealing with Malaysian politics and the corresponding political media.

In this chapter, I look at the blogging experiences of the respondents by identifying the bloggers' everyday blogging habits and connecting them to the bloggers' already existing citizen-selves detailed in the previous chapter. I aim to show that while blogging is evidently an extension of the bloggers' political lives; it also enables these bloggers to become more engaged in ways that were not available to them in the mainstream and alternative media. This new form of media engagement has also allowed the bloggers to experience actualising citizenship (Bennett, 2008), enabling them to participate in politics in ways that are more meaningful and closer to their everyday lives.

6.2 Blogging and the Lived Experience

This chapter answers several descriptive questions that are significant in providing an in-depth look into the bloggers' own understandings of their experiences. These questions include: 1) Why do the bloggers' blog?; 2) How do they blog?; 3) What do they blog about?; and 4) What do they get out of blogging? I drew data from three main sources: 1) the bloggers' descriptions and explanations in response to the interview questions, 2) answers from the survey

questionnaire that asked about everyday blogging habits; and 3) my non-participant observation of the blog content and layout. The data indicates that the blogging experience, when analysed within the context of Malaysian politics and citizenship, is an extension of existing political lives. This agrees with Cottle's (2011, p.649) observation that political participation and change - 'No matter how spontaneous or seemingly unplanned, they arise from somewhere'.

Consequently, the ways these bloggers are able to create their own meaning through their blogging practices also signify that they are able to be part of a new form of media engagement that goes beyond and even challenges the dichotomised Malaysian media sphere that re-enforces the status quo (see Section 3.3.2). Blogging allow the bloggers to defy the partisan and elitist political culture by proposing and deliberating on issues that can bridge the disconnection between everyday Malaysians, the media and politics. In making sense of their own media use and citizenship experience, these bloggers assume the characteristics of actualised citizens who understand and practice citizenship according to ways that are related to their personal lives. Actualising citizens do not adhere to the structured and traditional understanding of politics and participation; rather, they create or follow traditions that fit their individual purpose.

In Chapter 2 (Section 2.6.1), I detailed how the actualising citizen is a new kind of citizen category that emerged as a result of the socio-political changes and is ultimately challenging the more traditional dutiful citizen whose political inclinations are directed to electoral and institutional politics. I ground my argument about the emergence of the self-actualising citizen by identifying and detailing the two kinds of bloggers that I have identified - the activist and the diarist. I show through the blogging experiences of these two kinds of bloggers that despite the strong connection between the bloggers' existing political lives and their desire to blog, new everyday practices that come with blogging such as the freedom to express, to share and to connect with others are affecting the ways these bloggers experience citizenship.

6.3 Two Kinds of Bloggers

I have previously explained that when it comes to politics and citizenship, the bloggers in this study can generally be categorised into four groups: the partisan citizen, the advocate citizen, the observant citizen and the distant citizen. These citizen types explain the different forms of participation adopted by the bloggers. While all the bloggers were generally informed about the

local political and media system, their levels of participation were mostly confined to their affiliation with and acceptance of the established political culture. In this chapter, I explain the distinct influence or ‘twist’ blogging adds to this state of affairs.

While the bloggers’ citizenship experience can generally be categorised into four types, I show that when the everyday blogging practices are considered as part of the citizenship experience, the blogger-citizens can best be grouped into the activist blogger and diarist blogger categories. I find this streamlining of categories apt because the more active citizen groups (the partisan citizens and the advocate citizens) tend to blog through an activist and authoritative position while the less active citizen groups, (the observant citizens and the distant citizens), tend to blog using a diary-like approach.

6.3.1 The Activist Bloggers

The activist bloggers consisted of partisan and advocate citizens. This group of bloggers was interested in participating directly in the country’s political discourse. If the local media tradition seems to privilege the partisan citizens who were supporters of specific political parties, blogs as a form of individual media that allow for the equally active advocate citizen to also participate in public political discourse. Like the partisan citizens, the advocate citizens were also interested in sharing their views and opinions on issues. While they may not support the partisan political culture, the advocate citizens had strong opinions on the country’s socio-political issues. Because of this mindset, I find that both the partisan and advocate citizen groups tended to blog from an activist perspective. The activist bloggers were driven by the altruistic desire to promote change and encourage participation in relation to the specific issue that they championed. For the partisan citizens, they usually wanted to create discourses that could support their political party. While the advocate citizens may not have been focused on partisan politics specifically, they were active in creating and moderating discussions that could attract more attention to the cause that they were fighting for. The activist bloggers were also motivated to influence others. For the partisan citizens, they obviously wanted to influence their readers to adopt their political stance, while the advocate citizens found it vital to encourage and influence their readers to become equally participative in social and political discourses.

6.3.2 The Diarist Bloggers

The diarist bloggers consisted of the observant and distant citizens who I considered as less political and participative in comparison to the advocate and partisan citizens. I argued in Chapter 5 (Section 5.5) that despite their apparent lack of interest in local politics, these bloggers were not entirely passive and had been conditioned by the political and media system to feel excluded from the country's politics. For these citizens, being less participative was actually their way of negotiating with and adapting to the strict political culture that they did not find appealing or inviting. Their limited interest in state politics was translated in their blogging. This group of bloggers tended to blog about personal and everyday experiences rather than politics and community issues. They were more interested to share their everyday experiences with friends and family. As such, they usually adopted an informal and conversational blogging style. Instead of trying to appear authoritative, these bloggers often shared their stories, views and opinions by writing and sharing stories as they were experienced. For these bloggers, blogging was personal even when intersecting with formal political issues. The blog was the journal in which they documented their life experiences. Unlike the activist bloggers who blogged with deliberate political intentions, the diarist bloggers understood blogging as acts of expressing and sharing. Table 3 summarises the basic characteristics of the activist blogger and diarist blogger categories.

Table 3: Characteristics of the Activist Bloggers and Diarist Bloggers

Blogger-type	Citizen type	Blog characteristics
Activist bloggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - mostly partisan and advocate citizens - involved in partisan politics/issue advocacy - active media users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - political/issue advocacy - expert / authority - factual analysis
Diarist bloggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - mostly observant and distant citizens - not involved in politics or issue advocacy - informed media users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - everyday life experiences/ personal interest - story-telling - sharing of experiences

6.4 The Everyday Blogging Experiences of the Activist and Diarist Bloggers

While the two blogger categories seem to have contrasting characteristics, I do not consider them as opposites. Rather, they are simply analytical categorisations of two ways of blogging. I find it more useful to highlight each blogger category according to their descriptive blogging habits and everyday blogging experiences based on their own merit and not in direct comparison with the other. To do this I explain in detail the everyday blogging experiences by focusing on four dimensions of the blogging experience: the blogging motivation, style, practices and rewards.

6.4.1 Blogging Motivation

Several recent studies have examined the question of why bloggers blog. Nardi et al. (2004) identified five motivational factors for blogging: documenting one's life; providing commentary and opinions; expressing deeply felt emotions; articulating ideas through writing; and forming and maintaining community forums. In discussing all types of bloggers, the authors claimed blogging was driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. They described blogging as "an unusually versatile medium, employed for everything from spontaneous release of emotion to archivable support of group collaboration and community" (Nardi et al., 2004b, p. 46). Similarly, Li (2005) and Trammell (2005) found that the two greatest motivational factors for bloggers were the intrinsic motivation of expressing feelings and the extrinsic motivation of connecting with other people. These findings resonate with the experiences of the bloggers found in this study.

Both the activist and diarist bloggers claimed that their main motivation to blog was mostly to express and to share. The freedom to write and reach audiences was one of the main advantages of blogging and it was apparent that these bloggers were attracted to blogging because of the lack of gatekeepers and requirements to set-up a blog (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006). According to Van Lear et al (2005), self-expression in blogging refers to the desire to show others one's identity and individuality. Blogging is a way to express oneself online by sharing personal thoughts and information while managing one's image or reputation through strategic selection of content. Self-expression can be direct by disclosing personal information, or it can be indirect, by revealing one's true self through words, pictures, opinions, and style. Thus, the

ability to express in general could be understood as the desire to bring out, put forth or even make tangible thoughts and feelings.

However, I would argue that the desire to express can only be properly measured and analysed by understanding the desired implication of the particular act of expression. Despite all the bloggers, both the activists and diarists, claiming that the ability to express themselves was their main blogging motivation, I find that the desire for expression could be articulated by different justifications in an attempt to reach different outcomes. For the activist bloggers, the ability to express often connoted the intention of voicing opinions, influencing others and deliberating on important socio-political issues. For the diarist bloggers, to express usually meant to share. I further argue that to influence and to share are evidently two different understandings of the desire for self-expression. For the activist bloggers, the desire for expression meant a deliberate attempt to discuss and build support for a specific political stance or community issue. For the diarist bloggers, expression meant the ability to share everyday life experiences with the hope of connecting with family and friends.

This difference in the bloggers' understanding and practice of expression could be seen by the way they explained their motivations to blog. Shahrul, a 36 year old blogger categorised as a partisan citizen because of his support for the ruling government had this to say about his motivation to blog:

I needed a place to express my thoughts and views and with blogging, I feel like I do have a voice. I realize there are friends who actually follow my blog. Sometimes they come and tell me that they are reading my blog... OK... that's good [laughs]. So, on my own... I try to open minds. I'd like to think that I am writing for my community. I hope some people will just read it and think 'Well, that makes sense'. I do want to push my case, like PPSMI⁷⁰ for example, it is something for the country's future, so I would want it in place and if I can push my case to extra 3 or 4 people, I'd be happy about it...

For Shahrul, blogging gave him a "voice". The blog was a medium where he could express his thoughts and views. Like the other bloggers who I have categorised as activists, Shahrul's thoughts and views were mostly about socio-political issues and having a voice meant

⁷⁰ Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris (PPSMI) or translated as Teaching Science and Mathematics is a government educational policy introduced in 2003 by the then-Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, that enforced the teaching of Science and Mathematics in the English medium as opposed to the Malay language medium. The policy has been subjected to debate among academics, politicians and the public alike who want the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, to be reinstated as the main medium of instruction in the national education. The pressure culminated in the announcement of the policy's reversal in 2012.

having others reading his arguments on the issues that he cared about. Shahrul was motivated to participate in issues and was determined to create (political) change. He gave the example of the PPSMI which he found to be a pressing issue for Malaysia. He claimed that blogging about PPSMI made him feel that he was able to influence others and in the course of doing so he can “open minds” and does something for his “community”. As such, his motivation to blog was about more than just expressing his thoughts but extended to involvement in political change.

There are cynical arguments in the literature about the ability of non A-list bloggers (like Shahrul) to actually instigate political change (Ekdale, 2010; Wallsten, 2008). These bloggers are seen as standing on soap boxes, writing anything they want, with little thought, deliberation or accountability (Wallsten, 2008). They have also been described as echo chambers that simply repeat and redistribute the messages of the political elites and the mass media and have a readership limited to a small group of family and friends (Wallsten, 2005; McKenna & Pole, 2008). Despite these arguments about the limited impact of A-list bloggers, I would argue that Shahrul was indeed experiencing and promoting political change. More specifically, from the perspective of citizens’ media where media experience should mainly be understood by the change it brings to the particular media user, I find Shahrul’s drive to push his case to the “extra 3 or 4 people” to be significant in his own understanding of his blogging practices which he considers a form of citizen participation. The comments by Mudin, a 30 year old PAS supporter, echoed Shahrul’s argument. Mudin explained:

It doesn’t matter whether the authorities actually care about what we [bloggers] have to say. To me it’s not really an issue whether the authorities are listening to the bloggers because regardless of the blogger- whether he has 20 or 20,000 followers, they each have their own circle of influence. I have my own circle that I can share information and may even influence a little... and as a blogger that is enough for me....

Mudin was confident about his capacity as a blogger. He was motivated by the knowledge that, despite a limited readership, he could still express his views and be satisfied with his own circle of readers that he could invite into a political discourse and, to some extent, influence to adopt a similar political stance.

I find that while the activist bloggers were political in their everyday lives, blogging enabled them to challenge the way politics was experienced by everyday citizens. If politics had mostly been exclusively confined to the political elites in Malaysia, blogging enabled the politically active – whether partisan or not – to create their own political discourse and build an

influence base that was detached from the established political centre. Mudin and Shahrul, for example, were able to participate in politics without having the need to depend on or succumb to institutional political patronage. Although they were partisan bloggers, whereby their aspirations were essentially entangled with those of the political party, it was their ability to create their own political group and influence that challenged the very structured political culture that highly privileges the partisan elites. In this sense, I also contend that while these partisan citizens initially fulfilled Bennett's (2008) conceptualisation of the dutiful citizen in their adoption of the partisan and electoral understanding and practice of politics (as discussed in Section 2.6.1), blogging enabled them to transition into what Bennett described as actualising citizens who construct politics and participation according to their own everyday experience. Actualising citizens fit politics and participation to their own understanding and are satisfied by material transformations that are easily experienced by and visible to them. When applied to this study, this means that blogging enabled partisan politics to be appropriated to the bloggers' own views and sentiments, and also allowed the elitist political culture to be brought down and experienced in the everyday.

For the diarist bloggers, their main motivation to blog was the ability to write and share everyday experiences. For this group of bloggers, who I considered to be less political in the traditional sense, the political potential of blogging did not appeal to them. Raja, a 21 year old engineering student who I categorised as an observant citizen, stated:

Initially it [blogging] was somewhat like a diary. When I was doing my foundation studies [in university], I participated in a number of student programs. I wanted to share my experience like what I've learnt [from the university programs] with friends. I hope that by blogging about these activities, I can also make my friends be interested to participate in them. I really feel that these programs are very beneficial. Anyway, my readers are mostly friends my age so I don't want to bore them with politics or serious issues. I might as well share with them experiences that they can relate to. I mean, I do like to write; to share and communicate with friends, so blogging seems to bring all these together.

For Raja, blogging was a medium for him to record and share his everyday experiences. He claimed that his blog was "somewhat like a diary" indicating the blog's function in recording his experiences. At the same time, unlike a diary, Raja used his blog to share his experiences with intended friends. Raja wrote about issues that he felt were suitable for his young friends. To him, politics and other serious issues were possibly "boring" and therefore he avoided them and

preferred instead to share his thoughts about university programs that he personally found rewarding and significant enough to be shared with friends. Although Raja's desire to encourage his friends was less obvious and forceful as compared to the activist bloggers' desire to influence readers and instigate change, there was a citizen dimension to his ability to inform others about useful community programs and in his effort to encourage others to participate.

Pradeesh, a 23 year old IT enthusiast and an observant citizen, shared Raja's motivation to share his personal interest. He explained:

I started early 2008. I guess I was mostly driven by my desire to share my interest and opinions. I think if you have something to share, why not? I started blogging about IT mostly. I've had people asking me to advise them about IT and I try to help wherever I can but I wouldn't say that it's a niche blog, it's more of a mixture of all things. I do write about my daily activities sometimes but IT would be the main thing I blog about. I would say that my blog is just a place I hang out...

Pradeesh mainly blogged about IT, a subject he was very much interested in. He indicated clearly that his motivation to blog was to share his knowledge about IT. Getting responses from his blog readers further motivated him to write about IT. Although IT was the main topic discussed in his blog, Pradeesh felt that his blog had become more than just about IT because he also blogged about other activities in his life. Therefore, blogging to him was a medium that allowed him to record his everyday experiences and share his personal interests with others. The blog became a place where he could "hang out" indicating that blogging to him was simply an extension of his everyday life. This showed that for the diarist bloggers like Raja and Pradeesh, their motivation to blog mostly came from the personal desire to document everyday life, archive thoughts and opinions and be connected with friends or others with the same interests. These less definitive goals may be different from the goals of the activist bloggers whose motivations appeared to be more external, public and political. However, I would suggest that in the recording and sharing of everyday interests and activities, the diarist bloggers were also able to engage with their circles of readers and promote specific lifestyles that can also be beneficial for the community. In this sense blogging allowed this group of less explicitly political citizens to cut across the private and the public dichotomies by making a private interest a public discourse.

6.4.2 Blogging Style

Blogging style refers to the ways bloggers write and present their personae in their blogs. This presentation includes the tone and approach bloggers adopt in their blog posts in relation to how they position their roles as bloggers. Papacharissi (2010) identified that self-representation is important among bloggers as they are concerned about the image they present to their readers. She contends that bloggers understand that the right image can attract more attention to their blogs. For the activist bloggers, their blogging style worked in parallel with their political stance and their desire to encourage political debate and promote socio-political change. In their attempt to highlight a particular issue, these bloggers often portrayed themselves as the authority or expert on the subject matter. By being formal, the activist bloggers often used the third-person narrative in their blog posts. They liked to write from an analytical perspective. They wanted to appear objective and authoritative. Therefore they expressed their thoughts and opinions as someone who was watching and analysing, rather than someone who was merely experiencing the topic discussed.

Amirul, a 48 year old Malay blogger who I categorised as an advocate citizen because of his political family background and active participation in his community group, had this to say about his blogging style:

Blogging allows me to archive my writing. I can retrieve them, re-analyse and edit. If possible I would like to compile them [his blog posts] one day and turn it into a book or a memoir. I don't simply write for the sake of writing. I write because I have something significant to share. That is why I am very concerned with how I write and what I write. My daughter once commented that my blog is too formal and boring [laughs]. I guess she reads my blog from a teenager's point of view. At that age, you know.... they [teenagers] just don't bother. But for me, all these issues are important. Like my blog on Shah Alam⁷¹ I want to make my residential area a better and safer place to live not just for me but for the next generation. That is why I try to make it [the blog] formal and analytical. I want my readers to understand my opinions and analysis. I am not simply throwing thoughts or telling stories, I try to provide substantiated facts and arguments.

Amirul's blogging style corresponded with his blogging motivation. He claimed that he blogged about issues that affected his community and wanted his readers to understand his arguments. He further admitted that he wanted to archive and even publish his writings. The affordances of blogging such as easy editing and data retrieval support Amirul's intention to

⁷¹ Shah Alam is the state capital of Selangor, one of the most developed states in Malaysia. It is also one of the major cities in Klang Valley that is heavily populated and industrialised.

participate in discourses and record his thoughts. He made it clear that he did not blog for the sake of simply sharing experiences. Through blogging, he wanted to make his residential area (Shah Alam) a better place for everyone, and in attempting to do this, he tried to be as formal and analytical as possible in his blog posts. He shared that even his daughter thought that his blog was too formal, but he dismissed her criticism by claiming that as a teenager, his daughter could not fathom the seriousness of his writing. I understood Amirul's desire to present himself as a serious blogger. He did not want to please his readers. Instead, he wanted them to adopt his stance and as such he only focused on readers who were as serious about the community as he was. Amirul further stressed that he was not simply "throwing thoughts" or "telling stories" and that, as a concerned citizen, he provided objective, third-person narratives on issues.

In contrast, the diarist bloggers' limited interest in state politics was apparent in their blogging style. They tended to adopt a blogging style that was less formal and often resembled a story-telling approach. This group of bloggers wrote about personal and everyday experiences rather than politics and community issues. They were more interested in recording their everyday experiences and sharing them with friends and family. Thus, they were usually informal and conversational in their blogging, just as they would communicate with their close circle of acquaintances. Instead of trying to appear authoritative, these bloggers often shared their stories, views and opinions in first-person narratives, writing and sharing stories as they were experienced. For these bloggers, blogging was personal; the blog was their journal in which they documented their life experiences. Unlike the activist bloggers who adopted strict and formal blogging styles to represent their deliberate political intentions, the diarist bloggers used their own personal style, mostly hoping to be able to share their stories as they understood and experienced them. Ju-Li, a 20 year old Chinese law student who I categorised as an observant citizen shared these thoughts on her blogging style:

I like to write in riddles, it's my way of writing because that's how I think. Some of my friends have mentioned the same thing - which I like to write 'beat around the bush' kind of way. The thing is, when I'm writing my postings, it is actually not for the public to read, it's more for me to express myself so sometimes I may write something that other people don't understand and only I can understand so it may seem like a teen-*novelish* thing but it is actually kind of like a little riddle... in that sense... you get what I mean? Maybe those who are really close to me, close friends and family who are familiar with the way I am can understand my blog.

Ju-Li blogged as she thought, which according to her was “in riddles” and a “beat around the bush kind of way”. While she shared her blog posts with friends and family, she claimed that when she blogged, she mainly did it to express herself, and to record her own thoughts and experiences as she understood them. She explained that this was why her friends sometimes found it hard to understand her postings, suggesting that only those who were close to her could understand what she shared on her blog. For Ju-Li, blogging was very personal. She did not mind about public approval nor did she want to attract readers to her blog. Rather, she approached her blog through a first-person narrative where she blogged informally according to her own style that probably limited her blog reach, but preserved the personal nature of her blog.

Thus, the ways the activist and diarist bloggers presented themselves on their blogs were in accordance with their blogging motivations and their citizen types. The activist bloggers who felt driven to blog as a means of political participation tended to be formal and authoritative. To them, such a blogging style was important for having the readers take their views and analysis seriously. On the other hand, for the diarist bloggers whose goals were mostly to express, record and share everyday experiences, their blogging style often resembled their everyday way of conversing. They did not intend to appear authoritative. Instead, they presented themselves as typically and as naturally as they were in everyday life. These blogging styles indicated that the bloggers reflected their existing political selves in their blogs and was an extension of who they were as citizens.

6.4.3 Blogging Practices

The blogging practices show that despite the strong connection between blogging and their existing political selves, everyday, habitual and sometimes mundane blogging habits can offer new and significant citizen experiences. For the activist bloggers who wanted to present a serious political persona, their blogging practices were often strictly formatted. They usually took a long time to write their analysis due to the research they completed to substantiate their arguments. Mudin aptly explained how blogging can require a lot of time and effort:

It takes a lot of time, even to write a few sentences. I must have a stand and my own personal views which need to be verified and researched to ensure that they are substantiated. I need to craft my arguments convincingly and correctly. At the same time it is important that I don't put myself as easy target simply because I wrote a post that is unsubstantiated. It's never fun to get condemned in your own blog [laughs]. I don't filter

the comments my readers put on my blog. I figured since I am free to blog about what I feel, it is only right that I also offer the same freedom for others to scrutinize my writings.

Mudin took his time and put in a lot of effort to write a blog post. Since he wanted to present his own views and recommendations on issues, he felt accountable to provide analyses that were substantiated. He wanted to ensure that his writings were significant and were convincing to the readers. Moreover, he claimed to not filter his readers' comments, allowing his analyses to be scrutinised and even criticised. In his blogging practice that was very factually oriented, reflecting a reputation that Mudin wanted to build and protect. In their study of bloggers' habits, Sepp et al. (2011) identified self-presentation, image management and reputation as especially important to serious bloggers who consider blogging a form of political advocacy. It is evident in the Mudin's approach to blogging that he is a serious blogger. Mudin's articulated and careful blogging practices also concurs with recent studies (Nardi et. al, 2004; Baumer et al., 2008) that showed blogging as a social activity where the bloggers' awareness of their readers can have an impact on what they chose to blog about and what identity they presented to their audience. These studies also indicated that the expectations of blog readers, concerning the frequency of updates, responsiveness and more, may influence a blogger's posting activities. In addition, I argue that in the basic act of researching and carefully developing a blog post, a blogger like Mudin was not only trying to be accountable for his writings but was also acting as a responsible citizen who initiated and deliberated in political discourses. Khairol, a 22 year old law graduate who I categorised as an advocate citizen because of his involvement in socio-political organisations shared Mudin's attitude:

I often write with the intention of making my readers think. I want to provide a different view than what's available in the media. I want other Malaysians to read what I have to say. That is why I am careful with what I write. They must be factual. I will take the time to go through different sources. I will read opinions from other prominent political commentators. I also read from books, journal and other websites. Sometimes I engage in discussions with friends or other bloggers before I come up with my own take on an issue. It's also important that I am part of blogger groups, where I can engage in discussions about what I write and how to make my blog better and attract more readers.

Like Mudin, Khairol also found it important to conduct significant research before blogging about his opinions and arguments. Being an activist blogger whose intention was to participate in political discourse and influence his readers, Khairol stressed that it was vital that his writings were factual and that he based his arguments on as many sources as possible.

Khairol was willing to go the ‘extra mile’ in order to provide analyses that were unique and that were different to “what’s available in the media”. To provide an analysis or opinion post that was personalised, Khairol accessed many different sources before writing his piece. One of the ways was by being a member of blogger-groups that enabled him to be engaged in discourses with other serious bloggers like himself. Khairol’s and Mudin’s practices are consistent with the findings of Kavanaugh et al. (2006) who reported that political bloggers tended to adopt more caution in their writings, had a higher sense of accountability, were better informed about local and larger political problems, belonged to more formal social networks and were more likely to deliberate with others on the issues that they blogged about.

The blogging practices for the diarist bloggers were less disciplined. Their blog posts were mostly written instantaneously without prior research and discussions. The diarist bloggers rarely referred to any other sources. They wrote by experiences and memories and as such were mostly based on personal hearsay. Adzam, a 38 year old blogger I considered to be an observant citizen, found it necessary to be political only during election periods (see Section 5.4.3). He had this to say about his blogging practices:

If I feel like writing, I just write it. I don’t expect people to visit my blog. It’s just for my own purposes. Although my blog is open to the public, I feel that it is really up to the readers what they make of my writing. It does not really matter because I don’t write to please anyone. Anyway I don’t think that I write about issues that can trigger anything, I mostly write about my experiences. I don’t see the need for research and stuff. I do have some blogger friends who comment on my blog and I do the same in their blogs but it’s mostly friendly, it’s not a formal group where we formally advise each other.

Adzam saw himself as a ‘free agent’. He wrote whenever he felt like writing and he did not feel accountable to his readers. He hardly referred to other resources for facts and information, relying on his own opinions and ideas. Adzam defended the lack of effort he put in his blogging practices by saying that he did not find such practices important since he was mostly writing about his own experiences, which he felt were personal and not threatening to anyone. He did not feel accountable to his readers because, to him, the readers came to his blog on their own free will and were responsible for their own thoughts and behaviors when reading his blog. As a diarist blogger, Adzam saw his blog as his private medium that he let others enter at their own risk. Unlike Khairol, the activist blogger, Adzam was not a part of a formal blogger group or association. Instead he was usually in a “friendly” relationship with his blogger friends where they exchanged comments on each others’ blog posts. Essentially, the blogging practices

of the diarist bloggers indicated that because they saw blogging as a private activity, the lack of research and the unstructured way of blogging exemplified the notion that blogs are an open journal that recorded everyday experiences, and thoughts and were not a public medium used to influence others about issues.

Aini, a 31 year old divorcee who I also considered to be an observant citizen, similarly indicated that blogging was essentially a private activity. However, in Aini's example it was apparent that despite the private and personal intentions of this particular group of bloggers, through their act of sharing they were sometimes able to engage in discourses and influence their readers. Aini shared the following thoughts about her blogging experience:

Blogging became an avenue for me to express myself. Not just about my personal emotional experience but also about sharing my experience legally dealing with divorce procedures. I have people asking me for advice as they are also experiencing the same thing. That was why I chose to privatize my blog. Some of the things that I shared were very personal. I don't really provide legal analysis but my own experience dealing with the divorce... I think it can also tell a lot.

Aini limited who can access her blog. By privatising her blog, only invited and approved readers could access her writings and her experiences. She did this to protect her own privacy. In her sharing of her divorce procedures, she was also narrating for her readers a very personal life experience that she did not want to make public. In her careful blogging practice, Aini was being accountable to her readers and protecting her own freedom to express and share. She claimed to share mostly personal experiences and not legal and formal analyses. Thus, her experiences were meant to help only those who sought them - friends and other readers who had been carefully filtered by her. These readers were the selected few who she trusted with her experience and who she could personally locate and identify. While her blog was essentially a closed network, she was still offering information to her readers, who shared her experience and read her blog for advice and information. Therefore, I would argue that even in blogging practices that are deliberately private and personal, blogging can still be a significant act of engagement. At the same time, in the bloggers' careful defence that they were not blogging to be political, I also find a naturalised approach towards the media where awareness about the potential dangers of open political discourse had led the bloggers to adopt a conscious effort to separate the private and the political.

6.4.4 Blogging Rewards

It is important to recognise that to continuously blog requires ongoing motivations that come in the form of blogging rewards. This approach is in agreement with Liu et al. (2010) and Ekdale et al. (2010) who found blogging activities were strongly related to perceived gratifications, as those who believed blogging would fulfil their desire to pour out feelings and connect with others were more willing to update and maintain their blogs. Similarly, Miura and Yamashita (2007) found an intention to continue blog writing was positively affected by bloggers' being satisfied with benefits to self, relationships with others, and skill in handling information. Both the diarist and activist bloggers in the present study claimed that they were mostly rewarded by the responses they received. The activist bloggers felt that they were rewarded by the possibility of causing some form of political change or influencing others by expressing their opinions. Since this group of bloggers mostly blogged with the intention of participating in political discourses, the ability to connect with other politically-inclined bloggers and readers, as well as the responses they obtained for each blog post, were an important indication that blogging was serving the purpose of affecting others and being part of the country's politics. At the same time, these bloggers were also satisfied by the belief that blogging was their material contribution to making a better Malaysia. Zul, a 28 year old partisan citizen who is a strong supporter of Anwar Ibrahim, claimed that:

There are no monetary rewards. In fact I had to spend a lot of my own money. I just want people to free their minds; to deliberate on their own. Malaysians should learn to be more political. I want a better environment for my country. I'm happy to know that at least I've done my part [through blogging] to achieve something better for my country; at least my children will inherit a better Malaysia...

Zul was gratified by the belief that he had been able to make other Malaysians think outside the rigid political dimensions they have been historically conditioned to accept. As someone who was very politically active, blogging was his access to the public. Through blogging he was able to reach others who he might not have been able to in his capacity as an everyday Malaysian. He was rewarded by the thought that his views and opinions were being read and deliberated on, and these results were an indication that he had achieved his goal of creating more politically critical and analytical Malaysians.

Goh Wei Liang, a 26 year old postgraduate student in Economics, was the only non-Malay blogger who I categorised as a partisan citizen. He was very open in his support for the

government and his inclinations towards the MCA⁷² the Chinese component in the government Barisan Nasional coalition. According to Goh, blogging had enabled him to make new acquaintances in the political arena and had allowed him to contribute to the country's political marketplace. He explained:

I get the satisfaction knowing that I can share my opinions with others. I have made a lot of friends – some politicians – but I had misunderstandings with some too because they cannot agree to disagree. Several friends or bloggers have even accused me of being a paid blogger for a particular political party. But I have always stood firm to tell my side of the story and that I am neither paid nor working for any politicians. My blog stays clear of monetary rewards and remains a place for me to pen my thoughts for others to read. I feel rewarded by the thought that I am able to give a different opinion than what is already out there in the blogosphere and the media.

Blogging had given Goh the ability to put his views forward but because of his partisan stance, he had been accused of being a paid blogger. To Goh, this criticism was not the downside to blogging; it was an opportunity for him to defend his political inclinations. Blogging enabled him to explain his views and, in the process, he had also been able to make new acquaintances, especially political ones. He also stressed that he did not blog for money but was more interested in making his views public. Goh's justification of why he blogged and the satisfaction he obtained from blogging showed that for partisan bloggers especially, blogging was rewarding in that it was a non-partisan platform wherein even partisan bloggers like Goh can present his analysis and arguments to be scrutinised in an objective manner. It allowed partisan citizens like Goh to put forward and justify his political stance to a wider audiences.

For the diarist bloggers, rewards often come in the form of the feeling of release and the positive acknowledgement from their blog readers. Aida, a 31 year old blogger I considered to be a distant citizen because of her apprehension towards local politics (see Section 5.4.4), stated that blogging helped her feel happy in her everyday life. She narrated her thoughts on this point as follows:

If I had a bad day at work for example, blogging is a good release. I don't necessarily need to blog about the things that are stressing me, I could blog about anything and it still helps. The comments from my visitors are also very rewarding. The intimacy between my visitors and myself has helped me build friendships. It feels good to know that there are people reading about me and sometimes they too share the same experience. It is not really about enjoying the attention but more about appreciating the connectedness

⁷² The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) is the main Chinese political party and together with UMNO and MIC makes up the ruling government, Barisan Nasional.

between friends and even strangers. I'm happy to know that others are interested in my life. It makes me feel significant.

Diarist bloggers like Aida were gratified by the act of blogging and sharing as much as by the ability to put forth specific thoughts or experiences. She found it fulfilling that there were responses to whatever she shared and this made her feel that her experiences were appreciated and meaningful. She also claimed that she felt connected to her readers who sometime shared her experience. All these responses and acknowledgements made Aida feel significant. I argue that blogging was mostly rewarding to the diarist bloggers when their everyday experiences were magnified by the positive or even negative responses given by the blog readers. Everyday experiences became more important when they were blogged about. As such, while the activist bloggers were rewarded by their ability to be a part of public political discourses and the potential of influencing political decision-making, the diarist bloggers were gratified by the value blogging added to their everyday experiences. Blogging and its affordances for expression and connection made both the diarist bloggers and the activist bloggers feel more important and significant as bloggers, citizens and individuals. In a way, these bloggers are satisfied by the way they are able to fulfil their motivation for expression and, as proposed by Shao (2009), these bloggers feel that they are able to actualize their self-potential through self-reflection and sharing of personal feelings and thoughts.

6.4.5 Blogging and Citizen Engagement

The bloggers' motivations to blog indicated that the desire to blog was an extension of their citizen selves. The explicitly political bloggers were inclined to blog about politics with the hope of affecting socio-political change. The less political bloggers were more interested in sharing everyday experiences and connecting with close acquaintances. However, despite the obvious connection between existing political lives and blogging practice, I have argued that the affordances of blogging have enabled new forms of engagements that cut across strict understandings and practices of politics in the traditional sense. Blogging facilitates the freedom to express and share, which is welcomed by everyday Malaysians who have previously been accustomed to a closed political and media system. Blogs offer the ability to make public their concerns and most importantly dictate their own understanding of politics and engagement. Even for citizens who were not directly involved in socio-political actions, the ability to share personal

experiences and interests has led them to become more connected with others and enter into discourses that may not be formally political, but were nevertheless significant for the community they live in. Most importantly, following the proposition of blogging as a form of citizens' media, blogging was evidently a new engagement experience for these bloggers in the sense that they were personally gratified with their ability to make public their personal views, opinions and experiences. Table 4 summarises the everyday blogging experiences that differentiate the activist bloggers and the diarist bloggers.

Table 4: Summary of the Everyday Blogging Experiences of the Activist and Diarist Bloggers

	Activist Bloggers	Diarist Bloggers
Blogging Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Voicing and sharing opinion - Have a voice - Participate in issues - Influence change - Debate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Documenting everyday life - Get acquainted with family and friends - Archive thoughts - Meet others with same interest
Blogging Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Authority/expert/moderator - Formal - Third-person narrative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conversational - Informal - First-person narrative
Blogging Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Factual - Do not filter comments - Access external resources for information - Discuss with others - Some are members of blogger groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Story-telling - Filter comments - Hardly refer to other sources - Own opinion/hearsay - Not involved in blogger groups
Blogging Rewards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Influence socio-political change - Possible link to authorities - Debate/discourse - influence local politics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Better writer - More informed - Acquainted with others - Everyday life becomes significant

6.5 Blogging and the Citizenship Experience

In the previous chapter, I explained that only the partisan citizens fit Bennett's (2008) description of the dutiful citizens who adhere to the traditional convention where politics and participation are confined to the electoral and institutional kind. However, the blogging experiences that the bloggers in the present study shared are the realisation of what Bennett

termed the actualising citizen. According to Bennett, actualising citizens experience politics and participation in unique ways wherein they create their own citizen experiences that are directly based on and are beneficial to their everyday life. The bloggers' ability to dictate what they blogged about and their creativity in building their own blogging persona exemplify that even for the most partisan bloggers, the traits of actualising citizenship were emerging. Blogging allowed these citizens to break away from the very structured and elitist practice of politics and participation. Mudin, the PAS supporting blogger, illuminated how blogging was changing the way everyday partisan citizen experienced political participation:

I am a partisan blogger but I am also the party's critic. Many of my writings criticize PAS. I think that is the responsibility of PAS bloggers. If we find faults with PAS, we must voice it out; we must tell it as it is. I think bloggers play an important role. For example, if you are directly involved in PAS or a PAS politician, you cannot speak as you like, your opinions may have to be aligned to the party's. But if you're a blogger, you can say whatever. That's important because we are able to give different opinions and present grassroots sentiments.

For Mudin, blogging enabled him to show his support for PAS by being objective and critical. He did not want to appear to be a 'blind' supporter. In this instance, blogging enabled the partisan citizen to support the party on his own terms, enabling more participative accounts of politics. Hence, partisan politics could be taken from a grassroots perspective, something that is not available in the party-owned media. Mudin explained the problem with conventional partisan politics by noting that it would be harder for a PAS politician to criticise the party. As a result, blogging gave the freedom for a PAS supporter to negotiate and even challenge a rigid political tradition by creating their own platform where they can comment, support or even advise the political elites that have traditionally controlled the party sentiments. It is in this merging of partisan politics and democratic participation that I find the notions of the dutiful citizen and the self-actualising citizen crossing paths. This aligns with Bennett's (2008) contention that the two kinds of citizenship are not opposing categorisations of the citizen experience; rather, the two could also work in parallel and affect the traditional ways of understanding politics and citizenship. For the partisan citizens who strongly believe in the credibility of electoral and governmental politics, the characteristics of the dutiful citizen is accompanied or even enhanced by a higher sense of individual purpose where voting is as important as having the freedom to publish their personal stance on issues.

For those who have been excluded by the culture of partisan politics and cannot adhere to the conventions of the dutiful citizens, blogging also affords them the possibility of actualising citizenship. Especially for the activist bloggers, the ability to share their opinions and encourage others to support and participate in community-oriented movements allowed them to expand their activism and create a discourse that is beneficial to their cause without having to depend on and succumb to the partisan mass media. Similarly, for the diarist bloggers who were able to blog about lived experiences and everyday concerns, the ability to share and make significant their personal stories and interests changes the way these politically excluded citizens make sense of their own lives and their ability to become active citizens. Blogging allowed the diarist bloggers to share and put to good use personal experiences and private interests, allowing them to connect the everyday with public issues that were closely related and even material in their own lives (Dahlgren, 2006). This is indicative of actualising citizenship wherein community action can be derived from loose networks established through friendships and close relations (Bennett, 2008).

Subsequently, when the blogging experiences are viewed through a citizens' media lens, it is evident that blogging was a rewarding media practice that was changing the way the bloggers understood politics and participation, as well as the way they viewed and gave meaning to their everyday lives. This resembles Rodriguez's (2001) claim that the pivotal role of citizens' media in empowering citizens is to develop new understandings and images of themselves outside the corporate space of mediation created by mainstream media channels and outlets. More specifically in Malaysia, this means that citizens are able to make sense of their own lives and find meaning in their everyday lives through a media practice that is free from the patronage of partisan politics. Even for the most casual of the diarist bloggers like Adzam whose blogging motto was "if I feel like writing, I just write it" and who did not feel accountable to his readers, the ability to blog, express and to connect with the readers and other bloggers was a significant change in everyday life and, to an extent, an important form of media engagement. The satisfaction and optimism that the bloggers experienced not only came from the expression of specific thoughts or ideas, but also in the ability to take control of their own media as well as the ability to magnify and make significant the banality of everyday lives. Blogging also helps to bring into being what Cottle (2011, p.651) explains as 'a new space for social inclusivity, group recognition and pluralized participation as well as different forms of political conversation and

engagement'. As a result, these bloggers were able to become actualising citizens who dictated their own citizenship experience by personally defining political and everyday acts that were meaningful and material in their lives (Bennett, 2008).

6.6 Conclusion

From the categorisation outlined above, I have shown in general that the citizens' blogging motivations and blogging styles corresponded with their everyday political life. For the more active and participative citizens, their blogging motivation was more political in that they made it obvious that they blogged not simply for friends, but mostly to have their opinions and views shared with the public. Their activist inclinations were brought over to their blogs. For the less political, blogging was largely the act of recording and sharing everyday experiences. While the activist bloggers were obviously more political in their blogs, I would argue that when it comes to measuring the significance of blogging on the experience of citizenship, both kinds of bloggers were transforming the ways they participated in politics and the way they understood their roles as citizens. This pattern will become more evident when the blogging experiences are discussed in more detail in the following chapters where I go into detail the blogging experiences of the activist bloggers and the diarist bloggers more specifically.

CHAPTER 7: ACTIVIST BLOGGERS AND THE PERSONALISATION OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter highlighted interesting differences in blogging motivation, styles, practices and rewards. Based on these differences, I found that the bloggers can generally be grouped into the activist bloggers and diarist bloggers. The activist bloggers often blog with the intention of participating in local politics while the diarist bloggers tend to blog for personal release. Despite the differences in the everyday blogging habits, I also uncovered that these bloggers were realising actualised citizenship (Bennett, 2008) by experiencing politics and participation through creating their own citizen practices, which are directly based on and beneficial to their lived everyday. In this chapter I explore further this relationship between blogging and the actualization of citizenship by looking specifically at the experiences of the activist bloggers.

I show how blogging enabled the activist bloggers to participate in active political discourses that in many cases were translated into direct political action. Through blogging, these bloggers were able to situate themselves as the authoritative figure at the centre of politics, dictating and designing their own political path. They were experiencing a new form of participation in which politics could be and is being personalised (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). More specifically, I indicate that personalization is essentially the bloggers' response towards the structural controls that limit their participation in formal politics. Since the established culture confines democratic participation, these bloggers participate in the ways that are available to them. In relation to the bloggers' personalisation of politics, I argue that the activist bloggers in this study were also realising the experience of the new politics in Malaysia (Loh, 2009; Sani, 2009) that offers a more participative and democratic account of politics and participation compared to the established old politics that is elitist and ethnicised.

7.2 Blogging and the Personalisation of Politics

According to Bennett (2012), the personalisation of politics has long existed in the form of populist uprisings or emotional bonds with charismatic leaders. To date, many theoretical and empirical studies on the personalisation of politics have concentrated on the role of politicians

and their personal lives in defining politics and political campaigns (McAllister, 2007; Garzia, 2011; Van Aelst et al., 2012). However, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) contended that the notion of personalised politics is salient in the practices of everyday political participation. They reasoned that the rise of new communication technologies together with increased social fragmentation have produced individualisation as a dominant social condition. These developments have also led to the diminishing of institutionalised, formal and hierarchical accounts of politics and participation.

As ideological and formal group identifications (such as party, union, church or class) fade as the mechanisms for organising civic life (Putnam, 2000), individuals increasingly code their personal politics through personal lifestyle values (Bennett, 1998; Giddens, 1991). Social fragmentation and the decline of group loyalties have also given rise to an era of personalised politics in which individual expression displaces collective action framed by reference to the agenda of political causes. Individuals can hold themselves at the centre of their own political universe and take control of their political environment. The social networking potential of ubiquitous communication technologies, such as blogs, has expanded these political universes, and the reach of social networks often enables the co-production and distribution of multi-media content involving a potentially large audience. These individualised orientations can lead to engagement with politics as an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles and grievances. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argued that:

when enabled by various kinds of communication technologies, the resulting personalized political action in post-industrial democracies bear some remarkable similarities to action formations in decidedly undemocratic regimes such as those swept by the Arab Spring⁷³ In both contexts, large numbers of similarly disaffected individuals seized upon opportunities to organize collectively through access to various technologies (p. 744)

While personalisation and individualisation have been related to the experiences of post-democratic societies (Coleman, 2008; Dahlgren, 2006), Bennett and Segerberg's acknowledgement of the similarity shared between the deinstitutionalised post-democratic society and the discriminatory undemocratic society in personalising and maximising the use of

⁷³ The Arab Spring is a series of revolutionary demonstrations, protests, and civil wars occurring in the Arab world since late 2010. The protests mostly consist of civil resistance in the form of strikes, demonstrations, marches and rallies, characterised by the effective use of social media to organise, communicate, and raise awareness against the Arab states' oppression of democracy and human rights.

communication technologies for political participation. The ability to reclaim politics and personalise participation is appealing to any citizenry where there is a disconnection between institutionalised, formal politics and the everyday citizens. In the case of the activist bloggers that I focus on in this chapter, it was evident that their participation was not welcomed by the political centre. Just like the disaffected individuals in Western democracies or in undemocratic societies, these bloggers found it more effective and rewarding to design their own political framework where they were able to assert and offer their own views on socio-political issues without having to succumb to the elitist and partisan political traditions.

Blogging fits well with this desire to customise political participation. Papacharissi (2010, p. 144) claimed that personalisation is:

The ability to organize information based on a subjective order of importance determined by the self, presents an operative feature of online media like the internet. It is a widely accepted fact that popular applied uses of the internet, like blogs or MySpace personal/private spaces, thrive on personalization

Like Papacharissi, I find it evident that by allowing the personalisation of content, blogging facilitates the personalisation of politics. In the ability to dictate and design how a particular discourse is presented, the activist bloggers in this study often wrote about political issues that interested and benefited them personally. Such personally-invested intention might appear selfish. However, based on the narratives that I gathered, I argue that for these activist bloggers, the political views shared on blogs may be personally motivated but were meant to contribute to the greater public. Papacharissi (2010) further argued that personalising politics through blogging encourages the plurality of voices and expands the public agenda by creating greater fragmentation and pluralism in the structure of political participation. Papacharissi further argued that by de-institutionalising politics, fragmenting communication and accelerating the pace of public agenda and decision-making, blogging challenges the political status quo by making personal agendas public. Blogging also offers new political opportunities for activist bloggers to communicate without the need to depend on mainstream media and political institutions (Cottle, 2008)

The interviews conducted in the present study concur with Papacharissi's optimistic take on personalization by revealing a civic and democratic dimension to the bloggers' personalised take on politics. To explain how the dynamic relationship between blogging and the

personalisation of politics is central to the realisation of the new politics in Malaysia, I identify three ways in which the activist bloggers investigated in this study were challenging the established conventions. Blogging allowed the activist bloggers to present themselves as: 1) an authoritative voice; 2) the centre of politics; and; 3) public/political figures.

7.2.1 The Authoritative Voice

One of the ways in which the bloggers personalise politics is by employing the authoritative voice. The term “authoritative voice” refers to the way they present themselves as the authority, indicating self-proclaimed expertise on issues and deliberate attempts to influence the public’s political views. In his study of bloggers’ motivations, Kim (2006) found that political bloggers were more likely to say that blogging made them feel confident and authoritative. He also found that bloggers who were explicitly political tended to identify the need to influence readers. Kim’s findings resonate with the present study, where it was found that the activist bloggers were more likely to assert an authoritative voice when blogging.

To illuminate my argument, I present the case of Laila. Laila was a 33 year old English teacher who had never thought much about politics nor the media system. Her life was utterly changed when her husband was detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA)⁷⁴ in 2002. I interviewed Laila in early 2010, more than a year before the ISA was repealed. Although the ISA is no longer in existence, Laila’s experience is still significant in explaining the role of blogging in enabling the personalisation of political participation. Laila represented a lived experience that can map the implications of blogging on the lives of everyday citizens at a particular juncture of Malaysian media and political history. The ISA may have been repealed but Laila’s experience remained an important example of the undeniable realisation of new politics where the citizen is able to narrate their own political destiny.

Laila’s political activism was catalysed by her husband’s unexpected arrest. As someone who had not been exposed to public life, her husband’s arrest left her, as she said “shocked”. Laila explained that “for two years I was not able to do anything. I was clueless, I did not even contact a lawyer when that was the first thing I should have done”. Blogging enabled Laila to transform from a victim of the ISA to an ISA activist. If she was previously unable to bring forth

⁷⁴ The Internal Security Act (1960) allowed for the detention without trial of anyone deemed to be a security threat to the country. The Act was repealed in 2011.

her predicament, blogging allowed her to not only fight for her cause but also become an expert on ISA and human rights. Laila explained:

My husband was accused of trying to bomb Port Klang⁷⁵ and kill people. He was thrown straight to jail without given any legal opportunity to state his case. If there are evidences against my husband, put it forward for all to see. Just give us [Laila and husband] justice. We have no intention of going against the government. So my blog is my own media, my own newspaper.

Laila wanted justice. She did not see her activism as anti-government, but unfortunately she was not offered the avenue to state her case in the mainstream media and the mainstream political culture silenced voices that challenged the established system. As such, Laila resorted to blogging which she claimed was her “own media”. With full control of what she wanted to make public and how she wanted to promote her fight, Laila was able to personalise her own activism. In her terms, activism was about getting justice for her husband and other ISA detainees. I argue that Laila’s attribution of her struggles and the personal nature of her blogging is a result of the structural controls that suppress her ability to participate through formal political channels. Since objectively discussing and commenting about laws and legislations is not considered acceptable in the political culture, personalizing these issues based on her experience seems a viable option. By personalizing the ISA through her experience and sharing them in her blog, Laila is not only able express her views and experiences, she is also able to influence her readers. Personalization allowed her to dictate what she wanted her readers to get from her blog by focusing on the ISA and her experience as the spouse of a detainee. In her claims of creating and dictating issues, I further interpret Laila to be portraying and asserting political authority. To her, blogging was:

First, self-expression. Second, to educate and create awareness and lastly, of course to influence. I need the public’s support. I want my readers to be my media. The government’s media is too big and powerful. We [the ISA detainees and their family] do not have anything. The detainees are not even tried in court. So where can we defend ourselves and clear our name? Even some of the Chinese who had been detained, they were called communists when most of them were really freedom fighters; they were simply fighting for their rights. I don’t want these people to die with the communist label. The main point here is that everybody needs to be given due process. You cannot just accuse people and take it as the absolute truth.

⁷⁵ Port Klang is the main shipping port in Malaysia and is one of the busiest ports in Asia. It is located in the Klang district of Selangor.

Laila was very clear about her intention to use her blog as her media and political tool. To her, the purpose of blogging was more than just self-expression it and a way for her to share her predicament - it was a form of political action. She claimed to want to educate, create awareness and ultimately influence her readers specifically about the ISA and its unfairness. Her goals were specific and they required more than simply the sharing of experiences. Laila was aware of this and that is why she felt the need to gain the public's support. Blogging allowed her to reach audiences whom she wanted "to be my media". Laila's way of presenting her case became two-fold. Laila used her media to inform her readers with the hope that her readers would in turn be equally informed and able to spread her cause. By indicating authority over the issue, Laila not only acted as an opinion leader, she also aimed to create and train other opinion leaders.

Laila's performance as an opinion leader is not a unique experience. Wright and Hinson (2009) suggested that blogging has updated the relevance of Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step-flow model as many bloggers are becoming influential as opinion leaders. Before explaining about Laila's opinion leadership further, it is important to introduce the theoretical background of opinion leaders in the context of media studies. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) identified opinion leaders as certain individuals who paid close attention to an issue, frequently discussed the issue, and considered themselves more persuasive in convincing others to adopt an opinion or course of action. Opinion leaders need not necessarily hold formal positions of power or prestige in communities but they serve as the link that alerts their peers to what matters among political events, social issues and consumer choices (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). More than that, opinion leadership can lead to better social status based on knowing about and circulating media content (Ruddock, 2013). The emergence of digital communication and the Internet has made opinion leadership more significant with unprecedented opportunities for opinion leaders to assert their influence on large number of users (Lyons & Henderson, 2005). As such, bloggers often use their blogs to express opinions on public issues (Tremayne, 2007) and can on occasion create sufficient noise to influence the media, public and policy agenda (Rettberg, 2008).

Despite the affordances of blogging, the importance of bloggers in the information dissemination process of opinion leadership stems not only from the unique characteristics of blogs, but also from the bloggers' own personal traits and motivations (Segev & Villar, 2012). For example, by capitalising on her personal struggles and desire to achieve justice for her husband and other ISA detainees, Laila was able to assume the role of opinion leader among her

blog readers. Pelmutter (2008) explained that blog opinion leaders are issue-specific. They are highly interested in discussing particular issues and their expertise and influence is usually related to a specific area of influence. Laila was evidently issue-specific. Her focus on the ISA was a personal conviction and her activism was driven by her own experience and her deep knowledge of the law.

Furthermore, as proposed by Nisbet and Kotcher's (2009, p. 341) delineation of bloggers as opinion leaders, Laila might be defined as an "agitator", who sparks discussion about issues, and a "synthesizer" who compiles and makes sense of news, scientific reports, and other blog material. As an agitator, Laila saw herself as the main source of information. She provided alternative information to the government-influenced media that was "too big and powerful". Thus, she not only shared her experience but also the predicament of other ISA detainees. Laila became somewhat like a spokesperson for the other detainees. As a synthesiser, Laila became the expert, scrutinising and analysing these experiences while continuously updating her readers about new developments or activities that related to the ISA. By becoming an opinion leader, Laila was able to further educate and train her readers to become "her media", allowing her personalised activism to achieve a wider reach.

In a way, Laila was tactical in her media use. There was a method to her blogging. Her own experience dealing with her husband's arrest and her solidarity with other detainees further supported her portrayal as an opinion leader in ISA activism. Her ability to highlight the ISA as a national issue that cut across racial boundaries further signified her way of making the ISA more than a personal issue. By claiming that she was fighting for justice and due process, Laila was able to generalise the ISA as something that was ultimately a legal and political issue that affected all Malaysians. Her ability to relate her experience into wider political connotations indicates that Laila portrayed herself as an authority.

Furthermore, Laila saw herself as educating the public; she became the experienced expert thus giving her a form of ownership of the issues. She also did this by strategically targeting specific audiences. For instance, she explained that her blog specifically catered to the Malays and the younger generation, two demographic groups she felt needed to be educated about the ISA:

I used to write in English but my friends advised me to write in Malay because they claim that the non-Malays are very well aware of the ISA, it is the Malays who are still oblivious. Therefore, I mainly focus on the Malay readers. And then there are the young

ones, they are genuine because they ask so many things, they want to know. They get their answers from the internet. I see the internet as a marketplace that is satisfying the growing demands for information. My blog came at the right time. My blog must provide this younger generation the information they need.

For Laila to be able to segment her blog readers and target her blog reach shows that she was doing more than just blogging. She was ultimately involved in a systematic act of media production and political participation. By tactically and strategically exploiting the participatory nature of blogging, Laila was able to position herself as an authoritative expert and the opinion leader. As the authority, Laila was able to negotiate and to a certain extent shape the way issues are presented according to her preferences. By indicating that her blog was a prominent source of information for the younger generation, Laila was again employing the authoritative voice. She saw herself as able to educate a generation as her blog “came at the right time”. She was confident that she could provide the information and the education demanded by this new generation.

By adopting the authoritative voice, Laila was personalising her own understanding and practice of politics and participation. To her, educating not only her readers but a whole generation was in itself a powerful citizenship experience. In doing so, Laila was portraying what Bang (2009) considered as a discursive approach to “the political”, whereby citizens create their own political realities through action. In response to the structural controls that affected her everyday life, Laila sought to take control of her existing reality. By being able to create discourses and form collectives with other detainees and also her blog readers, Laila was also experiencing a new form of citizenship – one that was personalised but civically and politically significant. Laila was able to reach and connect with other Malaysians through her personal activism, something that is not entirely accepted within the established culture. Through blogging, Laila was not only a victim of the ISA, she was also an ISA expert, ISA activist and ultimately an authoritative citizen. Laila was strategic in her pursuit of these roles and was determined because she sought political influence. By personalising her own political activism, Laila moved from feeling hopeless to taking charge of her own predicament by challenging the system that caused her the predicament.

7.2.2 The Centre of Politics

Being authoritative allowed these bloggers to feel some form of ownership over issues. By being the expert opinion leader, they were able to command a following and attract the attention of politicians and authorities. For these bloggers whose main intent was to influence and pursue their ideals, being connected to the public and the political decision-makers allowed them to directly participate in the country's politics (Cottle, 2008). Through the connection they built with the authorities and the larger public, the bloggers often found themselves advising, initiating and participating in political actions. The transition from blogging about politics to participating in political action is common among elite A-list bloggers (Drezner & Ferrell, 2004; Davis, 2010) who are sometimes co-opted into mainstream politics. This can be seen in the way several Malaysian bloggers such as Jeff Ooi, Nik Nazmi, Tony Pua and Elizabeth Wong into instant politicians and state representatives (Gong, 2011; Tan & Zawawi, 2008) (see Section 3.4.3).

Similarly, for the activist bloggers in this study who had followers but were not part of the A-list, participating in political actions that went beyond blogging brought them to see themselves as significant political players, placing themselves at the centre of the particular politics that they adhered to. Through blogging, these bloggers were able to highlight their personal contribution to politics and in the process saw themselves as important citizens. By the phrase "the centre of politics", I refer to how the bloggers were able to not only see themselves as participative citizens but also as agenda-setters and decision-makers. In this sense, the bloggers focused on their ability to highlight the issues that they cared about and pushed these issues onto the political agendas of their blog readers. Essentially, agenda setting is a traditional and well-accepted function of the mass media, and the experience of these activist bloggers indicates that agenda setting can also be realised by citizens who have the ability to connect directly with the mass media, political elites and the general public.

A core assertion in the agenda-setting theory is that media attention to specific "objects" (e.g., issues, politicians, organizations, activists) in the news leads to increased public concern with these same objects. The transfer of object salience from one agenda to another has come to be known as "first-level" agenda-setting (Lopez-Escobar et al., 1998; McCombs, 2004). Agendas consist of not only a set of objects but the attributes that are chosen by communicators to describe and define these objects. Expressed another way, the media not only may tell the public

“what to think about” (object salience) but also may influence “how to think about” (attribute salience) those objects. This transfer of attribute salience is identified as “second-level” agenda-setting (Lopez-Escobar et al., 1998; McCombs, 2004). Through blogging, the activist bloggers in this study claimed that they were able to inform their readers about pressing issues and through deliberate and careful analysis, the bloggers could even directly influence how their readers interpret and understand the issues. In these situations, the bloggers can be said to have adopted both the first and second levels of agenda-setting. These bloggers were able to highlight specific issues and when those issues caught the attention of a number of readers including politicians and authorities, the bloggers situated themselves at the centre of the discourse, managing and navigating how the issue was presented and accepted. If having the authoritative voice gave the bloggers a sense of ownership over issues and allowed them to act as the opinion leaders, being at the centre of politics gave the bloggers an indication that they could also become agenda-setters and decision-makers.

The agenda-setting ability of blogs mostly relies on the kind of communication that they make possible. Blogs are an immediate, horizontally linked dialogical space. This format has the effect of expanding the scope of public space and providing a structure that is closer to conversation than any traditional news medium (Papacharissi, 2009). As such, blogs enabled news and information to be directly picked up, distributed and promoted by everyday citizens. Citizens can identify issues that they feel are important and subsequently transmit the importance of those issues to their readers. Hewitt (2005, p. 104) explained succinctly new media arrangement by claiming that “the old information monopoly had an enormous ability to decide where and when news would be ‘news’. That gatekeeping function is gone, and blogs have rushed in to decide for themselves what matters”.

Although the agenda-setting function of blogs can be undermined by its small readership, Tomaszewski et al. (2009) contended that sometimes blogs attract the attention of the traditional news media and the political elites who might be scanning the blogosphere for public sentiments on issues. In cases where blogs are able to influence the agendas of political elites and the traditional media, blogs challenge and modify the agenda-setting function by enabling a bottom-up or horizontal transmission of issue salience (Woodly, 2008). Drezner and Farrell (2004, p. 17) explained the bloggers’ agenda-setting ability as follows: “The rapidity of blogger interactions affects political communication in the mainstream media through agenda setting and framing

effects. The agenda-setting role is clear – if a critical number of elite blogs raise a particular story, it can pique the interest of mainstream media outlets”.

The activist bloggers in this study claimed that, through their issue advocacy, they had in many instances attracted the attention of the political elites. Although these bloggers mostly focused on issues that interested and affected them personally, they had nevertheless been able to have these issues included in the agenda of the political decision-makers. Mahendran, for example, was a 24 year old IT analyst. He grew up Indian in a Malay-majority community in the rural northern state of Kedah. His father was a driving instructor and his mother was a housewife. Mahendran claimed that his minority background and underprivileged upbringing motivated him to be interested in the country’s politics:

I started blogging in 2007, my final year in college. I started blogging casually; very informal... but everything I wrote is usually related to my personal life. I remembered when I was in UTP⁷⁶; one of my friends told me that his father had told him not to go to Indian barbers because it would be wrong to have a non-Muslim touch his head. When I blogged about it, I related it to my own experience growing up in a multi-racial community. I wrote about how I was not chosen to be a prefect simply because I was a Non-Malay. I wrote about how we must learn from these experiences. I cannot hate Malaysia just because of these disparate experiences... that’s how my experiences shape my views and my interest in politics and social activism.

While Mahendran did not openly admit to ethnicity as the factor driving his political motivations, his constant reference to his upbringing and his sharing of his personal experience dealing with racial issues indicated that, as non-Malay, Mahendran was well aware of the country’s biased political system and how this affected his everyday life. He claimed that his life experiences had shaped his views and had made him more aware and inquisitive. Dealing with a biased system (such as his inability to become a school prefect because of his ethnicity) had intentionally and unintentionally limited his citizen potential and had pushed Mahendran to be more interested in the system that discriminated against him. In response to this bias, Mahendran resolved to perform social activism and blogging as a way to participate and challenge the system that had excluded him as an equal citizen. Mahendran’s interest in politics reflected my contention that the non-Malay bloggers were mostly advocate citizens (see Section 5.4.2) who

⁷⁶ Universiti Teknologi Petronas is a private university owed by the Malaysian oil conglomerate Petronas. It is located in Seri Iskandariah Perak and offers a wide range of engineering and technology programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (<http://www.utp.edu.my/>).

were politically engaged and were involved in social issues. However, their participation was at the grassroots level and was not considered to be legitimate by the traditional political culture.

Since Mahendran started blogging in 2007 he had been able to share and deliberate about issues that might have been considered sensitive by the mainstream political culture. His blog (bmahendran.com) was prominent, especially within the Indian community, and was read by non-Indians. Although he mainly focused on issues in the Indian community, Mahendran stated that he was actually more interested in fair governance. He claimed that politicians read and exploited his blog posts and related the following:

The non-Indian readers, they read my archived post and they understand my experiences [as a minority] and this allow for the creation of dialogues. As such they tend to relate more. Like the issue with the slaughter of the cow at the parliament. I was disgusted by it and I wrote about it. I got many responses saying things like 'I would feel the same if I was in your shoes'. They [the non-Indians] wouldn't know if I don't talk about it and they can be informed if they get the perception of the minorities. There are also politicians; Indian and non-Indians that read my blog, they tend to pick up whatever I write, even the smallest of issue. They will then highlight the issue as if they are the champions of the minorities. But it's good I guess, at least the message gets across.

Mahendran felt that by sharing his experience and writing about issues relating to the Indian community, he created inter-ethnic dialogue. The non-Indian readers looked to his blog to become better informed about issues that related to the Indian community. By indicating that he was sharing the views of the minority who were always sidelined, Mahendran considered his blog to be the centre that represented Indian politics especially for those who were unaware such as the non-Indians who were not exposed to the issues in the mainstream media. Mahendran gave the example of a controversial demonstration that happened in 2009. In the demonstration, a group of Muslim demonstrators were protesting against the relocation of a Hindu temple into their neighbourhood and marched a few hundred metres from the parliament carrying the decapitated head of a cow as an act of offence against the Hindu faith. The demonstration was met with nation-wide condemnation. Mahendran claimed that the sharing of his views and personal feelings about the incident allowed for a better understanding among his non-Indian readers. He believed that he gave his readers the views of the minority. In this way, Mahendran was able to dictate and determine what he considered to be the important issues in the Indian community. Subsequently, he further indicated and relayed the importance of these issues he had

identified to his readers. In this sense he was pushing the issues of the minority Indians onto the political agendas of his circle of readers.

Mahendran placed himself at the centre of the politics that he championed. By positioning himself in this way, he was able to analyse and present issues according to his personal views and transform the issues into a political agenda. He substantiated this claim to represent the Indians by stating that there were politicians who looked to his blog to get an Indian perspective. He believed that politicians politicised his views and made his views their own. Mahendran saw himself as not only informing other citizens; he was also setting the agenda for politicians. Although he did not seem to approve of the politicians 'borrowing' his views, he obliged because he found that at least "the messages get across". By being cynical about the politicians' way of taking his ideas and presenting themselves "as the champions of the minorities", Mahendran portrayed the lack of trust many of the advocate citizens investigated in this study had about the established politicians whom they felt were part of the problem with the essentially elitist and exclusive mainstream politics (see Section 5.4.2). At the same time, by claiming that the politicians tended to "pick up whatever I write, even the smallest of issue", Mahendran was really pointing out that he was the actual champion of the minorities because to him, the views and issues that were politicised by the politicians were really his views and reflected his agenda.

Like Mahendran, the blogger Dr. Rafick often found himself to be at the centre of political action. Dr. Rafick was introduced in the previous chapter as one of the advocate citizens identified in this study. He was active in many civil society activities and dedicated himself to his local community; Bukit Antarabangsa⁷⁷ Dr. Rafick claimed that through blogging he was able to contribute directly to the country. He did not just blog to express, he blogged for change. He even named his blog 'therightstowrite' indicating his support for the freedom to express. He found satisfaction through blogging as he felt that as a citizen he was able to share his views and have them considered. Dr. Rafick explained:

As a citizen I feel I am able to express more, whether it is being read or not? I don't know. But I can see some impact of my writing. For example, immediately after the [2008] election, I met up with one Ketua Puteri UMNO⁷⁸, I suggested to her to set up an

⁷⁷ Bukit Antarabangsa (International Hill) is a hillside township and in Ulu Klang, Selangor. It is one of the elite residential areas in Malaysia and is considered to be luxurious real estate property.

⁷⁸ Ketua Puteri UMNO is the head of the women youth wing of UMNO. Members of Puteri UMNO must be female aged under 40 years old.

NGO⁷⁹ and call it 1BukitAntarabangsa. If you go to my blog, there is actually a tab called 1BukitAntarabangsa. I said it is mine [the name and concept], you can take it. It is supposed to be about the people in Bukit Antarabangsa. 1BukitAntarabangsa is now 1Malaysia, they took my idea. There was another instance when I was invited to a forum on hill slope safety; I was given a few minutes to speak. I wrote about it on my blog. Soon after, I got calls from the geological department and the works ministry, they wanted to clarify on the points I made on my blog so I explained. In that sense, I see that whatever I do there is some impact.

Dr. Rafick found that his blog was effective. It had precipitated many political changes. He even indicated that he coined the idea for the 1Malaysia national unity concept. He claimed that 1Malaysia was actually based on his concept of 1BukitAntarabangsa, which was a discussion board Dr. Rafick created in his blog to enable residents of the area to share information and experiences and communicate with each other. 1Bukit Antarabangsa functioned as a community centre for both Dr. Rafick's blog readers and the local residents. When Dr. Rafick set up the community group in his blog, he assumed the role of the initiator and moderator giving the power to propose and dictate community discourse. Even if the community was set up online, Dr. Rafick had created a platform for his readers to interact and he became the centre of the community.

Just as Mahendran was able to equate his concerns with the agenda of the Indian minority, Dr. Rafick believed he was able to set the agenda for his community. In the interview, Dr. Rafick went on to imply that his ideas had a bigger result. It led to the creation of 1Malaysia. 1Malaysia is a national campaign designed by Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak emphasising ethnic harmony, national unity and efficient governance. Dr. Rafick believed that the 1Malaysia concept resembled his 1BukitAntarabangsa community concept and credited himself for formulating a concept that was applicable to the nation. Having said this, Dr. Rafick believes that he was able to understand the people's sentiment and turn them into a political campaign. Although there has never been a formal acknowledgement of Dr. Rafick's claim of his contribution to the conceptualisation of the 1Malaysia campaign, Dr. Rafick was confident that it was his idea and that the government "took my idea". Irrespective of whether the relationship between his 1BukitAntarabangsa idea and the government's 1Malaysia campaign was evident or coincidental, Dr. Rafick was convinced that, through blogging, he could influence national political agendas and initiate political actions.

⁷⁹ Non-Governmental Organizations

Dr. Rafick provided other evidence to substantiate the claims that his blog was significant not only to him and his readers but to the authorities as well. He stated that he was contacted by the state local council regarding his blog post on the topic of hill slope safety. He said that the authorities had referred to his blog and called him personally for clarification. Through blogging, Dr Rafick was able to connect directly to the politicians and the authorities, something he was not able to do previously. Furthermore, he saw himself as an important contributor. He was able to inspire a national campaign, create a community group and provide advice to the authorities. Having done these, Dr. Rafick put himself at the centre of political action where he had the ability to set agendas and make a significant contribution to his community specifically and the nation in general.

The reported experiences of Mahendran and Dr. Rafick confirm the findings by McKenna and Pole (2004) and Drezner and Ferrell (2008) who concluded, in their studies on blogging and political participation that the majority of bloggers felt that they had become more knowledgeable and had much more influence on politics and political discourse. I would argue a step further. For the bloggers interviewed in the present study that had activist ideals but came from a grassroots background where they previously had no direct relationship with the country's political decision-making, blogging enabled them to put themselves at the centre of political action. Blogging becomes a form of political empowerment. The bloggers' claims of having direct influence on the country's higher political decision-making might require a more sophisticated research tool able to quantify or qualify the claimed contributions. But I contend that by having the confidence to equate their roles as bloggers with those of agenda-setters and decision-makers, these bloggers were personalising politics and issues according to their own interpretation and were portraying themselves as political citizens. As a result, blogging allows more than just the personalization of politics; it also gives a sense of power and confidence to the bloggers who now feel that they are part of the country's politics.

7.2.3 The Public/Political Figure

The activist bloggers were motivated to share their views and opinions and often portrayed themselves as the authoritative experts at the political centre. By doing so, they were able to see themselves as important and significant within the country's political decision-making. They found the confidence to dictate and moderate issues in their blogs and made claims

to influence not only their blog readers but the authorities and politicians as well. They were able to personalise political participation by presenting, promoting and emphasising their own understanding of issues. Personalisation becomes further evident when the self becomes the foundation of participation, and the self is then credited for what is intended to be a representation of either party or grassroots politics. Just like a politician or a public figure, the bloggers sometimes became recognised for their activism (Papacharissi, 2010). I contend that external acknowledgement did indicate to the bloggers that they were indeed significant politically. These bloggers did not start out having a readership, but acquired a following through blogging. For these bloggers who were politically active, being acknowledged by the public and the authorities fulfilled their desire for political influence. Personally, they wanted recognition for their personal interpretation and presentation of politics because such recognition served as evidence of their contribution to and position within the wider political environment. This finding concurs with Sepp et al. (2011) who identified that bloggers enjoyed the exposure and acknowledgement they attained through blogging, and that vanity, or the need for attention, was a common gratification sought by bloggers in validating their position in the blogosphere.

Azhar, for example, was a 38 year old lecturer who I categorised as partisan. He was a strong supporter of UMNO and previously worked as the personal assistant to an UMNO politician. He started blogging in 2007, writing mostly about his experience working in politics and providing analysis on issues that interested him. Azhar claimed that blogging had made him a type of public figure:

When I first started, I had 5 readers a day. Today I can get to about 800 a day. I have had people contacting me through YM⁸⁰ and email with questions that they think I can answer. For them to do that, I mean they must be in need of the information that they cannot find elsewhere. I will definitely respond. I feel responsible to these people. I also know that the authorities are reading. I know certain politicians who read my blog because they have communicated with me. There have been instances where I was approached by strangers who claim to read my blog. To say that I'm a public figure will be too far off but it has made me known to some people. In addition, I am now acquainted to many other bloggers who are public figures in their own right. I may not be 100% public figure probably just 10% [laughs].

Azhar indicated that he had built a following. With a readership that could reach 800, Azhar had a consistent circle of readers. He also claimed to have politicians reading his blog,

⁸⁰ Yahoo Messenger (YM) is an online chat program that allows users to chat through text-based instantaneous communication.

further validating his position as a significant blogger. He had created a persona that went beyond blogging. Being approached outside his blog and having people ask for his personal advice signified his reputation as a public figure in his own right. Although his circle of influence may not have matched a full-fledged politician, Azhar was credible to his followers. In addition, he had connections with other bloggers who he considered were prominent public figures. I observed that for Azhar to imply that he was a part of this network of important bloggers was a self-acknowledgement of his position as a significant blogger. He may have seemed humble by admitting that he was only 10% of a public figure but for him to even feel like a public figure at all was important self-validation. As a result of these external acknowledgements, Azhar was driven to become more participative. He felt a responsibility towards his readers, which drove him to entertain their questions and provide more significant blogging materials. I also find that Laila, who I introduced previously as the wife of an ISA detainee, provided a good example of how external validation and the building of a public persona can ultimately be healthy for political participation. Laila claimed to experience being a public figure when she met her blog readers. She shared an example:

When we had the ‘Gerakan hapus ISA’ demonstration⁸¹, I was arrested and brought to the police centre in Cheras.⁸² When I got there, there were already hundreds of demonstrators who were already arrested. When they saw me they started asking ‘Are you kak Laila?’ They were happy to see me, they gave the *takbir*.⁸³ I was like a symbol of the ISA. These people... they were mostly my blog readers.

When Laila participated in the 2009 ‘Gerakan hapus ISA’ demonstration calling for the abolishment of the ISA she was arrested. As explained in the introductory chapter (Section 1.3.3), street demonstrations and any form of non-governmental political gatherings are illegal in Malaysia, meaning Laila’s arrest was very much anticipated. In the police centre, she found public encouragement. Laila was recognised by fellow protestors who knew about her experience and shared her activism. When they saw her, they acknowledged her by approaching her and giving the *takbir*. The *takbir*, or the Islamic call, translated as “God is great”, was her supporters’ way of praising God and indicates their feeling of solidarity when they saw that Laila was together with them in the demonstration. The acknowledgement from the public, who,

⁸¹ A demonstration calling for the abolishment of ISA organised on August 1st, 2009.

⁸² Cheras is a suburb located to the south-east of Kuala Lumpur.

⁸³ The Islamic call translated as ‘God is Great’.

according to Laila consisted mainly of her blog readers, indicated to Laila that she had become a symbol of the ISA. It was evident to her that her fight was being shared and appreciated. It also signified that Laila had been able to assert her personal agenda into the political agendas of her blog readers, with the support that she received validating her role as an important authority in ISA activism.

The connection that Laila built with her readers went beyond her activism; it had become a personal bond. She shared that when her husband was finally freed, it was really the result of a collective effort that she had managed to build through blogging:

When my husband was released I felt that all of Malaysia was jubilant, celebrating together with me. These are the people who were supporting me through my blog; they too feel as if they are part of my fight and that the fight was successful. Ultimately, I was able to share my happiness with my blog readers.

Laila dedicated her triumph and joy to her blog readers who she felt had always been part of her journey. More than that, she felt as if “all of Malaysia” was celebrating with her, indicating that she believed her activism had impacted the whole nation. While she may have been referring to an imagined community, it signified that, for Laila, her activism was politically significant and was acknowledged by the general public. It also indicated to her that the public were on her side, supporting her fight against the political establishment.

Laila considered her husband’s freedom as the measure of her success. She further implied that the success was not hers alone, but was something she shared with her readers who she felt had fought together with her. I argue that Laila’s acknowledgement of the collective effort enforced her status as an opinion leader at the centre of the fight. In this sense, the fight became less about the ISA and more about her ability to lead and help form the collective. While such an argument might cast personalisation in a negative light, I propose that, ultimately, Laila’s feeling of ownership over the fight was a signifier of citizen empowerment. Her ability to assert authority and the consequent validation that she received from her supporters show that such personalised political participation can be pertinent in the creation of meaningful citizenship.

7.3 New Politics in the Personalisation of Participation

I argue that for this group of activist bloggers who were very much motivated to blog about socio-political issues and had the desire to educate and influence others, blogging gave them a new way to experience citizenship. I propose that these bloggers were experiencing what Bennett and Segerberg (2011) called the personalisation of politics. Personalisation in this context refers to the preoccupation with the self as the foundation of civic and political participation. I find that by portraying themselves as the authoritative voice - at the centre of politics and as public figures - these bloggers were satisfied by their ability to personalise their mode of activism, dictating politics according to their understanding and life experiences. In their attempt to personalise politics according to their ideals, these bloggers often found themselves organising political discourses and participating in political actions without having to succumb to institutionalised political patronage.

As such, for these bloggers who intentionally blog for political influence, personalization affords them the political power to create an alternative sphere of new politics that was more participative and deliberative, a sphere free from the rigidity of the traditional culture of old politics that is inherently ethnicised and elitist (Sani, 2009). In this sphere of new politics, the bloggers were reclaiming their rights to express, deliberate and even scrutinise the political system that evidently affected their everyday lives. Their participation often started from the sharing of personal views, affiliations and experiences that were inherently political. According to Bang (2005, p. 163), this is how personalisation negotiates traditional political structures. Citizens' engagement is now "couched increasingly in political networks rather than positioned against a hierarchy". The structured and hierarchical elements of traditional politics that used to be the central elements in political life are replaced by ethics, personal integrity and mutual confidence.

According to Bang (2004, p. 163) "the political is growing increasingly personal and self-reflexive." It is evident by the narratives that I have shared that these bloggers were ultimately proactive citizens who were affecting and transforming the culture of local politics. Through everyday blogging, they contributed by sharing personal and political views and participating in political actions that would ultimately affect the larger public that could even facilitate political change (Cottle, 2011). Although it has been argued that personalised politics might distance bloggers such as these from institutional politics and thus have the effect of disintegrating

politics (Lenzi, 2006; Cook, 2006), I find the opposite to be the case. With regard to this study especially, I argue that the personalisation of participation is really the unintended result of a restrictive political tradition that privileges formal political and public channels for a selected few. Personalization allowed these bloggers to penetrate into the exclusive political culture and overcome the barriers to enter formal politics by claiming and practicing politics as personal. Thus personalization is part of the new deliberative and participative politics in Malaysia (Loh, 2003) that is transforming Malaysian politics.

In their approach to an action-oriented politics, the bloggers investigated in this study were strategic in their desire to inform and take part in decision-making processes because they sought political influence and strove for political recognition (Loh, 2009). These citizens possessed, or could access, the skills and resources that enabled them to influence agendas and decisions. Participation became an integral, almost natural, extension of their identity as they considered themselves to be significant in the political system (Bang, 2005).

7.4 Conclusion

I conclude this chapter by re-affirming the experiences of the activist bloggers. I emphasise that ultimately these bloggers were personalising politics. They were adapting and customising issues according to what they understood as the best interpretation and practice. I argue such personalisation is ultimately healthy for political participation. Especially for these bloggers who previously felt that there was no opportunity to participate in local political traditions, blogging enabled them to not only participate but also control the issues that they wanted to focus on. In doing so, they not only satisfied their own need for expression and participation, they also offered the public different ways of understanding issues. I find that such personalised citizen participation affects the political convention. The way they were able to situate themselves as the political authorities, dictating issues and policies and subsequently affecting political agendas and decision-making also indicates that these activist bloggers were, as Bang (2004, 2005) described, negotiating “the political” and participating in new politics (Loh, 2003) that moves the political centre from the state to the everyday citizens. In the next chapter, I continue to explain the influence of blogging on citizenship by analysing the experiences of the diarist bloggers. I show that, even for this group of bloggers who mostly wrote about personal experiences, blogging enabled a new understanding of politics and participation.

CHAPTER 8: THE DIARIST BLOGGERS AND THE POLITICISATION OF THE PERSONAL

8.1 Introduction

This chapter details the experiences of the diarist bloggers who I have claimed to be less political and more interested in blogging about everyday experiences. By focusing specifically on the experiences of Muslim women bloggers, I show how blogging enables personal political power to rise among women who have ostensibly accepted their place in the order of things. Despite the obviously gendered political policies, the women interviewed in this study were generally uncritical about political exclusions in their everyday lives. I argue that there is a systemic and structural justification for this lack of confrontation. More specifically, I show that for these Muslim women especially, there was a naturalised acceptance of this gendered political dimension and this explains why most of the women in this study occupied the least active citizen categories.

In relation to this acceptance, I explore how blogging has enabled these women to become political and participative without having to openly resist this naturalised gender role. I explain in detail how these women used the religious concept of *Dakwah*, simply translated as “a call to God”, as their motivation and justification for participation in political action. I adopt a feminist view in my explanation of the relationship between blogging, religion, citizenship and being a woman. In doing so, I show that in the women’s claims of performing *Dakwah* through blogging, they were really transforming how the less political citizens in general, and women in particular, understand and negotiate their everyday experiences in relation to politics and citizenship.

8.2 Diarist Bloggers and the Narratives of Muslim Women

The diarist bloggers consisted mostly of the observant and distant citizens that I considered to be less political and participative in comparison to the partisan and advocate citizens (see Section 6.5.1). I argued in Chapter 5 that despite their apparent lack of interest in local politics, these bloggers were not entirely passive and had been conditioned by the political and media system to feel excluded from the country’s politics. This group of bloggers tended to blog about personal and everyday experiences, rather than overtly political issues. I also

indicated that a strong gendered dimension to political participation was apparent. In this chapter I try to put into context why these women were less political in the traditional sense and how, through blogging, they were negotiating and even challenging this custom. Their experiences indicated that blogging allowed more than just the sharing of personal experiences; it also enabled participation in the politics and policies that shaped those very experiences. This concurs with Cottle (2011) who explains that:

everyday conversation and conviviality entered into via new social media helps to instantiate moments of social connectedness and interaction in which identities and interests, rights and responsibilities can become recognized and performed and may even produce new templates for the conduct of civil society (p.651)

Although the bloggers I have grouped as observant and distant citizens came from different demographic backgrounds, I find that the Muslim women bloggers formed the majority of this least participative citizen group. All the three distant citizens that I have identified as being cynical and pessimistic regarding mainstream politics were Muslim and female. In addition, out of the 7 bloggers I categorised as the observant citizens, three were Muslim women (See section 5.4.3). In their experience I discovered that gender and religion were key ideas in how these women made sense of blogging and being citizens. For these women, blogging was seen as a religious commitment. To ground my observation and analyses of this gendered and religious experience, I find it necessary to first contextualise the relationship between gender, Islam and citizenship within the Malaysian context.

8.3 Islam, Gender and Citizenship in Malaysia

According to Lister (2003), the twentieth-century mainstream theorisation of citizenship has tended to ignore the ways in which women's gradual achievement of civil, political and social rights often followed a different pattern from men's. Likewise, it has tended to dismiss women's earlier exclusion as a historical anomaly. The works of feminist scholars have, on the contrary, revealed how, in both theory and practice that citizenship has been quintessentially male. Looking at the Malaysian political demographics and cultural representation, it is hard to deny Lister's contention. Malaysia is a paternalistic society (Mohamad et al., 2006). Even in the age of globalisation and women's empowerment, women are still expected to fulfil their traditional roles of being the care-giver at home. Women still play a secondary role to men in

politics and government. While men are expected to fulfil public duties, women are still left to carry the burden of house work (Othman, 2006). It is due to this politicised distinction between the domestic and the public roles and the biased separation of the personal and the political that Malaysian women are structurally excluded in the fulfilment of citizenship.

Malaysian feminist scholars such as Othman (2006) and Mohamad (2006, 2010) have argued that the Islamisation process that engulfed the global Muslim world in the 1970s and 1980s has further “gendered” the Malaysian public life. The rise of political Islam that came in the forms of student movements and religious associations saw greater demands for moral and religious action from the state, which was then seen as secular and not representing the true Islamic leadership and governance (Hamid, 2009). Student uprisings in the 1970s led by ABIM⁸⁴ whose leader at the time was Anwar Ibrahim managed to create a new identification with political Islam among young, educated Malays. At the same time, the rise of the *Ulama*⁸⁵ leadership in the opposition party, PAS, placed further extreme pressure on the state to emphasise Islamisation projects. According to Foley (2001), the 1980s especially saw a dramatic change in PAS, the only Malay-Muslim majority opposition party. After a brief co-operation with UMNO and the coalition government in the 1970s – mostly in response to the May 1969 racial riot – PAS changed its political course by adopting a stricter Islamic stance that proposed the full implementation of *Shariah* law.

In response to these political pressures and in the attempt to show that UMNO was an equally Islamic political party, the 1980s and 1990s saw Islamisation being co-opted into state policies. The strategy was to bring Islam within the state’s modernising project (Stivens, 2006). For example, to appear more attuned to Islamic concerns, the state initiated an Islamic bank, an Islamic university, an Islamic insurance scheme, as well as the Malaysian Institute for Islamic Understanding, which was charged with shaping an Islamic work ethic (Tong & Turner, 2008). Mohamad (2010) further argued that the Islamisation project could also be seen clearly in the bureaucratisation of Islam in terms of the implementation of *Shariah* laws and the expansion of

⁸⁴ Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), simply translated as the Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement, is a powerful Non-Governmental organization that consists of professional and educated Muslims that work for the creation of an Islamic community

⁸⁵ Ulama is an Arabic term for religious clerics. In Malaysian politics, Ulama often refers to religious leaders that attempt to Islamise the Constitution. These Ulama(s) are often related to the political ideology of PAS that promotes religious leadership.

Islamic public institutions. Mohamad (2010) explained, that starting from the 1990s, all laws affecting Muslims were radically revamped:

with family laws and Islamic criminal codes redrafted as distinct legislation, while new laws were enacted to govern the functioning and administration of the upgraded *Shariah* courts. These resulted in an abundance of statutes, from Islamic matters to criminal offences to *Shariah* civil court procedures to *Shariah* criminal court procedures to laws on the administration of Islam itself (p. 515)

Although there is a common penal code in Malaysia, it does not cover certain crimes that are deemed exclusively Islamic. According to Othman (2006), the first state to have separate legislation on *Shariah* criminal offences was Kelantan, which passed the law in 1985. In 1987, Kelantan also passed a law introducing whipping as a punishment, distinguishing whipping under Islam from whipping techniques used under the penal code. By the 1990s, all *Shariah* courts were empowered to impose public caning. As to the types of activities and behaviour deemed Islamic crimes, they can include men who behave like women in public places, fornication, adultery, kissing in public, sodomy, lesbian sex, prostitution, alcohol consumption and eating during the fasting month of Ramadan.

These Islamic interventions in public life have deep implications for Muslim women in Malaysia. Mohamad (2010) argued that the state's reinterpretation of Islam has actually caused the entrenchment of a conservative gender discourse. The battle for power between the political and religious establishments caught women in the middle. While the political establishment wanted a modern Islam, its contest for Islamic legitimacy with the religious authorities resulted in greater moral surveillance of women in both the public and private spheres. For example, in June 1997, three Muslim girls took part in the Miss Malaysia Petite pageant in Selangor state. After two of them had been announced first and second runners-up, officials from the Selangor Islamic Affairs Department arrested all three. It appeared they had contravened a little known *fatwa* that banned Muslim women from participating in beauty contests. A more recent example is the case of Kartika Seri Dewi, a young mother who was charged for consuming alcohol in public. In 2008, the *Shariah* High Court found her guilty and sentenced her to a fine of RM500 and six lashes of the whip. This case gained much national and international notoriety as it was one of the first cases involving a female offender (Kartika's case will be further explained in the section below where I discuss the women bloggers' experience).

Foley (2001) noted that because the government's modern version of Islam did not entail a rethinking of the traditional gender roles, the struggle for political power between the political and religious establishments has resulted in greater scrutiny of 'natural women', the bearers of morality. Stivens (2006) supported this claim by documenting how the state's implementation of family values within the Islamisation project has confirmed patriarchal stereotypes: women were enjoined to become good mothers and wives while men were to support their female dependants. As such, a conservative discourse regarding Muslim women emerged, incorporating the belief that women and men were equal but different, meaning that each sex had its own functions and roles that the opposite sex could not fulfil. Stivens (2006, p. 363) argued that the state's role in championing this version of Islamic modernity and family values greatly "complicates the works of reformist Muslim women who are working for women's (human) rights in families and new forms of family".

Despite such criticisms, Tong and Turner (2008) and Frisk (2009) claimed that there was a degree of acceptance by Malaysian Muslim women of the Islamic differential interpretation of gender roles because it provided them with respect and value as mothers and wives; it also enabled them to hold men accountable to certain Islamic responsibilities such as providing for their wives and children. Far from sitting back and simply living the Islamic traditions, Muslim women is part of it and are attempting to shape its direction concerning them. Their faith in the Islamic interpretations did not mean that women vanished from the public arena: instead, women were still found within politics and in the workplace.

I argue that this naturalised acceptance of women's roles and the prevalence of Islam in the everyday life have made Muslim women, such as those interviewed in this study, to not resist the gendered and discriminatory political culture. In the previous chapters I explained that when it comes to the non-Malays, discriminatory state policies that privilege the Malays are often viewed with apprehension and have resulted in the non-Malays' participation in grassroots activism that can challenge the status quo. Discriminatory policies against women do not appear to have instigated the same activism. For these Muslim women bloggers especially, discriminatory policies that place women in the private sphere and emphasise their role as primarily domestic care-providers are accepted as a religious duty and are not confronted publicly or politically. Discriminatory policies are generally not seen as a major threat to

citizenship as women in general are given the basic rights to vote and participate in public discourse.

8.4 Blogging, Agency and Citizenship

I found that the six Muslim women bloggers that I focus on in this chapter were amongst the many Muslim women who are both domesticated and intellectually liberated within the context of Islam. They are not representative of the clichéd portrayal of the subjugated Muslim woman who, according to Vasilaki (2011, p. 3), is often depicted as the “victim of her culture: stereotyped as covered, subservient and docile in a culture in which women are often thought to be secondary, passive and manipulated agents, the Muslim woman has been the ideal example of powerlessness and victimization”. Although I want to focus on the gendered and religious dimensions of their blogging experience, it is vital that I first establish that these women were not just Muslims; they were educated and middle class as well. Therefore, the experiences that I later discuss come from a specific group of Muslim women who were in the general sense modern and not entirely subjugated. The three married women – Aini, Aida and Fariza – were all mothers with working experience; while the three single women – Zue, Maryani and Suraya – were pursuing degrees in Economics, Engineering and Law, respectively.

These women were all devout Muslims. They wore the veil, prayed and tried their best to profess Islam as a way of life. As such, despite being modern in the sense that they were educated professionals, these women still conformed to the gendered roles outlined by the state and Islamic tradition. For the working mothers, for example, they were living the “double burden”⁸⁶ of working as professionals and as the unpaid care-givers at home. They usually found it hard to make time for themselves, let alone to participate in community and political activities. Fariza, a 30-year old Engineer and mother of four explained the experience as follows:

Things have definitely changed especially now that I have children. I cannot be a superwoman. Even now I find it hard to balance so many responsibilities. I am now a fulltime engineer and a fulltime housewife. Currently I am not involved in any community or political groups. I do have the desire to participate but unfortunately time does not permit.

⁸⁶ A term used by feminists to describe the workload of women who work to earn money, but also have responsibility for unpaid, domestic labour.

Although Fariza did not see parenting or house work as a burden, she admitted to not having the time to engage in activities that she enjoyed. Fariza did not participate in community activities because the demands of work and family were so demanding. The need to be a “superwoman”, as Fariza explained, showed how the demands for women to be the main domestic providers while having a career are limiting their ability to function as individuals and as citizens.

The single women I interviewed also shared that they experienced the pressures associated with domestication. According to Zue, an Economics student:

When my mom passed away a few years back, I had to look after my younger brothers. My dad just got re-married and he expects me to automatically bond with my stepmother. He would ask me to cook or clean with her. It doesn't work that way. I'm not particularly best friends with my stepmother. She does her thing and I do mine. I'm so glad to be in Uni, I feel free and now I'm more exposed to activities and stuff. I'm currently active in 'Ikhwan'; its a student society that focuses on exposing students to social work. I mean I want to be a good daughter but I also want to contribute more to society.

Being the eldest daughter, Zue was expected to play the female role of caring for her brothers in her mother's absence. There was also the pressure from her father for Zue to bond with her stepmother through domestic chores; something she didn't really enjoy. Zue found the university a great place for her to break away from the domestic demands of being a daughter. As a result, she saw her role as a daughter and an active student as two separate and gendered categories – the domesticated woman and the liberated student. This separation indicates a dichotomised understanding of the private and the public in women's lives. Also, for these women, Aida and Zue, being professional and educated did not exclude them from the demands of being the one who took care of the family. For the married women particularly, they were held back from being participative in communities or having other interests. This was because of the domestic role that they had to fulfil and also because of the “double burden” of having to be a productive professional and a devoted mother or care-giver at the same time.

Blogging allowed these women to enter a realm that is both public and private. They started blogging as a private activity to get connected with friends and families and as a way of sharing personal experiences. Maryani, was a 28-year old post-graduate student residing in the UK. She started blogging to stay acquainted with friends and she soon discovered that her blog was able to reach more than just friends she knew. In Chapter 5, I quoted her cynicism and

pessimism about Malaysian politics. Despite her apparent uneasiness with politics, she seemed to celebrate the public and participatory nature of blogging:

One day, I experimented with a hidden tracker so that I can know where my readers come from and I found that I have readers from the States, France and Indonesia. I was surprised as I do not have friends from there and so I decided to be careful with what I write. I then told myself that if I write something it has to be shared and as such I must write things that will benefit my readers. I still do write about myself but I try to make sure that my blog is not entirely about me.

Maryani realised that blogging was not simply a private activity, as it was also public and available for others to read. The realisation that blogging could bridge the distinction between the private and the public made her more serious about the stories and issues she blogged about. Understanding that what she wrote had consequences, Maryani found accountability in blogging. This feeling of accountability and responsibility led her to blog about issues that she felt were beneficial for others. For Maryani to claim that her blog was “not entirely about me” shows that her blog was her own personal yet public medium where she shared about life, as well as discussing and participating in issues that she felt were important.

Interestingly, I find that despite being able to challenge the gendered roles allocated by the state, culture and religion, this group of women identified their blogging practices as a form of religious duty. When writing about issues or participating in community or political actions, all the Muslim women in this study claimed that their actions were motivated and directed towards *Dakwah*. For these Muslim women that I have categorised as diarist bloggers, the realisation that blogging could be a practice that was also beneficial for others triggered an innate desire to contribute to society with the hope that, by sharing and doing good, they would be able to achieve a higher gratification which could only be satisfied spiritually. Hence, in my attempt to understand how these women situated their blogging of everyday experiences within a gendered and contested socio-political environment, I discovered a religious dimension that may not be apparent in discussion about gender, politics and citizenship. In the quest for *Dakwah*, these women were transforming the ways they saw and positioned themselves within the wider socio-political order.

8.5 Contextualising *Dakwah* in Blogging

Dakwah is the generic Arabic term for any Muslim (or non-Muslim) missionary activity. Historically, both in Malaysia and the wider Muslim world, it has come to encompass a whole range of meanings. In its contemporary use in the Muslim world, *Dakwah* has taken on a new meaning of renewed commitment to religion by the existing Muslim population, thus not referring exclusively to the conversion of non-Muslims. Several scholars have pointed to the fact that there is sometimes confusion as to what is actually meant by *Dakwah* in the Malaysian context (Nagata, 1996; Shamsul, 1999). They are referring not so much to the ideological and demographic aspects of the movement but as to what *Dakwah* is meant to describe. On one hand, it is used to refer to specific individuals, groups, institutions and organisations in order to spread the Islamic faith. On the other hand, *Dakwah* represents a very broad wave of raised Islamic consciousness among Malays. Thus, Foley (2001) and Frisk (2009) emphasised its importance as an intellectual and cultural phenomenon, as opposed to its significance as a network of organisations and institutions. Shamsul (1999) pointed out that *Dakwah* has taken on a wide spectrum of meanings, ranging from slightly stricter observance of Muslim codes through to committed activism.

For Frisk (2009), the consequences of a raised Islamic awareness can manifest in many forms on an individual and collective level. It can result in a stronger personal commitment to Islam, entailing a change in practice. Instead of praying irregularly, a person starts to pray five times a day and initiates a search for spiritual guidance from God and the Quran. For some, this is a personal process while for others it involves reaching out and joining loosely organised study groups. A stronger commitment to Islam can also lead to a desire to affect other people's lives in the direction of Islam. In leading a pious life, a person can be an example for others, so that those around him or her may be willing to seek change in their lives and may ask for help. A strong commitment to Islam can also result in participation in formal group activities. For some, the commitment leads to more overt political involvement. In some cases, the aim is to change Muslims into better Muslims and in other cases there are explicit political goals such as the establishment of an Islamic state.

The women I focus on here engaged in activities that certainly corresponded to this upsurge in religiosity. These women were committed Muslims who lived everyday within the Islamic tradition. They continuously found the need to become good Muslims and did not just

participate in religious activities; they also approached blogging as a form of their personal *Dakwah* effort to become better Muslims by helping other Muslims or non-Muslims with the guidance of Islam. Zue, the blogger I have introduced as a single woman and an active student, related how blogging was her own religious practice and expression:

I make sure that my blog has beneficial content. I know I'm not a politician or anyone significant so I think the blog is more for me to reflect on and understand my own views. This world is temporary, what we leave behind when we pass on is mostly our thoughts and ideas, what we share with others. Islam teaches us that the only things that are taken with us to the hereafter are the knowledge we share, the prayers of our children and the charity we give others. So I take this as my preparation for the hereafter. This is my *Dakwah*. Who knows? Someone might read my postings and find it enlightening. That would be a reward. Even if I was writing something personal, if someone finds it relatable, I have in some way helped another human.

Zue explicated in distinctive fashion how blogging could become a form of *Dakwah*. While she admitted that her blog was mostly her own journal where she recorded her own thoughts and views, she found it necessary to make sure that the thoughts and views that she shared were significant and could benefit others. She claimed that Islam emphasises the importance of knowledge sharing, and blogging was one of the ways where she could fulfil this religious demand. Hence, blogging was her *Dakwah*, her contribution to others and her service to God. It is evident that in their desire for *Dakwah*, these women understood blogging to be more than an act of writing and sharing. The way they took responsibility for their blogging and attempted to create a space that was theirs and yet beneficial to others, indicates that these women have found a way of challenging and transforming the gendered space in which they were often confined to stay in the private sphere.

8.6 Feminist Agency and the Diffusion of the Political

In this sense, these women were practising feminist agency that could be defined loosely as a woman's capability to act independently and choose to live according to her desires, despite the numerous suppressing influences such as culture, religion and men (Abrams, 1999). According to McNay (2000), the theoretical foundation of feminist agency has always been one that is politically-inclined. Agency in feminism has always been related to subversive action against patriarchy and misogyny. There have been criticisms of feminist agency as being too confined to the idea of women's resistive action against patriarchy and gender subordination, as

this universalistic interpretation of agency mostly ends with a dichotomised notion of resistance and subjection (McNay 2000; Frisk, 2009). Thus, when applying feminist theory to the evidence in this study, I found the conceptualisation of women's agency in terms of resistance to submission to be much too limited for revealing the experiences of these Muslim women bloggers. In this respect, these women occupy a particularly awkward space in feminist scholarship as they pursued practices and ideals that were embedded within traditions that historically have accorded women a subordinate status (Rinaldo, 2010).

In *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood (2005) spoke against these naturalised, universalistic theories and assumptions. Through her ethnographic work with the women's mosque movement in urban Egypt, Mahmood questioned well-established assumptions in feminist theory and secular-liberal thought concerning the ideal of human and political agency. She challenged the binary opposition between resistance and subordination that is characteristic of secular liberal thought and liberal and poststructuralist feminism. Mahmood analysed the conceptions of self, moral agency and politics that underlie the practices of the Egyptian women's mosque movement, a movement in which women provide lessons to one another on Islamic doctrine in order to cultivate an ideal virtuous self. Mahmood considered the dilemma that women's active support of socio-religious movements that sustain principles of female subordination poses for feminist analysts. She refused to use the term "false consciousness" to resolve the dilemma of women's subordination to feminine virtues, such as shyness and modesty.

Moreover, Mahmood (2005) did not try to portray women's resistance to the dominant male order and their subversion of the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices, which is the focus of the work of a number of other feminist scholars. Rather, she explored how the focus on agency and the assumptions underlying this focus could constitute a barrier to the exploration of movements such as the one she addressed. Mahmood argued that human agency is not limited to acts that challenge social norms. By claiming that agential capacity is "entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms" (p. 15), Mahmood defied the normative liberal assumptions about human nature, including the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom and autonomy, and that human agency consists of acts that challenge social norms.

Mahmood (2005) argued persuasively that there are different forms of agency that can only be understood by confronting the discursive milieu in which only one version of agency –

the liberal democratic one – is conceived as universal. Mahmood (2001, 2005) then proposed the possibility of thinking about women’s political agency in terms of adherence to discriminatory gender practices and ideas emanating from a religious discursive tradition that detaches political agency from its secular lineage. She also suggested the freeing of feminist agency from the politics of grand narratives of emancipation and argued for a subsequent re-orientation to forms of micro-politics where religious expression holds a prominent place. Mahmood argued that when the unified feminist subject comes into question, and the subscription to the idea of a universal patriarchy and the necessity to overthrow the unequal relations of power it sustains and enables, no longer enjoy unanimity, then political action as well as political subjectivity will be re-opened to definition.

In his reading of Mahmood’s work, Bautista (2008) claimed that in conceptualising religious submission and female piety as agency, Mahmood has challenged the universalised notion of agency prevalent in the social sciences. This is a refashioning that is driven by dissatisfaction with the ways in which existing models for conceptualising agency manifest a lack of reflection of the wider political milieu in which such concepts are embedded. Bautista further commented that the argument Mahmood made is that no concept, whether in the academic or public sphere, has a causal, deterministic relationship to the reality it claims to denote. Thus, Mahmood was not championing a blind form of cultural relativism when it comes to the heuristic concepts deployed by scholars. Rather, the significance of her work is in acknowledging the specific fields of power in which subjects circulate and form.

Therefore, in line with the proposal by Mahmood (2001) for a re-defined idea of political action and political subjectivity in understanding feminist religious expression, I find that the Muslim women blogger’s consistent attachment to the notion of *Dakwah* in their blogging experience indicates a form of feminist agency that takes religious subjectivity not as negative discrimination or subjugation but rather as a creative motivation and justification for agential actions. Agency in this sense comes from accommodating individual actions and goals within a religious framework where service for the religion becomes the ultimate end. It also suggests that, for these women, agency is not particularly resistant to relations of domination, but more a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination have enabled and created.

At the same time, despite the women’s insistence that they were blogging for God’s blessings, I find them to be doing more than just becoming pious Muslims. It is in these religious

agential acts that arose from the blogging of the everyday that these women were becoming participative and even political through what McClure (1992) called the “diffusion of the political”. McClure proposed that political action can arise from all aspects of life and can range or expand from private realms such as the family to the realms of state and governance. McClure (1992) suggested that when the lines that separate the public from the private and the personal from the political diminish, the terrain of political contestation opens up to acknowledge politics in the everyday enactment and reiteration of social practices and cultural representation. This allows the nature of political action to expand and include not only demands for basic citizen rights and quality of life, but also to define what is considered culturally intelligible; that is, the transformation of legitimised cultural codes and social discourses becomes a form of political action.

McClure’s (1992) theorisation is an important framework in feminist studies, especially when explaining women’s participation in public and political issues. Her ability to delineate how the personal and the private can become important sites for political action strongly resist the private/public dichotomy that has engulfed the celebration of women’s’ participation in political activism. By diffusing the concept of the political to be more fluid and more inclusive of actions that are not limited to institutional politics, researchers have become more receptive to the idea of activism that and operates in lived personal, social and even cultural domains. Thus, McClure’s theorisation of “the political” allows me to explain the women bloggers’ claims of *Dakwah* through a wider lens where the dynamic of power relations become apparent. I aim to show that despite the socio-cultural and political exclusions that have made these women less political in the conventional sense are offset by the ability to share personal experiences and make them beneficial for others in an attempt to gain God’s blessings or *Dakwah*. These activities defy the gendered constraints that would initially assume their concerns to be simply personal and private.

8.7 Blogging for *Dakwah* and the Politics of the Personal

I argue that in the bloggers’ insistence that their blogging intentions were mostly divine, they were really challenging the gendered dichotomies of private/public, personal/political and resistance/submission. Their experiences showed that they were able to negotiate around and even challenge the socio-political and cultural mechanisms that limited their ability and desire to

participate in public and political issues. Although these women viewed blogging as a religious responsibility, by sharing and creating discourses around their everyday experiences, these women were also politicising what would normally be considered private and domestic concerns. As such, in pursuing religious contentment, these women were subsequently participating in public actions. I explain how this was possible by delineating how, in their blogging for *Dakwah*, these women were making the personal political. They did this by identifying religious connotations in their ability to pursue self-direction, build community discourse, promote issues and advocate through blogging.

8.7.1 Blogging and the Pursuit of Self-Direction

In their blogging and sharing of personal experiences, these women were able to exert agency in the form of self-direction. According to Abrams (1999), when the notions of the political are diffused, it is possible to acknowledge that women's ability to formulate their own life goals and plans that break away from the normalised expectations imposed on them is in itself a powerful form of political agency. Abrams argued that such agential acts become more significant when, in the realisation of personal goals, women recognise the social influences that shape those goals. Abrams (1999, p.830) claimed that "awareness of the ways in which social formation may shape one's goals, or the ways in which one pursues them, may provide room in which to affirm, reject, or modify some of these means and ends".

I identified this form of agency in the experience of Aini, a 31-year old divorcee. Aini discovered through blogging her ability to become a social activist and to resist cultural and legal traditions that she felt often sacrificed women's rights. Aini was someone who not only succumbed to the gendered tradition of politics and participation, she internalised it and felt that as a woman, she was inferior when it came to participating in politics and issues. Aini revealed:

As a female blogger, I think we (female bloggers) tend to express our emotions... as for me personally I am not that confident to write about serious politics because I don't think I am capable enough to answer or respond to political comments. I usually just express. When I write I don't really provide serious analysis, I just write based on my views and experience. Mentally I think we are different from male bloggers. I somehow feel more inferior.

Aini understood politics to be gendered. Politics to her involved issues that had nothing to do with emotions – something she identified as a female attribute. She claimed to only be

capable of expressing her ideas and being unable to provide serious analysis like male bloggers. Politics to her was confined to the tradition – as I discussed at length in Chapter 5 – that fits within the conceptualisation of politics as governance and institutions. Therefore, as a distant citizen,⁸⁷ Aini saw politics as something beyond her reach. I found her gendered ideas of blogging and politics to be the result of a systematic structural tradition that deliberately pushes women especially, away from actualising their potential as citizens. The way she portrayed herself in this statement indicates a woman who was subjugated by patriarchy and lacked political agency. However, it took a personal tragedy to make Aini aware of her potential. While she had been blogging since her university days, she only discovered a personal purpose in blogging after experiencing divorce:

I actually stopped blogging while I was going through the divorce. Support came mostly from family and close friends. To me blogging became more important after I got my divorce. It became an avenue for me to express myself, not just about my personal emotional experience but also about sharing my experience legally dealing with divorce procedures. I have people asking me for advice as they are also experiencing the same thing, so I want to share all the details.

Aini did not blog as a way of dealing with her personal pain. She claimed that she actually had to stop blogging to deal with her divorce. What she found through blogging was the ability to make her experience useful for others. In sharing her experience she discovered an audience that was interested in her experience and was asking for her advice. In this situation, where her experience became a point of reference, Aini discovered her ability to contribute to others. Through the responses she received, she discovered a sense of power and authority that countered the gendered idea she held; that is, that personal emotions and self-expressions were apolitical. Giving advice and educating others about court procedures allowed Aini to defy her own understanding of the so-called ‘emotional woman’ and the masculine politics. Despite her initial awareness of the social formation that limited feminine emotions to the private, Aini was able to challenge the gendered constraints placed on private experiences and pursue them publicly:

I never had a diary in my life but once I started blogging, I feel like I want to capture every moment. Especially now that I have kids, I want to keep their memories. It’s not really about showing it to others, it’s more of a personal keepsake. At the same time, I

⁸⁷ In chapter 5 I have explained the distant citizen as being cynical of and excluded from the local political culture,

feel like I have a purpose... talking about court procedures and sharing them. I also have to reply and answer all the emails and questions that I get from others.

While her blog was a personal keepsake where she preserved her memories, it was also her connection to the public where she could share and advice about divorce procedures. In this experience of claiming that her blog was a form of diary, something that was private and her way of gaining a purpose through blogging about her divorce experience, Aini was also resisting the dichotomised space between her private personal life and her public persona. Blogging allowed her to challenge the gendered idea that personal and emotional experiences are in no way connected to public participation. Aini is sharing her personal stories while explaining and implicating them in terms of politics and institutions. In this instance, blogging creates what Dahlgren (2009) and Cottle (2011) considers as a space for social inclusivity, group recognition and democratic participation that facilitates new modes of political engagement and participation.

As someone who claimed to feel inferior when it came to writing about serious issues, Aini was doing more than just analysing and discussing, she was an expert to readers who went to her for advice. She found self-direction in helping others:

I want other women like me to know their rights and fight for them. The average public will not know much about all the procedures. As someone who has gone through them, I am compelled to share and to some extent educate others, especially the women. I used to write for myself but after sharing my experience people started to tell me their stories and I end up giving counselling. I feel responsible to help others. It's as if god has planned this for me.

In wanting to educate women about their rights and motivating them to fight for those rights, Aini had become an active citizen. She had become aware of the social formation that had limited her own agential capacity. Although she was divorced and felt helpless initially, she found a way through blogging to resist her own gendered understanding of politics, participation and womanhood. Aini found agency in taking charge of her experience and making it more than just a personal tragedy. She set a new self-direction for herself. Aini was not just a divorcee; she had become a social activist. She took her role in counselling other women as her responsibility and saw her experience as something planned by God. I argue that in insisting it was God's plan for her, Aini, in her own terms, resisted the rigid interpretation applied to the Muslim woman. The pious Muslim woman is not one who submits to her fate, she is someone who is able to find

greater meaning and purpose through her experience. In discovering her new self-direction, Aini became involved in the material transformation of politics and citizenship whereby she was an active citizen who not only blogged about laws and institutions, but was shaping how other women related to and negotiated the legal system, the state's policies and institutional traditions.

8.7.2 Blogging and the Building of Community Discourse

Through blogging about the everyday, these women were also able to form community discourses around their personal experiences. They did this by engaging with other women, sharing experiences and providing support around issues that were relevant to their own lives. In these instances, these women were able to form a collective and assert authority over issues that would have been considered domestic and private. When these women realised that blogging was not entirely a private activity and that it could link them to others who might be interested in what they had to say, they felt empowered to make the most of their experiences and participate in community discourses. By receiving responses and engaging in discussions, these women were able to accord value to their personal, everyday experiences, while at the same time feeling responsible for doing the same for others. This resonates with the proposal of Abrams (1999) that women's agency and resistance can be encouraged

by the sheer force of their (the women's) insight, the sense of power conferred by other group-based attributes, the support of other women, or the receptiveness or the resistance of their first 'outside' audiences, to act on this insight to alter the arrangements in which they find themselves (p.837)

I locate this ability to turn private experiences into community discourse in the experience of Fariza who managed to form solidarity with a community of mothers who shared her experience. Fariza, an engineer and a mother of four, could be seen as having succumbed to the double burden of having to work and care for her family. However, Fariza refused to see herself as subjugated. As a Muslim woman, she held her role as a wife and mother in high regard. While she put her interest in politics and social issues aside to give priority to her children, blogging enabled her to be a devoted mother and active citizen as well:

Blogging fits well with my everyday demands. I mean I can still be with the children and still be sharing and communicating with friends. It also gives me a form of motivation to write because I know that there are people reading it.

By having the chance to still blog and share with others without having to sacrifice family time, Fariza found a way of making her domestic experience beneficial to her readers. She used blogging to alter the social arrangement that might have left her alone in performing her domestic duties. Blogging about her domestic experience enabled her to negotiate between accepting domestic duty and performing public duty. To her, blogging was not simply about writing for expression or self-satisfaction; she explained that:

My main motivation to blog is to share the good things, whatever they may be. Just like when my son was admitted to the hospital for swine flu. I shared my experience so that I can help others who did not have the experience or information. I even received a thank you sms (short message service) from one of my readers. She said that when her child had the same symptoms as my son, she went for a check-up and that saved her son because initially she didn't think that her son was that sick.

Blogging about everyday experiences allowed Fariza to creatively portray that being in the domestic sphere did not necessarily mean being passive. Instead she showed that she could also contribute to the wider society by becoming a dutiful mother who cared for her sick child and also a mother who was very much informed about the available medical care options. In this sense, she was not only a citizen who felt responsible for helping others; she had become a source of practical knowledge about health care and child care. The issues she discussed related to her domestic role and could easily be dismissed as “mommy talk” in everyday conversations. But for Fariza, she was not engaging in a conversation, rather she was creating a community where her readers could reflect on their own experiences and relate them to specific issues. Blogging was also a space where she had become the authority who deliberately turned a particular experience or issue into an active public discourse. According to her, “I am not the kind who writes on demand; if I find the topic interesting – like there was one time when I opened a discussion on whether housewives should employ maids – I would discuss and moderate the discussions with my readers”

In this conscious act of wanting to understand, deliberate and create discourses about issues and policies, Fariza exuded agency through her acceptance of the gendered role of a working mother. There was nothing subversive in her agential act; she was not sharing her experience to criticise the government or to undermine the role of the father, husband or any man in particular. She chose to write, share and even create discussions on these issues because she saw it as her way of doing good in the name of religion:

I see it [blogging and sharing about issues] as a form of *Dakwah*. *Dakwah* is part of my purpose in life. I need to contribute and not just blog for the fun of it. I want to be good in everything that makes me a better Muslim, may it be in being a mother, a wife or a blogger.

Fariza found contentment in knowing that she was living according to the traditions of Islam. She strove to be a good mother and, at the same time, find a way to perform her duty for *Dakwah* in the sharing of her experiences. Fariza's experience resonates with the contention by Mahmood (2001, 2005) that social norms (and religious norms) do not necessarily impose constraints on the individual. Instead, they become the important ground on which a subject/woman can find realisation and agency. In Fariza's ability to create community discourses based on her domestic experience, she not only added value to her own experience, she also helped her readers to do the same. Fariza managed, through blogging about her parenting and motherhood experience, to mobilise discourses that had a direct connection to institutions and policies. The way she was able to create and moderate discussions about health care and domestic help⁸⁸ transformed the ways women viewed and experienced domestic life. Personal experiences were no longer isolated in private but were being brought into the public sphere and discussed in terms of policies and collective action. In this mesh of the private and public, personal and political, these women were able to create a political space that was unique to their own context, participating within their own understanding while staying true to the Islamic framework.

8.7.3 Blogging for Issue Advocacy

Blogging about the personal enabled these women to adopt issue advocacy. The desire to share and help others in the name of *Dakwah* led them to bring forward and fight for issues that were personal to them. I identify how blogging can become a form of advocacy through focusing on the experience of Suraya, a 23 year old law student. Suraya was passionate about law – *Shariah* law especially. *Shariah* is the moral code and religious law of Islam. *Shariah* deals with many topics addressed by secular law, including crime, politics and economics, as well as personal matters such as sexual intercourse, hygiene, diet, prayer and fasting (Mohamad, 2010).

⁸⁸ It is a norm in Malaysian households to have domestic help in the form of Indonesian or other foreign maids. The use of foreign maids has triggered discussion on issues such as the dependence on foreign workers and its implications for the economy, social security and many others.

Though interpretations of *Shariah* vary between cultures, in its strictest definition it is considered the infallible law of God. *Shariah* has often been criticised by secular feminists as central to female subjugation in Islam (Othman, 1997). Some of the controversial *Shariah* laws that relate to women include the veil and limited rights in marriage. For Suraya, *Shariah* was the law of Islam and, as a Law student; she considered it her responsibility to correct any misunderstanding about the law:

I don't really understand about politics that much, but when I do write about it, it would have to be related to the *Shariah* legal system for example, my latest entry was about the Kartika case. As a Muslim, I feel there is a lot of unnecessary issue surrounding her case. I've always been very interested in *Shariah*, its implementation especially, so if there is something that triggers me I will write it in my blog. I am interested to pursue *Shariah* law in the future [professionally]. At the same time, I find it hard to understand why groups like the Sisters in Islam are still unclear of the *Shariah* concept. It is not that I am such an expert but I feel that I need to share whatever I know. I feel responsible to correct any misunderstandings on *Shariah*.

Suraya's attempt to defend and educate about the *Shariah* indicates a form of issue advocacy. Despite the controversies surrounding the law, Suraya was adamant about the need for its implementation. In her efforts to defend her stance, she educated others by blogging about the provisions of the law. She further supported the law by trying to respond to the controversies surrounding it. Suraya's strong advocacy for the law is interesting because it represents the contention by Mahmood (2005) that women can find agency in submitting to religious traditions. Suraya's acceptance of the Islamic gendered traditions could be seen in two instances. First, she claimed to defend the sentence handed down in the Kartika case, and second, she complained about the Sisters in Islam group.

The Kartika case was controversial. It surrounded the caning sentence for Kartika Sari Dewi Shukarno who was sentenced in 2009 to six strokes of the cane and a fine for drinking beer in a hotel bar.⁸⁹ Feminists in Malaysia and other parts of the world heavily criticised the sentence as a breach of human rights. Kartika's case was of widespread interest not only because of the sentence, but also because it would be the first-ever caning of a woman for any offence in Malaysia. Feminists in Malaysia, especially the Sisters in Islam group, were adamant and vocal

⁸⁹ Kartika was pardoned by the King in 2009 and the sentence was cancelled. Kartika, however, wanted the sentence to be carried out claiming that she has repented and would prefer to be sentenced in this world and not in the hereafter – Sin chew (August 25, 2009). <http://www.mysinchew.com/node/28633>

in their attempts to have the sentenced overturned as they were concerned that the case would set a precedent for other *Shariah*-inspired rulings against women in general.

Firstly, for a final year Law student with a desire to become a *Shariah* expert, Suraya was exposed to both the secular and *Shariah* law, but because of her strong faith in Islam, she considered the sentence in the Kartika case to be appropriate. Suraya's agreement with the case and the caning sentence indicated her strong faith in Islam whereby she was willing to accept the *Shariah* even if it meant endorsing the caning of a fellow woman. Suraya did not see the sentence as a feminist issue but instead saw it as a religious issue that she, as a Muslim and as a Law student, felt responsible to defend. She took the time to blog about the issue, explain the law, criticise those who were against the law and educate the readers of her blog. Suraya's faith in the *Shariah* was not a docile submission to the Islamic law. Her acceptance was based not only on her being Muslim, but also on her reading the Law at university. It is important to acknowledge that, at the time of writing, *Shariah* law is not fully implemented in Malaysia and only three states (Pahang, Perlis and Kelantan) impose whipping as a punishment on Muslims for drinking, while in the other ten states, they are merely fined. Caning women or men under *Shariah* law is not a normal sentence and, due to the King's pardon of Kartika, it has not been carried out in Malaysia. Therefore, it would be incorrect to say that Suraya's acceptance of the sentence was the norm. Yet, a form of agency was being practised by Suraya, one that came from strong legal and religious principles that do not align with the liberal normative conceptions of women's rights or even human rights.

Second, Suraya claimed to not understand why "groups like Sisters in Islam are still unclear of the *Shariah* concept". In this statement, Suraya specifically mentioned the Sisters in Islam organisation of Muslim women in Malaysia, which seeks to articulate women's rights in Islam by emphasising the need to interpret the *Qur'an*⁹⁰ and the *Hadith*⁹¹ in their proper historical and cultural contexts. With regard to the *Shariah* especially, Sisters in Islam has been at the forefront criticising not the law specifically, but mostly the implementation of the legislation, which it considers to be haphazard. For example, there is no standardised implementation of the *Shariah* across the 14 states in Malaysia, meaning that each state has the

⁹⁰ The *Qur'an* is the main Islamic religious scripture, written by God and used as the main reference in all aspects of Islamic life.

⁹¹ A *Hadith* is a saying or an act ascribed by Islamic prophet Muhammad s.a.w. It is an important reference to understand the *Qur'an* and in matters of Islamic jurisprudence.

ability to define and impose its own understanding of the *Shariah*. This unsystematic approach, according to Sisters in Islam, allows unaccountable discrimination against women especially in instances where the majority of the *Shariah* judges are male (Mohamad, 2010).

Sisters in Islam engages in a re-reading of the Qur'an and Sunnah with the aim of developing a "feminist fiqh" to replace the codified "patriarchal" family law of the Malaysian state, which is derived from Islamic law (Moll, 2009). Through a range of activities in research and advocacy, publications and education initiatives both locally and internationally, Sisters in Islam has raised awareness on the contested nature of Islam in Malaysia. They have also challenged the authority of the *Ulama*⁹² and other religious groups on Islamic issues (Othman, 2006). Because of its sound reputation and support from many educated elites, Sisters in Islam has been able to speak in public on alternative views on Islam and *Shariah*. As claimed by one of the pioneers of the organisation, Othman (2006, p. 349), Sisters in Islam are able to "challenge the obscurantist view which discriminates against women and which is detrimental to the best interest of a modernizing, industrializing multi-racial and multi-religious society". In recent times, Sisters in Islam have persistently taken a stance on public positions on women's and human rights issues that expand to areas of democracy and fundamental rights.

Despite their profile in the global feminist and human rights circles, the Sisters in Islam organisation faces heavy criticism from Muslim groups for its bold re-interpretation of the *Quran* and *Hadith*, an act considered deviant by Muslims who take the *Quran* as the unquestioned word of God. The reputation of Sisters in Islam among pious and middle-class Muslim women is mixed with many disagreeing with the group's version of feminism. The Sisters in Islam are often associated with urban and Westernised professional Muslims (Moll, 2009). Their brand of feminism is sometimes considered too liberal and un-Islamic. In this study, Suraya was an example of a Muslim woman who finds the Sisters in Islam problematic. She disagreed with the organisation's strong criticism of the Kartika sentence. In this situation, Sisters in Islam represented women who were advocating against a law and a sentence they believed to be discriminatory, while Suraya strongly advocated for the implementation of the law. As an activist of the *Shariah*, Suraya not only agreed in silence, she chose of her own free will to educate others about the necessity of the law and to defend her own faith in the law.

⁹² *Ulama* refers to Muslim scholars who are regarded highly in their field of study. More specifically, the *Ulamas* are considered to be experts in Islamic laws and knowledge.

Suraya's position highlights the dilemma posed to feminist analysis by women's active support of socio-religious traditions that sustain principles of female subordination. Like Mahmood (2005) and Frisk (2009), I resist the use of the term false consciousness to resolve the dilemma of women's subordination to strict religious tradition, in this case the *Shariah*. By accepting that agential capacity "entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 15), I argue that Suraya was an advocate even if she supported a tradition that was gendered and discriminatory according to the normative liberal assumptions about human nature. To an extent, Suraya was even challenging the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom and autonomy, and that human agency consists of acts that challenge social norms.

In Suraya's acceptance of and advocacy for gendered tradition and strict religious law, I find an effective example of the argument by Mahmood (2005) - agency should not be seen as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable. Suraya did not just accept the Kartika verdict, she took the time to discuss it and educate her blog readers on why she believed that the sentence was apt. In this sense, while her acceptance might indicate her submission to the strict *Shariah* law which she considered to be the law of God, she found in her acceptance a religious and legal responsibility to defend the verdict and advocate the significance of the *Shariah*. For Suraya, her blogging about the *Shariah* was her service to Islam and to her fellow Muslims. In her apparent submission to God's law, she politicised her personal religious views by advocating them through serious analysis, educating her readers and challenging the socio-political norms that, to Suraya, appeared to be against the *Shariah*. Her strong commitments indicate a form of agency that Muslim women adopt in their attempt to justify their beliefs and resist external attempts to scrutinise and disregard what they consider valid and significant. This conceptualisation of agency focused more on women's capacity to act based on free will, whether in the form of subordination or resistance, opens a way to explain why women like Suraya are committed to the strict Islamic tradition that may appear rigid and oppressive.

8.8 Resistance and Transformation in the Blogging of the Personal

These women blogged and became involved in issues and politics within an Islamic framework where gendered traditions were always evident. The way they negotiated the

gendered ideals of Islam and the ability to act of their own free will offered an interesting insight into how agency can persist even within religious subjectivity. In the name of duty to God or *Dakwah*, these women had become agents who creatively accepted and resisted subjections and traditions that they felt were important in their realisation to be a better Muslim. In traditions that they felt were necessary and significant in their becoming a good Muslim, these women creatively justified their acceptance and accommodation through critical analysis, lengthy discussions and active participation. They did not passively accept traditions such as domestication and *Shariah* law without going through some intellectual and emotional deliberation. Similarly, when agency was used to resist state or cultural norms and traditions, it was often done on the basis of submission to God. Thus, agency as experienced by these women could be receptive or resistant depending on whether they perceived it compatible with the Islamic framework.

The desire to submit to God's will is an important aspect of women's religious commitment that would be overlooked in an analysis that has the explicit purpose of understanding Islam through secular feminism. While I have argued that accepting and justifying certain gendered traditions can be considered religious agency, these women also engaged in acts of resistance that concurred with the general understanding of feminist agency. However, the kind of resistance that these women engage in was different. The target of their resistance was not the gendered practices of patriarchy but was instead the systems and cultures that they felt were depriving them the rights and authority they have a right to as Muslim women.

For these women, the acceptance and resistance they asserted in their act of religious submission did not stop with their own feelings of liberation and satisfaction, but was materialised in their direct participation in issues and politics. As such, while these women may have been submissive to God, they were also active citizens who were engaged (through blogging) in evaluating and disrupting laws, traditions, cultures and policies that affected their lives and the lives of other women as well. There was a collective aspect to their agency. Thus, I would argue that in these acts of inhabiting and upholding religious norms, there was also an evident material transformation in terms of the diffusion of the political that is a consistent feature of feminist struggles.

From a more general perspective, blogging about the personal turns citizens who are considered apolitical into what Dahlgren (2006, p. 275) described as "publics who talk about

political issues – and begin to enact their civic identities and make use of their civic competencies”. These bloggers move from the private realm to the public one, making use of and further developing their own citizenship experience by participating in political and community actions through the sharing of personal politics. For these citizens who have always felt excluded from partisan institutional politics, blogging offers new ways of being citizens and doing politics. Blogging about their own life experiences, according to Dahlgren (2006, p. 278), “encourages the development of clear justifications for choices and decisions as well as more generalized sense of collective good” and, in the process, links the politically abstract with people's everyday lives.

8.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the common image of Muslim women as oppressed victims and instead presented them as active agents. By blogging and sharing their life experiences in the name of *Dakwah* and the desire for God's blessings, the women bloggers investigated in this study not only made public their private experiences, they politicised them by creating discourses and mobilising public interest and collective actions based on their initially private experience. By being able to find self-direction, create community discourse and adopt issue advocacy, these women found it possible to participate in and challenge the exclusive and gendered character of Malaysian politics. In doing so, they diffused the notion of the political by making all aspects of everyday life potentially open for political action. What is unique about these women's acts of agency is that it was grounded more in religious submission rather than political emancipation. Thus, their agential acts went beyond conventional understanding of agency as resistance to submission. Their agency came from an innate desire to become better Muslims and in their attempt to do this they found it important to also contribute to material transformations. It is in the negotiation of religious goals and structural transformation that these women disrupt the gendered notion of politics and citizenship.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

9.1 Introduction

Guided by the question, “How does blogging influence the citizenship practice of the everyday Malaysian Bloggers?” I conducted a qualitative study of 30 Malaysian bloggers. These bloggers were “everyday Malaysians” who came from different demographic backgrounds and were not part of the elite A-list bloggers who are well known and have a large following (Bruns, 2008). In my attempt to understand their experiences, I studied their everyday blogging practices by also considering the historical, structural and individual contexts that shaped those experiences. By applying, appropriating and developing the theories of new politics and alternative media as they are specifically applied to the Malaysian context, I proposed that the bloggers in this study have found the ability to symbiotically negotiate and challenge the socio-political and media restrictions that have shaped their citizen lives. They negotiate these restrictions by using blogging to signify and magnify personal interests and experiences and making them both public and political. Consequently, they also challenge the structural traditions of experiencing politics, creating discourses and affecting policies through everyday blogging and, offering an alternative to the established citizen practices that have been guided by an exclusive, partisan and elitist political and media culture. This chapter highlights the main findings arising from this study, looks forward to future research avenues, suggests recommendations, and points to some of the wider social and political implications of blogging and the practice of citizenship.

9.2 Key Empirical Findings

This study has identified three main findings that are significant in explaining the influence of blogging on the citizen practices of the everyday Malaysian bloggers. The findings are as follows:

9.2.1. Typology of Citizen Kinds

When it comes to the citizenship experience, I have found that despite a contested and confined socio-political and media environment, the group of everyday Malaysian bloggers that I have studied were not apathetic or passive. Instead, they have found unique ways to justify and

negotiate the different conditions that contextualise their citizen experience. To illuminate these experiences, I categorised the bloggers in this study into four kinds of citizens - the partisan citizen, the advocate citizen, the observant citizen and the distant citizen. I have explained that these categories are not mutually exclusive but are different ways of describing how people become citizens. While they are based on a traditional and institutional definition of political participation and range from the most active to the least participative, they represent how the dynamics of socio-political constraints, the media environment, everyday life and individual contexts influence the experience of citizenship.

I have explained that the partisan citizens who are actively involved in party politics resemble the dutiful citizen (Bennett, 2008) often proposed by the state as the ideal citizenry. In contrast, the advocate citizens who are actively involved in non-partisan social, community and even political actions are not considered participative because they tend to function outside the culture of party politics. Realising this, the advocate citizens often distanced themselves from party politics and preferred to claim that they are essentially non-political. For the observant citizen and distant citizen, participation manifest in terms of political awareness at best and cynicism at worse. These least participative citizens do not find it necessary to participate in party politics or social activism, not because they are disconnected from local politics but mostly because it justifies their preconceived ideas about politics and citizenship. I proposed that these preconceived ideas are mostly a product of state propaganda that portrays an exclusive version of politics and participation. This portrayal results in the citizens' feeling apprehensive about what they perceive to an elitist and partisan political culture.

I also found that for these everyday Malaysians, a dichotomised political media that polarises state politics into government and opposition only re-establishes and re-affirms the existing social order and status quo. All the bloggers in this study were aware of the divisive media system and were also able to understand the political justification behind the divide. Because of this, the bloggers who were partisan citizens tended to be biased in their media choice, preferring only to read the media sources that supported their political party. As a result, the partisan citizens were mostly confined and separated by the political parties that they supported.

For the non-partisan citizens, that is, the advocate, the observant and the distant citizens, the media systematically pushes them to feel isolated from politics by confining issues and

participation strictly to party politics. The close relationship between the media and their political sponsors makes it almost impossible for issues that do not benefit a particular political party to receive media attention. As a result, non-partisan citizens often negotiate and accommodate their media experience to the existing restrictions, forcing the advocate citizens to be critical and resistant, the observant citizens to play safe, and the distant citizens to become cynical and uninterested. In short, a divisive media does not offer a space for citizens who have other political inclinations and this reinforces their belief that institutionalised politics are in general rigid and exclusive (Couldry, 2006; Dahlgren, 2006).

These established opinions about local politics and the restrictive and divided political mass media led the bloggers in this study to become politically-savvy in that they were able to shape and justify their own participation or the lack of it. The non-partisan bloggers especially were not passive citizens; instead, they were very aware and able to find a place within the confined socio-political culture. Everyday citizenship then means a continuous effort to manage, negotiate and appropriate personal sentiments to fit a system that can be contested and is often portrayed as dangerous. Therefore, for these bloggers, the range of political responses that they adopted – from partisan involvement, grassroots activism, political awareness and even cynicism – were calculated responses to the contextual circumstances that shaped their everyday life.

9.2.2 Blogging as an Everyday Citizenship Practice

It is in the apparent lack of affordances for engagement and participation in the established media and socio-political culture that the democratic potential of blogging becomes most important. The experiences of these bloggers show that when blogging is understood as an everyday practice, its influence on the citizenship experience is not ‘revolutionary’ but is more an enhancement and an extension of already existing political life. When everyday blogging habits, including motivations, styles, practices and rewards were measured, the bloggers in this study could generally be grouped into the categories of the activist and the diarist bloggers.

In response to the existing dynamics of political life, the activist bloggers were equally political in their blogs. These activist bloggers tended to blog with deliberate political intentions, openly wanting to educate and influence others. They preferred to portray themselves as the observer and the analyst of issues and adopt objective and authoritative positions when blogging. The activist bloggers found in blogging the ability to become directly involved in local politics.

For the diarist bloggers who were less openly political in expression, their blogging motivation was mostly personal. Although the diarist bloggers tended to share everyday experiences and were not interested in gathering a 'fan base', they have found new paths towards becoming political via the very structures that limit political participation as it is conventionally understood.

Despite the different blogging motivations and styles, the everyday blogging practices and rewards these bloggers shared also indicated that they were realising the potential of the actualising citizens (Bennett, 2008) who experience politics and participation in unique ways, creating their own citizen experiences that are directly based on and are beneficial to their lived everyday experience. The bloggers' ability to dictate what they blogged about and their creativity in building their own blogging persona exemplified that even for the most partisan and the most distant citizens, blogging enabled them to realise their citizen potential. For the activist bloggers, the ability to share their opinions and encourage others to support and participate in socio-political movements allowed them to expand their activism and create discourses that were beneficial to their cause without having to depend on the partisan mass media. Similarly, for the diarist bloggers who were able to blog about lived experiences and everyday concerns, the ability to share and make significant their personal stories and interests were changing the way these politically-distant citizens made sense of their own lives and their ability to become active citizens. Blogging allowed the diarist bloggers to share and put into good use personal experiences and private interests, allowing them to connect the everyday with public issues that were closely related and even material in their own lives. Hence, the satisfaction and optimism that these activist and diarist bloggers experienced came from the expression of specific thoughts of ideas, and in the ability to take control of a media form where they had become the authority.

The ways the bloggers were able to comfortably adopt and appropriate blogging in their everyday lives further implied that blogging was a reaction and a reflection of a limiting local socio-political and media system. These bloggers found in blogging a democratic space for community sharing and discourses that they had been deprived of in the established mass media. Thus, blogging offered a helpful space for these bloggers to extend their activism and everyday experiences that had previously been kept private. This extension of everyday life into blogging practices also justified my intention to study the non A-list bloggers because I believed that the experiences of these everyday citizens captured and explained how historical, cultural and

structural exclusions are appropriated, negotiated and even challenged in the act of everyday blogging.

9.2.3 Personalising Politics and Politicising the Personal

Since blogging is a citizens' response towards the political exclusion that they experience, I would further claim that the blogging experiences detailed in this study – whether intended or not – were inherently political. While the experiences of these bloggers may not represent the experiences of all Malaysians, these bloggers were standing at a particular juncture of Malaysian political and media history. Their experiences indicate how sophisticated political negotiations can occur within the complex dynamics that exist between a contested political climate and democratic media affordances. I further delved into this proposition by detailing, contrasting and finding parallels in the blogging experiences of both the activist bloggers and the diarist bloggers. The blogging experiences of these two groups of bloggers shows that when it comes to relating blogging to citizenship, the experience is different for citizens who are already socio-politically active in comparison to citizens who are least participative in the institutional sense. However, I would argue also that despite the differences in experiences, both sets of attitudes and experiences are grounded in the complex and multi-layered links between the political and the personal.

For the activist bloggers whose motivation was deliberately political, they experienced what I found to be the personalisation of politics (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011). I argued that the activist bloggers often placed themselves at the centre of the politics that they claimed to practise. By positioning themselves as the authority, the political centre and the public figure, these bloggers were able to personalise issues and politics according to their own interpretations and in the process they promoted issues that they felt were pressing and rated them as important for their readers. By assuming these roles, they often saw themselves as important political players and their assumption was validated by the way they were able to form a following of their own. Creating and disseminating their own political conviction and activism enabled these bloggers to reach other citizens as well as attracting the attention of the political elites.

Therefore, I contended that these bloggers were essentially trying to become part of the exclusive political culture. I argued that it is the contested local culture that establishes political participation as elitist, partisan and even dangerous that makes personalization a convenient

solution for these politically-inclined bloggers. Since politics have been painted as exclusive, these bloggers personalize their participation as a way of making sense of their own involvement in issues and institutional politics. By making issues and policies personal, these bloggers were able to negotiate, respond and even take ownership of the politics that were previously not available to them but were nonetheless affecting their lives.

On the other hand, the experiences of the Muslim women bloggers reveals that for the less political citizens, blogging enabled them to politicise their personal experiences by diffusing the traditional conception of politics. I argued that what these women experienced went beyond civic engagement because in their attempt to share their experience, these women had – whether advertently or not – influenced material transformations by forming collectives and engaging in discourses that directly affected state policies and politics. Although they justified their efforts through religious ideals which they viewed as their personal service to God, I argued that their efforts and experiences were politically inflected as they were able to touch on issues that were institutional, such as health care and legal procedures.

The diarist bloggers often inadvertently politicised their personal experiences by sharing them and turning them into serious discourses that could have implications for policies and politics. Politics was never the driving factor in their activities. They did not intend to define and understand politics; rather, they experienced it in everyday life without formal acknowledgement that what they experienced was essentially political. Blogging evidently allowed these individuals to defy the normalised dichotomy of the personal and the political. Because blogs are a potentially democratic platform that enables interpretations of the personal, the private, the public and the political (Bruns, 2008), bloggers can in general choose to make public personal and private thoughts and experiences.

In this process of making public personal thoughts and experiences, the bloggers in this study were able to make better sense of their citizenship experience by sharing, magnifying and signifying experiences that they had previously kept private. As I have proposed, blogging is not ‘revolutionising’ Malaysian politics; rather, it is enhancing existing experiences. For the activist bloggers, socio-political issues had always been their interest; and blogging enabled them to put their interests and activism in perspective. By blogging, they could better plan, analyse and disseminate their own political ideals. Personalisation further afforded them the authority, accountability and means to link their personal interest to direct political action. At the same

time, blogging did not make the diarist bloggers become strictly political; rather, it allowed these less-involved citizens to remain comfortable participating in issues that to them were more personal than political. By sharing and making significant everyday experiences, and relating them to wider circles such as the community, the diarist bloggers were in their own terms finding a way to situate the impact of politically abstract laws and policies within their own everyday.

9.3 Contribution to Theory

In my identification, analysis and delineation of the research findings, I adopted several theories of media and citizenship. However, three main theories especially guided this research, which were: 1) the theory of new politics, 2) the theory of alternative media, and 3) the theory of feminist agency. I believe that by appropriating and developing on these theories, especially within the context of the Malaysian experience, I have contributed to the enrichment of these theories as discussed further in the following sub-sections.

9.3.1 A Theory of New Politics in Malaysia

In Chapter 1, I proposed that one of the research problems this thesis needed to assess is the theorization of political participation and citizens' experience, especially in regard to the Malaysian context. I contend that in relation to the argument that Malaysians are now more politically aware and are reclaiming their political potential through new media, there needs to be more flexibility in approaching political participation that can capture this new dynamic in Malaysian political life. I argued that the traditional definition of politics and participation that is confined to institutions and elections can no longer explain the citizens' own understanding and interpretations of their own political processes. Thus, in my analysis of the complex relationship between blogging and the citizenship experiences I have incorporated theories, concepts and empirical evidence that analyse and explain political participation within the context of new politics.

In the process of adopting, appropriating and detailing this new approach to politics and citizenship, I believe that the contribution of this thesis to theories of citizenship was made in two ways. The first way was by finding evidence in agreement with the potentiality and realisation of what Loh (2003) proposed to be the practice of new politics in Malaysia; and the

second way was by carefully analysing the relationship between new politics and blogging in Malaysia by incorporating the ideas of personalisation.

In his theorisation of new politics, Loh (2003) proposed that because of the rise of a new civil society in Malaysia resulting from a more educated and affluent citizenry, Malaysians were experiencing a new form of citizen experience, one that was challenging the elitist and ethnicised version of citizenship enforced by the state. Although this new citizenship experience was not entirely detached from institutions and governmental policies, it was an alternative in the sense that it provided a route to political participation based on the ideals of participatory democracy. Citizens were reclaiming their rights to participate by questioning the political structures that made politics exclusive to them. The availability of new media and recent political events further substantiated Loh's argument about the new politics. Other scholars such as Sani (2009) and Weiss (2009) further extended the theorisation of new politics to include the centrality of new media. They proposed that the democratic affordances of new media have introduced ideals of deliberative democracy into discussions of Malaysian politics.

In this thesis, I explained the ways in which blogging was a citizenship practice for this group of bloggers, signifying the realisation of new politics in Malaysia. These bloggers were living an alternative approach to political participation. They were able to negotiate and extend existing institutional constraints into a form of political action that was evidently not available within the existing political culture. The bloggers were affecting issues and policies on their own terms, defying the partisan and elitist practices of the old politics (Loh, 2003). Moreover, this thesis offered a fresh application of the theory of new politics in Malaysia by investigating the lived perspective. The blogging experiences shared here showed that new politics is not simply a theoretical ideal or a revolutionary change; it exists in the experiences of the everyday and is occurring in a complex, sophisticated and sometimes obscure manner. These bloggers did not abruptly adopt new politics; instead they experienced it as a result of continuous and everyday negotiations between structural constraints, media use and personal experiences.

In my attempt to further contextualise blogging and the lived new politics, I also proposed the centrality of personalisation (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011). This relates to my second contribution to the theory of new politics. I proposed that when a new media practice such as blogging is considered to be one of the main contributors to the realisation of new politics, and when the implications of new politics are analysed from a micro-perspective that

looks into how it is experienced by individual citizens, the notion of personalisation is important. Personalisation, that is, the ability to put the self as the driver and centre of participation, is the way the bloggers in this study were able to make sense of their role and become part of the new politics. Personalisation allowed these bloggers to experience politics and citizenship in ways that were directly related to their lives. By personalising participation and by making personal experiences political, new politics was not an abstract ideal but a lived experience that linked the bloggers' everyday with the macro-structures that shaped them.

9.3.2 Theorising the Malaysian Alternative Media

Another research problem that I set out to contemplate was the theorisation of the Malaysian alternative media. I explained that because of the socio-political and media constraints, the Malaysian political media is dichotomised into the mainstream and the alternative. I argued that this oppositional relationship between the mainstream and alternative media is problematic in theorising the democratic potential of blogging in Malaysia. Through my attempt to work around this dichotomy, I propose that the contribution of this thesis is two-fold. First, it contextualised and problematised the often generalised understanding and theorising of the Malaysian alternative media; and second, it proposed a more inclusive understanding of the democratic media potential by adopting a citizens' media approach.

As I have explained, the alternative media is a significant component in Malaysian political life. Because of the very controlled mainstream media, the alternative media is the source Malaysians refer to for other political news. George (2006, 2007) explained that the Malaysian alternative media is politically contentious in the sense that it is focused on offering news and information that specifically challenges the credibility of the state-controlled mainstream media. I found that studies on the Malaysian media often reinforced this dichotomy by referring to all other non-government political media as the alternative media (Smeltzer, 2008, Lim, 2009; Steele, 2009; Anuar, 2004, 2005). As such, the alternative media has often been taken as a blanket term covering all forms of non-mainstream media and this undermines the complexities and specificities of the many kinds of democratic media practices. The media choice is always "either-or". Thus, I proposed that this binary was problematic when trying to understand other forms of media, especially new media platforms like blogs that are owned by individuals and used for many purposes that go beyond subversive politics. Therefore, in relation

to the Malaysian experience, this thesis unpacked the problematic application and categorisation of this dichotomy.

In response to this problematic categorisation, I have shown that such a limited categorisation of the Malaysian political media has resulted in Malaysians having a corresponding dichotomised view of their media system. The bloggers in this study confirmed that they tended to consider the Malaysian political media as partisan and had resorted to blogging where they were able to experience politics in a less partisan and institutional sense. The democratic potential of blogging facilitated media experiences that challenged the established structure that went beyond the perceived oppositional and subversive stereotype of the Malaysian alternative media. This new media experience required me to consider other interpretations of the alternative media that can capture both the structural and individual implications of non-mainstream media practices. Hence, this study contributes to the theorisation of the Malaysian alternative media by proposing a more inclusive understanding and practice of alternative media by adopting a citizens' media approach (Rodriguez, 2001).

Rodriguez's (2001) theorisation of citizens' media allowed for a flexible understanding of the relationship between media and citizenship. Her insistence that political participation and citizenship experience should be understood less in institutional terms but more through the media users' contextual lived experience allows for a more inclusive approach to studying the media experiences of everyday citizens. More specifically within the Malaysian context where participation in institutional and electoral politics can be contested, a framework for analysing new forms of political ideas was vital for explaining how citizens negotiate and challenge the socio-political culture that shapes their everyday experience. Thus, by adopting a citizens' media perspective on blogging, I have been able to explain how blogging is a powerful media practice because it empowers the bloggers to become participative and make their everyday experiences significant. The citizens' media concept also allowed for a more meaningful media engagement whereby citizens are able to name and narrate their citizenship experiences in their own words.

9.3.3 Theories of Feminist Agency

In my attempt to understand the experiences of Muslim women bloggers, I proposed to look at women's religious conviction as a form of political agency that can be both resistant and submissive. When applying feminist theory to the evidence, I found the conceptualisation of

women's agency in terms of resistance or false consciousness to be inadequate in revealing the religious lives of the Muslim Malay women bloggers. In my efforts to understand the limitations of the conceptualisation of agency as resistance that is often privileged in feminist theories, I drew from Mahmood's (2001, 2005) re-conceptualisation of agency in religious submission. Mahmood argued that the conceptualisation of women's agency in terms of resistance within feminist theory is linked closely to a specific idea of how women understand themselves as subjects. As Mahmood contended, the understanding of the subject in the feminist framework is often understood in negative terms primarily as an effect of discursive structure. Thus, feminist theory becomes caught in what McNay (2000) called the negative paradigm of subjectivisation and agency.

The narratives of the women in this study agreed with Mahmood's contention that feminist agency manifests in diverse ways and does not necessarily have to be derived from this negative paradigm. In my analysis of the blogging experiences of the Muslim women bloggers, I argued that these women were engaged in agential acts that went beyond resistance or submission. Instead, their agency came from an innate desire to become better Muslims and in their attempt to do this they found it important to contribute to material transformations. Therefore, my analysis of the blogging experiences of these Muslim women bloggers contributes to the inclusive understanding of subject formation in feminist theories, indicating that women's religious convictions can lead to material political transformations.

The ways these women were able to ground political actions within religious submission is significant in revealing that women are agential in negotiating their lives despite the apparent gendered traditions they adopt. These women who had been conditioned by the religious and political culture to accept and adopt a secondary role as citizens had found through blogging the ability to be politically expressive and authoritative. Blogging enabled them to challenge the gendered dichotomy of the private and public by allowing them to share and make significant their private experiences. More than that, blogging enabled these private experiences to also become political when framed in the context of laws and policies. In this sense, these women were able to assert political agency by living within the gendered ideals of religion. It was because of their desire to become better Muslims that they were blogging and sharing their personal experiences. Instead of confining themselves within the traditional ideals of the state and religion, they found – within the same gendered ideals – ways to participate in and resist the

politics that shaped their everyday. Thus, even within gendered subject formations, the women were still able to find agency.

9.4 Reflections

When I first contextualised the Malaysian citizenship, I was focused on the ethnic dimension. The literatures I read, the histories that I studied and the everyday life that I experienced indicated to me that ethnicity was the main component in understanding Malaysian politics and citizenship. This is right to a large extent. In a country where citizen rights and responsibilities are institutionally ethnicised, it is only natural that the resulting citizenship experience is contested. Although the ethnic dimension was also evident in this study, it was not entirely what I had initially expected to find. The literature on Malaysian citizenship often focuses, sometimes with a negative view, on the structural implications of the ethnic divide (Heng, 1996; Sani, 2009). It does not emphasise the complexities of how everyday Malaysians make sense of, and most importantly, make do with this divide. I propose that while ethnic politics are still the defining characteristic of Malaysian politics, the lived relationship between ethnicity and citizenship is not always clear-cut. The non-Malays, in this sense, are not always detached and unhappy with their citizenship status, while the Malays do not necessarily assert ownership over their privileged status. I identified that when it came to politics and participation, the ethnic dimension was only evident in the types of participation and not the level of participation. The non-Malays were participative, but they mostly preferred to be involved in non-partisan activism. I also found that the elitist socio-political structure pushed both the Malays and non-Malays away from state politics. This was evidenced by just 6 out of 20 Malay bloggers considered to be partisan and also by the claims of the bloggers categorised as observant and distant citizens of feeling excluded from state politics.

I also did not plan to focus on the experiences of the Muslim women bloggers in particular. Although I aimed to sample different groups of Malaysians, and this included female bloggers, it did not occur to me that the gendered experience of citizenship and blogging would be so compelling. I was probably distracted by the more obviously politicised group differences of ethnicity and religion. Being a Muslim woman myself, it may be a surprise that gender was not significant in my conceptualisation of the citizenship experience. I would say that I might have adhered to the very idea that I have now tried to problematise; that is, that politics and

citizenship revolves mostly around participation in institutional and governmental activities. Also, I might have started the project consciously trying to be mindful of my role as the privileged Malay, not realising that I could also be the subjected woman. However, the data I gathered showed me that politics and participation permeates in different areas of everyday life. Therefore, in reflection, I would suggest that any attempt to contextualise Malaysian politics should also emphasise other political contestations such as class and gender. I discovered the significance of these other contestations, and the issue gender at a later stage of the study.

9.5 Implications and Recommendations: The 13th General Election and the Battle for New Politics and Media Freedom Continues

This research has shown that blogging is a citizen practice that is part of the experience of new politics in Malaysia, and which is challenging the exclusive political culture. When blogging is considered a citizen practice that is inherent in the everyday lives of the bloggers, blogging cannot be easily considered as an alternative media that is simply oppositional; rather blogging becomes more than a political response. It is, as I have expressed before, a lived experience that appropriates and negotiates the political, the public, the private and the personal in sophisticated ways. By allowing this, blogging enables the bloggers in this study to experience politics and participation by linking politically abstract issues to their everyday life. In this final section, I would like to generally apply these conclusions to current developments in Malaysia.

On 5 May 2013, Malaysians went to the polls again. There was much hype and anticipation about this election as many are anxious to know whether the coalition of opposition parties, the Pakatan Rakyat (PR), would be able to form a new government in Malaysia and replace the Barisan Nasional (BN), which has been in power since 1955. The voter turnout was remarkable. Approximately, 85% of registered voters or 11,257,147 Malaysians exercised their basic rights to vote, making it the highest voter turnout in Malaysian history.⁹³ Marred by the usual claims of electoral cheats and faced with accusations of phantom voters and unaccounted ballots⁹⁴ BN managed to stay in power, winning 133 parliament seats against the PR's 89 seats.⁹⁵

⁹³ TheStar May 6th, 2013 "GE13: EC - Record 85% turnout ; BN gets 46.5% of popular vote" Available at: <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2013/5/6/nation/20130506213336&sec=nation>

⁹⁴ Malaysiakini May 6th, 2013. "Bersih to set up tribunal to probe election fraud" Available at: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/229299>

⁹⁵ MalaysianInsider May 6th, 2013 "Triumphant BN losing popular vote" Available at: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/Triumphant-BN-seen-losing-popular-vote>

Despite their victory, BN faced its worst electoral performance in history. In comparison, PR won more popular votes with 5.89 millions votes, which accounts to 51.4% of all votes compared to Barisan that managed to gain only 48.6% of the popular votes.⁹⁶ However the number of votes is not relevant in determining the federal government, as Malaysian democracy dictates that the political party with the most parliamentary seats forms the federal government.⁹⁷ As such while Pakatan Rakyat was voted for by more Malaysians, they had to concede defeat.

While defeated, the PR managed to secure more parliament seats and form a significant opposition block. They managed to make inroads into many other, mostly rural Malaysian states that were previously closed to opposition parties.⁹⁸ The table below compares the overall performance of both BN and the opposition parties since 2004. It clearly illustrates that Malaysian politics is moving from a one party monopoly to a more democratic two-party system. With the increasing numbers of opposition members in the parliament, the BN government can no longer be comfortable with their position.

Election year	Seats won by Barisan	
	Nasional	Pakatan Rakyat
2004	198	21
2008	140	82
2013	133	89

Table 5: Parliamentary seats won by both Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Rakyat since 2004

⁹⁶ Malaysiakini May 7th 2013 “Pakatan Deserves to be in Putrajaya” pakatan rakyat popular vote malaysiskini

⁹⁷ TheMalaysianChronicles May 7th 2013 “ How can Barisan loose the popular vote & still win the election?”

Available at: http://www.malaysia-chronicle.com/index.php/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=97872:how-bn-can-lose-the-popular-vote--still-win-the-election&Itemid=2

⁹⁸ TheEdgeMalaysia. May 7th, 2013. “Pakatan makes inroads into BN bastions” Available at:

<http://www.theedgemalaysia.com/political-news/238037-pakatan-makes-inroads-into-bn-bastion.html>

This development in Malaysian politics further strengthens my argument that Malaysians are moving towards new politics. They are challenging the elitist and ethnicised political tradition by becoming more aware and participative. BN represents the old politics that champions elite representation and ethnic superiority, while the PR is a unique coalition that consists of a Chinese-majority political party, a multiracial political party and an Islamist political party. Despite the disparate differences in the demographic makeup of the parties in PR, it is considered, for now, to be a more democratic alternative to the BN that openly has UMNO, the Malay-based political party as its patron. Malaysians are no longer afraid of political change and, as evidenced by the number of voter turnout and vote distribution, they are very much involved in and aware of their roles as citizens. Most importantly they realize that they can indeed make a difference in the political arrangements that shape their lives.

In the outcomes of the election, PR head, Anwar Ibrahim, has called for an intervention in the Malaysian electoral system, which he claims to be corrupted and is fundamentally controlled by the BN government.⁹⁹ BN on the other hand has resorted to blaming the lack of support from the Chinese electorate for their poor showing in the election. They supported this claim by indicating that it is really DAP, the Chinese majority party in PR that had really won the election. DAP managed to win a resounding 39 parliamentary seats, a 10 seat increase from the previous election.¹⁰⁰

In the midst of the election frenzy, 3 bloggers have been detained under the sedition act. Blogger 'Milosuam' was arrested on 2 May 2013 under the Official Secrets Act on the basis that he had posted classified documents on his blog. 'Milosuam' had also blogged that the Malaysian police had conducted early voting, a claim denied by police officials¹⁰¹. Two other bloggers were also arrested. 'KingJason' was arrested on 6 May 2013 over his allegations that the election was fraudulent, and 'Papagomo', an UMNO blogger, was arrested for racial remarks against the Chinese electorate who he claims were ungrateful and caused BN to suffer in the election.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Malaysiakini May 8th, 2013. "My work is not done yet, says Anwar" Available at: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/229476>

¹⁰⁰ TheStar May 6th, 2013 "GE13: Reeling from Chinese tsunami" Available at: <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2013/5/6/nation/13071619&sec=nation>

¹⁰¹ TheStar, May 2nd 2013 "Blogger Milo Suam detained over website postings" <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2013/5/2/nation/20130502155656&sec=nation>

¹⁰² TheStar, May 8th 2013 "GE13: Papagomo and King Jason arrested" available at: http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2013/5/8/nation/13083059&sec=nation&utm_source=TSOL_main&utm_medium=links&utm_campaign=GE13

Both bloggers were detained under the Communications and Multimedia Act.¹⁰³ Even with the repeal of the ISA and the sedition act, freedom of speech is still very much constrained in Malaysia.

On May 7th, *Utusan Malaysia*, the main Malay language newspaper had on its front page a provocative editorial claiming ‘Apa lagi Cina mahu’¹⁰⁴, literally translated as ‘What else do the Chinese want?’ In the article, the openly UMNO-biased newspaper questioned the loyalty of the Chinese who it claims should be grateful for the opportunities provided for them by the BN government. Prime Minister Najib Razak supported the editorial by claiming that the Chinese newspapers were equally racist against the Malays.¹⁰⁵ In their attempt to make sense of their defeat, BN and its news media have again resorted to ethnic blame. While these recent developments indicate that the ruling government is still trying to hold on to the remnants of old politics, many Malaysians have been rejecting such racial provocation.



Figure 2: Front page of *Utusan Malaysia* dated May 7th 2012 with the headline “Apa lagi Cina mahu?”

On the Internet especially, everyday Malaysians who are against such politics are making their voices heard. In blogs, Facebook, Twitter and many other online user platforms, calls for unity and anti-racism are evident. While they are also those who support the racial stance, many

¹⁰³ ibid

¹⁰⁴ Utusan Malaysia May 7th 2013 ‘Apa Lagi Cina Mahu?’ Available at: http://ww3.utusan.com.my/utusan/Pilihan_Raya/20130507/px_03/Apa-lagi-orang-Cina-mahu

¹⁰⁵ Malaysiakini May 8th 2013. “Najib defends Utusan, says Chinese papers the same” Available at: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/229423>

are against it and this even includes supporters of BN.¹⁰⁶ More interestingly, everyday citizens are sharing their memories, stories and experiences of being part of a harmonious multiracial society and are proposing that these experiences should be considered as evidence that Malaysians are not racists. The Malays are calling on their Chinese friends especially to clarify that they are not what the mainstream media makes them out to be. The Chinese are expressing themselves by showing that they are not affected by the racist political propaganda and are in solidarity with their fellow Malaysians. While these reflections and analysis are based on limited observation, I would argue that these responses by the citizens further indicate that new media practices are allowing everyday Malaysians to understand and participate in politics by making politics material in their lives. Expressing and sharing personal experiences and calling for unity and solidarity are powerful citizen actions that can only be understood by analysing media use as a form of citizens' media. Media use in this sense then becomes a routine and accessible citizen practice that connects politics and citizenship in Malaysia.

A future research agenda that acknowledges citizens' media experience as more than an alternative to the mainstream media is needed in the study of Malaysian political media. What is clear from this research study is that the rise of new politics and the availability of democratic media practices have changed the Malaysian media landscape and its corresponding effects on the experience of citizenship. The dichotomy that divides the Malaysian political media can no longer effectively explain the political and media dynamics in the country as new media practices have complexly entered into many areas of citizen life. Therefore, more extensive and in-depth research that address the impact of this new political media experience across institutions, governments, media organizations and different citizen groups can provide an encompassing understanding of how overlapping and complex new media experiences penetrate and evolve politics and the experience of citizenship over time.

¹⁰⁶ Malaysiakini May 7th 2013. "Irate Netizens take to Twitter over Utusan front page" Available at: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/229352>

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Appendix A: Letter of Inquiry

Citizenship through Political Blogging: The Lived Experience of Malaysian Bloggers

LETTER OF ENQUIRY

Shafizan Mohamed
22/1191,
Plenty Rd., Bundoora
3083 Vic, Australia

Dear Bloggers,

Request for Participants in a Research Study

I am Shafizan Mohamed, a doctoral candidate in Media Studies in the Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. I am writing to invite you to take part in my research study which will investigate the relationship between political blogging and citizenship among Malaysian bloggers. Therefore, my study requires the participation of Malaysian bloggers who actively write about Malaysian politics in their blogs. The research will be conducted in the month of August 2009 to December 2009.

More specifically, my research will analyse the relationship between political blogging and your experience of citizenship by putting your everyday blogging experiences into context by also considering other important factors such as Malaysia's historical background, Malaysia's media and political system and your individual life experiences.

I would be very grateful if you would agree to participate in this study. To further enlighten you about the research, I am attaching an explanatory statement and a consent form that will be used during the study.

Your kind consideration and cooperation is highly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

.....
Shafizan Mohamed

Phone : 

Appendix B: Explanatory Statement

Explanatory Statement

Title: Citizenship through Political Blogging: The Lived Experience of Malaysian Bloggers

This information sheet is for you to keep.

Introduction:

My name is Shafizan bt Mohamed and I am conducting a research project with Dr. Andy Ruddock, a lecturer in the School of English, Communications and Performance Studies, Faculty of Arts towards a doctoral degree in Media Studies at Monash University. The aim of this research project is to investigate how average Malaysians experience blogging in their everyday lives and how those experiences define their unique understanding and practice of citizenship. The research will also put into context the bloggers' experience by also considering other factors such as Malaysia's historical and cultural background; Malaysia's political and social system; and the bloggers' personal histories.

Research process:

The research process involves audio taping an interview session with the individual blogger. The interview will be done in a setting preferred by the blogger. Each blogger will be asked to choose a time and venue for the interview to be conducted. The interview will look into the blogger's life experiences, blogging practices and personal understanding of their blogging experience. The interview will take approximately one hour. The bloggers will also be given a questionnaire to detail their basic demographics and blogging experiences before the interview is conducted. The research also involves an online non-participant observation of the blogger's blogs and blogging activities. More specifically, I will observe specific dimensions such as the blogger's blogging habits, writing styles, self-representation and interaction with others. The observation will be done throughout the time I spend on fieldwork which will approximately be between August 2009 and November 2009.

Possible Inconvenience/Discomfort:

No inconvenience or discomfort is expected to follow from participating in this research. Since participation is voluntary, participants are under no obligation to consent to participation. Furthermore, during the interview, participants are entitled to avoid answering any question which they feel is inappropriate or intrusive, withdraw selected comments if they wish to do so, and/or withdraw their involvement in this project at any point with no adverse consequences. However, withdrawal can only be done before the data are included in the research write-up. If requested, participants may peruse data collected, adding or withdrawing sections of the information that they have provided.

Confidentiality and Storage of Data

I will personally transcribe the interview statements and thus all information gathered from the participant will only be read by me. The interview transcripts and audio tapes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and all electronic information will be stored on a password protected computer. Storage of data collected will adhere to the University regulations and kept on University

premises in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet for 5 years. The identifying features of the information will be disposed in a confidential manner within 1 year of collection and tapes will be erased. A report of the study may be submitted for publication other than the research thesis, but since the data are anonymous, individual participants will not be named and thus will not be identifiable in any way.

However, the participants have the option of giving a conditioned agreement wherein the data concerning them can only be used for this particular project and not in other future works.

If you would like to be informed of the aggregate research finding, please contact Shafizan bt. Mohamed on [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The findings are accessible for 3 months.

<p>If you would like to contact the researchers about any aspect of this study, please contact the Chief Investigator:</p>	<p>If you have a complaint concerning the manner in which this research <CF09/1888-2009001083> is being conducted, please contact:</p>
<p>Dr. Andy Ruddock, Lecturer of Communications and Media Studies, School of English, Communications and Performance Studies, Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Caulfield campus Vic, 3145</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p>	<p>Executive Officer Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans (SCERH) Building 3e Room 111 Research Office Monash University VIC 3800</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p>

Thank you

SHAFIZAN BT. MOHAMED

APPENDIX C: Consent Form

Consent Form

Research Title: Citizenship through Political Blogging: The Lived Experience of Malaysian Bloggers

NOTE: *This consent form will remain with the Monash University researcher for their records*

I agree to take part in the Monash University research project specified above. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the Explanatory Statement, which I keep for my records. I understand that agreeing to take part means that:

I agree to complete the research questionnaire Yes No

I agree to have my name used in the thesis Yes No

I agree to allow the interview to be audio-taped and/or video-taped Yes No

I agree to make myself available for a further interview if required Yes No

I agree to allow my blog to be observed by the researcher Yes No

I agree to allow the data collected from the interview to be used in other forms of publications and/ or other future research Yes No

I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that in the case where consent has been given, withdrawal can only be done before the data are included in the research write-up.

I understand that I am able to request a transcript of data concerning me for my approval before it is included in the write up of the research.

I understand that I have the option to have my real name and blog name changed in the research documents.

I understand that I have the choice to not allow any information regarding myself to be used in other publications or future research.

I understand that data from the interview will be kept in a secure storage and accessible to the research team. I also understand that the data will be destroyed after a 5 year period unless I consent to it being used in future research.

Sincerely,

.....

Participant's name:

Date:

If you have any queries please contact my supervisor, Dr. Andy Ruddock, School of English, Communications and Performance Studies, Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Caulfield campus, 3145 Victoria, Australia, phone [REDACTED] [REDACTED] or email [REDACTED]. Should you have any complaints, you may contact the Human Ethics Office First Floor, Building 3e, Monash Research Office, Clayton Campus Monash University VIC 3800. Tel: 03 9905 5490, Email: [REDACTED]

Appendix D: Questionnaire

Citizenship through Political Blogging: the Lived Experience of Malaysian Bloggers

Dear Bloggers,

You are invited to participate in a research study to discover how Malaysians experience citizenship through blogging. Your participation will help the researcher understand bloggers' everyday blogging experiences and uncover their understanding of those experiences. This study will also identify how blogging influence bloggers' interpretation and practice of citizenship.

The research study is being carried out as part of Shafizan Mohamed's doctoral thesis under the supervision of Dr. Andy Ruddock from Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

All the information will remain confidential and anonymous. The questionnaire can be returned through the researcher's personal e-mail. No one apart of the researcher will have the access to this data. The data will be stored in the researcher's laptop and will be password protected.

If you have any questions regarding the research, you may contact the researcher, Shafizan Mohamed via email at [REDACTED]

Submitting this questionnaire signifies that you are willing to participate in this study. It also indicates that you have read and understood the information provided above. Please ensure that you have filled in the consent form.

Thank you for your support and assistance.

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If you have any queries please contact my supervisor, Dr. Andy Ruddock, School of English, Communications and Performance Studies, Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Caulfield campus, 3145 Victoria, Australia, phone [REDACTED] or email [REDACTED]. Should you have any complaints, you may contact the [Human Ethics Office](#) First Floor, Building 3e, Monash Research Office, Clayton Campus Monash University VIC 3800. Tel: [REDACTED] Email: [REDACTED]

PART 1 : DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

Please answer all the questions below: (If you are answering the soft-copy version of the questionnaire, please double-click on the check-box)

1. Gender: Male Female
2. Age: _____
3. Ethnic group: _____
4. Please name the state where you were born: _____
5. Please name the state(s) where you grew up: _____
6. Marital status:
 Single Married Divorced
 Widowed Others (please specify) _____
7. Education Level:
 SPM Diploma Others (please specify) _____
 Bachelor's Maters/PhD
8. Please name the institution where you last completed your formal education

9. Current Occupation: _____
10. Last two occupations (if any):
a. _____ b. _____
11. What language(s) do you speak growing up? _____
12. What language(s) do you currently speak at home? _____
13. How do you usually spend your free time? _____
14. Do you own any of these technological devices? (Tick any that apply)
 Laptop computer
 Desktop computer
 Portable Digital Assistant (PDA)
 3G Mobile Phone
 Ipod/ Mp3 players
15. Where do you usually get political news and information? (Tick any that apply)
 TV
 Newspaper
 Internet
 Radio
 Magazines/ Books

PART 2 : EVERYDAY BLOGGING PRACTICES

Please answer all the questions below:

(If you are filling in the soft-copy version of the questionnaire, please double-click on the check-box)

1. How long have you been blogging? _____

2. How frequent do you blog?

- Several times a day
- Everyday
- Several days a week
- Once a week
- Several times a month
- Only when there is something interesting to write about

3. How many hours do you usually take to write a blog post?

- Not more than 15 minutes
- Around one hour
- 1-2 hours
- 2-3 hours
- More than 3 hours

4. Where do you usually blog?

- At home
- In the office
- Cafes
- Nowhere specific
- Others (Please specify) _____

5. What particular sources do you rely on when you blog?

- The Malaysian mass media
- The Malaysian alternative media
- Other political blogs
- Personal acquaintances
- Political books and magazines
- Others (Please specify) _____

6. Do you verify the facts you include in your blog posts?

Yes No

7. Do you filter the comments you receive on your blogs?

Yes No

8. Are you a member of any kinds of blogging societies/associations? Yes No

9. How many of your close friends or family members blog?

- None
- A few
- Many
- Almost all

10. How would you estimate the number of your blog readers?

- Less than 50
- 50 -100
- A few hundred
- A few thousand
- More than 10,000

11. Who are your blog readers? (Tick any that apply)

- Family and friends
- Malaysians overseas
- Non-Malaysians
- Politicians
- Journalists

12. How do you keep in contact with blog readers who are not your immediate friends or families? (Tick any that apply)

- E-mail
- I meet them sometimes
- Online messaging
- Telephone
- I do not keep in-touch with blog readers who are not my immediate friends or families

13. Please list the top 5 Malaysian blogs (not in any particular order) you usually visit:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Appendix E: Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview

The purpose of this interview is to explore and understand in detail how Malaysian bloggers experience political blogging and how the experiences influence their understanding and practice of citizenship. A tape recorder will be used to record the interview. The interview process will be guided by categories listed below. The interview will primarily use open ended questions in order to explore the blogger's responses to the questions. However, the researcher will also ask prompt and probing questions depending on the depth of insights shared by the interviewees. In order to create a comfortable interview session, the researcher will use a conversational approach.

Confidentiality

The bloggers' blog and real name will be changed upon request to protect their privacy and confidentiality. The interview will be transcribed verbatim and analysed by thematic and numerical codes.

Interview Thematic Guide

This research aims to tell the story of how average Malaysian becomes politically active through blogging. This story will come from the bloggers' personal accounts of their unique experiences. To better record and later present these stories, the researcher will apply narrative interview. Narrative interview is a form of qualitative interview practice that looks at the interview process as a story which has a start, middle and an end. As such, this sequence will be followed in the interview process by covering the individual life histories, blogging experiences and the meaning they make from those experiences in the particular order.

Category 1: Life histories

The bloggers' life histories can provide the researcher with in-depth understanding of the bloggers personal background and life experiences that might contribute to their desire to be politically active. It helps establish the context of the bloggers' experience. The questions under this category will range from basic demographic questions to detailed significant life experiences. This category will also look at the motivations behind each blogger's desire to blog about politics. Examples of questions include:

- Can you tell about your family and your childhood?
- Can you tell me about your student life experiences?
- What are the significant events in your life and why?
- What drove your interest in politics?
- How did you start blogging?

Category 2: Blogging experiences

This category of questions is intended to understand how the banality of everyday political blogging becomes a form of citizen activism. By asking questions relating to the bloggers everyday blogging experiences, the bloggers will be able to reconstruct their experience within the context which it occurs. Under this category the researcher will mainly ask about the bloggers' everyday blogging practices and routine and also the different roles they assume when they blog about politics. Examples of questions include:

- Do you research before writing a post?
- Do you write or report your own political news or analysis?
- Do you comment on other peoples writings?
- Do you feel the need to influence others?
- What do you think of people who read your blog?
- What makes political blogging different from other blogs?
- Do you promote your blog to others?
- What is the most important topic that you have discussed in your blog?
- How do your family/friends perceive your blogging activity? Do they come to you for political commentaries?

Category 3: Individual understanding and meaning of the blogging experience.

The last category of questions attempts to tie all the information gathered from the initial categories and makes sense of the bloggers experiences and their own understanding of those experiences. The bloggers will be asked to reflect on the meaning their blogging experience offers them. They will also be asked on how the impact of these experiences on their lives and ultimately how it affect their understanding of their roles as Malaysians. Examples of questions include:

- How important is blogging to you?
- Do you feel that blogging has changed you as a person?
- How are you rewarded by blogging?
- How do you see yourself as a Malaysian blogger?
- Should other Malaysian blog?
- How do blogging contribute to your position as a Malaysian?
- Do you feel that you are making significant contribution to the country's politics?
- Do you feel that your opinions are heard by those directly involved in the country's politics?
- How would you advise someone who wants to start a political blog?
- Would your life be much different if you did not have a blog?
- How much longer will you continue blogging?
- How important will bloggers become in the next 10 years?

Note: The actual questions asked may differ depending on the context of each particular blogger. However they will not deviate from covering the categories listed above.