

A Malaysia's Y Culture: Of Media Convergence and Political Awareness

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ABSTRACT

Media convergence has proven to be a focal point in many countries, including Malaysia. In fact media convergence has changed the landscape in the way young Malaysians read and seek information. To go one step further, ever since the 1990s when Malaysia had created an agenda for a national Internet platform, media convergence has changed the way Malaysian youth, especially Generation Y is looking at gaining political knowledge and awareness. This paper examines the Malaysian case, where the Internet, and subsequently the social network service such as Facebook that has created a new generation that is looking to change the current political scenario through active political participation. The potential for allowing the growth of a civil society and the emergence of a dynamic political awareness and activism, as a result of the social network service is also discussed. The key point is that urban young Malaysians are increasingly dependent on newer forms of computer mediated communication in order to fulfill their political aspirations.

KEYWORDS: Malaysia, Media Convergence, Generation Y, Political Awareness, Civil Society

1. INTRODUCTION

The fact that media convergence has been in the limelight for some time now cannot be easily dispensed. In fact media convergence has become a buzz word of the 21st century. And who has embraced this convergence better than the Y culture in many parts of the world, including in developing countries. Malaysia would certainly not be an exception. In fact gender does not matter in this case, as both sexes today freely use this new form of media in seeking information with ease, almost too easily [1].

However, although the term media convergence originates from the Western theorists, it does not have a proper definition. As Alsagoff and Azizah have argued convergence can only be described as a notion, as there is no clear empirical meaning [2]. In relation to this idea, as Syed Hussein stated convergence can be looked upon as a catalyst of change from traditional media to newer forms using computer and telecommunication technologies [3].

This is why Straubhaar and LaRose have rightly used the term communication media in reference to seamless forms of media which are not limited by mere signal waves in order to be able to communicate – and effectively cut across physical country boundaries [4].

Meanwhile Thompson, another researcher has also implied that convergence is rather symbolic and relates to the development of communication media as “interwoven in fundamental ways with major institutional transformations which have shaped the modern world” (p. 209) [5]. Similarly, the European Commission in 1997 described convergence as different networks and electronic devices merging to offer similar services – in reference to the digital revolution of the 1990s [6].

However, media convergence is more complex than using the tools of technology. It needs to recognize the roles and relationships of technology and the various actors involved i.e. attitudes of governments, industries, target audience or even cultural identity of a particular country – in this case Malaysia.

Malaysia after all is a relatively young nation. Over the years from 1970 to 2010, the population from the ages of 15 onwards has steadily grown from 5.6 million to 19.0 million – who can be considered Generation Y [7].

Be it theory or model, as Chakaveh and Bogen have clearly stated with respect to media convergence “very soon, there will be no more need for having a television and a computer separate from each other, since both would be able to do the job of the other, ultimately making both extinct and creating a new medium from the synthesis” (p.811) [8].

LITERATURE DISCOURSE

Media Convergence and Political Awareness

The theory behind ‘media convergence’ is that online information is increasingly becoming structured in more ways than one [9].

This may partly have to do with the existence of search engines, which assist in the search for information. As Johnson states the Web appears to tow what is called a power law, where the top ten websites may be more

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than ten times greater than the hundred most popular sites[10].Seale also noted the content in ‘old’ and ‘new’ (p. 516) media have converged suggesting that it promotes a wider array of perspectives for the consumer.

As Jenkins puts it correctly that in a media convergence environment, every story angle gets told, every brand can get sold, and all consumers can get courted via multiple media agencies [11].

How does this relate to political awareness? Two models associated with media convergence can perhaps explain this.

First, the simple reason is that consumers can actively participate in the quest for information search (using a smartphone to a tablet), and making connections among the widespread media content that is available to them [11].Jenkins refers this to as a *participatory culture*, which obviously contrasts to passive media spectatorship. Jenkins adds one can see consumers as active participants who interact with one another (i.e. Facebook, blogs) according to a new set of guidelines that none of us can fully understand. The fact that is interesting is that he adds that some consumers (i.e. Y Culture) have stronger skills to participate in this emerging cultural modal than some others (i.e. 60s or 70s generation).

Second, media consumption has now become a *collective process*, a concept discovered by Pierre Levy, a French cyber-theorist in 1994 to explain the influence of the Internet and its related technologies towards cultural creation and knowledge consumption[12].Levy debated that since open, and universal data and idea exchange are due to the Internet, over a period of time, the system “mobilize[s] and coordinate [s] the intelligence, experience, skills, wisdom, and imagination of humanity” in novel and surprising ways (p. 50). His argument could be applied to political awareness and participation.

If one were to consider Malaysia, then the 2008 elections would be a good example. For Malaysia the year 2008 indeed marked a water-shed moment in the history of Malaysian politics and active citizenry (especially among the Y Culture). This has trickled to the 2013 general elections as well.

Indeed the active citizenry model’s underlying principle is derived from democratic theory, which has widely become the foci of much literature and debate [13-15].In fact according to McLeod et al.’s findings, a stimulus-response model does predict political participation as mentioned earlier from the various kinds of media exposure and responsiveness.[13]Stated differently, media effects on participation may indirectly work, thereby increasing knowledge level of local politics, which in turn impacts political participation levels.

In a related manner, in the presence of the Internet sphere, there exist widespread portals to access the WWW, which may also provide users (Y Culture) to learn about current matters [16]– including the political sphere.

Malaysia’s Y Culture

To be precise Malaysia is a relatively young nation. In fact over the years from 1970 to 2010, Malaysia’s Y Generation population under the age of 15 has steadily grown from 5.6 million to 19.0 million[7].

The Y Generation, according to Gardner and Engis defined quite accurately as having being born post 1982, and are also referred to as the “Net Generation, the Digital Generation, the Echo Boom Generation, or the Millennials” (p. 407)[17].The authors explain “as profiled in Neil Howe & William Strauss' watershed 2000 book, Millennials Rising: the Next Great Generation, the new generation is unique because they are more ambitious and optimistic than Generation X, and are the most ethnically diverse” (p. 408). Although this argument referred to Generation Y in the United States, in Malaysia’s case it is no different, as the population is also made up of ethnic Malays, Chinese, Indians, and other minorities – and according to Rahim and Pawanteh make up 49 per cent of Malaysia’s population below 35 years [18].Howe and Strauss added this segment of society favor different values and learning styles than their predecessors (Generation X) and are indeed technologically savvy. Their learning styles differ in the sense they are highly visual learners and prefer to use media convergence gadgets such as smartphones to seek information, or to gain knowledge. As Schiller rightly suggests that telecommunication does offer exceptionally agile options to nurture consumerism [19].

Although Weiler has mentioned that “motivation and critical thinking, along with the learning theories” (p. 47) such as behavior, control issues, multiple intelligences, and learning styles are all important literature with regards to information seeking behavior, this paper will not review them, as this paper is focused more on communication research rather than on learning theories per se[20].

But in order to illustrate the importance of these theories in understanding how the Y Generation seek information visually, a University of Idaho Library focus group study by Young and Marilynconducted among undergraduates in the United States had revealed the levitation of this Generation towards visual learning[21].This meant they went to the Internet for either personal, study or work related matters. Their needs also included user friendliness, dependability, and precision of the information obtained. In fact, other similar studies in the United States such as D’ Esposito and Gardner had provided similar views[22].

New Media and Political Awareness

The Malaysian general election in 2008 was a bell weather which had spilled over to the elections in 2013. It can be seen from the results of the elections where the opposition party gained more seats in the electoral

system [23].

This indicated that there was the influence of political knowledge on a citizen's ability to make informed decisions on the affairs of a community [24].

It can be seen from the electoral results that the youth were more engaging via policy debates. As Neumann et al. observe, information processing, especially when it comes to tasks such as policy debates, it does not take place in a vacuum, rather in a social context [25]. Perhaps then as rightly pointed out by Zukin et al. the new younger generation has a different relationship with the arrival of new media, preferring to relate more interactively [26].

In fact researchers like Greenaway raises the question that teenagers are now finding other source of political news, other than the traditional TV[27]. Instead of being passive listeners of media content, today's young generation has a capacity to use new technology in more tangible manner. As Bennett points out within the political research scope, there is a strong relationship between political awareness and consumption of news [28].

Which is why Buckingham points out there is a need for greater creativity in how news is presented to the young[24]. The thing is youth these days want to engage, and participate. They also want to be challenged. As Henn et al. have pointed out that young people today are thought to be more skeptical and tend to show more political apathy. So they question what is not right which happens around them [29].

This is the reason why many young people from Generation Y are less fascinated by outmoded styles of political involvement[26].

Such affirmations have led to a varied and a more contemporary style of civic engagement [30]. Obviously political norms of the past such as party membership and political meeting will no longer be valid.

Why is this so? The answer lies with the increasing trends in individualization in electoral behavior[31]—meaning that young people want to express their likes or dislikes by participating in any type of event that they like. For instance, Tolbert and McNeal had noticed that being exposed to election news on the Internet had actually amplified the likelihood that people would vote during the 2000 U.S. presidential elections, leading to the notion that the Internet had a mobilizing potential[32].

This indicates the role of proficiency and understanding in the way political information is presented via new media, and is processed before judgment is made. For instance, it has been indicated that prior political awareness is a reliable indicator of reception and remembering political communication[33], that it is the finest forecaster of political information processing[34], and also the strongest indicator of political awareness and expertise [35].

Therefore this leads to what researcher term as democratic citizenry[36]. In turn political socialization is a crucial component of this system which has effects on political attitude, opinions, and behavior in later years[37].

This is why Beetham notes that democratic practices are formed by national history, political norms, and social construction early on in life [37]. Accordingly an important factor to consider is that democratic creed and responsibility are often formed in early adolescence years[36]. In fact new studies have allured to the notion that juveniles who are part of a politically thriving location, mainly urban in nature, are more likely to be politically active, and thus have sturdier political outlook and views than their rural colleagues[36]. Malaysia is good example of this where youth in the urban areas are more politically active than their rural counterparts [23].

In addition to the differences in democratic attitudes and activities, which may vary from urban to rural zones, they may also vary from one culture to culture.

If one were to refer to the Western definition liberal democracy, this definition stresses freedom of expression, fair electoral competition, and separation of powers as key norms[38].

If this definition is taken into the Malaysian context, it could mean the same, as Malaysia's Y Generation Y has the same inclinations as youths in other countries. One reason is that politically conscious youths most likely dedicate time and energy on issues which is most relevant to them [39]— which is what is happening with today's Malaysian youth [23].

But why this sudden change of heart among this young generation with regards to political awareness?

More often than not these issues may significantly vary as they are related to the varying conditions that they generation is exposed to. A case in point would be between youth born in 1970s between youth born in 1990s, where Internet is already a major part of the latter when growing up. Similarly in the 1980s this was the case of youths in Thailand where they only had little access to political information because of the lack of communication channels [40].

If one were to compare with the current cohorts Y Generation with youth of the 60s, the former are more politically savvy, as they have at their disposal more media outlets, virtual communities and social network sites such as Facebook.

Not surprisingly current research has indicated that there is a generational difference with regards to outlook towards democracy in three areas – trust in state politics, the ideal leader, and social equality[41].

Notwithstanding, in countries such as China where there is a larger difference between generations the creation of democratic transitions becomes more problematic[42]. This would include the number of elderly,

adults and juveniles.

It all has to do with electoral reverses that occurred within the framework of Malaysia's social structure revolution amidst the bigger trends happening globally. Perhaps one of the main pull factors is the ostracizing of the middle class as Rodan noted in Singapore[43].

With the Malaysian economy fast developing, and numerous studies indicating the gaps between rich and middle class becoming increasingly jarring, it has led to dissatisfaction among the middle class. And most of the middle class come from Generation Y. In combination with rising costs and stagnant salaries it has led to frustrations among this class[44].

The Rise of SNS and Political Awareness

According to Kizza social network is an online service to create social relation among people sharing their experiences, feelings, and moods[45]. A typical social network like Facebook may consist of some elements including user's profile, social links and a variety of additional services.

As Wakefield and Rice mention in their paper that 'cyber communication' (p. 2) gives an opportunity for Internet users an opportunity to learn, work and network, and share information[46].

In fact Alhabash et al. explored the motivations of online social network use among a sample of the general population in Taiwan – investigating how seven different motivations for using Facebook predicted the intensity of Facebook use and content generation behaviours on Facebook [47]. The results showed that the motivation to use Facebook for posting and viewing status updates as being the strongest predictor of Facebook intensity, while the motivation to view and share photographs was the sturdiest forecaster of content generation behaviour on the site.

According to Choo new media channels such as Facebook and Twitter allow individuals to voice their opinions easily without the need to go through intermediaries [48].

In that sense, social networking sites have become a popular medium for interpersonal communication particularly among college students. Facebook was their most popular social networking site with 80% of college students using it. Facebook was also the number one site accessed by 18-24 year olds[49].

In recognition of this rising trend in the use of Facebook, a study was conducted in 2011 to determine whether previously found effects of computer mediated communications on interpersonal relationships had indeed indicated specifically to the socio-networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace[50]. The study was undertaken to understand the extent to which Facebook and MySpace are used to create new relationships rather than to maintain prior existing face to face relationships. The study which utilized a small non-random sample of college students, found that using Facebook and MySpace as an extension of face-to-face interaction to maintain interpersonal relationships may enable users to broaden connections that they otherwise may not have been able to, and also to strengthen their existing friendships that could potentially lead to a stronger and larger social circle depending on the goals of use.

Literature on computer-mediated communication and the influence of social and emotional nature seem to suggest that over time people can generate impressions of individuals primarily built on the linguistic content of written electronic messages[51]. Such research is focused on social cognition and interpersonal relations from the aspect of social psychology, which is important in political communication.

In light of this, in today's era of digital communication online discussions and forums are increasingly gaining momentum, and have widespread influence on political issues. Why is that? One reason is online communities are easily and instantaneously created when individuals take part in non-private computer-mediated discussions with much emotion with another participant, a phenomena Rheingold terms as social relationships[52]. As the name suggests these online network of people are highly mobile and dynamic in nature, and their interests may be varied. On this note, Kozinets notes consumption-related online communities as groups of people whose online exchanges actually establish a common platform of eagerness, a particular consumption activity or even related group of activities—which are all crucial for political participants[53].

Not surprisingly then a Pew Internet database revealed that 65% of social network site users were aged 18–29 years. The best part was during the American 2008 political campaign this group of users had participated in at least one political activity (out of a total of 5 activities measured) using a SNS. The data revealed they had either joined a political group on the site or wanted to acquire more information with regards to a particular candidate they had interest in [54].

In fact although emerging research thus far on SNS-politics has focused on election campaign strategies and the role of social media on politics [55], there is a dearth with regards to research on the impact of SNS on the political behavior of juveniles. This is kind of research is then quite timely in order to understand this phenomenon, especially now that Facebook has become such a crucial social media tool for 18 to 24 year-olds in Malaysia[49].

In the case of Malaysian politics, the twelfth 2008 general elections were a good case in point (see Table 1), which resulted in amazing outcome – for the opposition after a dismal performance in 2004. It was considered a new beginning for the opposition party in Malaysia. This has further been reflected in the thirteenth general

elections in 2013 (see Table 1). The reasons are aplenty, from worsening interreligious affairs, the incompetent fight against corruption, increased crime rate, high inflation and difficult living conditions for the middle class, and the confrontational attitude of Malay rights by UMNO politicians. In retrospect, new media, such as Facebook obviously had a connected and impact on the election results in 2008 [56].

Table 1: Table National Parliamentary Seats since 1990 (Most Important Parties)*

	1990	1995	1999	2004	2008	2013
Barisan Nasional (Pro-government Party)	127	162	148	198	140	133
UMNO	71	88	72	109	79	88
MCA	18	30	28	31	15	7
PBB	10	13	10	11	14	25
MIC	6	6	7	9	3	4
Gerakan	5	7	7	10	2	1
Minor Component Parties						8
Opposition Parties	49	30	45	20	82	89
PAS	7	7	27	7	23	21
PKN (since 2004:PKR)	-	-	5	1	31	30
DAP	20	9	10	12	28	38
PBS (since 2004 part of BN)	14	8	3	**	-	-
Semangat' 46	***	8	6	-	-	-
Total	180	192	193	219	222	222

Source: Election Commission of Malaysia.

*UMNO, United Malays National Organization; MCA, Malaysian Chinese Association; PBB, United Traditional Bumiputera Party (Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu); MIC, Malaysian Indian Congress; Gerakan (Party Gerakan, Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia); PAS, Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se Malaysia); PKN, National Justice Party, Parti Keadilan Nasional (since 2004: PKR, People's Justice Party, Parti Keadilan Rakyat); DAP, Democratic Action Party; PBS, United Sabah Party (Parti Bersatu Sabah)

**Four seats for the BN.

***Breakaway party from UMNO. Most of its members returned to UMNO in 1996.

Therefore research by Wellman et al. seems to allude to the notion that instead of altering or fading interaction, the Internet does indeed have an effect [57]. Similarly, if one were to make a comparison with political participation, SNS would indeed provide more options for partaking in political discussions that may not be present using the offline mode. This may include personal blogs to vent out political frustration among the middle class [58].

In this regard the Internet does provide an alternative option to interact. Polat (2005) contends that it is not the technical aspects of the Internet that changes and increases political participation, but rather it must be looked at as an added source of information to discuss politics [59]. In addition Polat also argues that the Internet should also be considered as a dynamic communication channel to debate about politics, which really is an indication that this is an expanded public sphere to discuss issues that matter [59].

Quite obviously these are significant points to consider when discussing about SNS. In fact SNS sites such as Facebook has a combination of features that allows users to access freely, and seeking information. As such, it is obviously quite reasonable to accept that political events discussed using SNS especially Facebook can have the possibility to impact politics in more ways than one.

In Malaysia Facebook has an increasing database of more than 13 million users with a penetration rate of 48.02% -- with more than 60.0% users within the age group of 18-34 [49], which also suggests that Facebook is indeed fit for political participation. This is because Malaysia's group of young cohorts wants to acquire greater political knowledge and awareness using this new media outlet. This naturally should increase their political interests and self-worth. In fact previous research has supported that both characteristics support increased political contribution [60].

Take for example the case of active political groups. Facebook holders wishing to involve in political debates could perhaps download applications of candidates, and share their own personal political opinions via the many features available on the Facebook site such tag and share.

Users could also as easily scroll through the "News Feed" option available to them and comment on their friends' postings. Overtime what this turns into is an appealing and dynamic conversation trail for political topics.

Therefore, SNS such as Facebook, in addition to becoming a conversation medium, from a source viewpoint SNS also offers a 'no cost to you' -- as it is a free public site -- to advance sensitive political debates and conversations.

This being so, it can be considered that the proliferation of Facebook as a particularly important WOM that can be looked upon with great zeal as an important part of political communication research.

As a confirmation that Facebook is a suitable medium for increasing political awareness, Hirst et al. affirms this in their study[61]. The author study included various researchers from a combination of universities which included UK's London South Bank University, Australia's Deakin University, France's Normandy Business School and Turkey's Yasar University, which found most SNS users wanted to find information about the political candidates.

New Media and Political Awareness: A Malaysian Perspective

On November 25, 2007 about 10,000 to 30,000 citizens (most of them Culture Y generation) had gathered in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur under the banner of the Hindu Rights Action Force – Hindraf[62]. The public outcry concerned the alleged discrimination and marginalization of Malaysia's third largest community – the Indians against the dissatisfaction of pro-Malay rhetoric (the majority community) supremacy policies, which included demolitions of places of worship and inadequate school/university placing for Indian children among others.

What is interesting is that the gathering was mooted via new media i.e. YouTube, Facebook, and blogs were one of the reasons for this to transpire [63].

The police had to use tear gas and water cannons to disperse the demonstrators. The event went viral via new media such as YouTube, blogs run by AHIRUDIN ATAN, RONNIE LIU, JEEF OOI [64], and news portals such as Malaysia Today, owned by Raja Petra Kamaruddin [65] and Malaysiakini [56].

The fact is new media was instrumentally used by the opposition parties to later gain support for the general election in 2008. As Abbott puts it in 1999 the Internet has become a crucial catalyst with regards towards social critiquing of the Malaysian government[66]. Abbott also stated that the Internet provided an opportunity for much communication and cooperation between dissimilar views in civil society, which remarkably enough cut across ethnic lines [66]. From 3.7 million Internet users in 2000, this figure had risen to 16 million in 2011 cutting across ethnicity and race, which is more than a 60% penetration rate (NYT, 2011)[67].

In fact on the night of the March 8 elections in 2008, the Malaysiakini news portal had one million users in one hour. Even the opposition's online information were updated regularly, printed and distributed in the rural areas [68]. This figure multiplied many times over in the 2013 elections. In fact the Malaysiakini website 'at the height of the vote count, Malaysiakini's readership hit 500,000 users per minute, according to Google Analytics' [69]. In fact on the night of the election, it had 4.3 million users [70].

In fact after the wide coverage of Hindraf on SNS, subsequent protests in Malaysia against social justice such as the movements by the name of Bersih 1.0, Bersih 2.0 and Bersih 3.0 have all been posted and covered in new media widely[63]. Bersih in the Malaysian language is connoted with the context "clean". As stated by Weiss [70], Bersih was a series of social movements undertaken in 2011 as a "protest campaign in support of electoral reform exemplifies the potential of new media to sidestep ossified patterns of social cleavage...social media was a prime mover in this organized protests" (p. 35).

This amplifies the review undertaken in this article that media convergence has a multiplier effect on political awareness among the young generation.

Ironically, even efforts by the Malaysian government to use high-handed tactics such as confiscating Malaysiakini's computers, suing bloggers for defamation only increased the incense of the Internet savvy youth in Malaysia [69].

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis it can be seen as Malaysia matures in its political landscape, SNS will indeed play a crucial role towards the objective of increasing political knowledge and awareness. For instance, it will not be surprising to observe there could be a hike in the Facebook accounts without faces making requests to befriend the opposition.

Why is that? Simply because these Facebook accounts without faces are solely created for political mileage purposes, and perhaps may not include the usual circle of friends.

This is quite understandable because the regular Facebook accounts with faces may be cautious and afraid in joining an opposition party openly. Nevertheless, there are some who will be bold enough and participate openly. After all this is what we term as the new era in political awareness among Malaysia's culture Y.

It will not be surprising to also anticipate that Facebook will also be the primary online SNS platform used by both the opposition and the pro-government parties to engage the Y Generation from now. It certainly has been evident in 2008 and 2013 general elections.

In fact, engagement is an important factor in political awareness and knowledge among the generation Y. This being said, alongside with new social media platforms such as Facebook, and not to forget the ubiquitous smart phones, this is a new dawn for Y-journalism, a platform where the young actively partake and present their opinions in a free-willed manner. The best part is there are no physical boundaries, as it can be accessed, commented, edited from anywhere, anytime, at any given situation.

The young Malaysian cohorts are finally of the opinion that they are getting political news that is

considered impartial and sensible to them because of this— via the alternative media.

With access to a plethora of websites where the Y Generation are able to read, share a number of viewpoints, this discerning generation is also able to differentiate what is right and wrong for them. In fact this opinionated generation is not only able to broadcast their views within the boundaries of Malaysia, but to the whole world, which makes indeed healthy for the political advancement and sanity of a nation.

It is fervently hoped by the authors that this new found interest by Malaysia's Y generation towards gaining political cognizance will bring about a shift in the way political education is provided to these young cohorts using new convergence media technology. The change in the political teaching should also take into account of the transferable talents, principles, *doxa* and ideals that very much could aid both the young generation's self-potentials towards an equitable and just society in the long run.

Although there still persists a digital divide in Malaysia but nevertheless what has been happening is there is courage and new found zeal among the youth in Malaysia by using new media to form a challenging and aggressive voting public.

This stated, in retrospect political awareness and knowledge is not dying. In fact it has been rejuvenated, all thanks to media convergence.

Yes! Welcome to the new Y-culture and the new media landscape.

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