ONLINE JOURNALISM CHANGING PUBLIC MINDSET AND ITS IMPACT ON THE POLITICAL SCENARIO (IN MALAYSIA)

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ABSTRACT

Public mindset change (due to the influences of the new communication technologies, mainly online journalism or the so-called Internet media) is the central factor that drives today`s political mobilization and conflicts in many countries around the globe, especially developing, non-democratic and semi-democratic countries. This paper explores the role of online journalism in changing public mindset and its relationship to the public revolutions and political turmoil that engulfed Malaysia, as many other developing countries across the world, these last few years. The researcher has analysed several local and foreign online newspapers published to date, as well as many netizens and informants` perspectives and insights. The results show that the political turmoil and conflicts have been raised and sharpened in Malaysia, as elsewhere, when more citizens have changed their mindset towards the hegemonic, conventional mechanism of power, due to the influence of the new communication technology, particularly independent online journalism that is very daring, democratic, investigative, and critical of government and norms. The new communication technologies are creating a new generation with a different kind of thinking that clashes with conventional mechanisms of power and norms. Those who often read independent online media news are usually found to be more outspoken and political savvy, yet cynical and rebellious against the regime and norms. Online journalism is used today as a powerful catalyst for public brainwashing, social movements and political reforms.

Keywords: Online Journalism, public mindset change, political conflicts

INTRODUCTION

Online journalism has a powerful influence in reshaping public mindset, thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions of the regime and norms. It has become not only a popular medium for political communication but an influential arena for public mindset change, public mobilization, political struggle, and political reforms. Changing public`s mindset towards hegemonic mechanisms of power and norms has fuelled public revolutions and anti-government protests, and gave a rise to serious internal political conflicts these last few years in Malaysia, as in many other developing countries.

With the rise of Internet media which have been influencing the public beliefs, thoughts and perceptions over the last few years, many countries in the world, especially developing, non-democratic and semi-democratic countries have witnessed several anti-government protests and public revolutions that led to the downfall of many leaders and regimes.Research reveals that online journalism, especially citizen journalism or the so-called alternative online media has been used as an instrumental tool in mobilizing the Arab Revolution/Arab Spring 2011 to accelerate democratization process and pave the way towards political reforms (Africa Online Journalism, 2014).The Arab revolution is a global phenomenon in which suppressive regimes face a threat from citizen journalism (Madeline Storck, 2011; Joel Simon, 2012). "If you want to liberate a society, just give them the Internet," stated Wael Ghonim (2011) after the downfall of the President of Egypt, Husni Mobarak.

The Internet played a role in introducing, cultivating, and developing the philosophical ideas of democracy, while others raise doubts (Rice, 2002). Online journalism in 1998 and the years that followed, has turned out to be not only a channel for political protest, but also a key influence for democratic change and reform (Abbott, 2004). The Internet went beyond a tool of communication to become an active political tool (Ferdinand, 2000). People today are using the Internet media not only to read or watch news but to share, comment, complain, exchange views, gather, inspire others, vote and protest. People who consume more news online are likely to become civically and politically engaged across various measures (Wihbey, 2015). But the question here is - How has online journalism managed to mobilize all at once such public revolutions from North Africa to the Middle East to South East Asia and Latin America these last few years.

The purpose of this study is to further understand the relationship between online journalism, political mobilization and political turmoil/ conflicts, in the context of Malaysia which has also suffered from the wind of the Arab revolution. Though Malaysia public power revolution (Bersih 4 and 5 or the so-called Yellow T-shirts) in 2015 and 2016 was always peaceful and colourful compared to the deadly Arab Revolution, it had the same goal as this latter, which is - to topple the government, Barisan Nasional (BN) that ruled the nation for decades since Malaysia Independence in 1957, and change the political system.

This research is based on the assumption that the political mobilization and conflicts have been raised and sharpened in Malaysia these last few years when more citizens have changed their mindset towards the hegemonic regime and norms, due to the influences of the new communication technologies, particularly independent/alternative online media. Those who often read alternative online news are likely to become cynical and rebellious against the existing government and norms. Public mindset change is the core factor that drives political mobilization against conventional mechanisms of power and norms. Citizens would

not take to the street, sacrificing their lives or time and defying the authorities to topple a leader or regime unless their mindset has been completely changed towards this latter. Online journalism, especially independent online journalism raised and sharpened political turmoil and conflicts while changing public mindset (thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions) towards hegemonic regimes and conventional constitutions.

Based on these theoretical parameters, this study aims to explore the role of online journalism in changing public mindset and its relationship to the political turmoil and conflicts that engulfed Malaysia, as many other nations across the globe. To meet the objectives of this research, the researcher asked three main questions: 1) Why online independent/alternative media is becoming more popular and influential than the mainstream media and its online versions? 2) How is online journalism changing public mindset? 3) To what extent online journalism changing public mindset affected BN government and the political scenario in Malaysia? Though this research has been done in the context of Malaysia, the results and findings can be applied to all other countries that suffer the same consequences of this phenomenon.

METHODOLOGY

This study applied a mixed methods approach with a concurrent triangulation design and employed three data collection methods, namely a survey, content analysis and in-depth interview. The purpose of applying a mixed methods approach was to tackle the phenomenon from a holistic perspective and come up with reliable, vigorous results. Indeed, the researcher analysed several local and foreign online newspapers to date, users `comments, as well as several informants and respondents ` views and perspectives. The in-depth interviews were conducted with 11 Malaysian informants (1 former minister, 1 political analyst, two chief editors from the mainstream media and independent/alternative media respectively, two academicians from mass communication and 5 senior journalists from both mainstream media and independent online media respectively. The researcher has also conducted a survey with 480 Malaysian netizens from two urban cities (Kuala Lumpur and Selangor), male and female from all walks of life, aged between 20 to 65. The quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed concurrently, starting from July 2015 to April 2016 in the light of Malaysian public power revolution (Bersih 4 and 5) that were demanding the removal of Malaysia Prime Minister Najib Razak and political reforms.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

As mentioned above, the main research questions are: 1) Why online independent/alternative media is becoming more popular and influential than the mainstream media and its online versions? 2) How is online journalism changing public mindset? 3) To what extent online journalism changing public mindset affected BN government and the political scenario in Malaysia? This section presents the results that emerged from these questions, according to the survey, content analysis and in-depth interviews, respectively:

From the perspectives of the survey

The survey results show that 91% of urban news readers get their news from the Internet today. Almost 40% of them get their news from MalaysiaKini which is an independent online newspaper. However, 42% of them still like to get their news from the mainstream media online news portals, especially from the Star Online which is the digital version of the English newspaper `the Star`. But, only 32% still like Utusan online which also belongs to the mainstream media, Utusan Malaysia - one of the most established national newspaper in the region. This shows that the independent online media such as MalaysiaKini is challenging the mainstream media and their online versions while attracting and capturing the minds of many readers and viewers.

The survey also shows that 40% of urban netizens no longer trust the current government (42% of them are neutral), most of them are those who often read news from online independent/alternative media, MalaysiaKini. Sixty-six percent (66%) of the respondents said their thinking about (BN) government have changed since they started reading online news. Fifty- one percent (51%) said they know about government wrongdoings only via the Internet media. The survey also reveals that 61% of urban netizens want the government to change - they want a more democratic government - most of them are those who often read independent online media news. However, 41% do not prefer the opposition party.

From the perspective of the content analysis

Analysing and comparing online independent newspapers to the mainstream media including their online versions, the results show that the alternative/independent online media are very daring, investigative, independent, borderless, democratic, and critical of government and they are taking over the mainstream media. MalaysiaKini is Number 1 news portal in Malaysia in terms of credibility, political coverage, immediacy, views and public engagement, according to a survey done by comScore's MMX™ in 2015.The content analysis also shows that independent online media focus more on political and national issues that matter the public, mainly issues regarding corruption, racism, demonstrations, democracy, and extremism. Analyzing online news users` comments, the results show that there has been a severe backlash against the ruling party on the social media these last few years, due to `public trust deficit. However, the results reveal that not the majority of the public lost confidence in the BN government which is still in power till today.

From the perspective of in-depth interviews

Most of the informants argued that the era of mainstream media, mainly the print editions, is coming to an end. The mainstream media and their online news portals avoid being investigative or critical of government, because most of them are owned or

sponsored by the government. Many citizens are shunning the mainstream media and instead they are resorting to the independent/alternative media which are very daring, critical, democratic, and faster than the former. People are attracted to sensational news that break taboos, report on government corruptions and wrongdoings, and cover both the opposition party and the ruling party events and stories. People want to read the other side of the story. They are shunning the mainstream media because this latter sounds more biased and partisan to the ruling party, does not represent the voice of the public.

Informant also argued that exposing government corruption and wrongdoings, portraying the government as non-democratic and corrupted, promoting new and opposite views and ideologies regarding democracy and international values, would have had great impact on public`s beliefs and perception of government. The alternative media has become a powerful, influential catalyst in moulding public mindset, creating negative perceptions and disbeliefs among the public against BN regime and norms, which eventually facilitate public mobilization, protests and social movements. The result also shows that the more the mainstream media that have been supporting the ruling party are losing readership the more the government is losing credibility, public support and public trust. More citizens are reading online alternative media news, more citizens are changing their mindset towards the government, and more probably, there would be a public revolution and severe backlash against the government.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Online journalism, mainly online independent journalism has a powerful influence in reshaping public`s beliefs, thoughts and perceptions towards the existing regime and norms, which eventually had a significant impact on the political scenario in Malaysia. Its political coverage, exposure, negative portrayals of the government, critical reports, debates, and the spread of new, opposite views, ideologies and propagandas are not only attracting and capturing more minds but they are also changing public's mindset (beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions) towards the hegemonic government and norms, and raising political mobilization and conflicts.   More citizens are becoming more political savvy, sceptical, cynical and rebellious against the government and norms. They no longer trust or believe in Barisan Nasional (BN) government that ruled the country for many decades since Malaysia independence in 1957. Some of them even participate in rallies and political campaigns to throw out the government, because of negative perception and suspicion shaped in their minds by what they have read on the Internet media.

As Abraham Lincoln (1858) famously stated, "communication is a tool to build trust and shape perceptions." Trust in government is closely related to confidence in institutions (Bardes& W. Oldendick, 2012). "The dimension of trust in government runs from high trust to high distrust or political cynism...Cynism refers to a statement of the belief that the government is not functioning and producing outputs in accord with individual expectations" (Mitter, as cited in Bardes & Oldendick, 2012:5). The flow of ideas, the capacity to make informed choices, the ability to criticize, all of the assumptions on which political democracy rests, depend largely on communications (John F. Kennedy, 1960). The media, whether print or digital, are a powerful tool in communicating with the public. Communication is as able of constructing beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions towards a politician or subject. Communication is designed not only to provide information but also "to convince or persuade individuals to think or act in a particular way" (Berg & Boguslaw, 1985:273).The media plays a big part in educating the public, mastering their minds, creating sentiments, beliefs, trust and perceptions. As Abraham Lincoln (1858) famously said, "public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed. "Who moulds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions."

The new communication technologies create suspicion and confusions among the public. The American writer and futurist, Alvin Toffler (1971) stated in his book `Future Shock`, "we are increasing the sophistication of deception faster than the technology of verification. The consequence of that is the end of truth. The dark side of information technology explosion is that it will breed a population that believes nothing". There would be a problem if facts are distorted by citizen journalists. Anyone with a computer or a cell phone can post in online forums. Anyone with a moderate amount of skill with Photoshop or other image manipulation software can distort reality. Special effects make even videos untrustworthy - we have a problem here!" (Gillmor, 2004).

The west, the opposition party, democratic activists and their supporters (cyber troopers) are today using online media as a tool to spread and promote their ideologies and propagandas, and form certain opinions in the minds of the public/readers, for political motivations. However, the ruling elites are also making use of online media today; they employ their own news portals, blogs, social media accounts and cybertroopers to counterattack the opposition party and their critics.

 As Rahmat Ghazali (2008) pointed out in his research, issues related to democracy, human rights, racism, extremism, and corruption are today openly discussed on such news webs and blogs. This kind of political coverage and debates attract and capture the minds of thousands of citizens, particularly the marginalized, the minorities, and the millennials who perceive these issues to be close to their hearts. At the same time, they reshape and change their beliefs and views of the ruling party.

Today, the western civilization is easily and widely invading Malaysians` homes and minds via the Internet media and its Apps. Foreign, western ideologies and propagandas spread on online media and social media have had great impact on the psychology, beliefs, and perceptions of Malaysian netizens, particularly the youths including Malays and the minority Malaysian Chinese and Malaysian Indians. In fact, the west and democratic journalists and activists are today leveraging on online media to democratize and liberalize developing countries.

Online media users' views and comments are also capable of forming different opinions or convincing other readers on certain subjects. Online media provide users a free, interactive sphere/space where they can voice up, express their opinions, exchange

ideas, and debate on issues that matter them and which the mainstream media (including its online versions) have been silent on. Thus, online news readers are not reading only the piece of article published by online journalists, but they are also reading other users' comments and views on the subject. So, other users' comments and views would also have great influence on the readers` beliefs and perceptions. Sometimes a reader may change his mind or idea only because he agreed to other users` views or opinions.

The independent online media exposing high ranked officials` corruption and wrongdoings, portraying the government as corrupt, incompetent and non-democratic, and spreading new, different views and ideologies, have not only changed the beliefs and perceptions of many citizens towards the government but also turned them against the latter. It triggered public revolutions, uprisings and campaigns on the street and online, which tends to topple the government, these last few years. The independent/alternative online media are being used by the opposition party, democratic journalists and activists as an influential tool in changing public's mindset and hence mobilizing them to topple the regime. As Abraham Lincoln (1856) once stated that "the government rests in public opinion, whoever can change public opinion, can change the government."

IMPLICATION

The results of 2008 and 2013 General Elections when Barisan Nasional government won only a simple majority for the first time in history, and Bersih4 rally that called for the removal of the Prime Minister Najib Razak and his Cabinet indicate the extent to which online journalism`s public mindset change affected the ruling party and the political environment in Malaysia. Never in Malaysia's history was a public revolution or rally that demanded the removal of a Prime Minister or government. Evidence suggests that new media are providing new opportunities for political voice and discussion, thus increasing the role of participatory politics in public life (Kahne, Middaugh, Allen, 2014).

Social network sites, websites, and text increasingly serve as both a conduit for political information and a major public arena where citizens express and exchange their political ideas; raise funds; and mobilize others to vote, protest, and work on public issues (Kahne, Middaugh, Allen, 2014).Many citizens go against the regime today because they no longer trust or believe in this latter. Their beliefs and perceptions are influenced by alternative media negative news about the government. For example, the independent alternative media's exposure of the RM2.6 billion and 1MDB issues in July 2015 have not only shaken public's conscience but drawn severe backlashes to the government and brought thousands of protesters to the street in a mass rally (Bersih4 rally) that called the Prime Minister, Najib Razak to step down. Such revelations have not only led to more public trust deficits and revolutions, but have also divided the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) party. Many UMNO prominent political figures such as the former Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the Deputy Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin and Mukhriz Mahathir have left UMNO party and formed an opposition party called Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM). They have become serious critics against United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and its president, the Prime Minister Najib Razak. These internal political conflicts started when many Malaysians boycotted Barisan Nasional (BN) government. Ethno-political conflicts and tensions between the Malay politicians in UMNO and their Malay supporters and the Malaysian Chinese opposition party, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and their Malaysian Chinese supporters have increased dramatically, these last few years, ever since the Malaysian Chinese minorities changed their mindset towards the Barisan Nasional (BN) government and no longer support or vote for this latter.

The Barisan Nasional government is facing big challenges and threats from the online media, especially independent/alternative online media and its users. Online media has, in fact, become no longer just a mere means for news and information dissemination, but also an influential arena for political struggle, social movements and protests, and political reforms. The opposition party and democracy supporters are now relying heavily on independent/alternative media to convince the public and change their mindset (thoughts, beliefs and perceptions) and hence mobilize them in social movements against the ruling party. The more the mainstream media (that have been supporting, defending and backing the government) are losing readership and credibility, the more the government is losing public's trust, support and vote.

Even though there have been many negative reports and exposures about BN government corruption and scandals, not all the public changed their mindset towards the government. The Barisan Nasional government is still gripping on its political power as it still wins the latest elections (such as Sarawak State Election on 7th May 2016, and the Sungai Besar and Kuala Kangsar By-Elections on 18th June 2016) with a big majority. This suggests that Barisan Nasional still has the majority Malay support, especially the rural Malays who do not read news online and who still believe in Barisan Nasional government and its mainstream media. BarisanNasional government still holds power because they are now fully aware of the influences and threats of the new technologies. They are also utilizing online media and cyber troopers (keyboard warriors) in their campaigns, control and maintain public's trust, beliefs, and support, and counterattack the opposition party ideologies and propagandas spread on the Internet media via alternative media blogs and news portals.

However, Barisan Nasional (BN) government has been obviously shaken by the independent/alternative online media`s political coverage and revelations, and public mindset change. The 2008 and 2013 General Elections results where Barisan Nasional government lost many seats, the Bersih4 rally on August 2015 and the Citizen's Declaration that called for the Prime Minister Najib and his Cabinet's removal could be seen as considerable effects of online journalism's public mindset change towards the Barisan Nasional government.

Therefore, the government of today should not undermine the influences and impact of independent online media on public mindset and political environment. Politicians must be aware and careful when giving a statement or dealing with an issue, as

whatever they say or do can go viral locally and internationally today, create perceptions and even trigger political movements and chaos.

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