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Can Twitter be an Effective Platform for Political Discourse in Malaysia? A Study of #PRU13

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Abstract

Studies show that social media play an important role in shaping political discourse. Applications of Web 2.0, particularly Twitter, are currently influencing the nature of online participation in which the audience is not merely passively reading web content, but is actually contributing to and creating the content. This study examines communication on Twitter during the 13th Malaysian General Election based on Twitter messages collected under the #PRU13 hashtag. The analyzed dataset is collected from Twitter's public timeline from May 1 to May 6, 2013. This study found lack of diversity in the discussion on Twitter sphere in which tweets that are pro-Barisan National coalition dominates the #pru13. Based on the communication patterns, however, #PRU13 constitute a multifaceted group of commenters who seek to persuade, educate, provoke and so on.

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1. Introduction

The debate about the role of social media in supporting or discouraging exposure to various perspectives is pertinent to the argument of vigorous democracy. This relates to the potential of Internet-based media to create a vibrant public sphere, which is a key concept in contemporary political communication. Rasmussen (2013) contends that Internet-based media has radically revised Habermas's (1989) conception of the public sphere. This is because

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of the potential of the Internet-based public sphere to democratise access to media and to disperse the structure of communication, in contrast to the traditional argument of a single space conceptualised by Habermas.

Another important potential of social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube is their ability to encourage the interest of young people in politics. Through political information received from their online network of friends, Baumgartner and Morris (2009) argue that social network sites offer an opportunity to this previously disengaged young age group to become involved in politics. In contrast to traditional media, which function in a one-way communication, social media hubs such as Twitter and Facebook allow users to express actively their views and ideas to each other. Therefore, many argue that it is impossible to define a coherent worldview of social media communication as “similar worldviews may be shared within a group, but may be incompatible between them” (Sobkowicz & Sobkowicz, 2012, p. 451).

This article examines how the members of the public who utilized the #PRU13 hashtag followed, discussed and commented on the 2013 Malaysian general election. What makes the study of political engagement on social networking important is the role that social media play with regard to political engagement within a restricted media environment like Malaysia. As a country with little freedom of press, studies show that citizens often turn to alternative forms of media to “express dissent, connect with like-minded individuals, and organize” (Smeltzer & Keddy, 2010). Since there are no specific studies that look into the characteristic of communication in social media networking based on the Malaysian context, this study hopes to explore the following questions: How do people find and share information about events on Twitter? And what kinds of viewpoints are people exposed to?

2. Social media: Between diversity and fragmentation

There are two main arguments as regards the characteristic of Internet-based communication. First, Internet-based communication is likely to foster echo chambers. Second, the Internet is a means of exposure to divergent perspectives. The first hypothesis argues that the Internet results in individuals increasingly involved in forums that align with their perspectives and disregard issues that are not of their interest (Sunstein, 2007). Since the Internet enhances the capacity for selectivity, it is believed that those using it are protected from different points of view and thus make echo chambers more likely. In this situation, individuals are consistently partisan and read information that aligns with their views, and inhibit their chances of being exposed to disagreeable information (Freelon, 2010).

Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler (2009, p. 177) explain that members and new-media users are “self-seeking consumers, free-floating individuals, or sensation-seeking hedonists rather than active and responsible members of political communities”. Although Internet users have more choices of information, they argue that there is little in-depth, thought-provoking and deliberative political news and analysis. Instead, political content on the Internet is dominated by news and discussion that focus on celebrity, rumour and attack, with politics presented as a cynical game. Analysis of a Polish Internet political discussion forum by Sobkowicz and Sobkowicz (2012) also found that the medium is characterised by significant polarisation and political discussions which lead to no significant opinion changes. They argue that highly emotional communication such as provocations has further intensified the political division. This also serves to strengthen the in-group status and arouse defensive mechanisms between different political divisions.

Others propose an alternative hypothesis in which Internet-based political discussion has the potential to provide a democracy-enriching communication platform. According to this line of argument, participation in online communities and activities may foster more diverse networks and connections. In addition, research has demonstrated that the Internet has the ability to support public deliberation and has potential to offer normative conditions for public opinion formation (Dahlberg, 2001; Räsänen & Kuovo, 2007). Rasmussen (2013, p. 98) argues that although the Internet is mostly associated with the concept of ‘individualisation’ of content usage, the personalisation of media on the the Internet enables the individual “to voice opinion directly in social networks, to participate in campaigns and social movements, and to exchange opinions in social media in his or her own ways and language, drawing upon personal experiences, knowledge, engagements, values and judgements”.

Research shows that Twitter in particular can foster a more diverse public discussion than other kinds of social network. Twitter is believed to have the capacity to join two separate audiences into one cohesive group, by merging audiences that use the Internet for entertainment with audiences that use the Internet for, among other things,

exposure to further lines of political discourse (Nguyen, 2011). Anstead and O'Loughlin's (2011) study of real-time audience commentary on an episode of the BBC programme Question Time, shows that viewers use social media to publish and acquire new information, and to engage in discussion. The findings argue that Twitter is inclined towards many-to-many communication, in which the members of what they dubbed "the viewertariat" constitute a multifaceted group of commenters with a range of motivations, associations and identity, who seek to persuade, educate, bond, have fun, provoke and so on. They argue that online discussion in real time is not uniformly banal, coarse, or ill informed, but consists of diverse interaction activity that can enrich democratic deliberation. A study by Ifukor (2010) looking at the linguistic construction of textual messages in the use of blogs and Twitter in the Nigerian 2007 electoral cycle came to the same conclusion. The research shows that citizens' access to Twitter electronically empowers them to be actively involved in democratic activities. This encourages more public discussions about politics and makes the democratic process more dynamic than on the traditional media.

3. Methodology

Since its inception in 2006, Twitter has become one of the most popular social networking sites and is regarded as the fastest growing one (Wang, 2010). Twitter is a social networking and microblogging site on which users can post 140-character messages, or tweets.

Apart from broadcasting tweets to an audience of followers, Twitter users can interact with one another through two primary public methods known as retweets and mentions. Retweets act as a form of endorsement, which allows individuals to rebroadcast content generated by other users, thereby raising the content's visibility (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2008). Mentions, the second primary public method through which tweeters interact, functions differently by allowing someone to address a specific user directly through their public feed, or to a lesser extent, by referring to an individual in the third person (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009). These two means of communication on Twitter serve distinct and complementary purposes, but together, they act as the primary mechanisms for explicit, public user-user interaction on Twitter (Conover, Ratkiewicz, Francisco, Goncalves, Flammini & Menczer, 2011).

Furthermore, hashtags are considered to be another important feature on the Twitter platform. This is simply because they allow users to annotate tweets with metadata specifying the topic or intended audience of a communication. Each hashtag identifies a stream of content and users' tag choices denote participation in different information channels (Conover et al., 2011). Hashtags are central to the organization of information on Twitter. Through the use of hashtags, tweets can be sent to an audience larger than one's followers. Indeed, one does not have to be a Twitter user to follow the conversation because hashtags are visible to anyone. Hashtags are searchable through Twitter, Google and trending sites (Small, 2011).

In this study, the core discussion is about the 2013 Malaysian general election. It was organized around #pru13, which quickly emerged as the central hashtag for political discussion. The act of affixing a hashtag to one's tweets, such as the political hashtag #PRU13, may be seen as a thoughtful attempt by the user to contribute to a hashtag debate that is visible to all the users who follow it. Although other debates regarding the Malaysian election may have taken place through non-hashtagged messages on Twitter, the absence of the #pru13 hashtag resulted in less visibility for those posts (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). Therefore, this paper presents an analysis of how the members of the public who utilized the #PRU13 hashtag followed, discussed, and commented on the election campaign and its results, as mentioned above.

This study employs a content analysis method. An archive of all the tweets bearing the hashtag #PRU13 between May 1 and May 6, 2013 was accessed through a third-party tool that collects Twitter search results, Twitter Archivist.

Table 1. Sampling

Type	No of tweets	Random sampling (10%)
1 May (from 12.01 am)	9086	909
2 nd May	7919	792
3 rd May	9284	928
4 th May	11359	1136
5 th May	11942	1194
6 th May	6510	651
Total	56100	5610
Missing values		99
Total Twitter Analyzed		5511
Number of users		2996

Table 1 shows the number of tweets by day; there were 56,100 tweets sent between May 1 and May 6, 2013. Each day, 10% of the tweets were randomly selected from the data set. Excluding the missing values, this provides a total of 5511 samples of tweets sent by 2996 users. The unit of analysis for the content analysis was the individual tweet.

This study was undertaken with the understanding that using this tweet set as a sample for analysis involves two limitations. First, there was no definitive method to determine if the tweet set was completed. Twitter Archivist relies on Twitter's API archiving service; it is reasonable to assume that some tweets were missed. Given the sheer size of the data set, however, it is unlikely that the missing tweets would significantly impact the results.

Second, this data set likely excluded a large number of the politically-related tweets sent by Twitter users. Since many Twitter users tweeted "on-the-go," it is likely that many did not include the #PRU13 hashtag. While this excludes a potentially significant number of tweets from the tweet set, it does not exclude many that were clearly intended for politically active Twitter users. Thus, the #PRU13 tweet set should be sufficient to evaluate the use of Twitter during the 13th Malaysian General Election.

Table 2. Coding sheets

Variables	Percent agreement	Krippendorff's alpha
Type of Tweet	100	1
Target Group	84	0.743107363
Slant of Tweets	88	0.801536919
Communication Patterns	78	0.703026998

As shown in Table 2, there are four important variables in the content analysis of #pru13. The first variable is the type of tweet and indicates whether it is original, @reply or retweeted. The second variable is the target group. The fourth variable is the slant of the tweet towards both the target group and the fifth variable is the communication patterns.

An intercoder agreement was calculated via Krippendorff's alpha using ReCal, an intercoder reliability service. As shown in Table 2.0, the intercoder reliability for all variables is more than 0.7. Five undergraduate students, who were trained extensively, served as coders for this research.

4. Findings

Table 3 shows the distribution of the total sample by type of message (original, @reply or retweet, as discussed above). Retweets were the most common with 55%, followed by original posts with 37% and @reply or directed messages with 8.2%.

Table 3. Type of tweets

Type	Frequency	Percent
Original post	2015	37.2
Retweet	3010	54.6
@reply or directed post	450	8.2
Total	5511	100

It can be argued that the level of addressivity in the messages is an indication of the exchange of ideas on Twitter. Assuming that ‘@-mentions’ indicates interactions between users, roughly 8% of the messages in our sample were direct messages, which indicates that people were engaged in interactive discussions (Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner & Welpe, 2010).

As shown in Table 4, the Barisan Nasional (BN) was the most frequently mentioned on #PRU13 with 43.7% of overall tweets, more than double the tweets that mentioned Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) or its 3-party opposition alliance namely Pakatan Rakyat (PR), PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) and DAP (Democratic Action Party). SPR (Election Commission of Malaysia) was mentioned in less than 2% of overall tweets.

Table 4. Target group

Target Group	Frequency	Percent
BN/ Government	2407	43.7
PR/ PKR	1043	18.9
PAS	205	3.7
SPR	107	1.9
DAP	96	1.7

When we cross tab between target groups and the slant of tweets, as shown in Table 5, most of the tweets that mentioned BN were positive, with 94%. More than 50% of tweets that mentioned PKR/ PR were negative. Similarly, most tweets that mentioned DAP and PAS were negative.

Table 5. Target group * slant cross tabulation

Target group	Slant (%)			Frequency
	Neutral	Positive	Negative	
BN/ Government	0.4	94	5.6	2407
PR/ PKR	1.8	45	53	1043
DAP	6.2	12.5	81.3	96
PAS	2.9	20	77.1	205
SPR	30.8	30	39.2	107

The content analysis identified seven typical communication patterns, which are shown in Table 6. Sharing information is the most common communication pattern identified with 73 percent of overall tweets sample. This is in line with the previous findings of type of Tweets where more than half of the messages are retweets. This is more of a one-way communication pattern, where the users are providing some information for everyone to read, without any expectations to receive input or initiate a discussion with others. Most of the time, the messages appeared to be “forwarded” or “copy and paste” from original twitter with external links to websites as shown in paragraph [1] – [3]. The second communication pattern in #PRU13 with only 13 percent is relating to giving opinion or observations in about the election. This type of messages includes users expressing their frustration in the election process and the issues of indelible ink and phantom voters top the lists. #PRU13 is also used as a platform for political mobilization and this is shown as the third most popular communication pattern in #PRU13. Twitter users made good use of this tool to educate, enlighten, and encourage eligible voters to avail themselves of the opportunity to perform their civic duties. Although majority of tweets in #PRU13 show clashes of opinions between supporters of the oppositions and supporters of ruling coalitions, there are significant numbers of tweets that are neutral and apolitical. These original tweets are mainly in the form of random statements, messages about users’ informing their activities, anecdotes pertaining to the election or election campaigns and asking questions Tweets congratulating both opposition and the winning coalition group are also plentiful. In addition, there are also tweets that reminded Malaysians to preserve their unity in the midst of rigorous election campaigns.

Table 6. Communication patterns

Communication patterns	Frequency	Percent
Sharing Information	4020	72.9
Giving opinion/ observations	705	12.8
Mobilize	272	4.9
Random statement/ thought	172	3.1
About Me	166	3.0
Question	102	1.9
Anecdote	74	1.3
Total	5511	100.0

As shown in Table 7, the most linked information is from Websites, Blogs, and Youtube clips with more than 37 percent. Less than 5 percent Twitter are linked to articles or news from mainstream online newspapers. The most shared information is from a website called lagenda.org.my [paragraph 1], which shows a clear inclination of campaigning for BN. The most shared Youtube clips are a collection of videos showing Malaysian [paragraph 2] and celebrities pledging their support for Najib Razak.

- #PRU13 Najib Minta Kaum India Beri Mandat Besar Kepada Beliau Pada PRU13 <http://t.co/rFOKUseJN4> #NajibMyPM.
[...*Najib requests Indians to give him a big mandate In PRU13...*].
- [Video] People have decided - "Saya pilih Najib Razak" <https://t.co/0cjZo72NpM> #PRU13 #GE13 #BetterNation #NajibMyPM
[...*I choose Najib Razak...*].

Table 7. Linked to

	Frequency	Percent
Websites	767	13.9
Blogs	651	11.8
Pictures	623	11.3
Youtube	431	7.8
BH online	128	2.3
UM online	37	.7
Others	213	.43

Some of the most linked blogs are “aktivispendangjr.blogspot.com”, “azmykelanajaya.blogspot.com” and “brojingo.blogspot.com”, which show a tone of anti-opposition group. One shared characteristic of language of these linked tweets could be associated to the concept of “flaming” which is defined as “displaying hostility by insulting, swearing or using otherwise offensive language” (Moor, Heuvelman & Verleur, 2010). As shown in the example of paragraph 3, blog posts which featured stories, videos and photos including rumors of sex scandals involving opposition leader are widely circulated on #PRU13. The account given in paragraphs below appears to express the opinions of the twitter users on #pru13 which shares information from blogs.

- Nurul Izzah Kantoi Menipu, Individu Yang Mendakwa Dirinya Anggota Tentera Ini Perlu Disiasat #PRU13 #GE13: <http://t.co/2SrD8rRgnN>.
[*Nurul Izzah caught cheating, individuals claiming to be members of the army should be investigated*]
- #PRU13 : Insiden Anwar Kena Tembak Jam 3 Petang ?!: Percubaan Pakatan Haram Jadah untuk merampas kuasa melalui... <http://t.co/epqsFXkD8Z>.
[...*An incident where Anwar was shot at 3pm?!: An attempt of the bastard alliance to come to seize power through...*].
- #PRU13 ; Terkini ! Foto Skandal Seks Aksi '67' Calon Pas Kedah ?! <http://t.co/FW377kfxCs>
[*Latests! Scandal sex photos of Kedah PAS candidate in '67' action*].

5. Discussion

The results of the content analysis of the most prominent hashtag during the 2013 Malaysian general elections demonstrate that tweets that are pro-Barisan National coalition dominates the Twitter sphere. This to some extent support the argument that the social media expose Internet individuals in communications that align with their perspectives and disregard issues that are not of their interest (Sunstein, 2007). This also protected twitter users from different points of view and thus make echo chambers more likely where their chances of being exposed to disagreeable information (Freelon, 2010).

The results of the content analysis of the most prominent hashtag during the 2013 Malaysian general elections demonstrate that the Barisan National coalition has absolute domination of the Twitter sphere compared with the opposition group, but this domination did not reflect its vote share in the election. A report by the electoral commission shows that, with a high turnout of 85% of the country's 13.3 million voters, the Barisan Nasional coalition won 47% of the popular vote, while the opposition group won more than 50% of the popular vote (The Star, 2013). The analysis of this study, to some extent, is in line with the argument of Metaxas, Mustafaraj and Gayo-Avello (2011) that the predictive power of Twitter does not match that of traditional election polls.

There are several explanations for the result. Firstly, political deliberation on Twitter is arguably led by a few "political junkies" rather than the wider general public (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). The content analysis found that posts from 60 most active Twitter users on #PRU13, a mere 2% out of 2996 users, constituted more than 22% of the overall sample tweets. This also supports the argument that there is low equality of participation in the political debate on Twitter (Tumasjan et al., 2010).

Secondly, the content analysis shows that posts from 58 of the accounts were mainly pro-BN and only two showed support for opposition groups. Based on this, one could argue that the reasons that may have contributed to the failure of the #PRU13 hashtag to reflect the vote share in the election was the deluge of messages produced by what appears to be bots or cyborgs instead of human beings. This concerted effort, by what appears a campaign machine, particularly in the pro-Barisan National camp, also may be regarded as characteristic of an astroturf political campaign, in which multiple centrally controlled accounts created the appearance of unprecedented support for the coalition's candidates or opinions.

The homogenous characteristic of Twitter communication reveals some pertinent issues: the extent to which the Internet plays an active role in diversity of communication on the Internet and social media stimulate democratic discourse. The personalisation of media on the Internet supposedly enables the individual to voice opinion directly in social networks, and to exchange opinions in social media, which produce heterogeneity of discussion (Rasmussen, 2013). Another important characteristic about Twitter communication in this case study is that people are less likely to interact with others. Rather than deliberating and debating about the issue between them, the posts are mostly about users sharing informations in the form of retweets of links to websites, videos, and blogs.

The result of this study is, to some extent, in line with the argument put forward by Gurevitch, Stephen Coleman and Jay G. Blumler (2009, p. 177), which explains that new-media users are mostly not active and responsible members of political communities. Rather, political discussion is mostly framed as rumour, attack, or a cynical game. The findings of the analysis are also characterised by Mancini's (2013) argument that the line between informing people and sharing common feelings and attitudes that frequently represent the characteristic of the social network communication becomes blurred. The interaction and participation are based on subjective preferences and viewpoints and they are articulated and linked to others, re/producing webs of intersubjectivity (Rasmussen, 2013).

However, the samples of Twitter still show diversity of news and information. Links to clips on YouTube, articles and blogs about the issue abound on the Internet, and messages originating from a multitude of Facebook pages circulate virally across social networks. There is information not only from Twitter users/ accounts, who are distinctly pro-government supporters but also pro-oppositions. One could argue that social network websites contribute to democratic discourse by providing information about politics and current events to otherwise disengaged individuals. The communication patterns on #PRU13 show that there are users who become aware of the 2013 election unintentionally because it was the most talked or most "trending" topic on Twitter. Baumgartner and Morris (2009) explain that exposure to this news among the disengaged public may offer a "gateway" into higher levels of political deliberation. The more individuals learn about politics via these means, the more likely they are to

participate in the future via more conventional means. Consuming news through social network websites may lead people to a better understanding of politics and participation in political activities.

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