

NEW MEDIA, OLD POLITICS: WEB-PAGES AS A NEW POLITICAL OUTREACH IN MALAYSIA

ABDUL MUA'TI @ ZAMRI HAJI AHMAD

ABSTRACT

The introduction of Internet to some extent has changed the lives of Malaysian people. The internet has been beneficial to mankind in almost every aspect of their daily routine. From trading to education, shopping to referring for health advice, internet emerged as a necessity in the lives of modern people. So does in politics. D'Alessio (2000) observed that "web based political information has been the focus of researchers since 1996 presidential campaign" in the United States. How about in a developing country like Malaysia? Since Malaysia is practicing democracy, do political parties in the country make use of the internet as a mean to disseminate their ideologies? This paper is based on a study of web-pages published by eight political parties in Malaysia. Out of the eight parties selected, six are from the component parties of the National Front, the ruling government, and two are from the oppositions. This study focuses on the characteristics of the web-pages in their effort to penetrate to the target masses. Emphasized were given to the richness in the content of the web-pages, comprehensiveness in the coverage of current issues, interactivity, linkages, attractiveness of the design and abilities of incorporating multimedia functions. In general, this study found that the political parties in Malaysia tried to outdo each other in designing their web-pages in order to get to their potential voters. The oppositions especially utilize the web-pages as a meaningful campaign tool since they were curbed from using other forms of mainstream media such as the print and the electronic media. Thus, the web-pages have emerged as a significant new weapon in an old political war in Malaysia.

Keywords: *New media, web-pages, media politics, media studies, Malaysia*

INTRODUCTION

According to McNair (1999) there are five functions that should be assumed by communication media in a democratic society. The functions are, firstly, the media

must inform the people of what is happening around them. By this function the media tries to inform people of every event and development that are relevant to their lives. For instance, the media announces the important dates such as checking of election rolls, nomination days, and election days.

Secondly, the media should educate the people of the meanings and the significance of facts that occur around them. This will allow them to understand and co-relate an event or an occurrence that happens in their lives. The media tries to make the citizen understand why they should cast their votes in the general election, their rights and responsibilities in a democratic society and so on.

Thirdly, the media should be a platform for public discussion. The media should facilitate public opinion process so that members of the public will have a mean to voice out their views concerning certain relevant matters. This includes providing them with an arena to express their disagreement besides their agreement with certain policies, acts, projects etc.

Fourthly, the media should assume a role to give publicity to political and governmental institutions. Here the media plays the roles of a watchdog. The media should expose all corruptions and malpractices in the country.

The last function of the media is to serve as a channel to advocate political viewpoints. Here political parties can use media as an outlet to disseminate their policies and manifesto to the masses.

Thus it can be seen that the media plays a very vital role in a democratic society. In an educated society where the members of the public have an access to a free flow of information, the media should play a more challenging function. In this information era, Malaysians are more exposed to various forms of information. The introduction of internet for instance, has helped sources of information to reach their target masses faster. With seven million internet users in this country, web-pages now has become an alternative to newspapers, radio and television as source of information, including political information (Salleh and Saiful Nujaimi, 2002 and International Communication Union, 2002). This was made possible with the guarantee from the government that there will not be any form of censorship for the internet (The Government of Malaysia, 2000). Thus the internet has emerged as an important medium for political outreach in the country. DAP was the first political party in Malaysia to publish its web-page, that is on 18 Mac, 1996. Eventually not long after that almost all political parties in the country have followed the trend. The question is, however, what is the current status of the internet usage for political purposes in the country? How much do the political parties in the country take advantage of the technology in spreading their ideology to the masses?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Generally, this study is a descriptive analysis of the official web-pages posted by political parties in Malaysia. The focus of the study is on the characteristics of the web pages. Specifically, the study attempts to:

- Identify the richness of the content of the web pages.
- Determine the issues discussed in the web pages.

- Identify interactivity, linkages and multimedia properties of the web pages.
- Compare the layout of the web pages.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on official web-pages posted by eight political parties in this country. Out of the total eight parties, six are from the ruling coalition, the National Front and two are from the opposition. The web pages included in the study are from UMNO, MCA, PGM or GERAKAN, MIC, SUPP and SAPP that formed the National Front, and PAS and DAP (the opposition parties). In short, all official web pages of political parties in Malaysia that can be accessed are included in the study. The web pages of other parties are excluded since they are inaccessible during the period of study. According to a classification by Electionworld.org, UMNO (United Malays National Organization) is a Malay-based national party, MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) is a Chinese-based national party, PGM or GERAKAN (Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia) is a liberal party, MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) is an Indian-based national party, SUPP (Sarawak United Peoples' Party) is a progressive party dominated by Chinese from Sarawak, SAPP (Sabah Progressive Party) is a progressive party dominated by Chinese from Sabah, PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia) is an Islamist party, and DAP (Democratic Action Party) is a social-democratic party. The official web-pages of these parties are analyzed qualitatively focusing on the characteristics of the pages. Specifically the focus of the analysis are on the richness of the content, nature of current issues discussed in the web-pages, linkages, multimedia functions, interactivity and the layout of the web-pages.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

In answering the first specific objective, that is regarding the richness of the content of the pages, it was found that all the web-pages are developed in text-rich form. (Please refer to Table 1). However, all the web-pages carry illustrations in the form of pictures. Anyway, none of the web-pages use caricatures to transmit their political messages.

All the web-pages studied carry information in the forms of news and articles. Only the web-page of PAS includes some quotations especially from the Koran and Hadiths (the words of the Prophet Muhammad), and the one from MCA features a quotation column that carries the words and sayings from national leaders. Only the web-pages of MCA carries a column that reports highlights from UTAR, a university funded and run by the party.

The same table also shows that the web-pages of UMNO, SAPP and PAS use Bahasa Melayu and English. The web-pages of MCA, PGM and SUPP are in English and Mandarin. On the other hand the web-page of MIC uses English and Tamil. However, DAP is the only party that uses three languages in its official web-page. The languages are Bahasa Melayu, English and Mandarin. Anyway, none of the web-pages studied use other languages. In addition, Table 1 also shows that all of the web-pages except for PGM, MIC and SAPP incorporate a diary or calendar of activity. This information is updated periodically.

Table 1:
The content of political parties' web-pages

The Content	UMNO	MCA	PGM	MIC	SUPP	SAPP	PAS	DAP
Form of content								
1. text	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
2. illustration								
• picture	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
• caricature	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Types of content								
1. news	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
2. quotations	N	Y	N	N	N	N	Y	N
3. articles	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
4. complaints & actions	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N
Medium								
1. Bahasa Melayu	Y	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y
2. English	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
3. Mandarin	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y
4. Tamil	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N
5. Others	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Additional information								
1. Diary	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y

Y= yes N= no

In answering the second specific objective of the study, that is regarding the nature of the issues or coverage of current political development in the country, Table 2 below shows that all web-pages carry multiple issues. However all web-pages give a detail analyses and explanation of the issues.

Table 2:
Issues discussed in the web-pages

Issues	UMNO	MCA	PGM	MIC	SUPP	SAPP	PAS	DAP
a. quantity	Multiple	Multiple	Multiple	Multiple	Multiple	Multiple	Multiple	Multiple
b. depth	Detail	Detail	Detail	Detail	Detail	Detail	Detail	Detail
c. scope								
i. domestic	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
ii. international	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N

Y= yes N= no

As depicted in the same table, all web-pages carry domestic issues. Only the web page of PAS includes discussions on international issues besides domestic matters.

In answering the third specific objective, that is regarding interactivity of the web-pages, Table 3 shows that only the web-pages of UMNO and PAS are furnished

with facilities for surfers to join forums for online discussions of relevant political development surrounding them. Anyhow, none of the web-pages are equipped with chatting facilities. At any rate, all of the web-pages provide a locus for feedback from the visitors. This includes providing the surfers with the party's or web-master's e-mail addresses, telephone numbers or mailing addresses.

The same table also shows that web-pages belonging to UMNO, MCA, PAS and DAP provide facilities for surfers to vote or response by stating their opinions regarding certain matters. This facility is not present in other parties' web-pages. Ironically, none of the political parties includes online membership forms in their web-pages. Some of the parties provide the membership forms, which can only be downloaded and printed by the surfers. The surfers are then required to mail the form back to the party headquarters via conventional mail after filling up the form.

In addition, only official web-pages of UMNO, PAS and DAP are equipped with search engines. With this facility, surfers can type in any relevant information they need to know such as information on their representatives in the state constituencies, members of parliament, senators, etc.

Table 3 also shows that only web-pages of UMNO and MIC are equipped with a function where surfers can obtain information from electoral rolls. With this function surfers are able to check their voting centers and other relevant information. This function however is not to be found in other web-pages.

Anyway, of all the web-pages studied, only the web-page of PAS provides an avenue for surfers to seek answers to their religious inquiries. With this facility, surfers are able to post their questions regarding Islam in its widest sense, to be attended by the web-master or the religious wing of the party. This is probably inline with the parties claim that its struggle is based on the true teachings of Islam.

Table 3:
Interactivity of the web-pages

Interactivity	UMNO	MCA	PGM	MIC	SUPP	SAPP	PAS	DAP
Forum	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N
Chat	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Locus for feedback	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Vote / opinion	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	Y	Y
Online membership form	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Search engine	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y
Election rolls	Y	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N
Religious Q&A	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N

Y= yes N= no

Another part of the third objective can be answered by looking into the linking abilities of the web-pages. These abilities are depicted in Table 4. From the table we can see that most web-pages from the ruling coalition that is UMNO and PGM are linked to web-pages of other parties in the same coalition. On the other hand, the web-page of PAS is linked to web-pages of other opposition parties in the Alternative

Front, a loose pact of opposition parties. The table also shows that none of the web-pages of the National Front are linked to other organizations, unlike of PAS and DAP. The web-page of PAS is linked to web-pages of several Non-governmental organizations such as ABIM (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia), SUARAM (The Voices of the People of Malaysia), etc. The web-page of DAP on the other hand is linked to the web-pages of Socialist International.

Table 4:
Linkages

Linking ability	UMNO	MCA	PGM	MIC	SUPP	SAPP	PAS	DAP
Link to other pol. party.	Y-NF	N	Y-NF	N	N	N	Y-AF	N
Link to other organization	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y-NGO	Y-SI
Link to reading materials.	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N
Link to branches /area.	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Link to individual pages.	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y

Y= yes
 N= no
 Y-NF= yes, linked to National Front Parties
 Y-AF= yes, linked to Alternative Front Parties
 Y-NGO= yes, linked to NGO's
 Y-SI= yes, linked to Solidarity International (International Organization)

Table 4 also shows that most web-pages studied have linkages to reading materials except that of MIC, SAPP and DAP. The web-pages of component parties of the ruling coalition have linkages to local dailies besides the parties' organ or newsletters. However the web-page of PAS is linked to Harakahdaily (the party's organ) besides other local and international journals such as Malaysiakini, Berita Keadilan, Bernama, AFP, CNN interactive, BBC news, ST Singapore, Republika, Kompas etc. In addition, the web-pages of UMNO, MCA, PGM, MIC, PAS and DAP are linked to web-pages of their branches in various areas and constituencies throughout the country. The web-pages of UMNO, MCA, MIC, SAPP, PAS and DAP are also linked to the web-pages of certain individuals especially those holding key positions in the parties.

Table 5 shows multimedia functions incorporated in the web-pages studied. Only the web-pages of UMNO and PAS are furnished with pre-recorded speeches of their leaders or interviews with the parties' key personnel. Only the web-pages belong to UMNO and MCA are loaded with pre-recorded songs, i.e. the parties' anthem. Additionally, only web-pages of UMNO and PAS are equipped with pre-recorded video clips of significant events and vital speeches of their leaders. Nevertheless, only the web-page of PAS is equipped with 'live' web radio and TV, and the web-page belongs to UMNO is equipped with 'live' web TV. These radio and TV programs are broadcasted live occasionally to provide coverage on significant party events. Anyway, none of the web-pages are equipped with video conferencing facilities.

Table 5:
Multimedia functions of the web-pages

Multimedia functions.	UMNO	MCA	PGM	MIC	SUPP	SAPP	PAS	DAP
Audio (pre-recorded)								
i. Speeches / interview.	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N
ii. Patriotic songs.	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N
Video (pre-recorded)								
i. Events.	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N
ii. Speeches.	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N
'Live web radio'	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N
'Live web tv'	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N
'Video conferencing'	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N

Y= yes

N= no

In order to answer the fourth specific objective of the study that is regarding the layout of the web-page, the study found that none of the web-pages are developed only from text. Instead, all of them bear a combination of text and illustration, with colourful heavy graphics.

Table 6:
Layout of the web-pages

Layout.	UMNO	MCA	PGM	MIC	SUPP	SAPP	PAS	DAP
Simple, text only.	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Text and illustration.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Y= yes

N= no

In addition to the graphics, texts and colourful illustrations, the web-page of UMNO is also equipped with 'IT Corner', a place where surfers can learn more about information technology. Besides IT Corner, the web-page is also furnished with online shopping facilities where surfers can order party's souvenirs. The same goes to the web-pages of MCA. The web-page belongs to PAS is also equipped with the same facility whereby surfers can order political and religious reading materials. On the other hand, the MCA web-page offers a special column named 'Cupid Space' which served as a place where single and unmarried Chinese men and women can get to know each other besides having a healthy social activity. (Please refer to Table 7).

Table 7:
Additional properties

Additional properties	UMNO	MCA	PGM	MIC	SUPP	SAPP	PAS	DAP
IT Corner	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Online shopping	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N
Cupid Space	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N

Y= yes

N= no

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that:

- Almost all political parties in Malaysia have developed and published their own official web-pages. This is inline with the current development where the country has evolved into the information technology era. Thus the political parties too have taken the opportunity by making use of one of the element of the era that is the internet in order to disseminate their political ideologies to the public.
- In terms of the content of the web-pages, majority of the political web-pages are in the forms of text and illustration. This is definitely to attract the surfers to visit and understand the issues at hand. Most of the web-pages cover political events and carry articles on the party's principles and manifestos. The web-pages are developed in at least two languages, and all of the web-pages have English version of the content. Ironically, quite a number of the web-pages published by government component parties have no Bahasa Melayu version, even though Bahasa Melayu is the national language of the country.
- In terms of the issues covered in the web-pages, it can be concluded that all of the web-pages give a great detail of analyses of relevant current issues, especially domestic matters. Only PAS through its web-page includes discussions on international developments.
- In terms of interactivity of the web-pages, it can be concluded that most of the web-pages have not yet achieve a high level of interactivity. Only the web-pages of PAS and UMNO are more sophisticated. Linkage wise, it was found that the web-pages are linked only to other web-pages from the same political ideology or to other organizations that share the same path of struggle.
- In terms of multimedia functions, the study found that most of the web-pages of political parties in Malaysia are still lacking in these facilities. Only the web-pages of UMNO and PAS are equipped with audio and video functions. Anyway, the web-page of PAS is the most sophisticated as it bears 'live' radio and TV broadcasting functions. PAS and other oppositions are barred from using public broadcasting media to air their thoughts and ideologies. Therefore they substitute the main stream electronic media with the web broadcasting. Probably the ruling parties do not need this function since they are capable of taking advantage of conventional radio and TV to channel their political viewpoints.
- Finally in terms of the layout of the web-pages, it can be concluded that all of the web-pages studied combine text and illustrations in full colour graphics. Adding some extra functions such as 'IT Corner' and online shopping facilities will definitely increase attraction and interaction.

Overall, it was found from this study that the web-pages of political parties in Malaysia have tried to assume the functions of media in a democratic society as suggested by McNair. The web-pages has achieved a commendable extent of its purposes in informing the surfers of current political development of the country,

educating the visitors democratically of the development, becoming an arena for the public to discuss and seek opinion regarding facts that occur around them, assuming the role of watchdog in revealing all sorts of misappropriation in governing the nation and becoming an alternative media in disseminating political ideologies to the general public. Even though not all web-pages have successfully played all the functions, the trend can be seen clearly from the findings of this study. In time to come, the internet will definitely emerge as a new frontier in political struggle in this country.

RECOMMENDATION

From the conclusion above, further in-depth study is recommended to compare the issues carried out in the web-pages with the one in the conventional media. This is to observe whether there are similarities in terms of the depth of coverage of the issues via conventional and alternative media. Furthermore, this will determine whether internet is really an alternative media to the conventional one or merely serve as a complement to the existing media in the country. Further study should also be conducted on the visitors or the surfers of the web-pages, to seek their opinion and comments on the pages and the impact that the web-pages have shaped on them.

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