The Comparison between Public and Private University Chinese Students towards Utilizing Facebook as Public Sphere for Political Discussion: A Case Study on University Utara Malaysia (UUM) and University Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR)

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ABSTRACT

This research paper is targeted on university students from public and private university of the aged 21 and above, plus it is only focuses on the ethnic group of Chinese. The case study surrounded public university students which are from University Utara Malaysia (UUM) and private university students from University Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR). It is to make a comparison between public and private university Chinese students towards utilizing Facebook as public sphere to discuss political issue. In order to carry out the research study, the researcher made use of simple random sampling method through quantitative survey in order to get the respond from the target respondents. The study concluded that private university students are more active towards participating on Facebook's political atmosphere by sharing political post, comment or involve in political discussion compared to public university students.

Keywords: *Public sphere, political discussion, Facebook, universities, Malaysia*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the recent years, the new public sphere is made possible by the emergence of new media. Public sphere was originally made available by traditional printed or broadcast media. Now, the public sphere exists in the new media – the internet. People no longer fully rely on mainstream media such as newspapers or televisions for news. The internet has provided an alternative way for people to receive information or updates regarding an event [2].

The invention of internet had bring arise to a lot of thing in the cyber world. For example, social networking sites (SNS). Ideally, social networking sites were created to connect people from all around the world and promoting a nation without boundary. However, instead of just connecting with others; people have used it to discuss political issues. One of the most prominent SNS, Facebook obviously has turned into the platform of online political discussion and debate especially when approaching the general election. Users able to participate in political discussion posted on fan page as well as receiving updates from their preference political candidates.

Being one of the major users crowd in Facebook, university students also started participate in commenting or sharing of political issue over the Facebook. Thus, this research paper serves to compare between public and private university Chinese students towards utilizing Facebook as public sphere for political discussion. The case study targeted on Northern University of Malaysia (UUM) and Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Malaysia (UTAR) for public and private university respectively.

1.1 Background of Study

By looking into the context of Malaysia during the days when the idea of having a virtual space and world without boundary was still a fantasy, public rely on mainstream media to obtain information and to provide guidance. At this time, public opinions unable to be heard and gained attention from the authority. However, the invention of internet has solved the distress of the people by allowing their voices to be heard.

Mainstream media in Malaysia are always strictly guarded by the agenda settings, gatekeeper, laws and regulation implemented by the ruling coalition since the independence – Barisan Nasional. Unlike mainstream media, new media is not so restricted by the ruling coalition or external forces being implemented on it. Hence, new media became the favorite of those who are hoping for a freedom of press and for a fair balance reporting. For example, one of the famous Malaysia's political blog, Malaysia Today which was founded by Raja Petra and gained 100 million hits since it was founded in August 2004 (Malaysia Today official website 2013).

Besides, arise from the great loss of Barisan Nasional on its two-third majority in the Parliament along with the five of peninsular Malaysia's 11 states, scholars and researchers named the 12th General Election as the "Political Tsunami". Former Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who led in the battle had put the blame on new media. He said: "We certainly lost the Internet war, the cyber-war... It was a serious misjudgment. We made the biggest mistake in thinking that it was not important" [29]. Thus, the emergence of new media is closely related to forming a whole new public sphere for political discussion.

As five years had passed since the last general election; internet had developed much throughout this period of time. Social networking sites come into place and take over the entire public sphere on the internet. Fighting over democracy, right, freedom of press or for common good in the country is no longer an individual

business. Social networking sites enable the shout-out from the organizer towards participating in a political rally or even movement.

Social networking sites mainly Facebook, Twitter and YouTube allow users to have a platform to share information in a continuous virtual conversation. For example, in the case of Bersih 2.0, activists made use of Twitter themes to snowball responses, like "why#Bersih" for users to give their reasons for supporting Bersih. Twitter provides quick updates on the go, YouTube allows users to share video and Facebook allows lengthier exchanges of opinions and ideas. The combination of these three social media became the fundamental feature of the Bersih buzz online [25].

According to a survey carried out by Maeve Duggan [7], 66 percent of social networking sites users have engaged political activities in social media. Looking into a good example of social networking site, Facebook; the involvement of social networking sites in political atmosphere is further promoted by the creation of political fan pages. In Malaysia, there are a number of famous political fan pages in Facebook such as "ZZKuaiXun" with 118,000 of subscribers and Huawiki with 34,000 of subscribers. Hence, this statistics have proven that social networking sites have become an important medium when it comes to political discussion.

As the 13th General Election is approaching, the virtual battle in the cyber war especially in social networking sites becomes more intense. According to Lenhart et.al. [16], in the age group of 18-29, there are 72 percent in total of young adults who are enthusiasm for social networking sites. Young adults fall under this age who is mostly university students. They somehow directly or indirectly consumed the political news or being involved into it. Hence, this brings rises to this research study on how public and private university students react, respond or participate in the political discussion on Facebook.

1.2 Statement of Problem

Prior to Malaysia's policy on introducing Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (UUCA), university students are not allowed to participate in any form of political activities including taking part in politics or rallies or else he or she might faced a multitude of actions such as suspensions or even expulsions [5]. A worse case if the student is pursuing his degree or diploma in any of the public university in Malaysia.

However, amendment had been made towards UUCA in April, 2012 and students can now be actively involved in politics off campus and in peaceful rallies without worrying about getting into trouble with their universities. Under the amended version of UUCA, all students are expected to be mature enough to understand that they would still be subjected to natural legal process if

they were to commit offences such as acts of crime, sedition and defamation, among others [5].

Although effort to amend the act had been made by the government; however, will the effort encourage the university students to participate in any form of political activities is still questionable. This is because the act was introduced and implemented over the last four decades; it might already become a norm or belief that university students are not suppose to participate in politics. Or even perhaps, university students might still worry that they will subjected to disciplinary action if they are caught involving politics.

Lastly, MCA veteran Datuk Woon See Chin also a former deputy education minister told in an interview that "Chinese youth are more independent. They don't rely on any political parties. These are the ones with stronger anti-BN sentiments" [32]. Through the speech given by Woon, it is to be sure that Chinese youth poses a threat to the political atmosphere in Malaysia. Thus, the question regarding the inclination of young voters in the coming 13th general election appears.

1.3 Methodology

In order to complete the research study, the researcher decided to use quantitative approach to gather statistics and figure to be analyzed. Questionnaire was designed and underwent few times of pilot test before distributing it to the target respondents. There will be a total of 300 sets of questionnaires to be distributed to the both universities involved, each with 150 sets.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Public Sphere

Public Sphere is a theoretical term developed by a social critic and philosopher Jurgen Habermas. It defined as "a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed" [24]. Habermas suggested that forum of public communication which individuals can come together as public and confer freely about matters of general interest. For instance, matters relate to societal problems and common good.

Besides, citizen act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without the being subject to coercion. The Transformation of the Public sphere traced the history of the phenomenon from the eighteenth-century salons to the contemporary physical or virtual spaces where citizens can take part in conversation regarding the common good. Public sphere was originally fixed as places such as salons, coffee shops or beer gardens [11].

Other than that, Habermas proposed that public sphere must possess the characteristics of:
(i) All citizens are guaranteed access;
(ii) Within the "public sphere" citizens are in principle considered equals;

(iii) All citizens are free to engage in dialogue without coercion or constraint;

(iv) The "public sphere" is distinct from both the state and the market, and is not subjected to domination by either;

(v) Through public provision of knowledge and information, the "public sphere" promoted the development of an informed citizenry , something essential in a functioning democracy [27].

According to Azizuddin Sani [3], the rationale of developing the concept of public sphere by Jurgen Habermas was to understand the role of the media in today's world and national politics. Habermas emphasizes the critical role of the media in the public sphere. It distinguishes between the early press who highlighted political controversy and the more recent development of media that commodities the news.

Habermas also outlines the development of Western newspapers in the early seventeenth century and commenting that the press "was for the first time established as a genuinely critical organ of a public engaged in critical political debate: as the fourth estate." [3]. It is said that the fourth estate acts as a watch-dog towards the other three existing estates. The three existing estates consist of legislative, executive and judiciary. They are the branches of government under the doctrine of separation of power). Thus, mass media as watch-dog for the three estates; act to serve the interest of the public and informs them on the wrong doing of the three estates [23].

Moreover, Habermas's argued that the concept of public sphere acquires philosophical and sociological meaning as a concept of a social order with room for a societal debate, which is accessible to citizens. Habermas's work is concerned with how we make sense in public, especially how we negotiate our differences with one another and decide upon our common purpose [1].

In his book Between Facts and Norms, Habermas stated that the public sphere cannot be conceived of as an organization; it is not even a framework of norms. The public sphere can best be described as a network of communicating information and point of view; the streams of communication are, in process, filtered in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinion [31].

Habermas's analysis also demonstrated the value of the public sphere as it progresses through the physical battle of culture with the pre-modern authorities. Habermas hopes to a create a dialogue that will occur outside the realm of government and the economy, but his public sphere model attempts to focus on Enlightenment values of reason and freedom in a modern discourse that aims too much at pragmatic consensus. Therefore, within the debate over the concept of public sphere, Habermas attempts to introduce democratic judgments that can have a universal application while remaining anchored with the

practical realm of discourse among all individuals. The democratic of public sphere is activated by social movement, pressure groups and critical intellectuals. By addressing questions of key public controversy, these individuals and groups seem to highlight a number of critical problems and questions. Thus a public sphere can say it is effective according to the extent to which it is able to connect with wider public norms[31].

Pinter [24] elaborated that Habermas had also lists certain criteria of freedom and equality that are necessary for an "ideal speech situation" to occur in a democratic society. He also offered another theoretical justification of the public sphere by pointing out that social movement and campaigning organization that force issues onto the public agenda are also closely associated with democratic values. In addition, Habermas' theory of the public sphere demonstrates that the public sphere refers both to practices and to normative ideals. In Habermas's point of view, it was also during the nineteenth and twentieth century's that a liberal form of the public sphere was transformed into a realm in which the formulation of public opinion is superseded by mass consumption and publicity.

Lastly, Douglas Kellner [14] also reinterpreted Habermas' understand of the public sphere. Douglas proposed that the principles of the public sphere involved an open discussion of all issues of general concern in which discursive argumentation was employed to ascertain general interests and the public good. The public sphere thus presupposed freedoms of speech and assembly, a free press and the right to freely participate in political debate and decision-making.

Kellner further elaborated on the concept of public sphere that " Despite the limitations of his analysis, Habermas is right that in the era of the democratic revolutions a public sphere emerged in which for the first time in history ordinary citizens could participate in political discussion and debate, organize, and struggle against unjust authority, while militating for social change, and that this sphere was institutionalized, however imperfectly, in later developments of Western societies.

There are a numbers of criticisms towards the concept of public sphere pioneered by Jurgen Habermas. Some commented that Habermas's notion of the bourgeois public sphere fail to note that the thrust of his study is precisely that of transformation, of the mutations of the public sphere from a space of rational discussion, debate, and consensus to a realm of mass cultural consumption and administration by corporations and dominant elites [18]. Habermas's system or life world dualism and the reduction of steering media within the system to money and power neglects the crucial functions of media of communication and new technologies in the structure and activity of contemporary societies and unnecessarily limits Habermas's political options. Hence, despite extremely detailed discussion of democracy in Between Facts and

Norms, Habermas fails to adequately explicate the precise institutional and normative functions of the media and the public sphere within constitutional democracy.

2.2 The Convergence of Public Sphere from Mainstream to Alternative Media

Shiozaki [28] mentioned that Malaysia as a multi-ethnic country, social, economic and political activities are undertaken either collectively by various ethnic groups or within each ethnic group's community. Though political parties in Malaysia profess to be multi-ethnic, each political party usually consists of a single ethnic group. For example, United Malays National Organization (UMNO) consists of single ethnic group – Malays, Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) for Chinese and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) for Indians. Then, these parties joined forces to form the National Front (Barisan National) of
multi-ethnics.

Activities within each ethnic group's community are usually conducted in ethnic group's native language. For instance, Malays use Malay; Chinese use Mandarin and Indians use Tamil. Thus, Malaysia government has provided native languages at some public schools and private schools. The same situation goes with the mass media in Malaysia. There are newspapers and broadcasting in Malay, Chinese, and Tamil, respectively, as well as English-language newspapers and broadcasting available for various ethnic groups. As for public spheres as a place to form public opinion, there are multi-ethnic arenas on the one hand and single-ethnic arenas on the other hand [28].

The government and the political parties participating in Barisan Nasional exclusively manage the mass media. Specifically, UMNO is deeply involved in the management of the Malay-language papers Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian. MCA is has the ownership towards English-language papers namely The Star publication [36].

Besides, the local television stations such as TV1 and TV2 are state run. Although there are commercial broadcasting stations such as TV3, NTV7, and 8TV, the management body of TV3 and 8TV is Media Prima Berhad (MPB). MPB is a subsidiary media corporation, controls several television networks, newspapers and radio stations and is closely linked to country's ruling which is UMNO [13]. MPB also manages another English-language publication- The News Straits Times. Whereas, RTM (Radio Televisyen Malaysia) is run by the government, under the jurisdiction of Ministry of Information, while Media Prima, ASTRO, and MiTV Corporation Network Guidance are private companies [28].

Meanwhile, there have been attempts to deregulate the media, especially the mainstream electronic media through the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998, which required for the set up of four independent industry to encourage self-regulation in the consumer service, content and technical aspects. The Codes for the private broadcast and telecommunication industries related to consumer service and content were developed with input from civic groups and with some public consultation. Nevertheless, they were screened by the regulatory body Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) and required some amendments before being registered by MCMC [27].

Furthermore, in the history of Malaysia's context, there was a case of journalistic suppression called Operasi Lalang in the year of 1987. More than a hundred journalist, social activists, opposition leaders, scholars, human rights activists and social workers were arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA) [28]. There are other cases where journalist and politician from the opposition party detained under the law of ISA. For example, Malaysia Today news portal editor Raja Petra Kamarudin, Seputeh MP Teresa Kok and Sin Chew Daily reporter Tan Hoon Cheng were arrested for allegedly being a threat to security, peace and public order [37]. Hence, this had shown the freedom of speech and expression in Malaysia is strictly prohibited by the ruling government.

Prior to Malaysia's strict control over the media, former Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir was listed by the Committee to Protect Journalist (CPJ) as one of the world's 10 greatest enemies of press freedom. He was named for three years in a row from 1998. Moreover, he was described by CPJ as: "openly contemptuous of press freedom, manipulated Malaysian media to cement his hold on power and has signaled plans to induce even more stringent controls on a severely constricted media" [6].

As a conclusion, since the mainstream mass media in Malaysia is said to be guarded strictly by the ruling coalition namely Barisan National since the independence of Malaysia on the year 1957. It is obvious that public sphere for a fair political discussion or debate between the government and the oppositional party unable to occur in the mainstream media. Hence, this bring rises and urge to the new public sphere made available through the usage of new media – internet.

2.3 The Development of New Media in Malaysia's Context

According to George [10], the internet's introduction was in the mid of 1990s and it marked a fundamental discontinuity in this decades-old approach to media management. Internet later became the first medium that citizens of Malaysia were allowed to use for mass communication without first having to secure a government license. Besides, the qualitative shift in the media regime enabled the flowering of dissenting communication on an unprecedented scale. Malaysians who utilize the internet as a medium of mass communication have created a bewildering spectrum of websites and mailing lists. They range from individuals

and drawing ego gratification from placing personal home pages in cyberspace, to government departments and corporations pursuing publicity and profits. Hence, the revolution had led to the emergence of the new media in Malaysia.

Fast developing technology contributes to a whole new information revolution. The new media, digital broadcasting and the internet are sweeping away the limitations of the analogue world and weakening the grip of government-owned platforms. New media in this information age provides an immediate, informative, intelligent, interactive platform for discussion and debate [19]. Example of new media that exist today are social networking sites, online news portal and internet blogs. Social networking sites particularly Facebook has enormously popular among people these days.

Moreover, there is no screening for new media which is based on the internet in Malaysia. People are free to access whatever information they want, apart from airing their views online via blogs and portals, which is covered by the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998. Among the provisions of the act are Section 211 and 233 that bar all forms of obscene comments, views and suggestion as well as threats which harm, dishonor or bring disrepute to others [19].

One of the prominent events which marked a greatest improvement in the history of new media in Malaysia is the introducing of Multimedia Super Corridor in the year of 1996 with the aspiration of becoming a global hub for ICT and multimedia innovation, operation and services and to transform Malaysia into a knowledge-economy and achieve developed nation status in line with Vision 2020 [9].

In the following year, Malaysia's government led by former Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohammad announced a non-censorship guarantee for the internet in trying to attract investors to its proposed Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) [10].

However, the idea of non-censorship guarantee for the internet did not function as it was proposed as there are numerals of laws being implemented on the media industries. This is because if someone presented seditious or libelous content to Malaysian audiences, action could be taken under existing laws that applied to broadcast and print media. For instance, there was a popular young blogger Mohd Nur Hanief Abdul Jalil who was hauled for questioning under the Sedition Act for allegations of a sex scandal involving the Sultan of Selangor and a celebrity model [33].

Lastly, activists could never be sure how long does Malaysia government would honor the no-censorship guarantee. Activists were sure that eventually Mahathir's own preference would rule the day; while MSC was clearly a pet project that he did not want to jeopardize and

he certainly would not abandoned his authoritarian instincts [10].

2.4 The Impact of New Media on Traditional Mainstream Media

Salman, A. et.al [26] suggested that the Malaysian media context has seen intense changes over the past few decades. They proposed that Malaysia began with a controlled media environment where the print media worked under an annual licensing scheme and broadcast media were state-controlled. Malaysia has also witnessed a process of deregulation and liberalization of the media landscape since the early 1980s. Today, the Malaysian media continues to see some form of control over the mainstream media through licensing of the print media and state control of broadcasting.

The emergence of new media has challenged the status of traditional mainstream media as the channel for the information to flow to the public. In Malaysia, the new media gained popularity and acceptance because of the need to have freer information flow as the mainstream media is perceived to be controlled by the government [17].

Unlike printed media, new media do not subjected to law such as Printing Press and Publication Act 1984 (PPPA). PPPA is an act to regulate the use of printing presses and the printing, importation, production, reproduction, publishing and distribution of publication and for matters connected therewith. Hence, it is said that news that cannot be published in mainstream or printed media can be published in the new media [15].

Though it is believed that printed media's readership in Malaysia has yet to drop to a drastic level, while advertisers still regard it as the medium of choice. The internet might have become a force to be reckoned with in the political arena, but the reality is that most Malaysians still get their news from convention media like newspapers and TV. However, this does not mean that the newspapers agency in Malaysia can sit back and do nothing while expecting their readership to be maintained or increased.

2.5 The Role of New Media in Malaysia's Political Sphere (12th General Election)

The expansion of the new media in Malaysia has been so extensive that the former Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar stated that: "The internet news media cannot be called an "alternative media" anymore as it is a more popular medium than the traditional mainstream media in Malaysia. I think we have to call the alternative media the mainstream. In fact, mainstream papers are trying to emulate them and be as critical as they can in selling their papers" [26]. It is obvious that the new media as the alternative one has slowly taken over the place of mainstream media.

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Steele J [29] pointed out that the Barisan National ruling coalition suffered a stunning upset, losing its two-thirds majority in Parliament along with the five of peninsular Malaysia's 11 states on March 8, 2008 (the 12th General Election).

The 12th General Election proved to be a watershed in the development of media in Malaysia. She suggested that it was largely due to the role played by the new media. While the mainstream media's role has always been evident in every election, the role of new media proved to be a turning point in the 12th General Election [25]. As online media was accessible to a large segment of the population, it served as a new medium of information. Thus, even though it had little coverage in the mainstream media, the opposition (Pakatan Rakyat) effectively and essentially relied on online media to counter the National Front (Barisan National) onslaught and set its own agenda as well as making its success in the 12th General Election.

2.6 The Era of New Media and New Public Sphere/ Blogosphere in Malaysia

Malaysia has a total of 17, 723,000 internet users as of December 31, 2011 which is a total of 60.7 percent of penetration per ITU. Thus, the statistics directly telling that Malaysia have a high penetration of internet [12].

With a high penetration of internet access in the society, blogging had become one of the favorite activities of internet users to express their ideas and opinions. Some internet users even "blog" down their diary every single day. A 2006 survey by Universal McCann, an international media agency, showed that 18 percent of Malaysian respondents polled logged on for more than 6 hours and 41 percent for between 1-3 hours daily. The study showed that blogging, podcasting, gaming and social networking on the Internet were gaining strength as well. Average Malaysian Internet users usually visit and read blogs while heavy users create self-blogs and leave comments on other blogs[27].

Besides, veteran journalist Rehman Rashid proposed that new place has emerged - popularly known as "blogosphere" and touted by its denizens as a Utopia of freedom of expression. New Malaysians too have caught on to a life in the blogosphere and the new and emerging medium, the weblog, which is reshaping society [27].

This situation further worrying the authorities mainly Malaysia ruling coalition to reconsider the existing policy of non-regulation of the internet; and to call for some controls on the content make published on the net.

The best example to show that new media or blogosphere is blooming in the media industry is through the success made by Malaysiakini. Malaysiakini was launched on November 20, 1999 and offers daily news and view in the language of English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. According to Google Analytics on Jan, 2013, Malaysiakini successfully delivering over 40 million page views and 1 million hours of reading time to over 2 million absolute unique visitors. Besides, as of July 2008, Malaysiakini became the most read news website and the most popular Malaysian website according to Alexa.com (Malaysiakini official website).

One of the major reason contribute to the success of Malaysiakini is it does not require a license to operate as it falls within the ambit of a non-regulated medium - the Internet. However, it is often monitored by authorities. It also posts blogs of certain individuals on its site that have been accused of lacking credibility due to unsubstantiation of facts by government authorities.

Peskin and Nachison [22] suggested that blogs are one of three expressions of the democratic "We Media," (the others being the Internet and international satellite channels), a phrase coined to describe global access to content from infinite sources. They define blogs as "online journals that create and connect individuals and their ideas throughout the world…. Internet sites such as Technorati.com have been created to track more than 25 million blogs or about one-fourth of the e-journals in the blogosphere. They point out that these expressions have led to the emergence of "participation" where "everyone is part of the story….Everyone exerts influence." Citizens collect, report, analyze and disseminate news. Uncontrolled and untutored this could have adverse and detrimental effects or impact on a society, its leaders and or its citizens.

Since it was said that Blogosphere have somehow contributed to the closing of Barisan Nasional in the 12th General Election of Malaysia, a group of researchers from University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) conducted a research based on the topic of "Main Issues Before, Current and After the 12th General Election: An Analysis of the Contents of Selected Malaysian Political Blogs". The result that the researcher found is the freedom existed in cyber space was used extensively by bloggers to channel information which not normally found in the mainstream media.

Moreover, the researcher from National University of Malaysia also found that political blogs in Malaysia are more in the form of personal narratives with the bloggers having total freedom to share ideas, thoughts and to discuss current issues among the cyber community. It is said that this genre of blogs is more attractive among the cyber community since what was written are more personal experiences and views that are not academic in nature. The style of writing which is very simple and emotional; thus, making these blogs more attractive. Readers also loved this type of blogs because is considered to be more independent minded and more open [20].

Last but not least, being one of the most controversial person in controlling the freedom of press in Malaysia, former Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir

Mohammad also started blogging in the year of 2008 [35]. Tun Mahathir had retired long time ago, he continues to provide his political opinion not through the mainstream media first but through his blog named "Cedet". He had been attacking the government for some of the policies implemented or abolished. Moreover, there was once that Tun Mahathir seeks out different ways including through website and blogs to beat the mainstream media banned over his speech made on his successor Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi [4]. The speeches made by Tun Mahathir went viral through the means of internet. This had made Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to break his silence and forcefully arrange a meeting with Tun Mahathir [34]. Thus, this tells that the Blogosphere environment in the cyber is so influential enough to the society.

2.7 The Convergence of Political Blogosphere into Social Networking Sites – Facebook

Time had passed for five years since the last general election; idea of Blogosphere started to fade as technology advance. Nowadays, politician or political party whom previously own a blog started to shift into another new medium to deliver their political messages. Social networking sites particularly Facebook had become the whole new medium for political public sphere to develop. Political blogs or portal such as Malaysiakini also ventured into the mean of Facebook to expand the readership and also subscriber.

There are 13,589,520 Facebook subscribers on December 31, 2012 which is of 46.6 percent of penetration. This figure show that Malaysia has a high penetration of internet as well as social networking sites users. Consequently, Malaysians are familiar with the usage of internet as well as Facebook [12].

Perraudin F. [21] suggested that Malaysians are the most enthusiasm when it comes to Facebook. This is because Malaysians have the most friends on their social networks. In Malaysia, the average number of digital friends is 233, closely followed by 231 in Brazil and 217 in Norway. Besides having the most friends, Malaysians are also the heaviest users of social networking sites, spending a whopping nine hours per week on average communicating with their hoard of online friends. Thus, looking at the shocking statistics, the researcher can conclude that Malaysians are mostly active when it comes to social networking sites – Facebook.

Another survey carried out by Maeve Duggan [7], showed that 66 percent of social networking sites users have engaged political activities in social media. By taking Malaysia into the consideration, there are a number of famous political fan pages in Facebook such as ZZKuaiXun, We want to change, We Fully Support PKR <DAP> and Huawiki. These pages have very high number of subscribers. For example, ZZKuaiXun with 118,000 subscribers, we want to change with 122,000 subscribers and 'We Fully Support PKR <DAP>' has the appalling number of subscribers which is 313,000.

All in all, Facebook had replaced the era of blogosphere to be the public sphere for political discussion. Users of Facebook now able to comment, share, like or even discuss political post openly by their favorite political party or politician [8]. Besides, Facebook also enable the shout-out from a political party to the followers without being censored by the mainstream media. Hence, this allows the mobilization of public towards a political movement. Bersih rally is a good example from the history of Malaysia where Facebook had helped in promoting the event as well as to spread out the agenda settings of the rally [30].

3. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The statistics suggested that UTAR students spent most of the time on Facebook compare to UUM students. This is because there are 36 percent of UTAR students spent more than 6 hours surfing Facebook; whereas there are only 8 percent of UUM students doing so. The possible reason of UTAR students being heavier user of Facebook compared to UUM students maybe because they used it for academic purpose. As Facebook enable the forming of group for assignment discussion as well as group chat on the net, students able to use it to connect with their group member. Moreover, according to Media Dependency Theory, the more an individual rely on media, the more influence that media towards the individual. In this context, the more time UTAR students spend on Facebook, the more they rely on Facebook, the more influence Facebook will be towards them.

Both the UUM and UTAR had shown the highest percentage for the category of "Like" the political news shared by others. This is because there are 43 percent each for UUM and UTAR respectively; share political news which caught your attention among your friends, it earned the second highest percentages of students from both of the universities which are 41 percent for UUM and 35 percent for UTAR; provide your opinion and feedback toward an issue. This is because 30 percent of UTAR students and 28 percent of UUM students had admitted that they provide their opinion and feedback toward an issue on Facebook; participate in the discussion among other users.

From the statistics collected, it is obvious most of the UUM students only shared and likes the political post in Facebook whereby UTAR students are more towards participating and commenting. Hence, it is said that UTAR students are more sociable, open and action towards the political issue and UUM students are more conservative.

There are 38 percent of UUM students said that most of their posts in Facebook are related to political issue. It is followed by 29 percent of respondent who posted a little political post. The lowest percentage falls under the category of none at all which is 8 percent. Secondly, the highest percentage (33 percent) of UTAR

students admitted that they posted some of the political post on Facebook recently.

There are a majority of 170 students who said neither agree nor disagree to the statement whether the university encourages them to participate or concern about political issue. Besides, there are 127 students who disagreed with the statement and 3 students who agreed with it.

Statistics shown that there are a majority of 130 students who disagreed with the statement of their university once warns them not to participate or involve in politics. There are 112 students who neither agree nor disagree with this statement. There are also 30 students who strongly disagreed with the statement and 28 students who is strongly agreed.

Research finding suggested that the respondents and their friends discuss political issue around the campus whenever they come across hot topics in Facebook. There are a majority of 180 students who agreed with the statement and 63 who neither agreed nor disagreed. This is followed by 35 students who disagreed and 22 students who strongly agreed with it.

Majority of 210 students answered disagreed with the statement of they do not discuss political issue with someone else though they come across in Facebook. There are 35 students who are neither agreed or disagree with the statement and 33 students who are agreed with it. 22 students answered that they strongly disagreed with the statement.

The researchers also indicate that the respondents re-shared the political post by their friends all the time when they come across in the Facebook. There are a majority of 181 students who agreed with the statement, followed by 62 students who disagreed and 44 students who neither agree nor disagree. There are also 7 students who are strongly disagreed and another 6 students who is strongly agreed with the statement. The researchers able to come to a conclusion that majority of UUM students participate in politics although the university discourages them from involving. Besides, despite the university discourage them from participating, the students of UUM still discuss political issues widely and freely when they come across some topic online. Some of them even shared out political post on their Facebook wall and re-shared others wall post when they think it is worth it.

According to the statistics obtained, the majority for both UUM and UTAR students said that the political system in Malaysia is dirty and filthy. This is because there are 42 percent of UUM students think that Malaysia's political system is dirty and filthy. On the other hand, 77 percent of UTAR students said that Malaysia's political system is dirty and filthy.

Besides, there is 13 percent of UTAR students said that the Malaysia's political system is clean and said; another 10 percent suggested that Malaysia's political system is in the progress of improving.

Based on the statistics obtained from UTAR students, Media Dependency Theory can be best to explain their behavior and perception towards the political system in Malaysia. This is because most of the UTAR students subscribed to the ZzKuaiXun which promotes the political agenda of Pakatan Rakyat as well attacking the ruling party in issues of corruption. When these students rely on ZzKuaiXun more often than UUM students, they tend to follow exactly what is made available and perceived by the page admin. Hence, UTAR students perceived the political system in Malaysia as dirty and filthy.

Based on the statistics, a majority for both UUM and UTAR students agreed that Facebook is a suitable platform as public sphere for political discussion.

4. CONCLUSION

The convergence of traditional media to new media has brought along a lot of ease towards the consumer. One of it is the free flow of information without the restriction from agenda setting or laws. In the process of converging, Facebook has become the public sphere for political discussion. Being one of the larger consumers of Facebook, university students unable to keep themselves totally away from politics that happened. Whether one likes it or not, the fact that politics will always exist in the realm of social networking sites especially Facebook.

Besides, the study concluded that private university students are more active towards participating on Facebook's political atmosphere by sharing political post, comment or involve in political discussion compared to public university students. The study also tells that Facebook is a suitable place for political discussion and though users might censor it down through blocking, it is still considered as the most important public sphere in the context today. Other than that, the study also concluded that Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) no longer a major concern of students for not participating on political activities especially on the means of social networking sites. Moreover, the inclination of young Chinese voters in the coming general election is towards the sites of the People's Alliances (Pakatan Rakyat) where a high majority of both public and private universities students answered that they will cast their vote to PR.

It is also confirmed that media dependency theory still applicable to the context that happened in today's world. It is seen that the greater an individual rely on a specific political fan page on Facebook, the more that individual will act towards what it says and propagated. Furthermore, two-step flow theory also been testified in this research paper. Opinion leaders - parent had brought influence to their children through their speech and guidance. Instead of just keep on censoring the media,

government of Malaysia should be aware of the existence of opinion leaders in a society.

As a conclusion, Asian nations such as Malaysia should not ignore the development of new media but to take them in their stride. Concurrently, they should let other development sidelined. Besides, the political party leaders should not underestimate the influence of Facebook towards mobilizes the public opinion as well as to provide a public sphere for them to discuss political issue. This is because all these will somehow influence the decision making and eventually vote will be cast to the rival of the general election.

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