

Postgraduate Program in Communication and Professional Writing

Department of Communication, Language and Cultural Studies

Minor Thesis (ACG6020)

Title: The revolution will not be downloaded? (Internet and Democratization in Malaysia.)

Research question: "In this era of globalization, can the Internet be used to facilitate or restrict greater democracy in Malaysia?"

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Dedicated to the loving memory of my grandfather,

Mr. P. Selvaratnam

1916-1997.

Thank you for opening my eyes.

Acknowledgments

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction.

2. Literature survey.

2.1 Think Global, Act Local, Think Again: Theoretical dilemmas faced by cultural theorists, coming to terms with the globalization of the media.

2.2 Neoliberalism: Reagan & Thatcher's Bastard Child?: The global influence of neoliberalism in politics and economics.

2.3 Where Would You Like to Go Today? 'Save the Amazon' or 'Amazon.com'?:
The commodification of information technology and the Internet in developing countries.

2.4 It's the Asian way or the Information Superhighway: "Asian values" in relation to neoliberalism, information technology, democracy and human rights.

2.5 From Colonial Conquistadors to Domestic Despots: A brief political history of Malaysia.

2.6 Doctor's (Mahathir) Orders: Take Some Oppression & Call Me in the Morning:

Authoritarianism and corruption associated with the Mahathir government.

3 Research design & methods.

4 Conclusion.

5 Bibliography

An olive that is neither of the East nor of the West,

Whose oil well nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it;

Light upon Light;

-The Transcendence and Immanence of God, in The Holy Quran.

1) Introduction

The main question I have posed for this thesis is “in this era of globalization, can certain Malaysian pro-democracy websites on the Internet be used to encourage or facilitate an alternative public sphere in Malaysia?” The reason why I chose this topic is because it is very timely and I believe it is a very important time in Malaysia at the moment, as its very democratic foundations are being tested. Furthermore, Malaysia is located in a region that is vital to Australia’s commercial, social, communication and security interests. Researching the impact of the globalization of the media on Malaysia can be beneficial to a variety of interests here in Australia; interests that include or pertain to trade, investment, or any future sociological or communication related research in that country. Another reason for my choice of topic is personal. Being originally from Malaysia, I feel a close association with the country and have been following closely its political, economic and social issues.

Lastly, the beginning of the twenty-first century now sees Marshall McLuhan’s much-touted words, that the globe is no more than a village, ring truer with each passing day. With the help (in no small measure) of technology, the transformation of societies from the industrial to the informational has enabled McLuhan’s prophetic words to materialize.

The first section of this thesis is the literature survey. I have divided the literature survey into six sub-sections. The first sub-section, which I have titled, *Think Global, Act Local, Think Again...* deals with the current theoretical dilemmas faced by cultural theorists, in coming to terms with the globalization of the media. Within the context of this dilemma, I also include the argument why the cultural imperialism thesis is inadequate in dealing with the nature of the media in relation to globalization.

In the next sub-section, which is titled *Neoliberalism: Reagan and Thatcher's Bastard Child?* I use political economic theory to talk about the influence of neoliberalism in politics and economics, on a global scale.

In the third sub-section, *Where do You Want to Go Today? "Save the Amazon" or "Amazon.com"*, I discuss the global commodification of information technology, the Internet in particular, and the impact of such technology on developing countries, especially in Asia.

In the following sub-section, titled *It's the Asian Way or the Information Superhighway*, I talk about the concept of so-called "Asian values" in relation to neoliberalism, information technology, democracy and human rights.

Then, in *From Colonial Conquistadors to Domestic Despots*, I look at Malaysia specifically. Areas looked at include a brief political history of the country, from the time of its independence from the British, to its current situation.

In the final sub-section titled, *Doctor's (Mahathir) Orders: Take Some Oppression and Call Me in the Morning*, I discuss authoritarianism and corruption, associated mainly with the Mahathir government.

Throughout the literature survey, I use political economic theory as a basis for my discussions as it best explains the unique situation that the Internet is in, whereby certain progressive political groups in Malaysia are using it as a tool to spread their messages. Furthermore, the Internet itself has become a source of struggle between commercial interests (of “new-economy” and media multinationals) and the various progressive political groups. This phenomenon mirrors the situation in Malaysia, where politics and business are very much intertwined, where “crony capitalism” is practiced widely, and impacts (negatively) on democracy.

In the next section, I discuss the methodology used in my research, and also the actual data researched (i.e. the pro-democracy websites). Also discussed here, is how the Mahathir brainchild, the Multimedia Super Corridor fits into this scenario. Finally, in my conclusion, I look at particular case studies where the Internet has been used for democratic means and its impact on the Malaysian people and the government.

This section also includes a brief post-mortem on last year's federal election results, and the Malaysian government's reaction to the Internet and its related technologies.

2) Literature Survey

2.1) Think Global, Act Local, Think Again:

Theoretical dilemmas faced by cultural theorists, coming to terms with the globalization of the media.

Sreberny-Mohammadi quotes Anthony Giddens when she defines globalization as ‘the intensification of world wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice-versa’ (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1991, p.119). Sreberny-Mohammadi (1991) asserts that the labeling and conceptualization of globalization has generated many debates in academic circles. She explains that some argue that there is a new kind of ‘economic-cultural structure’ called post-modernity while others argue that the evident changes of the last fifteen years simply reflect the ‘supreme development and natural extensions of global capitalism’ and prefer to call this structure late capitalism or ‘high modernity’ (p.119). Giddens (1999) himself however, takes this notion further when he says that the idea of globalization is misunderstood if it is only applied to connections that are literally world-wide and if it is treated as only economic (Giddens 1999, p. 31).

Prior to Giddens, Sreberny-Mohammadi (1996, p.19) said that the current discourses on globalization suggest that political, economic and social activity is becoming more worldwide in scope (p.19). In this, Sreberny-Mohammadi plays devil's advocate as she suggests that although there are precedents across the social sciences for 'transnational theorizing', what these new, contending, and often 'abstract notions of globalization' suggest is a 'paradigmatic challenge across the social sciences toward reconceptualizing nation-bounded models of social dynamics and change' (p.19).

She goes on to say that some of these new and emerging notions add 'multidimensionality, disjuncture as well as conjuncture, and further undermine simplistic, triumphalist, or even critical models of unidirectional Eurocentric influence out to the rest of the world' (p.20). In a sense, Sreberny-Mohammadi is saying that we are all confronted with a new environment in which it is not clear what the appropriate resources, skills and policies are for collective survival in a truly 'globalized risk environment' (p.20). She follows on by stating that attempts to clarify the 'scope and meaning' of culture, to identify and understand the new forms of identity, and to study the role of the media as 'sites of production and meaning and as disseminators of particular kinds of cultural products', will remain central to developing the analysis of the processes of globalization (p.21).

Sreberny-Mohammadi (1991), has also stipulated that what is significant throughout these debates on globalization, is that the role of the media is an important factor in this 'time of confusion' (p.119). Yet, she says, the role of the media, especially electronic media is by no means very fixed or very clear, and neither are our theoretical models for explaining its communications on an international scale (p.119). Hence, she concedes that there is a sort of 'paradigm flux obfuscating any form of metanarrative theory' to describe the role of the media (p.134).

Sreberny-Mohammadi reinforces this notion when she goes on to say that the mood of contemporary analysts can be quite varied. She cites examples, such as the political economist who sees the 'all-pervasive reach of the multinationals' and wonders how long distinctive cultures can outlast the 'onslaught of the Western culture industries' or what she calls the 'cautiously optimistic Fourth Worlder' who sees in the spread of media the possibilities for 'revitalization of local identities' (ethnic, religious, class, etc) and their use of tools of political mobilization via both national and global forces (p.135).

However, she qualifies those variants she mentions in global theorizing, by stating that such theorizing may not be sufficient to explain the rather complex realities of globalization. Thus, she talks about the 'slippery nature of the linguistic terms used in international communications analysis': that "global" rarely means "universal", and often implies only the actors of the North: while "local" is often 'really "national" which can be oppressive of the local. (p.135).

She adds that indigenous culture is often already ‘contaminated through older cultural contacts’ and exists as a ‘political claim rather than a clean analytic construct’ (p.135).

This is where the cultural imperialism thesis comes in. According to Menon (1993), this thesis sees mass communication as a ‘powerful vehicle of arbitrary and destructive foreign influence against which fragile and defenseless traditional cultures must be insulated’ (p.82). Menon adds that this view exaggerates the power of the vehicle as well as the ‘arbitrariness and destructiveness of the influence’, and it ignores the necessary ‘complicity of traditional culture (or any culture) in the process of change’ (p.82). He says that the foreign products are not for the most part uninvited. Usually, they are sought – even ‘bought by people in the host country, which indicates already a substantial degree of cultural contact and cultural congruencies’ but invited or not, they are widely accepted in the host country, only if they have ‘meaning and relevance for the host culture, and, if accepted, they will not simply be passed on into the host culture, but transplanted and enriched in the process’ (p.82).

Before Menon, Appadurai (1990) argued that a major problem of today’s global interactions is the tension between ‘cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization’ (p.296). What Appadurai means by this is, quite often, the homogenization argument digresses into either an argument about Americanization, or an argument about commodification, and very often the two arguments are closely linked (p.296).

As with Sreberny-Mohammadi, Appadurai suggests that fears of homogenization can also be exploited by 'nation-states in relation to their own minorities, by posing global commodification as more real than the threat of its own hegemonic strategies' (p.296). Appadurai also stresses that the new global cultural economy has to be understood as a 'complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models' (p.296). Even the most 'complex and flexible theories of global development' which have come out of the Marxist tradition are inadequate and do not come to terms with 'disorganized capitalism' (p.296). Appadurai concurs with Sreberny-Mohammadi once again when he summarizes that the complexity of the current global economy has to do with certain 'fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture, and politics, which we have barely begun to theorize' (p.297).

Prior to Appadurai, Tunstall (1977) recommended that we must bear in mind that, within the argument of cultural imperialism, both the 'exporters and importers intentions', as well as recognizing that many social consequences of the importation of cultural products are not unintended (p.63).

On the other side of the cultural imperialism coin, Nostbakken (1993), puts a more positive spin on the media's influence when he says, 'if democratization of access to information and knowledge is the way of the future', then the media are the key to breaking down 'social and political barriers to change' (p.4).

He says, through the media (if properly handled) we can bring about a ‘fundamental shift in peoples’ perceptions and behaviours’ (p.4). Thus, he says instruments of mass communication can be harnessed for ‘positive, ethically sound and supportive expression’ – in the South as well as the North and they need not be ‘exploitative or frivolous’, nor do they need to be forms of ‘cultural or social manipulation or repression’ (p.4). Today, as never before, global issues need to be globally grasped (p.4).

One other important component of dealing with the role of media in the globalization process is technology. As discussed throughout this thesis, the evolving nature of technology means that it has a fundamental impact on the many facets of the globalization process. As Sreberny-Mohammadi (1996) attests, there is considerable recognition of the important role played by ‘communications structures and information networks’ in establishing the new global environment (p. 4). Over the past 25 years, a substantial body of work has focussed on the ‘increasingly transnational spread of the media’ and taken up issues pertaining to that spread, from ‘news to television entertainment, electronic data, economic and political development processes, social attitudes and cultural practices, and audience habits and tastes’ (p. 4).

Within the context of this thesis, Sreberny-Mohammadi (1996) encapsulates quite well, what I am trying to ascertain in my research, and her words are as follows: ‘The challenge of globalization is two-fold: first it is the need to recognize and understand the real changes in the world, especially but not solely the implications of global media diffusion; secondly, what new theoretical questions and empirical challenges do the debates around globalization bring to the study of the media’ (p.4)? Whose discourse does it represent, what are its vantage points, what does it allow to be spoken, and what does it silence’ (p.4)?

Questions raised in the previous paragraph reinforce the complex nature of the term globalization and its impact on the media. Hence, we cannot rely on any type of “meta-theory” to explain or understand the phenomenon of the globalization of the media. Therefore, within the context of this thesis, I have isolated one component of globalized media, which is the Internet. Because I am also only focussing on certain Malaysian websites, which is a mere microcosm of the sprawling behemoth, that is the Internet, in the next two sub-sections, I will be talking about political economic theory, and later using it as a basis for interpreting my data. I believe that the theory of political economy is the best one to use for this thesis.

2.2) Neoliberalism: Reagan and Thatcher's Bastard Child?:

The global influence of neoliberalism in politics and economics.

Global integration goes together with a doctrine of economic salvation, which is constantly brought into politics, economics and other aspects of globalization. The basic thesis, usually labeled as neoliberalism, asserts that the 'market is good and state intervention is bad' (Martin & Schumann 1996, p. 8). Basing themselves on the ideas of the leading exponent of this school, the American economist and Nobel prizewinner Milton Friedman, quite a few of the neo-liberal governments of the West made this dogma their 'guiding policy principle in the 1980s' (p.8). Neoliberal policy involves, 'deregulation instead of state controls, liberalization of trade and capital movements, privatization of public enterprises – these were the strategic weapons in the arsenal of market-trusting governments and the international economic organizations under their sway', like the World Bank, the IMF, and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (p.8). 'With these instruments, they fought a struggle for the freedom of capital that is going on today' (p.8). What the G7 countries had decided for their own economic areas, they gradually pushed through in the rest of the world.

Martin and Schumann (1996) concede that at the moment, there is 'no ideology, no popular culture, no international organisation, no ecological interest even, which binds the nations of the world more closely together than the electronic network of global money machines of the banks, insurance companies and investment funds' (p.48).

Martin and Schumann add that unlike classical social democracy, neoliberalism is a 'globalizing theory', and has contributed very directly to 'globalizing forces' (p.48).

Giddens (1999) makes a point along the same lines as Martin and Schumann, when he says, the neoliberals apply at world level, the philosophy that guides them in their more local involvement, which is, 'the world will get along best if markets are allowed to work with little or no interference' (p.14). Soros (1998) is even more specific about this current climate of neoliberalism when he says, we live in a global economy that is characterized not only by free trade in goods and services but even more by the 'free movement of capital' (p.101). He adds that interest rates, exchange rates, and stock prices in various countries are 'intimately interrelated' and global financial markets exert tremendous influence on economic conditions (p.101). Given the 'decisive role that international financial capital plays in the fortunes of individual countries', Soros contends that it is therefore, not inappropriate to speak of a 'global capitalist system' (p.101). Soros adds that despite its 'non-territorial' nature, the global capitalist system does have a center and periphery (p.106). The centre provides the capital and the periphery uses it, and the 'rules of the game are skewed in favour of the centre' (p.106). Saul (1997), interestingly, refers to nations, which have embraced neoliberalism as a 'civilization tightly held at this moment in the embrace of a dominant ideology: corporatism' (p.2). He also stipulates that the acceptance of corporatism causes us to 'deny and undermine the legitimacy of the individual as citizen in a democracy' (p.2).

Hence, the result of such a denial is growing inequality, which leads to our 'adoration of self-interest and our denial of the public good' (p.2). This makes corporatism an ideology, which 'claims rationality as its central quality' (p.2).

Saul also states the ideology of corporatism, especially in the last twenty five years or so, constantly evokes the marketplace as 'the source of freedom and democracy' as well as the only possible force to lead us back to growth (p.133). Saul qualifies this statement by claiming that the marketplace is capable only of 'calculating exclusive costs'; that is, excluding all possible costs that 'interfere with profit' (p.133).

Another important factor, or even, major contributor to neoliberalism is technology.

Mohammadi (1997) explains that communication technology has in no small way helped the neoliberal cause. Mohammadi explains that since 1980, when the idea of involving the private sector in public matters became a 'crucial issue in Anglo-American media', the use of deregulation policy paved the way for the globalization process (p.67).

Mohammadi goes on further to say that in this context, communication technology was accelerated faster than other sectors of the economy to monopolize the world market (p.67).

Mohammadi also states that apart from the role of communication technology in the deregulation process, deregulation itself also served to bring the influence of the private sector and interest groups into the 'active politics of government' (p. 70).

What he means by this is that the public sector was increasingly weakened and laws relating to monopolies and mergers were relaxed, allowing big companies to organize in 'global terms' (p.70).

Thus, according to Mohammadi, the globalization process has resulted in the fact that 80% of foreign investment and 70% of world trade are controlled by 500 corporations, which between them, own 30 % of the world's GDP (p.70). These corporations are mainly run from North America, Western Europe and Japan, and their profit returns to those places (p.70). Hamelink (1997) complements Mohammadi, when he says the consolidation of multinational corporations basically means that companies are buying their competitors and thus 'concentrating market control in the hands of fewer companies' (p.97). Hamelink goes on to suggest that world communication has developed into a 'fast-moving and expanding market-place mainly controlled by a limited number of mega-corporations' (p. 97). Hamelink also argues that a free market under capitalist conditions leads inexorably to a concentration of capital, growth of transnational corporations and forms of 'industrial oligopolization', which are not necessarily 'supportive of everybody's interest and need' (p.117). He also argues that 'market oriented economic development' implies reduced attention to 'collective and social provisions' and invites the 'exclusion from this development of large numbers of individuals, social groups and even whole nations' and in this process the 'market strengthens existing conditions of social inequity' (p.117).

2.3) Where do you want to go Today? Save the Amazon or

Amazon.com?:

The commodification of information technology and the Internet in developing countries.

Even back in 1991, Gurevitch (1991) argued that a lot of the discussion of the globalization of the media, often in the media themselves and sometimes in academic literature, is 'platitudinous, repetitive, or soaked in the aura of high tech' (p.178).

Gurevitch says, examples such as the live broadcasting of the landing on the moon, is often invoked to dramatize the marvels of the new technologies while less attention is paid to questions concerning the 'social, cultural, economic and political antecedents and consequences of this communication revolution' (p.178). Gurevitch concedes that a 'blue skies psychology' seems to permeate the discussion, according to which, this revolution will bring people and nations together, shrink our world and turn it into 'McLuhan's prophesised global village' and it is a perspective based on the 'implicit assumption that communication can only be a good thing (p.179). He goes on to say that the difficulty we are faced with, in trying to 'grasp the nature and consequences of this process' lie partly in the rapid development of the technology that facilitates its 'rapid emergence', and change of the 'institutional structures that carry the globalization process forward', and the diverse ways in which the 'implications and the consequences of these developments manifest themselves' (p.191).

Stratton (1997) elaborates on Gurevitch's point as he relates the notion discussed by Gurevitch within the context of newer technologies. Stratton contends that what has enabled these highly advanced global systems to flourish has been the development of increasingly 'complex computers' and their 'coupling with an automated and digitalized telecommunications system linking points not only nationally but internationally' (p.256). He goes on to suggest that the 'reifications of money', like that of information, leads us back to the reconstitution of communication media as 'transport systems' and these new commodities are being transported through a 'hyperspace in which distance does not exist, and pure movement replaces place and extension' (p.256). Stratton also says that where 'geographical space was colonized and transformed into a site of production (and consumption) within the capitalist exchange system', hyperspace is, itself, a 'product of communication technologies developed in the context of capitalism' (p.256).

Kroker and Weinstein (1994) put forward the argument that this technological determinism only serves the interests of what they call the 'virtual class: the social strata in contemporary pan-capitalism that have material and ideological interest in speeding up and intensifying the process of virtualisation' (p. 163). They continue to suggest that the virtual class 'institutes anew the authoritarian mind, projecting its class interests onto cyberspace from which vantage point it crushes any and all dissent to the prevailing orthodoxies of technotopia' (p.5).

Mohammadi (1997) is more specific about this issue when he states that the flow of technology and its 'attendant forms of knowledge' became the focus of the seven industrial nations, and the doctrine of deregulation was successfully applied in the areas of banking, aviation, telecommunications and broadcasting for many years (p.68).

However, Mohammadi stresses that the major factor in the success of the private sector was the full application of communication technologies; for example, the satellite linking of telephones and the expansion of the international computer network (p.68).

Before Mohammadi, Saik (1993) observed that 'the fast growing trade in data services coupled with businesses' dependence on exchange of data across national boundaries to effect intra-corporate transactions have given rise to deep concerns on transborder data flows (TBDF)', and these flows typically occur using computer networks plugged into telecommunications systems (p.128). Saik also stipulates that advances, especially in the past two decades in computer hardware and software have made the 'processing, storage and transmission' of information a 'strategic resource' that impacts on 'economic productivity, investment, structural change, and employment' (p.128). Saik singles out the US as leading the pack in 'critical' information technology, causing not only the South but also Northern countries such as Japan, the UK, and Canada to fear relentless American domination of the information services sector by 'GATT rules framed to preserve the status quo' (p.128).

Mohammadi (1997) is more specific in how advanced the US is in the field of information technology. For example, he discusses the role of US IT company IBM in all this; IBM is responsible for 'over 70% of the installed capacity in Europe' and enjoys a monopoly of the 'global data processing market' and, as a result is able to impose its standards on the rest of the world (p.78). Mohammadi goes on to say that the US is the major producer and consumer of semi-conductors in the world (p.78). In 1989 the US produced \$20 billion, and consumed nearly \$18 billion of them, while the rest of the world, except Japan and Western Europe, produced only \$2 billion and consumed under \$7 billion (p.78). The US is also the largest manufacturer of satellites and fibre optic equipment in the world (p.78).

Mohammadi also suggests that that the US was always eager to have access to the global communications markets as computer and telecommunications exports are second only to agriculture in the balance of payments (p.78). Thus, Mohammadi asserts that the 'transfer of international transmission markets from public to private control is in the political and economic interests of the United States' (p. 78). What is crucial in all of this, according to Mohammadi, is that, so far, the globalization of telecommunication technology has been: 'the cause of deregulation, with the emphasis on the data rather than voice transmission, which in practice 'squeezes out the interests of two-thirds of the world community, in favour of big business in the West' (p.80).

He goes on to suggest that deregulation in the international market is a 'move by the rich against the poor', by emphasizing data over voice communication, because 'when data still represents only a small minority of all transmission, it favours major companies in the industrialized world (p.80).

Hamelink (1997) explains that the type of data Mohammadi refers to, include 'electronic data exchange, electronic funds transfers, remote resource satellite sensing, electronic mail and database searches' and these flows are carried by networks such as 'the Internet, by the provider of financial data services such as Reuters Information Services, or by such inter-firm networks as the largest inter-bank network SWIFT which is now operated by some 1000 banks and links more than 2000 sites in 60 countries' (p.93). Hamelink adds that the 'flows of electronic data' across the globe are supported by a rapidly growing software services industry, where in 1995, recorded an estimated market value of US\$300 billion. Leading players in the software market are companies like Microsoft (US) with 1993 sales of US\$3, 753 million and profits of US\$953 million (p.93).

Therefore, Hamelink suggests that the outcome of this is the 'commodification of information and culture', thus creating a 'price tag for access and use' (p.117). So, as the capacity to purchase is 'unequally distributed in most societies and between societies', there is increasing evidence that the marketplace creates a growing 'disparity between the rich and poor in and between societies in terms of access to information and communication resources' (p.117).

Will these new communications technologies offer an opportunity for change? Saul (1997) compares the advent of communication technologies with the beginnings of the printing press. He suggests that, with the introduction of the printing press, the result was not an 'economic revolution, but a humanist revolution, driven by language, beliefs and a desire to understand the world was profoundly changed', but from its beginnings, the printing press was independent of government and business interests (p.140). Hence, that is where its power lay. On the other hand, Saul points out that high-tech communications have been quite different in their beginnings. He says that 'government and industry have been at the centre of development, constantly striving for control', plus, even as the 'information superhighway takes form, the public and private interests are carving it up as an information control system and a sales mechanism' (p.140). Therefore, Saul asks the question, can the technology free itself or can those who use it, use it as how writers, printers and readers of books once used the printing press? Saul is ambivalent in his answer, as he says 'perhaps, though the possibilities are by no means clear at this stage' (p.140).

Today, as world communication is increasingly controlled by a decreasing number of powerful players, Hamelink (1997) asserts that 'most of the world's people are excluded from most of the flows that make up the playing field' (p.109). An example cited by Hamelink to qualify his statement is low-income countries, which have 55% of the world's population, but have less than 5% of the world's telephone lines.

More alarmingly, in 1994, more than two-thirds of the world's households had no telephones at all (p.109).

Hamelink also states that the 'market-driven direction of international media' raises the serious prospect that the selection of ideas and information is more determined by the maximization of profits rather than by the wish to 'serve the information needs of democratic societies' (p.112). He adds that emphasis is more likely put on light music and advertising than on information and ideas that enable people to 'exercise the rights and duties of citizenship' (p.112). Hamelink asserts that in order for 'social communication to perform its public function'; it needs the 'realization that mass media have a fundamental duty to their audiences', and they cannot simply equate them with 'consumers or commodities to be sold to advertisers' (p.112). Hamelink also claims that whereas the trend towards 'global digital information utilities' facilitates an 'unprecedented access' to information, there is a good chance that deregulatory policies reinforcing commercialization would relate this access to the affordability of the service (p.112).

Hence, commercialization implies that 'price and not public interest is the decisive factor', which in turn lead to the 'peculiar phenomenon of more and more people hooking off the information society as they can no longer afford the charges' (p.112).

Hamelink attests that along with issues relating to the affordability of communications technology, this technology should also be used to facilitate the blooming of local cultural space. He says that whether a community will be able to develop its own cultural identity (to empower itself culturally) will largely depend upon the local cultural space people can control and if people are to be 'beings for themselves, they need sufficient cultural space to define their identity autonomously' (p.117). Furthermore, if this space is not adequately provided or acquired, they will be 'incorporated in structures of oppression that defines people as beings for others' (p. 117).

In the debates on the creation of global information infrastructures to implement the global information superhighway, the strongest tendency is to 'delegate the realization of this project to the forces of the free market.' (Hamelink 1997, p. 97)

Hamelink states that the closest the world gets to the projected global information superhighway is today the Internet-a 'public meeting place where more than 20 million PC users in some 150 countries exchange information, search databases, play games and chat' (p.97). Hamelink also suggests that the Internet is also beginning to attract attention of the international business community. He quotes *Business Week*, in its cover story of 14 November 1994, which suggests that the Internet is emerging as 'one of the most exciting places for doing business' (p.97). Since its inception, the rule of sharing information for free has now turned the Internet into a 'major vehicle for commercial advertising' and it may turn into a 'global electronic shopping mall' (p.97).

In a nutshell, Hamelink says that, the field of international communication and its major players can best be described in terms of a commercial market-place driven by the belief that a 'free market under capitalist conditions guarantees an optimal delivery of information and culture to everyone' (p. 97).

Breslow (1997) argues that there are also political implications of the exchange of information on the Net. He says, 'as enthusiastic as it is naïve, this line of thought argues that the computer-mediated communication of the Internet is necessarily anarchical, decentralized, and anti-state in its nature' (p.236). Here, he points out that the 'nearly instantaneous' nature of e-mail, newsgroups, and Web access, and the immediacy of this access and the decentralization of both access to and production of electronic information, allows 'activists of all stripes, the opportunity to circumvent the centralized, bureaucratic, and location-bound state apparatus' (p.236).

Hence, Breslow adds that the Internet is a disputed medium, contested by, on the one hand, 'commercial and political forces that wish to define the Net in much the same way as television was construed – as both commodified communications apparatus (which television accomplished through the economic valorization of air time) and a market (the display of commodities to viewers)' (p.237).

On the other hand there are those individuals and organizations that wish to preserve the Internet's status as a 'non-commercial communications system', since it is in this form that the Net is seen as a 'progressive socio-political force' (p.237). Thus, Breslow suggests that we have what is 'tantamount to a debate concerning the nature of contemporary civil society; in principle at least, civil society is that space where individuals act socially, politically, and economically with one another outside of the private space of the home and according to the laws which establish the limits of "civil" behavior' (p.237). An 'inherently public space', civil society is intimately related to the 'juridical principles, morals, and ethics, which maintain its existence' and, more importantly, civil society is 'intimately integrated with the form and nature of social, political, and economic interaction' (p.237). Indeed, one could say that 'civil society and the activities therein mutually define one another' (p.237).

Breslow also states that, '*economically*, civil society exists in the guise of the free market, a space within which competing private economic actors "rationally negotiate" their interests with one another' and in the marketplace, one can argue that, the 'mechanism by which people remain civil with one another is the invisible hand, the rationalized relationships of supply, demand, and price which govern the actions of those engaged in economic activities within a framework of reasonable conduct' (p.239).

Also, the 'rational-critical function described of individuals as they act politically in the public sphere is relocated to the marketplace and redescribed as the capacity to rationally evaluate an item's exchange value against its use value in the public milieu of the market' (p. 239).

Likewise, Lockard (1997), argues that 'true believers who tout the Internet as democracy actualized', or as an 'electronic town hall meeting, live with class blinders in a middle of self-delusion' (p.220). He says this because he believes that access to cyberspace is 'effectively divided between self-financed, institutionally financed, and unprotected non-access', therefore, private access requires 'significant disposable income to cover computer capitalization and the continuing outlays of phone bills, repair of maintenance-intensive equipment, and periodic recapitalization' (p.220). Hence, a few excepted classes exist, but a 'middle-class income is the basic password to Internet access' (p.220).

Before Lockard, Kroker and Weinstein (1994) described this notion when they claimed that that is the 'Internet's subordination to the predatory business interests of a virtual class, which might pay virtual lip service to the growth of electronic communities on a global basis, but which is devoted in actuality to shutting down the anarchy of the Internet in favour of virtualized (commercial) exchange' (p. 7).

Lockard also argues that, 'cyberspace may be ethereal, but it will never be as cheap as air' (p.221). 'Trickle-down technology ideologues assert that cheap as rice chips and computer assemblies will eventually ensure universal cyberspace availability, they choose to ignore the gateway stratification and maldistribution of access incorporated in the current regime' (p.221). Lockard goes on to say that, as economic theory, it 'differs not a wit from the Friedmanian "free markets solve all panacea" that have been deployed to rationalize social greed' (p.221). It would be 'self-deceiving naivete to trust Silicon Valley market forces to provide affordable autonomous communications for those with less than American middle-class status' and further, corporate interests have increasingly regarded cyberspace as a 'discrete market on its own right', one where 'cybermalls will be accessed by remote shoppers' (p. 221).

Lockard states that the market's size has already reached several 100 million dollars, and an estimated half of Internet users are commercial businesses, where, 'marketplace access (i.e. computer purchase), credit access, and possible Internet privatization will act as successive barriers to down-market buyers' (p.222). Thus, 'profit from the mid and upscale-market, not downwardly spiraling cheapness, is already contouring public access' (p. 222).

According to Stratton (1997), the connection between the economic order and the Internet is reinforced in the five principles that the International Telecommunications Union has adopted for a G2 (a.k.a. the Information Superhighway): 'Private investment, market driven competition, flexible regulatory systems, non-discriminatory access, and universal service' (p.261). Stratton adds that the first three of these principles emphasize a 'capitalist form for the building, ownership and running of the G2', including what it is used for' and the last two are about 'audience' (p.261). Stratton further explains that, 'the idea-or, given its Utopian quality, the ideal- is to constitute the entire global population as an audience' and in order to understand fully what is being promoted here we need to remember US Vice-President Gore's 'rhetorical shift from talking about the Internet to the Information Superhighway' (p.261).

Thus, in making this connection, we can see that the building of the G2 provides the basis for a 'global interactive commodity-delivery system for vastly expanded media companies' (p.261). Stratton substantiates this claim by stating, 'it is the attempt to reform the Internet into yet another mass media delivery system' which is at the heart of the rhetorical shift towards the notion of an Information Superhighway (p.265). 'Where the traditional mass media audience consumes images, the scarcely veiled aim of the Information Superhighway is to transform the passive, receiving audience of the mass media into an active, consuming audience, now consuming, however, not just images but also-for a fee-the entire range of commercial goods and services which are becoming available on-line' (p.265).

Stratton postulates further that American dominance in the direction of the global flow in the Internet, however, need not necessarily continue, as he says, 'here lies an irony-or what Marx would have described as a contradiction in capitalism' whereby, at present the US is taking the lead in the building of a 'global information infrastructure' (G 2), a project which has taken on the 'aura of a humanitarian mission' (p.260). Stratton cites an excerpt of a speech given by Al Gore in a 1994 address in Kyoto, Japan, to substantiate this. "The effort to build the G2 provides us with an opportunity to reach beyond ideology to forge a common goal of providing an infrastructure that will benefit all citizens of our nation. We will use this infrastructure to help our respective economies and to promote health, education, environmental protection and democracy" (p.260).

Stratton explains that by 'sandwiching health, education and the environment', Gore, intends that the freedom of information access offered by the Internet will 'correlate with a movement within authoritarian nation-states towards democracy' (p.260). The US, in other words, is 'promoting and underwriting the G2 for its own economic and ideological advantage, but as more non-Americans and non-English speakers come on line the American hegemony over the use of the Internet will become harder to sustain' (p.260).

Lockard reinforces Stratton's notion of who would truly benefit from the information superhighway. Virtual communities, Lockard says, have become a 'new governing myth' (p.230). He adds that the 'opening of new communications paradigms' coincides with an 'unfulfilled need for community, and communications consumerism' makes it possible for this dream to be available in an 'electronic affinity group' and at its most expansive form, this notion becomes a comprehensive 'myth of global community' (p.230). Lockard also puts it quite succinctly when he says, 'communications capital has simultaneous and related mythographic needs for "community" to facilitate micro-marketing and universalism to ensure market expansion' and the 'challenge for progressive politics will be to separate the technological benefits of cyberspace from its marketing myths' (p.230).

Apart from the commodification of the Internet, the aspect of the Internet that Poster (1997) looks at is the question of new kinds of relations of power between participants. Poster stipulates that the question that needs to be asked about the relation of the Internet to democracy is this; 'are there new kinds of relations occurring within it, which suggest new forms of power configurations between communicating individuals' (p.206)? In other words, is there a new politics on the Internet (p. 206)? Poster contends that one way to approach this question is to 'make detours from the issue of technology and raise the question of a public sphere, gauging the extent of which Internet democracy may become 'intelligible in relation to it' (p.206).

Poster asserts that the notion of a public sphere suggests an arena of exchange, however, since there occurs 'no face to face interaction, only electronic flickers on a screen, what kind of community can there be in this space' (p.206)?

Lockard on the other hand suggests that progressive politics should seek to 'analyse, clarify, and demystify' these relations, otherwise there will be little to separate the 'celebration of cybermachines from the then progressive 19th Century infatuation with machines as the realization of human liberation' (1997, p.230). Hence, if we embrace cyberspace uncritically without a 'political consciousness of its structured dreams', then we are certain to 'awake in the tentacles of the octopus' (p.230).

On a global scale, the Internet is currently a medium torn between its potential as a conduit for the free exchange of ideas and as a means of generating profit for transglobal corporations. Theorists like Lockard and Stratton argue that those who claim that the Internet is democracy actualized fail to or perhaps refuse to see its rapid commodification due to the increasing use of the Internet for commercial purposes. However, Poster contends that for now, there is the opportunity to use the Internet as a public sphere or alternative public sphere. However, whether or not the Internet is or will prove to be a successful one is still unclear at this stage.

Because the Internet is still in its infancy, and as a medium, it is labyrinth-like in structure, the potential of the Internet as a successful public sphere, at this point, can only be looked at within the context of a small part of it. In the case of this thesis, that small part are the websites that I am looking at.

2.4) It's the Asian Way or the Information Superhighway!:

“Asian values” in relation to neoliberalism, information technology, democracy and human rights.

Sreberny-Mohammadi (1991a) states that the ‘dynamics of communications development in the Third World have not been an independent and natural unfurling of media, but have been closely linked with the broader processes of socioeconomic development and political struggle, themselves intricately entwined with international relations’ (p.133). Thus, ‘globalization and its partner, technology’, have had an impact on the Third World that is quite hard to pinpoint (p.133). However, Sreberny-Mohammadi adds that one thing is for certain, the Third World has struggled to ‘reap the much-touted benefits from globalization’s or neoliberalism’s trickle-down effects’ and this applies to the media and communications technology (p.33).

Nostbakken (1993) suggests that the industries of the mass media in the South and the North are widening the North-South gap for three reasons:

- 1) ‘the underdevelopment of communication infrastructure in the South;
- 2) the reactionary & oppressive use of media by repressive governments of the South, and
- 3) the domination by the Northern cultural industries, which leaves little room for indigenous cultural self-expression or the sharing of information supportive of development’ (p.3).

Saik (1993) acknowledges that the cause of underdevelopment was the unequal relationships among countries (p.117). In other words, 'the old East-West dichotomy became one between North and South' and southern communicators saw little important technological information 'trickling into the poor countries' (p.117). Instead, they saw a 'strong flow of news and entertainment from the North that threatened to smother native values and cultures' which meant that the South was unable to keep out 'unwanted information, defend their sovereignty, strengthen communication links among themselves, and build communication resources to counter alien information and perspectives of the South' (p.117). However, Saik concedes that all that has changed considerably now. He says that what we have seen, especially since the nineties, is the success of many Asian economies, known more commonly as the 'Asian miracle' (p.117).

Martin and Schumann (1996) highlight one of the factors contributing to the Asian miracle. While the 'old centres of prosperity call for the state to withdraw and for market forces to be given greater scope, the emergent economies do the exact opposite' (p.145). What they mean by this is that the same corporate strategists who in America, or Europe, 'brusquely reject any government interference in their investment decisions, are quite willing in Asia to subject billion-dollar investments to the conditions imposed by state bureaucrats who quite shamelessly describe their work as central economic planning' because the profits to be earned from double-digit growth 'sweep all ideological reservations aside' (p145).

Mohammadi (1997) explains that multinational corporations have a lot to gain from investing in Asia. He says, today, transnational corporations conduct about 70% of international trade, involving 'international capital market process transactions' worth around 75 billion a year, and many of these transnational corporations are eager to 'overcome the telecommunications bottleneck' (p.71). This would allow them to increase capital investment in the developing countries in order to expand their trade beyond the 'frontier settlement of mankind' (p.71). He adds that this has been going on since the early 1980s, though developing countries were expected to 'toe the neoliberal line' (p.75). Mohammadi claims that international organisations like The World Bank had a lot to do with it. The World Bank adopted a 'conditional adjustment lending policy' in order to stop debt crisis in the Third World and to avoid the problems of the previous policy' (p.75). The conditions set out by the World Bank became a double-edged sword. According to Mohammadi, this was because developing countries were persuaded by the World Bank to change their internal economic policy based on the 'prescription of the bank advisors'; or in another word, the 'recipient countries should get rid of any policy that may be prejudicial to development' (p.75). Furthermore, the nature of the loans were designed to protect 'special interest groups' and 'rent seekers based on the rhetoric of efficiency' and free competition (p.75). Mohammadi concludes that so far, neither the World Bank nor the IMF approaches have proved able to help eradicate poverty or help development, as the debts of the less developed countries in 1973 were around US\$100 billion, but, ten years later, had increased to nearly US\$900 billion (p76).

Martin and Schumann (1996) assert that whenever a less developed country tries, without subsidies and without tariff protection, to compete with the powerful industrial economies of the West, 'the prospect of failure is never far off' and free trade simply means the 'law of the jungle' (p.142). Mohammadi suggests that 'rapid deregulation policy' and the development of computer technology, including developments in broadcasting communications, formed a powerful tool in the globalization process and this has resulted in the domination of world markets by multinational companies, which face very little competition or resistance due to their 'overwhelming market force' (1997 p.68). Mohammadi goes on to state that transnational companies based in the industrialized world have access to all corners of the world and it is estimated that the basic telecommunications equipment market of the South is at least \$90 billion (p.68). Also, the developing countries, with 71% of global population possess only 17% of global GNP and a mere 7% of the existing stock of telecommunications resources, which are imperative for access to computer-based global markets and banking (p.69). Mohammadi also suggests that the ongoing trend in the World Bank indicates that the privatization of telecommunication has benefited foreign investors and the manufacturers of communication technology in the North, but, in contrast, has had no impact on poverty or the process of democratization in the South, and as members of some of the less developed countries are 'struggling for the basics of survival, communication is not one of their priorities' (p.77).

Therefore, according to Mohammadi, the impact of globalization in the South is 'crucially linked' to privatization and the expansion of telecommunications (p.78). To add to this situation, the developing countries also represent an increasingly important market to 'transnational advertisers' mainly because 'their consumer activities are growing faster than those of industrial countries' (p.78). 'The middle classes of the developing countries are expanding' and research has shown that the globalization of communication technology has played an important role as the 'key promoter of consumer goods throughout the developing countries' (p.78).

Back in 1993, Menon (1993), argued that in the context of the societies of the Third World, 'mass media is a misnomer; mass media are in fact class media; they are the media for the elite' (p.80). He said, in Asia, there are still pockets where such technology are beyond their reach, despite the 'transistor revolution, which makes literacy a redundant qualification for communication for communication exposure', and while 'illiteracy continues to cause concern, and several communities remain insulated in the countries of Asia, mass media have certainly made some inroads; but geography and poverty still defy them and prevent their full scale penetration' (p.80).

As far as the Internet is concerned, Lockard (1997) suggests that in the developing world, 'problems of access to cyberspace are cast first in national terms before arriving at questions of private/public appropriation' and even with the Internet's 'enormous international growth, it doesn't even approach serving 1 % of the adult global population; as it remains 'unknown and irrelevant to daily life in the world-at-large' (p.228).

However, that might change in the future as Saik (1993) foresees that the new century will probably see a set of 'innovations that are microcomputer based' which will include 'multimedia programs and VR facilities' (p.132). However, it is unlikely that any of these will 'touch the day to day lives of the millions of Asian households' but they will instead be the 'prestigious toys of the urban elite' (p.132). Saik does contend that there may be one exception. He talks about an increasing number of 'non-formal educators and information specialists' using multimedia soft and hardware as a powerful tool for assisting in the education of all groups of people, and the falling prices of PCs will 'render the medium affordable to developing communities in the later years of the decade' (p.132).

One must also not forget that the Asian Miracle has also resulted in some impressive gains especially in, East Asia. Former Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim (1996) says that the 'power of growth to transform society from poverty to prosperity cannot be denied, and nowhere is this process more remarkable than in East Asia' (p.79).

In the 1970s and 1980s, the average per capita income of East Asians grew by seven percent annually; the ‘most sustained and widespread development of the century’ and East Asian countries have in ‘30 years achieved progress in human development that took industrial countries more than 100 years’ (p.79). The tip of the iceberg is, ‘living standards for hundreds of millions rising, basic education and literacy spreading significantly and falling mortality rates for infants, children and women’ (p.79).

However, the Asian Miracle was achieved at a price. According to Saul (1997), the world is filled today, as it has often been in the past with nations that ‘embrace free markets’, impose ‘close censorship’ and conduct ‘false or no general elections’ (p.45). Saul adds that ‘Singapore and China spring to mind and the more complete these markets, the tighter the controls become on the other two freedoms’ (p.46). Saul argues that ‘the experiment in market leadership has not reinforced democracy or individualism, nor has it brought growth, instead it has reinforced corporatism’ or neoliberalism and it is therefore not surprising (p.133) that the most effective corporatist states – Japan, Korea, Singapore, for example – have benefited most (p.134). Saul goes on to say that Singapore’s problem is that it has become the ‘perfect miniature corporatist state – that is, managerial-market civilization, almost no democracy, little freedom of speech, the discouragement of individualism, but a high standard of education, living and therefore of wages’ (p.143). In other words Singapore has ‘created a production system inside globalization but outside any form of civilization’, a sort of ‘limbo, devoted solely to production, a lunar landscape devoid of the characteristics of human society’ (p.143).

Mohammadi (1997) makes a comparison of the difference between the Western and Asian models of economic policy when he says, Asia, has had an 'experience and understanding of trade that was not tied to the doctrine of the free market'; In Japan, 'bureaucracy is regarded as more respectable than business, while in the US it has totally different connotations' (p.68). Thus, in the majority of Asian countries, the 'concept of "we" is more important than that of "I", however, in the US, the liberal approach highly 'valorizes the sovereignty of the individual consumer' (p.68). The 'rhetoric of the freedom and liberty of the individual is equated with the freedom of the market' (p.68).

Soros (1998) actually provides a socio-cultural perspective of the Asian model. In the Asian model, the state 'allies itself with local business interests and helps them to accumulate capital', and this strategy requires 'government leadership in industrial planning, a high degree of financial leverage and some degree of protection for the domestic economy, as well as the ability to control wages' (p.110). Soros goes on to say that such a strategy was pioneered by Japan, which had the 'benefit of democratic institutions', introduced at the time of the US occupation (p.110). He adds that Korea tried to imitate Japan quite slavishly, but without democratic institutions, was instead, a 'military dictatorship holding sway over a small group of industrial conglomerates (chaebols)'(p.110). Soros adds that there was a similar 'alliance' between the military and the mainly Chinese business class in Indonesia, and in Singapore the state itself became a capitalist, by setting up well-managed and highly successful investment funds (p.110).

Soros also talks about how it is often argued that successful, autocratic regimes eventually lead to the development of democratic institutions. He says that the argument has some merit, and an emerging middle class is very helpful in the creation of democratic regimes but it does not follow that 'economic prosperity necessarily leads to the evolution of democratic freedoms' (p.111). He adds that, 'rulers are reluctant to relinquish their power, they need to be pushed', like, for instance, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore was 'more strident in propounding the merits of the Asian Way' after decades of prosperity than he was before (p.111).

Soros argues that that there is a more fundamental difficulty with the argument that capitalism leads to democracy. He says 'forces within the global capitalist system that might push individual countries in a democratic direction are missing'; international banks and multinational corporations often 'feel more comfortable with a strong, if autocratic, regime' and Asian leaders like Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore and Malaysia's Dr. Mahathir 'proudly proclaim their belief that Asian values are superior to Western values (p.134). Soros adds that Lee and Mahathir were so adamant in their beliefs, that they went so far as to challenge the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (p.134).

Prior to Soros, Saik (1993) contended that some of Asia's 'most powerful and enduring leaders who have held some of the most rigid courses of ideology and development' are in this decade, into what could be their final years of leadership and some are no more in power (p. 130).

Thus, in the absence of clear plans of succession in some countries and promise of smooth transfer of power in others, Asians await with 'varying degrees of trepidation for the exit of this aging political leadership' (p.130). Saik adds that these transitions will certainly 'define the latitudes and rules for development communication' and 'whether or not communication processes and information flows will become freer and more dynamic, or less participatory and less vibrant, remains to be determined' (p130).

Hamelink (1997) puts forward the notion that 'parallel with the development of world communication-driven by the morality of the market, the world community has adopted a common standard of achievement to guide its conduct, which is driven by the morality of human rights' (p.97). Hamelink also posits that against the 'selection of human rights norms as a common standard of achievement for the world community', a recurrent argument is that human rights have no 'universal applicability', since their 'implementation is related to specific cultural and historical spaces' (p.99). Hamelink contests this view because he sees the importance of accepting a 'minimal standard of universal validity', which should be used to intervene in situations where the victims cannot speak for themselves (p.100). He also suggests that it should be borne in mind that the belief that there are no 'universally shared basic moral concepts' is usually proposed by 'elites who are not representative of ordinary people', hence, this 'relativist argument is in most countries around the world, easily defeated if one only inquires among the victims of human rights violations' (p.100).

Hamelink goes on to say that ordinary citizens in country after country in the Third World have found 'internationally recognized civil and political rights essential to protecting themselves against repressive economic and political elites' (p.100).

Even US Vice-President Gore has jumped on this bandwagon during his speech at the 1998 APEC conference in Kuala Lumpur. This was at the time when the former Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim had just been arrested. In his speech, Gore paraphrased South Korean President Kim Dae Jung when he said 'any government that suppresses information suppresses the economic potential of the Information Age; from Thailand to South Korea, Eastern Europe to Mexico, democracies have done better in coping with economic crises than nations where freedom is suppressed'. He went on to say, 'democracy offers a stamp of legitimacy that reforms must have, in order to be effective. And so, among nations suffering economic crises, we continue to hear calls for democracy, calls for Reformasi' (<http://www.whitehouse.gov>).

Back in 1996, Anwar Ibrahim (1996) stated that if the term, 'Asian values, is not to ring hollow', Asians must be prepared to 'champion ideals, which are universal' (p.28). He adds that it is 'altogether shameful, if ingenious, to cite Asian values as an excuse for autocratic practices and denial of basic rights and civil liberties', as no Asian tradition can be cited to support the proposition that in Asia, the individual must 'melt into a faceless community' (p.28).

Ibrahim also suggests that, often there is a misconception by the West in assuming that the Asian way is only associated with 'despotism and authoritarian rule' (p.28). Hence he brings up the point that, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, European writers on Southeast Asia conjured the image of the 'lazy native to justify colonialism', and today, a new image is being 'distilled in the international mass media and popular travel writings', portraying Asia as an 'economic juggernaut and a vast sweat shop', made up of 'congested cities and fecund factories, with an endless supply of cheap labour ever ready to be exploited' (p.38).

The other misconception, according to Ibrahim, is that Asian societies are 'stratified into two levels; on the one hand, there are the downtrodden masses, economically and politically disadvantaged, the plebeians as it were and on the other hand, lording over the oppressed majority, a patrician class comprising the old aristocracy, the military cliques, and an expanding coterie of equally corrupt opportunists' (p.38). 'These perceived excesses and autocratic tendencies of the ruling elite are attributed to Asian values, which, in Western eyes, fall far short of universal ideals' (p. 38).

Ibrahim states that 'democracy is not a luxury that Asians cannot afford, as some would have us believe; on the contrary, it is a basic necessity for responsible and ethical governance' (p52).

However, he also acknowledges the degree of hypocrisy by the North/West, when they preach certain issues to the South. 'We are nowhere near dignity or justice when the global order is dominated by a few who preach democracy at home and blatantly deny it abroad, when 85% of the world's wealth is enjoyed by 20% of the global population' (p.50). Hence, Ibrahim states that it is important to have the right balance of freedom and progress. 'Growth is necessary' and the debate should instead be 'focussed on the kind of growth that we want' (p.81). Ibrahim quotes The Human Development Report 1996's classification of two types of growth with negative consequences, which must be avoided at all costs. 'Ruthless growth, where the fruits of economic growth mostly benefit the rich, leaving millions mired in ever deepening poverty'; and 'voiceless growth, which does not empower the people and which silences alternative voices' (p.81).

In relation to the impact of new technologies, especially the Internet, on Asia, Ibrahim suggests that there are, today, in Asia, 'progressive currents' and 'retrogressive counter-currents', which cannot be ignored (p.132). In this, he talks about the 'ardent advocates of democracy and civil society', and the reactionary elements (usually those in positions of political and/or economic power), who are opposed to any type of democratic expression (p.132). Ibrahim states that the 'contest between the two forces is one of the great themes of Asia today and will remain so in many decades to come' because if democracy is about the 'exercise of informed choice, then the information revolution is likely to be a friend of democracy', for the same reason that an 'informed citizenry is also a responsible citizenry' (p.132).

Ibrahim suggests that the Internet, for example, offers us a 'new paradigm for the spread and accessibility of information', which is the 'lifeblood of a functioning democracy' (p.132). However, he does acknowledge that the issues of privacy and individual freedom raised by the interactive value of the Internet are genuine problems for which a 'collective solution must be found', but, the answer, he says, does not lie in 'censoring the medium, as simply closing the doors will not only hurt our nations, but push Asia back in the race for growth and prosperity' (p.132).

However, as a postscript, Ibrahim warns that the 'mastery of the tools of information technology by itself is not enough; even more crucial is the content of the information that is disseminated through the electronic channels of this new age' (p.133). 'The creative energies of Asia, for long smothered by foreign colonial masters or homegrown despots must be allowed to flourish if the continent is to play an active role in moulding the pivotal ideas of the new millenium' (p.133).

The role of the Internet as an alternative public sphere, takes an interesting turn, when seen through an Asian perspective. In Asia, to only argue the Internet as a source of struggle between neoliberal and progressive political interests is not enough. Because of continuous debates on the definition of The Asian Way and what its role is in this era of globalization, perhaps any study or debate on the democratic or commercial role of the Internet in Asia has to include what is meant or defined as the Asian Way.

Like the idea/concept of globalization, the Asian Way is a complex phenomenon that requires further investigation, before we can truly ascertain its impact or role in a globalized world.

2.5) From Colonial Conquistadors to Domestic Despots:

A brief political history of Malaysia.

In order to appreciate the need for an alternative public sphere in Malaysia, it is important to understand Malaysia's current political situation. In the next sub-section, I will discuss how the Mahathir government dictates and maintains a stranglehold on legislation, law and the media. However, in order to see how the Mahathir regime has managed to obtain such power, it is important to look at the country's political history as a starting point.

Malaysia has an open economy, which is widely seen as being highly successful.

According to Gomez and Jomo (1997), 'access to considerable resource rents has undoubtedly facilitated economic growth and diversification' (p.1). Gomez and Jomo define an economic rent as a 'return to a resource owner in excess of the owner's opportunity cost' (p.1). Gomez and Jomo also claim that Malaysia's economic progress has been achieved at a cost, hence tainting the gains.

For example, there has been growing concern over the 'influence of political patronage on the business sector, the increasingly inequitable distribution of wealth and the apparent increase of corruption and other abuses of power' and controversy over the issues has grown with the implementation of the privatization policy since the mid-1980s, which has enhanced private control of key economic activities and further concentrated 'ownership and control of corporate equity in the hands of a multi-ethnic, politically influential minority' (p.1).

As Milne and Mauzy (1986) put it, 'to understand Malaysian politics, one must begin by recognizing that the most salient political division in Malaysia has been and remains that between the Malays and the non-Malays' (p.99).

Gomez and Jomo explain that several developments in the economy and the nation's history, which have probably contributed to this division. They contend that many of Malaysia's problems are believed to stem from the multi-ethnic nature of its population, largely a legacy of British colonialism from the late 18th Century to 1957, when independence was granted to British Malaya, now known as Peninsula Malaysia (p.1).

Of Malaysia's 20 million people in 1996, indigenous Bumiputera or Malay, accounted for 61%, while Chinese constituted about 30% and Indians 8%; the remaining 1% was made up of other minor ethnic groups (p.1).

Most political parties in Malaysia are ethnically based, encouraging 'ethnic political mobilisation and consciousness', thus 'exacerbating the ethnic problem'

(1997, p.1). This is only 'partly mitigated by the ruling Barisan Nasional (National Front) being a multi-ethnic, multi-party coalition' (p.2). Barisan Nasional (BN) comprises over a dozen parties, and is dominated by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), while two other senior members of the coalition are also ethnically based parties-the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) (p.2).

According to Gomez and Jomo, British colonialism contributed to the 'ethnically heterogeneous population' by encouraging Chinese and Javanese immigration and organising Indian immigrants to work in the public and plantation sectors, resulting in a 'close identification between race and economic function' (p.10).

For example, although the ruling coalition has always been multiracial in composition, the character and constitution of most Malaysian political parties are 'ethnically based and heavily influenced by the multiethnic feature of its population and its colonial legacy' (p.10).

However, this multiethnic coexistence was shaken by the outbreak of ethnic clashes on 13 May 1969, resulting in the proclamation of a state of emergency, which led to the suspension of parliament and a palace coup by UMNO's young Turks against the then Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman's 'more conservative ruling clique and style' (p.22). Gomez and Jomo concede that the incident of 13 May 'exposed the vulnerability of the supposed multi-racial unity' that was believed to prevail in Malaysia and in the post-1969 period, the 'hegemonic position' of the new, more Malay-oriented leadership in the BN was, enhanced through amendments to the Constitution (p.22). It was, for example prohibited, even in parliament, to question "ethnically sensitive" issues, which included any reference to 'Malay special rights, non-Malay citizenship, the status of the national language, Islam, and the constitutional provisions pertaining to the Sultans (royalty)' (p.22).

In subsequent years, UMNO leaders would openly assert that the party could rule alone, but preferred to 'share power in the interests of national unity' and ironically, the government insisted that it was precisely this system of 'power-sharing, within the Barisan Nasional which enabled them to manage and resolve ethnic problems, thus contributing to ethnic co-existence' (p.22).

Gomez and Jomo also assert that Malay hegemony within this political arrangement, however, was justified on the grounds that it represented the interests of the largest ethnic community and this contributed to the creation of a 'pronounced Malay perception of policies by the party leadership' (p.23).

Gomez and Jomo add that this was represented in the ideology of 'Bumiputeraism', reflected especially in the post-1969 'New Economic Policy (NEP)', which contributed to UMNO's enhanced dominance of the BN (p.23). This entailed 'partial abandonment of the previous laissez-faire style of economic management, in favour of greater state intervention', and besides the 'eradication of poverty, the policy mandated extensive state intervention for ethnic affirmative action, including the accelerated expansion of the Malay middle class, capital accumulation on behalf of the Malay community and the creation of Malay capitalists' (p.23).

Gomez and Jomo also suggest that the NEP also gave rise to 'cronyism, or the distribution of rentier opportunities to companies controlled by politicians, retired bureaucrats, parties in the ruling coalition and politically well-connected businessmen', which in turn raised concerns about the 'transparency of government policymaking and implementation' (p.25). Crony capitalists were 'rent-seeking private-sector businessmen' who benefit enormously from close relations with government leaders by obtaining not only protection from foreign competition, but also concessions, licenses, monopoly rights and government subsidies (p.25).

Gomez and Jomo also argue there is great justification for such criticism since ‘patronage networks, especially in UMNO, grew under the NEP; it is through the NEP that rents have been created, captured and disbursed ostensibly as part of the government’s policy of restructuring to attain greater inter-ethnic wealth parity and to develop Bumiputera entrepreneurs’ (p.25).

As a result of the multiethnic composition and economic disparity within the Malaysian population, a set of complex political and economic policies were created by subsequent Malaysian governments, after Independence, to improve the economic standing of a particular ethnic group (Malays). Over the years, through further amendments to the Constitution limiting public discourse in politically sensitive issues, these policies have lost their initially intended affirmative-action goals and have resulted in widespread cronyism and corruption, especially by the Mahathir government, which is discussed in greater detail in the next sub-section.

2.6) Doctor's (Mahathir) Orders: Take Some Oppression & Call Me in the Morning:

Authoritarianism and corruption associated with the Mahathir government.

Malaysia, under its long serving prime minister, Mahathir Mohammed, has developed into one of Asia's most successful rising economies. According to Martin and Schumann (1996), Malaysia has long ceased to be a developing country. They add that, since 1970, its economy has grown by an annual average of seven to eight percent, and its industrial output by more than ten percent, and today, 25 percent of the active population work in industry, which account for third of Malaysia's total product (p.146). Martin and Schumann also state that Malaysia's move up the 'chain of world production' brought full employment and rising wages for many Malaysians, because the government at least permitted company trade unions, but concede that Malaysia is still far from being a 'free country with basic democratic rights' (p.146). They argue that draconian laws and policies have exacerbated since Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed, came into power, more than 15 years ago. Mahathir's regime has imposed strict censorship on all the media, and forbade strikes and assemblies. (p.146). Martin and Schumann also stress that the 'growing economic strength of a rising middle class' goes together with often inhuman working conditions for the underclass, not to mention the million or more immigrant workers from poorer countries in the region who can be 'squeezed dry in any way whatever' (p.146).

Gomez and Jomo (1997) assert that in spite of fairly regular multi-party elections and some other features requiring accountability of the regime, the Malaysian State has been authoritarian since the colonial period, though analysts have characterised the political system as 'semi-authoritarian, semi-democratic or quasi-democratic' (p.2). Gomez and Jomo add that although these 'qualified descriptions' suggest that some democratic aspects and forms remain, most of the minimal conditions necessary for the practice of democracy, particularly fair elections, 'adequate opportunities for independent political opinion-making and political organisation and minimal protection from the individual from arbitrary state power', hardly exist in Malaysia (p.2). Furthermore, the 'minimal civil liberties and democratic procedures' that exist are only allowed as long as long as the position of the ruling elite is not seriously threatened or undermined and such rights have been quickly 'modified or abolished when elite interests were threatened' (p.2). Gomez and Jomo state that this has been made possible by amendments made to the Federal Constitution and other legislation, as well as to the rules and regulations governing UMNO, which has increasingly 'enjoyed and deployed the powers and privileges of long term incumbency since 1955 in a seemingly one party state' (p.2).

Gomez and Jomo (1997) argue that some features of authoritarianism have been more pronounced since Dr Mahathir Mohammed became Prime Minister in 1981 and particularly during the late 1980s, when his own position was under threat by challenges to his leadership.

They go on to explain that since the 1980s, a 'pattern of incremental executive encroachment on the other branches of government has transpired', involving 'diminution of the powers of the (nine constitutional) monarchies, while the executive's encroachment on the independence of the judiciary has badly undermined public confidence in the judicial system's capacity to administer justice' (p.2). The worst abuse of the system is the 'Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows for indefinite detention without trial' (p.2). In 1987, draconian amendments to the 'Official Secrets Act (OSA)' have further reduced transparency, inevitably eroding public accountability in the process (p.2). To make matters worse, Gomez and Jomo state that ownership of the docile press by politicians and politically influential businessmen and stringent government regulation have combined to similar effect (p.2). Gomez and Jomo also argue that the government controlled media has been used by the BN to promote and legitimize itself as well as to discredit political opposition and dissent more generally, and all this has been accompanied by an 'intolerant official attitude towards opposition, dissent and independent criticism by largely ignoring and even discrediting public interest groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and trade unions, which have been gradually emasculated through repression, legislation, regulation and manipulation' (p.3). Gomez and Jomo state that this is partly a result of 'the absence of constitutional and other legislative constraints on the powers of the government of the day holding a majority in parliament' (p.3).

They add that much of this has been legitimized by reference to the threat of ethnic conflict and the necessity of making such political sacrifices in the interest of political stability, ethnic harmony, economic redistribution, economic growth and accelerated modernization, especially industrialization (p.3).

Also according to Gomez and Jomo, over the years, the BN government has introduced numerous restrictions, which have 'undermined the capacity of the opposition parties to pose serious threat to the ruling coalition' (p.3). There is also the issue of gerrymandering and other unfair electoral practices, 'considered almost routine facts of life' by an 'increasingly cynical populace unaccustomed to expect otherwise', thus setting limitations on political participation and eventually fostering a political culture with rather 'modest expectations of democracy, civic rights and public accountability' (p.3).

As expressed by Bowie and Unger (1997), apart from corruption, oppression was used by Mahathir's regime especially during their push for privatisation, in the eighties. In the 1980s, to attract foreign investors, the government adopted laws to limit the ability of national labour unions to press for higher wages and improved employee working conditions and with increasing numbers of Japanese companies investing in Malaysia at the time, the government moved to 'overhaul Malaysian labour laws to encourage Japanese-style enterprise unions and weaken existing large national unions', resulting in existing national unions being 'forced to bow to enterprise unions' in industries where they competed for members (p.93).

Shamsul (1992) suggests that Mahathir's privatisation policy, is 'one which drew inspiration from the West and perhaps especially from Thatcher' (p.10). Shamsul also acknowledges that the increasingly widespread use of poorly paid and badly treated immigrant contract labour, especially in plantation agriculture, land development schemes and construction, and the introduction of easily controlled government-and management-endorsed in-house unions have further weakened the bargaining position of labour in the 1980s (p.10).

Milne and Mauzy (1986) contend that another area of strict governmental control is with regard to interest groups. They state that, in Western countries, interest groups do not 'exactly make life easier for governments but at least they are respected', whereas in Malaysia and other neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, 'neither are they such a nuisance nor are they accorded much respect' (p.97). A few are actually sponsored by the government, and the remainder, though they exert some influence, tend to be 'dominated by the government; as they are tolerated but will be checked if they try to go beyond certain limits' (p.97). Government attitudes are exemplified by the 'Societies Act', which was originally designed to register and control secret societies and subversive groups but was amended in 1981 to 'smoke out groups the government believed were acting politically (though ostensibly formed for other purposes)' (p.97). One such group, which still exists today, 'Aliran' (a multiethnic reform movement led by Dr Chandra Muzaffar) and other organizations fought the amendments and 'secured some modifications' (p.97).

Milne and Mauzy also add that the Government has also acted to control university student bodies by passing the 'Universities and University Colleges Act of 1975', which prohibited students from supporting or becoming members of parties, trade unions, or other bodies without university approval (p.98). Finally, not only is the power of interest groups considerably restricted, but their role in the process of passing legislation is also minimal, in that they have few opportunities to state their views on proposed laws through consultation and it is only after a law has been passed that the groups can 'agitate for amendments, or at least for favorable implementation' (p.98).

Shamsul (1992) does not think much will change in the future. He says, 'the natural tendency for vested interests to mobilize around self-benefiting preference policies will continue' and the same group of people is likely to have 'preponderant power in defining future policy', thus 'no amount of political will shall change this, at least in the foreseeable future, and the situation of a stable tension will continue in Malaysia' (p.11).

The undemocratic nature of the Malaysian government's modus operandi in many areas of policy, legislation and law, makes it difficult, if not near impossible for Malaysians to have any say or debate on how their country is run. Therefore, the availability of an alternative public sphere is vital for such expression.

3) Research design and methods

A significant proportion of the data used in my research is from the various Malaysian pro-democracy websites. Having studied these websites over a twelve-month period, it is quite astounding that a plethora of them have mushroomed in that time. Hence, choosing the ones to use for this thesis was quite difficult. During the beginning of my research in January 1999, I began my search by using keywords based around words like, “Malaysia” and “Politics”. In order to cover as many bases as possible, I used a few search engines to conduct the searches. The search engines I used were mainly Yahoo, AltaVista and Lycos. Looking at the basic descriptions of the websites listed in the search engines, I narrowed my searches further by selecting sites that I found would be most interesting or useful for this research. This was based on the descriptions of the sites in the listing on the search engines. Hence, I was deliberately looking for websites, which were politically or socially based. This made it easier to weed out sites that were not relevant to my research. (eg. tourism based ones, commercial sites selling products, etc). It is interesting to note that most of the websites are written in English, some of which contain sections in Malay. There are a very small number of websites in the Malay language. As far as advertising is concerned, most websites contain banners for local e-commerce companies, though a few, do have advertising from foreign (mainly US) companies, like Amazon.com and Microsoft.

Having looked at various pro-democracy websites, from the ones that had their inception since the arrest of Anwar Ibrahim, to newly posted ones, I have decided to focus on a handful of them. To quote The Australian newspaper 'while many of the original Reformasi sites were crude efforts, the most successful have evolved into informed and provocative government-baiters, across a broad range of political, social and economic issues' (30 March 2000). For example, one of the pioneer websites, SAKSI (www.saksi.com) 'launched in October 1998, was notable in the midst of the Anwar furore for reflecting critically' on Mahathir's 17 years in government and features the work of 'some of Malaysia's best-known independent writers' and, after a fallow period since last year, SAKSI has now been reinvigorated (The Australian, 30 March 2000). In my opinion, the site is now a source of intelligently written features and reflections on issues pertinent to a post-Anwar Malaysia. Compared with a lot of the other websites, the features written in Saksi are written in a very academic style, giving me the impression that the some of the contributors are academics. Issues addressed in these articles are quite varied and range on critiques of new and old media, criticisms on the various political parties (BN and the opposition parties), and political/economic issues pertaining to other countries in the region. Because of the academic bent of the writings, I would presume that the intended readerships of this site are educated professionals or other members of academia.

‘What is now the most potent of the Reformasi sites’, freeMalaysia (www.freemalaysia.com) is operated anonymously by a self-described ‘small, committed group of individuals from economics, business and the political process’, whose ‘identities are a matter of much speculation’ (The Australian, 30 March 2000). Started in January 1999 and claiming about 5000 regular readers, freeMalaysia carries political analysis, which, ‘while partisan, is of a quality that shames the dailies, and scathing accounts of government business practices and cronyism’ (The Australian, March 30 2000). The most interesting aspect about freeMalaysia is that satire permeates throughout this website. Although the subject matter of the website is predominantly political in content, the writing is not without a certain degree of tongue-in-cheek. For example, there is a section called the Rogues Row, which lists so-called business and political cronies of the government. The introduction to this section reads, ‘Rogues Row: freeMalaysia’s running roster of figures, who have grown fat at Dr M’s not-so-public trough. Get up close and personal with these profiles’ (www.freemalaysia.com).

Malaysiakini (www.malaysiakini.com) claims over 30,000 daily hits. This site was started by and run by a group of Malaysian journalists from the print media. Like Saksi, Malaysiakini consists of feature articles relating to local politics and current affairs, with a ‘different slant from the mainstream media’ (The Australian, March 30 2000). Its content is very political, and it does not just criticize Mahathir’s regime, but is equally critical of the other political parties and movements.

The issues addressed on this website do not just pertain to Malaysia, but there is extensive coverage of regional issues, too. What is striking about this website is that it looks like it is a source of a variety of political news, that may be skimmed over or worse still, not necessarily rate a mention in the mainstream media.

Agenda Malaysia (www.agendamalaysia.com), launched in April 2000 is a 'digest of Malaysian news and current affairs in government, the economy and society' (The Australian, March 30 2000). This website is unique, as compared with the other ones because it most resembles an on-line version of current affairs magazines like Time or Newsweek. As a matter of fact, its masthead is followed by a sub-heading that says 'news.information.commerce' (www.agendamalaysia.com). The website is divided into different sub-sections, with headings that range from 'Business & Finance', 'Arts, Culture & Society' to 'Sports & Recreation'. (www.agendamalaysia.com).

Thus, more than any of the other sites, and based on its format, Agenda Malaysia gives the impression that it is trying to be a legitimate alternative to the mainstream press.

Looking at these websites from a historical perspective, albeit a short one, pro-democracy websites only really started to sprout after the Anwar Ibrahim arrest, starting off as an alternative public sphere. For instance, the early incarnates were mainly a forum for people to e-mail their opinions and thoughts. Also, a few of the sites contained chat rooms to facilitate live, on-line discussion.

However, since the arrest of Anwar Ibrahim in 1998, some of these websites have attempted to evolve into alternative media, which tried to be more critical of the powers that be, and more balanced in their coverage. As commendable as that is, because of the anonymity of many of the contributors, and questions to how reliable their sources are, as the reader, we have to read the content of the websites with some degree of doubt into the reliability of the information. This is because there is no way we can be sure of how accurate the information contained in the sites is. However, because there is an attempt made to create alternative sources of news and information to the established, mainstream media in Malaysia, this should be seen as the start of something worthwhile. Ironically, in order to woo and appeal to the neoliberal, new economy multinational corporations, Mahathir and his government may have to facilitate and encourage, even through legislation, such new media, sooner than we think. As mentioned in The Australian, by the time the Anwar affair had broken, the 'mainstream media had already lost so much credibility they were vulnerable to the push for alternative news, and of course, the Internet was the best medium'-as it required 'no licenses and relatively small capital needed to get started' (The Australian, 30 March 2000). Furthermore, and 'not least because of the PM's exhortations for Malaysians to get wired, the Internet as a media market, though relatively small, was in blast-off mode.' (The Australian, 30 March 2000).

Where information technology is concerned, the Malaysian government has tried to embrace it and court the international corporations associated with the technology.

However, whatever its exact policies are, regarding this, are unclear, though the government and Dr. Mahathir, in particular, are keen to give the impression that they do not intend to censor the Internet.

One of the government's major infrastructure projects, was designed and built to facilitate cutting-edge information technology research and investment. Known as the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), the MSC is the main reason for Mahathir's anti-censorship stance. The MSC's nucleus and Smart City, the RM2.2 billion Cyberjaya houses this ambitious project. According to the editorial section of Malaysian daily, the New Straits Times, the MSC project itself has been described by many among the 32 of the 50 world-class high-tech companies who are looking to be involved in the MSC, as an 'epoch making, revolutionary effort' and a 'pioneering Malaysian example to governments around the world'. (New Straits Times, July 10th 1999). The editorial also claims that 'life's full spectrum in the MSC is wholly microchip-based' and 'with the comprehensive cyber legislation, the MSC, in all likelihood, may well become the platform for an International Cyber Court of Justice' (New Straits Times, July 10th 1999).

Furthermore, the government has set up a 'sound Internet infrastructure to boost cyber commerce through the establishment of the Digital Signature Act (1997), Certification Authority System and recently, the Secure Electronic Transaction arrangement', thus, any 'discrediting of a national endeavour that will push Malaysia to the technological forefront by the politically motivated, is tantamount to an intimation of political weakness-not strength' (New Straits Times, July 10, 1999).

According to The Australian, 'Dr Mahathir's \$20 billion MSC concept is now well on its way to realisation' and, with his 'uncanny sense of picking important trends, Mahathir envisioned the MSC as far back as 1993 and began selling it to the likes of Microsoft's Bill Gates, Scott McNeally of Sun Microsystems, Oracle's Larry Ellison and Masayoshi Son of Softbank', and they 'bought it' (The Australian, March 30 2000). Gates and several other heavy hitters including Sony's Noboyuki Idei and IBM's Lou Gerstner even joined the initial MSC advisory board, and from them the Prime Minister quickly understood that an essential condition for international IT investment was freedom from government interference, resulting in these 'liberties' being cemented in a 1996 Multimedia Bill of Guarantees (now known as the Cyber Laws of Malaysia) (The Australian, 30 March 2000). Though mostly specific to MSC investors, the Government guarantees include a flat undertaking that Malaysia will ensure no censorship of the Internet, but that was all before Anwar Ibrahim's Reformasi rebellion and arrest in September 1998, which set Malaysia's 'previously prim Internet community fizzing with mutinous activists' (The Australian, 30 March 2000).

The Malaysian government, however, is well aware of the possibilities (positive and negative) that information technology and especially the Internet have to offer. It is also obvious that the government is more interested in its commercial rather than its democratic potential. Another article in the New Straits Times illustrates this. 'The private sector and the government must work together to address the negative aspects of the Internet', said the current Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr Abdullah Badawi, and the Internet should be made a 'safe environment without impeding its commercial development' (New Straits Times, July 11th, 1999). 'As with any major societal transformation', he said the 'Internet and the Digital economy would lead to some upheaval, but we see 'disturbing trends such as the mushrooming of hate sites, the vilest of pornography and the dissemination of lies that have the potential of creating discord' (New Straits Times, July 11th, 1999). The Deputy Prime Minister added that, 'governments will have to work closely with the private sector to ensure a predictable legal and financial environment globally for doing business on the Internet', and 'we are fully cognizant of the fact that the necessary legal framework has to be in place for the MSC to be able to deliver its promise of an environment that will unlock the full potential of multimedia' (New Straits Times, July 11th, 1999).

The Malaysian government is now in a predicament, where, it is caught between the Asian Way ala suppressing dissent in the name of stability, and trying to woo neoliberal interests in the guise of the new economy and e-commerce. In wooing neoliberal, commercial interests, the Malaysian government, and Dr. Mahathir, in particular, must put up a front of tolerance of free expression, and facilitate freedom of information (as long as they do not interfere with profit). Therein lies the paradox.

As a footnote, it is important to note that initiatives in IT were not just spearheaded by the Malaysian government, or a purely industry-driven top-down phenomenon, but a major contribution to this initiative involved the work of academics. In 1990, the Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems (MIMOS) launched Malaysia's main ISP, called Joint Advanced Intergrated Networking (JARING). According to Hashim and Yusof (1999), the person who initiated, implemented and developed' this venture was Dr. Mohammed Awang-Lah (p. 49). They also state that according to Dr. Mohammed, the Internet in Malaysia really started in the University of Malaya's Electrical/Electronics Engineering Faculty, where he lectured and experimented with the BSD Unix system (p. 49). When Mohammed Awang-Lah joined MIMOS (a government entity then), he set up Rangkom, 'a smaller computer network developed under the Fifth Malaysia plan', which had four dial-up lines to Australia, the USA, the Netherlands and Korea (p. 49). JARING, which was launched as an extension to Rangkom, in turn, 'promoted information exchange and database development through access to Internet' (p. 49).

With the help of a satellite link between Malaysia and the USA in 1992, JARING was connected to the Internet, thus providing Malaysian users with accessibility to the Internet in more than 140 countries (p. 49).

From my investigations of the selected websites and description of the MSC, I am trying to show that (as discussed in the literature review) the contradictory nature of new technologies. On a micro level, the situation in Malaysia plays like the current situation globally. In this case, being the Internet as used by Malaysians and the MSC as developed by the Malaysian government. The tension now lies between the need to profit from this medium and the potential of this medium to become a public sphere, where the exchange of opinions and ideas can take place. So, profit and freedom of expression appear to work together and contradict each other at the same time. However, it is important to note that for now, the websites which I have investigated are being used by academics, journalists and other professionals, as an alternative source of news and current affairs to the heavily controlled and monitored mainstream media. Whether or not these websites are a source of critical discourse or a forum where Malaysians can exchange ideas, is unclear at the moment. Although there is some evidence of these websites being used as a forum for intellectual discussion, it is still on a small scale, thus not significant enough to have any impact on the political stage.

4) Conclusion

Whether or not the Internet has facilitated a successful alternative public sphere in Malaysia, is too early to tell at this stage. However, since the arrest of Anwar Ibrahim, there have been, and still are, signs and evidence of the Internet facilitating increased political activism by some Malaysians. The BBC News Online website has reported that Malaysians are using the Internet as a 'forum of discussion or to voice their grievances about issues that wouldn't normally be reported or mentioned in the mainstream media', like the case where BBC News Online received around 500 e-mails in the hours immediately after the jailing of Malaysia's former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim on corruption charges' (BBC News Online, April 15, 1999, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>). The 'tone of around two-thirds of them mirrored the outrage that sparked violence on the streets of the country's capital Kuala Lumpur' (BBC News Online, April 15, 1999). The BBC has also reported news of Malaysian authorities being threatened by or fearful of certain information released on the Internet. Police in Malaysia are reported to have set up an 'Internet unit to monitor websites and newsgroups, which have been organising protests against the jailing of former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim', and the 'national Bernama news agency reported that the unit was set up on the instructions of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed' (BBC News Online, October 5, 1998.). The website also mentions the mission of this Internet unit to watch for 'information and messages, which could affect public security' (BBC News Online, October 5, 1998.).

Malaysians, who feel their newspapers and broadcasters are 'toeing the government line too much', have been turning increasingly to the Internet for alternative coverage and reports in the foreign media, (the latter 'accused by the Prime Minister of trying to engineer his downfall,) which are freely available over the World Wide Web' (BBC News Online, October 5, 1998).

Numerous pro-Anwar websites have also been set up and there are 'no-holds barred debates online in newsgroups' and, some of the messages deal with how to avoid detection by the authorities' - many users 'adopt aliases, but this does not guarantee complete anonymity when expressing views' (BBC News Online, October 5, 1998). The BBC also adds that investigations aided by the Malaysian Institute of Microelectronics Systems (Mimos), led to the arrest of four people in August 1998, who were charged with spreading rumours of rioting. The suspects were detained under the ISA after an anonymous e-mail warned that migrant workers from Indonesia were buying machetes as a prelude to riots (BBC News Online, October 5, 1998).

Rumours and reports on the Internet have made some sort of impact on the populace and powers that be, that even the currencies market has been affected by it. According to the BBC, the rumours regarding possible riots by migrant workers contributed to the selling off of the Ringgit in international currency markets. (BBC News Online, August 10, 1998).

According to The Australian, 'now, confronted with a burgeoning, provocative and increasingly noticed alternative media on-line, the PM, who loathes dissent, declines to crush the upstarts', The Australian quotes Steven Gan, co-founder and editor of Malaysiakini.com, as saying, 'Mahathir's itching to censor the Net but he has to think twice because it would damage his pet project, the MSC' (The Australian, 30 March 2000).

The Australian also adds, 'this explosion of e-politics and a corresponding sharp drop in the sales of arch-establishment newspapers also exposed a simmering contempt for the mainstream media's toadying to the Government and its distorted, often savage, treatment of anyone marked out as a Mahathir opponent' (The Australian, 30 March 2000). Furthermore, local ISPs now have 900,000 subscribers, with sign-ups growing at close to 20 percent annually; counting Internet cafes and suchlike, an estimated 2 million Malaysians are regular Net-users (The Australian, 30 March 2000).

Because there is the impression that Mahathir is the most 'wired' politician in Malaysia and understands the need to avoid any censorship on the Internet, many observers suspect that if the Net newsmakers do come under official attack it will be from the 'flank rather than front-on, quite possibly from defamation action launched by the government or its friends' (The Australian, 30 March 2000).

Deputy Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi has ‘openly suggested defamation will be the first line of action against troublemakers, and the costs of one serious defamation action, won or lost, would wipe out any of those operations’, so ‘they must be careful with their facts, and the facts must support their opinions’ (The Australian, 30 March 2000). With ministers now warning the online operators almost weekly against wild allegations and ‘unfounded criticisms’, pressure is clearly coming on them to begin ‘backing down that forlorn path’ but, however, they don’t look like ‘buckling at this point, as they are as interested as anyone else in who blinks first in this intriguing conflict between Mahathir the cyber-visionary, and Mahathir the media muzzler’ (The Australian March 30, 2000).

The BBC News Online website has reported similar moves by Malaysian authorities in squashing dissent when it mentioned that authorities warned Internet users caught fabricating news, that they could be jailed for three years under the Telecommunications Act, and the Printing Presses and Publications Act meant that just downloading and printing such messages could lead to charges. (BBC News Online, August 11, 1998).

Another report on the BBC website stated that, according to the then Information Minister, Dato Mohammad Rahmat that the 'government had never censored news sent via the Internet', as it has always 'allowed the free flow of information but it had to be done in a proper manner', and it would 'struggle to impose any censorship on the Internet'; this has 'opened up a Pandora's box in embracing the digital future with its planned MSC, a fibre-optic network aimed at creating an Asian silicon valley' (BBC News Online, September 28, 1998).

Based on the popularity of the current use of the Internet by some Malaysians as an alternative source of news and current affairs, perhaps there could be a potential for the Internet as a medium for even greater freedom of expression and as a bona fide alternative public sphere by even more Malaysians in the future. According to Gomez and Jomo; in these circumstances the question that arises is whether or not the rapidly 'changing socio-economic conditions, such as the growth of a multi-ethnic middle class, the resentments of less favoured business interests, and the growing cultural and lifestyle disparities' would bring about tensions within the authoritarian state and its relationship with civil society, and whether this may lead to the development of more democratic tendencies' (Gomez & Jomo 1997, p.183).

However, Gomez and Jomo do not foresee any dramatic changes happening in the current political and economic climate. 'As the development of participatory democratic institutions will be crucial to ensuring greater transparency and accountability in governance, public-policy making and administration, it is unlikely that this will happen in the near future, given the current economic prosperity, the declining influence of opposition parties, and the UMNO leadership.' (p. 184)

Perhaps, to gauge if the tide is changing in Malaysia is to analyse the outcome of the last general election, which was held in November 1999. Looking purely at on-line activism, would not, I believe, give an accurate picture, of whether Malaysians, at large, are ready for, or even wanting a change. The most important reason is that, information technology, and use of the Internet in particular, is still pretty much the domain of the more affluent or at least middle-class sections of the Malaysian population, due to the lack of affordability, of such technology. Although, some may argue that Internet cafes and the like may provide greater accessibility to the Internet, one must acknowledge that most of these cafes are located in Kuala Lumpur and other cities or larger townships. Hence, rural Malaysia, is still pretty much, "un-wired". Furthermore, Internet cafes are all privately owned, and hence, rely on a user-pays system, in order to make a profit. This brings into question, once more, the issue of affordability.

In the 1999 general election, BN secured 148 parliamentary seats, which essentially 'only just gave the government the two-thirds majority it desired' (New Straits Times, December 6, 1999). Although the Opposition garnered over 45% of the popular vote, it only won 45 parliamentary seats (New Straits Times, 5 Dec 1999).

According to Kaur, Ramanathan and Shaari (2000), the results of the November 1999 elections revealed that the Malaysian electorate is not easily 'swayed by the rhetoric of the opposition parties' (p. 22). However, although UMNO fared badly against the combined might of the opposition in the Malay-majority rural constituencies, its BN partners made up for this with its two-thirds majority in the Dewan Rakyat. (p.22).

Kaur, Ramanathan and Shaari concur that the 1999 Malaysian General Election result is interesting because despite its strong opposition showing in two states, the BN has been returned to power for another five-year term (p. 33). They add that while the 'new and alternate media' were more influential than in previous elections, 'BN control of the mainstream media remained a crucial factor in ensuring its continued success' (p.33).

Farish A. Noor, a Malaysian political scientist and human rights activist, perhaps best sums up the current climate in Malaysia, in a treatise that he wrote on the Saksi website.

Many political observers, social scientists and avid watchers of the Malay political scene have noted that from the beginning the whole Reformasi movement was full of sound and fury, paradoxically signifying everything and nothing at the same time. The proponents of the movement were quick to bombard the agitated masses with by-lines and slogans. The Malaysian public, in the end, did not know which was the dominant voice to follow and which was the authentic voice that could represent them all. We are left with the same question now: What is the Reformasi movement all about? Human agency, free will and the dialectics of change were all bracketed away as redundant abstract concepts while the self-styled “heroes of the people” projected themselves as martyrs and fighters for some cause which remained mythic and ephemeral. Ideology was absent while rhetoric and sophistry ruled the roost. History gave way to amateur dramatics and histrionics instead. If one were a virtual citizen whose life was lived purely on the Internet or in magazines, one might have the impression that the country is in a state of civil war and that blood was flowing freely in the streets. Unfortunately, rhetoric often fails to reflect reality and a disjuncture is bound to occur. One cannot help but see the difference between the overheated tenor of Reformasi material and the boringly static state of daily life in the streets.

In conclusion, will the Internet will be used by even more Malaysians to express themselves within the context of a public sphere? Based on evidence that I have highlighted in this section, signs are starting to show that more and more Malaysians are taking to new media like the Internet as a vehicle for such expression. However, whether or not the Internet remains as such a medium or will eventually be totally commodified by neoliberal interests is left to be seen. Furthermore, do Malaysians, as a whole, not just certain religious or ethnic groups, still have the drive to demand greater freedoms or democratic reforms, or is the once heralded catchphrase “Reformasi”, now a thing of the distant past?

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