



The Influence of New Media on Malaysian Public Affairs

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The 2008 Malaysian general election was a watershed moment for new media in the country.

Largely ignored by political parties previously, today new media has newfound credibility, especially as a medium to reach a younger audience. This is an increasingly important voting group as half of Malaysia's population is aged 25 and under.

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The government's new push online is also driven by the need to actively engage with the wider public on a number of issues that are potentially divisive, and could hurt the country's image abroad. Some of these issues are not new, but with new media's growing audience, both inside and outside the country, there are wider and more open discussions.

For political institutions used to one-way communication with its constituents, where information can be controlled and criticisms downplayed, the new rules of engagement can be daunting. Even more so when the comments or feedback come almost instantaneously. Without a proper engagement strategy in place, it may seem that one is always on the defensive on any issue, which may have negative implications.

This has led to national-level institutions seeking counsel from multinational public relations consultancies, specifically for digital outreach programmes. Understanding the impact that new media had on the elections, politicians tried to catch up with the online trend. They developed blogs, featuring Twitter updates on their whereabouts and periodically uploading their press statements and carefully chosen photographs. Malaysians understood the motivation for this instantly.

The websites generated traffic, but not necessarily any change in opinion. Existing politicians had a distance about them; they spoke a diplomatic, guarded language and proclaimed policies that came off as more robotic than sincere. No matter how digital outreach was applied, visitors still felt as if they were communicating with an institution, rather than to a person.

The lacklustre response can be attributed to a number of reasons. Prevailing cynicism in politicians in general has been on the rise. One could say that old hands cannot promise the mystique for change as new faces do. However, a large cause for the poor reception is really a lack of understanding of digital media's role in public affairs. It facilitates, it does not cure.

One point to always keep in mind is that new media is just a delivery channel, albeit one that is becoming increasingly influential. It is not just about setting up a blog, a Facebook page or a Twitter feed.

Developing a compelling message and building a network of advocates and opinion leaders remain the key elements for a successful communications programme. The technology is only a tool. More specifically, for issues management and reputation development, new media apply the same rules for advocacy and building relationships.

As the government prepares an impressive array of convincing reforms, only a willingness to show the human and more personal side of the political rhetoric will regain the public confidence they covet.