Malaysia's Changing Media Environment and Youth Political Engagement—Student
Voices from 2010

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This dissertation titled
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Voices from 2010

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores the roles played by media toward political engagement and disengagement among students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), an affirmative action university in Malaysia, during 2010. In doing so, this study examined perceptions regarding Malaysian media and politics, and the roles played by both mainstream mass media and online media in fostering political engagement and disengagement among UiTM students. The ethnographic fieldwork for this study was conducted during 2010—a critical year in Malaysia’s political history, which preceded the repeal of the country’s controversial laws including the Internal Security Act University and the University Colleges Act (UUCA). Before its repeal in 2012, UUCA banned university students and academicians from joining political parties, which presented a key challenge in obtaining informant feedback during the fieldwork.

The findings revealed a distrust of mainstream media among many of the informants, including the politically engaged and the disengaged, during 2010. The alternative media online had helped disseminate oppositional messages and had encouraged both engagement and disengagement. Moreover, social media, including Facebook and Twitter, had led to an unprecedented form of engagement between youth and political leaders and issues, which, in turn, had led to enhanced interactions—thereby increasing student involvement in the country’s political discourse. While both
government controlled media and alternative media online had resulted in multiple political discourses, the overall environment for youth political engagement and disengagement was shaped by multiple factors, including parental influence, peer influence, role models, and establishment, along with media. Moreover, issues such as continued corruption in the country had contributed further to a distrust of mainstream media and political leaders, and had, thereby, contributed to the growing political disengagement among many UiTM students. The students’ reactions were later justified in government actions to resist a change in the country’s political leadership.

*Keywords*: Malaysia, political engagement, political disengagement, university students, online, social media
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The completion of this dissertation would have been far more challenging in absence of a comprehensive library collection on Malaysia. Here, I would like to acknowledge the help and support provided by people at the Vernon R. Alden Library, especially I wish to thank Mr. Jeff Ferrier (Curator, International Collections & Reference Librarian), Ms. Edie Luce (Staff), Ms. Lucy Conn (Staff), Mr. Jeff Shane (Reference Librarian), Dr. KengWe Koh (Shao You-Bao Center), Mr. Scott Seaman (Dean), and many others. I am thankful to Dr. Adah Ward-Randolph (Educational
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The seeds for this study were sown during December 2006 when I was conducting interviews at Universiti Malaya—one of the oldest institutions of higher education in Malaysia—established in 1958 (Tilman, 1968). A student at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences once mentioned that his academic program, Public Administration, predominantly had male students from a single social group—Bumiputera. I later found that while Bumiputera (meaning son of soil) was an official term, which first appeared in the 1970s, it included all of the ethnic Malays and aboriginal groups. The uneven gender and ethnic distribution in the Public Administration program meant that primarily male Malay students were getting trained for government jobs. This situation somewhat elucidated the continued disparities within Malaysia’s political system. Over the next several years, learning about the country’s restrictive media and political environment made me curious about student perceptions on issues such as freedom of political expression and, more importantly, engaging in politics as active citizens. Furthermore, given Malaysia’s commitment to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) development, which clearly contributed to the growth of online media, I became interested in studying the connections between electronic media, Malaysian university students, and political engagement during the changing times.

This dissertation is an outcome of my research involving fieldwork and primary and secondary sources of information tracing the development of Malaysia’s media, including both broadcast and online media, and exploring the roles played by electronic in promoting political engagement among students at Universiti Teknologi MARA.
(UiTM) during 2010. The year 2010 was critical in Malaysia’s history, for university students in particular, with regards to the country’s changing media, political, and social landscapes. In light of the findings, the conclusion of this study further discusses the later developments in Malaysia.

This chapter is divided into seven main sections. The first section offers a glimpse into Malaysia’s background, including location and governance, demography, colonial economic policy, and the circumstances leading to the New Economic Policy (NEP). The second section notes the development and key issues emerging within the country’s higher education system. The third section notes my past impressions from a Malaysian university campus. The fourth section identifies a key challenge toward political engagement among Malaysia’s university students prior to 2010. The next section notes some of the key events and aspects that made the year 2010 critical in Malaysia’s political history. The penultimate section of this chapter presents a case for studying the site chosen for this study. The final section states the purpose of this study, operationalizes the key terms, and presents a general outline and a chapter-wise summary of this dissertation.

Malaysia—a Brief Background

Location and Governance

Malaysia is located in Southeast Asia across two regions—Peninsular Malaysia and Eastern Malaysia—divided by the South China Sea. The Eastern part of Malaysia is a territory on the Borneo Island, which is an island divided among Indonesia, Brunei, and Malaysia. The Federation of Malaysia consists of 13 states as shown in Table 1 below.
Table 1

_Federation of Malaysia: States and Territories_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Former Federated Malay States</td>
<td>Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, Selangor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Non-Federated Malay States</td>
<td>Johor, Kelantan, Kedah, Perlis, Terengganu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Straits Settlements</td>
<td>Penang, Malacca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Malaysia (Borneo)</td>
<td>Sabah, Sarawak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Territories</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur, Labuan, Putrajaya</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Koy (2010)*

Malaysia is a federal constitutional monarchy. The King of Malaysia or *Yang DiPertuan Agong* is the supreme head of the state followed by a Deputy King. The King is elected for a five-year period from the rulers or *Sultans* of nine Malay states based on voting involving the nine *Sultans*. The remaining four states have Governors who, along with the nine *Sultans*, form the Conference of Rulers, although the Governors are not involved in electing the King. The election process for electing the King as well as the proceedings of the Conference of Rulers are secrets (Koy, 2010).

However, following Malaya’s independence from the British rule, the power of the Rulers was transferred to the federal government run by an elected Prime Minister and a cabinet comprised of ministers (Koy, 2010). The federal laws are enacted by the Parliament, which is formed by the *Yang DiPertuan Agong* and two houses—upper and lower. The upper house is called *Dewan Negara* (the Senate) and the Lower House is called *Dewan Rakyat* (the House of Representatives). The State Legislative Assemblies
function at the state level across the 13 states (Muhamad Fuzi Omar, 2008). The *Dewan Negara* is formed by the members who are either elected by the State Legislatures or appointed by the *Yang DiPertuan Agong*. The appointed members represent the federal territories, minorities, or distinguished public service. The *Dewan Rakyat* is formed by members elected through the electoral system and this house holds a significant legislative power (Muhamad Fuzi Omar, 2008).

Table 2 (below) notes the major political parties in Malaysia. The general elections for *Dewan Rakyat* have been held regularly since 1957 when Malaysia gained independence from British colonial rule (Mohar Mokhtar, 2008a). Despite a loss of five states during the 2008 elections and losing the popular vote in 2013 elections, the ruling coalition, *Barisan Nasional* (BN), has remained in power since 1957. Many, including Jomo (1996), have criticized the electoral process that has resulted in a continued dominance of BN (cited in Mohar Mokhtar, 2008a, p. 183). In addition, observers have argued that the Parliament’s powers have deteriorated over the years (Muhamad Fuzi Omar, 2008). The Cabinet makes important decisions while the Parliament endorses the presented bills. Given the two-thirds majority mostly held by the BN coalition since 1957, the Cabinet usually succeeds after initiating any legislation (Muhamad Fuzi Omar, 2008). Consequently, despite holding regular elections, Malaysia’s political system has been termed as pseudo-democracy, quasi-democracy, and semi-democracy (Mohar Mokhtar, 2008a).
Table 2

Political Parties in Malaysia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coalition</th>
<th>Parties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Barisan Nasional</em> (National Front)</td>
<td>United Malay National Organization (UMNO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Gerakan Rakyat</em> Malaysia (Malaysian People’s Movement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu</em> (PBB—United <em>Bumiputera</em> Heritage Party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Parti Bersatu Sabah</em> (PBS—Sabah United Party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pakatan Rakyat</em> (People’s Pact)</td>
<td><em>Parti Keadilan Rakyat</em> (PKR—People’s Justice Party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democratic Action Party (DAP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Parti Islam Se-Malaysia</em> (PAS—Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Demography

Malaysia is an ethnically diverse country, which is reflected in its population figures. The official Malaysian census divides its citizens primarily into two groups, namely *Bumiputera*, literally meaning “son of soil,” and non-*Bumiputera*. While *Bumiputera* includes Malays and other indigenous groups primarily from Eastern Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, non-*Bumiputera* includes Malaysians of Chinese, Indian, and other foreign origins. The official sub-categories within the *Bumiputera* group includes *Melayu* (Malays) and *Bumiputera Lain* (other) (Department of Statistics, 2012).
*Bumiputera Lain* includes indigenous groups such as the *Orang Asli*. The term *Orang Asli* translates to “original peoples” or “first peoples” (Nicholas, 1997). The group includes aboriginal people who are known to be the first people to inhabit the Peninsula (Jumper, 1997). In addition, Andaya and Andaya (2001) note that both Malays and *Orang Asli* share “the same genetic pool” (p.10). Traditionally, the *Orang Asli* lived in tribal groups, which often had cultural and power differences, but in the wake of the Malaysian government policy, they started adopting a collective identity (Jumper, 1997). Subsequently, the term *Orang Asli* became less visible in government reports. In one instance, the categories included in a monthly statistical bulletin from 2008 were *Bumiputera*, including Malays and non-Malays, and non-*Bumiputera*, including Chinese, Indians, and others, but the report did not mention *Orang Asli*. Hence, while the indigenous groups, such as *Orang Asli*, have received official recognition, they tend to be assimilated into a single category *Bumiputera* along with Malays, which makes the *Bumiputera* classification somewhat questionable, especially with regards to *Orang Asli*.

According to Malaysia’s 2010 population census, the country had 28.3 million inhabitants, including 91.8 percent citizens and 8.2 percent foreigners—pointing toward a continued inward migration. The citizen population of approximately 25.98 million included 67.4 percent *Bumiputera*, 24.6 percent Chinese, 7.3 percent Indians, and 0.7 percent others. In terms of religion, Islam was followed by a majority (61.3 percent) of the country’s population. Other religions included Buddhism (19.8 percent), Christianity (9.2 percent), and Hinduism (6.3 percent) (Department of Statistics, 2014). The year 2010 census also showed an increase in the proportion of the population in working age (15—
64 years) and the older population (65 years and above) compared to the year 2000 census—indicating a gradual trend of aging population.

The distribution of different ethnic groups has been uneven across Peninsular and Eastern Malaysia since Malays formed over 63 percent of Peninsular Malaysia’s citizen population, whereas 30.3 percent of citizens in Sarawak and 24.5 percent of citizens in Sabah were Ibans and Kadazan/Dushur respectively as per the 2010 census (Department of Statistics, 2014, paras 6-7). Moreover, within the Bumiputera category, there were 14.3 million Malays and 3.35 million other Bumiputera (Department of Statistics, 2012, p. 24). Therefore, the country’s largest ethnic group formed a little over one-half of Malaysia’s total population in 2010.

Furthermore, this largest ethnic group is comprised of people from a variety of backgrounds. For instance, Andaya and Andaya (2001) note that the term Malay could be misleading since according to the official definition, anyone who professes Islam, follows Malay customs, and speaks Malay language (Bahasa Melayu) habitually is a Malay. This fluidity in defining Malay has allowed individuals from other groups and countries, such as Indonesia and Southern Thailand. For instance, the country’s 1991 census classified Indonesians, who had become Malaysian citizens, as Malays, while it classified non-citizen Indonesians as Other (Andaya & Andaya, 2001).

While the Malays are spread across all sectors of the Malaysian economy, the level of education and economic prosperity across the ethnic groups varies considerably (Andaya and Andaya, 2001). Moreover, geography, not just in terms of urban and rural but also in terms of East and West Malaysia, plays an important role. For instance,
Malays are outnumbered by indigenous groups and foreign populations in both Sabah (Kedazan, Chinese, etc.) and Sarawak (Iban, Filipino-Indonesians, etc.) states of Eastern Malaysia.

Colonial Economic Policy and its Impact

Much of Malaysia’s cultural diversity is an outcome of the colonial policy of exploiting bonded labor and foreign traders in Malaya. While Malaya historically had cultural and trade exchanges with both China and India for many centuries prior to the arrival of the Europeans, the Chinese still constitute the highest proportion of the country’s non-Bumiputera population in current times (as noted in the previous section). Heng (1988) noted three main phases of Chinese immigration to Malaya. The first phase started in the early fifteenth century and lasted until the formation of the Straits Settlements under the British rule in the early nineteenth century. The Chinese who arrived during this phase became known as Baba or Straits Chinese (while the term Baba was used for males, female members of the community were called Nonyas or Nyonyas). The second wave of Chinese immigration started in 1820 and lasted until the end of the nineteenth century. The third phase was from 1900s to the beginning of World War II.

During the early phase of colonization, the British used Chinese traders because of their local knowledge and links as well as their control of tin mines in Malaya. Growing urbanization in Europe had increased the need for tin and the British also welcomed cheap labor from China to work in the tin mines in the region (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). Subsequently, the advent of the automobile industry had resulted in an increased demand for rubber and the British administration found that Malaya’s climate
was ideal for growing rubber. Therefore, the administration decided to bring contract labor from South India, who had experience of working on plantations in Southern India, to rubber plantations in Malaya. Thereafter, as the need for administrative staff in Malaya increased, the administration brought more educated people from India to fill in those positions (Sandhu, 1993).

As a result of colonial policy of allowing Chinese and Indian immigrants to move to Malaya, the local population was outnumbered by the immigrant populations as per the census counts from 1931, 1947, and 1957 (Fell, 1960). Following the 1921 population census, when Malaysians (including Malays and aboriginal groups) formed about 54 percent of the total population, the immigrant groups continued to constitute over 50 percent of the country’s population for the next three census counts (Fell, 1960, p. 3). For instance, according to the 1931 census figures for the Federation of Malaya, the total population was 3.78 million, which included 1.86 million Malaysians (49.2 percent), 1.28 million Chinese (34 percent), 571 thousand Indians (15 percent), and 68 thousand Others (1.8 percent) (Fell, 1960, p. 3).

The British understood the importance of keeping the society divided and ethnic groups segregated so that those groups did not mobilize against the colonial power. While the British took advantage of Chinese networking skills and kept them involved in trade and tin mining, they forged alliances with local sultans (Malay kings) and provided them security in lieu of control of the trade and for establishing an army base. The British also brought contract labor from India to work at the rubber plantations and a small number of educated people to work at administrative support positions in British Malaya. Hence, at
the time of independence, the indigenous Malays had the control of politics, Chinese
dominated the economy, and Indians were somewhat more active in academic, medical,
legal, and other professions. Since a majority of the expatriates from China and India had
been in Malaya for more than a generation, it was not possible for them to return (Andaya
and Andaya, 2001; Sandhu, 1993).

As a result of the British occupation, Malaysia had become what Lijphart (1977)
termed—a plural society, wherein an alliance regime was created through an original
agreement between different ethnic groups. According to Lipjhart, Malays earned
political and governmental control, whereas the Chinese continued to control the
economy as per the agreement, although some non-Malays, especially Tamils from South
of India and Ceylon, held superior positions in administrative jobs for some time after the
agreement due to their educational competence at the time of independence
(Arasaratnam, 1972; Sandhu, 1993). Furthermore, the Malays did not have a majority
status in Eastern Malaysia (Lijphart, 1977). And so, Malaysia faced a variety of social,
economic, as well as political issues pertaining to, but definitely not restricted to, ethnic
divisions within society. Representing the interests of different ethnic groups, mainly
Malays, Chinese, and Indians, the ruling alliance Barisan Nasional—comprised of
UMNO (United Malay National Organization), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association),
MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress), and smaller political parties—formed the government
after the country’s independence (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). Nonetheless, the decades
following independence noted substantial changes in the Malaysian society and due to the
dominance of Chinese in the economic sector and Malays in the country’s political system.

May 13, 1969

In the decade after independence, the ethnic tensions continued to grow in the country and eventually resulted in post-election racial riots on May 13, 1969. The rioting took place mainly in Kuala Lumpur and surrounding parts of Selangor (Goh, 1971). While there have been debates about the exact cause of the rioting, the riots followed an election that were won by the opposition alliance and exposed country’s vulnerability to political and ethnic clashes. Following the riots and understanding the delicate situation, a mutual agreement was reached among the representatives of Malay, Chinese, and Indian interests in Barisan Nasional. Based upon their negotiations and to maintain the ethnic peace, a New Economic Policy (NEP) was devised and introduced in 1971 (Andaya and Andaya, 2001). Thereafter, Barisan Nasional returned to power and has been ruling the country for almost past four decades (Jumper, 1997; Kheng, 2003; Andaya & Andaya, 2001).

The New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1971

The NEP provided special privileges to the Bumiputera, which included Malays and other indigenous groups, in doing business, land ownership, education, and government jobs. This was done in order to reduce the economic difference between various ethnic groups. It is noteworthy that the term Bumiputera did not come into official use until the introduction of NEP, which favored and gave special privileges to the Bumiputera, such as preference in business licensing, land ownership, education, and
government jobs, in order to reduce socio-economic disparities between the Malays and the Chinese (more affluent of the two) (Kheng, 2003). Nonetheless, NEP as well as the development of the Malaysian constitution itself has been viewed as a “social contract” to maintain social stability in the country by many (see, for example, Lijphart, 1977; Puthucheary, 2008).

While debate on this social contract has emerged recently, there has been much disagreement about its meaning among scholars. Moreover, the general sense of this contract keeps changing from time to time. For instance, Puthucheary (2008) noted that Article 153 was to help reduce the economic disadvantage faced by the Malays during the 1960s, but since the 1980s, the idea of *Ketuanan Melayu* (or Malay dominance) has become more prominent. Puthucheary further suggested that the relationship between the Malays and non-Malays has turned from a simple distinction to an unequal relationship. The term *pendatang* (immigrants), according to Puthucheary, implies a unique socio-psychological orientation and such dichotomy leads to a normative proposition that Malays should have the primary access to land and other resources. Puthucheary (2008) went on to argue that together with “Islamic supremacy,” “Malay ethno-nationalism” in the recent years has deteriorated the multicultural character of the country, which many non-Malays considered an inherent trait of Malaysia’s “constitutional bargain” (p. 17).

*Outcomes of the NEP*

One of the many outcomes of the NEP and Malay dominance in *Barisan Nasional* was that they enabled the local politicians called *wakil rakyat* (meaning people’s representative) to decide the allocation of benefits to local areas as well as to determine
the direction of development at the district level. Hence, the internal competition within
the party increased for the *wakil rakyat* position, as it promised more power and wealth.
The arrangement also reduced the real concern towards poor farmers. Shamsul (1986)
suggested that an elite-driven organization of UMNO had led to a less democratic system
at local levels. As a result, the peasants and proletarian classes could not exercise much
control over the decision-making process. In one example, in 1974, a newly elected *wakil
rakyat* blocked development support to *Kampung Chempaka* (a village in the state of
Selangor) due to *Chempaka’s* support to the opposition during the elections. According to
Shamsul (1986), besides transforming the social base of the local politics from peasants
to elites, the pro-*Bumiputera* policy had also led to increased class tensions within the
local communities.

Moreover, the NEP strongly favored the Malay elite in urban areas in gaining
control of private sector enterprises, including media companies, during the privatization
of market in Malaysia in the 1980-90s. Thereafter, as pointed by Bunnel (2004), the
development of private sector led to urban spaces meant for growing middle classes in
cities. Bunnel, however, also suggested that “as such, the greatest costs of transformation
were borne by already socio-spatially marginalized individuals and groups” and
“plantation workers and indigenous *Orang Asli* groups—were financially excluded from
privatized urban developments” (p. 117). While describing the political evolution of the
*Orang Asli*, Jumper (1997) found that their relationship with the Malays had migrated
from being symbiotic to being one involving political struggle between the two (with
Malays having a strong control of the political system). Jumper argued that while many
scholars had considered the political power of *Orang Asli* as constantly weak, the reality
had been something different, as they appeared to gain power and influence through
united efforts. For instance, their lobbying reduced logging and helped attain limited
relaxation on the issues of land rights (Jumper, 1997).

**Malaysian Higher Education**

*The Beginning*

The higher education system in Malaysia has its roots in the colonial times. However, following the establishment of the Raffles Institution in 1823 in Singapore, the
British provided only a “token financial support for educational activities” (Tilman, 1968,
p. 211). Thereafter, the number of institutes of higher education in the region remained
low throughout the colonial period. Nevertheless, Tilman (1968) noted that the English
education system implemented by the British administration helped create urban elites
with widely differing political viewpoints, but they were loyal to the British and English
culture. These elite included both (mostly) Malays and (some) Chinese who were bonded
linguistically and culturally.

However, the practice of training and recruiting subordinate administrative staff
from a single ethnic group—Malays—became evident with the development of Malaya’s
higher education system. Tilman (1968), who discussed the influence of education on the
rise of political elites and loyalty in the post-independence Malaya, marked the
establishment of Malay College in Kuala Kangsar in the state of Perak in 1910 as a
significant event in terms of educational development. Subsequently,

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1 The region included Malaya, the Straits Settlements, and other areas (as listed in Table 1).
When the Malay Administrative Service was created in 1910 all candidates were recruited from the students of Malay College, a practice that continued until 1921. Although the Malay College monopoly of the MAS was formally broken in 1921 when it began to share its role with other schools, it continued to be tied into MAS recruitment and training schemes until 1941. (Tilman, 1968, p. 212)

A number of independent Malaya’s political leaders, including Tun Abdul Razak, who later became Malaysia’s second Prime Minister, were graduates of Malay College.

In terms of vernacular education, the British administration mostly supported Malay, English, and Tamil schools. For instance, there were 402 Malay, 11 English, 10 Tamil, and one Chinese among the government-run schools in Federated Malay States in 1921 (Tilman, 1968, p. 216). Nevertheless, Chinese had their own schools, although these schools were China-centered, which, according to Tilman, developed a worldview of superior Chinese culture and Chinese nationalism that eventually conflicted with the local realities. In addition, the English-medium higher education system had sidelined a majority of Chinese while creating Malay elites—many of whom were bilingual and were more comfortable with the urban English culture than the culture in their own villages (Tilman, 1968). Overall, Tilman suggested that the vernacular education system deployed by the administration was likely to lead to a second-class citizenry, which, for instance, included the estate-sponsored education for Indians at rubber plantations and the education for rural Malays in Malay schools. As a result, when Malay-educated Malays encountered English-educated urban Malay elites, they found themselves underprepared to compete with the elites for political power and status (Tilman, 1968). Therefore, the
colonial education system had not only helped create urban Malay elite but also had helped maintain social differences—both across and within the ethnic groups.

*Post-Independence Developments*

While the Malay-education system removed some of the intra-communal barriers post-independence, it reinforced the inter-communal differences. For instance, the government required all public secondary schools to use either Malay or English as the language of instruction while Chinese or Tamil could be taught as subjects (Rudner, 1977). In 1967, the government declared Malay the national language and required all schools to teach Malay (Tilman, 1968). Following the implementation of NEP, Malaysia’s educational policies focused upon making the universities a part of the national development program (Sato, 2007; Rudner, 1977). This changed in the mid-1990s with the government’s decision to corporatize public universities. While the decision was made to generate sufficient revenues for the operations of universities, it also threatened the government’s strong control on the functioning of universities. Nevertheless, the government’s decision to corporatize universities did not lead to autonomy and academic freedom, but led to a new structure and institutional changes (Sato, 2007).

*Key Issues*

The boards governing public universities became more powerful within the higher education system since they essentially worked under the government’s directive. The education minister appointed members on these boards while denying university communities to elect their representatives to serve on the board (Soaib Asimiran &
Sufean Hussin, 2012). Therefore, despite a corporatization and restructuring spree during the 1990s, the outcome primarily indicated a consolidation of the higher education system to maintain government’s hegemony. According to Sato (2007), lack of discussions among academicians, administrators, and the government had prevented notable reform in Malaysia’s higher education system. The government expected the universities to generate revenue and provide better service, but kept their autonomy limited. Subsequently, the number of private institutions of higher education increased during the 1990s (Soaib Asimiran & Sufean Hussin, 2012).

Sato (2007) found that the government in Malaysia was overwhelmingly more powerful than individual public universities—most of which had lacked a strong institutional identity and culture. Similarly, Husin Ali (2009) had cited a need to cherish university autonomy and to allow universities independence to develop their courses, modules, and other academic concerns. While a centralized education system put bureaucratic pressures on teachers, it also restricted their flexibility to develop assessments (Chan, 2014). Chan (2014) asserted that despite Malaysia’s growing interest in decentralizing education, which was primarily influenced by international best practices, decentralization was not being implemented accordingly. And although decentralization was synonymous to autonomy, both the teachers and the administration had to report students’ and teachers’ assessments to the ministry of education.

Breaking free our education from the shackles of an over-centralised bureaucracy that is deemed too inept to adapt to global and local needs requires more than substituting its elements with savvy ICT tools and quantitative but lifeless
markers that seek more to judge than to assess learning outcomes. (Chan, 2014, p. 14)

Loh (2014) also had argued that political parties should support decentralization of the education system.²

In addition to the administrative control on the functioning of universities, public dissatisfaction with higher education system had reportedly continued due to ethnic discrimination in public universities. In one instance, Guan (2009) suggested, “perhaps the single most important root cause that needs to be dealt with immediately is the extensive ethnic discrimination practices in the public education sector” (p. 228). These inconsistencies in the education system have perhaps contributed to differing perceptions among the students from different ethnic group. In a survey involving 501 students across four institutions of higher education, including HELP Institute, National University of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman College, and University of Malaya, Heng (2004, p. 373) found that about 70 percent of the students had a stronger sense of a shared national identity compared to their own ethnic identity. However, the ideas of national identity and nationhood differed across Malays and non-Malays since a majority of Malay students saw Islam and Malay language whereas a majority of Chinese students saw cultural and religious diversity as the top markers of Malaysian identity.

² However, in response to UMNO Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin’s call to allow UMNO to extend their influence to youth (ages 17—18) in schools, Loh (2014) cautioned that the political parties needed to stay away from schools.
Impressions from a University Campus

During December 2006, I was conducting interviews with faculty and students at Universiti Malaya regarding the use of Information Technology (IT) among the students in Arts and Social Sciences. There were several findings from those interviews that contributed further to my curiosity about IT and culture in Malaysia. For instance, one of the participants was an Iban student (male, aged 21) from Eastern Malaysia, who was not very familiar with computers and IT prior to leaving his hometown. Nonetheless, coming to Kuala Lumpur had opened a window of opportunity for him and within a year, he became well conversant with basic computer operations, such as emailing and word processing. On another occasion, a Malay student (male, aged 20 years), enrolled in the Public Administration program, reported that all the fellow students in his class were Malay males and noted that this was a common trend in his department. It was apparent that many students would go on making careers in public service as well as in politics in some cases, which was essentially a continuation of what the colonial government had envisaged.

The findings of my study conducted in 2006 revealed that not only did girl students use IT more (in terms of the total time spent) than boys but, according to their teachers, were also more sincere toward their studies than boys. However, there were arguably weaker prospects for female students as well as students from other ethnic groups to study public administration when compared with Malay (male) students. Another Malay student (male, aged 22) expressed that his facility in using computers was inferior to his Chinese classmates. When I asked for the reason, he responded—“because
they are more hard-working.” This not only reflected a stereotype but also reflected an outcome of the pro-Bumiputera and patriarchal bias in the Malaysian social system in the form of a more competitive environment for girls and students from other ethnic groups. Given the technological skills and determination among these neglected groups, a considerable change in social and perhaps even political environments appeared inevitable at the time.

Malaysian University Students and Political Engagement

As widely acknowledged, Southeast Asia comprises nation states that are mostly democracies in transition with varying degrees of authoritarianism (George, 2006, 2007). While the political systems in place have been less developed compared to the more established democracies of the West, they offered at least some scope for democratic growth compared to authoritarian states. Nonetheless, the strong state control of media across Southeast Asia has challenged the basic right to information—deemed essential to functioning of a democracy, let alone engagement—even in the 21st century (C.E.). Yet despite limited freedom of speech, numerous instances of political activism, movement, and coup d'état were witnessed across the region in the last century. One of the most mobile and potent forces in such actions had been the youth—students in particular. For example, the student and labor unions in Myanmar were formed and became politically active as early as the British colonial times, and students were a strong force in the 1962 coup, 1988 uprising, and thereafter (Hlaing, 2007; Fink, 2001; Beer, 1999). In Thailand, both students as well as teachers played a key role in the October 1973 coup, 1992’s May uprising, and other movements thereafter that led to change in power (Girling, 1981;
Similarly, students were consistently active during the 1970s and 80s toward forming a consensus that led to the Philippines’ *People Power* movement, which overthrew the military regime of Marcos in 1986 (Zunes, 1999; Schock, 2005). Within the Malay world, student involvement in political action was clear in case of Indonesia throughout the last century (Douglas, 1970; Aspinall, 1993; 2005).

The Malaysian education system, on the other hand, had remained under constant control and supervision (firstly the British colonial rule and subsequently the government after independence). During the colonial era, especially by the 1950s, students at *Universiti Malaya* were not only actively engaged in political clubs, their actions moved beyond campus (Weiss, 2011). Yet, the student movements in Malaysia largely remained a part of resistance against the colonial power and gradually declined in influencing post-independence politics. During the decades following independence, pre-college public education in Malaysia focused on nation-building, whereas university education favored Malay interests, thereby creating “ethnic citizens” encouraged to be uncritical of the nation and political leadership (Brown, 2007). According to Weiss (2009a), Malaysia, especially after the 1960s and the ’70s, had consistently failed to witness much student activism or even student engagement with politics. This was primarily due to the fact that the state viewed the idea of “political participation” purely as “party politics” and was largely successful in what Weiss (2009a) termed “intellectual containment” among the country’s budding intellectuals—students. A key factor in shaping this political containment had been the University and University Colleges Act 1971 (UUCA), which
prevented all university-level students, staff, and faculty from engaging in political activities or joining any political societies, groups, or parties—unless otherwise appointed by a government minister (Educational Institutions (Discipline) Act 1976, 2006).

Moreover:

Even the language used to refer to students had changed: for official purposes, they were generally no longer called mahasiswa, “undergraduates,” but pelajar, just “students,” as in secondary school. When they did take a public stand, students were roundly castigated for ingratitude to the government and society that granted them opportunities and subsidized their studies—as kacang lupakan kulit, peas that forget their pod—and derided as clearly too childlike for politics (Weiss, 2009a, p. 511).

Therefore, Malaysian university students had not only been disengaged, such disengagement was viewed as natural and desirable by the political system (Farish, 2002). Although Weiss (2009a) acknowledged a certain level of engagement among some cadres of students, this engagement was considerably less effective in making the student voices a collective force and influencing a substantial change in the political realm. And while student involvement in the Indonesian Reformasi (reform) movement had led to the ousting of Suharto, Malaysia’s non-violent Reformasi was not as strong in mobilizing Malaysians and students, in particular, were suppressed easily (Todzia, 2008; Weiss, 2009a, 2011); although the Malaysian Reformasi took various symbolic forms online, such as stories pertaining to May 13, 1969 violence and Hikayat Hang Tuah (tale of legendary Malay warrior Hang Tuah) (Todzia, 2008).
Furthermore, there were two crucial aspects that could potentially change the level of political engagement among Malaysian university students: First, the presence of the Internet as the means of access to alternative political opinion and information, which could inform the students in unconventional ways. Second, the presence of the Internet as the means to communicate and discuss political issues and mobilize, which could engage the students to potentially participate in political movements. The provision of open (censorship-free) Internet allowed the first scenario, but in light of strict laws threatening political expression or engagement, the latter idea of political engagement and mobilization through the Internet would be more difficult for the students. Although, the political mobilization across the general population was increasing during the first decade of the 21st century, as demonstrated by the organization of multiple Bersih (Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections) rallies over the years since 2007 (Bersih, 2012). An increasing student support in the Bersih movement had been evident, but constantly faced threat (see Sen, 2012 & Azim Idris, 2012—for example).

The Year 2010 in Malaysia’s Political History

This section explains the importance of the year 2010 in Malaysia’s political history. First, there was a continued dissatisfaction with the functioning of the political system among the people. This dissatisfaction was reflected in the unusual election outcome in 2008, wherein the ruling alliance lost five states to the opposition. It was about a decade ago, in 1998, that a Reformasi (meaning reform) movement began, which ended after the ruling alliance won the 1999 general elections (Weiss, 2006). The movement was an aftermath of 1997’s economic crisis, the fall of Anwar Ibrahim,
increasing awareness of government’s authoritarian practices among the people, and general dissatisfaction with the administration. The 2008 election upset for the ruling alliance meant that although the Reformasi had ended, the dissatisfaction had continued. By 2009, despite a continuation of the ruling alliance in power, the country had witnessed three different leaders since 1999. The year 2010 was not only a midpoint between the country’s 12th and 13th general elections but it also marked the end of the first year of Prime Minister Najib Razak’s leadership, which was important in setting the tone for the country’s 13th general elections (that were eventually held in early 2013). Second, between 2010 and 2011, the number of Internet users in the country increased from 15.9 million to 17.4 million, which was the highest during the 2007-2012 period (see Table 11, Chapter 3). And so, the year 2010 presented a unique opportunity to explore people’s viewpoints about the country’s political system in light of its changing media landscape—driven by an increasing number of Internet users.

Third, a key incident took place during 2010—primarily due the presence of Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) that had essentially prevented students and academicians from joining politics. In describing the Act, Soaib Asimiran and Sufean Hussin (2012) noted:

The Universities and University Colleges Act (1971) has been in existence for 35 years and it has been criticized by many that the Act impedes students’ development, hampers academic autonomy and limits university core business of discovering and disseminating knowledge. (p. 171)
Although a 2009 amendment to UUCA allowed a university’s Vice Chancellor to grant a student the permission to join a political party, the implementation of this change was non-existent (Gooch, 2010). While students and academicians had been held under UUCA in the past to contain oppositional political movements since the 1970s, an incident that took place in 2010 stirred the widespread sentiment against the Act in a major way. On April 22, 2010 four political science students studying at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) were on their way to observe a by-election in Hulu Selangor for academic research. At around 11 a.m., their vehicles were stopped by the police in Ampang Pecah, Kuala Kubu Baru, “allegedly for showing support, sympathy or opposition towards political parties in Malaysia” (Solidariti Mahasiswa Malaysia, 2010, Para 1). The police searched the van and found political campaign fliers and video CDs, which did not belong to the students, but which UKM assumed was in support of political parties and conducted disciplinary proceedings against these students. The whole incident led to a series of debates—both on- and off-line—that challenged the legitimacy of UUCA’s Section 15(5)(a), which banned students from political participation, and eventually led to a Court ruling the Section as “unconstitutional” (“UKM, government get,” 2012, Para 1). By April 2012, UUCA was amended to allow student participation in politics. Although the changes allowed student participation in peaceful rallies and political activities, they still barred the students who held positions in political parties from contesting in university elections to join student government. Furthermore, the Act continued to ban the influence of political parties on university campuses and prevent students from conducting political campaigns on campus (Vinod, 2012). Nevertheless,
the whole event, and the major policy-level changes it led to, made the year 2010 highly unusual with regards to the history of student political rights in the country.

Lastly, the year 2010’s beginning was marked by arson and vandal attacks on churches and other religious buildings, which presented a changing social situation since incidents of violence had been somewhat rare in the country since May 13, 1969. In 2009, the Malaysian government warned The Herald, a Catholic newspaper, against using the word Allah (meaning God in Arabic and Malay) in its Malay (language) edition, otherwise its publishing permit will be revoked. This decision was in line with government’s ban on the use of the term Allah in the Malay version of the Bible and confiscation of 15,000 copies of the Bible imported from Indonesia during the same year (Pigott, 2009). The ban was a result of continued appeals by some Muslim leaders who claimed that the use of the term in the Bible and in children’s books was aimed at attracting more converts. According to the government, upsetting the country’s Muslims would be too risky. Following the government’s warning to The Herald, the country’s Roman Catholic Church went to court (Pigott, 2009). The court ruled in favor of the Church in December 2009 (“Malaysia court rules,” 2013). After the ruling, there were attacks on many churches across the country and even a Sikh temple in Kuala Lumpur (Associated Press, 2010). According to one estimate, 11 churches, a Sikh temple, and two Muslim prayer rooms and three mosques were attacked (“Malaysia men guilty,” 2010). Overall, the above instances suggest that year 2010 was highly critical given Malaysia’s changing political, social, educational, and technological landscapes.
Why Study UiTM?

In 1956, UiTM started as Dewan Rahetan RIDA. Between 1965 and 1967, the institute was called Maktab MARA, which then became Institut Teknologi MARA in 1967—until it became Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) in 1999 through Act 173 (Historical Development, 2016). As of February 2016, the university had 13 state campuses and 21 satellite campuses (University Profile, 2016). The university was established with a vision to aid Bumiputeras’ professional development and “produce globally competitive graduates of sound ethical standing” (University Motto, Vision, Mission, Philosophy & Objectives, 2016, Para 2). The mission of UiTM is to “enhance the knowledge and expertise of Bumiputeras in all fields of study” and its main objective is to “provide maximum opportunities for bumiputeras to pursue professionally-recognised programmes of study in science, technology, industry, business, arts and humanities” (University Motto, Vision, Mission, Philosophy & Objectives, 2016, Para 3-4). Therefore, UiTM was clearly an affirmative action university—in line with the long-standing government policy of promoting Bumiputra interests in the economy.

In August 2008, Selangor’s Menteri Besar (meaning First Minister—a position held by an elected candidate), Tan Sri Abdul Khalid Ibrahim, suggested that UiTM should reserve ten percent of its admissions for students of non-Bumiputra and foreign origins. Thereafter, over 5,000 UiTM students held a demonstration outside the Selangor State Secretariat to oppose the Minister’s call (Singh, 2008). According to Malaysia’s noted lawyer and opposition politician, Karpal Singh, this gathering was unlawful since it did not have a police permit (as per the country’s Police Act, public assemblies require a
police permit). However, no police action was taken to disperse the demonstration (Singh, 2008). The whole situation led to a series of reactions on both mainstream and alternative media, especially online. Among those who openly welcomed Khalid’s suggestion, a blogger pointed out that continuing a mono-ethnic admission policy could not help the university in attaining the “world class” status (Ming, 2008, Para 2). Ming (2008) attributed the opposition to the suggestion to UiTM’s leadership, which was aligned with UMNO.

Another blogger, Haris Ibrahim, a UiTM student, expressed that the actions of UiTM’s student council, backed by the university’s Vice Chancellor (top official), were not representative of what the university’s student body believed in. Haris identified himself as the voice of UiTM’s minority and openly supported Khalid’s suggestion. Haris argued that while UUCA was often blamed for a lack of freedom of speech, it was indeed the mindset that was being shaped by political parties such as UMNO. According to Haris, the students who did not support the student council’s actions were labeled as “traitors” (Haris Ibrahim, 2008, Para 3). Citing one of the examples, Haris noted:

One particular UiTM student was asked to wear black coloured clothing by a senior when he refused to as the colour black on that day meant supporting the protest and he did not support it. The senior could only respond in ways such as asking him whether he was a jew or a homosexual. And this brilliant friend of mine then just answered, ‘No, I’m a muslim and remember when the Prophet Muhammad SAW ruled Medinah? He had all kinds of races that were hostile towards each other to live peacefully under the open sky. Why would you be
afraid of opening this institution to others if you claim to take the prophet as your example?’ And the senior who was lost for words just left and slammed the door on him. Although stories like these do not happen everyday in UiTM as many students who share similar views to my friend here are usually fearful of the consequences of speaking openly. (Haris Ibrahim, 2008, Para 4)

Haris further disclosed, “any sign of disobedience towards policies or so-called UiTM values and ideals are usually not tolerated” (Haris Ibrahim, 2008, Para 7).

Following the 2010 incident involving UKM students and the development of a strong public opinion against UUCA, which led to a proposal to amend the Act, UiTM’s Vice Chancellor Datuk Professor Sahol Hamid Abu Bakar expressed that the university was not in favor of the amendment (“Political freedom would,” 2011). In his opinion, political participation would divide the students, who already had the opportunity to join associations and campus elections, which were sufficient. And so, UiTM, as an institution, offered a challenging, albeit unique, venue for the exploration of the process of political engagement.

About this Study

Purpose of this Study

Based on a review of available literature, this study sought answers to the following questions: First, what kind of media access did the students at an affirmative action university in Peninsular Malaysia had during 2010? Second, given the country’s changing media environment, how did the students who identified as either politically engaged or disengaged perceive the relationship between Malaysian media and politics?
during 2010? (based on Wilson et al., 2003; Carvalho, 2010; Dahlgren, 2009; Coleman, 2006; Weaver, 1996; Farish Noor, 2002; Weiss, 2009b). Third, how were parental and peer influences and other non-media factors related to political engagement and disengagement among these students during 2010? (based on Ekström, 2016). Fourth, what were the roles played by the alternative and mainstream mass media in fostering a sense of political engagement or disengagement among these students during 2010? (based on Coleman, 2006; O'Neill, 2010). And finally, how did the aspects of media credibility and distrust influence these students’ decisions to engage or disengage with politics in future? (based on Norris, 1999)

**Key Terms**

The term mainstream *media* is used for government owned as well as government controlled mass media, including broadcast, print, online, and other forms. In some places, Chapter 4 for instance, the term *other mass media* is used for mass media excluding the online media. The term *alternative media* is used for the media outlets that are not controlled by the government (or at least are less controlled) and carry alternative opinion, oppositional viewpoints, and events not covered by the mainstream media. The term *political engagement* in this study refers to a pre-cursor to actions of political participation such as voting during elections, attending political party meetings and rallies, participating in protests, and other activities that qualify as political participation.³

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³ I refrained from using the term *youth* since, as also argued by Bucholtz (2002), there are multiple issues in defining this term in a general way, which is uniformly acceptable to different cultures around the world.
Dissertation Outline

This introductory chapter presents the main theme of this study and offers a background on Malaysia and the relevance of the year 2010 and the study site. Before delving into the relevant literature for this study, it is important to note the development of Malaysian media and to understand their functioning given the country’s political environment. Therefore, the next two chapters discuss the historical development of Malaysia’s mainstream mass media. The fourth chapter reviews relevant literature pertaining to media and youth political engagement before and after 2010 and establishes the need to study media and student political engagement in Malaysia. The fifth chapter records the methods used in conducting this study. The sixth and the seventh chapters present the findings of this study while capturing the responses of politically disengaged and politically engaged informants of this study. The last chapter discusses the findings in light of the research questions, offers further discussion based on the events that took place post-2010, and provides concluding remarks on the potential of new media in fostering political engagement during the times of change.

Chapter-Wise Summary

Chapter 2 notes the emergence and development of Malaysia’s mainstream mass media. Following a slow development of vernacular media during the British colonial period, Malaysian mass media experienced a continued growth during the twentieth century—most of this growth took place within the limits placed by the government. During and after the WWII, the vernacular press played an important role in strengthening nationalism, especially among Malays. However, following the end of
British occupation of Malays, the *Barisan Nasional* coalition government continued the policy of strict media control and used mass media as their mouthpiece for promoting government schemes and for maintaining a positive image in the public-eye. The government’s control on media content remained unchallenged until the entry of video cassette recorders (VCR) in the Malaysian market in the 1980s, which offered foreign and uncensored content to the Malaysian audience. To counter the threat of VCRs, the government allowed the country’s first private television channel, TV Tiga, to start operations in the early-1980s. Although the growth of private broadcasting challenged the strict control on media content, the government introduced newer laws and regulations while amending the past ones to keep the private media in check. Moreover, the companies that owned private media over the years were linked to the ruling alliance.

Chapter 3 continues to discuss the developments and changes in Malaysian media since the 1990s. During the 1990s, the government strongly supported the development of local content. This policy was first challenged by private broadcasting in the 1980s and later by the introduction of satellite and by the launch of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC)—a multi-million dollar Information Technology project—during the late 1990s. In order to attract foreign capital, the then administration signed a pledge to keep the Internet in Malaysia free from censorship. This led to the birth of alternative media in the country in the late 1990s, which gradually made it far more difficult for the government to control the information and content from reaching the masses.

The second half of Chapter 3 notes the continued growth of private media and a major shift in audience from government to private media. The ownership of private mass
media had remained in the hands of those having connections with the government. Furthermore, consolidation of multiple media outlets during the mid-2000s gave rise to Media Prima—Malaysia’s most powerful media company. While the new online media had been challenging the government’s control of information and content, the government remained in control of mass media and press freedom. However, the growth of online media also led to a major shift in audience preferences across radio, television, films, and new online media. Lastly, Chapter 3 notes an increasing dependence of the Malaysian economy on the communications sector, including the new online media and mobile communications that are hard to monitor, amidst the government’s continued urge to maintain its influence and control on communications.

Chapter 4 reviews literature relevant to media and youth political engagement, before and after the first decade of the 21st century (C.E.) to identify some of the gaps in scholarship and presents a framework for analysis. It becomes noteworthy that a vast majority of studies on media and youth political engagement—both before and after 2010—had been conducted in the West. And so, there had been a need to explore non-Western settings. In particular, there had been a need for qualitative inquiries with a more nuanced depiction of the roles played by changing media environment toward political engagement or disengagement in specific contexts. While researchers had, in one way or another, studied media and youth political engagement, both within the region and within Malaysia, there remained sufficient scope for conducting related research in a university setting. The theoretical framework touches upon the concepts of agency, power, and structure with regards to the university as a social institution and as a site for youth
political engagement. The framework also acknowledges the changing media environment and power dynamics and the concept of Norris’ (1999) critical citizens as a lens for a qualitative inquiry.

Chapter 5 depicts the methods used to seek answers to the research questions of this study. I considered different ways in which this research could be conducted. Initially, I had deliberated upon a combination of questionnaire-based survey and in-depth interviewing for this study, but I found the exploratory approach more suitable given the political focus of this study. I realized that investigating individual perceptions was very important in undertaking this study. Since interviews could help explore the diversity of views on a given topic, I conducted interviews with 22 university students based at the site of this study. In-depth interviewing through multiple meetings helped build a rapport with the participants and gel appropriately with the participant observation. Therefore, I used a combination of in-depth qualitative interviewing and participant observation for this study.

Chapter 6 presents the first half of the findings of this study based upon the responses of the students who considered themselves as politically disengaged. I found that even the politically disengaged were not entirely unaware of political issues the country. In contrast, some of these students were highly informed citizens who were cautious and watchful of their actions. In certain cases, they had deliberated over and rejected the idea of actively engaging in politics somewhat early in their lives. These students usually avoided the mainstream media coverage, especially the news content. The pro-government bias, censorship, and manipulation of information were some of the
key issues deterring the credibility of mainstream mass media among the informants, whereas the credibility of online media depended on the sources. These students did not trust or rely heavily on a single source of information and referred to multiple sources with skepticism. However, through the course of this research, it became apparent that the highly interactive nature of social networks had not only helped increase the political interactions involving students, but they were also increasingly challenging the ways in which political engagement had been defined in the past.

Chapter 7 presents the second half of the findings based upon the responses of the students who were interested in politics and could consider a future career in politics. This chapter shows that both media use as well as parental and peer influences had primarily helped generate political interest and engagement. For those uninfluenced by their parents, media were the primary sources of investigation and offered issues for discussion with friends. Moreover, even for those who were influenced by their parents, media played a crucial role in shaping their political discussions with their friends and parents. The influence of media was primarily comprised of two aspects, including the creation of role models in politics and coverage of issues facing the country. Following a strong interest in politics, some students willingly participated in different activities, such as political discussions at *Kedai Mama* (local restaurants mostly run by Tamils) and other similar spaces, which allowed free exchange of political views and ideas, voting, blogging, and some more formal activities, such as joining a political rally and interning for a political party. The political engagement was fostered through the online media more explicitly compared to both the mainstream media as well as other conventional
means, such as political rallies. Yet, the strict rules and regulations had meant that most students were hesitant in actively engaging in political blogging. For some, on the other hand, these blogs were more disengaging than engaging due to their lack of credibility. Therefore, the Internet had also contributed to an increased confusion regarding political matters and had led to selective media usage.

In answering the main research questions in this study, the final chapter discusses the perceptions about media and politics among the informants, the influences of both mainstream and online media on the processes of political engagement and disengagement, other factors influencing political engagement (including parental and peer influences and the role of the establishment), meaning of political engagement in the realm of the new online media, pertinent issues (including brain drain, online media and political change, limitations of technology, restrictions placed on students, and other themes), the implications of this study, and recommendations for future studies. Based on the evidence presented in Chapters 6 and 7, this chapter argues that while the online media had played a key role in disseminating oppositional messages and encouraged both engagement and disengagement, the online social media in particular had led to a new form of engagement between youth and political leaders and issues. The ICTs had strengthened the democracy in Malaysia, but a shift in the country’s leadership appeared unlikely at the time. Indeed, the developments post-2010 in the country revealed that while some of the changes were slower, the leadership remained unaffected by the 2013 election outcome—in which the ruling alliance lost the popular vote for the first time in Malaysia’s history, yet continued to remain in power. Nevertheless, the interactions
between technology and socio-political structure had continued to pave way for more freedoms, continued restrictions, and increasing complexities in the ongoing process of youth political engagement.
CHAPTER 2: THE DEVELOPMENT OF MALAYSIA’S MAINSTREAM MASS MEDIA

This chapter notes the historical development of mainstream mass media in Malaysia until the 1990s. Divided into eight main sections, this chapter notes the emergence, post-independence changes, government policy and legal environment, and privatization of the country’s mainstream mass media. The first section discusses the early newspapers, press freedom, and introduction of radio in the Straits Settlements and the Malay States under the British colonial control. The second section describes the functioning of mass media in the region during WWII. The third section notes media policy, including Press freedom and electronic media, after the end of the colonial era. The next two section focus on the changes in media law, including the controversial Internal Security Act 1960, following the events of May 13, 1969 and the state of mass media in the country during the next decade respectively. The sixth section notes the beginning of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad’s reign as the country’s fourth Prime Minister and his administration’s broadcasting policy during the 1980s. The last two sections describe the growth, ownership, and continued, although indirect, control of private mass media by the government.

Emergence of Mass Media

Despite the presence of Chinese and Indian cultures in the region, it was the Europeans who were primarily responsible for bringing modern mass media into the region. This is evident from the beginning of print and later on radio—both of which essentially targeted the European audiences at first. The vernacular press picked up later,
and its development was not consistent with the English Press, especially during the nineteenth century.

*Early Newspapers and Press Freedom*

It is crucial to understand the growth of early newspapers in Malaya since newspapers and magazines were the only mass media, especially for the Asian populations in the region, during the nineteenth century and influenced the course of radio’s development later on. The early newspapers in Malaya were basically read by European readers, who were either settlers or worked for the British government. According to Turnbull (1972), all of the early newspapers in the Straits Settlements were in English and had British Editors. However, this changed since the very first Chinese papers in the region were founded by English missionaries in Malacca during the early part of the 19th century (see Table 3).

The early English and Chinese papers pre-dated the early Malay papers in the region by many years (see Table 3 below). Eventually, *Al-Iman* (1906) and *Neracha* (1911) marked a new era of Malay newspapers, although they focused on religious reforms and not politics. In 1914, *Lembaga Melayu* became the first newspaper published by Malays (earlier newspapers, including *Jawi Peranakan* had Arab editors) in Singapore that focused on Malay interests (Dyer, 1974; Roff, 1961). Subsequently, other newspapers, including *Lembaga, Majlis, Saudara,* and *Warta Malaya,* focused more strongly on Malay nationalism. This was essentially an outcome of the formation of Singapore Malay Union by the editor of *Lembaya Melayu* (Encik Mohd Yunos bin Abdullah) in 1926.
Table 3

Early Newspapers in British Malaya

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Year Established</th>
<th>Place of Publication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Prince of Wales Island</em> Gazette</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>1806¹</td>
<td>Penang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Chinese Monthly</em> Magazine</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>1815</td>
<td>Malacca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Universal Gazette</em></td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>1823</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Singapore Chronicle</em></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>1824</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Penang Gazette</em></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>1833</td>
<td>Penang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Singapore Free Press</em></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>1835</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Straits Times</em></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>1845</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Jawi Peranakan</em></td>
<td>Malay⁵</td>
<td>1876</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nujumu’l-Fajar</em></td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>1877</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Shamsu’l-Kamar</em></td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>1880s</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sekola Melayu</em></td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>1888</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


¹ Dyer (1974, p. 38) reports the start date as 1803, whereas Turnbull (1971, p. 130) notes 1833 as the year in which the *Prince of Wales Island Gazette* started. However, both of these accounts appear to be inaccurate since on checking Ohio University Libraries’ online catalogue, I found that 1806 was indeed the year of this newspaper’s first volume.

⁵ Notably, the Malay newspapers of this era were in Arabic (Jawi) script.
According to Sidney (1927), public opinion, as known in England during the late-1920s, was non-existent in Malaya. Sidney suggests that the British press attempted to stir reforms and encourage reporters, but it did not succeed since the Europeans were content with the success of the rubber and tin trade. The Chinese, on the other hand, had maintained vernacular press where occasionally critical opinions were expressed, although these unofficial members of the press sometimes faced difficulties from the government and from fellow Chinese. Malays, who were just beginning to publish their writings at the time, felt strongly about their affairs, although there appeared to be a dearth of evidence suggesting any strong criticism of government.

The Chinese Press witnessed emergence of two major newspapers during the 1920s, including *Nanyang Siang Pau* (1923) and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (1929)—both supported by business tycoons. Later on, *Sin Pin Jih Pao* (1939) and *Kin Kwok Daily News* (1940) were started in Penang and Ipoh respectively (Dyer, 1974). Apparently, both the number of newspapers and their readership were higher in case of English and Chinese publications compared to the Malay Press. For instance, according to one estimate, there were eight European and 12 Chinese large printing shops, besides 60 small ones owned by the Chinese, and 10 English and 15 Chinese newspapers in circulation (Bliss, 1931, p. 25). And despite an increasing number of Malay newspapers, the difficulty in distribution and a lack of literacy among the Malays limited their impact in the pre-World War II era. Nevertheless, *Utusan Melayu* was later established in 1938 with a 100 percent Malay investment (Dyer, 1974).
Compared to English, Chinese, and Malay publications, the growth of papers for the Indian community was slow, which could be contributed to a late but sudden increase in their population during the late-nineteenth century. The first vernacular paper for the Indians was *Tamil Nesan*, which started in 1924 and was published from Kuala Lumpur. In 1935, *Tamil Murasu* was started in Singapore followed by *Pardesi Khalsa Sevak* in the next year, which used Gurumukhi script and had Punjabis along with Gujaratis and other Indian groups, who could read Gurumukhi, among its readers (Dyer, 1974). Overall, the development of print was uneven—both in terms of timing and ownership—across English, Chinese, Malay, and Indian language newspapers.

*Introduction of Radio*

Amateur radio first started in Singapore in the 1920s. In 1926, a committee within the British government in Malaya came up with a formal proposal for setting up a radio station (McDaniel, 1994). Batson (1930) notes that in addition to poor (hot and damp) climate, radio’s popularity was restricted to Europeans—limiting its growth in the region. Half of the population was supposedly concentrated in Singapore, but the first station was closed within a year from its installation in November 1926. Nonetheless, stations in Johor and Singapore were offering shortwave broadcasts, along with transmissions from India, East Indies, and the Philippines by 1930. There were around 500 sets, mostly

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6 Although migrants from India were moving to Malay areas for generations—many of them being Muslims from Coromandel coast, the sudden increase was due to an unprecedented demand for cheap labor at rubber plantations. Andaya and Andaya (2001) note that the conditions for Indian workers, most of whom were urban dwellers from Southern India, were hard, but they were more disciplined than the Chinese and were unlike Malay workers who were less willing to work for wages. Given the poor work conditions and distance from their hometowns, most of these workers preferred to return to India at the end of their contract. However, this started to change around the end of the nineteenth century since the colonial government took measures to increase Indian migration (Andaya & Andaya, 2001).
British-owned, in use at the time (Batson, 1930, p. 99). These sets operated on shortwave and alternating current and required licenses from the administration.

During 1930s, along with South Asia, Southeast Asia received its first BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) transmission. Local transmission had also begun in the Straits Settlements around this time (McDaniel, 1994). In March 1937, British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation (BMBC), a private company, started its operations with a medium wave transmission from Singapore with plans to offer 36 hours’ weekly programming with music in Malay, Chinese, and Tamil. Thereafter, the development of radio was somewhat slow until World War II—mainly due to a lack of interest shown by the British colonial authorities in establishing a region-wide public radio system, which essentially prevented the growth of a mass medium in the region until 1940s—unlike India where the British had taken an active interest in taking over broadcasting, which started in early 1920s in the form of radio clubs, and had already established Indian State Broadcasting Service (ISBS) in April 1930 (All India Radio, 2012).

When Europe was at the brink of World War II, the threat was felt even in Southeast Asia, especially if Britain and the Netherlands were drawn into the war, it would affect their colonies. Therefore, a Far Eastern Bureau was created in Singapore to oversee radio broadcasting, war information, and propaganda (McDaniel, 1994). The radio services included a mix of BBC and European programming while continuing with

7 In a personal account, A. E. Percival, who had served in the British Army in Malaya during 1941-42, reports that Ministry of Information Far East headed by George Samson and Malayan Information Bureau were set up in Singapore. They were located in the same building that had public relations and chief censor offices (including press, cable, and mail censors) during the wartime (Percival, 1949).
its English, Chinese, and Malay schedules (the Tamil schedule was dropped due to a smaller number of Tamil listeners). Consequently, the Malaya Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), which was not connected with the BBC and was a different entity than its predecessor BMBC—a private company running a small station locally, came into existence (Playfair, 1943). The decision to establish MBC was made during the pre-war years, but the implementation was delayed. The MBC service targeted British Malaya and the entire Far East, although for establishing a radio service for a region so diverse, it was necessary to offer regular programming in 26 languages and dialects.

Changing Power Equation and Media Control

*Mass Media during World War II*

By 1942, MBC was relaying four simultaneous signals covering 13 languages. The old transmitters and equipment were replaced by new ones, studios were being prepared in Singapore, and the broadcasting stations were being extended. Moreover, MBC trained around 290 individuals, who were mostly of Asian origins, locally (Playfair, 1943, p. 272). With the Japanese progression in Malaya, some of the equipment and transmitters were reportedly destroyed while the staff was dispersed. Among the Asian staff, many chose to stay in Singapore while some were imprisoned by the

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8 The station was equipped with low-power transmitters and five studios (including two subsidiary studios for vernacular programs) at the beginning, but the setup lacked trained professionals except for the Manager (John Dumeresque). Moreover, the executive staff recruited in London arrived in Malaya separately and was not together at the beginning of war with Japan. For instance, the MBC Chairman (Eric Davis) and the Chief Executive Officer (W. R. Reid) arrived in Malaya in December 1940 and January 1941 respectively (Playfair, 1943, p. 271).
Japanese (Playfair, 1943). Once the British surrendered to the Japanese troops on February 15, 1942, broadcasts did not resume for two months (McDaniel, 1994).

While the British military administrators were cautious in dealing with the Press, the Japanese exploited both radio infrastructure and Press extensively for wartime propaganda and to promote Japanese culture and language in the region between 1942 and 1945 (McDaniel, 1994). For instance, vernacular Press, Chinese in particular, was exploited as a propaganda tool (Dyer, 1974). In addition, Nippon Times and Mainichi dailies, which were printed in English in Japan during wartime, arrived in batches to Malaya—every one to three months from the publication date. These dailies, according to Percival (1949), carried biased news and a great deal of information was withheld, but occasionally there were candid articles and statements.

The radio served two purposes during this time: First, to promote Japanese as a language of the masses; and second, to popularize Japanese ideology and to reify Japanese military’s dominance during the War (McDaniel, 1994). Nevertheless, within the Japanese controlled areas, there was a demand and listenership for outside broadcasts,

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9 Percival (1949) found that the Press in Malaya, which was earlier unfriendly to the military, had slowly started supporting the war effort and the (British) troops’ welfare. The Press in Malaya had two main categories including English and vernacular. Within the vernacular press, different ethnic groups had their own publications. Furthermore, the vernacular press had a Japanese newspaper, which had led to a complicated situation since the British government wanted to avoid inviting that paper’s representatives to press conferences. As the war approached, war reporters started arriving in Malaya. To deal with the Press and increasing number of reporters, it was deemed necessary by the British administration to form an organization and so it established the Services Press Bureau in May 1941 (Percival, 1949). The bureau’s Head and Press Relations positions were held by military commanders who maintained press relations and released war news on behalf of army, air force, and navy. While meeting the requirements of Press in offering war information through press conferences, these commanders were also cautious in retaining military secrets. However, despite all possible precautions, Percival notes that the reporting by the Press was not as per the expectations of the bureau and, therefore, a directive from the Commander-in-Chief Far East forbid press conferences after 1941.

10 The delivery of those newspapers stopped after allied troops’ landing in Normandy (Percival, 1949).
which later led to a ban by the Japanese officials on receiving foreign broadcasts. Although the penalties for those caught included beating and imprisonment, news pertaining to the war covered by foreign sources continued to find its way into Malaya.

Post-War Media Control

Following the end of Japanese occupation in 1945, the British became more vigilant and protective of the mass media (McDaniel, 1994). In September 1945, the military administration from Britain set up the Department of Publicity and Printing. Later, when the civil administration took over in April 1946, it became the Public Relations Department and then the Department of Information in 1950 (Silva, 1975). Press Division, which was formed in 1946 under the Ministry of Information, was responsible for government and Press relations and publicity—through radio and later on through television as well (Dyer, 1974).

The Japanese occupation during the war had clearly left a doubt regarding the effectiveness of British control in the region. And subsequently, the vernacular Press became more active. For instance, after the war, the Chinese press became more independent and registered a fast growth once they received the support of Chinese business tycoons and political leaders. For example, China Press was started in 1946 by the Chinese leader Tun H. S. Lee.

As a result of Japanese occupation and to control the Press following the occupation, in 1948, the British administration enacted the Printing Presses Ordinance, which later became the Printing Presses Act 1948 (Act 58) in July 1948. According to Act 58, the government could take complete control of the media during the times of
emergency. In contrast with the Chinese newspapers, most Malay publications had stopped functioning during the war and only some of them revived post-war, such as *Utusan Melayu, Utusan Zaman,* and *Mastika* (Dyer, 1974). Nevertheless, following the post-war years, a number of publications, including *Utusan Melayu, Melayu Raya* (1950), *Suara UMNO* (1950), *Merdeka* (1954), and *Malaya Merdeka* (1954) supported Malay interests and active participation in politics. Overall, this was the first time, according to Dyer, when the vernacular press had strongly connected with the Malays. Among the Indian papers, the Punjabi newspaper called *Navjiwan* started in the early-1950s.

In the years following the Japanese occupation, radio’s popularity started gaining momentum and continued to grow during the early-1950s. In 1947, there were 22,045 radio licenses and by the end of 1954 the number increased over seven times to 160,728. In addition, there were 36,776 Rediffusion (a private radio service) subscribers across Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Singapore (Department of Broadcasting, 1954, p. 27). As shown in Table 4 below, most of the content on Radio Malaya was in English and Chinese by the end of 1954. It is noteworthy that news broadcasts in Chinese amounted to more hours (70) than the news broadcasts in other three languages combined (a total of 52 hours) (Department of Broadcasting, 1954, p. 6).
Table 4

Radio Malaya Monthly Broadcasts in Hours (1954)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Malay</th>
<th>Indian</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Music (popular)</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk (news, language lessons, etc.)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music (traditional &amp; classical)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>16½</td>
<td>28½</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drama, stories, and variety</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children and Youth</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>381</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>184½</td>
<td>182½</td>
<td>1,128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Broadcasting (1954, p. 6)

Beginning of Private Radio

Private broadcasting in Malaysia begun when Rediffusion, a private corporation based in Britain, started its operations in Kuala Lumpur in August 1949 (McDaniel, 1994; “Remembering Rediffusion Limited,” 2011). Through wired radio receivers, which required a license and a monthly subscription fee, the listeners could receive English programming from Radio Malaya and BBC. In addition to English, Rediffusion started offering programming in Chinese dialects, which was unavailable on Radio Malaya.
During the 1950s, this implied a better potential for dialect programs due to an increasing number of Chinese listeners in the Malay Peninsula. McDaniel (1994) suggests that although Rediffusion was a commercial operation, the officials had allowed it to flourish after World War II because of its potential to reach those who supported the Malayan Communist Party (MCP).\(^\text{11}\) Rediffusion, however, faced serious union problems within the first year of its operations and again in 1962 and 1964 through 1967 because the unions were somewhat sympathetic to the MCP.

**Media Policy in Independent Malaya**

Malaya became independent from the British rule on August 31, 1957 (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). Following the country’s independence, the Department of Information emphasized development communication, and the programs were designed to aid social change. Besides being government’s mouthpiece for publicizing its policies, the department was responsible “for waging psychological warfare against the communist terrorists and their supporters” (Silva, 1975, p. 6).

**Press Freedom**

To understand media control in Malaysia, it is crucial to consider the press freedom since the press pre-dated other mass media in most cases. Lent (1979) suggests

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\(^{11}\) Following the Japanese occupation, the MCP was interested in seizing power and gaining control of Malaya. However, they did not attempt to do so since they were ill-prepared and were small in number against the British troops. Nonetheless, they continued their legal activities, including formation of General Labour Unions (mostly comprised of Chinese labors) to negotiate with their employers and the government, which helped them in becoming powerful over time. An increased communist propaganda and incidents of violence linked to industrial disputes (including death of three European managers) led to a declaration of the State of Emergency by the colonial government by 1948. Consequently, MCP membership was declared illegal, although the State of Emergency lasted until the end of July 1960 (by this time the newly formed government of independent Malaya was convinced of the end of the communist armed threat) (see Andaya & Andaya, 2001, for more on this).
that at the time of independence, Malaysia was unlike some other countries in the
developing world and there was some scope for discussion of public issues. However, the
Malay newspapers had lost their edge in the post-independence years since the freedom
for which they fought was achieved (Dyer, 1974). Moreover, the freedom of expression
of the past was replaced with discretion and control. According to McDaniel (2008), the
government’s control of mass media after independence had essentially been a
continuation of colonial policy.

In the years following independence, the government licensing system and the
legal framework meant that the independence of press and freedom of expression were
apparently non-existent in the country (Glatbach & Anderson, 1971). Only a few Malay
newspapers, such as Berita Harian (1957), emerged during those years. The Chinese
newspapers experienced further growth with additions such as Malayan Thung Pau
(1959), which was started by an experienced journalist, and Shin Min Daily News (1966),
which was started by businessmen from Hong Kong and Singapore. In addition, there
were new Indian publications including Malaya Samachar (1961), which was the new
version of the earlier Pardesi Khalsa Sevak, and Tamil Malar (1963), which was
published in Singapore (Dyer, 1974).

The Communist threat was cited as a serious threat by the government and, as a
result, the Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA) or Act 82 was passed, although the
government believed that the communist violence had ended by then (Andaya & Andaya,
2001). The Act authorized detention of any person under the suspicion of or potentially
causing threat to the security of Malaysia through the order of the Home Affairs Minister
without a trial or bail provision ("Malaysia to scrap," 2011; Internal Security Act 1960, 2006). The ISA allowed for the arrest of an individual and detention without trial. The ISA made the police officers extremely powerful since it enabled them to make arrests solely on the grounds of potential security-threat to people, property, or land and keep the arrested individuals under preventive detention (Internal Security Act 1960, 1972).

As noted later, ISA offered specific guidelines for the Press and mass media operations, which helped the government in exercising firm control on the country’s mass media. Furthermore, the Press was expected to play a role in promoting the national language and national unity (Dyer, 1974). To provide news to the Press, Bernama, the national news agency, was established in 1968, and it covered Kuala Lumpur news during the first year of its operations. From mid-1969, its coverage extended to Epoh and Penang in the West and Kota Kinabalu and Kuching in the Eastern part of Malaysia. Thereafter, Bernama covered entire Malaysia along with its correspondents located in Bangkok and Jakarta (Dyer, 1974).

Electronic Media Policy

Radio

Post-independence, radio services were officially carried by Radio Malaya which later became Radio Malaysia (McDaniel, 1994). During the 1950s, Radio Malaya broadcasting activities were moved to Kuala Lumpur and commercial advertising was introduced in 1960 (RTM, 2012). By the time Malaysia was introduced to television in the 1960s, the radio programming, which was initially around 24 hours a week in the late-1940s, had witnessed a tremendous growth. As noted previously, the number of radio
licenses issued had grown to over 160,000 by the mid-1950s. In 1963, the government also took special interest in radio transmission in Borneo, where the residents in the states of Sabah and Sarawak were subject to political influence from neighboring Indonesia, which threatened to control entire Borneo at the time. Under Indonesia’s “crush Malaysia” campaign, the number of attacks on the international border between the two countries, along the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, increased during the mid-1960s. Thereafter, the Commonwealth and Malaysian forces countered the Indonesian aggression in 1965 and the Malaysian Federation continued to maintain its control on the territory (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). Consequently, a shortwave service called Suara Malaysia, meaning the Voice of Malaysia, was introduced in 1963 targeting foreign listeners in Southeast Asia. The broadcasts were in English, Indonesian, and Mandarin until the 1970s when more languages, such as Thai and Tagalog, were added (McDaniel, 1994).

Documentary and Film

Following the WWII, the British authorities had established the Malayan Film Unit, as a propaganda tool under the Department of Information. Post-independence, the Malaysian government retained the film unit (later called Filem Negara Malaysia) and used it along with broadcasting to promote its messages and campaigns among the masses. Thereafter, according to Yasin (2007), the documentary productions of this unit were based on government campaigns and became dull and uninteresting for the Malaysian audience.
Although the screening of foreign films and later the production of films domestically was in place much before WWII, the Malay movie industry actually flourished during the 1950s and 1960s (Gray, 2010). For instance, Ida Bachtiar (1994) suggests that hundreds of Malay films were produced during the 1950s. Thereafter, they were overtaken by Hollywood, Hong Kong, Indonesian, and Indian productions (Ida Bachtiar, 1994). Moreover, the introduction of television, separation of Singapore, and further defragmentation of the market through the loss of non-Malay as well as Indonesian markets led to a gradual decline of the Malay film industry by the 1970s.

Television

In the post-emergency era, the television technology started to develop during the 1960s. Once again, the experimental transmissions begin in Singapore in 1960 followed by a recommendation to start a nationwide service in 1963 (McDaniel, 1994). Consequently, television broadcasting started on December 28, 1963 (Dyer, 1974, p. 60). All privately-owned television receivers required a license, which could be obtained after paying a fee of $24, although the receivers owned by the government were exempt from this fee (Telecommunications (Television Receivers) Regulations, 1964, p. 64). The growth of television was even faster than radio with the number of television sets reaching 150,000 by 1969 (cited in McDaniel, 1994, p. 72).

Media Law Post-May 1969

The incidents of violence could be used as a means to justify the implementation of policies that could increase the power of a state. It is noteworthy that following the Communist threat, which was used to justify government policies after independence, the
violent events of May 13, 1969 (mentioned in previous chapter) were used to impose further changes in the legal structure to safeguard the ruling alliance against political threats and to extend government’s control over the country’s mass media. For instance, the government implemented the Emergency (Public Order and Crime Prevention) Ordinance (EO) as a temporary measure following the events of May 13, 1969. As per EO, criminal suspects could be detained without trial indefinitely. EO was used consistently for many years until its total repeal in 2011. There were several other laws (discussed next) that were either introduced for the first time or were amended following the May 1969 events. These laws became a platform as well as shield for the policy-makers and the ruling power for the decades to come, especially in maintaining a firm control over mass media.

*Sedition Act*

Sedition Act 1948 (revised in 1969) or Act 15 prohibits seditious (meaning anti-government or anti-ruler) expression, action, publication or distribution, and importation of seditious publications. Moreover, it prohibits an individual from possessing any seditious publication. According to Act 15, the court might suspend the publication and circulation of any newspapers containing seditious matter. Act 15 empowers the court to issue a search warrant, which allows officials to use force if required to search and seize a prohibited publication. Act 15 also empowers an inspector or a higher-ranking police official to arrest an individual found committing or suspected of committing or attempting to commit an offense against the Sedition Act (Sedition Act 1948, 2006). Lent (1979) has described the Sedition Act as a special cause for worry for the journalists,
which, following the 1971 amendments, made it illegal to discuss sensitive issues, including *Bahasa* Malaysia (Malay language) policy, special role of Sultans, non-Malay citizenship policies, and Malay privileges under the second Malaysia plan.

*Printing Presses Act 1948, Revised 1971*

The Printing Presses Act 1948 (Act 58) was revised in 1971 with the revised Act enforced in December 1971 (Dyer, 1974). The third section of Act 58 (Printing Presses Act 1948, Revised 1971) required a license for using or keeping a press for printing. The fifth section made it compulsory for a publication to bear the names of publisher and printer. Furthermore, printing or publishing or distribution of any document without those names was banned. The next section required the printers to keep a copy of printed documents for six months from the date of publication, with the details of their employers, for the magistrate. The seventh section made it mandatory for each newspaper to get a permit for printing or publishing. This permit would expire on December 31 every year and could be renewed annually. A permit was also required for distribution and sale. The permit could be denied, granted, or revoked on the discretion of the minister for home affairs. Anyone who failed to obtain a permit was subject to a year’s imprisonment or a fine up to RM (Malaysian Ringgit) 2,000 or both. According to sections 10 and 11, the end of and change in proprietorship had to be reported to the registrar of newspapers.

The seventh section of Act 58 also gave power to officials above the ranks of Assistant Controller of Postal Services Department, Custom Officer, and Police Inspector, to seize and inspect any package, for newspapers from outside West Malaysia.
for publication, distribution, or sale, on suspicion. If the minister of home affairs found a statement published by a newspaper as incorrect, then the minister had the power to ask that newspaper to publish a denial of that statement in the public interest according to the 15th section of Act 58. Moreover, the Act provided magistrates and officers above the rank of Inspector the power to search for presses lacking or misusing a license. The last section (24) enabled the minister to prescribe forms, determine the fees, prescribe changes, and enforce the Act (Laws of Malaysia Act 58, Printing Presses Act 1948, Revised 1971).

*Internal Security Act 1960, Amended 1972*

The third and fourth chapters of ISA, entitled “Special Powers Relating to Subversive Publications, etc.” and “Control of Entertainments and Exhibitions” respectively, related to media control (Internal Security Act 1960, 1972, p. ii). The third chapter essentially prohibited the printing and sale of content that could incite violence, promote lawlessness, disturb peace, and promote hostile feeling between races or classes, or was prejudiced against Malaysia’s order, security, or national interest. Moreover, ISA banned dissemination of reports deemed false or possession of documents deemed subversive by the government. The fourth chapter made it mandatory for anyone involved with promoting an exhibition or entertainment to report the particulars of everyone associated with that exhibition or entertainment along with its purpose to the government. Furnishing false or incomplete information would lead to detention under ISA. In addition, the government, at the discretion of the home minister, could impose conditions, such as a fine or a bond, and even ban an entertainment or exhibition. The
ISA also allowed the government to investigate a site and seize documents, although it did state clearly that “no woman shall be searched under this section [Section 37, Chapter IV] except by a woman” (Internal Security Act 1960, 1972, p. 26). ISA or Act 82 had been used against opposition leaders, activists, teachers, and students, over the years—until its repeal in 2012 (“Malaysia to scrap,” 2011).  

**Introduction of the Official Secrets Act**

The Official Secrets Act (OSA) of 1972 or Act 88 prohibits the dissemination of any information classified as an official secret by individuals. This Act allows only the designated ministers and officials to classify an official document as secret or declassify an official secret and prohibits all others from making such documents public (OSA, 2006). This Act also discourages any form of involvement with those who possess an official secret and includes penalties for spying and, therefore, discourages any form of investigative journalism regarding governmental or other matters relatable to national security.

**Mass Media during the 1970s**

In addition to new laws and amendments to the existing ones, the ethnic clashes of 1969 essentially led to a drafting of a *Rukunegara*—ideology of the nation—by the Malay dominated leadership. Introduced on August 31, 1971, *Rukunegara* encompasses five principles, including belief in god, loyalty to king and country, upholding of constitution, rule of law, good behavior, and morality (Department of National Unity & Integration, 2013). The national ideology influenced the law and policy structure and essentially guided the mass media in Malaysia (Lent, 1979). In particular, the Department
of Information promoted the principles of *Rukunegara* while focusing on national unity and making people aware of the New Economic Policy (NEP) as its key functions (Silva, 1975).

*Media and National Development*

*Educational Media Service*

The government emphasized the role of media in supporting national development and introduced programs and services to fulfill that role. This was evident in continuation of the school broadcasting service, which was initiated by the British administration during the 1940s, by Radio Malaysia. While the early broadcasts targeted primary classrooms, secondary instruction was included during the 1960s (McDaniel, 1994). Table 5 below notes the number of schools covered by the school broadcasting service in Malaya in 1954, which was among the leading school broadcasting systems in the world at the time (Department of Broadcasting, 1954).

Table 5

*Schools Covered by the School Broadcasting Service (1954)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Singapore</th>
<th>Federation</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>647</td>
<td>676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>178</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>1,812</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Department of Broadcasting (1954, p. 22)*
Radio Malaysia’s school broadcasting service was offered in Malay (15 hours per week), English (ten hours per week), Chinese (six hours per week), and Tamil (six hours per week) (RTM, 1972, p. 32). By the 1970s, the ministry of education took over educational broadcasting and it reached about 65 percent of schools across Malaysia, including Malay, Chinese, English, and Tamil, with 40 hours of weekly content (80 programs) (McDaniel, 1994; Dyer, 1974, p. 65). By early-1974, educational television service was offering 18 programs, which ranged from 15 to 20-minute each in duration, daily for four days per week. As a part of this project, about 3,000 television sets were to be supplied to schools by the end of 1974 (Dyer, 1974, p. 65). During the 1990s, under the ministry of education, the educational media service was responsible for all education broadcasting in Malaysia (McDaniel, 1994).

Food Production Campaign

In 1974, the Department of Information started supporting a national campaign to increase food production. The department was headquartered in Kuala Lumpur with 13 state-level and many more district-level offices, under district information officers, across the country. The key function of these district offices was to publicize state and federal governments’ programs and policies. Through public speeches, group discussions, exhibitions, film shows, and civic activities, including civics courses, assemblies, tours, days, briefings, dialogues, and other activities, the rural audiences were informed about their role in fulfilling the government’s goal of increasing food production. In addition, the Department of Information provided “press and liaison service to the local and
foreign press” (Silva, 1975, p. 5). In 1946, the department had 285 offices, by 1974 this number had grown to over 1,500 (Silva, 1975, p. 7).

*Maintaining Press Control*

As noted earlier, the Printing Presses Act 1948 was amended to ban the publication of incidents that could increase communal tensions or threaten national security—also the idea behind the Essential (Newspapers and other publications) Regulations 1969 (Dyer, 1974). In addition, the changes to Sedition Act made in February 1971 had led to self-censorship across all newspapers (Dyer, 1974). On one occasion, Glatbach and Anderson (1971) noted, “... objective criticism in editorials is vanishing. Investigative reporting is virtually unknown. In-depth coverage is rare, although the language papers do have the slightly better record there” (p. 3).

In August 1972, Bernama, the government-run national news agency, started a new unit exclusively to provide news to RTM (while focusing on national interest). By December 1973, Bernama had employed 99 journalists (Dyer, 1974, p. 13). In addition, Malaysian Press Institute (MPI), which operated on an annual grant from the government, conducted training programs for journalists and held seminars and workshops for editors, news writers, and publishers (Silva, 1975). Newspapers were not only required to register, but they also had to follow Regulations 1969 and were expected to use self-censorship to avoid publishing stories and articles, which could threaten country’s internal peace and security. Mostly, the press was supposed to cover news provided by the government sources (Glatbach and Anderson, 1971).
Given the restrictions placed on the freedom of expression through multiple laws and regulations, the only option for the journalists to avoid getting into trouble with the authorities was self-censorship, especially among the vernacular press for non-Malay groups. For instance, the Tamil dailies were very careful in handling government issues and the reporters mostly translated the news copied from mainstream (Malay) news and reports. Such papers usually had seven to eight sub-editors and only two reporters (Lent, 1974, p. 347). The primary role of the Tamil dailies, therefore, revolved around promoting the Indian culture, and they did not delve much into government issues (Lent, 1974).

Within the Indian community in Malaysia, there were diverse ethnic groups, such as Tamils, Malayalis, Punjabis, and so on. Moreover, within each of these groups, there were caste and religion-based distinctions (Sandhu, 1993). The minority press had conventionally attempted to reflect this diversity and occasionally had been a mouthpiece for them. In one such instance, *Malaya Samachar*, a Punjabi daily run by a Tamil majority, voiced its concerns over mandatory helmet rule for motorbike riders in favor of the Sikh community that wears turban as a religious practice (Lent, 1974). However, other than such advocacy, the vernacular press did not attempt to interfere with the functioning of the government or discuss racial issues. The caution observed by vernacular press was due to a combination of policies and laws that had helped put up a constant surveillance on the functioning of media in Malaysia (Lent, 1979). Overall, newspapers across Malaysia often relied heavily on information services run by the government for almost all of the news (Glatbach & Anderson, 1971).
The press was also expected to promote government’s *Rukunegara* policy and developmental efforts. In one study, Hamima Dona (1975) studied developmental news emphasis across three national newspapers, including *New Straits Times (NST)* (English), *Utusan Melayu*, and *Utusan Malaysia* (both in Bahasa Malaysia), and found that, overall, the *Bahasa* Malaysia newspapers devoted more space to developmental news than *NST*. Moreover, while all three newspapers used most of the space for developmental news on NEP and *Rukunegara*, *Bahasa* Malaysia papers focused the most on national integration, whereas *NST* focused the most on economic activities. In addition, *NST* had more advertisements, foreign content, and more news on the capital city than on rural areas, in contrast to the *Bahasa* Malaysia newspapers (Hamima Dona, 1975).

**Market, Circulation, and Ownership**

In terms of market, Glatbach and Anderson (1971) noted that in West Malaysia, *The Straits Times* dominated the newspaper industry, although the Chinese publications were financially sound and the Malay press was also starting to get the benefit of the change in Malays’ socio-economic position. Moreover, the production technology and quality of output were also improving. In Eastern Malaysia, however, the story was different compared to the Peninsular Malaysia. There were more papers in East Malaysia than in the West, but with a much lower circulation (Dyer, 1974). This was perhaps due to the language diversity in the East and higher population across ethnic group in the West. According to Glatbach and Anderson (1971), the geography, low demand, and cultural diversity in Eastern Malaysia led to a slower growth of press in the two states of Sabah and Sarawak. The distance of around 1,000 miles between the West and the East
had made the circulation of newspapers from Peninsular Malaysia very difficult if not impossible. Due to a dependence on primary production there was a low demand for information, especially with regards to West Malaysia. Moreover, the cultural diversity in these states had led to a diversity of locally published newspapers. According to one estimate, there were 19 papers serving 1.5 million people across the two states in 1970 (Glatbach & Anderson, 1971, p. 5).

In 1974, there were 25 Chinese, 12 English, six Malay, six Tamil, and 2 Punjabi newspapers. The circulation figures during 1973 were highest for Chinese publications at 800,000 followed by 500,000 for English and 300,000 for Bahasa Malaysia (Dyer, 1974, p. 3). According to Dyer, while the Chinese formed only about 34 percent of the country’s total population, they bought more papers, in Chinese as well as in English, than the rest of the population.

It is also noteworthy that out of 34 local newspaper companies, only 13 had a 100 percent Malaysian ownership, 16 had less than 50 percent foreign investment, and five had 100 percent foreign investment. To change this, Dyer (1974) notes, the newspapers had been under pressure for some time from the government to restructure their ownership so that the ownership remained in the hands of Malaysian citizens. For instance, this pressure had led to the birth of New Straits Times Press where 80 percent of the shares were offered to Malaysians. Chinese newspapers, such as Nanyang Siang Pau, were also preparing for restructuring. To make the conversion quicker, the House of Representatives, the lower house of Malaysian parliament, approved an amendment to Printing Presses Act 1948 in January 1974 and made it mandatory for newspapers to have
majority investments by Malaysian citizens. The amendment also empowered the home affairs minister to deny, suspend, or revoke the license of those newspapers that had higher investment by non-citizens compared to citizens. This was essentially to increase Malay ownership in businesses and to maintain indirect control over the Press. Evidently, the trend of newspapers owned by politicians also saw a rise in the East since at least one newspaper in each state was controlled by its chief minister (Glatbach & Anderson, 1971).

In addition to political advantage, media ownership also offered an economic incentive. For instance, citing Market Intelligence Services, a computerized service for monitoring media in Singapore and Malaysia, Dyer notes that during 1973, English press earned 57 percent of the advertising revenue, Chinese press had 5.4 percent, Bahasa Malaysia had 5.4 percent, and the Indian press had a 0.7 percent share, although press was the most expensive means for advertising in terms of the number of people reached (1974, p. 4). Table 6 below shows the total revenue earned by each media outlet through advertising during 1973.
Table 6

Advertising Revenue across Mass Media (1973)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outlet</th>
<th>Amount (RM)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cinemas</td>
<td>6,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>18,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>53,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Radio</td>
<td>6,250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rediffusion</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>16,500,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Dyer (1974, p. 4)

Electronic Media Growth and Programming Policy

Growth

Television was merged with radio to be called Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) under the Ministry of Information in October 1969, and a second television channel was introduced in the next month—November 1969 (RTM, 2012; Dyer, 1974, p. 60). Compared to print, both radio and television saw a rapid growth following their introduction in Malaysia. By 1970, the radio had a reach of about 80 percent and television around 65 to 70 percent of the country (Glatbach & Anderson, 1971, p. 22). While the average daily audience for radio in Malaysia exceeded 2.82 million by 1970, the average daily audience for television in Malaysia reached one million in early 1971 (Glatbach & Anderson, 1971).
Citing multiple sources, Glatbach and Anderson (1971) noted an increase of at least 216 percent in the number of licensed radio sets from 1962, when the commercial radio first started in Malaysia—also cited in McDaniel (1994), to 1970. On the other hand, the number of licensed television sets increased by 234 percent—just between 1965 and 1970—indicating a higher growth rate compared to radio (Glatbach & Anderson, 1971, p. 22). The number of television licenses issued also went up from 28,000 to 300,000 between 1964 and 1973 (Dyer, 1974, p. 61). Overall, electronic media had emerged as more effective means of reaching the masses compared to the Press, especially given the low literacy levels in rural Malaysia. And so, it was crucial for the government to exercise and maintain control through RTM.

**Programming policy**

The main functions of RTM were to communicate government policies, generate civic consciousness, serve the public interest, offer information and education, encourage national unity, and help to create a Malaysian identity, including the use of the national language—Bahasa Malaysia in its programming (Dyer, 1974). After the events of May 1969, the ideas of national integration and Malaysian nationalism became stronger in the 1970s and the media were used to create a national identity among Malaysians. Radio and television in particular were viewed as principal vehicles for national integration and promotion of Malay as the national language. This was clearly reflected in the dominant Malay programming on radio as well as on television (McDaniel, 1994). Table 7 below shows the high share of Bahasa Malaysia in RTM’s radio content. The broadcasts in East
Malaysia included both local and national programming relayed through local transmitters in Sabah and Sarawak.

According to one estimate, Radio Malaysia, Sarawak, had a daily program output of 36 ½ hours with 41 ½ hours over the weekends in February 1971 and the station could broadcast four networks by mid-1971 (RTM, 1972, p. 7). However, Malaysia’s ethnic diversity meant that the programming had to be offered in multiple languages. And despite promoting the use of national language, phasing out programs in Mandarin and Tamil was unlikely because understanding and respecting ethnic differences was important for the national broadcaster to keep the social equilibrium. In addition, during the early-1970s, All India Radio and Radio Ceylon were drawing a considerable audience among Malaysian Indians, which led to inclusion of regular Tamil programming on radio (Lent, 1974).

By 1970, the radio content was in Malay (129.5 hours), Chinese (100.33 hours), English (97 hours), and Tamil (92.5 hours) per week to serve different ethnic groups. In April 1971, the Malay radio network started a 24-hour service. Similarly, in Sabah the airtime increased from 40 to 126 hours per week between 1955 and 1969 (Glatbach & Anderson, 1971, p. 23; RTM, 1972, p. 7). Notably, catering to the listeners in both Sabah and Sarawak (in Eastern Malaysia) was an integral part of independent Malaysia’s programming policy, especially to counter Indonesian influence among the residents of these states (McDaniel, 1994). In addition, Malaysia had an 85.25 hours overseas service per week (Glatbach & Anderson, 1971, p. 24).
Table 7

*Radio Malaysia Programming (Weekly Hours), 1971*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>West Malaysia</th>
<th>Sabah</th>
<th>Sarawak</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bahasa Malaysia (Malay)</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>54 ¾</td>
<td>112*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>100 1/3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>25 ¾</td>
<td>41 ½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil</td>
<td>92 ½</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal (Semai/Temiar)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kadazan</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>16 ¾</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murut</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5 ¼</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesian</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bajau</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 ¾</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iban</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bidayuh</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>45 ½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayan/Kenyah</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanau</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forces</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 ¼</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forces (Malay)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forces (English)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>457 hrs. 50 mins.</td>
<td>126 hrs.</td>
<td>307 hrs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Including 38 ½ hours of weekly broadcasts in Malay contributed by Bidayuh, Chinese, English, and Iban services. Source: RTM (1972, p. 18)*
The listeners in rural areas were served by the Rural Broadcast Service of Radio Malaysia. This service offered agricultural information while attempting to infuse desirable changes across rural populations’ values and attitudes. Similarly, the educational service covering 2,442 primary and 327 secondary schools offered about 37 hours’ programming per week (Glatbach & Anderson, 1971, p. 24). Moreover, toward strengthening the Malay identity, special attention was paid to religious programming. In January 1973, the RDU (Religious and Dakwah Unit) was set up by RTM to produce and administer religious programs (Zulkiple, 1998, p. 3). By 1976, RTM’s religious arm RDU was producing 22 programs per week and with an increasing demand of these programs among Malays, RDU was producing 1,391 programs or 288 hours of content annually (Zulkiple, 1998, p. 3-4).

Although Bahasa Malaysia still dominated other language contents (see Table 7 above), radio broadcasting had made it possible to reach different ethnic groups and social classes across the country. Considering radio’s immense potential and continuing impact, the government continued to develop its radio infrastructure. In March 1973, Wisma Radio, a broadcasting setup located in Angkasapuri, Kuala Lumpur, was inaugurated. At the cost of Malaysian $13.9 million, it was the largest setup in Malaysia at the time (Dyer, 1974, p. 58). By 1974, 80 percent of the country received short and medium wave radio broadcasting, while 70 percent received the television service (Dyer, 1974, p. 57). Villages often had group viewings—likely due to a limited number of television sets in rural areas.
In addition to the government-run radio service in multiple languages (see Table 7 above), Rediffusion was offering service in Chinese, Bahasa Malaysia, and English by 1973 (Dyer, 1974). While radio broadcasting was mainly government controlled and owned, any competition from alternative services, such as Rediffusion, offering entertainment programs, could lead to a fragmentation of listeners. Consequently, Radio Malaysia launched Radio Muzik (Music Radio), an entertainment radio service, in June 1975 (RTM, 2012).

*Television programming*

On the other hand, programming on a single television network was a challenge due to a multilingual society and so introduction of a second network in 1969 helped manage the situation somewhat. While the first network (which later became TV1) offered 54 hours of programming, the second network (which later became TV2) offered 35 hours of programming amounting to a total of 89 hours of weekly television programming (Glatbach & Anderson, 1971, p. 24). By 1976, Sabah and Sarawak were also served by government broadcasting service (Dyer, 1974, p. 60).

With an increase in the number of RTM’s television networks, the government emphasized a need for more local programming. To support the development of a Malaysian identity, RTM was directed to maintain over 50 percent domestic content within its programming schedule, although imported programs regularly ranked among the top ten popular programs. The first channel Rangkaian Pertama or TV1 had 52.8 percent, whereas the second channel Rangkaian Kedua or TV2 had 56.8 percent domestic content—with only 2.5 and 3.5 percent advertising content respectively (Dyer, 1974, p. 60).
In addition, RTM did not advertise liquor and food containing pork on television and radio, although TV2 was not prohibited from advertising liquor (Dyer, 1974). This was another step to protect Malay identity, besides the propagation of Bahasa Malaysia across the country, since pork and liquor are prohibited in Islam, which is an integral part of the Malay identity.

**Limiting foreign influence**

The government imposed a five percent surcharge on foreign television commercials in April 1972. By July 1973, this surcharge was increased to 50 percent, which led to a situation where over 90 percent of television commercials were locally produced in 1973 (Dyer, 1974, p. 64). Given the government’s urge for more local content for the two television networks to limit foreign influence, Film Division of RTM and *Filem Negara* were combined on January 1, 1974 (Dyer, 1974, p. 64). The main goals of *Filem Negara* were to promote national integration and spread cultural awareness. The RTM and *Filem Negara* studios were also open for use by private production companies, which helped government earn additional revenues.

**Electronic Media Audiences**

While RTM followed the government’s policy of promoting *Bahasa Malaysia* and local content, promoting national unity was apparently more challenging, especially given the fragmentation of audiences from different ethnic groups. In one instance, Grenfell (1979) analyzed a series of unpublished reports by Survey Research Malaysia Sdn. Bhd. from 1971 to 1975 while studying audience trends for electronic mass media. Grenfell (1979) notes that compared to Malays, Chinese and Indians were less likely to
listen to Radio Malaysia and were more likely to listen to Radio Singapore and foreign stations. Moreover, private broadcaster Rediffusion had been more successful in retaining its Chinese program audiences compared to the government system. The Chinese audiences were reportedly more interested in drama and stories compared to informational and educational programs (Grenfell, 1979). While Radio Malaysia emphasized informational and educational programs more, Rediffusion used more time for drama and stories, which could perhaps explain Chinese audiences’ preference for Rediffusion and other stations over Radio Malaysia. Apparently 98 percent of Rediffusion’s audiences were Chinese, whereas 62 percent of Radio Malaysia’s audiences were Malay.

Compared to radio, television attracted younger, more urban audiences. However, the ethnic disparity was evident in television as well since about 75 percent of TV1 viewers were Malay and 84 percent of TV2 viewers were non-Malay. English programs with Malay subtitles were able to draw audiences from different ethnic groups, nonetheless. While commercial cinema attracted urban Chinese and mobile-unit films attracted rural Malays, both forms of cinema attracted younger and more male audiences. Overall, the country’s mixed media systems had facilitated “ethnic compartmentalization in media use” (Grenfell, 1979, p. 240).

As noted earlier, given the low literacy among rural populations, radio was the most effective means of reaching the masses in those areas. On one occasion, a survey of 394 pupils from three schools across three rural locations in Northern Kelantan showed that radio apparently reached the largest audience (54.7 percent) (Wan Hashim, 1979, p.
Overall, the electronic media, including radio and television, reached larger number of people compared to print in the given instance. Both print as well as television had reached these rural areas through rural urbanites.

Local films

The local film industry had an uneven growth. After initial success during the 1950s, it started experiencing a decline, but was revived in 1975 with the release of *Keluarga Si Comat* (Comat’s family). The movie generated an interest among audiences and went on to become a commercial success partly due to its production quality, which was visually close to imported movies at the time. This improvement in a local production could be attributed to the producer of *Keluarga Si Comat*, Sabah Films, which had NEP’s support in promoting *Bumiputras* in the film industry (Gray, 2010).

Nonetheless, the local productions had to abide by regulations, such as ISA, and had a limited freedom of expression, which impacted the creativity and the quality of productions (Gray, 2010). Consequently, while many of the commercially viable movies were light comedies, some others copied either the old Malay movies from the 1950s and 1960s or successful overseas films. Moreover, they mainly targeted urban Malay youth, as the production of Malay films increased during the 1970s and 1980s (Amir Muhamad, 1998; cited in Gray, 2010, p. 121). This meant that these movies were unlikely to be popular across other ethnic and age groups.
The Beginning of the Mahathir Era

Broadcasting Policy during the 1980s

By the 1980s, the content and programming available through government broadcasting was heavily influenced by politics and the broadcast media were essentially “acting as the publicity agent of the government” (Lowe, 1985, p. 63). In 1981, Dr. Mahathir Mohammad became Malaysia’s fourth Prime Minister and stayed in power until 2003 (“The new Prime Minister,” 1981; “Leaders respect and accept,” 2002). There were major changes in the government across different ministers (“Major’ team changes,” 1981). In addition, the shift to Bahasa Malaysia and Look East Policy became the key focus of the media during Mahathir’s reign.

The broadcasting policy continued to focus on Islamic religious content, and the emerging media campaigns started infusing Islamic values in Malaysia’s public administration services. In addition to RDU’s religious programming, the broadcast media were required to continue playing a supplemental role in the process of national development. Lowe (1985) suggested that the idea of rural development originated from the fact that a majority of rural population was Malay, which formed the key support for a government that was dominated by Malays, especially considering that the rural votes were more valuable than the urban votes during the elections. In the context of Malaysia, Lowe argued, a tradition for one group could represent change for another. Hence, while the dominant values of Bahasa Malaysia and Islam were largely due to the rural audience, they posed challenges in modernization as well as in becoming a part of modern world economy (Lowe, 1985).
As shown in the previous section, the lower newspaper purchasing power among rural residents meant that radio could be a more effective means of reaching the rural populations. Nonetheless, the propagation of television affected the popularity of radio somewhat during the 1980s and 1990s, although the privatization and the resultant change in content, primarily musical programming, meant that radio had maintained its popularity among different groups within the country (McDaniel, 1994). On the other hand, following the privatization process across different sectors of the Malaysian economy during Mahathir’s administration, there was some resistance from factions within the RTM, including RDU, to a complete privatization of RTM so that RDU could still enjoy the government allocations (Zulkiple, 1998).

The 1980s marked the beginning of an era of economic and technological development and continued growth for the country. As country’s new leader, Dr. Mahathir was a firm believer in economic and technological reforms. The 1980s observed privatization of many state-owned enterprises, including the media. Prior to 1983, the television service was primarily run and owned by RTM under the aegis of the Ministry of Information (later the Ministry of Information, Communications, and Culture). However, the national television programming was firmly dictated by the state policy and often resulted in showing an unreal and “imagined” portrayal of the Malaysian nation (McDaniel, 1994). For example, the programs had to show people from different ethnic groups together on screen in order to maintain the ethnic representation and promote a sense of national integration on-screen, which was generally not well received.
Promoting Local Film Industry

In 1981, FINAS (National Film Development Corporation) was established with an investment of RM 17 million under Malaysia’s trade and industry ministry (Ida Bachtiar, 1994; FINAS, 2013). The main functions of FINAS were facilitating the development, promotion, and preservation of Malaysian film industry. The establishment of FINAS was a part of the policy to develop local content aimed at promoting government’s agenda of national integration and creating a Malaysian identity. In addition, the Malaysian Film Academy was introduced during the late 1980s to train professionals in the movie industry (Gray, 2010).

Emergence of VCR

As the broadcasting policy focused more on religious, nationalistic, and development related content, programming became unattractive for the audience. In the early 1980s, video cassette recorders (VCRs) became a preferred alternative to television, especially for the Chinese and Indian groups, since they offered movies and programs from other countries including China and India (McDaniel, 2002). People gained access to foreign content, including Chinese, English, and Tamil, through video cassettes which served their entertainment needs. This resulted in a decline in audience, especially non-Malays, for the government broadcasting services. McDaniel (2002) noted that while Malaysia imposed heavy import duty on VCRs, there were various instances of smuggling of VCRs from neighboring Singapore into Malaysia. Just between 1982 and 1983, the number of VCRs in Malaysia swelled to 220,000 (cited in McDaniel, 2002, p.
50). Eventually, this led the RTM to open up and invite proposals for a private television channel.

**Growth of Private Mass Media**

Dr. Mahathir considered public enterprises inefficient, and he was inclined to enhance the role of private sector in the country’s economy. He introduced the concepts of Malaysia Incorporated and Privatization. According to Mahathir Mohamad (1984), the nation would prosper only after its commercial and service arms, or the private sector and public agencies, worked together. While the private sector was expected to optimize production and return on investment, the public agencies were expected to provide the required support to ensure the success of private sector and, thereby, the nation. The expected benefits were the government’s cooperation and support for the private sector and increased revenues for the government from the fees and taxes paid by the private sector companies. Mahathir proposed privatization as a necessity to overcome the inefficient public enterprises, which required government subsidies and investments to run (Mahathir Mohamad, 1984).

The communication technology sector required large investments to stay up with the changes and was, therefore, a target for privatization. The privatization of media led to an increase in the number of stations in Malaysia (McDaniel, 2002). According to McDaniel (2002), the private stations focused on the 18-35 age-group—the segment most desired by the advertisers. While government media also wanted to reach this segment for its commercial potential and, more importantly, for garnering support for policies, they were also responsible as national broadcasters to cater to other groups, such as children,
the elderly, and the less affluent. Therefore, they lost to the private stations and, in some cases, the drops in revenues and audiences were so high that their viability became questionable (McDaniel, 2002, p. 150). Fragmentation in radio audiences started in the late 1980s whereas fragmentation in television audiences did not take place until the late-1990s due to an increase in the number of private television channels and the introduction of satellite television later on (McDaniel, 2002).

**TV Tiga: The Birth of Private Television**

As noted previously, there were estimates of around 220,000 VCRs in the country by 1983 (cited in McDaniel, 2002, p. 50). The VCRs offered flexibility and users could choose what they wanted to watch. This made government control of content very difficult and threatened government sponsored media campaigns meant to unify the country. According to Survey Research Malaysia (1987), around 67 percent Chinese, 46 percent Indian, and 11 percent Malay households owned a VCR by 1986 (cited in McDaniel, 2002, p. 51). In addition to censoring the video content and regulating the distribution, the government offered an additional channel in the form of privately-run TV Tiga.

According to the information ministry’s statement, the private channel would operate in the interest of national security following the *Rukunegara* principles with Islam as the country’s official religion. The commercial channel was expected to follow governmental guidelines aligned with the Malaysia Incorporated philosophy. In addition, RTM held the first right to refuse direct telecast of any foreign or domestic programs on
the private channel (“Conditions for Third,” 1983). Thereafter, TV Tiga (or TV-3) came into existence and soon became popular among masses for its vibrant programming.

Through TV Tiga, programs outside RTM’s schedule could be broadcast (McDaniel, 2002). TV Tiga’s operations first targeted audiences in and around Klang Valley—the wealthiest consumer market in Malaysia. Through broadcasting rights to the 1984 Olympics and a mix of entertaining foreign content, TV Tiga gained quick popularity. TV Tiga not only emerged as a leading advertising medium within Malaysia, but also threatened Singapore Broadcasting Corporation with advertising losses during the mid-1980s (McDaniel, 2002). Due to its quick launch, TV Tiga relied heavily on foreign content to fill its programming hours during the first six months, but some of the content led to controversies during the very first year of its operations (McDaniel, 1994; “TV3: A bright new,” 1984).

TV Tiga was supposed to provide at least 30 percent locally produced content as per the RTM’s directive (“TV3: A bright new,” 1984). The information minister Datuk Rais Yatim emphasized that STMB should cooperate with RTM in obtaining foreign shows for local broadcasting to protect national heritage and prevent an invasion by the Western culture through its programming. He also indicated that the 30 percent locally produced content would increase in future. Like RTM’s networks, TV Tiga was directed to create a Malaysian identity through its daily schedule and include religious programming, although TV Tiga could not produce sufficient content since only had five program producers compared to RTM’s sixty-four by July 1985 (“Closer TV3—RTM,” 1985).
During the first few years of its operations, TV Tiga followed the government directive, but it was not mandatory for it to do so (“Bill for controlling,” 1987). However, TV Tiga had to function under the guidelines provided by the government. This became evident in 1985 when TV Tiga came under scrutiny for broadcasting violent and culturally unacceptable content (McDaniel, 1994). Following the controversies during the first few years, a Bill was introduced in 1987, which gave the Information Minister a complete control over all the private media broadcasts (“Bill for controlling,” 1987).

**More Private Radio Stations**

It was only in the 1970s that Rediffusion’s operations became possible due to favorable economic and political conditions (McDaniel, 1994). By late-1980s, Rediffusion was not only providing 18 hours of daily programming in English and Chinese dialects over two networks, but it also relayed news in Malay from RTM and had introduced other Malay programs. While the privatization of over-the-air service for radio was under consideration by the Mahathir administration during the mid-1980s, the applications for commercial broadcasting license were rejected since government radio covered 90 percent of the country and the authorities did not consider private radio stations necessary (McDaniel, 1994). Nevertheless, this position changed in 1989 when first private station in Johor was proposed. This station was close to Singapore and could possibly counter the popularity of an Indonesian commercial service aired from Bantam Island, which was available throughout the southern part of Malaysia. Moreover, the
proposed station was to be owned by royal family members, which could explain its quick approval (McDaniel, 1994).

**Media Ownership and Continued Control**

*TV Tiga and STMB*

While privatization would mean denationalization of government owned agencies and public enterprises, the privatization of Malaysian television in the early-1980s was to establish a private service in addition to the government-run television channels. Therefore, the government continued with its ownership of existing broadcasting, but had allowed the private companies to invest into the new channel—*TV Tiga*. Privatization was arranged in such a manner that investors linked with government or investment firms belonging to political parties held a stake in newly formed media companies. While the privatization resulted in change in program content, diversity in viewpoints were still missing due to continued government influence (McDaniel, 2002).

The country’s first private channel, *TV Tiga*, was operated by *Sistem Televisyen Malaysia Berhad* (STMB). Fleet Holding Group, along with publishing companies such as *Nanyag Siang Pau, Utusan Melayu*, and individuals, was responsible for setting up STMB (“Conditions for Third,” 1983). According to Sulong (1984), Fleet launched the RM 45 million private television channel project around eight months earlier than scheduled. The Fleet Group was Malaysia’s largest newspaper publisher at the time through its publishing subsidiary *New Straits Times Press (NSTP)*\(^{12}\) and also became the

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\(^{12}\) The Straits Times Press began its operations in 1845 with the publication of *The Straits Times* from Singapore. In 1900, it became *The Straits Times Press Pte Ltd* and opened its office in Kuala Lumpur in
majority shareholder of the country’s largest property and hotel company—Faber Merlin (Sulong, 1983). By August 1985, Fleet Group had also acquired majority (51 percent) stake in *Pertanian Baring Sanwa* merchant bank, which was earlier owned by Bank *Pertanian*—an agricultural bank owned by the government (Sulong, 1985).

According to the opposition leader Lim Kit Siang, the Fleet Group had connections with UMNO (“Why Third Channel,” 1983). While Fleet had a 40 percent share in STMB, *Utusan Melayu*, which was also linked to UMNO, had 20 percent share, whereas another 30 percent was held by Malay and Malaysian Indian firms, and only remaining 10 percent was publicly owned (cited in McDaniel, 1994, p. 158). There was immediate concern among some Chinese over STMB’s financial structure, which lacked any Chinese ownership. Subsequently, Shaw Brothers (Malaysia) Sdn. Bhd. attempted to purchase 10 percent stock in STMB, which was rejected by a government committee citing that the Malaysian company was partly held by its Singaporean parent corporation and, therefore, the government did not want a foreign corporation to be involved in the ownership of local television station (McDaniel, 1994, p. 159).

Following the first several years of TV *Tiga*’s operations, STMB underwent restructuring during 1987, in which the NSTP bought 30 percent of the stock from Fleet and 40 percent from other stockholders (McDaniel, 1994, p. 159). The NSTP had

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1930. During the Japanese occupation from 1942-45, the Straits Times Press was used to publish *Syonan Times* (a Japanese newspaper), but the publication of *The Straits Times* was resumed at the end of occupation. In 1952, the Straits Times Press took over Kuala Lumpur-based *The Malay Mail* and started publishing *The Straits Times* from Kuala Lumpur in 1956. In the next year, the Straits Times Press started first Romanized Malay newspaper called Bertia Harian. In 1972, the Straits Times Press changed its name to New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd (NSTP). Company’s third publication *Harian Metro* started in 1981 claiming to be the country’s first afternoon paper in *Bahasa* Malaysia (NSTP, 2013).
reportedly invested around US$42.5 million in STMB and financial services to diversify its operation and reduce financial dependence on its publishing operations (Sulong, 1987a). However, due to Foreign Investment Committee’s objection that NSTP stock should be 49.9 percent of the total stock, Fleet’s 20 percent share was bought by Malayan Cables Bhd. (MCB)—a company contracted by the Telecoms Department, thereby making TV Tiga an associate of MCB (“MCB buys 20pc,” 1987). Despite losing the direct ownership of majority of STMB’s stock, Fleet still had a controlling interest in NSTP ownership (McDaniel, 1994, p. 159). At the same time, Fleet Group reduced its stake in NSTP to 51 percent while selling over 24 percent of stock to foreign investors (Sulong, 1987a).

Changes in Media Law

The support of Dr. Mahathir’s leadership by mainstream media was evident right from the beginning of his tenure as Malaysia’s fourth Prime Minister. Following his first day in office, the headlines in the New Straits Times read, “The fourth PM of Malaysia: Enter the Mahathir Era” (“The fourth PM of Malaysia,” 1981). Thereafter, Mahathir’s administration continued modifying the existing laws and introducing new ones to increase the government’s stronghold on mass media.

Printing Presses and Publications Act

The Printing Presses and Publications Act or Act 301 was revised in 1984 and it replaced the Control of Imported Publications Act (1958; Revised 1972) and the Printing Presses Act (1948). The amended Act essentially required the potential publishers to obtain a permit for keeping and using a printing press, publishing a newspaper, and
allowed the authorities to control undesirable publications both within Malaysia as well as imported from other countries. The Act made it illegal to possess any prohibited or banned publications, publish false news, and import undesirable publications from foreign countries. Moreover, the license and the permit could be revoked, suspended, and transferred at authorities’ discretion. The Act not only allowed an officer with a search warrant obtained through a Magistrate to search, seize, and detain the printing press or publication copies under suspicion, but also allows an officer without a warrant to arrest anyone under suspicion (Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984, 2006). The home affairs ministry continued to be responsible for enforcing Act 301 like the previous Acts. Consequently, each publication in Malaysia still had to obtain and maintain a publishing license through the ministry annually.

Defamation Act

The Defamation Act 1957 or Act 286, a civil law against libel and slander that prohibited dissemination of false information affecting official, professional, or business reputation, as well as the status of women, was revised in 1983. The Act carried provisions for both intentional and unintentional acts of defamation through publication and broadcasting (Defamation Act 1956, 2006). Furthermore, Section 500 of the Malaysian Penal Code (Act 574) criminalizes defamation and states, “whoever defames another shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years or with fine or with both” (Penal Code, 2006).\(^\text{13}\)

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\(^{13}\) In addition, Copyright Act 1987 replaced the Copyright Act of 1969 following the increasing demands of copyright owners as well as U.K. and U.S. governments (Tee, 2008). The Copyright Act 1987 or Act 332
Controlling the Private Broadcast Media

While the private broadcast media offered more variety in their programming compared to government-run RTM, they had to function under the guidance of government and faced constant threat of losing programs. For instance, private radio Rediffusion had to follow the guidelines from the ministries of information and home affairs and practice self-censorship. On one occasion, Rediffusion prohibited the airing of several songs by Tai Chi, a rock band based in Hong Kong, during the late-1980s (McDaniel, 1994). Similarly, authorities censored two programs from its schedule in July 1985 and instructed TV Tiga to increase content on family life while reducing violence in its programs (McDaniel, 1994).

Moreover, TV Tiga had a little control over the newscasts, which had to be aligned with RTM’s aims. McDaniel (1994) compared newscasts across RTM and TV Tiga through a content analysis and found that while RTM carried more government news compared to TV Tiga, which carried more international news, both of them included many government stories. Moreover, coverage of development stories by TV Tiga contradicted the rationale for government’s ownership and control of media since TV Tiga was privately owned.

Although the private media practiced self-censorship and stayed on alert, they were not immune to the aftermath of political unrest. In a noted instance during 1987,
conflict emerged between two factions of UMNO—one headed by Mahathir and the other by Razaleh Hamzah—the former Finance Minister. This led to UMNO being declared illegal in early-1987 by a High Court in Kuala Lumpur. There were also inter-ethnic tensions between Chinese political parties, including oppositional DAP and coalition member MCA, and UMNO due to issues related to Chinese education and financial problems in Malaysia during the same year. In addition, the government was under opposition parties’ pressure to probe into many financial scandals at the time. These circumstances led to *Operasi Lalang* (meaning weeding operation)—a major crackdown through which more than 100 individuals were detained under the ISA by the Mahathir administration. Among the arrested were political opponents, social workers, activists, and academicians. During the crackdown, some major newspapers, including *The Sun, Sin Chew Jit Poh,* and *Watan,* lost their publishing licenses (Zaharom, 2004). Thereafter, TV Tiga’s managing director was arrested following the cancellation of a rally sponsored by UMNO. This arrest showed that the crackdown was beyond party, religious, and racial lines while Mahathir was trying to overcome the racial tensions and regain his control over UMNO (Sulong, 1987b).

*Renong and Continuation of UMNO Interests*

During the 1990s, there was major restructuring within the Fleet Group. While the Fleet Group and *Hatibudi* served as UMNO’s commercial interests, it became apparent by 1990 that some investments, *Hatibudi’s* in particular, were threatened due to the conflict between the two factions of UMNO (noted in previous section) (Lim, 1990a). Moreover, Fleet had made investments of RM 800 million (US$ 217.7 million) through
debt-financing (Lim, 1990b). As a result, major restructuring took place to consolidate UMNO’s commercial interests. Renong, a loss-stricken, publicly quoted small property company, bought Fleet Group and Hatibudi for RM 1.23 million (US$ 452 million). The acquisition gave Renong the control of eight publicly quoted companies, which included TV Tiga and the NSTP. On completion of the deal, Fleet Holding would have a 64 percent stock in Renong, which Fleet planned on reducing to 28.5 percent (Lim, 1990a).

The deal was a reverse takeover, which enabled UMNO’s control on Renong. While Renong’s executive chairman, Chan Chin Cheung, denied any political pressure, the deal had essentially ended his independent control of the company by giving 52 percent ownership to UMNO’s interests. Following the deal, Fleet expected to raise RM 440 million (US$ 163 million) by selling off its holding to other Renong shareholders (Lim, 1990b). In 1991, Renong also acquired Faber (real estate)—consolidating UMNO’s assets further. The Renong deal had apparently unified UMNO’s assets, resuscitated its corporate performance, and helped acquire new assets (Lim, 1991).

However, within two years of the deal, Renong decided to sell its 43 percent stock in STMB and 48 percent stock in NSTP for RM 800 million (US$ 320 million). In addition to Renong facing a lack of cash, there were speculations about an ongoing feud between Halim Saad, Renong’s chief, and top executives of TV Tiga and the New Straits Times, which had resulted in the decision. Around the same time, Malaysian Resources Corporation Bhd. (MRCB), a property developer company held by Hong Leong Group, became conspicuous at the stock market due to the transfer of its shares in high volume, which led to an assumption that the Hong Leong Group was selling MRCB to be used as
the means for the buyout (Lopez, 1993a). However, six out of seven directors, including Mirzan Mahathir, son of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, stepped down from the MRCB’s board of directors and the Hong Leong Group no longer controlled MRCB. Thereafter, NSTP’s group editor Abdul Kadir Jasin, NSTP’s managing director Khalid Ahmad, NSTP’s senior group general manager Mohamed Noor A Mutlib, and group editor of Berita Harian Ahmad Nazri Abdullah became the new directors and formed a company called Realmild Sdn. Bhd. (“Six out of seven,” 1993).

Realmild took over Renong’s shares in both STMB and NSTP (Cooke, 1993a). Malaysia’s corporate laws required that the parties, which bought over 33 percent of a company’s stock, to make a public offering—unless they were granted an exemption by the finance minister (Lopez, 1993a). It is noteworthy that Realmild, the company that bought Renong’s shares in STMB and NSTP, was believed to have close ties with Anwar Ibrahim—Malaysia’s finance minister at the time (Cooke, 1993a; Lopez, 1993b). Moreover, Anwar was believed to be keen on gaining control over Malaysia’s important media groups at the time—prior to 1993’s party elections that were expected to decide Dr. Mahathir’s successor (Cooke, 1993b). This essentially reiterated the strong connection between mass media and political leadership, which was evident at the time Dr. Mahathir became the Prime Minister. However, the 1990s not only saw Mahathir’s continued stronghold on the country’s media and political leadership, but also saw a decline in Anwar’s political career and a new challenge to the hegemony of country’s mainstream media and government’s control over the freedom of Press. These are
discussed in more detail in the next chapter on Malaysia’s changing media landscape since the 1990s.

Summary

The mainstream mass media in Malaysia have conventionally been government’s mouthpiece, albeit a slower growth given the lack of interest taken by the colonial government and other factors. The crucial relationship between media control and political control first became apparent during the WWII—wherein the British and the Japanese exploited the mass media for propaganda and maintaining political control. The vernacular Press, while especially active during the pre-independence era, lost its voice and edge once Malaya became independent. Following the British rule, the Barisan Nasional coalition government continued the policy of strict media control. The mass media were first used to disseminate government’s messages and were portrayed as a key to national development. Broadcasting developments in Eastern Malaysia demonstrated that what was once colonial battle for information control and propaganda later turned into a tussle between the two newly formed modern states—Indonesia and Malaysia. Thereafter, the fear of losing audiences to the VCR apparently led to the launch of country’s first private television channel, TV Tiga, in the early-1980s. Subsequently, the growth of private broadcasting challenged the strict control on media content. Nonetheless, the government apparently retained an upper hand by introducing newer laws and regulations while amending the past ones to keep the private media in check. Moreover, the parties in the ruling alliance, especially UMNO, had ownership interests in the companies that owned TV Tiga and some of the country’s other leading publications.
and the restructuring within these companies over the years consistently resulted in ownership linked to the ruling alliance. Overall, the connection between political leadership and media control had become clearer and more of a norm than an exception through the decades after the independence.

The government control of media, including both direct ownership and indirect control, had strengthened over the years and was mainly challenged by the flow of content through alternative means, such as video cassette recorders, independent productions, and the publications by opposition parties. Indeed, McDaniel (2008) marks the 1970s or the arrival of videotape as the beginning of a trend which essentially started making strict control of electronic media difficult for the government. This trend was strengthened further through the emergence of satellite television and later the new online media, which, as demonstrated in the next chapter, exploited a policy loophole to their advantage in voicing alternative and oppositional viewpoints and challenged the ruling alliance’s position and media stronghold in unprecedented ways.
CHAPTER 3: MALAYSIA’S CHANGING MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Divided into three main parts, this chapter is a continuation of the discussion on Malaysian media. The first part of this chapter observes the Malaysian government’s media policy during the 1990s, which led to the rise of alternative media online. The second part looks at ownership and consolidation in the new millennium and continued efforts by the government to maintain media control. The third part depicts the state of mass media by examining audience trends, including notable shifts during 2010. Additionally, the latter half of the third part illustrates the experience of a journalist named Raja Petra Kamarudin, who ultimately had to flee the country because of his outspoken alternative views.

Malaysia’s media policy during the 1990s included a strong support for local content, the introduction of satellite television, the launch of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), the introduction of National Film Policy, and the efforts for further privatization of government media agencies. However, a signed bill, which guaranteed Internet freedom, led to the rise of alternative media following the implementation of the MSC project. The late 1990s were marked by two events—the Asian financial crisis and sacking of the then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim—both of which contributed to a considerable decline in credibility of the mainstream mass media.

During the 2000s, the ownership continued to remain in the hands of those connected to the government, and, through a consolidation of different media outlets,

14 The term alternative media includes both online and offline media run by opposition political parties or independent entities, which were not aligned with the ruling alliance.
Media Prima emerged as the most powerful media company in Malaysia. The existing laws pertaining to media were challenged by online media, which led to changes in media law. Nevertheless, the emphasis on government-driven content continued, and the government remained in control of mass media and press freedom. However, given market pressures and a need to generate additional revenues, the government later relaxed the limits on international coverage and censorship in films and advertising. While the ruling alliance had maintained its control of mainstream mass media through different laws and policies, the growth of online media not only threatened such control but also led to a major shift in audience preferences across radio, television, films, and online media by 2010. In particular, the number of Internet users saw the highest increase in 2010 during the 2007-2012 period. Moreover, according to a Nielsen survey involving 55 countries, Malaysia ranked 9th for online video usage by consumers above the age of 15 during the same year (Nielsen, 2010, p. 7). The last section of this chapter depicts the experience of a journalist named Raja Petra Kamarudin and his online newsletter. The case of Raja Petra is crucial for developing an understanding of the constraints that exist in Malaysian media since it demonstrated the risks and consequences generally faced by the alternative press and journalists given the strict media environment.

Media Policy in the 1990s

Despite the privatization efforts which started taking place during the 1980s, the Malaysian government continued to control the flow of media content in two ways: censorship of foreign content and promoting the local content.
Censoring foreign content

A continuation of censorship practices during the British colonial period, the Malaysian Film Censorship Board was formally established in 1966 in Kuala Lumpur. In addition to feature films, the board could ban advertisements, newsreels, posters, trailers, and short films (Wan Amizah, Chang, and Jamaluddin Aziz, 2009). The made in Malaysia (MIM) rule was introduced in early-1980s to protect and nurture local values, identity, and industry. Consequently, all the broadcast commercials were required to get MIM certification from the National Film Development Corporation (or FINAS) (Teoh, 2004). On the other hand, Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) was trying to generate more revenues and end the dependence on government funding. McDaniel (2002) found that between 1990 and 1997, the commercial advertising on television (both government and private) had increased from 10 minutes per hour of programming to over 15 minutes for the most popular program in English—X-Files.

Continued support for local content

The previous chapter documented the strong support for local content, especially through the promotion of the local film industry during the 1980s. This support continued during the 1990s. In 1994, for instance, a compulsory screening directive called FINAS Act came into effect in 1994 covering 183 theaters across Malaysia (“Call to change ruling,” 1995). The Act required the local cinema operators to run domestic films for at least two weeks (Zieman, 1995). Nevertheless, domestic movies were generally reported as struggling at the box office—both locally and internationally by late-1994. According to the acting director general of FINAS at the time, Zainol Abidin Abu Bakar, none of the
films that were screened through compulsory screening during 1994 made a profit at the box office (Groves & Baharudin Latif, 1994).

Consequently, some producers and directors expressed concerns over the FINAS Act. For instance, Shuhaimi Baba, a well-known producer, urged FINAS to review the policy in February 1995 (“Call to change ruling,” 1995). In a TV Teleskop show titled Teleskop, prominent producers including Rohani Abdul Rahman, Julie Dahlan, and Yusof Haslan voiced opposition to the idea of providing such exposure to poorly created films. Rohani went on to note that the rule was damaging to the industry since people would stop going to cinema halls if more substandard movies continued to be screened under the policy (Fatimah, 1995). Nonetheless, FINAS chairman Abdul Samad Idris rejected any plans to change the compulsory screening clause, but pointed at considering possible improvement. Another cause of concern for many producers was that the practice had allowed movies cleared by the censorship board to be released ahead of those which started production much earlier but did not get a timely clearance from the censor board (“Call to change ruling,” 1995). Hence, there was widespread dissatisfaction among the industry professionals regarding compulsory screening and censorship policies deployed by the government.

In addition to offering funding and policy support that shaped the domestic film industry, FINAS owned the Merdeka studio complex in Kuala Lumpur. The studio offered all the basic facilities for filmmaking and post-production (Toh, 1996). As a result, Malaysia was producing over 20 movies annually during the early-1990s compared to about a dozen per year previously (Ida Bachtiar, 1994). The top-grossing
film during this time was *Sembilu*, a local production, which earned over 4 million RM (Malaysian Ringgit) [$1 \text{ USD} = 4.28 \text{ RM}$] at the Malaysian box office in 1994 (Toh, 1996).

More Private Channels and Introduction of Satellite Television

During the 1990s, while TV1 continued to focus more on news and information programs, TV2 was considered to be an entertainment channel by the government and it screened more non-Malay programs. The TV1 broadcasts also included more religious programming compared to TV2. Citing a study done by Shahnnon Ahmad and Ellias Zakaria (1991), Zulkiple (1998, p. 35) noted that the religious programs only attracted a limited number of viewers due to less entertaining formats, such as speech and talk. Moreover, the content was perhaps too academic and these programs were not promoted well among the audience (Zulkiple, 1998). This preference led to a shift of audience from government channels to TV Tiga. Following the popularity of TV Tiga, more private channels entered the Malaysian media market. For example, a fourth channel MetroVision was launched in February 1995, which was followed by a fifth channel called NTV7 in 1998 (Azman, 1996; McDaniel, 2002, p. 38).  

Compared to both government and private terrestrial networks within Malaysia, satellite television could offer a wider range of television content through numerous channels. The introduction of *TV Tiga* in the 1980s had shown that allowing a private television channel was a better proposition for the government compared to losing viewership to VCRs, especially since monitoring and censoring the content, both local

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15 Due to monetary issues and difficulty in maintaining its operations, MetroVision closed in 1999 (McDaniel, 2002, p. 188).
Satellite television, at first, was also portrayed by the government as an undesirable foreign influence from the West. While the administration under Mahathir had adopted a “Look East” policy, both Western influence and media were looked upon by Mahathir as a diminishing influence on the local culture (Balraj, 2006). Hence, the policy makers in Malaysia cited cultural contamination as a key reason to avoid allowing satellite television and foreign channels in the country.

For most of Asia, however, the 1990s was a decade of making a prompt shift to satellite channels. In a country like neighboring Indonesia, for instance, which is divided into thousands of islands, satellite technology had proved to be a boon in reaching remote parts of the country. In Malaysia, on the other hand, the government-owned terrestrial transmitters could cover 90 percent of the residents, which meant that there was no real push for the Malaysian authorities to allow foreign satellite channels to compete with the local broadcasting. However, it was difficult to reach the Malaysians in Borneo through terrestrial broadcasting and the Malaysian government felt a consistent threat of Indonesian propaganda. Moreover, while the government was somehow able to prohibit the use of satellite receiving systems at home in Peninsular Malaysia, the story was very different in Eastern Malaysia, where the residents could slip into Indonesian territory and buy the apparatus cheaply and had unregulated access to foreign content (McDaniel, 2002). Therefore, the government finally granted a license to Measat Broadcast Network System Sendirian Berhad (or Sdn. Bhd., meaning private limited) that launched
Malaysia’s first satellite broadcast service through the All Asia Television and Radio Company (ASTRO) (Suraya, 1996).

As ASTRO increased its operations over the years, it offered 22 television channels, which included two RTM channels, and an all-Malay channel Astro Ria (with dramas, musical shows, movies, business and general news, and educational programming) and many foreign channels, including family channels (Cartoon Network, The Disney Channel, Hallmark, NBC, Star Plus, and TNT), movie channels (HBO, MGM Gold, Star Movies, and Star Asian Movie Channel), news channels (ABN, CNBC, and CNN International), sports channels (ESPN and Star Sports), music channels (Channel [V] and MTV), and an educational channel (Discovery). In addition, ASTRO offered Wah Lai Toi and Vaanavil television channels for the Chinese and Indian audiences (ASTRO, 2014a).

Ownership of ASTRO

Ananda Krishnan, a Malaysian real estate developer and oil tycoon who oversaw Measat and ASTRO operations, had planned media ventures considered key to Mahathir’s Vision 2020—a policy aimed at turning Malaysia into a developed country by the year 2020. Despite Mahathir’s Look East policy, which focused on strengthening ties and collaborating with Asian economies, such as Japan, without depending upon Western countries, many top managers and senior executives in Krishnan’s television and telecommunication operations were American or British. Nonetheless, Krishnan’s companies consistently won licenses for satellites, telecommunication, and gambling ventures from the regulators, suggesting powerful ties with the coalition government.
(called *Barisan Nasional*) led by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Moreover, Tanjong, another company owned by Krishnan, partnered with Village Roadshow entertainment company (Australia) and Golden Harvest movie studio (Hong Kong) to develop multiplex cinemas in the country’s capital Kuala Lumpur (“Media Baron: Ananda,” 1997). In addition to Krishnan’s ties with *Barisan Nasional* (BN), the government also had a share in ASTRO.¹⁶

*Vision 2020 and Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC)*

In 1991, Mahathir introduced Vision 2020 in Malaysian Business Council’s inaugural meeting. A key goal of Vision 2020 had been to turn Malaysia into a developed country by bringing the average income levels at par with developed countries. Andaya and Andaya (2001) had noted that compared to the New Economic Policy (NEP) that had led to multiple five-year plans with specific goals Vision 2020 was “more an exhortation to Malaysians to work harder and double the GDP every ten years from 1990 to 2020” (p. 321). During the mid-1990s, the MSC was considered central to Malaysia’s Vision 2020.

Around the same time when satellite channels were becoming popular in Asia, the Internet was becoming a reality for an increasing number of countries in the world. Malaysia was not far behind in technological advancements through 1980s and 1990s since, for instance, it had become the world’s leading manufacturer of integrated circuits (McDaniel, 2008). Inspired by the promise of Information Technology (IT), Dr. Mahathir

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announced Malaysia’s ambitious multi-million dollar IT project, MSC, which consisted of a set of policies and a physical strip of land near Kuala Lumpur.

During the 1990s, the regional governments launched several IT initiatives aimed at their transformation into information societies, which included Singapore’s IT 2000, Malaysia’s Vision 2020 and MSC, Thailand’s Data Processing Zone, and Infonas (Informasi Nasional—meaning Information National) in Indonesia, which was somewhat less developed at the time (Atkins, 2002). With the opening up of the national economy to foreign, especially Western, investment in line with other Asian economies, Malaysia invested heavily in developing IT infrastructure with a hope to secure foreign contracts by allowing a number of global IT giants, including Microsoft, to operate in Malaysia. Malaysia’s investment in MSC was so high that Malaysia not only topped the telecommunications expenditure (over U.S. $16 billion, which also included satellite, cable, etc.) among the ASEAN countries during the 1995-99 period but also surpassed the expenditure by Australia and South Korea (U.S. $ 15 million each) as well as India (U.S. $ 14 million) during the same period (Goonasekara, 1997, p. 9).

With the advent of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Malaysia during the 1990s, which was followed by a rapid growth of multimedia industry and the Internet, there was a need for a new set of laws in the changing communication environment. As a result, the Communications and Multimedia Act (1998), which replaced the Broadcasting Act (1988) and Telecommunications Act (1950), was enacted and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) was formed (Legal Research Board, 2003).
Controlling Satellite Television and International Coverage

While the launch of ASTRO allowed the once banned satellite dishes, it was restricted to small dishes receiving signals from the two Measat satellites and bigger dishes were still illegal (“Media Baron: Ananda,” 1997). Moreover, the guidelines from the Censorship Board, still applied to all ASTRO programs. During the launch of ASTRO’s satellite services, Paul Edwards the chief operating officer noted:

We will work very closely with the Government to make sure that all the programmes are consistent with the guidelines . . . With the current allowances given by the Government, news over CNN will be transmitted either live or nearly live. We have the ability to transmit without delay but it all depends on the content. (cited in Suraya, 1996)

It was, therefore, clear that the ASTRO team was not only aware of the political environment they were going to operate in but was also prepared to delay transmission if needed.

In addition, the government did not want foreign interference in the country’s media operations. For instance, in 1998, the information ministry barred foreign companies from bidding for licenses for terrestrial broadcasting to prevent any foreigners from holding shares in local television networks (Ainon, 1998). However, this policy was changed somewhat when, through ASTRO, foreign channels were allowed to air in the country for the first time. Nevertheless, McDaniel (2008) notes that despite the entry of foreign channels, the television content had been heavily regulated from the beginning and both BBC and CNN International, for example, were delayed by several minutes to
allow monitoring and, if needed, removing any content that could offend the ruling alliance.

Nevertheless, over time, it became evident that censoring agencies were ill equipped to monitor private media content due to the rapidly increasing number of stations, video CDs, satellite channels, Internet channels, and other outlets. Therefore, government authorities relied on self-censorship among media professionals, which was enforced through a strict policy environment and penalties. Such self-censorship was evident through the actions of journalists and program producers who avoided topics that could get them into trouble with authorities (McDaniel, 2002, p. 174).

National Film Policy

During the mid-1990s, a panel commissioned to draft a National Film Policy (NFP) proposed the establishment of an independent body to control the film industry. This body was intended to take over the functions of information and home ministries and oversee production, distribution, and censorship aspects of the film industry (“Autonomous film body,” 1995). In 1997, the information ministry proposed the National Film Board (NFB) to oversee the local film industry and to enforce NFP. Both FINAS and Filem Negara were expected to operate under the NFB. The NFP focused on the development of the film industry, nurturing responsibility and openness, improving Malaysia’s international image and the film industry by adopting “positive cultural and societal values,” and aligning the industry with Vision 2020 and the country’s development policy (“Proposal for National Film,” 1997). The NFP targeted 80 percent local content within the Malaysian film industry by 2000. Moreover, FINAS was
expected to provide 50 percent discount on film equipment rental to Bumiputra-owned production companies. The policy also required home video distributors to keep at least 30 percent local content in their inventory (“Proposal for National Film,” 1997).

Two years after the NFP was introduced during March 1997, officials announced that many operators had failed to abide by the policy and cautioned that there would, henceforth, be strict enforcement of the NFP without compromises. Moreover, FINAS would issue licenses only to those operators who made an agreement with their distributors for acquiring local content (“Boost for local films,” 1999). In February 1999, following the announcement, 20 video centers were raided in Kuala Lumpur (“Video centres unhappy,” 1999). In collaboration with the local police and under the instruction of home ministry, FINAS began cracking down on illegal sales and distribution of pirated videocassettes and video compact discs (VCDs) (Ainon, 2001). The operators of video centers expressed frustration because locally produced content was not enough to fulfill the 30 percent quota requirement (“Video centres unhappy,” 1999). Likewise, retailers, distributors, exhibitors, and VCD manufacturers found it difficult to follow the NFP directive of 30 percent local content in their stock, especially given a lack of variety in local productions (“Boost for local films,” 1999).

By this time, Malaysian films were drawing more international attention and appreciation (Gray, 2010). However, FINAS was criticized for not paying for English subtitling of local productions and offering limited support in sending local entries to foreign film festivals (Suraya, 1997). Nonetheless, as Suraya (2006) explains, even during the financial crisis of the late-1990s the Malaysian film industry survived. This
was due, in part, to the government support, in contrast to neighboring Indonesia where many film professionals had retreated to move to the television industry following the crisis.  

**Further Privatization Efforts**

In 1998, the authorities considered privatizing FINAS along with *Filem Negara*. These film agencies were considered near dormant prior to this announcement (Baharudin Latif, 1998a). In 1999, the information ministry submitted a formal proposal for corporatization of *Filem Negara* Malaysia and FINAS to the government (“Proposal on Filem Negara,” 1999). The privatization move worried producers who were previously dependent on FINAS loans (Baharudin Latif, 1998a). Two companies, *Keris* Motion and HVD Entertainment, bought the FINAS studios (Baharudin Latif, 1998b). HVD Entertainment was a production and distribution company and *Keris* Motion was a consortium of video and film producers created in 1995 to (mainly) cater to ASTRO (Baharudin Latif, 1998b). The privatization agreement required HVD, 30 percent of which was held by Khazanah Holding *Bhd.* (the government’s investment arm), to hold 55 percent stock in FINAS while the remaining 45 percent would be held by *Keris* Motion. Furthermore, while the details of the deal were being worked out, the licensing, approval, and fund disbursement activities of FINAS were transferred to another

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17 During July 1997, many Asian countries were hit by a major financial crisis. While there were different reasons behind crisis cited by scholars, apparently the Thai baht had devalued considerably overnight and the crisis hit all the major Southeast and East Asian economies. Although the Malaysian economy was hit less severely compared to other economies, such as neighboring Thailand and Indonesia for instance (Jomo, 2003), many people had lost their lifetime savings due to the crisis and there was a growing dissatisfaction with the government among people (McDaniel, 2002).
government agency, according to the director general of FINAS Sharif Ahmed (Zainal, 1998). Therefore, despite the privatization efforts, it was clear that government control of certain aspects would continue even after the move to private ownership.

Conversely, the government had maintained ownership of RTM irrespective of the country’s economic climate over the years. On one occasion, following the currency crisis of the late 1990s, RTM had lost experienced employees to private stations due to more attractive salaries and employment terms. This loss of intellectual capital led the government to seriously consider privatization of RTM in order to make it more competitive (Chandra Sagaram, 2001). While the government was considering corporatization within RTM, the deputy information minister Khalid Yunus made it clear that the government would not allow TV2 to be privatized (“Government will not privatize,” 2001). Therefore, while privatization of mass media started in the early-1980s, privatization of government-owned media was not seriously considered even after nearly two more decades.

The Rise of Alternative Media Online

Prior to the Internet, the only available alternative to mainstream media had historically been opposition-run media. However, given the strict government control of broadcasting, media outlets for opposition political parties had conventionally been limited to print. Popular examples of opposition newspapers included Harakah (published by Parti Islam Se-Malaysia or Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) and Suara Keadilan (published by Parti Keadilan Rakyat or People’s Justice Party). However, both
of these newspapers had been operating under the continuing threat of being closed or having their publishing license revoked.

**Promise of Censorship-free Internet**

Unfortunately, following the regional economic crisis of late 1997, a number of multinational firms lost confidence in the Southeast Asian economies. Any control of the Internet was going to be considered an extension of the existing control of mainstream mass media and could easily dissuade Western economic interests and potential investors. The Mahathir administration wanted to make sure that the foreign companies stayed in MSC given that millions of dollars that were invested in the project and was willing to negotiate on their terms. Among those terms was a signed agreement in the form of *Bill of Guarantees*, which allowed complete Internet freedom in Malaysia (Atkins 2001; McDaniel, 2002; Bunnell, 2004). Although it was a part of the administration’s strategy to attract multinationals, this agreement indirectly granted an unprecedented freedom of political expression to Malaysians—something that was lacking since the country’s independence from the British rule.

Initially aimed at hosting and attracting investments from foreign firms, the MSC project received a majority of its investments from within Malaysia. Some observed that Dr. Mahathir’s criticism of the West and Western media had perhaps contributed in the diminishing support of the Western firms to the MSC effort (McDaniel, 2002). Moreover, with increasing competition from other regions (e.g. Thailand, Singapore, and Hong Kong), the chances of rapid growth through foreign investment and becoming a regional hub appeared grim. By 2000, a majority of companies hosted at MSC were, in fact,
domestic (McDaniel, 2002). While the idea of an international hub was never realized, MSC helped boost the domestic IT sector. Nevertheless, many critics questioned the relevance of MSC, including the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) leader Lim Kit Siang who stated that IT revolution needed to be about people and the change it could bring in their lives and not the bandwidth or microprocessor power (cited in McDaniel, 2002, p. 106).

_Sacking of Anwar Ibrahim_

A notable incident in Malaysia’s political history took place in 1998 with the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim—the then Deputy Prime Minister. During the early 1990s, Anwar became Dr. Mahathir’s Deputy and was the leading candidate to become the next Prime Minister. However, Anwar increasingly disagreed with some of Mahathir’s policies during the late 1990s. The conflict got worse following the currency crisis of 1997 when each maintained opposing viewpoints on how to overcome the crisis. In 1998, Anwar lost his Deputy position and seat in the parliament, was arrested under ISA, and was tried on multiple charges, including sodomy (Stewart, 2003). The rumor was that UMNO had an internal split between Dr. Mahathir and Anwar and the latter was a victim of political conspiracy. Consequently, Anwar was sentenced to six years in prison for corruption and was banned from running for elected office until 2008. However, Anwar’s supporters denied the allegations and demanded a fair trial by the government. His wife, Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, led the opposition movement, which became “Parti KeADILan Nasional” (Andaya & Andaya, 2001, p. 329).
Alternative Coverage of Anwar’s Case

Following Anwar’s sacking, there were attempts to curb alternative viewpoints by the authorities. In one instance, Harakah was confiscated by the administration on the grounds of unethical journalism practices for presenting an alternative viewpoint on the case against Anwar. Harakah had an estimated circulation of 300,000 at the time, but was asked to restrict the circulation only to party members through party offices (Sani, 2008). While the government faced some challenge within the mainstream mass media from foreign television channels—spurred by CNN and CNBC Asia’s coverage, the Malaysian satellite channel provider ASTRO was under pressure to delay the relay of these channels by around two minutes so that the content could be examined (Woodier, 2008). Evidently, the alternative coverage of Anwar’s case also led to a series of investigations by the Malaysian authorities into the local operations of CNBC (Anuar, 2008). Anwar’s arrest and beating made waves both within and outside Malaysia (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). Had it been several decades prior, the government would have controlled the media and public support of Anwar, but regular reporting by channels, such as the CNBC, before the government’s intervention, and Websites, such as freeanwar.com, which was started by Anwar’s supporters, attracted considerable attention not only within Malaysians but also among the international community (“‘Free Anwar’ Internet,” 2000). It became serious enough that the Malaysian embassy in the U.S. was questioned by the

18 Dr. Mahathir, in particular, cited international media as biased and anti-government and pro-opposition. In subsequent administration, Badawi had continued to follow UMNO’s policy of media control (Woodier, 2008).
State Department about the political situation. The whole episode led to considerable decline in Mahathir’s popularity (McDaniel, 2002).

Conventionally, the media censorship in Malaysia had been subtle and complex, primarily due to the corporate control of the media being in the hands of political parties and the hand-picked editorial executives. During peaceful times, such monitoring was hardly noticeable (Sani, 2008). However, the changing communication environment at the time of the Anwar scandal had helped avoid the complexity of censorship faced by the mainstream media. For instance, the satellite channels continued to face scrutiny from the administration in the years following Anwar’s sacking (“In pursuit of,” 2009).

Nonetheless, the provision of free Internet clearly posed a more complex threat. Coleman (2009) noted that “as political institutions have discovered to their cost, digital communication is dangerously porous” (p. 88), which was clearly evident in case of Malaysia since the lack of Internet censorship resulted in its popularity among the masses as an alternative to mainstream media coverage (McDaniel, 2002). For instance, any discussion of ethnic issues in public or on mass media was previously non-existent. However, the Internet had allowed a free environment for alternative media to flourish wherein controversial issues as well as the political dominance of the ruling alliance Barisan Nasional could be questioned.

\[19\] Anwar’s popularity as well as people’s dissatisfaction with authoritarianism and favoritism within the BN government had contributed to a strong support for KeADILan. And although BN managed to maintain its two-third majority in parliament following the 1999 elections, many Malay voters had defected from voting for BN due to Anwar’s ill-treatment by the police and judiciary (Andaya and Andaya, 2001).
Alternative Media Online: Malaysiakini’s Journey

The Anwar crisis had spurred the public’s interest through alternative media. The situation also revealed growing dissatisfaction with the BN-supported media publicly for the first time. There was an obvious manipulation of information provided by the mainstream mass media. However, the rigid control was challenged by the diversity of voices online, which meant a loss of support for BN. People were skeptical of charges against Anwar, which created opportunities for Malaysiakini, one of the first online publications to gain prominence without a political affiliation—unlike Harakkah.

Malaysiakini (meaning Malaysia Now), among Malaysia’s first online newspapers, became a subscription-based news website—not subject to government licensing as the print and broadcasting media (Abbott, 2000; Malaysiakini Blog, 2012). The editorial position of Malaysiakini supported democracy, free speech, good governance, human rights, and justice. It allowed discussion on issues such as racial quota system, religion, and other subjects considered taboo by the mainstream media. Besides English, it provided news and views in Malay, Chinese, and Tamil (Malaysiakini Blog, 2012).

Malaysiakini was started by Stevan Gan and his colleagues in November 1999 after continued frustration with the functioning of mainstream press. Gan, who previously worked for The Sun as a columnist, had experienced routine editing of his articles despite the promise of the editor to allow free speech. Eventually, his frustration peaked after one of his articles on the sufferings of immigrant labor in Malaysia was not carried by The Sun. Nonetheless, Mahathir’s pledge of free Internet had created a loophole in licensing
media and those operating online could do so without requiring a license, which proved
to be a boon for Gan and his team (Abbott, 2000). Being Web-based, it was easy to start
Malaysiakini on a low budget. The website initially provided content in English and
Malay, which was difficult with a small team (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2000).

The first story on Malaysiakini exposed Sin Chew Jit Poh (the biggest Chinese
daily in Malaysia) for publishing a doctored photograph of the members of Mahathir’s
cabinet from 1995 (when Anwar was Mahathir’s deputy) while replacing Anwar’s image.
The story stirred controversy and Sin Chew Jit Poh later apologized. At the beginning,
Malaysiakini had two to three stories a day published by a small team of a few journalists
(Abbott, 2000). However, within a year it had a team of fourteen journalists with over
100,000 daily visitors to the website (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2000). Initially
the editorial team’s target was to reach 20,000 readers in the first year, but the readership
had already crossed the 100,000 mark by the end of 2000. For its balanced and
independent reporting, Malaysiakini even won the International Press Freedom Award in
2000 (Smith, 2000). Nonetheless, Gan and his team were cautious from the outset since
Malaysiakini was based outside Kuala Lumpur with the group’s servers located in the
U.S.—preventing it from future government threats. Due to its independent reporting,
Malaysiakini was operating under a risk of police raids and harassment, as Gan had
mentioned in his interviews (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2000; Smith 2000).

After a successful first year, Malaysiakini started facing threats to its operation.
During March 2001, a police report was launched in Selangor against the website for
publishing comments from the opposition questioning the official report on death figures
during the racial riots in Petaling Jaya. In another instance during July of that same year, a student leader complained that *Malaysiakini* had published a letter in his name that he had not written. In January 2003, however, the situation got worse as *Malaysiakini* published a letter which accused the government of being partial in offering economic benefits and medical care only to Malays (or Muslim *Bumiputra*) and not the *Orang Asli* (aboriginal people mostly living in Eastern Malaysia). This resulted in Steven Gan’s five-hour-long interrogation by the police, an unannounced raid, and confiscation of 15 computers and four servers worth nearly US $40,000 (Brewer, 2003). Although there were allegations in the previous years, this was the first time that the website was shut down. Eventually, *Malaysiakini* came back online and continued to stay popular among the readers. By July 2008, *Malaysiakini* had developed as the most popular website in Malaysia and by January 2012, it had over 2 million unique visitors according to Google Analytics figures—a proof of the Website’s continued popularity (*Malaysiakini* Blog, 2012).

The success and survival of Steven Gan and *Malaysiakini* perhaps led to an increase in online publications by former journalists who worked for print media. These publications promised to offer a more balanced form of news coverage compared to the mainstream media. An example was the *Malaysian Insider*, which was started in February 2008 by Jahabar Sadiq who had worked as a journalist since the late-1980s (*The Malaysian Insider*, n.d.). Following the 2008 elections, the BN coalition failed in maintain a two-thirds majority in the parliament and lost in five states to the opposition alliance. This was largely attributed to urban votes that were influenced by alternative
coverage by online publications such as *Malaysiakini*. Thereafter, the *Barisan Nasional* government realized the importance of online media and its popularity over mainstream media among Malaysians. During the same year, police interrogated at least three bloggers on government orders (Chandranayagam, 2008). The extent of disturbance created by the alternative media online during the 2008 elections was clearly evident in UMNO’s subsequent action. In March 2009, UMNO held a general assembly under the new leadership. While no official word was made initially, a number of news websites were denied press tags to cover the event, including *Malaysiakini, The Malaysian Insider, Siasah, Merdeka Review, The Nut Graph*, and *Laksou*. In a press conference after the fact, UMNO’s secretary general confirmed barring six news websites from covering the general assembly, as they had all been perceived as “irresponsible in their reporting” by the UMNO leadership (Surin, 2009). There had been reports of government considering censorship of the Internet, but there was resistance from different sides, including the opposition leaders, such as Lim Kit Siang of DAP, who had urged the government to uphold the promise of Internet freedom (“In pursuit of,” 2009; American Free Press, 2009).

**Media Ownership, Consolidation, and Partnerships in the 2000s**

Following the currency crisis and Anwar episode during the late-1990s, mainstream media including NSTP and TV *Tiga* lost their earlier popularity among the masses and, consequently, the privatized media started incurring financial losses and were forced to reduce their operations (Zaharom, 2004). By April 2001, Malaysian Resources Corporation Bhd. (MRCB) was set to divest its control over TV *Tiga*. 

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Although loss of control over Sistem Televisyen Malaysia Berhad (STMB) would greatly reduce MRCB’s media interests, MRCB would still have sufficient assets. Moreover, the speculation was that the divestment would allow the chairman of Bernas (national rice distributor), Mohd Rahim, to head TV Tiga operations. Bernas had previously offered a bid to purchase TV2, Bernama, Filem Negara, FINAS, and several radio stations (Oon, 2001). In the same year, MRCB announced that NSTP would undergo debt restructuring. However, according to MRCB’s chief executive officer Abdul Rahman Ahmad, NSTP’s restructuring was to take place separately and only after MRCB and STMB restructuring was in place. Following MRCB’s restructuring, the new company would host STMB, NSTP, and MRCB’s IT and multimedia businesses (“NSTP debt restructuring,” 2001).

Continued self-censorship and the entry of satellite television into the media market followed by the Internet had a strong impact on the market for print. Subsequently, the mainstream publications (see Table 8 below), such as The New Straits Times, started getting into tabloid mode while competing with The Star and The Sun (Anuar, 2008). On one occasion, Abdullah Ahmad, the New Straits Times’ group editor in chief, noted

> The media business is a business. If a free press means a press without ownership, then there never has been such a thing, nor could there ever be . . . Every publisher is or should be a businessman and every businessman should want to make a profit. (“Editorial policies prerogative,” 2003)
Ahmad’s words above summed up the philosophy behind the functioning of domestic mainstream media in Malaysia. Carrying reports that were unfavorable for the ruling alliance would threaten smooth operations of a publication. Therefore, the focus remained on making a profit—even if it entailed getting into the tabloid mode and publishing sensational stories that do not threaten the government’s position. Moreover, media ownership linked to the ruling alliance would mean that a viewpoint critical of the government was unlikely to exist in media. Indeed, according to Jomo (1995), the privatization had helped a few wealthy individuals with political connections to acquire control of the newly privatized firms. Therefore, despite a privatization spree that started during the Mahathir administration, the mainstream media remained under government control.
### Major Mainstream Newspapers Published in Malaysia

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<th>Language</th>
<th>West Malaysia</th>
<th>Sabah</th>
<th>Sarawak</th>
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<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td><em>The New Straits Times</em></td>
<td><em>Daily Express</em></td>
<td><em>New Straits Times</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>The Star</em></td>
<td><em>New Sabah Times</em></td>
<td><em>The Borneo Post</em></td>
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<td><em>The Sun</em></td>
<td><em>New Straits Times</em></td>
<td><em>The Star</em></td>
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<td><em>The Malay Mail</em></td>
<td><em>The Borneo Post Sabah</em></td>
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<td>Malay</td>
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<td><em>Utusan Malaysia</em></td>
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<td>Chinese</td>
<td><em>China Press</em></td>
<td><em>Asia Times</em></td>
<td><em>International Times</em></td>
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<td><em>Guang Ming Daily</em></td>
<td><em>Berita Harian Merdeka</em></td>
<td><em>See Hua Daily News</em></td>
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<td><em>Sin Chew Daily</em></td>
<td><em>Harian Tawau Express</em></td>
<td><em>Sin Chew Daily</em></td>
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<td><em>Oriental Daily News</em></td>
<td><em>Morning Post</em></td>
<td><em>United Daily News</em></td>
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<td><em>Overseas Chinese Daily News</em></td>
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<td><em>See Hua Daily News</em></td>
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<td>Tamil</td>
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<td><em>Tamil Nesan</em></td>
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*Sources: Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia (2013), Malaysia Profile (2011), Indian Malaysian Online (2007)*

Thereafter, the mainstream (private) media firms stayed under close government supervision and continued to practice self-censorship. Sometimes they received threats and warnings despite remaining within regulations. In one such instance, MCMC sent a
letter to some private television channels requesting them to stop broadcasting speeches by opposition leaders, which earned MCMC criticism from different sides for assuming that the private television channels did not have the right to broadcast opposition speeches even if they were a part of pre-recorded parliamentary proceedings. Eventually, the Energy Water and Communications Ministry withdrew the letter (“MCMC, you’re out,” 2007). In another example, following the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, both Malaysia and Singapore made a number of arrests backed by the ISA that went unnoticed and unreported as far as the mainstream media were concerned (George, 2003). There had been many other instances—including the one when TV Tiga’s office received a bullet in parcel as a threat—where the actions of private media had fallen under government scrutiny (Sani, 2008).

Table 9 below provides a glimpse at the patterns of ownership in the Malaysian media industry. As noted later in this section, the private ownership had been held by those having close ties with the ruling alliance (also cited in McDaniel, 2002). For instance, the head of ASTRO was chosen by the Mahathir administration and had close ties with the ruling coalition (McDaniel, 2008; Woodier, 2008).
Table 9

*Major Broadcasting Media in Malaysia*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ownership</th>
<th>Media</th>
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<tr>
<td>State-run</td>
<td>TV1</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Radio Televisyen Malaysia</em></td>
<td>TV2</td>
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<td>TVi</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Operated over 30 radio stations</td>
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<td>Private</td>
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<td>8TV</td>
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<td></td>
<td>TV9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Astro (Satellite)</em></td>
<td>Era FM</td>
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<td>Hot FM</td>
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<td>Sinar FM</td>
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<td>THR FM</td>
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*Sources: “New TV channel” (2011), Malaysia Profile (2011)*

*Media Prima and Consolidation*

The new company was Media Prima Bhd. (MPB), which acquired complete control of STMB and 43.5 percent stock in NSTP in 2003 (“Media Prima to revive,” 2003; Zaharom, 2004, p. 264). The executive director of the newly formed Media Prima Bhd., Kamarulzaman Haji Zainal, had earlier worked as the press secretary for Abdullah
Ahmed Badawi and was also on *Utusan Malaysia*’s board of directors. *Utusan Malaysia* also remained in control of UMNO through the presence of both former and present UMNO leaders among the board of directors (Zaharom, 2004). Hence, UMNO’s continued control of private mass media was evident.

Zaharom (2004) cited a need for reform in the ownership to offer an opportunity to involve more players in the media industry. However, this became more difficult with further consolidation of media ownership through the expansion of Media Prima’s media interests. Media Prima was also scheduled to take over and re-launch Metrovision or Channel 8 (another private channel), which aired between February 1995 and November 1999, but went off the air due to financial challenges (“Media Prima to revive,” 2003). Within 18 months of its operations, Media Prima had become a profitable company according to its chairman, Abdul Mutalib Razak. Between 2004 and 2005, Media Prima’s net revenue growth was 21.7 percent and pre-tax profit was up by 44 percent—mainly due to advertising revenue generated by STMB (TV Tiga) and Metropolitan Televisyen Sdn. Bhd. (8TV), which was re-launched in January 2004. Media Prima also reported high profits through its TV3 Ghana operations. Moreover, the group acquired another private channel ntv7 and re-launched TV9 during 2006, which had increased Media Prima’s market share and contributed to the group’s long-term value (“Media Prima’s profit,” 2006). Overall, MPB had proven to be a profitable and growing enterprise in terms of its broadcasting operations.

Thereafter, MPB extended its ownership of mass media through further acquisitions and mergers. In November 2006, Media Prima acquired the Big Tree
Outdoor—a leading outdoor advertising firm—taking the group’s ownership to two radio stations, four private television channels, major ownership of NSTP, and two outdoor advertising businesses (including The Right Channel and Big Tree Outdoor) (“Malaysia’s MediaPrima acquires,” 2006). During late-2006, plans were also in place for a merger between the NSTP and Utusan Melayu Bhd. (UMB), the UMNO-owned publisher of Utusan Melayu, as a measure to reduce publishing costs. However, public outcry and criticism from activists led to a suspension of share trading by the two publishing companies. While Media Prima had a 43 percent ownership of NSTP, the merger would have increased the direct political control on press, especially given the large circulation figures for both Utusan Melayu and NSTP publications (Yeo, 2006; “Shares in two newspapers…,” 2006). Despite the suspension of the NSTP-UMB merger, Media Prima had been linked with UMNO thereafter (Ng, 2010). Apparently, Gabungan Kasturi, a firm owned by UMNO connections, was reported as Media Prima’s single largest shareholder in 2009 (Jayasankaran, 2009).

Media prima continued its consolidation activities, such as buying the remaining stake in 8TV, and registering continuous profits (“Stockwatch—Malaysia’s Media,” 2007). Media Prima’s successful growth within Malaysia led to the group venturing into foreign territories, such as establishment of TV3 in Ghana or Media Prima’s investment into ABC TV5 in the Philippines (Hamisah, 2007). Although Media Prima stopped its television operations in the Philippines after incurring continued losses during 2008 and 2009, it continued consolidating its ownership of media within Malaysia by gaining majority stock in the New Straits Times Press (NSTP) (Olszewski, 2009). Following the
consolidation, Media Prima witnessed an increase of RM 17.3 million in its profit from 2009 to 2010. Moreover, given the increasing purchasing power among the country’s majority (Malays), Media Prima had become more focused on the Malay audience (Ng, 2010). This shift was evident since Harian Metro, a Malay tabloid published by NSTP, had a circulation of 400,000 during 2010—easily surpassing the widely popular English daily The Star, which had a circulation of 280,000 at the time (Ng, 2010).

Over the years, Media Prima experienced a consistent growth. For instance, the combined viewership for Media Prima’s four free to air television channels amounted to around 50 percent market share by November 2012 (Aggregated Regulatory News Service, 2012). During 2012 and 2013, the company recorded a continued growth in its profits with the share price rising (“JPMorgan expects higher,” 2012; Kaur, 2013). By 2013, Media Prima had a 100 percent stake in TV Tiga, 8TV, ntv7, and TV9, and had also launched emas (a retro program channel in Malay) in 2011 (“EMAS now available,” 2011, Media Prima, 2013). Among the country’s most popular private radio services, Media Prima owned 100 percent stock in Hot FM and Fly FM, while it held 80 percent stock in One FM. In addition, Media Prima had a 98 percent stake in NSTP (from about 43 percent in 2007), which publishes The New Straits Times, Berita Harian, and Harian Metro. Media Prima also owned 100 percent stock in Big Tree outdoor media making it the largest outdoor advertising player as well (Hamisah, 2007; Min, 2009; Media Prima, 2013).
The links between media and political parties (in the ruling coalition) had been evident in many other cases as well. Moreover, the process of consolidation was not peculiar of Media Prima alone since other major media players had also been involved in such attempts. For example, Huaren Holdings Sdn. Bhd., linked with Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), had been operating Star Publications (M) Bhd., which published The Star daily. While Star Publications had been a profitable venture, Huaren Holdings’ acquisition of Nanyang Press Holding Bhd. from Hong Leong group, which begun in 2001, was not worthwhile (Ming, 2009).

Following the acquisition, the Chinese community was concerned that the takeover would restrict the views other than that of the MCA leadership and the government. Consequently, Nanyang Siang Pau, published by the Nanyang Press, had a poor circulation and incurred financial losses of RM 6.41 million (US$ 1.7 million) for the year ending on June 30, 2006. This eventually led to MCA losing control of Nanyang Siang Pau since Huaren had to sell 21 percent of its 41.95 percent stake in Nanyang Press Holding Bhd. in 2006 to Tion Hiew King. The deal allowed Tion’s company Ezywood Options Sdn. Bhd. to hold more than 44 percent stake in the Nanyang Press. Tiong, a timber tycoon, already had major stock in Sin Chew Media Corporation Bhd.—the company that published Guang Ming Daily and Sin Chew Daily (claimed to be Malaysia’s largest circulating Chinese newspaper) (“Malaysian political party,” 2006). While the acquisition of Nanyang Press did not prove worthwhile for Star Publications, it
was noteworthy that Star had earlier acquired Star Rfm (Red FM) Sdn. Bhd. (formerly Rediffusion\textsuperscript{20}) successfully since 2003 (Remembering Rediffusion Limited, 2011).

\textit{Funding Films and Emerging Collaborations}

While FINAS had set up a financial aid scheme to support filmmakers since the early 1980s, this fund was to be used for films enhancing Malaysia’s international image at film festivals (Suraya, 2006). Consequently, \textit{Filem Negara} was responsible for the initial productions (titled \textit{Embun} and \textit{Paloh}) that used FINAS’ funding, which puzzled the industry since both of these were government undertakings. While these productions won local and international awards, they did not succeed at the box office. Over the years, the process for getting funding had kept some established producers waiting for getting an approval, whereas some others with little experience or credentials were able to get the financial support easily. This practice had led to a lack of financial success and kept the industry stagnant. According to an industry observer, FINAS also needed to provide marketing support to the government-funded productions to improve their box office performance (Suraya, 2006).

By 2009, FINAS was collaborating with companies such as Dubai-based Spaceton International to develop documentaries and also working with Multimedia Development Corporation to help MSC-status multimedia companies to showcase their productions internationally (Azlan, 2009, “MSC-status firms,” 2009). In the same year, the Director General of FINAS Mohd Mahyidin Mustakim noted that FINAS was

\textsuperscript{20} The British partner in Rediffusion sold its 45 percent shares to local corporations in 1989. By 1991, Rediffusion’s name was changed to Rediffusion Cable Network Sdn. Bhd.
expecting RM 50 million box office revenue for local movies by the year-end (“Finas: RM50m in movie,” 2009). In 2010, Ahmad Puah Onah, the Malaysian Film Producers Association President, pointed out that local films that contained 70 percent Bahasa Malaysia enjoyed two weeks’ compulsory screening and the producers of those films qualified for a 20 percent tax rebate. On the other hand, local films in other languages did not receive those benefits according to Ahmad (Meor, 2010a).

The scheme offered two slots per month for local films to be screened in the biggest hall owned by cinema operators. While the scheme helped local films earlier, the number of films produced per year had doubled during the late-2000s, thereby increasing the wait-time for forthcoming movies. For instance, over 20 local productions were awaiting a screening date in mid-August 2010. Therefore, the scheme had proved a bottleneck and was subsequently reviewed (Meor, 2010b). Thereafter, FINAS scrapped 20 percent rebate for local films on December 1, 2010 (Meor, 2010c).

The rebate was replaced by a new scheme called Film Returns Incentive Scheme, which qualified the films that made below RM 6 million to get up to 10 percent of their box office collection as an incentive. The percentage would drop for higher box office collection, which led several producers to cut production costs (even if it compromised the film’s quality) to make sure they made a profit (Meor, 2011a). This could lead to a decline in production quality and create a new challenge for FINAS. In April 2011, FINAS finally modified its compulsory screening scheme to allow for weekly release of new local productions. While this change could improve the previous situation, the
increasing number of local productions still meant that the films under production during late-2011 would have to wait for their release until late-2013 (Meor, 2011b).

Through the budget allocation in October 2010, FINAS received RM 200 million to buy locally produced films, documentaries, and dramas of high quality—as a boost to the local television and film industries (Kaur et al., 2010). By 2012, FINAS offered funding up to RM 20,000 for short films and up to RM 50,000 for animated programs and documentaries through its Film Art and Multimedia Development Fund. FINAS also offered Feature Film Loan Scheme with loans up to 90 percent of the production budget or RM 1.5 million (whichever being lower) and Fiction Loan Scheme, which was introduced in 2005, with a revolving RM 50 million-fund to be used by local producers as working capital (Radziah, 2011).

Despite the presence of Filem Negara for several decades, the overall quality of documentary filming was reported to be below international standards in terms of background research, filming, and presentation even during the mid-2000s (V.K.C.T., 2005). In 2011, Mohd Naguib Razak, an internationally acclaimed documentary filmmaker, became the director general of FINAS (Meor, 2011a). Thereafter, FINAS’ emphasis moved to documentaries. In November 2012, Dr. Rais Yatim, the information, communication, and culture minister, announced a merger between FINAS and Filem Negara to improve productivity and to prevent overlapping infrastructure and wastage of funds since both these agencies had been providing similar services. While a key objective of FINAS was to promote nationalism in films, the eventual merger between FINAS and Filem Negara was aimed at producing nationalistic films that were not
considered profitable (“Finas, Filem Negara,” 2012). Dr. Yatim emphasized that the merger was an outcome of the National Film Development Corporation (Amendment) Act 2012 and encouraged FINAS “to produce films on statehood” (“Finas urged to be aggressive,” 2013).

Following the merger, FINAS was urged to be more aggressive in CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) and animation (“Finas urged to be aggressive,” 2013). This shift in focus toward CGI and animation could, in part, be attributed to the creation of the country’s first ever stereoscopic 3D animated production War of the Worlds: Goliath, which won the Best 3D Animated Feature award at the 3D Film Festival held in Los Angeles in 2012. The production was supervised by Tripod Entertainment Sdn. Bhd., which had received RM 1.1 million CGI Fund from FINAS (Archibald, 2013).

Continued Growth and Popularity of Satellite Television

By 2011, the federal government launched a third RTM channel TVi “to promote a deeper understanding” of the people of Sabah and Sarawak in Eastern Malaysia (“New TV channel,” 2011). Therefore, the government had continued with its emphasis on Eastern Malaysia in its broadcasting policy over the years. On the other hand, ASTRO’s broadcasting operations saw a continuous growth. For instance, Najib Razak, Malaysia’s sixth Prime Minister, announced ASTRO’s free satellite television service NJOI (derived from the word enjoy) in December 2011. After purchasing a satellite dish and an NJOI decoder, the viewers could receive the free service, which included 19 radio and 18 television channels. In his announcement, Najib emphasized the role of 1Malaysia (a government campaign aimed at national unity and racial harmony) in developing such
products as NJOI and praised ASTRO for bridging the digital gap. The first 50,000 households chosen to receive the decoders ahead of the rest of the country were listed as low-income earners under the e-Kasih governmental program. Moreover, these households received decoders free of charge since the scheme was a part of ASTRO’s corporate social responsibility efforts (Y. Lee, 2011a; 2011b).

Consequently, ASTRO reached a penetration of 52 percent television households (around 3.5 million residences) and radio listenership of 52 percent (13 million listeners per week) in 2012 (ASTRO, 2014a). In the next year, ASTRO launched 11 more channels in Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese, and Tamil. Some of these new channels were also available through NJOI—bringing the total number of channels available through the service to 22 (“Astro launches 11 new,” 2013). By 2014, ASTRO offered 20 radio channels in addition to more than 160 television channels, including 56 entertainment, 32 high definition, 16 movie, 14 premium, 13 kids, 10 sports, nine news, nine knowledge (educational), and four music (ASTRO, 2014a).

While Krishnan built his empire through oil business initially, ASTRO Malaysia Holdings Berhad grew continuously over the years and owned digital media, pay television, publications, and radio by 2014 (“Media Baron: Ananda,” 1997, ASTRO, 2014b). Consequently, Krishnan’s net worth during 1997 was over US $1 billion, which increased to around US $11.7 billion in 2013 while he was ranked 82nd on the Forbe’s list of the world’s richest billionaires (“Media Baron: Ananda,” 1997; “The world’s richest,” 2013).
Media Control and Press Freedom

It is noteworthy that Malaysian media had functioned under two different ministries of the government. The Ministry of Information Communications and Culture (MICC) supervised Department of Broadcasting (RTM), Department of Information, Malaysian National Film Department, Malaysian National News Agency (Bernama), Malaysian National Film Development Corporation, Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), and Telekom Malaysia Berhad (besides 11 other departments) (Malaysia Central, 2013). The Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA), on the other hand, supervised Information Technology Management Division, Film Censorship Control and Enforcement Division, Film Censorship Board, Publication and Qur’anic Text Control Division, Security and Public Order Division, and Police Force Commission (besides 22 other divisions) (MoHA, 2013a). The Ministry of Home Affairs, thus, offered services including Printing Machine License, Film Censorship, Publishing Permit, and Al-Quran Text Control (besides seven other areas) (MoHA, 2013b). Overall, MICC was responsible for media development, whereas MoHA was designated for censorship, enforcing laws, and maintaining order.

Changes in Media Law

In addition to the Communications and Multimedia Act (1998), other laws had also been used to exert press control. For instance, Sedition Act 1948 had been continuously used to detain opposition journalists and bloggers (“Malaysia arrests second,” 2008). Similarly, defamation laws had kept journalists in check and had resulted in caution while reporting. For example:
Instead of saying that some one [sic] is corrupt, it is better to say the person failed to respond to an allegation that he had received a sum of money from a contractor. Or instead of saying that there was a cover-up of certain cases by the police, it is safer to say that the case remained dormant and unsolved for many years despite leads provided by the public (Ng, 2008).

On the other hand, Prime Minister Najib Razak announced in 2011 that the annual license renewal would be abolished from the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984. The publications will be issued license once, which will be valid indefinitely unless revoked (“PM announces repeal,” 2011).

*Film Censorship Act*

Film Censorship Act 2002 or Act 620 had established and authorized a Board of Censors to control and regulate the screening and distribution of films in Malaysia. According to Act 620, the Board of Censors was appointed by the Home Affairs Minister and consists of a Chairman, a Vice-Chairman, and at least two more people (Film Censorship Act 2002, 2006). The Act banned manufacturing, circulation, possession, or screening of obscene films and empowered the Board to approve, approve with alteration, or disapprove a film for exhibition with applicable classification (e.g. Adult or otherwise). The Act had made it mandatory for all the film-publicity material to be submitted to the Board for approval. It was illegal to screen any film-publicity material without displaying the approval mark from the Board (Film Censorship Act 2002, 2006).
Copyright Act

This Act could be used to regulate the entry of foreign content in Malaysia. However, rapid technological developments meant that the existing Copyright Act was insufficient in preventing the unauthorized distribution of copyrighted works and also in dealing with international copyright issues (Tee, 2008). In one instance, the Recording Industry Association of Malaysia estimated the piracy rate at 75 percent (Patrick, 2003). In 2000, more changes were introduced including, but not restricted to, live performers’ rights, database protection, proof-of-ownership, and border measures. In 2007, the Intellectual Property Court was established in Malaysia. However, despite the proactive measures, the number of cases in Malaysian courts remained at 30 in 2008 (Tee, 2008). Therefore, the enforcement of the Act had remained questionable.

Repealing EO

The administration had consistently used Emergency Ordinance (EO) for many years until its total repeal in 2011. According to one estimate, while there were over a hundred Internal Security Act detainees in Malaysian prisons in 2005, there were more than 700 EO detainees during the same year (Cheah, 2006). In 2011, about 30 people (belonging to a Malaysian socialist party) were arrested for initiating a war against the King. Following a seven-day period, six of them were re-arrested in June 2011 under the EO. Within a month from their arrest, about 522 police reports were lodged calling for the release of these detainees (Tarani Palani, 2011). Similar incidents and a continued criticism of the EO eventually resulted in its total repeal by the end of 2011 (“PM announces repeal,” 2011).
noted that the EO was irrelevant in current context as the cell phone technology had made it possible for the EO detainees to continue their work even if they were sent far away through detention (Ariffin, 2012).

Replacing ISA with SOSMA

Over the years, the government used Internal Security Act (ISA) or Act 82 against opposition leaders, activists, teachers, and students, which had resulted in numerous demonstrations and protests (“Malaysia to scrap,” 2011). The number of people attending such rallies had continued to increase (Netto, 2008). In one such instance, a noted journalist and blogger named Raja Petra Kamarudin was held under the ISA for the second time in September 2008 for allegedly insulting Islam through his article and posing a threat to the national security (“Malaysia blogger held,” 2008). Within hours of Raja Petra’s arrest, a Chinese journalist and an opposition politician were also held under ISA, although both of them were later released (“MP free as,” 2008). The arrests were viewed as a crackdown by the government and led to a protest in Kuala Lumpur the next day calling for the release of the opposition politician and abolishing of the ISA (Brant, 2008a). Within the next few days, Zaid Ibrahim, the cabinet minister for legal affairs resigned reportedly due to the government’s misuse of ISA to detain civilians who did not pose a terrorist threat (“Malaysia resignation amid,” 2008). The pressure to abolish ISA mounted amid political uncertainties within Malaysia and the U.S. viewed it as a “fundamental infringement of democratic rights and values” (“MP free as,” 2008).

However it was not until 2011, when Prime Minister Najib Razak announced that the Act was under consideration for being repealed by the government (“Malaysia to
scrap,” 2011). Finally, the infamous ISA was repealed in late-2011 and was later replaced by the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (SOSMA) or Act 747 (“PM announces repeal,” 2011). According to Ariffin (2012), following the repeal of ISA, Najib Razak revealed that the Act helped the political detainees more than the government through earning them political attention. Despite the repeal of ISA, the new law—SOSMA—allows for arrest and detention of a person suspected of being involved in security offences without a warrant for up to twenty-eight days (Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012, 2012). According to Amnesty International, the first arrests under SOSMA were made in February 2013, which suggests that the arrests continued despite a change in law (“First arrests under,” 2013).

**Government-Driven Content**

Besides control over the ownership, the Barisan Nasional government (or the ruling alliance) had continued to use the mainstream media since the country’s independence to convey its ideological stand and policies. After the 2004 elections, Mahathir was succeeded by his deputy Abduallah Ahmad Badawi, who propagated the idea of Islam Hadhari (progressive Islam) as a part of his election campaign policy and used media to his advantage in securing the trust of the majority (Khadijah, 2007). Thereafter, since Najib Razak became Malaysia’s sixth prime minister in 2009, both the state-run and private media were expected to promote the 1Malaysia campaign—aimed at national unity and racial harmony (Lee, 2009). In fact, both RTM and MICC had included the term “One Malaysia” in their vision and mission statements (RTM, 2013; MICC, 2013).
On one occasion during September 2009, ASTRO’s broadcasting license, which was initially valid until 2017, came under scrutiny by the ministry of information, communications, and culture and ASTRO was told to include more “government friendly” and “One Malaysia” programming in its package (“In pursuit of,” 2009). Apparently, according to a UNESCO survey involving 28 countries, Malaysia along with Guinea, Kenya, and Senegal, had the highest quota for domestic media content—with a 60-percent quota for domestically produced programs on private television channels during 2009–2011 (UNESCO, 2012, p. 13).

Moreover, the government often had prompted the press to be more helpful in uniting the country by avoiding content that could lead to social unrest (Balraj, 2006; Sani, 2008). The Malaysian Press Institute that was originally established in 1968 by the Ministry of Information to train future journalists became a non-governmental organization in 2007 (MPI, 2014). The government run news agency Bernama had continued to act as a key source of news information for the mainstream media outlets (Malaysia Profile, 2011).

Given the disparities between local and foreign media coverage, Malaysia had often been listed among the countries with limited freedom of press. For instance, according to the BBC website:

Malaysia has some of the toughest censorship laws in the world. The authorities exert substantial control over the media and can impose restrictions in the name of national security. The government is keen to insulate the largely-Muslim population from what it considers harmful foreign influences. News is subject to
censorship, entertainment shows and music videos regularly fall foul of the censors, and scenes featuring swearing and kissing are routinely removed (Malaysia Profile, 2011).

For its tight control and censorship of the media, Malaysia was ranked at 142 out of 197, among the countries considered not free, in the global press freedom rankings for 2015 (Freedom House, 2015, p. 23).

*Censorship in Advertising and Films*

*Advertising*

While foreign advertisements were prohibited on Malaysian media during the last century, the government finally allowed foreign commercials on Malaysian television in October 2004 in a move to increase advertising revenues for the broadcasters. This policy was also introduced to foster creativity and improve quality and cost-efficiency within the local advertising industry, which had, until then, been driven by the MIM (made in Malaysia) rule. The television stations and advertising industry welcomed the decision. Farid Ridzuan, TV Tiga’s Chief Executive Officer, noted that this would increase the revenue by 10 to 20 percent for the broadcasters. Earlier, there were complaints of lack of creativity in the industry and long wait-times for FINAS’ approval. Although the home ministry’s censorship guidelines still applied to all the advertisements and an approval was still required to prevent the airing of foreign advertisements with objectionable scenes, this move offered an opportunity to the broadcasters to improve the quality of content (“TV stations happy,” 2004).
Films

The agency responsible for development of the local film industry in Malaysia—FINAS—had functioned under various ministries of the government since it was established in 1981. According to the FINAS website, for instance, it was moved to the information ministry in October 1986, then to the Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Heritage in 2004, followed by the Ministry of Information, Communication, and Culture, and under the Ministry of Communication and Multimedia in May 2013 (FINAS, 2013). While the government had supported the film industry in general (through policies such as compulsory screening scheme), it had also been strict in terms of censorship. Consequently, commercial films focused on light infotainment, and some filmmakers had elected to bypass the idea of releasing some of their critically acclaimed works within Malaysia and opted to release their films internationally rather than seeking commercial success domestically (Khoo, 2010; Gray, 2010). Conventionally, the documentaries on ASTRO and government television channels were aligned with state’s policies and ideology, but that was not the case with the independent films produced after 2000, which were often funded by non-profit groups or individual producers and not any of the government agencies, such as RTM or Filem Negara (Khoo, 2010).

One of these independent movies was called Lelaki Kommunis Terakhir (The Last Communist) that was released in 2006. Although the movie was initially approved by the Board of Censors for general audiences, certain sections within the Malay press opposed the movie (mainly due to its title and not the content) and the Home Affairs Minister banned the movie (McKay, 2010). While the film was considered as one of the least
objectionable by Amir Muhammad, the irony in getting banned was perhaps due to the mention of Kommunis in the title, and any mention of communism and Chin Peng (a former communist leader) was still perceived by the administration as a threat.  

Nevertheless, the film had one sanctioned screening following a public outcry and was screened to parliamentarians in Kuala Lumpur. According to McKay (2010), the experience of Lelaki Kommunis Terakhir revealed the “banalities of arbitrary censorship” in Malaysia (p. 173).

Similarly, The New Village (director Wong Kew Lit and producer Astro Shaw) was initially set to be released on August 22, 2013 but was later banned from release. The film portrayed Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army and Communist Party of Malaya, both of which fought against the Japanese forces during WWII, as freedom fighters. According to Mukhriz Mahathir, the Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) for the state of Kedah, the film “might create uneasiness in Malaysia’s multiethnic society” (“Ban film if it glorifies,” 2013). Based on the minister’s claim, the film was to be reviewed again by FINAS to guarantee that it was not “misleading” before they allowed it to be released in theaters. Another film Tanda Putera, on the other hand, was supported by Mukhriz since it portrayed sacrifices made by police and army during the violent events of 1969 (“Ban film if it glorifies,” 2013). Featuring the life of Malaysia’s second Prime Minister and his Deputy around the violent incidents that took place on May 13, 1969 following the

21 Amir Muhammad is among the few who pioneered independent digital film in Malaysia. In 2000, his first feature film, Lips to Lips, became Malaysia’s first independent digital film (McKay, 2010). Mohammed went on to make a number of short films as well as feature films during the next decade with an ironic take on Malaysian life.
country’s general elections, *Tanda Putera* was praised by mainstream media for its portrayal of former leaders. Although there was a movement boycotting the movie, evident through a page created on the social networking website Facebook, which described the movie as “racist” and painting “Chinese Malaysians in bad light,” the movie was, in fact, released just two days before the country’s 56th independence day (Chua, 2013).

Khoo (2010) noted that the government’s insistence on technological advancement and computer skills along with cheap access to foreign content and art cinema through pirated VCDs (video compact discs) followed by DVDs (digital versatile discs) had supported the development of independent filmmaking in Malaysia. For instance, there were a couple of pro-Reformasi documentaries which were sold through the VCD black market following the Anwar crisis in 1998 (cited in Khoo, 2010, p. 143). The advancements in recording technology also meant that films could be made more independently rather than relying on large production crews and at a fraction of production cost associated with commercial films. These so called “indies” (i.e. independent filmmakers) in Malaysia did have some overlap with documentary filmmakers, but were predominantly Chinese according to Khoo (2010). While Khoo finds the climate for the propagation of such films depressing—primarily due to the state and self-censorship as well as the lack of incentive for the filmmakers—these films had definitely demonstrated alternative means to reach audiences through DVDs, VCDs, and the Internet.
In addition to independent non-commercial films, the local commercial productions were also subject to the government’s scrutiny. During 2011, for instance, most local films had failed at the box office and most of these films were made by first-time producers (Meor, 2011b). However, the box office revenue for 2011 reached the RM 100 million mark (Radziah, 2011). In particular, there was an excess of locally produced horror films, which led to much criticism and debate. Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed even remarked that such movies were “counterproductive” to society. Consequently, Naguib Razak, then the newly appointed director general of FINAS, noted that FINAS was unable to impose sanctions on horror films without a directive from the ministry of information, communication, and culture (“Horror movies okay,” 2011). Nonetheless, Naguib later noted that FINAS would help local non-horror films’ international marketing efforts (Meor, 2011b), thereby implying that there was an incentive for not making horror films.

Audience Trends

Radio

Despite facing competition first from satellite television and then the Internet since the 1990s, radio has appeared to maintain its popularity in recent years. According to Nielsen ratings, Malaysia had the highest percentage of radio listeners (21.34) in the Asia-Pacific region—ahead of Australia (19.11), Singapore (17.08), Indonesia (16.58), Thailand (16.40), and the Philippines (10.59) (Asia Media Journal, 2008). By 2012, RTM had six radio stations which provided 24-hour service in Malay, English, Chinese (Mandarin) and Tamil. For the listeners in East Malaysia (in the states of Sabah and
Sarawak), RTM Kota Kinabalu offered Kadazan, Bajau, Dusun, Murut, English, and Mandarin language service (RTM, 2012).

**Television**

The popularity of the government-operated television channels had been consistently declining among younger audience groups over the years. On one occasion, Fauziah, Abdul, Emma, Arina, and Hasrul (2011) conducted three focus groups to analyze the reception of TV1 compared to other channels. The findings suggested that none of the three groups, which included young executives aged 24-30, university students aged 19-21, and housewives over 40 years, was motivated to watch TV1 since they found the programs unattractive and un-relatable. The students, in particular, reported hardly watching TV1 since it was “boring” and focused on rural and older-generation audiences (Fauziah et al., 2011, p. 9). Fauziah et al. (2011) also reported that the students saw their parents and older generations following TV1 programs out of habit and not because TV1 programming was more interesting.

Media fragmentation had been a key issue that had resulted in the inability of government television channels to reach the vast majority of the country’s population. Continuing Mahathir administration’s policy of promoting *Bahasa Malaysia* in media and academic institutions, the television channels, particularly the government ones, remained focused on programming in *Bahasa Malaysia*. The primary audience for such programs had been Malays, and only a minority audience (about 2-3 percent) were Chinese or Indian. According to McDaniel (2008), “the Chinese and Indian avoidance of Malay programming is not due to a lack of facility; it is a matter of personal choice” (pp.
Moreover, Malays watched limited content in Chinese or Tamil language. Overall, the reception of English programs had been positive across the three ethnic groups. Consequently, foreign channels, such as Al Jazeera English, had gained popularity through access on YouTube, which extended the by coverage foreign channels, especially for those who lacked access to foreign channels—provided through ASTRO (McDaniel, 2008). Viewers had been accepting alternative media coverage “as a dependable alternative to mainstream media” (McDaniel, 2008, p. 41). Additionally, it had become increasingly challenging for the government to control the multiple channels of information.

Films

The shift in television audience from government to private television channels and domestic to foreign content was also evident in the context of Malaysian films. For instance, Table 10 below shows an increase in domestic films followed by a decline in attendance starting in 2012. On the other hand, the attendance for English films had continued to steadily increase over the years. The number of Cinema screens increased from 68 to 124 between the years 2006 and 2013 (Table 10). Also, while the total number of movie-goers (theater admissions) in the country increased from 27.69 to 59.50 million in 2011, it had declined to 46.43 million for the January to November, 2013 period (FINAS, 2014).

22 The increase in attendance for English language films was steady with an exception of 2009—following the global financial crisis of 2008, which did not affect other language films (see Table 10).
Table 10

*Cinema Attendance in Malaysia (millions)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013 (Jan-Nov)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td>6.03</td>
<td>9.44</td>
<td>13.14</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Films</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>5.44</td>
<td>8.02</td>
<td>7.42</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Films</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Films</td>
<td>16.33</td>
<td>23.26</td>
<td>30.12</td>
<td>28.79</td>
<td>32.83</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>37.89</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesian</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27.69</td>
<td>33.55</td>
<td>43.85</td>
<td>44.13</td>
<td>54.49</td>
<td>59.50</td>
<td>56.90</td>
<td>46.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: FINAS, 2014*

*Digital and Online Media*

Compared to some neighboring countries, as well as many other countries outside the region, Malaysia had remained ahead—both in terms of media technology and its use. For instance, according to one estimate, Malaysia was ranked third with a projected penetration of 40 percent among the top ten pay DTH (direct to home) television countries by the end of 2016 (Digital TV Research, 2011, p. 2). Besides a higher percentage of radio audience compared to other countries in the Asia-Pacific (mentioned previously), television in Malaysia had a reach of 96 percent during the first quarter of 2010 (Nielsen, 2010, p. 5).

The most impressive performance, however, has been in terms of a continued growth in the number of Internet users. According to the International
Telecommunication Union, while 21.38 percent Malaysians were online in 2000, this ratio almost tripled in a decade with around 61 percent of Malaysians online by 2011 (ITU, 2011). As shown in Table 11 below, the number of Internet users increased from over 15 million in 2007 to nearly 18 million in 2012. And just between 2010 and 2011, Malaysia saw an increase of over 1.5 million Internet users (see Table 11). While the dial-up subscriptions and fixed telephone lines saw a decline, the broadband subscriptions and mobile subscriptions had a rapid growth during 2007 and 2012.

Table 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internet Users in Malaysia (’000s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet Users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet Subscribers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dial-Up Internet Subscribers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadband Internet Subscribers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixed Telephone Lines in Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile Telephone Subscriptions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Euromonitor International, 2013 (from International Telecommunications Union/OECD/national statistics)

There were at least two factors, noted previously in this chapter that had corroborated the trend of online media becoming more popular than the mainstream
media during 2010. First, the increasing number of Internet users and broadband subscriptions provided high speed connections and made it easier for the users to access videos and other online content. Second, there was an increased use of online content among the users. According to a Nielsen study, Malaysia ranked seventh among 55 countries that were included in the sample from around the world, for online video usage (by consumers above the age of 15) (Nielsen, 2010, p. 7). In the same study, Malaysia ranked ninth for “Video Consumption on Computer at Work” and sixteenth for mobile video usage (for the most recent month), although Malaysians (individuals above the age of four) still watched 3 hours and 18 minutes of television per day on an average (Nielsen, 2010, p. 8-10).

Besides video consumption, there were other Websites popular among the Malaysian Internet users whose number and percentage had grown rapidly since the early 2000s. As shown in Table 5, both Facebook.com (social networking website) and YouTube.com (video sharing Website) ranked among the top five most popular websites in Malaysia in 2014. Notably, Blogspot.com (blog hosting website) that ranked eleventh globally was ranked fifth in Malaysia. Moreover, the presence of Blogger.com and Wordpress.com within the top fifteen clearly showed the popularity of reading and writing on blogs among Malaysians. Also, Malaysiakini was the only news Website to make it to the list of top fifteen during 2014—once again implying a continued and perhaps growing popularity of alternative media online among Malaysians (see Table 12 below).
### Table 12

**Top 15 Websites: Malaysia and Global**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website Rank</th>
<th>Malaysia</th>
<th>Global</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Facebook.com</td>
<td>Facebook.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Google.com.my</td>
<td>Google.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Google.com</td>
<td>Youtube.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Youtube.com</td>
<td>Yahoo.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Blogspot.com</td>
<td>Baidu.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Yahoo.com</td>
<td>Amazon.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Wikipedia.org</td>
<td>Wikipedia.org</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Malaysiakini.com</td>
<td>Qq.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Maybank2u.com.my</td>
<td>Live.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Mudah.my</td>
<td>Taobao.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Twitter.com</td>
<td>Blogspot.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Blogger.com</td>
<td>Google.co.in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Live.com</td>
<td>Twitter.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Amazon.com</td>
<td>Linkedin.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Wordpress.com</td>
<td>Yahoo.co.jp</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Alexa, May 2013*

Boosted by the growth of communication sub-sector (a part of services sector of the economy), the Malaysian economy witnessed a growth of 7.2 percent in 2010 and 5.1 percent in 2011. The communication sub-sector grew by 8.8 percent during the last
quarter of 2011 due to higher data and voice usage and multimedia services (Department of Statistics, 2012). The economic growth influenced by the growth of the communication sector was an incentive that the government could not afford to lose. Therefore, censoring the Internet would also hurt the domestic communication sub-sector, in addition to limiting the FDI (foreign direct investment) inflow, which went from US $1 million to $9 billion between 2009 and 2010 according to UN figures (Mostrous, 2012).

Raja Petra Kamarudin and Malaysia Today

This section depicts the consequences and outcome of voicing an alternative opinion for a Malaysian journalist. The experience of Raja Petra Kamarudin and Malaysia Today presents a unique situation wherein the government’s inability to censor the Internet and the urge to keep a clean political image internationally came into sharp conflict with each other. The following sub-sections note Raja Petra’s introduction to politics, support for Anwar Ibrahim, controversies and trials, operations of and attacks on Malaysia Today, and Raja Petra’s eventual self-exile from Malaysia due to constant threat of further detention.

Supporting Anwar and Becoming a Journalist

Born in a royal family, Raja Petra attended the Malay College Kuala Kangsar, although he did not speak Malay until his 20s. He later became a successful businessman before turning into a journalist and an author during his late 40s. When Raja Petra did his first Haj (religious pilgrimage for Muslims) in 1981, he was impressed to see Anwar Ibrahim’s popularity. Thereafter, Raja Petra worked on Anwar’s political campaigns
during the 1980s, but their relationship drifted apart when Anwar became Mahathir’s deputy (“Royal revolutionary pays,” 2002). During the late-1990s, Raja Petra started writing a column for the English edition of an oppositional publication Harakah with the pen name of Sulong Kamarudin (since he supported Anwar in his articles and the opposition did not favor Anwar). In 1997, Raja Petra’s article “Battle Royal” depicted the expected conflict between Mahathir and Anwar. In two other articles, namely “The rise and fall of Anwar Ibrahim” and “Malaysia does not need another political party,” Raja Petra predicted Anwar’s fall and that the Reformasi movement (a Malaysian reformation movement mainly inspired by an oppositional movement in Indonesia) would fall once it became a political party. Compared to Indonesia, the Philippines, or Thailand, where the street demonstrations had led to change in regime, the Malaysian reform movement could not succeed because it had taken the form of a political party and the reformists had become more focused on attaining party positions than on organizing street protests against the ruling alliance (Raja Petra Kamarudin, 2006a).

When Anwar was sacked for corruption in 1998, Raja Petra initially did not support Anwar’s cause. However, he got concerned as the allegations of sodomy and illicit affairs surfaced to tarnish Anwar’s public image following the sacking (“Royal revolutionary pays,” 2002). While Anwar was serving his six-year prison sentence for corruption and was also being tried for charges of sodomy, his supporters launched the website freeanwar.com as a part of the “Free Anwar Campaign” (“Free Anwar’ Internet,” 2000). Raja Petra was the director of the whole campaign and managed the website. As a result, he was threatened and abused by the authorities for supporting
Anwar. In an attempt to close down freeanwar.com, police raided his home and later arrested him publicly in front of his family. Along with nine other activists, he was initially detained under ISA for two years in 2001, although he was later freed within 60 days, which he thought was due to his hunger strike during a 52-day solitary confinement. His death under detention would have caused unusual complications since he was the nephew of Salahuddin Abdul Azizshah—a former king of Malaysia and Sultan of the state of Selangor (“Royal revolutionary pays,” 2002). In June 2003, freeanwar.com reported that Malaysia had arrested 73 innocent Malaysians under ISA following the 911 disaster in the U.S. as a proof of Malaysia’s friendship to the U.S. and the Website continued to criticize Mahathir government’s policies (Raja Petra Kamarudin, 2006a). In December 2003, Easyspace, the company hosting freeanwar.com shut down the website without notice due to some of its “inflammatory” content according to Raja Petra, who was still the site editor at the time (Kent, 2003).

Malaysia Today

Raja Petra noted that while he had sent many articles to Harakah, they refused to publish his articles because, in addition to the government, he was perceived by the opposition to be critical of them as well. Thus, he stopped sending his articles to Harakah and decided to launch Malaysia Today, an online newsletter, to voice his opinion freely and to criticize both the government as well as the opposition (Raja Petra Kamarudin, 2006b). Malaysia Today was launched in August 2004—over two weeks before Anwar’s scheduled release from prison in September 2004. In the inaugural issue, Raja Petra wrote an article on Malaysian judiciary fighting back the corruption in the government
(Raja Petra Kamarudin, 2006a). While critical of the government, Malaysia Today offered an alternative view—not an opposition-friendly opinion. By 2007, Malaysia Today was getting about 1.5 million hits per day and was ranked among Malaysia’s ten most popular political websites (Tan, 2007). Even the former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir, who was denied space on mainstream media, saw Malaysia Today as a platform to voice his opinion.

**Accusations, Interrogations, and Trials**

On July 23, 2007, UMNO filed a police report against Malaysia Today for a series of comments that it viewed as insulting the king and Islam and causing racial hatred (Izatun Shari, 2007). Raja Petra was summoned and interrogated for eight hours on July 25, 2007, and later his wife was also interrogated (“Raja Petra summoned,” 2007; Ahirudin Bin Attan, 2007). While Raja Petra was summoned under the Sedition Act 1948 and the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998, the officials insisted that the anti-terrorism laws were not meant to abate Internet freedom (“Malaysia cracks down,” 2007). Previously on July 13, another blogger named Nathanial Tan was detained under the Official Secrets Act for accusing a minister of corruption through an anonymous comment online (Kwok, 2007). With Raja Petra’s interrogation, Malaysian bloggers initiated a petition “Citizens in solidarity with Raja Petra and freedom of speech,” which garnered a support of 900 signatures from the public within a week (Kwok, 2007). According to Raja Petra, the move by the government had forced the bloggers to unite and emerge stronger. In another instance, a high court ordered Raja Petra along with the editors of Suara Keadilan to pay RM seven million for libel in March 2008, as Raja Petra
had earlier claimed on *Malaysia Today* that University Utara Malaysia’s vice chancellor was a plagiarist (“Raja Petra and,” 2008).

On May 6, 2008, Raja Petra was charged with sedition for his article on *Malaysia Today*, which pointed at the involvement of Najib Razak (the then Deputy Prime Minister) and his wife in the murder of a Mongolian woman. While the hearing was supposed to take place from October 6 to 10, 2008, Raja Petra was granted a bail for RM 5,000, which he initially refused to pay and decided to stay in custody until the hearing. According to *Malaysiakini* online, “news about Raja Petra’s case spread like a wild fire last night and this morning a large crowd had gathered at the court complex to show support” (Mageswari, 2008). The arrest led to a debate in parliament where DAP’s Lim Kit Siang criticized Najib and his wife for abusing the judiciary in charging Raja Petra for sedition. Lim noted that the deputy prime minister and his family could have used civil action and litigation against Raja Petra, but using the government machinery and the Sedition Act to punish him was an abuse of power (“Ruckus over RPK,” 2008).

Earlier, on April 25, 2008, Raja Petra published the article “Let’s send Altantuya’s murderers to hell,” which had resulted in a police raid to confiscate his computers. Within a few days of the raid, he received a call to arrive at a Jalan Duta court. However, according to Raja Petra, it appeared as if the authorities had planned to charge him even before preparing the charge (“Thank you so,” 2008). During the detention, Raja Petra was not allowed to contact other prisoners. He did not accept any drink or food in prison due to a fear of arsenic poisoning by the authorities, which was considered a hunger strike (“Thank you so,” 2008; “Malaysian blogger starts,” 2008).
The prison in which he was held had a capacity of 2,500, but it had around 5,000 inmates at the time. Since guarding Raja Petra was a great burden for the special forces and the intelligence unit, both of which were trying their best to keep him safe in the crowded prison, their senior officers were trying to convince him to agree to bail and go home until the trial. Raja Petra reported having good support in jail not only from some of the other inmates but also from guards and special forces, who all wanted him to leave the prison so he could continue writing and they could learn what was happening in their country. Due to a continued insistence from family and supporters, Raja Petra later accepted bail and decided to put the surplus money (from the funds that his supporters had raised to pay for his bail) in a “Bloggers Defence Fund” (“Thank you so,” 2008).

In June 2008, Raja Petra made a statutory declaration regarding the killing of the Mongolian woman named Altantuya Sharibuu. The declaration noted that following her murder, Altantuya’s body was blown up with C4 explosive (a type of explosive only available to the military in Malaysia) in Shah Alam. According to the declaration, Raja Petra was “reliably informed” that Najib Razak’s wife was at the crime scene along with a C4 expert and his wife (“Rosmah at murder,” 2008). Following the statutory declaration, police charged Raja Petra for criminal defamation on July 16, 2008 (Suganthi Suparmanium, 2008). Raja Petra, however, refused to respond to the plea in court stating that the three charges of criminal defamation against him were in bad faith and defective. Eventually, he was granted a bail of RM 2,000 until August 15, 2008 following the proceedings (Mageswari, 2008).
Cyber-attacks and Blocking of Malaysia Today

*Malaysia Today* had been blocked on multiple occasions. For instance, in January 16, 2008, Raja Petra published an article, “Malays, the enemies of Islam,” which led to the blocking of the *Malaysia Today* website. The article discussed an instance of human rights violation by RELA Corps (meaning Volunteers of Malaysian People), a paramilitary civil volunteer group formed by the Malaysian government, for which they were being sued by a woman. According to Raja Petra, the user comments, and not the article itself, had caused the government action (to block the website) (“The offending article,” 2008).

Similarly, *Malaysia Today* was blocked again in August 2012. It was reported by some bloggers that *Malaysia Today* was perhaps blocked by the authorities as the news website could not be accessed through Telekom Malaysia’s Internet service. Later, *Malaysiakini* online confirmed that MCMC had ordered the blocking (Chandranayagam, 2008). The home minister indeed acknowledged the closure of *Malaysia Today* was a “cautious step” (Brant, 2008b). Besides being blocked, *Malaysia Today* had also been a victim of hacking from time to time. The statutory declaration on Altantuya’s murder mentioned above was considered a “bombshell” allegation by the media and received considerable attention from bloggers and alternative as well as mainstream media (Lim Kit Siang, 2008). Subsequently, in early July, *Malaysia Today* was hacked, but came back online within a day (“Raja Petra Kamarudin’s,” 2008).
Continued Lawsuits and Self-Exile

On September 12, 2008, Raja Petra was held again under the ISA for allegedly insulting Islam through his articles. He was detained two weeks after *Malaysia Today* was shut down since his writings were seen as a threat to the national security ("Malaysia blogger held," 2008). Following the arrest, Raja Petra was initially detained under the ISA for two years, which could be renewed indefinitely ("Malaysian blogger jailed," 2008; "Malaysia detains ‘dissent,’” 2008). While under detention, he was tried for sedition in October following his April article and statutory declaration in June 2008, suggesting the involvement of Najib and his wife in Altantuya’s murder. In a separate trial, three men including two policemen and another person named Abdul Razak Baginda, Najib’s close associate, were being tried for Altantuya’s murder in October 2006, although Najib had consistently denied his involvement in the murder ("Malaysia writer in,” 2008). While several questions pertaining to the mysterious case remained, Abdul Razak Baginda was freed on October 31, 2008, as the prosecution could not build a case against him ("Acquittal in Malaysia,” 2008). Thereafter, on November 7, 2008, a high court judge ruled Raja Petra’s detention order based on ISA, and signed by the home minister, as unlawful ("Court frees Raja,” 2008). This ruling marked the first time since 1989, when the government had prohibited such hearings, that a court had released an ISA detainee according to Raja Petra’s lawyer ("Malaysia blogger’s joy,” 2008). It is noteworthy that Raja Petra was released a week after Baginda’s acquittal—perhaps to prevent him from expressing his views online before the murder trial was over.
Moreover, Raja Petra still faced sedition charges for implicating Najib and his wife in Altantuya’s murder. In February 2009, a court announced the date of Raja Petra’s sedition trial following which he could face up to two years in prison and/or fine if proven guilty (“RPK’s defamation trial,” 2009). However, Raja Petra believed that he would not get a fair trial and, thus, went into self-exile in April 2009 while avoiding the trial (“Malaysia blogger boycotts,” 2009). It was later reported that he was in Britain. An UMNO leader demanded in 2010 that the government revoke his citizenship, showing a continued dislike for the blogger among certain politicians (“Revoke RPK’s citizenship,” 2010). With continuing charges and court cases against him, RPK had declared bankruptcy (Mageswari, 2011).

**Controversies Post-2010**

According to a report published in *The Star*, in an April 2011 interview on TV3, Raja Petra was shown denying that Najib’s wife was at the jungle where Altantuya’s murder was committed. The report also noted that Raja Petra was informed and forced by several individuals who wanted to block Najib from becoming the prime minister to implicate Najib and his wife (“RPK: I don’t,” 2011). However, the Malaysian Civil Liberties Movement (MCLM) heavily criticized both the interview that aired on TV3 as well as the report by *The Star*. The president of MCLM noted that while TV3 edited the interview to show “Barisan Nasional in a good light,” the mainstream newspapers, “such as *The Star* and *The Malay Mail* had put words in Raja Petra’s mouth” (P. Lee, 2011). Moreover, TV3’s voiceover had made it difficult to follow Raja Petra’s actual words, thereby creating doubts about the authenticity of the telecast (P. Lee, 2011). Apparently,
this fabrication was an attempt to present a clean image of Najib ahead of Sarawak elections during mid-April according to MCLM president (Chi, 2011).

It was also evident that both MCLM as well as its chairman Raja Petra had been critical of the opposition and Anwar for the past few years, especially given their inability to challenge the ruling alliance (Chi, 2011; P. Lee, 2011). In March 2013, ahead of Malaysia’s thirteenth general elections, Raja Petra wrote another controversial article, but this time reporting that Anwar and his aide Nur Misuari to had met MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front—an oppositional political organization in the Philippines) commanders on multiple occasions. These meetings were held to garner the support of Filipino Muslims in Sabah and Sarawak during the general elections (Raja Petra Kamarudin, 2013). These meetings became more relevant in light of intrusions by Filipino Muslims in the state of Sabah during February and March 2013. Consequently, Raja Petra was questioned by the Malaysian intelligence officials in Jakarta (since he refused to return to Malaysia following his counsel’s advice and the intelligence officers could not go to Britain) since the government was interested in finding Anwar’s link to the intrusion (“RPK stands by,” 2013). Raja Petra also noted the involvement of two other PKR leaders and pointed out that the intrusion “was meant to stir sentiments of Sulu community in Sabah” (Ahmad Fairuz Othman, 2013). The whole incident showed that despite being in exile, Raja Petra had continued to write and had remained critical of both the government as well as the opposition—something that he had claimed years ago (Raja Petra Kamarudin, 2006b).
Summary

The weakening of government control and influence over media saw a major turning point with the administration’s own promise of keeping the Internet censorship-free—a commitment made primarily to attract investments from global, and especially Western, investors during the mid-1990s. The promise not only resulted in a flood of alternative blogs and online news media but also challenged the mainstream media in popularity. The online media offered a wider variety of options free from government influence. Despite exploiting the legal framework to crackdown on both opposition and alternative online media on numerous occasions, the ruling alliance has gradually been weakened and has been losing credibility with the increasing popularity of alternative media online. The audience trends indicated that the Internet and, hence, online media were accessed by a majority of the country’s population, especially with regards to the year 2010. In addition to television’s reach of over 96 percent during the first quarter of 2010, the year Malaysia saw an increase of over 1.5 million Internet users—the highest increase recorded during the 2007-20012 period. During the same period, the number of mobile telephone subscriptions went up by over 2.8 million. Consequently, boosted by the growth of communications, the Malaysian economy witnessed a growth of 7.2 percent in 2010. The increasing popularity of certain websites, such as blogspot.com and Malaysiakini.com, clearly suggested that audiences were willingly and increasingly accessing alternative and oppositional viewpoints online. Therefore, despite a continued urge toward maintaining its influence on the country’s media, the government had been
finding it increasingly difficult to prevent alternative opinion from reaching the masses given the economic benefit.

This chapter reveals two different, but crucial, aspects regarding the functioning of Malaysian media since the 1990s. The first aspect was an increasing dependence of the Malaysian economy on the communications sector, including the country’s mass media, online media, and mobile communications, which had become increasingly hard to monitor. The second aspect was the government’s continued urge to maintain its influence and control over the country’s mass media. While such urge had been challenged over the years by different media technologies, including videocassette recorders, satellite channels, and then the online media, the experiences of Raja Petra Kamarudin and *Malaysia Today* clearly showed that the threat of government had remained despite the changes in technology.
CHAPTER 4: MEDIA AND YOUTH POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

This chapter reviews literature relevant to media and youth political engagement, before and after the first decade of the 21st century (C.E.) to identify some of the gaps in scholarship, notes the key research questions guiding this study, and presents a framework for analysis. The first section discusses some of the earlier work (conducted during the latter half of the 20th century/early 2000s) on media and political engagement. The next two sections capture studies pertaining to online political engagement and media and youth political engagement from the first decade of the 21st century. The fourth section delves into research done on media and youth political engagement post-2011 (following the protests mentioned in the Introduction chapter). The next three sections focus on previous studies on media and youth political engagement across East and Southeast Asia and within Malaysia—leading to the key research questions for this study. The last section of this chapter presents a theoretical framework that was used to pursue this study.

Media and Political Engagement

To understand the role played by media in fostering political engagement, it was imperative to first consider both the negative as well as positive influences of media. Previously, Robinson (1976) had noted that high exposure to public affairs news content in an atmosphere of political scandals could lead to “malaise” and a loss of trust in national political institutions among audience members. Similarly, Meyrowitz (1985) had found that electronic media, television in particular, had led to a decline in the credibility of government and other formal institutions. Moreover, Putnam (1995) also suggested
that high entertainment media consumption had led to a decline in involvement with public affairs. Thereafter, many observers, especially during the 1990s, including Sabato (1993), Patterson (1994; 2003), Absolabehere and Iyengar (1995), Fallows (1996), Kaid (1997), Wilkins (2000), and Tedesco (2002), noted that media, television in particular, helped increase the level of disengagement among citizens, especially through negative political advertising. Furthermore, Putnam (2000) noted that Americans who depended more on television for their entertainment needs were less likely to spend time with friends, participate in community organizations, and engage in public affairs.

Later studies, for example Strömbäck and Shehata (2010), showed a causal and reciprocal relationship between political interest and the use of traditional news media (including television, radio, and newspapers). In a similar instance, O’Neill (2010) associated lower engagement levels with the use of traditional mass media, including television and newspapers, among Canadians. On the other hand, Lee’s (2005) findings could not support the hypothesis that media had contributed to political disengagement. Moreover, along with Pinkleton, Austin, and Fortman (1998), Pinkleton and Austin (2001), Leshner and McKean (1997), Drew and Weaver (1991; 1995; 1998; 2001), and Norris (2000), Lee (2005) also reported that “a few news sources may in fact reduce the political cynicism and promote political trust” (2005, p. 416). In another instance, Moy, Xenos, and Hess (2005) studied the political effects of infotainment on television based upon an election survey from the year 2000. The study showed that although political infotainment did not necessarily enhance all sectors of electoral politics, such as voting
and party work during the elections, it enhanced political engagement among American audiences.

Online Political Engagement

A review of literature revealed that a vast number of studies during the first decade of the 21st Century (C.E.) had focused on Internet and political engagement. There were two key trends of research pertaining to online political engagement. First, most of these studies had been carried out in a Western setting since most of them either focused on the U.S. or on other Western countries. For example, Boulianne (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of 38 studies on Internet and political engagement and the sample primarily included studies that had been conducted within the U.S., such as Best and Krueger (2005), Bimber (2001; 2003), Jennings and Zeitner (2003), Hardy and Scheufele (2005), Kraut, Kiesler, Boneva, Cummings, Helgeson, and Crawford (2002), Krueger (2002; 2006), Kwak, Skoric, Williams, and Poor (2004), Kwak, Poor, and Skoric (2006), McCluskey, Deshpande, Shah, and McLeod (2004), Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal (2008), Nisbet and Scheufele (2002, 2004), and so on. Some of these studies had a more international focus, but still remained within the Western setting, such as Gibson, Howard, and Ward (2000), Katz and Rice (2002) (which, while focused on the U.S., had implications for other Western countries), Kwak, Poor, and Skoric (2006), Norris and Jones (1998), Norris (2000), and O’Neill (2010).

Second, most studies on political engagement usually had revolved around elections or special events. For instance, a number of studies covered in Boulianne’s meta-analysis had focused on engagement around war, elections, or other events of
political significance, such as Johnson and Kaye (2003), Nah, Veenstra, and Shah (2006), Hwang, Schmierbach, Paek, Zuniga, and Shah (2006), Kim, Jung, Cohen, and Ball-Rokeach (2004). In particular, there were numerous studies on political engagement that had focused on elections. In one such instance, Baumgartner and Morris (2010) focused on voting in past elections and likelihood to vote in future elections to study political engagement, but they did not consider online political discussions through blogs and discussion threads, online chatting, emailing, and political engagement through online media. Similarly, Donovan, Tolbert, and Smith (2009) studied voter engagement and mobilization around elections in the U.S., but did not consider political engagement during the non-election times.

In another study based in the U.S., Xenos and Moy (2007) studied the Internet’s direct as well as differential effects on civic and political engagement through the analyses of the 2004 national election studies (pre- as well as post-election) based upon a survey of over 1,200 American respondents. The results showed education, income, and youth as significant predictors of exposure to political information on the Internet. While Xenos and Moy (2007) were able to compare those who were politically motivated with those who happened to find political information unintentionally, the study did not really delve into—how were the two types of individuals (politically motivated and otherwise) processing the political information?

Beyond the studies focused on elections, Wojciesz, Baek, and Delli Caripini (2009) found that prior participation primarily affected follow up engagement among conservatives in a study on face-to-face political deliberation. In another study,
Wojcieszak (2009) assessed the links between two types of political engagement, first, supporting and promoting a political movement and, second, participation in online groups (either ideologically separate or radical). According to Wojcieszak (2009), political engagement had increased with online participation. The Internet was particularly influential in engaging active individuals in additional causes and an increasing visibility of online communities could eventually influence the political agenda (Wojcieszak, 2009). Earlier, Wojcieszak and Mutz (2007) had pointed out that online political discussion was either overlooked or studied exclusively. They questioned whether the Internet was adding to the diversity of political discussion networks and whether the impact was an increase in selective exposure or further political fragmentation (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2007). However, Brundidge and Rice (2009) reported that online discussion had contributed “slightly to the heterogeneity of political discussion networks” (p. 154). Therefore, Internet was helping in exposing people to political diversity.

On the other hand, Ferguson and Griffiths (2006) reported that political blogging could not live up to its promise even in Britain—a Western democracy. Those engaged in these blogs were primarily those with prior political knowledge and an urge to participate (Ferguson and Griffiths, 2006). In comparison, Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs (2004) noted that while “enough Americans engaged in public deliberation” and that the Internet may be a useful tool for promoting such deliberation as well as studying it, “the impact of deliberation and other forms of discursive politics” was highly context dependent (p. 336). And so, the local context and geographical region, which was often a Western
country, of most studies reviewed in this chapter could not be applied easily to transitional democracies in non-Western settings. Hence, there appeared a need for more studies focusing on political engagement in non-Western countries prior to 2011.

In line with the debate on the influence of media on political engagement, the nature of Internet’s influence (negative versus positive) on political engagement also had remained an area of disagreement among scholars. Boulianne (2009) had attempted to address this disagreement, although the meta-analysis of 38 studies could neither support the hypothesis that the Internet had a negative effect on engagement nor could it support that the Internet had a positive effect on political engagement. Nonetheless, the study demonstrated that the effect of engagement through the Internet had increased with time and such effect was larger in case of online news as a measure of Internet use (Boulianne, 2009).

O’Neill (2010) associated Internet use, often in combination with other mass media, with higher engagement levels among Canadians. Xenos and Moy (2007), on the other hand, predicted that the Internet would increase the gap in political participation in the U.S., as was later demonstrated by Brundidge and Rice (2009), who found that the information rich were getting richer through the Internet. Brundidge and Rice also cited a need for a continued exploration of how the Internet was affecting political engagement, “especially political discussion among heterogeneous networks of citizens” (p. 155). O’Neill’s findings, however, suggested that Canadian citizens’ engagement with party and electoral politics was qualitatively not the same as their civic or cause oriented engagement. O’Neill also cited a need for qualitative inquires exploring combinations of
online and other mass media that served the needs of people with high as well as low engagement levels.

Media and Youth Political Engagement

While many scholars had noted a lack of youth political engagement (including Putnam, 2000; Norris, 2002; Coleman, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Bennett, 2007; and others) and many others associated the use of media with political disengagement (including Robinson, 1976; Meyrowitz, 1985; Sabato, 1993; Patterson, 1994, 2003; Absolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Fallows, 1996; Kaid, 1997; Wilkins, 2000; Tedesco, 2002; and others), there was also some evidence to support that media could play a critical role in engaging youth. For instance, Dunsmore and Lagos (2008), studied political socialization in secondary schools through video production and reported that the participants were knowledgeable and could interpret political events through reality television and late night talk shows. In another such attempt, Vujčić (2003) studied the practices of citizenship among Croatian secondary school students based on secondary data and explored the behavioral aspects of students’ perception of citizenship through measures of discussing politics as well as following news in the media (radio, television, and newspaper). Most students preferred news access on television (91 percent) compared to either newspaper (72 percent) or radio (39 percent). While Vujčić’s study offered insights into students’ mainstream mass media preferences, Vujčić did not attempt to explore the influence of Internet and online media on political engagement.

Nevertheless, an increasing disinterest among youth had influenced the researchers to consider the issue of youth political engagement. This was evident through
an increased number of studies focusing on the issue of youth political engagement, such as Bernstein (2005), Pasek, Kenski, Romer, and Jamieson (2006), Esser and de Vreese (2007), Livingstone, Couldry, and Markham (2007), and Snell (2010). In one such study, Olsson (2008), interviewed youth activists (ages 15—20) in Sweden to study their perception as well as use of the Internet in four different political movements. Olsson demonstrated that the Internet corresponds with the structure of the organizations and acts “as a resource for everyday activism” (2008, pp. 672).

Following the earlier discussion on Internet’s influence on political engagement, it was clear that the Internet also could have positive, neutral, as well as negative influence on youth political engagement. In a transnational comparative analysis, Esser and de Vreese (2007) studied political engagement among young voters across U.S. and Europe and reported that both communication (online as well as interactive) and media use had a positive effect on voting turnout among youth. Esser and de Vreese, however, examined the use of news media and not any other political programming or media use.

Through secondary analysis of data collected from a sample of 1,000 young adults (ages 15—25), representative of U.S. population during November 2004, Yang (2009) found that neither blogging nor emailing related directly to political engagement among youth (ages 18—25). According to Yang (2009), even if the youth cared about political engagement, they did not depend upon emails for information. Similarly, Livingstone, Couldry, and Markham (2007) studied the relationship between the Internet and civic participation among youth and found a little evidence of the Internet attracting those who were not engaged already. However, while examining individual case studies,
Livingstone et al. (2007) concluded that the Internet was perhaps not the reason behind disengagement among youth, but on the contrary, it was possible that the Internet had helped develop skills required for engagement. Earlier, Pasek et al. (2006) also had supported that using mass media may stimulate development of political action among youth. Particularly, reading books, watching news on television, and information obtained through the Internet—had independent and positive association with political engagement (Pasek et al., 2006). In contrast, Yang (2009) noted that while emails urging turnout at a political rally could likely cause disengagement among youth, online chatting was negatively associated with offline voting attitudes—suggesting a negative influence of emailing and chatting on political action.

In further exploring the role of the Internet, Mesch and Coleman (2007) explored the extent of generational gap in ICT use for “information access, interpersonal political communication and political activism” across over 3,900 United Kingdom residents (p. 39). The results showed that the younger generation (ages 18—25) was more likely to use the Internet for information search as well as for exerting political influence. Nonetheless, both the low-income individuals as well as the female participants were less likely to look for political information or influence irrespective of their age. Mesch and Coleman (2007) further cited a risk of political disengagement reinforced by ICT among these groups. Overall, there was clear evidence of the crucial role played by online content in influencing youth political engagement.

The advent and rapid popularity of social media during the late 2000s was also reflected in studied relating social media use and political engagement. In one such
instance, Wu (2009) explored the use of the social networking website Facebook by the
supporters of Barrack Obama by studying his fan page. Wu noted that while Facebook
posts could help understand the patterns of political engagement among American youth
better, there was also a need for future studies to delve into youth learning from the
(online) discussions—possibly through interviewing along with analyzing the online
texts. On the other hand, Gibbons (2010) reported a weak trend among youth (ages 18—
34) in Britain, only seven percent of whom had reported following a politician or a
political group on Facebook or Twitter (in a survey conducted by the Hansard Society)
(p. 374). According to Gibbons, this low ratio pointed at skepticism among Internet users
that politicians’ social media accounts were managed by other people.

In another study based on a survey of 3,500 youth (ages 18—24), Baumgartner
and Morris (2010) found that the social networking websites did little in increasing
interest and engagement among disengaged youth, who were as disengaged as the youth
who used other mass media. They found a weak correlation between news consumption
through social websites and political engagement ($R^2 = 0.07, N = 2,289$) (Baumgartner
and Morris, 2010, p. 37). However, the low correlation could be because of the presence
of both engaged and disengaged individuals in the survey population. Based upon a
(U.S.) national survey conducted during 2009, Kim, Hsu, and de Zúñiga (2013), found
that individual personality traits and social media (including Facebook and Twitter) use
might influence civic engagement and (online) political discussion behaviors. Moreover,
they found that interactions and information exchange on social media could be useful in
extending social boundaries and civic life among introverted individuals. This called for
more qualitative inquiries exploring the effectiveness of social media in generating political interest and engagement.

Media, Political Engagement, and Youth Post-2011

As demonstrated in the previous sections, online media, especially social media, had attracted considerable attention among those studying political engagement prior to 2011. Thereafter, the so called Arab Spring in the Middle East and the occupy movement within the U.S. mentioned in the Introduction chapter had led to a new set of inquiries. For instance, Sayed (2011) found that political activism on social media was positively associated with offline engagement among the activists involved in the uprising. Likewise, Merlyna Lim (2012) found that new online media and cellphones had played a significant role in the uprising since they provided the means to share grievances and form networks, which were beyond government’s control. However, none of these studies supported a causal relationship between the social media and the 2011 uprising. In a later study, Brym, Godbout, Hoffbauer, Menard, and Zhang (2014) examined the role played by different factors, including social media, in the uprising by analyzing data from a Gallop survey involving Egyptians (n=1,005) conducted during March-April 2011 and concluded that “social media were not one of the uprising’s major causes” (p. 287). Epstein (2015), however, noted that a complementing and supportive use of different media forms had spurred discussion, support, and action—both online and in real life—during the protests in the 21st century. Epstein (2015) also pointed a need for future studies to focus on the impact of changing new media on organizational structure and social relationships.
Moreover, the propagation of social networking websites globally had offered further possibilities for studying youth engagement with politics. For instance, de Zúñiga (2012) found that informational use of social networks had a significant impact on political and civic action among individuals. In another instance, Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck, and Ljungberg (2013) found that the youngest group used social media more often for political purposes compared to the older groups, although the older groups used other mass media more often than the youngest group. However, Holt et al. also found that social media and other mass media both had positive effects on offline political participation and interest, which increased with age. On the other hand, Carlisle and Patton (2013) studied how individuals politically engaged themselves with Facebook and found no relationship between political participation and the number of friends one has on Facebook. They also reported limited political activity on Facebook compared to what popular accounts suggested (Carlisle and Patton, 2013).

In another study involving Belgian freshman, Quintelier and Theocharis (2012) found that while young people were attracted to Facebook and Internet, their political participation (both online and offline) was more dependent on individual personality traits. For instance, extrovert individuals were more likely to politically engage online and were more energetic and sociable compared to non-participants. While offline engagement was more likely for less conscientious individuals, online political engagement was related to more agreeableness since it (online engagement) implied a more spontaneous and easier decision (Quintelier & Theocharis, 2012). Similarly, Park (2013), who studied the relationship between opinion leadership on Twitter and political
engagement, had also suggested that Tweets by opinion leaders might be crucial in encouraging political participation among other individuals.

Youth and Online Political Engagement in East and Southeast Asia

As noted earlier in this chapter, scholarship on electronic media (both mainstream and online) and youth political engagement appeared frequently in the West before 2011. Nevertheless, there had been multiple studies across other regions, which had attempted to study the relationship between online media and political engagement. In one such study, Kim and Kim (2007) surveyed Korean adolescents for their use of online and other media and political engagement. Kim and Kim found that Internet use was positively associated with political engagement, although television, which was often the source of political information, did not have such a association with political engagement. On the other hand, Zhang (2004), who focused on Chinese blogs, concluded that although information technology was considered a potent agent of democracy, it could not bring out substantial change in the political realm on its own. South Korea and China represented two different socio-political contexts within East Asia. Therefore, even within a region, the influence of media on political engagement could vary—largely due to the extent of control the states had been exercising over the Internet.

There were also instances of studies conducted within Southeast Asia—a region occupied by many transitional democracies—exploring the role played by communication technologies in political engagement. For example, N. Lim (2009) reported that while the social media had enhanced political participation, such as online protests through Facebook, they had also helped traditional social movements, such as
gathered against a resolution to amend the Philippine constitution in 2009. Nevertheless, as an emerging social force, online social movements gathered a much higher number of signatures (or supporters) at around 100,000 compared to a gathering of 13,000 people at the most (an estimate from the organizers).

In a later study, David (2013) suggested that ICT-based youth political engagement could lead to engagement in real life. According to David, Filipino youth activists believed that ICTs had helped their efforts to build political engagement. For instance, social networking sites provided a space for discussions with political elites and peers. Activists could also generate political interest among peers by sharing political opinion. Many Filipinos believed that expression of political opinion through blogs, Facebook status messages, and Tweets were highly valued political activities. However, according to David (2013), youth who lacked the belief that they could change the corrupt and ineffective system would still refuse to take part in the opportunities for political participation offered through ICTs, which resonated with Quintelier & Theocharis’ (2012) and Kim et al.’s (2013) findings.

While the Philippine state did not restrict student engagement with political parties as did Malaysia (discussed in the introduction chapter), neighboring Singapore had been practicing one of the strictest media laws and Internet censorship rules in the region. In one study, Hao, Wen, and George (2014) found that online media, including social media, had improved news consumption and participation in civic and political activities among Singaporean youth. Nevertheless, Hao et al. also noted that the political structure and culture had still restricted the use of online media for political participation.
Similarly, Skoric and Poor (2013) examined the relationship between social media use and political engagement and found social media use positively related to political participation among Singaporean youth. They also noted the continuing and important role played by other mass media in the process of youth political engagement. According to Skoric and Poor (2013), student activists successfully had mobilized against media censorship in Singapore through the utilization of social media. As N. Lim (2009) had found in the Philippines, Skoric and Poor (2013) also found that social ties maintained through social network sites were important in mobilization of people in offline movements among Singaporean youth. They, however, also found that social networking sites might not reach as many audiences as the other mass media could, which could be due to the wider reach of social media across younger audiences as suggested by Holt et al. (2013) (noted in the previous section). Nonetheless, in line with David’s (2013) findings in the Philippines, Skoric and Poor (2013) also suggested that while social networks typically allowed politically engaged people to mobilize, the problem of engaging uninterested and alienated individuals had remained. While those who mobilized through social media also trusted other mass media, although social media were important since they were faster and more affordable than the other mass media (Skoric and Poor, 2013, p. 200). Skoric and Poor also cited a need for further research exploring the interplay of online and other mass media forms in different political settings. Malaysia, which arguably had a less restrictive media environment with a censorship-free Internet access compared to Singapore, clearly offered more opportunity
for research inquiries on youth political engagement in light of its fast changing media landscape and political scenario discussed in the earlier chapters.

Media and Political Environment in Malaysia

The previous chapter discusses the limitations placed on journalists and free expression in Malaysia—especially with regards to mass media. According to Balraj (2006), although the freedom of expression in the country had increased since independence, there still was room for improvements according to journalists, opinion leaders, and people. A 2003 survey done by the Socio-Economic and Environmental Research Institute (SERI) showed that while over half of the participants considered mass media laws restrictive, over 35 percent of respondents stayed neutral on the issue. The SERI survey also showed that ages 40—49 had the highest percentage of respondents with the knowledge of Malaysian media laws, which also increased with education. Moreover, over 33 of percent respondents agreed that online media laws were liberal, although 43.7 percent of respondents chose to stay neutral on the issue (SERI, 2003, p. 31). These findings demonstrated a widespread awareness regarding the country’s restricted media environment among the audiences.

In a study showcasing government’s continued dominance of the broadcast media, Juliana (2006) found the use of SMS (short messaging service) for audience voting during certain television programs. According to Juliana, the popularity of SMS voting had spread to and affected news programs as well. The questions asked during these programs, however, favored the ruling powers. Moreover, the options was always pro-government. The democracy in news programming worked primarily because those
responses or votes were non-threatening and they reinforced government’s position as the dominant group (Juliana, 2006). Therefore, despite keeping up with the emerging trends in programming that helped connect audiences to the content creators, the mass media (excluding the online media) in Malaysia appeared far from being democratic.

**Media and Electoral Politics in Malaysia**

It was evident that online media that had proved ideal for alternative views to flourish (George 2006) and had started gaining momentum during the early-2000s. For instance, Todzia (2008), through a semiotic discourse analysis of the exchange on online forums in Malaysia had found that following the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim, the Internet provided Malaysians a conduit to discuss the issues of sexual, religious, and ethnic identities, which were not usually raised on government controlled mass media. The impact of this ability to discuss such issues had been evident through the change in election results over the last decade. This change, however, had been gradual. For instance, Taylor (2004) noted that the victory margins during the 2004 elections were greater than the 1999 general elections implying that the Internet use by unsatisfied voters could not lead to a radical change in the country’s political leadership. Nonetheless, Taylor suggested that elections were highly unusual in the sense that they were closely contested in the states with high Internet penetration. Therefore, the Internet helped the opposition, although its impact was not strong enough to defeat *Barisan Nasional* (Taylor, 2004). Moreover, Khadijah (2007) found Abdullah Badawi’s *Islam Hadhari* (progressive Islam) campaign during the 2004 election as a key to *Barisan Nasional’s* convincing victory.
Nonetheless, the 2008 elections saw, for the first time in Malaysia’s history, a loss of five states including the populous state of Selangor to the opposition alliance. Even Taylor (2004) had argued against having high hopes on the short-term influence of IT, but a long-term influence could definitely not be ruled out of the equation—something which became apparent through the 2008 election outcome. On the other hand, considering the 2008 elections as a turning point in Malaysia’s political history, Maznah (2008) noted that the exposure of corruption within the government through blog-posts, videos, and websites, were indeed persuasive as they eventually affected the middle-class votes. Weiss (2009b) echoed Maznah’s point while noting that independent media had indeed boosted hopes for accountability and had facilitated public scrutiny.

George (2006; 2007) had cited hope for improved democracy in Malaysia—compared to neighboring Singapore where more stringent media laws had been in place—through citizen-based contentious journalism. Such journalism practice could influence political change—evident through the unusual election outcome in 2008. While both Azizudin and Knocks Tapiwa (2010) and Fama and Tam (2010) had suggested that social networks played a crucial role during the 2008 general elections, Khoo (2010) attributed the turnaround in the 2008 elections specifically to the cyber-networks developed by the opposition. In either case, the Internet and online media had led to the election upset during 2008 (Ibrahim Suffian, 2009; Gong, 2011).

Gong found that politicians who had online blogs were about seven times more likely to win in an election than those who did not. Besides being an alternative means of information, blogs had aided the development of interpersonal relationships and
mobilization of voters (Gong, 2011). In another instance, Ming Lim (2009) found blogs to be mobilizing agents that had facilitated mass protests during 2007 and 2008. While online blogs had definitely provided a platform for free expression, research exploring their influence on the audience—other than the election outcome and mass protests—had remained less explored.

Given Malaysia’s diverse ethnic composition, these blogs could also be used to target and attract minorities and other specific groups within the population. For instance, in a later study examining the role of blogging in fostering political mobilization among minorities, Rathina Pandi (2011) pointed at the connection between the use of blogs and political engagement and collective action among Malaysian Indians, although such engagement and actions were highly dependent on situation. Rathina Pandi suggested that the Internet had helped in the creation of a virtual public sphere, which included the opposition, non-governmental groups, communal and religious groups, and civil society. Earlier, Weiss (2009b) had also acknowledged civil society’s critical role in using independent media toward changing the political climate in Malaysia. However, Rathina Pandi did not touch upon the role of youth (if any) in such a sphere, especially had been a consistent force in other parts of Southeast Asia as noted in the Introduction chapter.

Media, Malaysian Youth, and Political Engagement

According to one estimate, a majority of youth (about 82.5 percent of those within ages 15—19 and 87.1 percent of those within ages 20—29) reported accessing local Internet sites (SERI, 2003, p. 27). The younger generations also showed a much stronger acknowledgment of information technologies’ impact on news evaluation compared to
older participants (ages 40 and above). Especially those with higher levels of education considered the Internet critical for evaluation of news on other mass media. Similarly, Internet had improved the understanding of politics mainly among the participants below 40, especially for 45.7 percent of respondents (ages 20—29). The Internet had also helped improve the understanding of politics across substantial minorities in both urban and semi-urban settings, but not as much in rural areas. Nevertheless, a majority of survey participants agreed that their political participation had increased due to emerging technologies—including 80.6 percent urban, 82 percent semi-urban, and 89.3 percent rural respondents (SERI, 2003, p. 30). However, their survey was conducted in 2003 under a different political administration and media environment—especially with regards to online media.

Despite the findings of the 2003 SERI survey, the security concerns and credibility issues were critical in shaping Internet use among the Malaysian youth. While examining the practice of e-commerce involving Malaysian students studying at a U.S. university, Gould (2004) had identified a lack of trust in the Internet in Malaysia among these students. According to Gould, the lack of trust, credit cards, access to computers, and slow Internet speeds had restricted e-commerce growth in Malaysia. Moreover, despite the government’s attempts at addressing the infrastructure-related issues, the issue of lack of trust had remained. Nonetheless, these students started getting interested in e-commerce after moving to the U.S. since they developed a more positive attitude towards the Internet. Through a later study conducted in Kelantan involving 225 participants, Mohd Safar and Ali (2009) had identified three factors influencing the sustainability of
Internet usage among Malay youth, including perceived and realized benefits of Internet use, social and interpersonal networks, and security concerns in using the Internet. The security concerns essentially pointed at a lack of trust among the participants.

Such lack of trust on the Internet could, in part, explain the lack of online political deliberation by Malaysian youth. In one such instance, Wilson et al. (2003) studied web-journalism reception in Malaysia through a focus-group study involving 45 participants (including 40 students) across Universiti Malaya, Universiti Sains Malaysia, and Universiti Kebangsan Malaysia. While the participants understood the anti-government stance and the (mainly) political nature of content on alternative websites, the study hinted at an absence of these students’ participation in the online sphere. The study touched upon students’ political perceptions, among other findings, but did not delve into the aspect of political engagement through online media (Wilson et al., 2003).

Given an improved understanding of politics among younger age groups, there had been an immense possibility for studying the ways in which information technology could foster political engagement among Malaysian youth. Students, especially college students, were likely to have opinions that they usually could not share due to being discouraged from engaging with political parties before 2011. Moreover, while students had emerged as a strong political force from time to time across Southeast Asia and while Malaysian politics has witnessed several changes since independence including the changes to UUCA noted in the Introduction chapter, scholarship on student political engagement before the repeal of UUCA appeared rare if not missing altogether. A number of studies, including Santhiram (1995), Kamogawa (2003), Wilson, Hamzah, and
Khattab (2003), Gould (2004), as well as Tan, Ng, and Saw (2010) had focused on school students, adolescents, youth, and college students. However, with the exceptions of Santhiram (1995), which had focused on racial polarization in secondary schools, and Wilson et al. (2003), these studies had seldom touched upon political issues.

Besides the scholarly research noted so far, Merdeka, a Malaysian non-governmental organization, conducted a nationwide survey involving country’s youth (ages 20—35) during November-December 2008 (Merdeka, 2008). The survey showed that Internet access among youth had increased from 57 to 70 percent between 2007 and 2008 (Merdeka, 2008, p. 1). The survey further revealed that almost half of the participants lacked trust in mainstream media, although the ethnic composition varied from one region to the other. For example, in Sarawak, 50 percent of Malays did not trust government controlled media as opposed to 46 percent of Malays who trusted them. Among other groups, 51 percent of non-Muslim Bumiputra and 39 percent of Chinese trusted the government controlled media as opposed to 44 percent of non-Muslim Bumiputra and 50 percent of Chinese who lacked trust in those media. Overall, at least half of the respondents from each social group had reported a lack of trust in the government controlled media.

According to Merdeka (2008), while 44 percent of the total youth Internet users looked for news on the Internet, they preferred online version of local (mainstream) publications, such as Harian and Bernama, compared to alternative news websites, such as Merdeka-review.com and Malaysiakini.com (less than three percent), since only three percent of youth reported accessing alternative websites, such as Merdeka.org and
This finding clearly conflicted with the findings of SERI (2003), which had indicated a popularity of online media among youth, and the overall popularity of alternative media online as discussed in Chapter 3. Moreover, among the alternative news websites, Malaysiakini.com (citing a Google survey) alone had claimed a subscriber base of 1.67 million (or around six percent of Malaysia’s total population), which also challenged the accuracy of Merdeka’s findings (Malaysiakini, 2009). Therefore, Merdeka’s findings could not be considered to have captured the proportion of alternative website users accurately.

Furthermore, while Merdeka’s research had generated data on youth media use, political outlook, social values, and lifestyle, it did not attempt to draw any connections between these four aspects. The relationship between media use and political outlook in particular appeared critical, but remained undeveloped and did not help explain the later developments pertaining to the country’s youth, politics, and media landscape. Merdeka also had reported low self-efficacy or confidence in solving community issues and influencing government decisions among youth (especially non-Malay), and thereby pointed out political withdrawal among youth, but did not offer further explanation. Overall, given the conventionally strict environment preventing youth and student political participation, particularly considering that UUCA was still in place at the time of the survey conducted by Merdeka, the possibility of getting accurate responses from youth participants would be very slim, if not absent. Moreover, the youth respondents would be less likely to provide honest responses and disclose their political inclination.
and preferences for alternative media during a telephone survey due to a fear of being monitored in future.

The above issue could be addressed through an ethnographic inquiry as demonstrated by Barlocco (2014), who studied the Kadazan (an indigenous ethnic group in Eastern Malaysia) in the state of Sabah. Barlocco found that while most of the male informants were interested in news, many of the informants were critical of the government and politics and the focus on Malay (culture and people) in the televised content. This dissatisfaction pointed at the possibility of moving to online and/or on demand content on other media—something reflected in the country’s changing audience trends in Chapter 3.

While the Internet had allowed youth to act anonymously online and, therefore, they could also voice their opinion, the likelihood of becoming a youth activist had still been low given the restrictive environment for youth political engagement. Moreover, through such an environment, as Weiss (2009b) had noted, the Malaysian students were “asked to be mute and uncritical, and” were “structurally conditioned to accede” (p. 520). The university students in particular were unlikely to engage politically. Moreover, despite later studies, such as J. Lim (2013), there had been a gap in scholarship on media and political engagement among Malaysian youth, university students in particular, even after 2011.

Among later studies on youth and media, Ahmad, Mohamad Zaid, and Muhd Najib (2012) focused on the impact of broadcasting media on the students’ behavior (moral development). In another instance, Prasad, Rao, and Mohd Zain (2012) reported
that digital video production not only helped in developing creative learning cultures, but also empowered the youth (aged sixteen) through fostering higher media literacy. However, they did not delve into the future possibilities or political potential of such empowerment.

On the other hand, the use of ICTs had remained an area of continuous research in Malaysia. For example, Soh, Yan, Ong, and Teh (2012) reported that despite 90 percent of the urban youth using the Internet, a digital divide, especially along ethnic lines, was still existent. Through a survey involving 1,639 respondents across Malaysia, Soh et al. (2012) found that Chinese youth spent more time (16.2 hours per week) online compared to both Malays and Indians (who spent 7.17 and 6.7 hours per week respectively) (p. 80). Chinese youth also had more experience in using the Internet since they started going online at an earlier age compared to Malays and Indians. In terms of online activities, the Chinese youth spent more time on information gathering (1.9 hours per week) compared to Indians or Malays (who spent 1.4 and 1.3 hours per week respectively), although they also spent more time (about two to three times compared to Malay and Indian youth) on non-productive task categories, such as online gaming (4.9 hours per week), which included gambling and playing violent games, chatting (4.8 hours per week), using social media (4 hours per week), and listening to music (3.4 hours per week) (Soh et al., 2012, p. 81). Overall, Soh et al. found that both Malays and Indians held a higher regard for the Internet as a tool to aid studies compared to the Chinese youth. The disparities in online access and Internet use across ethnic groups also meant that being more invested online, Chinese youth were more likely to indulge in a wider range of activities.
Following the repeal of UUCA, the fear of authorities seemed to be fading since more online youth activists/bloggers were emerging. In one case, J. Lim (2013) examined the popularity of video-sharing websites among Malaysian youth (not necessarily students) based upon video blogging platforms and focus groups and interviews with 80 youth informants. According to Lim, video-sharing websites had encouraged discourse among Malaysian youth on issues that were socially taboo, but were important to the community, such as ethnic discrimination, homosexuality, Orang Asli rights, and so on. However, Lim suggested that given the negative perception of authorities regarding activism, youth informants were still hesitant to be considered activists involved in activism and rather preferred being called advocates or responsible rakyats (meaning citizens).

Engagemedia.com, a video-sharing platform and a non-profit organization in the Asia-Pacific focused on environmental and social justice issues, had been so popular among Malaysian youth that it led to popular youth workshops on video production and distribution (J. Lim, 2013). The youth activists involved with such workshops believed in training other youth, especially in rural areas, in citizen journalism. Likewise, Lim found that certain human rights groups also shared videos on YouTube and other relevant content on Facebook, which had been getting increasingly popular among Malaysian youth. In addition, Lim identified the existence of complex ideological and political discourses through interactions with youth activists. Video blogging had encouraged participatory culture and had offered an opportunity for youth activists, who had gained prominence, to form a new mainstream while meeting their interests and demands.
Overall, the online platforms supporting video-blogging had empowered the previously silent social groups (J. Lim, 2013).

While Lim’s findings pointed at the substantial changes in Malaysia’s (online) media landscape and political environment through youth video blogging, Leong (2014) noted that the online information traveled beyond Internet users and reached non-users as well (both within and outside the country) influencing political actions.

Despite the above attempts, there appeared a need for more studies focusing on media and non-activist youth political engagement prior to the repeal of UUCA, especially within Peninsular Malaysia. While Merdeka (2008) had attempted to study youth using a telephonic survey, the survey was insufficient to develop a nuanced understanding of media and youth political engagement, especially with regards to university students. Moreover, the participants in such a study could express themselves more freely in a university environment compared to a telephone. Therefore, there appeared ample opportunity for an inquiry focused on university students in Malaysia—exploring the relationship between media use and political engagement prior to the repeal of UUCA.

Research Questions

Research Question 1

What kind of media access did the students at an affirmative action university in Peninsular Malaysia had during 2010?

Research Question 2

Given the country’s changing media environment, how did the students who identified as
either politically engaged or disengaged perceive the relationship between Malaysian media and politics during 2010? (based on Wilson et al., 2003; Carvalho, 2010; Dahlgren, 2009; Coleman, 2006; Weaver, 1996; Farish, 2002; Weiss, 2009b)

Research Question 3

How were parental and peer influences and other non-media factors related to political engagement and disengagement among these students during 2010? (based on Ekström, 2016)

Research Question 4

What were the roles played by the alternative and mainstream mass media in fostering a sense of political engagement or disengagement among these students during 2010? (based on Coleman, 2006; O'Neill, 2010)

Research Question 5

How did the aspects of media credibility and distrust influence these students’ decisions to engage or disengage with politics in future? (based on Norris, 1999)

Theoretical Framework

Because this study focuses on a university setting, it is crucial to understand that university, as a social institution, follows a certain set of principles, which defines its structure, and the agency or the capacity of such an institution toward social and political change.

Agency, Structure, and Institutions

According to Giddens (1984), human agents or actors have unconscious motives, practical consciousness, and discursive consciousness. The different aspects of agents’
learning and socialization processes can alter the division between practical and
discursive consciousness. Through their practical and discursive consciousness, the
agents can usually explain the reasons behind their action, which are essentially shaped
by motivation. While agency is an actor’s capacity of doing things or performing actions,
action involves power—given its capacity to change (Giddens, 1984). Bartlett (1989), on
the other hand, had described power as the ability of one agency to influence another.
Within a social system or a social structure, power would mean

The ability of one actor to alter the decisions made and/or welfare experienced by
another actor relative to the choices that would have been made and/or welfare
that would have been experienced had the first actor not existed or acted (Bartlett,
1989, p. 30).

For Giddens (1984), structure is defined by “the properties which make it possible for
discernably similar social practices to exist across varying spans of time and space and
which lend them ‘systematic’ form” (p. 17). These properties are called structural
principles. “The most important aspects of structure are rules and resources recursively
involved in institutions” (p. 24). Structures limit the action and, therefore, define the
agency of the constituent actors (Giddens, 1987).

Structure is both the medium and the outcome of human activities which it
recursively organizes. Institutions, or large-scale societies, have structural
properties in the virtue of the continuity of the actions of their component
members, but those members of society are only able to carry out their day-to-day
activities in virtue of their capability of instantiating those structural properties.

(Giddens, 1987, p. 61)

While the structural features of social systems are their institutions (Giddens, 1984), it is these social institutions that mainly define the social reality of the daily lives of people (Boltanski, 2011). According to Boltanski (2011), institutions have vested interests that drive them to support values, norms, social perceptions, and ideas that protect those interests.

Yet the structural properties of institutions are not just constraints upon action, they are enabling: a central issue facing social theory in this regard is that of developing a reformulation of key concepts of ‘structure’ and ‘system’ in such a way as to acknowledge the enabling as well as the constraining aspect of institutional forms. (Giddens, 1995, p. 196)

Subsequently, institutions offer space and “become the site of struggles and the key targets for critical analysis” (Boltanski, 2011—cited in Dahlgren, 2013, p. 162).

Therefore, structure is both constraining and enabling (Giddens, 1984).

*Universities as Social Institutions*

Based on the above discussion, higher education institutions clearly qualify as a site for contestation of values and ideologies. Often these contestations take place between the institutional ideologies and the actors within. While Higher education, as an institution, is also influenced by external agencies, such as foundations that offer financial support, within a social and cultural system (Hollis, 1940), Perkins (1973), on the other hand, questioned if university was an agent for social change and concluded that
a university’s greatest instrument toward social change is its graduates rather than its institutional muscle. And so, for a university to be successful as an agent for social change, its graduates need to develop their potential as students for bringing such a change.

Since both the production and the reproduction of institutional structures depends upon the actions of multiple actors (Giddens, 1995), universities can especially be (and historically have been) the agents of social change. What is noteworthy, yet less acknowledged, is a lack of analysis of the “occurrence of social activities in time space” (Giddens, 1984, p. 144). Analyzing the space refers to the interaction settings, which include activities situated within locales. Moreover, it is also important that “in understanding web-based political agency, its conditions, practices, and subjectivity, a sense of historical is important” (Dahlgren, 2013, p. 177). Therefore, focusing on the impact of a changing media landscape on the political agency among university students could help us make sense of the changing power dynamic in the recent history that led to the current political developments.

**Youth Political Engagement**

Engagement reflects a connection between the citizens and the ruling power. However, a glimpse at available scholarship (discussed earlier in this chapter) revealed that even within the West the term “political engagement” had been viewed differently in different studies and, sometimes, used interchangeably with participation in electoral politics or the voting process as well as with civic engagement. For instance, in a meta-analysis of 38 studies on political engagement conducted by Boulianne (2009), various
researchers operationalized the term political engagement differently. Boulianne included a variety of behaviors in defining political engagement, such as voting, attending party meetings, and even participating in protests—referred to as a “non-traditional form of political participation” (2009, p. 196). However, in Boulianne’s study, the distinction between political engagement and participation remained unclear. Therefore, it was important to discuss and understand the idea of political engagement within the framework of this study.

Coleman (2007a) considered political engagement as an action of “a free moral agent” (p. 21). This kind of engagement entails a host of activities ranging from voting, watching political news, joining a political party, discussing politics, and demonstrations—all of which signify a reaction to political power rather than mere submission. Such reaction would more likely be evident in case of what Bennett (2007) called an actualizing citizen—the one with a greater sense of purpose at an individual level, rather than a sense of obligation to get involved in government activities—the trait of a dutiful citizen. While engagement is essentially visible in case of Bennett’s actualizing citizen, it must be understood that “to engage is to have voice, but not necessarily to be heard” (Coleman, 2007a, p. 22). Thus, disengagement can be an active choice, which apparently has been the case with youth (Coleman, 2006). For instance, Putnam (2000) considered the substantial contribution of youth to the overall decline in engagement among Americans as a sign of concern. He noted that the interest in politics declined considerably among the younger generations of Americans during the twentieth century. Therefore, even for the established democracies of the West, there had been a
“steady secular erosion of the traditional avenues of political engagement, including electoral turnout, party work, and civic activism” (Norris, 2002, p. 215). Moreover,

It appears the contemporary politics in most societies increasingly fail to capture the interest and attention of young citizens, who are generally skeptical of politicians and party affiliations and increasingly unlikely to vote (Bennett, 2007, p. 59).

This broad rejection, according to Bennett, could be detrimental to the growth of democracy.

While attempting to define engagement in the 21st century, Coleman (2007a) challenged the usually uncritical stance taken by the scholars in describing engagement and tried to problematize engagement while emphasizing the issue of youth disengagement. According to Coleman (2007a), the youth disengagement with politics occurs precisely when they are pushed to follow certain norms, but is often viewed as irresponsible. Coleman (2006) suggested that the political ecology (even for the established democracies of the West) had been evolving and engaging youth as an obligation, but engaging youth could not be as important as engaging with youth, which tends to be mutually more respectful. Coleman (2007b) further argued that it was the democratic system that had disengaged from youth, rather than the other way round. This perhaps held true not just for Western democracies, but also for the transitional democracies in other parts of the world.

Although American youth appeared to have become more and more disengaged, Delli Carpini (2000) viewed this as an overall trait among younger generations, which
was not just a stage in life that would change with time—implying that such a trait might keep the younger generations politically disengaged throughout their lives. While youth political engagement can strengthen democracies, especially in Western contexts, it might not necessarily be the ideal option for citizens across transitional democracies such as Malaysia, where selective engagement is preferred. Galstone (1995) had noted that governments tend to train citizens so that they engage selectively in what government wants them to do, rather than fostering the kind of engagement, which, in addition to involvement in political activities, allows citizens to be openly critical. Therefore, the idea of political engagement might likely entail manipulation in closed communication environments that restrict criticism of the government by citizens and prevent what Dahlgren (2009, p. 81) noted as an “expression of free will,” which is usually taken for granted in the West. Such manipulation could more likely take place under the governments that function in environments that respect group interest as opposed to individual interest. Nonetheless, the globalization of media industries and corporations had meant that the conventional modes of democratic transition across such countries, including citizens’ engagement in the civic and political sense, were no longer the same in the 21st century (Bennett, 2004). And, hence, the levels of as well as the motivations and reasons behind political engagement were changing constantly and such developments across different cultures, as asserted by scholars (including Norris, 1999, 2001; Rheingold, 2003) needed to be explored in further detail.

Norris (2002) suggested that the diversification, across organizations shaping political activities, ways of political expression, as well as political players, had
contributed in redefining political activism—exemplified by increasing political protest, social movements, and activism on the Internet. Hence, it had become crucial to ask—how was the Internet influencing political engagement toward the end of the first decade of the 21st century, especially across transitional democracies?

*Changing Media Environment and Power Dynamics*

While media could be held responsible for much of the civic knowledge, media, especially the online media, could also be held responsible for political perceptions and involvement (Carvalho, 2010; Dahlgren, 2009; Coleman, 2006; Weaver, 1996). Moreover, while a dutiful citizen follows mass media to stay informed about government and issues, the actualizing citizen might not trust the other mass media (such as television and radio) as much as the interactive technologies (Bennett, 2007). These interactive digital technologies (primarily the Internet) could play a crucial role in actualizing the ideal of citizens’ direct representation without requiring them to be full-time participants (Coleman, 2005).

According to Gaber (2011), the change in media technologies had led to four major outcomes, including media convergence, interactivity, declining reliance on mainstream reporting among audience, and growth of blogosphere. On the other hand, many scholars pointed at a growing digital divide and the resultant knowledge gap. Consequently, while online media encouraged a more participatory culture, the participants remained unequal (Jenkins, 2006). Some groups had been more adept at using technologies and some groups were more comfortable in publicly expressing their views via online media. In the U.S., people had started to participate in knowledge
cultures (where deliberations could take place) beyond formal educational institutions, which essentially took place in the spaces that revolved around popular culture (Jenkins, 2006).

However, as warned by many, including Couldry (2007), the mere presence of new technology did not guarantee political engagement. Furthermore, as Coleman (2006) explains:

As politics becomes more technocratic and instrumental, it has less to do with contested values and becomes more like an ongoing audition of competing management teams. The public find this uninspiring. They vote less, watch less and join in less. They are not just politically disengaged; they disengage as a political act (p. 476).

Therefore, while ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) could decrease cynicism among citizens, technocratic politics, on the other hand, could spur disengagement. Nonetheless, the public had been “learning to adopt critical viewing strategies in order to decode the sophisticated presentational techniques employed by politicians” (Coleman, 2005, p. 211). Moreover, this critical viewpoint did not necessarily entail disengagement, and could be the opposite, especially for those “critical citizens” who had found the available avenues of participation as falling “short of democratic ideals” (Norris, 1999, p. 27).

**Critical Citizens and Scope for a Qualitative Inquiry**

In *Critical Citizens*, Norris (1999) found declining public consensus for representative democracy and increasing cynicism toward government across many
established and evolving democracies, and also pointed at the trendless nature of such decline during the last decade of the 20th century. A lack of trend reinforced that political and social systems across the world are in different stages. Hence, the making of such critical citizens (i.e. university students), within the scope of a given political system, required a more nuanced and specific inquiry. Norris (1999) used political trust as one of the variables and found that depleting faith in government had led to lower levels of participation in politics. Norris also suggested that it might be more important to focus on generating political interest compared to political trust. Therefore, it was crucial to understand what had generated political interest in a transitional democracy like Malaysia.

Norris (1999) also suggested that the citizens supporting a regime could more likely believe in the legitimacy of the law and follow it. This issue had been more critical than participation for many transitional democracies that witness crime and corruption, tax-avoidance, and ineffective legal system. These issues, when reported in media, could catalyze political cynicism, which could fuel protests ranging from peaceful rallies (as had been seen in Malaysia) to acts of terrorism (Oklahoma bombing; see Norris, 1999). And so, the outcome of increasing political cynicism could be more serious for the stability of a regime, especially across transitional and semi-democracies (Norris, 1999). Such cynicism could, therefore, contribute to the friction between democratic ideals and the reality, which could lead to disenchantment with existing institutions and might either act as a push for political reforms—strengthening the democracy, or weaken the support for democratic structures in transitioning political systems—threatening the consolidation
process across transitional democracies (Norris, 1999).

There could also be non-media factors shaping both political opinion and media choices. For instance, Ekström (2016) suggested that social settings shape the engagement in political talk and family and peers could provide important platform for discussions, developing opinions, and identities. While Ekström found social media to be a problematic platform for political talk and for managing political self-identities, Svensson (2014) had earlier noted that social media could offer a more reflexive communication and more participation compared to other media forms. Nevertheless, the situation could vary depending upon the political system and associated freedoms. Yet, the social media remained an area to be explored in the context of changing media landscape and political scenario.

Despite their increasing popularity, social media only constituted only a part of a wide range of media on the Internet during the late 2000s. Moreover, as Dahlgren and Olsson (2007) had noted, contextualizing the Internet in the changing media environment was crucial. Such consideration, according to Dahlgren and Olsson, would help deepen the analysis and prevent overestimating the potential of the Internet. And so, research on youth political engagement needed to consider the continued role played by the mainstream mass media while exploring the roles played by the Internet and online media toward political engagement.

While Epstein (2015) had noted that future studies could focus on the impact of changing new media on organizational structure and social relationships, O’Neill (2010) had earlier cited a need for qualitative inquires exploring combinations of online and
other mass media that served the needs of people with high as well as low engagement levels. Overall, the research questions raised in the previous section could be best addressed through an ethnographic inquiry focusing on a specific university setting discussed in the next chapter (e.g. see Barlocco (2014), who studied the Kadazan (an indigenous ethnic group in Eastern Malaysia) in the state of Sabah, and noted the connections between the informants’ political outlook and media use).

Summary

A review of available literature suggested that a vast majority of studies on media and youth political engagement—both before and after 2010—had been conducted in the West. And so, there had been a need to explore non-Western settings. Second, there had been a need for qualitative inquiries with a more nuanced depiction of the roles played by changing media environment toward political engagement or disengagement in specific contexts. While researchers had, in one way or another, studied media and youth political engagement, both within the region and within Malaysia, there remained sufficient scope for conducting related research in a university setting. Overall, the review led to the following questions guiding this study:

*Research Question 1*

What kind of media access did the students at an affirmative action university in Peninsular Malaysia had during 2010?

*Research Question 2*

Given the country’s changing media environment, how did the students who identified as either politically engaged or disengaged perceive the relationship between Malaysian
media and politics during 2010? (based on Wilson et al., 2003; Carvalho, 2010; Dahlgren, 2009; Coleman, 2006; Weaver, 1996; Farish, 2002; Weiss, 2009b)

Research Question 3
How were parental and peer influences and other non-media factors related to political engagement and disengagement among these students during 2010? (based on Ekström, 2016)

Research Question 4
What were the roles played by the alternative and mainstream mass media in fostering a sense of political engagement or disengagement among these students during 2010? (based on Coleman, 2006; O'Neill, 2010)

Research Question 5
How did the aspects of media credibility and distrust influence these students’ decisions to engage or disengage with politics in future? (based on Norris, 1999)

Given the specific nature of the above research questions and based on the theoretical discussion in the last section of this chapter, an ethnographic approach, discussed in the next chapter, was considered most suitable to find answers to these questions.
CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH METHODS

This chapter discusses the field research methods used to seek answers to the research questions raised in the previous chapter. In doing so, this chapter is divided into four sections. These sections describe the site of this study, the process of selecting informants, the tools used for this study, and the rationale behind the analysis. As evident from the previous chapter, past research pertaining to media in Malaysia had incorporated a wide variety of methodological approaches, such as surveys, content analysis, textual analysis, ethnography, and so on.

Based upon the key research questions of this study, I considered multiple ways in which this research could possibly be conducted. Initially, I had considered a combination of questionnaire-based survey and in-depth interviewing for this study. However, I later deemed an exploratory approach more suitable given the study’s focus on politics while the University and University Colleges Act of 1971 (UUCA) was still in place and the implausibility of developing a reliable survey instrument, especially given the language barrier that many Malay students faced. As Mutz (2002) had argued that the individual perceptions are crucial in shaping political actions and views, investigating individual perceptions was important in undertaking this study. In addition, interviews could help explore the diversity of views on a given topic (Fielding, 1993a). And so, I conducted interviews with 22 university students based at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)—the site of this study. In-depth interviewing through multiple meetings could help build a rapport with the participants and gel appropriately with the participant
observation (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Therefore, I chose a combination of in-depth qualitative interviewing and participant observation for this research study.\textsuperscript{23}

The Study Site

The introduction (Chapter 1) discusses the rationale behind choosing UiTM—a Bumiputera institution—for this study.\textsuperscript{24} The site chosen for conducting the fieldwork was UiTM’s campus in Shah Alam, Selangor (close to Kuala Lumpur). I had certain advantages at this site. First, it offered a semi-urban environment, which meant that the pace of life in this town was slower and more relaxed compared to the somewhat faster-paced big cities such as Kuala Lumpur. Thus, the students in general had more flexibility and time to participate in this study. Second, I lived on campus with other international students (from the Middle East), which allowed a regular interaction with the student community and helped me experience the student life outside the classroom first-hand. Third and most importantly, being a vast university campus, the study site offered multiple opportunities to interact with students and choose potential informants for the study. Once I established a rapport with an informant, the site offered many places safe for having serious political discussions.

I conducted the interviews for this study during the months of July and August 2010, which allowed sufficient time to establish contact, develop a rapport, and conduct multiple interviews with the informants. The host Fakulti (equivalent to a college)

\textsuperscript{23} This combination was supplemented by a close examination of primary and secondary sources of information to develop the two background chapters of this study pertaining to Malaysia’s media (Chapters 2 and 3).
\textsuperscript{24} The term Bumiputera includes all ethnic Malays and aboriginal groups in Malaysia (see Chapter 1 for details).
provided me with an office space and the college premise became a starting point toward identifying informants for this study. Sharing a living space with students and having an on-campus base, I had access to both student and teacher communities at the study site. Moreover, I conducted a number of interviews—both on and off-campus; usually, away from the noise usually experienced in a public environment.

Background of the Informants

Since the study site was a Bumiputera only institution, the students at this university were either Malays or, in some cases, belonged to one of the many indigenous groups (mostly from Eastern Malaysia). While Malaysia’s overall population consists of diverse ethnic groups, reaching a representative sample was not a target of this study. Out of the 22 informants in this study, 16 were Malay Bumiputera, one was non-Malay Bumiputera, and five were non-Bumiputera, including two Malaysian Chinese and three Malaysian Indian students. The Bumiputera students were pursuing undergraduate studies in different areas, including Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Sports Science and Recreation, Broadcasting, Public Relations, Interpersonal Communication, Law, and Food Technology. On the suggestion of one of the international advisors, I met with some non-Bumiputera pre-college students at the International Education Centre. These students had received government scholarship for pursuing university education abroad and were enrolled in a pre-college program at a location away from UiTM’s main campus.

My informants came from different parts of Malaysia, including Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Pahang, Perak, Sarawak, Selangor, and Terengganu. Overall, seven of these
students had come from villages, ten from towns, and five from cities. Most informants reported having a middle-income family background, with the exceptions of Aisyah and Laila, who belonged to an upper-middle-income family, and Ali and Salmah, who came from lower income families.

Among my informants, eight students, including Aisyah (aged 20 years), Ela (23), Hafiz (22), Karima (21), Rahim (22), Ratu (23), Shamsul (25), and Zarina (20) had shown a strong inclination toward joining politics in the future. On the other hand, Ali (21), Alifa (22), Aminah (23), Faridah (21), Fauziah (24), Laila (22), Nadia (22), Osman (23), and Salmah (26) lacked any such inclination and considered themselves far from politics. Furthermore, the non-Bumiputera students, including Mei, Lin, Deepak, Thangam, and Preeti (all aged 19 years), also lacked any interest in either joining or discussing politics. Moreover, these informants did not express a clear opinion on political issues—perhaps due to their age, which was less compared to other informants, as well as their ethnic backgrounds. However, their hesitation was not unusual since I had similar experiences with some of the Bumiputera informants as well.

Recruitment of Informants

The 22 informants for this study were recruited in several ways. First, I recruited seven individuals, including Nadia, Alifa, Ela, Faridah, Zarina, Habib, and Rahim, from an on-campus food court. Thereafter, I met the five non-Bumiputera students, including Mei, Lin, Deepak, Thangam, and Preeti, at the International Education Centre. Through an instructor acquaintance at the Fakulti, I recruited five more individuals, including

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25 The names of all the informants have been changed to protect their identities.
Salmah, Laila, Fauziah, Shamsul, and Osman. Among the informants at the Fakulti, Shamsul introduced me to two of his friends Karima and Aisyah at my office. I also recruited three individuals off campus, including Ali (whom I first met in a local bus) as well as Aminah and Ratu—both of whom were introduced to me by some mutual international friends at the university.

*Getting Started*

Feldman, Bell, and Berger (2003, p. 3) noted that the process for interview research is complex for “researchers who need to gather their own data,” particularly in cases where the data collection requires considerable time from the informants. Given the specific nature of my inquiry, getting started appeared quite challenging at first, especially with the tight timeframe and a slower pace of life in Malaysia compared to the United States, where I had received academic training for the past several years. Moreover, with a potential of conducting multiple interviews with each individual to reach the depth of the issues revolving around media and political engagement, I looked for individuals willing to share sufficient time and views on media and political issues. The idea was not merely to establish contact, develop a rapport, and conduct multiple interviews, but to develop mutual trust, which was usually tricky.

Feldman et al. (2003) cite developing contacts, identity, persistence, flexibility, and luck, as key aspects of gaining access to participants in a research project. My key contact at the Fakulti was Dr. Mohamad (name changed) who suggested that I could get potential informants from food courts located across campus and which often had students from different Fakultis. While I was hesitant at first, the food court helped me
getting started by offering a space to approach some individuals, who later became informants in this study. These included Nadia, Alifa, and Ela, who studied administrative science and were the first ones to be interviewed for this study. I also recruited Faridah, Zarina, Rahim, and Habib from the same vicinity. To make the process of recruitment more efficient, I used a combination of convenience and snowball sampling through the course of this research.

*Continuing Recruitment at the Fakulti*

Among the instructors, I came in touch with Azmah, who became one of my key acquaintances during the course of this research. During one of her class sessions, I had a brief interaction with Azmah’s students. Thereafter, I was contacted by several students with an interest to participate in my research and I ended up recruiting Salmah, Laila, Fauziah, Shamsul, and Osman, who shared their views through multiple interviews. While I considered it crucial to get the views of students from different academic disciplines, the students of communication and media could provide a different and perhaps a more detailed perspective compared to those from other disciplines.

*Using Snowball Technique to Reach New Informants*

As noted earlier, I also used snowball technique and, as a result, was introduced to new informants through existing ones. For instance, Osman’s participation was primarily encouraged by Fauziah’s participation, as they were classmates and good friends. In another instance, Shamsul was willing to help beyond his own participation in this study and introduced me to two of his friends, including Karima (from Sarawak; majoring in Public Relations) and Aisyah (majoring in Law). Similarly, some of my international
friends introduced me to Aminah and Ratu (both majoring in Food Technology). Due to the informal nature of the latter introductions, it was easy for me to have more detailed discussions on media and politics with Aminah and Ratu. However, since Aminah expressed a disinterest in politics at first, the issues pertaining to politics were only discussed sparingly during the initial conversations, which were more personal and mainly revolved around personal life experiences, getting familiar, and media use.

**Interviewing**

With some prior experience of conducting field research in Malaysia, I understood that the quality of information gathered depended greatly on the level of rapport between the researcher and the informants, which clearly required interaction beyond a paper-pencil questionnaire. Considering the political aspect of the study, it was imperative for me to use qualitative interviewing as a key constituent of an ethnographic approach that I had taken toward conducting this study.

**Planning the Interviews**

While an interview study needs planning and considerable forethought, planning each interview needs careful attention and must consider both general and specific goals (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002; Hunt & Eadie, 1987). In the interviews conducted for this study, my general goal was to obtain information, which was otherwise not available and I considered face-to-face communication most helpful in finding answers to my research questions. The specific goal of these interviews was to cover the theme of media and politics. Accordingly, I prepared interview guides in advance for both structured and semi-structured interviewing (Appendices A and B). I carefully selected opening, closing,
and transitions based upon each individual informant’s comfort level, and I also tailored the organization of follow-up interview schedules based upon the informants’ individual interests.

This study included structured interviewing based upon selected questions on specific details to get some basic information and to get acquainted with the informants and their media habits (See appendix A for the interview schedule). I usually conducted these interviews in a shorter time compared to semi-structured or unstructured interviews and the structured interviews often helped introducing the study and my research to the informants.

The semi-structured interviews, which I conducted as a follow-up to the structured interviews, gradually allowed for more unstructured and informal conversations with the informants through the rapport that we had reached. While I usually kept the initial interviews in this study structured, the later interviews were semi-structured or unstructured depending upon individual participants (Appendix B), although I preferred the latter format since I found most participants were more comfortable with the conversational nature of unstructured interviewing without getting conscious about their responses (Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

Kvale (1996) had noted two different roles of an interviewer—“miner” and “traveler.” While the miner seeks in-depth information and derives meaning from individual interviewees’ experiences, the traveler tends to explore various domains and perspectives represented by different interviewees to reach a goal of developing a general meaning toward the end. During this study, I sought to be both a miner as well as a
traveler and attempted to capture a variety of in-depth information. In doing so, I used different probes during the interviews for this study, such as echo probe (repeating the question), tell-me-more probe, and long question probe (Bernard, 2002). At the same time, a number of informants shared their political views freely without a need for probe or a concern about my foreign background. I found that these informants lacked any fear of such interaction leading them into trouble or any hesitation that might arise otherwise, such as during a telephone conversation with an unknown researcher. On the other hand, there were some other informants, including those who were politically motivated and those who considered themselves as disengaged, who were hesitant to share their political views, especially during the first two interactions. Nevertheless, my promise to keep their identities confidential and a growing understanding between us eventually helped me in getting their views in a few cases.

Feldman et al. (2003) cited certain instances wherein some researchers had altered their research design after investigating field conditions and determining accessibility. Regarding preparatory work, they suggested—

while the homework stage is important, the researcher should take care not to get stuck in it. It is easy to do this, for researchers often feel most in control during this part of gaining access. . . . Access is hardly ever gained without going out and making contact with people. Preparation can also be overdone. . . .it is important to be knowledgeable . . .but not so knowledgeable that you think you already know the answers to your questions. (Feldman et al., 2003, p. 6)
Hence, I was cautious and avoided overdoing the preparation. I especially maintained the exploratory feature of this research alive through the course of the fieldwork—even on those rare occasions when accessibility was a challenge.

*The Interview Process*

During the fieldwork, I conducted a total of 65 interviews with 22 university students at the study site. These interviews included 22 structured, 22 semi-structured, and 21 unstructured interview-sessions conducted based upon the informants’ availability. Out of the 22 participants, 12 individuals were only available for structured and semi-structured interviews, whereas the remaining ten individuals were willing to go beyond the first two interviews and continued to share their views and time through subsequent (unstructured) interviews. The total number of meetings with those ten informants varied from three to five in each individual case.

The interview sessions usually lasted from about 30 minutes to more than two hours on some occasions—depending upon participants’ availability. While the initial interviews with each of the informants were structured with simple questions to get familiar, the later interview(s) were unstructured and mostly exploratory in nature—attempting to unveil some of the many complex interactions between media and political engagement among the informants.

The initial interviews included a highly structured questionnaire and were followed by less structured interviewing pertaining to media use. These discussions eventually moved to politics. While lack of access could result in pulling back from the original questions for some researchers, researchers often “gain more access and thus
more knowledge than they ever imagined they would have” (Feldman et al., 2003, p. 3).

Through the initial interviews, it was worthwhile to first explore the level of their political awareness, which was often influenced by the media coverage, and then move to a more detailed discussion on media and politics. My informants offered different examples and leads to follow—especially when the meeting time was limited. For instance, toward the end of an interview session, Nadia recommended a book titled Two Faces by Syed Husin Ali besides other media, which she trusted as a reliable source of information and which provided a strong case for students’ disengagement from politics. Although I could only manage to acquire and read this book after collecting the data, it helped me understand an informed university student’s perspective better. This experience also demonstrated some informants’ willingness to help even if they were unable to meet repeatedly for subsequent interviews. The ethnographic approach taken for this study, therefore, helped me gain more access and knowledge than I had initially anticipated.

Interview Settings

I conducted the interviews mainly in the office room, in addition to several other places, including food courts at the Fakulti and near the student housing area, on-campus Café, library, and local restaurants just outside the campus. I mostly kept the initial meetings in the office environment so that the structured and semi-structured interviews could be conducted without outside distractions and noise. Moreover, in certain cases, the office space offered sufficient privacy to discuss sensitive issues, although I found that such discussions were often more livid at less-formal settings, such as off-campus
locations. However, in arranging all the sessions, I gave priority to the interviewees’ comfort and, thus, met them at places which were most convenient for them. My interviews with Ela, Alifa, Nadiah, Zarina, Faridah, Hafiz, Karima, Osman, Shamsul, Fauziah, and Aisyah took place on the university campus; interviews with Salmah, Laila, and Rahim started at the Fakulti and eventually moved to other locations; interviews with Chinese and Indian students took place at the International Education Centre; and all the interviews with Ali, Aminah, and Ratu took place outside the Fakulti at both on-campus as well as off-campus locations, including the library, food court, and restaurants. While I kept the initial meetings semi-formal, the later exchanges became friendlier and views on different matters were exchanged quite freely.

**Recording the Interviews**

I recorded the interviews in this study through hand-notes and personal recall. I did this after substantial thought and planning while considering the study focus and ascertaining informants’ trust, as Rubin and Rubin (2005) had noted that some interviewees could get shy or hesitant on learning that the interaction is being recorded. The presence of an electronic recorder could not only cause a distraction, it could also influence the responses among the informants of this study. Therefore, permission is a must before recording according to Kvale (1996), but in case of this research, which focused on politics, recording their responses could have raised serious concerns among the informants. Moreover, I did not consider audio recording these interviews without the knowledge of informants because that would be unethical (Bryman, 2001).
In planning this study, I initially debated the idea of audio-recording the interviews versus using hand-written notes and personal recall to record the interviews. Both of these options had their pros and cons. Taking hand written notes to record an interview verbatim could be time-consuming, and so, I needed to be selective in note-taking (Fielding 1993a). Taking hand-written notes according to Fielding was mainly advisable for a sample of 20 or less. Moreover, the recollection depended on active listening, which most contemporary interview researchers, who treat tapes and transcripts as actual data, do not engage in—simply due to a lack of sensitivity and training (Kvale, 1996). Therefore, I decided against audio recording the interviews. This decision made it possible to utilize several interview sites, which would otherwise be considered too noisy for audio recording.

In addition to hand notes, I recorded these interviews by using personal recall. While this entailed the risk of forgetting details and being selective, I usually tried to cover as much information as possible, including the visual information and social atmosphere, which are largely lost in audio recording (Kvale, 1996). In doing so, I typically wrote down the key relevant aspects during the interview sessions and updated them regularly, typically following the interview sessions, through the course of my fieldwork (Gordon, 1987; Fielding, 1993b; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Since carrying a laptop computer everywhere was cumbersome and typing while interviewing could be distractive as well as obstructive for the interviewee in providing the feedback, I took hand-written notes. The idea of avoiding audio recording also helped me in taking a more reflective approach because the gradual nature of the note-taking allowed me to be more
engaged with the data and also have a stronger analytical approach in my research (Fielding 1993b).

Cultural Factors

I had to consider the importance of cultural factors in interviewing seriously while preparing for the interviews (Cross, 1974). For instance, discussion of ethnic issues in public has been long deemed prohibited by the government in Malaysia, and I understood that discussing such issues with a foreign researcher might not be desirable for at least some of the informants, if not a majority. In many cases, such a discussion would be rather indirect and such indirectness in expressing oneself had become a part of the contemporary Malaysian culture. I had to be aware of this trait to understand the messages conveyed by some of the informants. Also, some students were reticent during the first interview and it took a couple of meetings before they were willing to talk about politics and media.

I deemed it imperative to consider social class, language, and religious backgrounds while meeting with my informants. For instance, some informants were more outgoing than the others and preferred to meet outside the campus; some were interested in practicing their English speaking skills and, hence, decided to participate in this study; and some participants felt more comfortable in interacting after learning that I had a religion. In terms of religious belief, Malaysia could most likely be viewed as a Malay-dominated Islamic society. However, I realized that while Islam received top priority, it was still important to have a religion, as most informants in this study showed stronger empathy once they found out that I had a religion and was not an atheist.
Educational background was another key factor that contributed to the informants’ knowledge as well as the ability to provide a commentary on issues related to media and politics. Moreover, those who excelled academically appeared to be more intrigued by the questions asked during this study.

I also found it useful to consider the themes of interest for the informants and take interest in what the interviewee has to say, besides organizing questions carefully and knowing those questions well (Stewart & Cash, 1974). For instance, Shamsul had a keen interest in Bollywood movies, and I took interest in his remarks mostly to provide a friendly environment so that he could express himself freely on other issues as well. As a result of proper acquaintance, I had more informal interactions with the informants. At the same time, keeping the nature of these interviews informal helped me in developing a positive rapport with the students. However, in no way, as Bernard (2002) warned, the adjective “informal” be confused with “lightweight,” as it required constant note-taking and an occasional deception toward the people who were being interviewed. For instance, with Laila, Salmah, Ali, and Rahim, I had in-depth, informal conversations, which would be difficult in a formal setup. Moreover, in dealing with research studies on Malaysian politics, such as this, informal interactions might be the only way to find answers. Yet, as Stewart and Cash (1974) had suggested, it was imperative for me to stay careful about dress code and timing and to avoid taking a lot for granted, although most of these were closely related to the rapport that I shared with the informants.

On only one occasion, I came across an interviewee, who was uncomfortable sharing his views on media and politics during the later part of an interview. This
informant left the interview session abruptly and was unavailable for follow-up interviews when I contacted him later. Therefore, it became apparent that no matter how well prepared I was, certain questions still needed to be abandoned entirely depending upon the willingness of the interviewee. Moreover, interviewees cannot express everything and interview-generated information cannot always be taken on its face value and one may need to rely on additional alternatives (Mason, 2002). As a researcher, I had to be mindful of the university’s policies and the limitations put on these students, especially with regards to political engagement. This situation validated the need for an additional tool, which did not depend as heavily on the informants and which could still supplement the information obtained through the interviewing process. This tool was participant observation, which is often used in field research, particularly as a key component of ethnographic studies. Indeed, in-depth interviewing and participant observation had been the most prominent among the qualitative research tools (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002).

Participant Observation

I collected additional data through participant observation for triangulation—as a solution to a tendency toward self-censorship among the participants in ethnographic audience research (Ruddock, 2001). The specific goals of participant observation in this study were to get the richest possible data, get “intimate familiarity with the setting,” and interact while participating in the minds of the participants in the setting (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 17). And so, I willingly participated in different activities at any possible level, which could potentially enable interactions with the student community.
and thereby offer me a chance to make observations. For instance, my introduction as a
guest speaker at the International Education Centre in front of a large audience (over 600
pre-college students) or my participation in a Gamelan (a traditional musical instrument
ensemble) workshop along with international students from a variety of academic
disciplines were examples of such activities—some of which indeed helped me identify
some of the potential informants for my research. While varying levels of proximity with
a setting in participant observation had been identified by Gold (1958) and Gans (1968)
cited in Bryman, 2001), I decided against the idea of “unobtrusive observation”
(Bryman, 2001, p. 299) occasionally to get a more nuanced picture of the setting and the
participants.

Fielding maintained that a researcher must have a certain level of detachment so
as to gather the data, but also warned against the issue of “not getting close enough”
while taking a superficial approach which might result into an analysis that researcher
already had in mind (1993b, p. 158). Therefore, I found it necessary to avoid any
superficial approaches. As a result, my active engagement helped acquire a different
understanding of the setting than my prior perception and I clearly had more access than I
had anticipated before starting the fieldwork. Evidently, Lofland and Lofland (1995),
who divide researcher’s roles between participant and outsider, also supported
involvement as well as enmeshment compared to objectivity and distance. Like the
interviews, selectivity was also unavoidable in participant observation, although I usually
attempted to engage with the entire situation or phenomenon under observation (Babbie,
1973).
Field Notes

In addition to taking notes for recording individual interviews as noted earlier, I used field notes to record participant observation. For instance, certain events, such as the visit to the International Education Center, a trip to Kuala Lumpur that included attending a fundraiser for Palestine, and the Gamelan workshop organized for international students, did not appear in the interview texts, but they certainly helped me in acquiring an understanding of the setting. The field notes were critical in this study since I had decided against using an audio recorder. Moreover, writing the field notes helped capture facial expressions or physical actions, which could not be audio-recorded (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

I used a three- to four-step process in preparing the field notes for this study. First, I took hand-written notes whenever possible, including during the interviews, without distracting the interviewee, and at other times when I had privacy. Second, I instantly updated the notes for details following the interview when such details were fresh in my memory. Third, I entered these notes on a text file electronically. Finally, during the follow-up meetings, I further corroborated the notes with the interviewees whenever possible. According to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), writing field notes requires proper training which often depends on experience. I had first-hand experience of conducting research and taking notes in Malaysia on a previous occasion, which helped in preparing field notes for this study. I found that writing down the experiences as and when they occurred was more efficient and useful compared to doing so at a later stage or to transcribing audio recordings much after the interviews took place. I found instant
note-taking especially helpful during the first few weeks of my ethnographic journey in a pre-dominantly Malay town since the sensitivities towards a foreign culture tend to become diluted with continued contact (Marcus & Fischer, 1996).

Analyzing the Data

I followed four basic steps involved in collecting and analyzing ethnographic data for this study. These steps included preparing the fieldnotes and interview transcripts, searching for patterns and categories, dividing the data, and constructing an outline or re-sequencing the data (Fielding, 1993b). In the first stage, it became obvious to me that each interview was an evolving interaction that delved into a variety of issues, which when included entirely could weaken the focus of this study. And so, in the next stage, I looked for categories and patterns based upon the key research questions, as Ruddock (2001) had noted, “interviews always generate more information than can be used, so the researcher’s task is to report those sections of interviews that shed most light on the research question at hand” (p. 139).

The third and the fourth stages required more effort in dividing the data and preparing an outline, which I essentially drew from Goffman’s (1974) “frame analysis” in the organization of experience (p. 11). The primary frames were based on the research questions, and while providing a basic structure, these questions helped organize my experience in a more meaningful manner. Moreover, “the type of framework we employ provides a way of describing the event to which it is applied” (Goffman, 1974, p. 24). Despite a somewhat uniform use of the interview guide, which included asking questions in a similar order to the informants, the structure of each individual interview differed
considerably in this study. I had also anticipated that none of the interviews could
individually yield complete answers to my research questions and some interviews could
clearly provide more relevant information than others. During the analysis, it was
imperative to consider that

no single interview, however revealing, can offer more than limited insight into
general social forces and processes. Only by comparing a series of interviews can
the significance of any one of them be fully understood. And, in the long run,
each interview will add to the final story. (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002, p. 211)

Hence, I rearranged the interview text and field notes in order to develop a story,
which could answer the research questions. The basic frame for the analysis was partly
provided by the research questions as well as the outcome of the interviews and
participant observation (Goffman, 1974; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). I then divided the
data from informants into two categories. The first category included the informants who
identified themselves as disengaged and who were unwilling to engage in politics in
future—discussed in the next chapter. The second category included the informants who
were willing to either join politics or engage with it in future—discussed in the
penultimate chapter.

Summary

This chapter described the method used to answer the research questions of this
study. The presence of UiTM’s vast campus in a semi-urban locality had provided me
with an easy access to potential informants for this study. I was able to recruit informants
not only from different academic disciplines across the campus as well as through a few
informants who willingly provided access to their friends. I conducted structured, semi-structured, as well as unstructured interviews to seek answers to the key research questions raised in this study. The unstructured and informal mode of interviewing especially helped me in gaining insights on the issues pertaining to media and politics in Malaysia. Supplementing interviewing with participant observation and field notes became a key component of my field research. I finally divided the data obtained from field notes and interview transcripts into two categories, including the responses of those informants who identified themselves as disengaged from politics and those who were willing engage with politics later in their lives. Based upon these two categories, the next two chapters present the key findings of this study.
CHAPTER 6: MEDIA AND THE DISENGAGED

This study focused on media use and political engagement among *Universiti Teknologi MARA* (UiTM) students during 2010. The fieldwork for this study was conducted in Shah Alam—a predominantly *Bumiputera* (mostly Malay) town where I was based for the duration of this study. A majority of my informants had expressed that they lacked an interest in politics and considered themselves politically disengaged. As mentioned in the previous chapter, these students included Ali (aged 21 years), Alifa (22), Aminah (23), Faridah (21), Fauziah (24), Laila (22), Nadia (22), Osman (23), and Salmah (26). The non-*Bumiputera* students, including Mei, Lin, Deepak, Thangam, and Preeti (all aged 19 years) also refrained from discussing politics in detail.

As the introduction chapter lays out, 2010 was a crucial year in Malaysia’s political history. This chapter captures media access, perceptions regarding media and politics, media’s contribution in generating political engagement, and the predictions among some of the UiTM students to support that position. Based upon my experience with these students, I found that even the politically disengaged were not entirely unaware of political issues in the country at the time. On the contrary, some of these students were highly informed citizens who were cautious and watchful of their actions. In certain cases, they had deliberated over and rejected the idea of actively engaging in politics somewhat early in their lives. Moreover, the informants’ preference for disengagement did not ensure that they were indeed disengaged. Through the course of this research, it became clear that the highly interactive nature of social media had not only helped increase the political interactions involving students, but they were also
increasingly challenging the ways in which political engagement had been understood previously. Overall, the findings in this chapter support the position that 2010 was a critical year in Malaysia’s political history amid changes fostered by the country’s changing media environment.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section depicts the kinds of media UiTM students were accessing and the content popular among some of these students. In exploring this access, the issue of credibility of government controlled mass media and online media, including blogs and social media, emerged. The second section explores the perceptions among UiTM students during 2010 regarding the depiction of politics in Malaysian Media, including the trust (based on the discussion on credibility in the latter half of the first section) on and the influence of political coverage in mainstream Malaysian media. This section also notes the first impressions on media and political engagement among the informants, including the influence of media on political decision-making among the informants during the elections, the influence of media on shaping political perceptions, and finally, the role, if any, the country’s media had played in generating youth political engagement. The third section discusses the role of alternative media online in catalyzing the process of political disengagement through alternative news Websites, blogs, and social networks. The fourth section of this chapter notes the predictions made by some of the informants regarding censorship and the political and media systems in the country, which are discussed further in the final chapter of this dissertation. As noted in Chapter 5, revealing details on informants’
backgrounds have been omitted and the names have been changed to protect the identity of those who volunteered to participate in this study.

Media Access

Although the UiTM campus was located less than 20 miles from Kuala Lumpur, the pace of life was much slower and relaxed. Nonetheless, my experience in this setting suggested that media and communication technologies were an integral part of students’ daily lives—just as in many other parts of the world. Most students at the research site did not seem to own a television set. They sometimes watched television at the food court (a place with food shops), Kedai Mama (a cafeteria often run by Tamil Muslims), residential colleges, houses (rented by those students who did not live in dormitories), or their parental homes (often in another town). There were television sets on some local buses as well, which mostly played music and short programs, such as Tom & Jerry and other cartoons [see Figure 1 below]. The television sets provided an option for those who did not have other means of entertainment while riding a bus, although sending text messages via cellphones was common.
For those who spent a considerable amount of time watching television in their hometown, television viewing was reduced due to a busy life at the university and the availability of diverse media options through the Internet. Many students preferred to download movies and television shows on their laptops and personal computers and watch them later with their friends. The Internet had largely replaced radio, television as well as newspapers for the informants. Besides the Internet, the use of cell phones was widespread among the students. In one such case, Nadia, who studied Administrative Sciences, mentioned that as a child she only read print versions of selected newspapers and magazines. Later on, she started following multiple news Websites, blogs, and so on. While Nadia had free access to the print version of Harian Metro through her department, she also had subscribed to Berita Harian through Short Messaging Service (SMS) on her cell phone since she considered herself lazy to buy a New Straits Times (NST)—primarily because of the cost and the effort involved.
While Nadia’s case demonstrated the variety of access points available to these students, Deepak, a pre-college student, on the other hand, did not access newspapers online because he primarily used the Internet for gathering information relevant for his assignments. Although at 19, Deepak was younger than most other participants, he was still interested in reading the print versions of newspapers rather than reading them online—in part because his parents did not want him to spend too much time in front of a monitor. Therefore, parental control appeared to influence media access in certain cases. When asked how she learned about political issues, Deepak’s classmate Lin, a Chinese-Malaysian, remarked “[I am] not actively seeking information, but received through TV, etc. . . . have to watch it due to father, so perhaps [I] go away if doesn’t [sic.] want to watch” (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010). Consequently, the reasons for watching certain types of content, political matters in this case, depended on the family environment as well.

In my own case, it took me more than two days to get access to the Internet (through an on-campus computer) and to acquire a cell phone. Typically, the students were able to access the Internet from computers available at on-campus locations, such as faculty (department) or college (dormitory) labs and the library, via wireless connection (using student ID and password), or through a personal broadband card [Figure 2]. The last option required the students to pay from their own pocket, but was readily available in the market at the time. There were mainly three types of broadband cards popular among the students, which cost around MYR 68 (Malaysian Ringgit; equivalent of USD 21.45), MYR 58 (USD 18.30), and MYR 50 (USD 15.77) per month depending upon the
quality and terms of service (USD 1 = MYR 3.17; Financial Management Service, 2010, p. 3). Since the card could only be used with one computer at a time, most students, such as Aminah and her friend Ratu, had their own individual broadband cards, while some others reported sharing the broadband cards with their friends or siblings.

Figure 2. A laptop with a user-friendly broadband card. Photograph taken during an interaction with a student (July 9, 2010).

By 2010, Facebook had already become a household name in Malaysia and was not untouched by the country’s political discourse. However, the university had blocked access to Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other social media and entertainment Websites on its own network during the working hours, 8 am to 5 pm from Monday to Friday. The reason cited by UiTM administrators, reportedly, was to keep the students focused on their schoolwork and use their time more efficiently. The university policy of blocking those Websites during weekdays had led to an unusual situation (unlike the rest of the country where the Internet was not blocked or filtered) wherein the students had to
look for other options for accessing Internet freely. For instance, some students suggested that one could still use “Facebook Lite” (a version discontinued by Facebook in 2010) which could bypass the university firewall. Moreover, this situation had led to an increasing popularity of broadband cards among students since those who owned a broadband card could access the blocked Websites anytime since their Internet access was not routed through the university servers (Figure 2, above, shows a student’s laptop with one such broadband card at the university library). And therefore, despite institutional limitation on Internet access, many students had bypassed the access barrier in different ways.

While the Internet and television appeared to be widely popular among these students, the use of radio was rather limited. Those who listened to radio did it while driving their car or, in a few cases, through their cell phones. Notably, even the basic cellphone devices at the local market had FM radio receivers. Accordingly, it was possible for some of the participants to get news through SMS and radio services through cell phones without actually using the Internet provided by UiTM. While I used a basic cellphone model for calls, text messaging, and occasional radio listening, most students had (more sophisticated) smartphones with Internet access. Both cellphones and the Internet were perhaps the most popular communication technologies on campus. During the course my fieldwork, the cellphone, especially SMS, was far more efficient in reaching informants and coordinating meetings compared to electronic mail. Nonetheless, the role of the Internet in students’ lives could hardly be overlooked.
Access to Media Content

Despite limited access to a television and to on-campus Internet, most informants had a variety of options to fulfill their entertainment and informational needs. These needs were often content-driven and determined the most convenient medium for these students. For instance, along with her friends, Laila primarily enjoyed foreign, mostly American, television programs—some of which were available through Star World (a satellite television channel) and the rest through the Internet. Unlike the U.S. and many other Western countries, downloading copyrighted content was commonplace in Malaysia during 2010. According to Laila, the copyright law was generally not well-enforced in Malaysia, so “most things” could be downloaded (Personal Communication, July 21, 2010). Such access had allowed Laila and her friend Salmah to watch and enjoy American television shows such as *The Simpsons* and *The Family Guy*. Watching these shows had helped them understand and appreciate the U.S. pop culture better. For instance, along with Laila and her other friends, Salmah enjoyed the sarcasm and humor in American shows. But, during the interviews, they were not sure if such shows would appeal to the country’s masses if they were to be aired on Malaysian television at the time. On the other hand, watching these shows together was an enjoyable experience for them and had brought them closer as friends. While downloading was common, the foreign content aired on television was usually edited due to censorship. For example, Laila had stopped watching *Gossip Girl* on television because she preferred to watch the uncut version downloaded from the Internet, which according to her, was more interesting and entertaining.
I was also curious if there was a place for political satire or comedy on Malaysian media. According to several informants, including Ali, Nadia, Alifa, Laila and Salmah, political comedy was a sensitive issue—at least on the broadcast media. However, political humor was more evident in Print and especially on the Internet at the time. According to Ali, who studied Law, and several other informants, such humor usually targeted politicians in a very indirect manner. On the other hand, Ali followed political issues on media mostly for “fun” and not out of any serious concerns. He considered parliamentary proceedings a joke in which the politicians fought with each other and noted, “most of the time, [the politicians] make a fool of themselves . . . they don’t concern us” (Personal Communication, July 16, 2010).

As far as online sources were concerned, some students occasionally mentioned blogs. For instance, Alifa noted that one of her favorite blogs was Tukar Tiub (Hishamuddin, 2010). This blog was entirely in Malay and provided satirical commentary on a wide variety of social and political issues. Although most informants usually denied accessing political blogs during the first meetings, reading and enjoying such blogs was a reality among many of these students. A part of the reason in enjoying such blogs was the limitations of the mainstream media. During a detailed interview session with Ali, I found that banned content was often something intriguing just because it was banned and some individuals took pride in having access to it—something that was also reflected in Laila’s experience of watching downloaded episodes of Gossip Girl along with her close friends.
Overall, there were several reasons behind accessing different types of content among the students. These reasons included entertainment value, relevance to studies/academic major in college, parental recommendation, peer influence through friends and/or siblings, an interest in rare or banned content, and so on. Here, it was imperative to consider the nature of content relevant to studies/academic major in college among these students since some of them were indeed encouraged to follow certain media content by their instructors. For instance, some informants, including Deepak, Ali, Salmah, and Laila, followed international events more closely than the rest of the informants. Deepak understood the importance of international events and noted that he did not want to be a “Katak di bawah tempurung” (meaning frog under the coconut shell) and, as a result, started following international news to broaden his knowledge (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010). Besides Deepak, Nadia, and Alifa, Fauziah also followed political news primarily due to her studies and expressed:

For my major and minor, I need to know everything… be aware [of everything]. Recent issues, for example the fuel price, sugar issue . . . My political interest is more to see government and opposition . . . I read about this on Malaysiakini, which is pro-opposition, but the mainstream also reported . . . [such issues].

(Personal Communication, July 27, 2010)

While Fauziah complained about the corruption within the government, it was evident that these students were also aware of a continued pro-government bias within the mainstream media and often questioned their credibility.
Media Credibility

Credibility remained a key factor behind the selection of news content by my informants, however, like I have noted earlier in this chapter, sometimes even the news and serious media consumption was influenced by parental- or peer-influences. Moreover, perceptions regarding media credibility varied from one informant to another. In one instance, Aminah, who studied food technology, acknowledged that credibility was non-existent while watching news on Malaysian media, although she later mentioned that she still had a preference for TV3 over TV1 or 2 because she did not believe in government’s coverage of news (Personal Communication, August 1, 2010). Aminah’s response was not unusual and several other students had a similar dislike for government controlled mainstream media during 2010.

Likewise, Osman followed Buletin Utama on TV3 and felt it was pro-government, but still found it more reliable compared to the strong pro-government bias on TV1 and TV2 (Personal Communication, July 30, 2010). Another informant Ali went on to say that the government used TV1 and TV2 to present their views, whereas the private channels, namely TV3, 8TV, NTV7, and Channel 9 (operated by Media Prima Corporation) also had a pro-government bias. According to Ali, although Media Prima channels were more entertaining than the government channels, they were committed to social engineering and, thus, were still applying government ideology in their programs. Emphasizing that the shows that went against official ideology were likely to receive rejection by the authorities, he remarked:
Sometimes there are shows that gain popularity, but then they get cancelled as they are not liked by some people in the government . . . there was this show on Astro Ria, which was basically a gay-oriented drama. They banned the airing and production of this show and now it is only available with restriction. (Personal Communication, July 16, 2010)

In another example, Ali mentioned a movie called “Mualaf,” which was banned in Malaysia since it had certain socially objectionable situations, such as a Muslim girl memorizing the Bible, a priest punishing his undressed son in public, and combining Chinese opera with Azan (the call for prayer in Islam). Ali believed that while the government could provide certain guidelines (rather than censorship) for the community, people should be free to choose what they wanted to watch. These examples made it clear that the country’s censorship policy could contribute strongly to public distrust in media content.

Besides pro-government bias and censorship, the manipulation of information within mainstream media was another cause for concern among some UiTM students. For instance, Laila’s exposure to foreign media had led to the following observation about the Malaysian media:

There are several issues with the mainstream media. One of the things is the language they use. They are very careful in stating things like “reduction in subsidies” rather than “price hike.” Similarly, during the H1N1 outbreak, the reported death count was only about 100 nationwide, but in reality there were about 100 deaths in a local hospital alone. . . . even Dr. Mahathir had tried to
Salmah, in agreement with her friend Laila, was also highly dissatisfied with the reporting bias in the mainstream media and cited several examples of misreporting. For instance,

In Kampung Baru [within KL], there was a Malay wedding at the same time as an Indian funeral, which led to a huge argument and many people got killed. Government lied and reported less deaths. They misreport on the grounds of “National Security” . . . bullshit! (Personal Communication, July 23, 2010)

On the issue of credibility, Laila believed that every media outlet had flaws. While a majority of newspapers were pro-government in her view, there were exceptions such as *Malaysiakini*, or the opposition-run publications such as *Harakkah* (PAS) and *Suara Keadilan* (PKR), which often faced licensing issues. Many mainstream publications supported *Barisan Nasional* (BN)—the ruling coalition, while almost all of them provided excuses and explanations on government’s behalf. On the other hand, alternative news sources were often openly critical of the government. Laila was unable to decide which one of the two was right, so she usually went for both.

Laila’s experience was not uncommon among other students. While Fauziah did not have a very deep understanding of foreign media content for drawing comparisons as Laila and Salmah did, she clearly understood the inherent biases among the Malaysian media. Describing her thoughts on print media, Fauziah reported that while *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Melayu* had a pro-government bias, she read *The Sun* (available free of cost at
the faculty) due to her lecturers’ recommendation. “The local Malays here don’t know if papers like Harian Metro are biased. For them, it’s all—okay lah” (Personal Communication, July 27, 2010).

The concerns pertaining to media bias not only had paved the way for selective media consumption but also had resulted in a general lack of trust in media reporting among the UiTM students. In Deepak’s words:

I read the New Straits Times, Malay Mail, and The Star. I don’t trust them entirely. But, I think NST is comparatively more reliable, while the info on The Star is not as reliable. (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010)

Similarly, Nadia preferred Berita Harian since she believed that Utusan Malaysia had a stronger pro-government bias in covering political news. This helped me confirm an earlier observation that most of these students were clearly aware of the government manipulation of mainstream mass media. Consequently, these students were distrustful of mainstream media in general at the time.

Contrary to Deepak and Nadia’s perceptions, Osman, who was studying Communication and apparently had a different understanding of Malaysian media, offered further feedback on Malaysian newspapers. Osman considered The Sun as a reliable source of news and believed that it was more balanced in its reporting, especially since he believed that most journalists working for The Sun were either Chinese or Indian (and were, therefore, less likely to follow either UMNO or BN). Just like Fauziah, he viewed Berita Harian as UMNO’s mouthpiece, which often blamed other publications for being biased. For instance, Berita Harian often reported that certain news published
by Harakkah (owned by an opposition party PAS) were not factual. In another instance, Berita Harian accused Suara Keadilan (owned by another opposition party PKR) of defamation and as a result Suara Keadilan almost shut down because its license renewal was threatened. Osman believed that the pro-government mainstream media portrayed PAS and PKR negatively and acted as watchdogs for the government at the same time since the government did not “want the opposition to leak their secrets to the people” (Personal Communication, July 30, 2010).

Both Fauziah and Osman were Communication students, which had allowed them to understand the functioning of Malaysian media more closely compared to other informants. Nonetheless, despite being from different academic backgrounds, most informants, such as Nadia’s friend Alifa, were well aware of the bias within the mainstream mass media. Alifa, for instance, believed that while the media certainly informed people about the political issues, they also twisted the story to favor certain interests and explained:

The TV is controlled by the government. But, I think TV should be neutral [and act] as a mediator to make people believe in what they [the media] have to say. Perhaps it is hard [for them] to stay neutral due to licensing issues. (Personal Communication, July 9, 2010)

As reflected in Laila’s experience earlier in this section, knowledge of bias in the mainstream media had resulted in a tendency to refer to multiple sources among UiTM students. However, such tendency did not automatically qualify alternative sources as credible. In one such example, Alifa read Harakkah occasionally, besides the mainstream
publications and news Websites, since it was popular among the opposition publications, but she also noted that it carried “too much criticism of the government” and, thus, she did not entirely trust the news on Harakkah. She also followed Malaysiakini, but mostly she searched for issue-specific information and news online through the Google search engine. Although, Alifa followed news online, she still considered print as more credible because she did not trust the Internet entirely (Personal Communication, July 9, 2010).

Similarly, for Deepak,

> No newspapers online . . . I search information through Internet for my assignments in economics, ethics, maths, advanced information . . . I don’t really trust the Internet . . . never been to the NST Website. I think information on the Web is not trustable. (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010)

Ali, on the other hand, did not trust mainstream media, especially print, since they were all controlled by the government. Describing the role of media in Malaysia, Ali explained:

> . . . With differing views of columnists, tabloids, newspapers, and government television channels, which one do I believe? . . . For me, Internet is the main source. I follow TV too, but I try to refer to different sources, as even the most honest source cannot be honest enough. (Personal Communication, July 22, 2010)

Hence, besides having individual preferences toward mainstream or alternative sources, Alifa, Deepak, and Ali also differed in their media choices across print, online, or broadcast.
Despite the convention that younger generations tend to be better equipped with new and emerging technologies, it could not be concluded that Internet-based online media actually had higher credibility over conventional options among the UiTM students, although increasing reliance and trust on the Internet, which was propelled by the social networks, was clearly evident during 2010. To my surprise, a notable feature of Facebook in Malaysia at the time of this study was its use as a tool for e-commerce. During my earlier visit to Malaysia in 2006, e-commerce had not picked up much momentum in Malaysia—perhaps due to lack of trust and security concerns. But during the course of this study, I found that e-commerce was widespread and had attracted numerous small businesses and consumers during 2010. On one occasion, Aminah mentioned that she was usually online logged into her Facebook account. Along with other activities, such as (text) chatting with her friends, she used Facebook for selling cupcakes (Personal Communication, July 25, 2010).

Similarly, Fauziah preferred to shop using Facebook as well as blogs and emphasized that blogs had become increasingly popular among buyers and sellers of different age groups. The transactions often used bank transfers, which apparently had led to an improved mutual trust between the parties involved. Therefore, an increased trust on the Internet was evident, although it did not necessarily mean that the informants were equally enthusiastic about the credibility of online media. Moreover, as discussed in a later section on alternative media, blogs, in particular, were less credible among the UiTM students because they offered personal perceptions and opinions and had no moral
obligation to provide factual information. On one occasion while discussing blogging, Laila noted:

No blogging. [I] don’t really believe in blogging about stuff. Basically, a blog is a public diary. I am satisfied with the people around and am not comfortable with writing about it. I considered it [blogging] at some point, but now am not interested at all. (Personal Communication, July 23, 2010)

While blogging had been around for more than a decade, social networks were relatively new and there was an increasing potential for sharing thoughts and information with a close group (formed by friends on a particular network) at the time. Indeed, most participants cited Facebook as a means to maintain contact with their friends and relatives and not as a source of serious information. Something that I found to be true for many U.S.-based Facebook users as well in the later years.

Politics on Malaysian Media

As previously noted, there was a lack of trust in the (government controlled) mainstream media coverage among the informants. On one occasion, Ali noted:

Media is [sic] at the heart of everything. Media need to be honest, as people rely on media. Earlier the media relied on people to get established. Now the people need the media to be honest, but they are not being honest. . . . Some school kids send articles about serious issues like drugs and corruption, which read much better than the [professional] journalists. (Personal Communication, July 22, 2010)
Indeed, most informants were also aware of the political role played by the media, especially regarding political content. Ali’s dissatisfaction was not unique and was shared by some other UiTM students. In case of Mary, for instance, such dissatisfaction had led to a situation in which political news held the lowest priority for her, and she had stopped following political news, since:

Some of their [politicians’] actions are not understandable. Just too many conflicts. [I] cannot decide which side is correct. But I follow domestic news—related to accidents, murder cases, social problems. For example, Children abuse, maltreatment of Indonesian immigrant workers, salary and welfare issues of foreign labor. Then, natural disaster—like earthquake in Sichuan, China.

(Personal Communication, July 12, 2010)

Mary basically relied on newspapers for news, but in terms of political content, she reported, “If I am watching TV, then yes, but not in newspapers. I am neutral about politics. Everyone has their stand, better become neutral” (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010). While Mary had decided to stay neutral to avoid further confusion and frustration, Aminah considered politics “dirty” since she was tired of learning about political conspiracies and conflicts through media (Personal Communication, July 28, 2010). Therefore, some of my informants had clearly withdrawn themselves from either seriously thinking about or actively following politics on media.

While the disinterest in politics had led to withdrawal in the above instances, it had also resulted in criticism of media use for political gains by the ruling alliance. For instance, during 2010, Prime Minister Najib’s One Malaysia campaign—a successor of
Malaysia: Truly Asia campaign—was prominent through radio and television advertisements, and even on roadside banners as well as inside shopping malls and other places. My informants usually mocked the campaign. For example, during one meeting, Salmah was especially critical of the campaign and remarked:

How can we think about One Malaysia when no one is equal? You know, in a national survey, it was revealed that the Chinese own two businesses per household, the Indians have one [medical] doctor per household, and the Malays just have one degree per household. (Personal Communication, July 21, 2010)

Salmah’s comment reflected the dissatisfaction among some Malays, especially the educated ones, toward continued social inequality in Malaysia. Moreover, Salmah’s reaction also pointed toward the government’s tendency to continue its one-way communication irrespective of audiences, who might not be inspired by their message at all. In my own experience during two different fieldtrips to Malaysia, both 1Malaysia and its predecessor Malaysia: Truly Asia were generally ridiculed by youth because of the superficial approach of these campaigns.

The role of media in the political realm and the perception of their manipulation by the government was indeed an issue of concern among many individuals. For instance, Osman was critical of politicians’ misuse of the media and while citing one example, he noted:

Rosmah Mansor likes publicity. She declared herself as the first lady to the media and Najib was still the defense minister at that time . . . This issue was even debated in Parliament. (Personal Communication, July 30, 2010)
Yet, according to Osman, the government had continued misusing mainstream media for publicity and for criticizing and humiliating the opposition. For instance, he suggested that even during 2010, or at least two years before the country’s next general elections, these media were trying to help *Barisan Nasional* re-capture the five states lost during the 2008 general elections (Osman, Personal Communication, August 3, 2010). Osman also considered mainstream media’s handling of the Anwar Ibrahim (leader of the opposition party and Dr. Mahathir’s former deputy) case extremely unfair since the media had declared him guilty even before the court verdict. It is noteworthy that while Anwar Ibrahim’s name had been surrounded by controversies since the late 1990s, and the mainstream media had consistently covered scandals involving his name since his release from prison in 2008, many UiTM were still sympathetic to him during 2010. On being asked about the role of media and his own viewpoint on the continued spree of court cases against Anwar—even a decade after his sacking in the late 1990s, another informant Ali remarked:

> Why suddenly sodomy in the midst of economic issues? The newspapers are not talking about the [financial] Bill, but about the Anwar Ibrahim issue. . . . getting a Bill passed takes time, as it requires a minimum vote of 40/20 in the parliament. But, [through the media] Anwar Ibrahim becomes a big issue because being gay is uncommon and unaccepted in people’s perception. I feel that the Anwar Ibrahim scandal is too mixed-up. (Personal Communication, July 16, 2010)

Ali also mentioned that most evidence did not support the claims against Anwar Ibrahim, yet the whole issue got continued attention from the media. Such policy, according to Ali,
was to take the people’s attention away from more serious issues—such as 1997’s financial crisis. Again, past issues, such as the financial crisis, were still alive in UiTM students’ minds—even after more than a decade. And so, these issues had survived in the public discourse, primarily through alternative media, and were being passed to younger generations at the time.

Another issue gaining momentum during 2010 was an increase in the price of sugar, which was noted by several informants including Salmah and Fauziah. In Fauziah’s village, the supply shop limited the sugar supply to one kilogram per family due to a government notice, which had left Fauziah and her family in disagreement with the government’s decision. In Salmah’s words:

Yeah . . . Recently *The Sun* reported a reduction of 25 sen in sugar subsidy and there were about 19 consumers associations who opposed the price hike, but then . . . one politician stated, “people should eat less sugar for a healthier life.”

*[getting upset]* . . . Yes, politics concerns me when things like this happen.

(Personal Communication, July 21, 2010)

Salmah also echoed the view held by both Ali and Osman that the media were used as a vehicle to convey politicians’ messages to the masses. Hence, while some UiTM students had decided to avoid political content on media, some others could not help being concerned about the state of media and political coverage, yet some others faced the outcome of political decisions first-hand, which had contributed to their overall dissatisfaction with politics on Malaysian media. The following subsection reports my
initial observations on political engagement through media among the UiTM students during 2010.

*Media and Political Engagement: The First Impressions*

As a starting point in developing an understanding of the process of political engagement through media at the time, it was important to consider three aspects. First, the influence of media on political decision-making among the informants during the elections; second, the influence of media on political perceptions; and finally, the role of media in promoting political engagement. Therefore, I asked the informants to share their opinion on the role of media in making the right choice during the elections in order to understand the influence of media on political decision-making at the time. In one case, Fauziah, who studied communication and was familiar with the functioning of Malaysian mass media, did not think news and media helped her make the right choice during elections. Before studying mass communication at the university, she believed in everything that was covered by news, but after studying cultivation and agenda setting theories, she had come to the realization that not all the news reports on mainstream media were true. Moreover, while listening to news, both her uncle (local guardian) and her friends often disagreed with the reporting and had their own perspectives on the issues, which had influenced Fauziah further to consider the news on mainstream media as government propaganda (Personal Communication, July 29, 2010). Fauziah also sought opinions on critical political issues from her uncle, boss, and friends before making-up her own mind. Such consultation was not only common among other students, but was also enhanced through technology at the time. For instance, some of Ali’s friends
were interested in elections and frequently sent text messages on phone to each other during the elections sharing their ideas about their preferred political party. On the other hand, Fauziah’s classmate Osman noted:

The news play a role during the elections . . . when government TV and radio convey bad things about the opposition . . . shows they are playing a game. For me, government is not all good, opposition is not all bad. There is a lot of news around the election . . . TV1, TV2 . . . TV3 more or less the same because owned by PM’s relative or some politician . . . I am not sure. (Personal Communication, July 30, 2010)

Thus, according to Osman, TV3, although privately owned, did not act very differently compared to either TV1 or TV2 during the elections. While Osman and Fauziah had already voted in the past, Deepak, who was only a pre-college student at the time, had not voted but was clear in his willingness to participate in the electoral process:

Yes. I will vote. I am not interested in politics. I am just a student. Politics doesn’t matter. Not the right time . . . I hear about politics once in a while on TV, but mostly through newspaper. (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010)

Deepak also showed skepticism toward information overload on the Internet, especially during the times of elections. Such skepticism was also shared by some other students, such as Fauziah (noted above), but Deepak differed as far as the role of media and the Internet in generating political interest was concerned due to his personal experience:

Media involves broad spectrum of current affairs, so definitely has an influence . . . but I had a bad experience with the Internet about four years ago . . . can’t recall
at the moment. . . . So, yes, newspapers make an influence. On the Internet, I just do minimum work . . . don’t have free time to go and check other things.

(Personal Communication, July 12, 2010)

Deepak appeared hesitant to talk about his bad experience, but it was clear that he did not want to express trust for the use of the Internet for decision-making during the elections. However, the unusual results of 2008 elections were largely due to the presence of alternative media on the Internet. While the Internet was underestimated during the 2008 elections by BN, Salmah felt that Internet had also created a generational divide by creating a difference in access to information. Therefore, while her grandparents, who mainly had access to mainstream media, still preferred to vote for BN, Salmah did not believe in voting and the electoral system—primarily due to her exposure to political information on the Internet.

The second aspect that helped me understand political engagement through media was the influence of media in generating political interest. It was evident that media coverage of politics was capable of generating interest as well as dissatisfaction among these students. For instance, Deepak’s classmate Preeti was unhappy about the government’s decision to reduce scholarships at the time. She, nevertheless, noted the importance of broadcast media and the Internet in creating political interest:

Yes, media can play a role in generating interest in politics. Radio and TV . . . they mix it with other [content] and you have to listen by hook or crook. On the Internet, we can choose . . . Internet helps to think critically . . . you see comments
from others and, so, there is diversity of opinion. (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010)

Preeti had pointed out an obvious trend due to the presence of Internet, which had enabled the youth the world over, including herself, to think critically about various issues, including politics. Such a trend was also evident through Osman’s account:

For me, yes (media influenced the political perception), because the media convey the information. We get all the info, so without media there is no political things [sic]. . . . For example, I follow Anwar Ibrahim’s Twitter, his issues, his case. When the mainstream media say something, then I see his tweets from that I can judge which one is telling the truth and which one is a lie, so for me, it helps. (Personal Communication, August 3, 2010)

Another student Thangam, who studied with Deepak and Preeti, preferred Internet with open access to all kinds of information—just as other informants of this study did. Although from her own experience on the Internet, she noted, “Politics is dirty… [I] used to read a lot about it through Websites. They [politicians] have many plans, but no real implementation, so gave up on reading.” (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010). Thangam had essentially lost interest in political matters after learning more about politics through the Internet. In another instance, Aminah disagreed that the Internet played a role in generating political interest since she did not like to surf the Internet for news and politics (Personal Communication, August 1, 2010).

On the other hand, Ali firmly believed that media had influenced the way he looked at politics by depicting political stories and portraying the political status of the
country at the time. Ali’s analysis of political news had led to his long-term perception of political affairs in the country, which he accepted was filled with dislike toward politics and the country’s mainstream media. Ali seldom read real newspapers and he usually flipped the pages for pictures and graphics, but contrary to Deepak’s experience, Ali believed that it was actually the Internet that had exposed the Malaysian teenagers to politics. For instance, he noted that Yahoo! Malaysia could carry certain political news. Similarly, Facebook had simple questionnaires (on politics) and, so,

. . . whether we acknowledge it or not, Internet is giving us political knowledge even if we are unaware. We don’t actively think about it, but [we] might even contribute to a discussion on a particular issue without realizing. Pretty much Internet for me could be like a newspaper in future . . . Older people think Internet is not truthful, but I think even the newspapers could be the same. (Personal Communication, August 6, 2010)

Likewise, Internet satisfied Alifa’s need/urge to know the state of current affairs in the country as a student of Political Science, which was a key reason behind her engagement with political content on the media, unless she was pushed by her elders or had to prepare for examinations. Alifa also agreed that the media influenced the way she looked at politics, especially with the ways in which they published stories. The catchy headlines of these stories helped attract more readers. She did not follow as much political content on either television or radio and noted that Internet had a lot more to offer to her in that regard. Alifa, however, felt that the unlimited access to information on the Internet could also be dangerous given that it might lead to information overload.
Moreover, it was easier to find twisted stories, especially on the blogs, which had led to a lack of trust on online media. Emphasizing the role of the Internet in Malaysia’s political context, Osman noted:

Yes. The Internet influences the way one feels about politics. . . . when you browse [the Internet] for certain political issues . . . I do Google search . . . Like Anwar issue or the water issue . . . for my assignment also. I think Internet . . . influences [interest] about politics, but at the end it all depends upon the personal belief . . . you believe what you want to believe. (Personal Communication, August 3, 2010)

While there was sufficient evidence of media and Internet’s influence on political interest among UiTM students, the story was not the same as far as political engagement was concerned. In Fauziah’s view, for example, media did not play any role in promoting political engagement:

I don’t think media helps in political engagement. I cannot trust sometime . . . On Harian Metro, the local news—I read it, but sometime false info . . . One day I stumbled upon an accident. The report said three died, although… only two bodies [sic]. The next day they apologize. (Personal Communication, July 29, 2010)

Thus, for Fauziah, such lack of credibility meant that the media at the time were incapable of fostering political engagement. Some other informants, including Laila, Salmah, and Ali, also demonstrated similar views pertaining to the role of media in fostering political engagement. On one occasion, Aminah observed:
So, what’s wrong with media . . . [thinking] I cannot explain. No engagement. I think they didn’t do much for the election. I mean the kesedaran [advice] for us [should be] to go and vote, but they don’t. They just [report] about what happened during election… who wins. (Aminah, Personal Communication, August 1, 2010)

Aminah did not sound optimistic implying that it was highly improbable for the mainstream media to engage in attracting youth interest toward politics. Nonetheless, the promise of unrestricted Internet in Malaysia had allowed UiTM students an easy access to the alternative media online while exposing them to political issues not covered by the mainstream media. There were, however, other issues that had led to a disinterest in politics and ultimately disengagement among these students. The following section delves into some of these issues, which formed the basis of political disengagement among many UiTM students.

Alternative Media Online and Political Disengagement

There were three major categories of online media that had the potential to generate political interest and initiate some form of engagement among the university students. These included alternative news Websites, blogs, and social media. For the informants included in this chapter, these alternative media had strongly influenced their decision to stay out of politics in different ways. First, for some informants of this study, such as Salmah, Laila, and the non-Bumiputera students, these online media had strengthened the disinterest in politics and had, consequently, led to a detachment from politics—unless a political issue affected them directly. Second, for some other informants, such as Alifa, Ali, Fauziah, and Nadia, while the alternative media had led to
a disinterest toward political engagement, there was a willingness to fight for change if there was an opportunity. Finally, for Osman, while these media had generated disinterest at first, they had led to a curiosity and eventually an unanticipated engagement with politics. The following subsections discuss individual experiences pertaining to alternative news Websites, blogs, and social networks among the politically disengaged informants.

**Alternative News Websites**

The online news Websites were popular among students and peer influence as well as the availability of multiple information options online had influenced informants’ preferences. During the first round of interviews for this study, I interacted with Nadia and her friend Alifa—both studying Administrative Science. While growing up, Nadia followed mainstream media, including television and print, but the situation had changed over time due to the growing diversity in media options and, along with her close friends, Nadia had started following both government and opposition sources online. For instance, she regularly followed *MalaysiaKini* online. This had allowed her to get acquainted with the oppositional viewpoints. On the other hand, Alifa, like some other students, used Google search to locate news stories and blogs to follow the content of her choice.

Many among my informants candidly expressed their dislike of politicians and mainstream media coverage received by political issues at the time. While Alifa believed that many issues in Malaysia existed due to misuse of media by the government, Salmah questioned the credibility of mainstream media and often consulted alternative sources,
including *Harakkah, Malaysiakini, and Suara Keadilan*, on various issues. Consequently, a general dislike of political coverage on mainstream media had become a key factor behind the popularity of alternative news Websites, such as *Malaysia Today, Malaysiakini, Harakkah, Suara Keadilan*, and so on—most of which had faced the threat of getting their publication license revoked in the past, especially those with the print versions. Hence, these publications had become increasingly more active online by 2010.

Salmah noted that she had access to online alternative news sources—primarily because her parents were strong supporters of the opposition party and their media. Such access had made Salmah aware of the controversies surrounding the ruling coalition *Barisan Nasional*, which ultimately had influenced her voting decision. On the other hand, Salmah’s grandfather who lived in *Batu Gajah* (a village) lacked such access to alternative news and was unaware of the controversies surrounding the ruling coalition. This unawareness, Salmah believed, had caused him to vote for BN during the 2008 elections. Similarly, alternative media online had influenced Alifa’s political outlook, although her parents were still following mainstream news on television and print during 2010. Therefore, the generation gap was still influential in determining media choices at the time.

Along with Alifa and Salmah, the perceptions of Malaysian media and politics among most informants were largely shaped by the alternative media had led to a consensus of dissatisfaction with the mainstream news. Moreover, as Ali suggested, while satellite channels provided some level of diversity, the Internet with unfiltered
information played a critical role in making people more aware and had, consequently, led them to question the mainstream coverage of political issues facing the country in 2010. In case of Fauziah, for instance, the access to alternative media and news sources had led to an increased awareness regarding media stories. While discussing her sources regarding pertinent issues she noted:

I read it [a news item] online on *Malaysiakini* just for my additional information. I am not influenced by them [the media], but almost all of them have truth in them, which forms the public opinion about the issues in Malaysia. Also, I follow up on some blogs, but not so often. I just go [online] and read . . . (Personal Communication, July 27, 2010)

According to Fauziah, it was a combination of different sources rather than a single source, which was more influential in forming the public opinion. This combination was particularly strengthened by the presence of alternative news online at the time. Moreover, Ali expressed that while the television channels had remained under direct or indirect government pressures, the Internet had provided the platform where people, especially journalists, could present their views without fear of the Internal Security Act (ISA—discussed in Chapter 2). Therefore, TV and other mass media offered the students a singular viewpoint, whereas the Internet and the new online media had given them a chance to seek out diverse viewpoints.

*Political Blogs*

Besides the alternative news Websites, some UiTM students also reported following online blogs, although there was a general doubt regarding the credibility of
such blogs. For instance, Aminah seldom followed blogs because she believed, “We don’t know whether the blog is right or wrong” (Personal Communication, August 1, 2010). While some, such as Alifa, considered blogs mere opinions and, thus, rejected them, some others were keen on following those opinions. In one such instance, Nadia mentioned that by following the blogs of Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak and former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, she could see the clash of ideologies for the two leaders often seemed to condemn each other. She remarked, “Sometimes their talk is good, but we are still young and we want to know the real situation, but with these kinds of things, we cannot understand their real motives” (Personal Communication, July 9, 2010). So, Nadia understood that these blogs were not sufficient in providing facts, but they evidenced the clash of differing political ideologies at the time.

Ali, on the other hand, followed blogs to get an alternative view on the news reported by the mainstream television channels and newspapers. While Ali and Nadia both had an interest that was driven by their majors (Administrative Science and Law), some other students still considered blogs uninteresting. For instance, while commenting on the nature of political blogs on the Internet in general, a communication student Osman conveyed:

I am not interested in those blogs. For me, I don’t know if it’s true or not because it is based on personal perspectives. News is more objective. Blogs are according to political party. If PKR . . . tends to write against government; if it’s by Barisan Nasional people, it will be pro-government. (Personal Communication, August 3, 2010)
Therefore, blogs were not an ideal source of information, other than offering politicians’ personal perspectives. Nonetheless, certain political blogs written by individuals who were not necessarily involved in politics—other than providing online commentary on issues of political relevance—were popular among student circles at the time. On one occasion, Nadia reported that she had started following political issues more closely after she met a close male friend, who not only followed such issues but also had his own blog. “After I met him and now when I read so much about these issues, I think people are getting smarter and cleverer” Nadia noted (Personal Communication, July 9, 2010). Although Nadia refused to provide further information on her friend to protect his identity, it became clear that political blogging was a hobby for at least some of the UiTM students—if not many.

On probing further, I found that Nadia’s fear was primarily due to authorities since she went on describing the ever-growing influence of ISA, which had gotten worse by 2010, for the journalists and for the bloggers who expressed an alternative view on political issues. There were enough examples to keep this fear alive, according to Salmah, such as the case of Raja Petra Kamarudin—the editor of *Malaysia Today*, who was first charged and arrested under the ISA in 2001 and then again in 2008 (see Chapter 3 for details). Moreover, the students were highly restricted in their public expression, especially oppositional viewpoints and political activities due to the existence of the controversial AUKU (*Akta Universiti dan Kolej Universiti* 1971) or the University and University Colleges Act of 1971 (UUCA) at the time. Even the information packet provided by UiTM during the orientation for incoming international students and scholars
included a copy of this Act. The university did not want any of its students, including the international ones, to indulge in any organization with political affiliations that might harm its image as an affirmative action institute. While discussing UUCA and student political engagement, an informant recommended a book titled *Two Faces* by Syed Husin Ali, who, besides many others, was charged under the ISA during the mid-1970s and spent six years in detention. Syed’s testimony in the book was a proof enough why even academicians, let alone students, would not dare engage in political activities, especially involving oppositional viewpoints. I was noteworthy that the fear of ISA and UUCA was still strong among the UiTM students even after more than 35 years of Syed’s ordeal.

Nadia and Alifa also noted that a group of second-year Political Science students from *Universiti Kebangsan Malaysia* (UKM) was recently charged by the police for their alleged involvement in political activities during a by-election around April-May 2010 (see Chapter 1). Alifa believed that while the alternative media had twisted and over-sensationalized the story, the issue gained popularity even outside Malaysia—mainly due to alternative Websites and personal blogs. And so, given the penalties for engaging in political activities and due to the strict enforcement of UUCA and ISA at UiTM, political blogging, and especially voicing a critical viewpoint, was out of question for the students. The incident involving UKM students had, in particular, led to an increased fear among UiTM students and discouraged their involvement with mainstream politics.

Consequently, most students not only denied blogging about political matters, they even stayed away from commenting on others’ blog entries. For instance, Ali did not raise political issues on his blog since he wanted to keep the blog personal. As per some
other informants’ accounts, while reading blogs was not unusual among college-goers, most refrained from posting comments on such blogs. Usually, the fear of getting into trouble with the authorities was cited as the key reason behind such restraint. In an extreme case, a student reported being highly restricted in accessing political content online and noted:

Internet? Not at all . . . I think Internet maybe helping, but I don’t like to search for news and politics . . . It’s too dangerous sometimes about the government, especially for students. I never read. Don’t like at all. (Aminah, Personal Communication, August 1, 2010)

Aminah had actively chosen to not follow the online media for political news or at least she did not accept doing so out of the fear of authorities. Thus, either due to the fear of getting into trouble with the authorities or as a personal choice, most informants did not indulge in political blogging.

Even so, there were a few informants who enjoyed sharing their experiences and dissatisfaction on blogs, although even those bloggers refrained from discussing political issues directly. For instance, Fauziah had a personal blog in Malay on which she posted about day-to-day issues that concerned her, such as traffic jams, her life, and her views in general. While some other students, including Ali and Laila, considered blogging a private affair, Fauziah often refrained from writing about political issues on her blogs. Moreover, while Fauziah often read others’ political blogs, she usually refrained from commenting since commenting required registration and she, like most of her peers, felt lazy about registering. And although she actively contributed to in-class discussions on
political matters, such as racial issues, she seldom expressed her opinion online, especially on domestic political issues. Fauziah also acknowledged commenting on certain news articles on rare occasions. On one occasion, she commented on an article published in *Malaysiakini* criticizing the government policy to send aid to other countries, such as Palestine, Myanmar, and Cambodia, although there were needy people in Malaysia who needed government’s attention first (Personal Communication, July 29, 2010). Similarly, Nadia reported that she was not actively involved in commenting on blog entries and did not have her own blog, but she commented on selected *Berita Harian* news articles occasionally. She had reacted to a story published in June 2010 regarding Israel’s attack on Gaza, but she, too, avoided commenting on domestic political news online. Nadia’s friend Alifa also refrained from posting comments due to a lack of motivation. While the fear of authorities was an obvious inhibition for political blogging, students seldom acknowledged it explicitly. On one occasion, though, Alifa cited the fear of getting into trouble with authorities as a key reason behind her reluctance to post on these blogs.

In some cases, students including Ali and Salmah, considered blogging about political issues a waste of time. For instance, on the question of sharing her views through blogging or even commenting on other’s blogs, Salmah’s response was:

I don’t blog . . . Just don’t have the time or motivation, I guess. And . . . well, commenting won’t do anything and we Malaysians have to be careful about these things . . . you know . . . No, I don’t comment . . . I don’t think anyone would
listen to me. Honestly, I don’t care about politicians at all. For me, politicians equal corruption. (Personal Communication, July 28, 2010)

Fear, helplessness, and frustration had led to Salmah’s withdrawal and detachment, which was not uncommon among some other UiTM students. She continued:

I have told you how f***ed up our politics is . . . I read [about] it, but don’t feel like commenting. I just don’t want to be here . . . I guess hatred keeps me going here so far. (Personal Communication, July 28, 2010)

Salmah was often angry and upset over the political mess her country had been witnessing over the years. While media scrutiny was absent and there were obvious problems within the mainstream media, Salmah noted that all the knowledge that she has gained was mainly due to the Internet. She emphasized that she still loved her country, but did not believe she could do much to change the situation as a future media professional. On the other hand, she also appreciated her country Malaysia since the situation—politically, socially, and morally—was not as corrupt as some other places, such as Indonesia and the Philippines.

While learning about political matters through online media had potentially helped at least some, if not most, UiTM students to engage politically to some degree, Salmah’s experience showed the other side of the coin. Such a sense of detachment from politics and political blogging in particular was even stronger among the non-Bumiputera informants. These students reported being far from interested in political blogging. When asked about particular Websites that she used for accessing news, Thangam replied, “I read news on The Star Online. Don’t read blogs… don’t really spend time reading blogs.
. . usually there is a time issue” (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010). Although Thangam had cited lack of time as the reason, the non-Bumiputera informants in general had denied following political blogs while avoiding further discussion on the matter.

**Social Networks**

The online social networks, including Facebook and Twitter, had allowed these students to connect with the rest of the world, including the country’s politicians, in unprecedented ways. Yet, there was evidence of self-censorship among these students at an individual level in different scenarios. For instance, the fear of authority and being monitored was clear from a non-Bumiputera student’s caution in using Facebook:

> On Facebook, we have to be careful about the issue or the topic while making status and others’ comments . . . Like, exchange between students and lecturers . . . [we] need to be very considerate. (Thangam, Personal Communication, July 12, 2010)

In another instance, Ali mentioned a case in which one of his classmates got into trouble for openly criticizing a lecturer on Facebook and cautioned:

> One has to be careful about posting something [on Facebook], as they might find out . . . even if it was related to a lecturer. Writing about political issues might get one into even more trouble . . . (Personal Communication, July 22, 2010)

Besides politics, religion was another critical area, where these students observed caution in expressing their views publicly. Describing the outcome of an incident in Kuantan, Pahang, which involved a schoolboy who had posted offensive Facebook comments on Islam, Osman noted that the boy was first suspended from his school and, subsequently,
there was an article in a newspaper a few weeks later about the incident. As noted in the introduction chapter, the year 2010 had begun with incidents of violence along the religious lines. Hence, the issue noted by Osman had attracted unusual public attention.

Osman felt that the student must be given another chance because he was a teenager, and expressed frustration about the hype created through the mainstream media coverage and the formation of a hate-group on Facebook against the teenager. And so, the penalties for uncontrolled expressions were not just judicial, but were also social since the hate-group on Facebook threatened the teenager’s social image and could adversely affect his personal relations in the time to come. Moreover, Osman appeared agitated that there were entities that could monitor and respond to one’s individual actions on Facebook and noted:

I didn’t know police can stalk our Facebook to view our posts. One guy put something on Facebook . . . something anti-government . . . Maybe Facebook monitoring is intentional to arrest someone [sic]. (Personal Communication, July 30, 2010)

Moreover, Osman mentioned that discussing the government and political matters was perhaps more dangerous than discussing religious issues on Facebook and added:

. . . there was offensive anti-government stuff by some guy, I don’t know where he was from. This is what my friend told me . . . so we are not supposed to put anything offensive or sensitive. (Personal Communication, August 3, 2010)

Such monitoring by authorities and watchdogs had not only threatened the freedom of expression on social networks, but had also taken the self-censorship among
mainstream media outlets to an individual level by 2010. Although the Internet had stayed free of censorship in general, the monitoring of social networks had meant that many of these students were very careful and restricted themselves in expressing their political thoughts at the time. For instance, as a self-imposed rule, Salmah did not express her opinion on political matters on Facebook, especially since she was a university student. Another student noted:

We have ISA, OSA . . . verbally [to discuss in person] maybe it’s okay, but when we write on Facebook or something . . . you know what happened to Rajapetra. Right? [on seeing agreement] . . . Due to ISA, people are afraid to say anything about government, criticize the government. No freedom of expression. Maybe it has a role in discouraging the youngsters to get involved in politics because nowadays no matter what you say to criticize—everything is ISA [angry tone]! When you say something wrong, it falls under the Defamation Act . . . Slander and Libel Laws—anything offensive against the government. Actually, it creates the awareness, so you are aware and not be a big mouth. You stay careful in expressing yourself and writing in public such as Facebook . . . it is monitored as well. (Osman, Personal Communication, August 3, 2010)

Yet, despite the threat of authorities at different levels, including school and local government, social networks emerged as a more potent medium for political expression and engagement eventually during the course of my fieldwork when I found that Ali had taken a different approach. While restrained in terms of writing on political blogs, Ali still raised certain issues, such as the termination of overseas scholarships provided by the
government, and conveyed his opinions through his Facebook status messages. He also believed that people could express themselves more freely through Facebook or blogs while using pseudonyms. In Ali’s opinion, making implicit and indirect comments and using pseudonyms were two common ways through which critical opinion had prevailed on social media without getting into trouble with the authorities at the time.

A strict enforcement of UUCA by UiTM had meant there was no room for formal political engagement for the informants, Facebook and Twitter were the potential means to connect these students online with politicians on a regular basis. On one occasion, Ali noted that even the prime minister had a Facebook account. According to Ali, Malaysian politicians were keen on exploiting the change in technology to reach the masses while ignoring the actual political issues at the time. Nonetheless, as the experience of Osman (to be detailed shortly) demonstrated, political figures on social media were also followed by many students, which could lead to a more formal engagement with politics later on.

Although Osman conveyed having a thorough understanding of media and politics in Malaysia, he did not think he would engage himself or even considered himself interested in politics at the time. While in his view the Malaysian youth generally had lacked interest in and seldom discussed politics, it was later revealed that Osman himself had been politically engaged, although he did not consider it as “engagement,” perhaps because it was more of a fan-following for him. After a long discussion during one of the meetings, he opened up and mentioned that he had, in fact, met Anwar Ibrahim (leader of the opposition party) following his release from prison in 2008 and had found Anwar to be a nice person. Osman was fascinated by Anwar’s speech and his personality
as well as encouragement toward youth, especially university students. Osman was aware that while meetings of such nature were considered illegal in Malaysia, he just followed a friend to an Anwar Ibrahim supporters’ club (Kelab Penyokong Anwar Ibrahim) at another university and met him in person along with a group of other university students. This experience encouraged Osman to connect further with Anwar Ibrahim and he decided to follow him on Twitter. In Osman’s experience:

. . . He has thousands of followers on Twitter. My friend said “good night” and he replied [excited]! Actually, I just did it [follow Anwar Ibrahim on Twitter] because my friend did it—to get his reply. But, actually I got a lot of info from his Twitter. At first, we made fun of his Twitter . . . like you follow him and then he follows you, which is unlike a celebrity, a politician, a well-known figure to follow you. But later on, I found that it is useful for balancing the news. We saw what the mainstream news said and then what Anwar Ibrahim had to say about himself. . . . My friend asked him [on Twitter], “Why do they do this to you Dato’?” “It’s all the matter of jealously because I am back,” he replied . . . then we made fun because it’s something unusual. (Personal Communication, August 2010)

While Osman suggested that since his friend was not interested in politics and she took Anwar’s tweets as something funny and unusual, Osman himself had found such updates helpful in improving his understanding of politics and staying in touch with a politician, which he had willingly continued.
Online Media and Disengagement

As noted earlier, online media had influenced the disengaged informants differently. Following her high school, and with increased access to information through the Internet, Salmah had gradually stopped taking politics seriously, unless an issue concerned her directly. On the political situation during 2010, she lamented that the Malays were still divided and were fighting for individual views and self-interests against each other on both mainstream and alternative media. Thus, while she understood the complications within the political system, Salmah had developed an escapist tendency. For Ali, Alifa, and Nadia the situation was different since they were going to be a part of either the judicial or the administrative systems and were willing to try to bring about a change, while still staying away from party politics, which would be challenging given the stronghold of the ruling alliance on the country’s administrative and legal systems. Among the disengaged informants, Osman was already witnessing some degree of engagement through social media, which he wanted to continue in the time to come.

Overall, the alternative news Websites mainly served the information needs among the UiTM students during 2010 because they did not trust the mainstream media entirely. The blogs, on the other hand, offered personal opinions of individuals, including politicians and social commentators, which further offered differing viewpoints, including mainstream and alternative, to UiTM students at the time. And while the social media, as suggested by Osman’s case above, had the potential of engaging the students by directly connecting them with politicians, these media were still not considered safe by the informants to freely express alternative opinions, either social or, especially,
political. Moreover, the non-Bumiputera students appeared even more cautious and restricted in terms of political expression, let alone engagement. Therefore, it was imperative to consider the possible outcome of such restricted environment according to the informants of this study.

Predictions Regarding Malaysia’s Media and Politics

Despite considering themselves as disengaged, some of my informants, including Ali, Alifa, Aminah, and Osman, held strong opinions regarding the political situation in the country and had therefore decided to stay politically disengaged in the future. They also shared their predictions about the state of media and politics in the country in the years to follow. These opinions were often grounded in their experience with the new online media, which were challenging the country’s political landscape during 2010 in unprecedented ways. While the mainstream mass media were under government’s constant scrutiny, either directly or indirectly, it was generally hard for the authorities to scrutinize the online media due to policy structure limitations. Nonetheless, as noted earlier, there was an environment of fear and caution at the time. For example, one of the informants noted:

In Malay, we have a saying: if you don’t want to die, then don’t build a house on a beach—Kalau takut dilambung ombak, jangan berumah di tepi pantai. In other words, if you don’t want to go into trouble, then don’t get close to the trouble in the first place. (Ali, Personal Communication, August 6, 2010)

Such an environment was essentially formed by the many different instances of individuals facing a threat of prosecution on social, if not political, grounds. During 2010
and in the years thereafter, there have been deliberations regarding possible censorship of the Internet in Malaysia.

_Internet Censorship_

While discussing the growth of Malaysian media in the years to come, Alifa saw the Internet as a means of social innovation, but such innovation, she cautioned, “might go chaotic, once it goes beyond the Internet” and applied to real life (Personal Communication, July 9, 2010). Alifa’s caution was reflective of the fear that authorities had cited previously to justify possible censoring and filtering of the Internet. Nonetheless, my informants generally disagreed with the idea of censorship at the time, as Osman noted:

> Government tries to limit the freedom of speech from the opposition sides. . . .

> Without Internet censorship, it will be more democratic. People will be more free to say things, not worrying about saying something, get caught, and put into ISA. For me, ISA is very scary. (Personal Communication, August 3, 2010)

Noting the impracticality of the idea of Internet censorship, Ali stated:

> If you cut off Internet, it will be like TV. Once you put censorship, there is no value, like cinema, radio, newspaper, magazine . . . Now Internet is the last remaining medium that pleasures people. Internet is the most popular, as it is not restricted. In future, they might filter the Internet based on national security issues. I think the one who moves the Internet is the people. It [the Internet] reflects the people. So, the [real] issue then will be people, not the Internet. (Personal Communication, August 6, 2010)
Moreover, from his own the experience at this university, Ali had believed that controlling the Internet in the years ahead was not a viable option for local and federal authorities.

Although here at the university, they block Facebook and other Websites during the daytime, they don’t block mobile Facebook. And after 6 pm, one can even access porn Websites. Actually many porn Websites are filtered, but then there are porn DVDs. (Personal Communication, August 6, 2010)

Therefore, even if the authorities tried to control the Internet, there were alternatives for individuals to access certain content and express their views online.

There might be more filtering, but depends on people. People pay for what they want, so they cannot be forced to buy filtered Internet. What I buy is what I want. You [policy makers] can show me the way… it is my choice after that. (Ali, Personal Communication, August 6, 2010)

While Ali considered continued filtering a future possibility, he was also convinced about the power of individual choice.

_Future Prospects_

There was a keen desire for change among my informants. However, there was also a belief that such change was hard to come by. Even for somebody like Osman, who was preparing to become a future media professional, there was a lack of confidence not only in the system but also in himself as an individual agent of change; he noted: “Change? I don’t think I can change anything” (Personal Communication, August 3, 2010). Similarly, there was a sense that the youth in general had stopped caring about
media and politics in the country. For instance, as Ali mentioned, “I don’t find today’s teen thinking a lot. Many of them still live with taboos” (Personal Communication, August 6, 2010). Ali’s frustration with country’s political system was also evident in his assessment of his country’s political future:

Political future . . . I think there will be another fight . . . [the current] government will lead . . . *Barisan Nasional* will perhaps continue to lead. It always leads. That’s the tradition, culture, that’s how things go. We have [past] fifty years to prove this, I am not cynical, but perhaps it will take another fifty years [for a radical change to take place], unless there is an apocalypse. (Personal Communication, August 6, 2010)

There was a similar dissatisfaction with the way media had functioned conventionally and had failed to spur youth political engagement among the UiTM students—many of whom had disengaged as a political act.

Yes. In Malaysia, we have to register for election. . . . now I am 23, I never register . . . I think media must do something to get people like me interested in politics, but it’s Malaysia you know . . . (Personal Communication, August 1, 2010)

Despite the above-mentioned difficulties, not all hope was lost and there still was a positive mindset among some:

I think we are going in the good direction through access to knowledge. I see Malaysia as well developed in terms of Internet development, access, and knowledge accession by 2020—perhaps not as good as the U.S., but better among
the leading countries in Asia—around Japan and Korea. We need to be at par [with them] or more… more is better [smiles]. (Ali, Personal Communication, August 6, 2010)

After finishing his degree, Ali was interested in practicing law and in traveling abroad for higher studies. Eventually, he wanted to settle in his home country, while trying to do his best to improve the conditions there. This was somewhat contradictory to the cases of Intan and Salmah, who, just like Ali, were highly influenced by American pop culture, but had developed an escapist tendency rather than confronting the social conditions in the years to come. Osman, on the other hand, lacked confidence, although he had his own suggestions to improve the situation:

I want to reduce the bias, pro-government bias, in the media. Media should be more neutral. Opposition has no meaning with all the pro-government media. PKR and PAS are only for fighting in election. [Presently] Media brainwash people, you have to believe the government. So, people tend to reject and react to the situation . . . About Internet, I don’t know, maybe I can stop the restrictions on the Internet. Then abolish the ways in which they use the ISA. Not everything that the government thinks is offensive would be put in ISA. For example, if one says, “government is stupid,” they put him under ISA. If opposition says something, they can use ISA. Yes, relaxing the ISA . . . because it’s like everything is ISA. (Personal Communication, August 3, 2010)

Thus, according to Osman, reducing the pro-government bias in mainstream media, keeping the Internet censorship-free, and relaxing laws, which limited the freedom of
expression, were a few of the steps that the government needed to take. In another instance, Aminah, who was among the politically most detached informants in this study, had hoped that through media:

> The government can motivate us for the responsibility for the country. Maybe for the long-term effect. What happen if we don’t choose the right party? It might not affect us, but our children . . . I think they should write more article for social responsibility and voting. (Personal Communication, August 1, 2010)

Aminah’s response suggested a positive outlook toward the future of her country’s politics and media. This was noteworthy given that she did not study political science, law, or communication, and apparently had little academic exposure to the issues of media and politics (perhaps her lack of knowledge had made her more optimistic). Therefore, Aminah’s example demonstrated not only the concerns but also the hopes that were likely shared by many other Malaysians as well.

### 2010 as a Year of Continued Transitions

In line with the issues raised in the introduction chapter, the findings of my fieldwork had supported the importance of 2010 as a critical year in Malaysian history. At the outset, the fear of UUCA among students was evident, albeit growing dissatisfaction with the country’s politics and mainstream media. The UKM issue had instantly become an example for UiTM students to stay away from politics at the time. As a result, many UiTM students did not open up easily regarding political issues that the country had been facing. Moreover, ISA and other laws were also getting tighter. And so,
there was a tremendous friction across different forces, and, as a result, many students had stopped to care about the country’s politics.

The wide variety of media content accessible to these students, including foreign TV shows and movies, could help explain the fragmentation of media audiences at the time. The use of radio was far less compared to Internet and cellphones. Given the prominence of alternative media and a rapid increase in the number of Internet users, currency crisis and Anwar issues were still alive in public memory, which had led to heightened dissatisfaction among the UiTM students. The religious violence at the beginning of the year had led to controversies on online media, which were closely followed by the UiTM students. An example of this was the instance involving a schoolboy (noted by Osman—mentioned earlier in this chapter) who had commented on Islam. Consequently, while governmental campaigns such as one Malaysia were mocked by some of the students, alternative news media had gained further popularity, which justified an increasing number of Internet users during the year. Even if the government wanted to use the online media to its advantage, the situation had gone out of control for the most part. Many of the students, despite being in an institution that enforced strict policies against student political participation, had firm disagreement with the country’s political system.

Summary

This chapter depicted the views of those individuals who had explicitly denied the possibility of a future political career. Nonetheless, I found that many of these students were aware of political issues the country and some of them were highly informed
citizens who were cautious as well as watchful of their actions at the time. In certain cases, they had deliberated over and rejected the idea of actively engaging in politics early in their lives. The role played by media in the process of such disengagement was indirect and varied across different individuals, but was certainly crucial.

Through the course of my fieldwork, it became clear that computers and cellphones had overtaken other mass media, including newspapers and radio for the most part (and also television), during 2010. The online media, in particular, had largely replaced other mass media for the UiTM students. Compared to watching movies in a cinema or watching television, many students preferred to download movies and television shows from the Internet on their laptops and personal computers and to watch them later with their friends. While these students had access to edited foreign content through satellite channels, they also had access to unedited foreign content online through downloading and streaming at the time. Such access had allowed these informants to further distance themselves from domestic media content.

Many among these students had swayed away from the mainstream content. The overall perception regarding mainstream media suggested a pro-government bias, censorship, and manipulation of information as some of the key issues deterring media credibility among my informants, whereas the credibility of online media depended on the sources. In most cases, these students did not trust or rely heavily on a single source of information and referred to multiple sources with skepticism. In some instances, they showed a strong interest in international news and entertainment content. I found that both peers and parents influenced media choices among the informants. While parents
were influential in determining access, peers were influential in determining the nature of content. A mix of alternative and mainstream media had allowed these students to stay aware of the country’s political situation during 2010. Alternative media, in particular, had allowed these students to corroborate the biases and other issues in mainstream media.

The first impressions on media and political engagement among the informants suggested a mixed influence of media, both mainstream and alternative, on political decision-making (including whether to vote or not and, if yes, then which party to vote for) among informants during the elections. Moreover, the media coverage of politics generated both interest and frustration among the informants. While the frustration was usually due to the biased reporting in the mainstream media, the interest was usually generated by alternative media online. In the form of alternative news Websites and blogs, these alternative media had strongly influenced individual perceptions at the time. Consequently, they had decided to stay away from politics.

The highly interactive social networks, on the other hand, could potentially reverse the disengagement process by establishing direct communication between politicians and youth— as suggested by Osman’s experience. Therefore, while alternative online media had influenced political perceptions along with the pro-government mainstream media, social networks showed the potential to reverse the process of disengagement somewhat. Moreover, with their widespread reach and appeal, especially among younger generations, social networks had started playing a crucial role in influencing Malaysian political landscape during 2010. The highly interactive nature of
social networks had facilitated political interactions involving students, which would be otherwise highly unusual, and, therefore, had started challenging the ways in which political engagement had been previously understood.

While the UiTM students had refrained from more serious forms of engagement, such as openly participating in political activities, writing blogs, or reacting to blog entries or political news articles, the relatively informal structure of and a cautious approach toward the social media had allowed them to engage politically to some degree. Yet, such possibilities were restricted due to a fear of authorities, both within and outside UiTM, which had led to self-censorship among the informants in expressing their views freely through social and other online media. Moreover, the non-Bumiputera students were even more cautious and restricted in political expression even during individual interactions, let alone engagement. Finally, despite continued dissatisfaction with media and political systems, the predictions by some UiTM students indicated a positive outlook, although not without reservation. For instance, their liking for the online media had also led to a serious concern regarding the freedom of the Internet and censorship in the years to come. These predictions are further discussed in light of post-2010 developments in the country in the final chapter of this dissertation. While continuing to discuss the findings of my fieldwork, the next chapter attempts to illustrate the views of those UiTM students who had acknowledged some level of engagement or a high degree of interest in engaging in politics in the time to come.
CHAPTER 7: THE ENGAGED

This chapter reflects the views of those students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) who had a strong inclination toward politics and an interest in joining politics later on. These individuals included Aisyah (aged 20 years), Ela (23), Hafiz (22), Karima (21), Rahim (22), Ratu (23), Shamsul (25), and Zarina (20). Even among the engaged students, there were individuals who disagreed with the political situation in the country during 2010. Similar to their disengaged counterparts, some of the UiTM students mentioned in this chapter were also critical of the politics and media control, but they appeared rather determined to face these issues in the time to come.

To understand the nature and extent of youth political engagement in light of the country’s changing media environment during 2010, which supported the idea that it was a crucial year in Malaysia’s political history (as noted in the previous chapter), this chapter is divided into four sections. The first section delves into the key reasons, other than media, behind political interest among these students. These reasons included parental influence, role models, and issues facing the country at the time. The second section discusses the process of political participation among the UiTM students, which was an outcome of individual interest, political discussions, voting, blogging, and other activities associated with politics. The third section notes the use of the government controlled mass media and online media for seeking political information and for political communication. This section further depicts the instances of distrust in both mainstream mass media and alternative media online, which had led to selective media use among the UiTM students. The final section of this chapter attempts to capture impressions of
political engagement through media among my informants. In doing so, I touch upon the
connection between political media and parental influence, media and political
perceptions, the role of political blogs in promoting political engagement, and note the
significance of 2010 with regards to the country’s changing media environment as
supported by this chapter.

Role of Non-Media Factors

In Chapter 6, I mention Osman, who despite considering himself as politically
disengaged, had attended a political gathering secretly, which had spurred his interest in
following Anwar Ibrahim on social media. Osman was clearly encouraged by his peer,
and so, I became curious about the factors other than media behind UiTM students’
interest in politics. It was useful to understand what these factors were since these could
generate the motivation resulting in engagement, which media alone were unlikely to
generate, although media often supplemented these factors in generating political interest
at the time. This section discusses a few key factors, other than media, which were
influential in generating political interest among some UiTM students during 2010.

Parental Influence

Parental influence worked in a couple of ways. First, the parents could offer
insights and motivation that the formally recognized means of political participation, such
as voting or participating in rallies (which had been banned for students due to UUCA),
could not achieve. Second, parental links could provide a direct access to politics.
Moreover, the parents did not have to be known political figures since even those parents
who were temporarily or indirectly involved with the political process had influenced
these students. For example, Ela had never voted before, but she reported being highly influenced by her parents. Her father was actively engaged in politics and had been a party worker during elections. Especially during the 2008 elections, “he worked for . . . yes, at the voting ballot as a . . . Naib Ketua Cawangan [Deputy Head Representative]” (Personal Communication, July 9, 2010). Similarly, Ratu’s father worked for the law enforcement system as a Corporal at the Police Headquarters. Although Ratu’s political motivation was also an outcome of the political situation in her country about which she learned through media, her father’s profession was especially helpful in giving her insights about the functioning of the system.

Parental influence did not come only from the fathers. In fact, besides Ali, both Shamsul and Aisyah were highly motivated by their mothers, and the latter indeed considered her mother as her role model. While Shamsul’s mother was a Lecturer at a university, she was also an Advisor to the Ministry of Higher Education on a two-year contract at the time. He noted that previously, she was the President of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) club while studying overseas, and, “because of my mom was involved in politics . . . I am interested in politics and like to participate a lot” (Personal Communication, July 26, 2010). Shamsul was interested in politics at any level, including that within UiTM, primarily due to the inspiration that he derived from his mother. Aisyah’s case was similar to Shamsul’s, as she noted:

My mom was the President of [overseas] UMNO-Wanita [the Women’s wing of the United Malays National Organization], where she focused on education more. My mom follows politics closely after returning to Malaysia. She has been to
many conferences internationally . . . She is really ambitious . . . Someday, I would like to be one like her . . . My dad is more laid back. Here in Malaysia, it’s still patriarchal . . . Earlier she used to be quiet, but is now louder. (Personal Communication, August 4, 2010)

The parental influence, however, did not work in the same way in case of Hafiz, a Public Relations student. Hafiz was generally critical of the Kampung (implying backward) mentality since he had often experienced resistance to change among the people in his Kampung (village), including his father. In one instance, he noted, government wanted to build an LRT (train) station in his village before 2010, which would have provided an easier commute, but the villagers, especially the old generation including his father, resisted the idea and the project fell apart. Hafiz’s discomfort with the older generation was also reflected while discussing party politics. Hafiz expressed that he did not like the bad politics in Malaysia. Nevertheless, he supported the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN)—primarily as a sign of his disagreement with his father and elders in the village who supported the opposition parties.

While there was parental influence of some kind in almost every case among the UiTM students included in this chapter, Rahim, along with Ratu, stood as exceptions who were not as motivated by their parents. While Rahim’s mother favored PAS, his father did not have a very strong inclination toward any single political party, but Rahim had his own ideas, which he seldom shared with his parents. He acknowledged, “I want to be a politician myself because I want to play with that kind of stuff” (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010). Rahim was particularly interested in different political
parties’ agenda setting at the time. For instance, he suggested, his preferred political coalition BN typically tried to cover up scandals through another item on their agenda. The opposition *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR—People’s Justice Party) with support from the Chinese dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP), on the other hand, emphasized a need for justice in the country in their agenda, whereas *PAS* (*Parti Islam Se Malaysia*) sought an Islamic country as their agenda, according to Rahim. Much of Rahim’s understanding was a result of following the media and discussions with friends rather than parental influence.

*Role Models*

Besides the parental influence, many of my informants were impressed by mainstream politicians. As noted in Chapter 6, Osman showed his enthusiasm for Anwar Ibrahim, although I found that former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad was by far the most inspiring leader among my informants. On one occasion, while discussing political power, Rahim noted:

. . . they [the political parties] want to rule the country, but they don’t want to do anything for the country. I know people like power. I do, too. Maybe I will exploit the power as well [giggles]. But, I would like to do good things too, something like Mahathir did for this country. (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010)

Among Malaysian politicians, Rahim favored Mahathir the most and saw him as “one of the most respected ones.” Rahim believed that what Mahathir did was for the benefit of the country and for the people. For instance, in 1998, Malaysia hosted the Commonwealth games for the first time in history. The Twin Towers, Kuala Lumpur
International Airport, Putrajaya (administrative center for the federal government including the Prime Minister’s Office), as well as Cyberjaya (a technology park-based township) were some of the examples of Mahathir’s vision for the country, according to Rahim. Similarly, Ratu expressed, “Dr. Mahathir is very kind. Made *Bangsa Melayu* [Malay people] more *maju* [successful], more progressive, move forward” (Personal Communication, August 1, 2010). While discussing the online media and politics, Shamsul lamented, “I am not that impressed by the Internet, Dr. Mahathir is the only one who impressed me” (Personal Communication, July 26, 2010). Like Osman, Shamsul had also met his hero, Dr. Mahathir, personally. Shamsul had listened to Mahathir’s live speeches on television as a child and considered him a visionary.

These UiTM students understood that there were disagreements with Mahathir’s way of running the country. Nonetheless, the longest reign as country’s Prime Minister had kept him as a role model—even after six years following his retirement from active politics. In Ratu’s opinion, for instance:

Some people question the government policy. It was criticized by some . . . many opposed why he want to make Putrajaya? He didn’t care. “*Tambak Johor*” [a bridge connecting Malaysia and Singapore] . . . Another bridge for dealing with the traffic issue. Many people, organization didn’t agree with him in Malaysia about this issue . . . (Personal Communication, August 1, 2010)

Ratu aspired to meet with Dr. Mahathir personally and ask him why he faced opposition in his projects. Rahim, on the other hand, noted “[some] people say he [Dr. Mahathir]
failed to change the Malay people, but I think he hasn’t failed, as he changed the country” (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010).

For both Rahim as well as Shamsul, the perception of Mahathir being an ideal leader, even during 2010, was primarily a result of the mainstream media images formed over decades of his administration. Such perception, however, was not the case with contemporary politicians, who despite having a more prominent presence on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, did not leave a strong impression among the UiTM students. For instance, both Anwar Ibrahim and Najib had many more followers on Twitter during 2010, yet Mahathir remained a favorite among the new generation—at least as noted by some UiTM students.

According to Rahim, different political leaders had different ideological positions with regard to the way the country should go. Dr. Mahathir, for example, had a “modern” outlook reflected through his Vision 2020 (Wawasan 2020), which Rahim felt was the most successful ideological position so far. Badawi focused on Islam Hadhari (secular and all-inclusive Islam), which was not exactly “wrong,” but was not relevant for the time and “his method was not quite right for the Malaysians,” whereas Najib (the Prime Minister in office during 2010) had come up with the “One Malaysia” campaign to promote solidarity among the Malaysian people, “which is good, but people don’t care,” Rahim commented (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010).

Besides Rahim, some other informants also were dissatisfied with political leadership after Mahathir’s retirement—another student Aisyah commented:
... now Najib is in power, but before him Badawi didn’t really do anything. The fact is that Najib has his own attitude of—I know what to do and I will do it now. But Badawi tried to obey others . . . (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

Aisyah, like Shamsul, had met Mahathir in person and had the following observation following her meeting:

Najib and Mahathir were not on talking terms even before the elections . . .

During the meeting, Mahathir mentioned his displeasure at the fact that Najib did not listen to his advice, words . . . so it was kind of disheartening to hear that from Tun Mahathir. (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010)

Aisyah also noted that despite his upfront attitude, Najib was not as likely to succeed because:

Everyone is now talking about the new PM, not Najib. They do agree with his way of doing things, but sometimes he contradicts himself . . . I discussed about this with my friends. I am not so sure about changing [leadership], but it depends upon who the successor is. (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

Besides media, Aisyah had developed political views following her discussions with her friends and peers. This was not uncommon among some other UiTM students since discussions with family and friends had influenced their political opinion as well as the potential to engage with politics. For students such as Zarina and Hafiz, friends were often more influential, compared to their parents, in generating an interest in political issues through regular discussions. Similarly, in Chapter 6, Nadia had reported that she had started following political issues more closely after she met a close male friend, who
not only followed such issues but also discussed them on his blog. And so, a strong interest could also result in real action. Moreover, Osman met Anwar Ibrahim only because he had followed his friend. Hence, besides parental influence and role models within the system, friends were another means of generating political interest among the UiTM during 2010.

*Issues Facing the Country*

The issues faced by the country, primarily depicted on media, emerged as another key reason behind the students’ interest in politics at the time. While Rahim was more interested in the power game, other informants mostly cited problems faced by the country as a main reason behind their interest in engaging in politics later on. For example, Ratu agreed that Malaysia was facing many social, economic, development, and political issues. She explained that through news, “I want to know how my country is doing? I think about it . . . I want to change (things) . . . Want to bring peace . . .” (Personal Communication, July 28, 2010). Ratu wanted to bring peace both within Malaysia as well as in the outside world, and she aspired to work toward it slowly. But, the conflict within the country was her priority.

My parents and younger brother talk about politics, but I don’t like to hear about it. Why? I don’t think what they tell is the truth about UMNO. So, I did some research about this party UMNO. It’s not like the old one. Now changing and not so stable. As I said, politic [*sic*] is dirty, that’s why [not stable]. Why not they join together? Make more peaceful. More parties will have more misunderstanding,
more confusion. I want the peaceful [*sic*]. (Personal Communication, August 1, 2010)

Ratu, although inspired, did not trust her parents’ take on UMNO. She questioned the split within the political parties and hoped that they could unite someday. She noted that politics was dirty, and so, her potential engagement would be meant to bring a change in the existing system. In her words:

I am not interested in politics because politics is dirty, so I stay away. Maybe I will participate someday because I want to change the way that I want to change people’s thinking that politics is not dirty . . . (Personal Communication, August 1, 2010)

Aisyah, on the other hand, was more certain of her future political engagement and commented:

Yes, I am interested in politics because it’s interesting. It makes me want to know what’s going on in my country. It’s the basis not only of a country, but even clubs. You cannot really avoid it. Like I hate politics, but am eventually interested in it due to my family background, sort of. I asked even my mom about becoming a minister, I will do it for my country to improve, change things. (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

According to Aisyah, politics was omnipresent and one could not avoid it. As a result, it made more sense for her to get active and try to bring about a change rather than developing an escapist tendency, which was the case with Laila and Salmah (see Chapter 6). However, the promise to engage and attempt to change the system did not necessarily
mean that these students had lost faith in a traditional mindset. In fact, despite exceptions such as Hafiz, some of these students had continued to take pride in their traditional culture, which justified their belief in Mahathir’s leadership discussed in the previous section. On one occasion, Ratu provided a detailed account of her television habits and acknowledged that she mostly preferred watching programs that had some moral in the story. On being asked about Adat (Malay customs), Ratu’s response was, “ohh, Adat? . . . Yes. Important. Most important” (Personal Communication, July 28, 2010). While Ratu wanted to change the system, she was deeply connected with the Malay culture and had a different ideology compared to either Rahim or Aisyah. Aisyah, on the other hand, did not enjoy Malay language media for the most part:

I am kind of a bit biased against Malay movies, but . . . I like to watch movies like those by Yasmin Ahmed, whose movies are not mainstream—which are either about love, gangsters, or both or comedies (stupid comedies) . . . There are heaps of movies from other countries like Thailand, Indonesia, India, Korea, we should learn from that. (Personal Communication, August 4, 2010)

Aisyah respected the Malay culture, but believed there was a lot to be learned from other cultures, not just in terms of media content but also in terms of finding solutions to the country’s problems at the time. From the experience of these UiTM students, it became clear that the development of individual ideology was informed by family background and the nature of cultural exposure. In Aisyah’s experience:

Usually the Malay girls are supposed to wear scarf by the age of twelve, but my parents were different. I grew up differently. Now I wear Baju Kurung by choice.
It is sort of formal, but I prefer it than wearing jeans and t-shirt. (Personal Communication, August 4, 2010)

In case of Aisyah, the choice of traditional values was an outcome of open-minded parents and extensive international travel that had shaped her perception differently compared to other UiTM students that I interacted with. And despite acknowledging earlier that Malaysia was still patriarchal, she chose to stay on the traditional side—perhaps after experiencing foreign cultures, which led her to see the merits of her home culture. Nevertheless, a possible way to improve the political system at the time was for her to get further trained in a foreign country with, of course, some limitation, as she noted:

Traveling has given me a wider perspective on things. I wish to study in UK for my MA in Civil Law. Criminal Law is heavy, so not advisable for girl. Then there is Shariah [Islamic Law], but that won’t suit me either. (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

Aisyah also commented that other professions, such as actors, usually would not turn into politicians in her country, but “mostly lawyers will turn into politics” (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010). Therefore, studying law was an interim step toward becoming a politician for Aisyah, unlike Ali, who also studied Law, but had decided to stay away from politics due to a lack of belief in the system—which he was not motivated enough to change as a future politician.
Political Participation

A student’s interest in politics did not necessarily result in political participation. However, political participation was often a result of strong interest and had, more importantly, inspired some individuals tremendously to engage in politics in the future. Political participation mentioned in this section does not include participation in a narrow sense of voting, but is more inclusive of activities, such as informal political discussions, student politics, and interaction with political parties. Delving into the participation aspect also helped me better understand the nature of ongoing preparation among these students, who planned to become future politicians.

*Kedai Mama: Creating a Malaysian Public Sphere*

Also mentioned earlier, *Kedai Mama* (local Cafeteria) served as an ideal platform for exchanging ideas. These places appeared inclusive of people from different walks of life, especially students, in offering a suitable environment for political discussions. These discussions were often unlikely to turn into serious and active engagement with politics. However, they formed a vital part of the exchange of ideas among individuals within the community and could take place without the risk of being monitored. As the findings suggested, despite the vast amount of information available online, any expression of alternative ideas online for the informants of this study had to be carefully crafted and indirect—so that it did not offend anyone, especially the authorities.

Even during the course of this study, I had more relaxed conversations at these places with the informants compared to more formal settings such as offices or even the food courts within the UiTM campus. Some informants, including Ratu, Intan, Salmah,
Rahim, and Ali had made it clear that they were more comfortable and open in sharing their views at *Kedai Mama* compared to other places since they felt safer there. Moreover, it was at *Kedai Mama* where Fauziah, Aisyah, and Zarina had serious discussions with their friends. Hafiz, in particular, felt excited about *lepak* (hanging out) with his friends at *Kedai Mama* or *Kedai Kopi* (coffee shops) during mornings and evenings. He recalled that sometimes he had gone into discussing serious political issues with older people at these places, but did not enjoy such discussions. He noted:

> I only like to *lepak* with my friends. With oldies, they are narrow-minded and they like to dominate the discussion. Like, they keep the government-opposition *Kedai Kopi* debate among themselves. They have their own ideas, but they want us to have their roles without any change. (Personal Communication, July 13, 2010)

While these discussions had helped the formation of political opinion for Hafiz, he had actually decided against voting during the elections as a result of such discussions, as he further noted:

> *Kerajaan makan duit rakyat*—it means government eating people’s money. By saying things like this, my father tries to turn me to believe the opposition. More people trust the opposition, so opposition leads in Selangor. And the opposition says bad things about the government, so I don’t want to vote. (Personal Communication, July 13, 2010)
Voting as an Act of Political Participation

Hafiz’s account brings attention to the aspect of voting, which, although less critical for some informants, such as Rahim, was indicative of active political participation. Hence, it was imperative to look into these students’ voting preferences. As an act of political participation, the desire to vote among the informants of this study varied considerably, but it was rather consistent among those who wanted to engage in politics. For instance, Aisyah had not been able to vote so far due to her age, but was willing to do so.

Can’t vote yet. Yes, I will definitely. Like [sic] ASAP. It depends who I vote for, but it could change with time. I would vote for one who could actually do their job. I will see what they have achieved/ done in the past, [will do] some background check as well. (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

Similarly, Ratu and Shamsul were also keen on voting although the latter had to miss it during the 2008 elections as he was studying overseas at the time. An exception in the group, Rahim was above the age of 21, but he did not care about voting during the elections since he believed that voting was for older people. Nonetheless, Rahim noted that he was more interested in the “agenda playing” and understanding what the politicians did to win people’s trust, rather than considering which political party ruled the country. For Rahim, voting was a short-term activity, which he did not consider useful for his future goal of becoming a politician. He was more interested in becoming a member of the group that had dominated the Malaysian political scene since independence rather than voting.
As noted earlier, Aisyah had suggested that it was not possible to avoid politics, since it was everywhere, and, hence, participating in it was inevitable for her.

So, can’t really run away from it [politics]. Even within a group of friends, they still play politics—that’s how the world moves around, besides money [chuckles].

Obviously! (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

While Aisyah found it difficult to escape politics, Rahim, on the other hand, believed that just voting will not help him make a change and understanding politics was more important.

*Blogging as an Act of Political Engagement*

Aisyah was not merely interested in the act of voting alone. For her, the electoral process was also important and she had her views, which she liked to share online through her blog. In her own words:

Before going to UK earlier this year, I wrote about last September’s by-elections, what to expect from people and my last prediction came true. This time, I think I said something about other parties, about government. Like other parties getting stronger, so there is a shift in power. (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

The informants in this study were usually not open about blogging. Most of them reported having blogs that were inactive, which, I later found on checking the blogs, was indeed true. Yet, Aisyah acknowledged that she had maintained two blogs—one of which was somewhat political in nature.

I have my own blogs. One is on personal thoughts and everyday life. The other has got stuff about politics, like when I find out something about a minister then I
post my opinion. It is more of a personal thing. It feels good to make my observation . . . (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

Another informant Zarina read blog entries, but refrained from having her own blog and noted:

Sometimes if I want to comment . . . then I comment. Mostly [I] just read, but prefer to write when I feeling [sic] strongly about an issue . . . But my comments are restricted due to culture and government. (Personal Communication, July 9, 2010)

On being probed further about culture, Zarina noted:

I have a friend… Police shot a kid and my friend criticized this on the blog. Then somebody came to warn him . . . We can’t write anything that we feel. Because of these issues, no blogging for me lah. (Personal Communication, July 9, 2010)

The traditional laws under which the mainstream mass media operated had also been applied to the new online media and, therefore, it was obvious why most informants were not interested in writing on blogs or had to be very careful in expressing themselves at the time. As Hafiz pointed out, “they use OSA [Official Secrets Act] and ISA [Internal Security Act, which has since then been replaced with a different law—see Chapter 3 for details], so everyone is scared. . . .which they use to hide the truth from public” (Personal Communication, July 13, 2010). Like Zarina, Hafiz also had a friend who had been in trouble with the authorities due to blogging on political issues and, therefore, Hafiz was reluctant to share further information about his friend’s blog. Nonetheless, he acknowledged that many of his friends and sometimes even he himself used pseudonyms
to post comments online. “The people can always work smart to cover and make indirect comments on the Internet,” he added (Personal Communication, July 13, 2010).

Likewise, Aisyah noted:

   It [political blogging] is kind of not safe now . . . There are heaps of problems one can get into. For example, Rajapetra and his son who got into trouble with ISA. Now ISA is sort of like you’d think it’s harmless, but can lead into trouble. So, I want to be a lawyer to know about all such laws. (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

Therefore, while Hafiz had noted the use of pseudonyms as a trend followed by most active bloggers, Aisyah understood that a thorough knowledge of the laws would make her aware of the risks associated with political blogging and would help her stay out of trouble as a blogger. Although the extent of blogging was not at a professional level by any means among these students, blogging did qualify as an act of engagement due to the popularity of blogs among these students, who often reported reading blogs to supplement their information needs.

**Offline Political Activities**

There were some other activities, which appeared stronger in promoting engagement when compared to discussions at *Kedai Mama*, voting, or even blogging. These activities had allowed some of these students to prepare better and stay confident in working in the political system in the future, although the approaches differed from one student to another. For instance, in order to prepare himself for a political career, Shamsul noted “. . . I try to get to know my capabilities, capacity. I take part in theatre,
acting, competitions, singing . . . a lot of things . . . Still looking for what I can do”
(Personal Communication, July 22, 2010). Shamsul further explained:

I am interested in politics . . . maybe nature. My passion is to change something in
my country. There is a lot of ways to do, quite a lot of ways to learn. When you
come to university, you see it is an English-speaking university. Many people
cannot participate due to [a lack of] English-speaking ability, therefore, they are
less confident. (Personal Communication, July 22, 2010)

Although Shamsul’s opinion suggested that there were limited opportunities for students
who lacked facility in English to participate in extra-curricular activities, including
student government, I found this was not exactly the case. Based upon my interactions
with other informants and my own observation, there were many activities, such as
speech, music, dance, and other events, where mostly Bahasa Melayu was used.
Moreover, while the use of English was encouraged in some places, such as the
International Education Centre, fluency in English did not appear to be a necessity in
most cases.

It was certain that extra-curricular activities could provide these students with
some means of engaging with issues without really getting them in trouble with the
authorities. So, what were these activities, which despite keeping up with the legal
restrictions, showed promise in fostering political engagement? There appeared to be
three major ways in which these students were politically active. The first way was social
work, which could eventually result in an ambition to pursue a political career through
goodwill. Ratu, for instance, showed a keen interest in joining politics in future, but
appeared unsure of an exact time. Before becoming active in politics, she noted, “I’d like to participate in social welfare. . . . from there, it can give me a better choice of which party to choose” (Personal Communication, August 1, 2010). The university indeed provided a platform for students to indulge in such activities. For instance, Kampung visits were arranged at least once every semester at UiTM for those who wanted to experience rural life and understand the issues faced by the people in villages. Moreover, there were opportunities within certain departments for the students to engage in social work. Aisyah, for instance, went on a trip to the Henry Gurney School, which was a correctional facility and school for past convicts. She took part in activities that aimed at familiarizing the inmates about their rights and limits and offered suggestions for improving their life and career.

While Aisyah considered the above experience worthwhile, she was not happy with the formal student organizations at UiTM, which was the second way to become politically active among the UiTM students. Aisyah’s reaction to her experience was:

It’s not worthwhile. I was the secretary of a law club in . . . but it was too much work and you can’t be yourself. It’s too hard because not everyone will like you and you can’t really please everyone. (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

The experience with the law club had prevented Aisyah from engaging with student organizations at UiTM.

However, Aisyah’s lost interest did not mean that UiTM was short on providing sufficient opportunities for students’ political development. Shamsul, for example, was a facilitator in a 50-member student council (similar to student governments or senate
bodies that exist within the U.S. universities), which had two representatives from each faculty (equivalent to a college). However, his attempt to contest in the election to become a representative from his faculty was sabotaged, according to Shamsul. It turned out that “pamphlets saying bad things were distributed . . . the system has its own preferences . . .” (Personal Communication, July 26, 2010); “outspoken people are not liked here,” he noted (Personal Communication, July 22, 2010). Following the forgettable incident, Shamsul had a new purpose:

My ambition is to change the way people communicate, sending information. Like some information didn’t get from us to the dean through the staff. For example, guards did nothing when I was sabotaged. The VC [Vice Chancellor’s] office also got the story . . . Someone else wrote offensive things about other faculty in derogatory language on my behalf to sabotage me . . . . Even among politicians, some doesn’t even have higher education . . . For me, communication is very important [in politics]. (Personal Communication, July 26, 2010)

While Shamsul was still keen on exploring ways to excel in UiTM’s politics, some UiTM students had gained access to actual political parties, which was indeed the third and final way was to get involved with political activities. The third way appeared to be mainly acceptable if the students were interested in one of the ruling parties since any involvement with oppositional parties could possibly get them into legal trouble. There were two unique cases within the context of the third scenario. In first case, Aisyah acknowledged that she had “worked at the UMNO office during last summer” (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010). This appeared surprising given the strict enforcement
of the University and University Colleges Act (UUCA), which prevented students from engaging with political parties. Later, Aisyah revealed that it was a professional administrative internship, which she obtained through her mother’s political connections and did as a part of her curriculum. During this internship, Aisyah mentioned excitedly, “I met Tun Mahathir . . . He was energetic during the meeting, but is old now . . . The discussion was on the ways to improve the current situation, his ideas, and his plans” (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010). This encouraged her to follow his famous speech given at the Putra World Trade Center in 2002 and to start taking politics more seriously. In another instance, Shamsul attended a political gathering, which is banned for students within Malaysia. However, since this gathering was overseas, Shamsul was not subject to legal action:

I have attended the UMNO overseas club conference before the election last time [in 2004]. During a conference like this, media will do a lot of coverage and even the Prime Minister and others are present. I am interested in participating in events like that. (Personal Communication, July 26, 2010)

While Shamsul’s options were limited in terms of involvement in actual party politics after returning to Malaysia, his overseas experience had given him a sense of distinction and confidence in approaching his future political career. In both the cases, these students participated in political activities while staying clear of any legal trouble. Osman’s experience discussed in Chapter 6, on the other hand, was more secret in nature, which arose from a fear of openly associating oneself with oppositional politics. Nevertheless, each of these cases, including Osman’s experience, indicated that actual contact with
politics had clearly redefined their media use and the nature of media content that these students followed.

Mainstream versus Online Media

In describing media use among informants of this study pertaining to political content and activities, it is crucial to consider two aspects. First, the use of media for political information and communication for academic purposes; and, second, their own interest in politics, which motivated these students to explore news and other content and learn more about politics. It was apparent that these two often supplemented each other as well as drawing from other influences, such as family background, in fostering political engagement. A key thesis emerging during this study was that students’ media use in a political context was both inspirational and investigative. For instance, as depicted earlier, Dr. Mahathir emerged as the most popular role model—primarily because of an image of a strong political leadership built consistently through the mainstream mass media for many years, which was clearly evident through informants’ perceptions. Hence, the mainstream media had apparently been successful in inspiring these informants. Yet, given the lack of trust in the functioning of mainstream media and the political leadership at the time of this research, there was a widespread skepticism about mainstream mass media, which had resulted in a continued investigation of mainstream news through the online media, such as alternative news websites and blogs, among the informants. The following section depicts various instances of individual experiences that had led to distrust in mainstream media.
Distrust in Mainstream Mass Media

The alternative opinion had stayed to a small extent within the mass media, usually in print, which often faced the threat of getting their publishing licenses cancelled by the authorities. On the other hand, the online media were frequently used to express alternative opinions and cover the news stories that did not appear on mainstream media. Yet, despite the evident and acknowledged biases, the influence of mainstream media was visible during the course of this research and was especially evident through Mahathir’s continued popularity among some of the informants discussed earlier.

Nevertheless, Mahathir’s administration proved successful in building a positive image through many years of cultivation via mainstream mass media. However, given the increased popularity of online media, it appeared difficult for the country’s next two leaders to recreate such a strong and powerful image. The administration at the time of this study had also been trying to use the mass media as a vehicle for building their public image. For instance, during the course of this study, I learned about Prime Minister Najib Razak’s One Malaysia campaign, which had a prominent presence on television and especially on radio. The informants of this study did not take this campaign very seriously. Aisyah, for instance, was especially critical and remarked, “Najib’s One Malaysia is not really integrating, but separating the people” (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010). According to Aisyah, people understood that through One Malaysia, the government was trying to cover its pro-Bumiputra bias, but it was not well received by the people. Aisyah was unable to recall any of the lyrics or punch lines from the One Malaysia advertisements since she had “seen it just once or twice on TV . . . heard One
Malaysia less than five times on radio,” as every time it played, her friend changed the station (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010).

The informants, irrespective of their interest to engage in politics, were well aware of the bias in mainstream media. On one occasion, Ratu noted that the mainstream media often discussed “Barisan Nasional/ UMNO . . . they even tell this party is more stable, their organization is more stable, and they have more people” to support them (Personal Communication, July 28, 2010). “I think that as media they have to support the government. What they say cannot be super-free. So, they lean towards the government,” Aisyah suggested (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010). Similarly, Rahim firmly believed that the media should act as watchdogs, but it was clearly not the case with Malaysian media. The only oppositional viewpoint, in Rahim’s opinion, was evident when he sometimes watched parliamentary proceedings on television during which the politicians often quarreled with each other.

Rahim noted that BN controlled the media, which was evident through the pro-government stance of government-run RTM (Radio Television Malaysia) or even the private channel TV3 (or TV Tiga), which was still influenced by the government (perhaps since TV Tiga has been owned in part by a private holdings company owned by BN—see Chapter 2 for details). Rahim recalled, “I was watching election news for some place covered by TV Tiga. The BN supporters and maybe party workers, I think, were shown stepping on others’ [other party’s] flag” (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010). Similar incidents had convinced Rahim that TV Tiga’s operations were far from
independent or objective—at least as far as the political news coverage was concerned. Similarly, there was a distrust surrounding newspapers. According to Shamsul:

\[\ldots\text{some of the newspapers for me have that kind of [bias]}\ldots\text{they are under the government control. They depend on news sources recognized by the government rather than putting their words first.}\ldots\text{Utusan Malaysia has more discussion on political conflicts, but is pro-government. Utusan’s source is Bernama, which is government-controlled news agency, also funded by the government. (Personal Communication, July 26, 2010)}\]

Shamsul’s skepticism was not limited to pro-government publications, he later pointed out:

\[\text{There is Harakkah, which belongs to opposition, can put whatever they want. They will give you another angle to the news. I don’t follow it. As you grow up, you are fed up because there is nothing positive in the newspaper}\ldots\text{(Personal Communication, July 26, 2010)}\]

Hence, in representing either pro-government or oppositional viewpoints, the mainstream mass media appeared to lose their credibility among the informants of this study. However, these students did not feel that people around the country were aware of the issues with the mainstream media:

\[\text{Most news is influenced by the authority. I don’t believe it 100 percent}\ldots\text{In Mayalsia, we are mostly influenced by the media. Only some educated people know the real situation. Kampung people do not have the diversity of media options. For example, sometimes it is difficult even to get a copy of newspaper in}\]

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Sabah and Sarawak. Selangor is more urban thinking lah . . . (Hafiz, Personal Communication, July 13, 2010)

The distrust in mainstream media was not merely an outcome of the knowledge of authoritarian control. In terms of political news, for instance, Ela did not trust the mainstream media entirely and considered them dishonest since they “changed the story a lot” (Personal Communication, July 9, 2010). Ela’s experience revealed her perception that mainstream media were selective in news coverage. Therefore, besides propaganda, selective coverage of events was another reason why these students did not treat the mainstream media seriously. This had led to a disinterest among these students and, therefore, they stayed away from news on the mainstream mass media for the most part.

For those who listened to radio, mostly preferred musical and entertainment programs. Regarding the radio programming in Malaysia, Shamsul remarked:

The popular stations don’t really have news—just brief news. RTM has more news but less listenership. I listen to radio in my car all the time. Nowadays, radio is boring—a lot of commercials, sometimes five minutes between two songs. Sometimes I listen to RTM, radio music some mornings. Actually, News is

26 Citing one particular incident, Ela noted:
. . . you know there is this cabinet, then the members went to Iraq to provide some help in 2004. Their airplane was attacked by the U.S. army, but the pilot saved the plane . . . it was not on news. I know this from my dad. (Personal Communication, July 9, 2010)

According to Ela, her father apparently had learned about the airplane attack incident directly from a cabinet member, who was on that plane. Ela had further acknowledged that she was able to corroborate her father’s account through other sources, including a few friends and some blogs. I was unable to corroborate Ela’s account of the airplane or any such incident involving Malaysian cabinet in Iraq through my own research. Nevertheless, for Ela, the story did not get to the media and for this reason she did not trust them.
boring, very boring. The way they present it is boring . . . (Personal Communication, July 26, 2010)

Shamsul mostly listened to private radio stations because he was bored with RTM’s radio programming. Some other informants, such as Zarina, had expressed similar opinions about radio and listened to musical programs rather than news or politics. Hence, while there was still some interest in the mainstream mass media, it was definitely not driven by the political coverage.

_Distrust in Online Media_

As mentioned in the previous chapter, I was intrigued by the fact that electronic commerce had apparently picked up in Malaysia during recent years, often through blogs and social networks. But this increased trend did not necessarily imply that people had finally started trusting everything that the Internet had to offer. The informants in this study typically did not believe all the news and blog posts that appeared on the Internet, especially not those on political issues. For instance, Ela did not follow political news or blogs on the Internet a lot. While she acknowledged that sometimes the media influenced her, there were also the times when she questioned them:

I think media is used by government political party, so some bias there . . . The blogs are also difficult to believe because someone from the opposition might use it for their . . . purpose. And government party is not perfect; they use media for [their own] benefits. (Personal Communication, July 9, 2010)

Ela’s distrust continued from the mainstream to the online media as well. Moreover, some informants noted that it was easier to create anonymous identities online and
deceive audiences compared to mainstream mass media, which were restricted in many ways and did not allow a public access. In Aisyah’s experience:

Sometimes I read blogs, but blogs could be random and what they say is not what is on their mind, so there is heaps of stuff there. Sometimes I find very narrow-minded opinion . . . some of these things aren’t even applicable in terms of politics, just personal attacks. They still have this kind of bitter resentment inside of what they say . . . sometimes it is perhaps one blog or post like that, not regularly. (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

Besides the anonymity and lack of credibility associated with blogs, some informants still had much stronger faith in the mainstream mass media. For example, Ratu shared her viewpoint:

. . . Internet? Not as much. I must trust in the TV. But in the Internet I am a little—not believe it. In the Internet, story can be made up, constructed. TV not like that. Radio, Newspaper also [sic]. For example, Harakkah is very extreme and too fundamentalist, so not influential. So, I trust TV, radio, and newspaper, but Internet—not as much. (Personal Communication, August 1, 2010)

The distrust pertaining to the Internet was not only because of what was being said. In certain cases, the distrust had stemmed from known dire consequences, which had prevented the students from blogging explicitly and extensively about political issues. As Hafiz commented while discussing the nature of Internet and blogging:

It [the Internet] is more free, but one still has to be aware of the ISA. There is an example, the Raja Petra Kamarudin case. They used ISA, so sometimes they go
back to the roots to use such law in the case of Internet. For newspapers, they [government] can be a gatekeeper, but for Internet it is difficult . . . (Personal Communication, July 13, 2010)

Due to the difficulty posed by the Internet, which had allowed alternative viewpoints to spread, especially through alternative news websites and individual blogs, the government used laws such as ISA, OSA, and so on to arrest journalists, such as Raja Petra Kamarudin, on the grounds of national security according to Hafiz. Moreover, the students were clearly conscious about getting into trouble due to AUKU. Hence, despite the promise of online media, they observed a high level of caution in their online conduct, especially in terms of participating in political discussions. The distrust in both mainstream and online media had resulted in a selective and somewhat limited media use as discussed below.

Selective Media Use

Overall, most informants mentioned that they usually preferred to watch entertainment programming compared to political or news content. For instance, while attempting to describe her favorite television series, Ratu noted:

I like to watch Ilusi (a drama series on TV3) from 6:30 to 7:30 pm. The main character can see future when touch the things. Can see a different story, new situation every time. All the characters are same every day. I like it because they give a moral value in the story. Moral for me lah . . . Don’t trust cruel people because they can cheat . . . not everyone can be trusted. (Personal Communication, July 28, 2010)
Ratu’s preference toward moral values was a result of her own traditional beliefs, which, when combined with a strong sense of Malay identity, had led to her media choices at the time. Discussions with Ratu revealed that she believed strongly in Malay culture and was conscious about keeping her Malay identity intact. Consequently, even in terms of entertainment programming, Ratu enjoyed the content that was closely tied to traditional beliefs and the Malay culture. The government controlled mainstream mass media projected Malay values through programming and content, which had convinced Ratu to follow mainstream media as more credible sources of political news. And so, the preference for entertainment programs was also influential in the choice of political content that these students followed. In another case, Aisyah noted that she liked “to watch ‘CSI Miami’ and ‘The House’ on TV . . . ‘CSI Miami’ is interesting because of the crime bit. The investigation bit is informative” (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010). However, unlike Ratu, while Aisyah had a preference for investigative entertainment programs, such preference did not influence the nature of political content that Aisyah followed. And so, while she was interested in the investigative series, Aisyah later reported not being interested in actual political scandals:

Mostly I follow political news in the country, about the politicians. What they do? Or what they have done? I don’t follow scandals as much. They are not interesting for me. I like to know about agenda or manifesto of different politicians, their plans and what has become of their plans. Surprisingly, the plans don’t go anywhere. Sometimes I followed some of the politicians and it hits rock bottom. It’s sad. (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)
Aisyah’s disinterest in scandals was indicative of her serious interest behind following political news as she sought information rather than entertainment from news programs. With the exception of Aisyah and a few others, most informants did not acknowledge that they followed political news very closely—unless it was required as a part of their studies. Even in case of Aisyah, while following the political content, she noted:

There is some part of news, for example, too much Anwar, I don’t think it is that important. It’s heavily blown out and then too less of what they have been doing or about development, just too much of ministerial scandals. (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

Hence, following political news did not necessarily mean that Aisyah had to agree with it at all times. Another informant Zarina reported that she usually did not trust political content on television. Instead, she preferred searching books through which she learned more about different political views. While she wanted to know “what happened” through newspaper and television, Zarina saw television as a source of “information people should know” and as “not real” (Personal Communication, July 9, 2010). Like many others, Zarina noted that she mostly followed news sources for information, but did not always trust those sources.

Among those who followed the news, both Shamsul and Aisyah liked to follow international news since it helped them understand the issues facing their own country better. Ratu, on the other hand, preferred to follow news pertaining to social, current, and educational issues. She particularly liked to watch “Malaysia Hari Ini” [a morning talk
show on TV Tiga], which was basically a “chitchat about Malaysia, its people, progress, politics, also can know about own country development [sic]” (Personal Communication, July 28, 2010). Ratu noted that besides “Malaysia Hari Ini,” she did not watch television as much for news, but listened to radio and regularly read newspapers. This was essentially because for some students, such as Ratu, Zarina, and Shamsul, the mainstream mass media were still more trustworthy and desirable over the online media and, hence, were found more influential. For instance, Ela believed that the Internet did not influence the way she felt about politics. It was noted earlier that Ela did not believe the mainstream media entirely, but as far as political content was concerned she ranked mainstream media above the online ones. At least in terms of credibility, she noted:

Yes, compared to Internet, I think newspaper is more trustworthy lah. The articles have rules and [are] more ethical than the Internet. Anyone can write on the Internet, but newspaper is published. (Personal Communication, July 9, 2010)

This trust in print media led Ela to choose Berita Harian and Harian Metro as her “set sources.” When asked about alternative publications, such as Harakkah, her response was:

Oh, Harakkah Daily? Not interested. Me and my parents support the government. But I think maybe I can still refer to it because gives alternate viewpoint. But not yet . . . maybe in future, I will . . . (Personal Communication, July 9, 2010)

Similarly, Ratu also noted that she did not “like Harakkah. I think Berita Harian is more true than others. Will just continue to read this one . . .” (Personal Communication, July 28, 2010). Besides Ela, Aisyah also followed her parents’ choice
and usually read *The Star* because of her mother. Hence, besides the direct political influence from parents, the media choices were also driven by parental preferences in some cases. Moreover, within the mass media, the usual choice stayed with mainstream publications. For instance, Shamsul reported that he sometimes bought *The Star* in English, which was a status symbol for some Malaysians. There were certain Malay language publications, such as *Harian Metro* and *Utusan Malaysia*, which emphasized everyday events more and read “more interesting” to Shamsul (Personal Communication, July 26, 2010). Rahim, on the other hand, had access to *Berita Harian* at his parents’ residence during the holidays, but seldom read a newspaper while on the UiTM campus since he was unable to decide what was right through the newspapers, especially the print versions. For political news, Rahim believed that sources, such as *Berita Harian, Utusan Malaysia*, or *Nanyang Siang Pau* each had their own slant or bias in reporting, but it was often difficult for average readers to understand it. Rahim believed that he could find the truth through multiple sources of information, including websites and sometimes blogs, which was a common view among other students as well.

*Why Online Media?*

Despite the skepticism, the online media were crucial in generating political interest and fostering engagement. They had provided the means for the propagation of oppositional and alternative viewpoints, which had led to the 2008 election results. With the exception of Shamsul, who did not consider the Internet as influential as some of his peers did, the informants who studied communication usually noted that Internet alone was responsible for the ruling alliance’s defeat in five states in 2008. The electoral results
were just a reflection of changing political opinion. Even among the UiTM students, the distinctive qualities of the Internet had made it one of the most preferred media, as Rahim suggested:

Internet does influence—the way the stories are written. Personally, I like to read, as I read and understand more I can accept it better, besides, of course, listening and viewing on TV . . . People tend to use the Internet more now. Internet becomes important source of information, leisure, and entertainment as well . . . more popular than TV among the students here. (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010)

The popularity of the Internet was visible among the students with the entertainment options it provided. Moreover, it could be used for other purposes such as investigating and corroborating news from mainstream media as well as word of mouth. For example, Zarina, who used books and other sources for her understanding of the country’s politics, kept herself updated with current affairs through the Internet, especially blogs written by political bloggers, who regularly updated their blogs. She preferred these blogs since these were often written by people who knew about politics, such as Anwar Ibrahim, over those bloggers who did not write regularly.

It was evident that the online media were playing a role in forming strong perceptions— despite the apparent skepticism associated with the online sources of information noted earlier. While discussing the ideological differences between Dr. Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim, Rahim shared some of his insights on Anwar Ibrahim’s sacking during the late 1990s. Rahim did not feel the charges or any truth in the matter
mattered for most Malaysians, but he expressed his own assessment of the possible cause and stated:

Anwar Ibrahim wanted to bring money from the IMF [International Monetary Fund] to Malaysia, which was against Mahathir’s plan, as this would put Malaysian economy in Western hands—just like the Philippines and Thailand. Anwar is considered as Westerner’s puppet and, so, is not liked as much by some of the Malaysian political circles. Now we have many parties and one would think they are along the racial lines, but even within Malays, there are so many different perspectives and viewpoints. I don’t really care whether the allegations on Anwar Ibrahim are true or not. There was a lot going on at the time of his sacking, but there were [other] reasons behind the whole episode, and sodomy charges were just a cover. (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010)

Rahim later mentioned that he had learned about this issue from a number of different websites, which mainly included alternative media websites and some blogs. According to Rahim, ISA prevented people from writing, speaking, or displaying fliers about sensitive topics, such as racial issues or the 1969 riots, although the differences in Malaysian society were visible to him. For example, he found the work attitude among the Chinese different than Malays. In Rahim’s experience, a Chinese person would do a job very professionally and finish it quickly, whereas Malays tended to be lazy. While the mainstream mass media had been forced to depict racial harmony, the online alternative media did not have such obligation, although even the online media could still invite
trouble by raising controversial issues (for example, the experience of Raja Petra Kamarudin discussed in Chapter 3).

Despite limited trust in online sources, the diversity of options offered by the online media had led to a preference for online media, which had allowed oppositional viewpoints to disseminate. For instance, as Shamsul noted, the pro-government news on mainstream media was aired at primetime 8–8:30 p.m. on TV1, TV2, and some other channels, but now the opposition had their own channel in the form of their presence on the Internet. There were YouTube videos uploaded by opposition and publications, such as Malaysiakini and Harakkah Online, which, in addition to the international media coverage, provided alternative options to Malaysians.

For the audience, the Internet offered the freedom to access or not access certain content by providing far more options than the mainstream media. The audience could investigate political issues online besides being able to express their opinion at the same time. However, the advent and propagation of online media had created a division between rural and urban knowledge. As evident from the earlier accounts of Ratu, Hafiz, and Salmah, the Kampung areas were still poorly connected to the Internet and, thus, suffered from a political knowledge gap. In Fauziah’s Kampung, however, this was not a challenge since it was well connected. While the absence of the Internet did not mean that people in these areas did not participate in politics or were unaware of political issues, they certainly lacked the perspective that their urban counterparts had gained through online media. The following section looks at the ways in which media had facilitated political engagement among the informants of this study during 2010.
Media and Political Engagement

A key aspect driving this research was the author’s curiosity to explore the role of media in facilitating political engagement. Through the course of fieldwork for this study, it became apparent that media certainly played a role in fostering political engagement. However, media use was not the only factor influencing political engagement. Other factors, such as individual political interest, motivation, media preferences, and sociocultural background, also played a role in shaping the process of political engagement among these students. Furthermore, the interaction between students and politicians through social media had redefined political engagement. The following sub-sections explore the informants’ perceptions on the ways in which media interested and inspired them toward political understanding and, as evident from some cases, activities.

*Political Media and Parental Influence*

While exploring the role of media, I had some detailed interactions with informants about their own views on media and political engagement. While a majority felt a positive influence, there were exceptions such as Shamsul, who expressed:

I don’t see the media influence me a lot. My mother, people’s real action motivated me. Media is only a medium for me to understand politics. But for me, I learned from real life experience. Just for understanding, media is useful, but they cannot change what I think because that is based on my own personal experience with Malaysian politics. Dr. Mahathir is the only one who impressed me. (Personal Communication, July 26, 2010)
Likewise, Aisyah was also clear about her preference for her mother over the media. In her experience:

The whole media is about news and how they deliver it—do influence me, but not more than my mom, she explains it well. The media are more on the surface. With my mom and dad, they talk [about political issues] with passion, so not so much media influence in my case, maybe half at the most. Well, I think it’s [media is] important for the [current] generation. . . . But sometimes their news is not really relevant. Sometimes they do it to attract more audience, which can be very shallow . . . yeah, that’s actually bad . . . Sometimes my mom knows a lot from her connections about what’s actually going on rather than scandals. (Aisyah, Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

Aisyah also noted that she often sought her parents’ opinion since she was highly influenced by her mother and father who, according to her, were pro-UMNO. She noted, “I have an aunty, my dad’s friend, who asked him to join some other political party in the past, but he refused” (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010). Compared to most other informants in this study, such a family background had put Aisyah on a different plane, which was evident through her confidence during the course of the interviews in which she was relaxed and usually answered my questions comprehensively.

Parental views were not always influential. For example, Ela, who followed political news mainly because she aspired to become a politician someday, took heed of her father’s suggestions on political matters. In order to prepare for the future, she emphasized a need to learn more about politics by analyzing what was on media:
... I watch political news, and discuss it with my dad. He gives me his suggestions on the news if something happens ... Sometimes I agree with him, sometimes I don’t. (Personal Communication, July 9, 2010)

Consequently, despite listening to her father’s suggestions, Ela did not always agree with her father’s viewpoint. On the other hand, his information held better credibility than media on certain occasions, as described earlier in the chapter. A discussion on politics at home had provided students such as Ela, Shamsul, and Aisyah a peculiar orientation toward politics, which was in sharp contrast with some of the other informants noted in the previous chapter. More importantly, in these cases the media were instrumental in fostering indirect engagement with politics. Discussions with family and friends were often an outcome of what was being watched on the media and this led to further political deliberation.

**Media and Political Perceptions**

As argued earlier, the political perceptions and orientation were not merely shaped by parental influence. Here, the media, including mainstream, often played a crucial role. For instance, Ratu had learned about several issues in the country through television, such as teenage pregnancy, miscarriage, urban issues, and so on, which had led her to believe “Newspapers, TV show ... that is real, they tell the true story” (Personal Communication, July 28, 2010). And so, Ratu learned about the real issues facing the country through media and it made her determined to work toward solving social problems in the future. Similarly, Zarina acknowledged:
it [media] make me think about it [politics]. I want explanation. I listen radio [sic], watch television and understand something . . . but not really trust the media. (Personal Communication, July 9, 2010)

While Rahim also agreed that media influenced the way he looked at politics, he believed that the government was the gatekeeper for mainstream mass media since even Dr. Mahathir had justified media control by stating that the truth would be harmful to people.

Internet, however, had changed the situation because much of the controversial information actually came from the blogs, which gave Rahim a different perspective from the television news. Occasionally, Rahim even went to YouTube.com to get what he considered the real news. The blogs depicted inside stories and exposed weaknesses of the government, unlike the mainstream mass media, which according to Rahim, were “a tool for the government for maintaining control.” He added:

I understand that I can’t do anything about that. So, I enjoy [watching] the game rather than thinking of doing something . . . but, we don’t have to eat what they [media] give us, we just have to think . . . (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010)

Zarina was also critical of mainstream mass media, but she, too, agreed that the online media had certainly influenced the way she felt about politics. Nonetheless, as mentioned previously, there had been skepticism surrounding the Internet as well. Ratu, for example, shared her perspective on the nature of content on the Internet:

. . . the way they present about the politics [on the Internet] is conflicting. The story on the Internet is not true. They added the wrong story to make the people
confused. That’s why Internet is not effective. Maybe half the people don’t know this and they trust the Internet. Actually, people can forgot the true story. Only the newspaper online is true, Kosmo, Berita Harian . . . not Harakkah lah; I don’t think Harakkah is true. Thus, I prefer news on TV, radio, but not interested in Internet. I don’t like the way [they] talk about socio-political on the Internet . . .

(Personal Communication, August 1, 2010)

Distrust in the Internet had emerged from Ratu’s confusion about politics and politicians for which she held the media in general responsible:

. . . just hear about politic to make sure which party that right. So, which one? I just feel so confused. That’s why I don’t vote because I don’t know which party to choose. Maybe I decide when I am 25 or 26 years old because I love my country, but I confuse [sic] to choose the party [right one]. (Personal Communication, August 1, 2010)

Ratu’s confusion was a result of contrasting political coverage and viewpoints across the media. Following multiple sources apparently had led to confusion and eventual frustration in making sense of the political content. Besides, in Ratu’s opinion, the Internet had worsened the confusion regarding politics due to a wide variety of information available online. For some others, such as Aisyah, one just had to be more selective:

I look for information on who is doing more or less and on what issues. But Internet is also full of scandals, similar to the TV. They still have a lot of misinformation and people [politicians] are interested in others’ downfall, mostly.
You have to be selective while choosing news. [For example] Anwar has achieved a lot as a deputy, although there were a few notorious instances when he dealt with things in an unpleasant manner . . . Yes, I’d like them to write more about positive and less about negative. (Aisyah, Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

The need felt for a more positive media environment was apparent among other informants as well. Yet despite the skepticism surrounding the Internet, it had allowed people to post comments and express themselves, exemplifying emerging forms of engagement, as Aisyah noted:

Yes, the people commenting does make it [the Internet] different. Some people argue and comment, which makes it more interesting and, thus, it has the tendency to make it provide better quality of news, so it definitely influences political engagement among the students. (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

Notwithstanding the distrust, Ratu’s attitude was not really escapist. In fact, she appeared determined about questioning former leaders, once she gained some political power and connection. While there were clear signs of government control on the nature of the content on mainstream media, online media were difficult if not impossible to control. In such environment, would searching for political information online qualify as participation? It appeared to me that defining political action and engagement had become increasingly difficult and challenging for the government in the changing media
environment. Moreover, tracking down those who accessed and own the information eventually would cost them a fortune and perhaps the election as well.

Role of Political Blogs

Although most informants reported that they did not maintain a political blog, most of them had visited political blogs. In Hafiz’s case, for instance, he acknowledged:

I read blogs. My friend’s blog, Mahathir’s blog, opposition blog, Lim Kit Siang, Malaysiakini, etc. I have my own blog, but it is not active, but I comment on others’ blogs or Facebook status. For example, No plastic shopping bags on Saturday in Selangor, then someone will post about that on their Facebook and everyone will comment on it. Some of my friends express their ideas through the blogs but not too open—just work smart. (Hafiz, Personal Communication, July 13, 2010)

From the interaction with Hafiz, it became evident that people were keen on expressing their views despite the challenges they faced in the form of ISA and OSA, primarily due to the features of anonymity and ambiguity associated with making online comments or blog postings. In case of Aisyah, however, there was no such reservation about acknowledging her political action, as she noted:

I do comment on online forums, when I do feel like. A while back I read a forum about differences in management styles of Tun Mahathir and Pak Lah [Abdullah Ahmed Badawi], but I think you can’t condemn him [Mahathir] all the time . . . Then I have this friend from Melaka, who is closed-minded and anti-government, who keeps complaining and says all the negative things about the government on
his blog. It is really annoying for me. (Aisyah, Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

Aisyah was not alone in concerns about people who wrote blogs randomly and did not put enough thought behind what they wrote. This was indeed reflected in Ratu’s unwillingness to write her own blog:

. . . No blog. Because I don’t like [sic] blog. Because if we comment on blog, it can conflict with people. I can argue only when I know more about politics. Proven is most important. Maybe on one day I will change my mind to write the blog, especially about the political and social in the TV, newspaper, and radio, not in the Internet, from my own research. Yes, after doing my research, maybe someday I want to make interview with Dr. Mahathir and maybe other people in the politics. (Personal Communication, August 1, 2010)

Along with Ratu, Rahim also felt that usually the blogs only pointed out weaknesses in the situation and therefore perhaps only some people relied on blogs for information.

. . . Certainly the people who take sides with [political] parties are common people who are often influenced by these media. . . .on the Internet [they] don’t really back up [their viewpoint], they [blogs] just say bad things about the parties. I think in some way the Internet influences me because TV and radio bring in one perspective, but the Internet brings in another perspective. (Personal Communication, July 29, 2010)
Hence, despite agreeing with the key role of Internet in keeping him politically motivated, Rahim understood the limitations and constraints of blogs and did not rely on them for accurate information. Moreover, Rahim and some of his friends did not take political blogs very seriously and occasionally made comical remarks on political posts. For instance, one of Rahim’s friends had a blog, in which he put together information, pictures, and video links uploaded by others. The content varied and:

... for example, drinking (alcohol) is wrong in Islam, but sometimes you can see pictures of Muslims drinking. ... my friend copies pictures and other information about celebrity gossip through Google and pastes that on his blog. Sometimes there are more bad things, but the criticism is indirect if it [the issue] involves government. ... my friend mostly copies and pastes information on his blog, but he tries to keep it as popular as possible, so he can get more advertising money [with the number of hits]. (Personal Communication, July 12, 2010)

Following the conversation, Rahim shared his friend’s blog, and I found it full of political humor—something that would be most unlikely to appear on mainstream mass media, although it did not seem to pose any serious threat as the webmaster’s identity appeared rather ambiguous. It was hard to conclude if that would have a serious influence on UiTM students since the blog appeared more disengaging than engaging. Shamsul, on the other hand, acknowledged the power of blogs, although he himself did not feel very impressed by online media and changing communication technologies.

... it’s been amazing, like the blogs during the 2008 elections. Usually, UMNO win two-third majority. But due to blogs, people, mostly young people, were
aware, so they won less seats. So, the blogs are successful and effective in bringing about a political change. (Shamsul, Personal Communication, July 26, 2010)

Shamsul believed that censoring the Internet would be very difficult for Malaysian or any other governments and, as a result, political change through the Internet was something inevitable that had already started taking place since the 2008 elections. Although in his own case, Shamsul did not seem impressed with online media and acknowledged, “Internet didn’t fit me that much . . . I am not that impressed with the Internet. . . . texting is addictive, similarly some times on Internet are like that” (Personal Communication, July 26, 2010). On the one hand, Shamsul did not see the online media influencing him much, while on the other, even those who had acknowledged the influence of online media found it more convenient to communicate in person. For instance, Aisyah, while discussing her media use and politics, noted:

. . . Among friends, we are not really texting about politics. It is a more interpersonal communication/ conversational topic. I do talk about this [politics] with my mom, sometimes by email, Skype, but not so much texting. She just calls from her cell phone. (Personal Communication, August 9, 2010)

Nevertheless, Internet had clearly changed the ways in which students could otherwise engage in politics. Some of the other communication technologies, such as Short Messaging Service (SMS) and other mobile applications did not seem to have made much of an impact in the context of UiTM students and mainstream politics, especially in light of the strictly enforced rules and regulations. Nonetheless, each form of media had
some role to play and Internet was increasingly making it difficult to define political engagement in conventional ways during 2010. Moreover, the Internet had provided a means for direct engagement, which had made it difficult for the government to control and restrain all the users at all the times as Shamsul and others had argued earlier on.

Significance of 2010

It became further evident through the discussion in this chapter that the mainstream media were losing relevance—even among the politically engaged and the pro-ruling alliance UiTM students. While this underlined some of the key points discussed in Chapter 6, which supported the significance of year 2010 in Malaysian political history, this chapter shows that trends such as anonymous blogging and selective media use were also on the rise. And once again, with the exception of Shamshul, who did not acknowledge the role of Internet toward political interest let alone engagement, almost all other UiTM students had witnessed and acknowledged the important role played by the Internet and online media at the time. In light of the country’s increasing Internet users and mobile subscribers during the same year, it was clear that the changing media environment had impacted the political discourses among the people in a variety of ways. And yet, the conventional means to engage politically, such as internships, rallies, or other activities, available to those aligned with UMNO had continued, which presented a polarizing situation. And hence, the importance of the year 2010 cannot be underestimated.
Summary

This chapter shows that while some informants did not consider media the main factor behind generating an interest or motivating individuals to engage in politics in the future, they (media) certainly played a highly influential role during 2010. In many cases, this influence was often a key supplement to the main cause—parental/family background, and in certain cases, such as Rahim’s, such an influence (of media) was even the main cause behind political interest and engagement. This chapter illustrated that both media use as well as parental and peer influences had primarily helped generate political interest and engagement among some UiTM students. For those who were not influenced by their parents, media were the primary sources of investigation and offered issues for discussion with friends. Moreover, even for those who were influenced by their parents, media played a crucial role in shaping their political discussions with their friends and parents. The influence of media was primarily comprised of two aspects, including the creation of role models in politics and coverage of issues facing the country. Following a strong interest in politics, some students willingly participated in different activities, such as political discussions at Kedai Mama and other similar spaces, which allowed free exchange of political views and ideas, voting, blogging, and some more formal activities, such as joining a political rally and interning for a political party. Besides, UiTM provided opportunities to get involved in social work, student government, and other extra-curricular activities that were conducive in students’ development as future politicians.
While there was clear awareness of the bias within the mainstream mass media, most of these students understood the constraints of the online media forms as well. The online media had fostered political engagement more explicitly compared to both the mainstream media as well as other conventional means, such as political rallies. Yet, the strict rules and regulations had meant that most students were hesitant in actively engaging in political blogging at the time. For some, on the other hand, these blogs were more disengaging than engaging due to the lack of credibility. Therefore, while the Internet had provided an avenue for free expression, it had also contributed to the increased confusion regarding political matters and had led to selective media usage, which was also influenced by other people’s, including peers’ and parents’, opinions. While the increased confusion due to inconsistency in media reports had led to a frustration among some informants, such as Ratu and Hafiz, such frustration could prevent these students from engaging in voting or other forms of political participation and engagement. In some other cases, however, the inconsistency in news coverage across both mainstream and online media had led to selective media use among the UiTM students.
CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

At the outset, this dissertation notes the significance of 2010 as a year critical in Malaysia’s political history for multiple reasons. The fieldwork of this study supported this position as noted in the outcome of the two findings chapters (Chapters 6 and 7). And so, I sought to find answers to some key questions pertaining to media and student political engagement at a Bumiputera university during 2010. These questions were as follows: What kind of media access did the students at an affirmative action university in Peninsular Malaysia had during 2010? Given the country’s changing media environment, how did the students who identified as either politically engaged or disengaged perceive the relationship between Malaysian media and politics during 2010? How were parental and peer influences and other non-media factors related to political engagement and disengagement among these students during 2010? What were the roles played by the alternative and mainstream mass media in fostering a sense of political engagement or disengagement among these students during 2010? And finally, how did the aspects of media credibility and distrust influence these students’ decisions to engage or disengage with politics in future?

This is the final chapter of this study, which draws upon the findings from Chapters 6 and 7 in answering the above research questions. The first section discusses the perceptions about media and politics among the informants. The next section discusses the influences of both mainstream and online media on the processes of political engagement and disengagement. The third section focuses on other factors that influence political engagement, including parental and peer influences and the role of the
establishment. The fourth section delves into the meaning of political engagement in the realm of the online media. The next section presents further discussion on the post-2010 developments in the country. While revisiting the year 2010, the final section notes the significance and the limitations of this study, and makes recommendations for future studies.

Perceptions

Perceptions of the Engaged

I found that perceptions had influenced the political motivation among some students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) and, as a result, they had made an active choice to pursue a future in politics. And so, it was necessary to understand their perception of the relationship between the country’s media and politics at the time. While it was clear that media, in general, had helped increase awareness of social issues among the UiTM students, the media, mainstream in particular, were also viewed as a tool for maintaining control of the ruling political alliance—Barisan Nasional (BN). The functioning of mainstream media had demonstrated that media control had helped BN maintain political power.

While the ruling alliance was considered a gatekeeper for mainstream mass media, former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir’s control of mainstream media was acceptable to many of the informants and some of them even cited the economic development during Mahathir’s reign to justify their liking for the country’s ex-leader. Moreover, through nation-building and many years of cultivation, Malaysian mass media had created a strong public image of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. Therefore, many
informants at the time of my fieldwork still perceived Dr. Mahathir as the country’s strongest political leader and a role model. Consequently, the mainstream media had influenced these students’ imagination to become political leaders themselves someday.

As future professionals, some UiTM students considered themselves helpless in changing the conventional control of mainstream mass media by the ruling alliance. On the other hand, some of them were willing to become a part of the dominant political power in the country. Nevertheless, most students had found online media to serve their information needs, although in different ways. While the alternative opinions and information offered online exposed government cover ups for some informants, the increasing number of online news sources also caused confusion through conflicting viewpoints as experienced and reported by some others. Notably, a few of those UiTM students who disapproved of alternative coverage had hailed from rural areas and their disapproval had stemmed from a strong sentiment that UMNO and BN were saviors for Malays. Their perception at the time was due, in part, to the many years of social engineering by the BN alliance through the mainstream media, which had continued to focus on rural audience since they form a majority of the BN’s vote-bank. And so, those informants usually rejected information and ideas expressed in publications run by opposition parties, such as Harakah, or independent publications, such as Malaysiakini. Overall, given their political inclinations and the lack of credibility and uncertainties associated with some online sources, most of my informants were highly selective in choosing their news sources during 2010.
Compared to government controlled mass media, the alternative online media had certainly offered interactivity to the informants in this study, which contributed to their political engagement at the time. Access to blogs written by political figures and commentators had allowed these students to learn about politics first hand while offering them a platform for political expression. In contrast, many UiTM students denied posting comments on such blogs mainly due to a fear of getting in trouble with the authorities (pointing toward a restrictive environment for political expression during 2010), and sometimes they cited lack of sufficient knowledge of politics that discouraged them from making comments. Nonetheless, many of these students understood the importance of alternative online media through the outcome of 2008 general elections in which UMNO-led BN lost five states in its worst election performance since independence.

**Perceptions of the Disengaged**

Those who felt disengaged from politics among the informants did not trust government controlled mainstream media, and some even reported feeling betrayed by the mainstream media. These students understood the political biases within the mainstream mass media and avoided political content. According to some informants, the reporting on national media often had a spin favoring UMNO and BN and carried misinformation, such as wrongly reported figures, which had contributed to a disbelief in mainstream media and politics. Moreover, the informants were generally aware of the control of private mass media through licensing. On the other hand, the conflicting coverage by alternative media had led to a confusion among many. As a result, these students were mainly concerned about social issues relating to their lives rather than party
politics, such as the increasing price of commodities or the change in policies pertaining to overseas scholarships.

In addition to the disagreement with the mainstream media reporting, I found varying interpretations of the messages on mainstream mass media among the disengaged informants. For instance, there were two different observations made by the informants on media coverage following the currency crisis of 1997, which shook a number of Asian economies during the late-1990s. First, that mainstream mass media had followed Mahathir’s rhetoric of Western powers trying to weaken the Malaysian economy with the help of insiders such as Anwar Ibrahim.27 Such a claim against Anwar Ibrahim was unbelievable for some informants even after more than a decade of the economic crisis. Second, while mainstream media had continued to focus on his trial, they tended to draw the people’s attention away from the financial crisis, which, according to an informant, was a proof of the ruling alliance’s manipulation of the mainstream media to divert people’s attention from key issues. And so, despite varying interpretations of the role of mainstream media following the currency crisis, the disengaged informants had continued to disagree with the functioning of the country’s mainstream media during 2010.

The ruling alliance’s continued use of mainstream media to project a strong and positive image of itself and for criticizing and humiliating the opposition was a concern

27 In one instance, contrary to the coverage by New Straits Times, K. S. Jomo, a well-known economist, found that Anwar had a “good grasp of the issues faced” by Malaysia during the currency crisis and “even defended” Mahathir’s policy initiatives following the crisis in his only policy discussion with Anwar (Jomo, 2001, p. xviii).
among these students and had led to a dissatisfaction among many. The dislike for government’s use of media, both online and offline, to convey its political messages was reflected through the students’ disagreement with the 1Malaysia campaign, which they considered superficial since they did not see equality both within and across ethnic groups. These students were aware of and were dissatisfied with the continued socio-economic inequalities in the country in terms of employment disparity (i.e. dominance of certain ethnic groups in certain occupations), differing income levels, cultural gaps, and other issues at the time.

According to these informants, both mainstream and online media were being used to help BN re-capture the five states lost during the 2008 elections. These students generally agreed with Anwar Ibrahim’s cause, especially for constantly being targeted by the ruling alliance through the mainstream media, and some even supported him. They, however, did not consider him or the opposition as powerful as the ruling alliance and more than one informants explicitly predicted that “no matter what,” Anwar Ibrahim could never become Malaysia’s Prime Minister. Therefore, even those who considered themselves disengaged and unwilling to participate in party-politics were also not willing to project Anwar Ibrahim as the country’s future leader, although the alternative media had helped him to earn their sympathy.

Media and Political Engagement

*Mainstream Mass Media and Political Engagement*

The perceptions noted in the previous section showed two key influences of mainstream media on political engagement. First, mass media control essentially meant
the ability to hold political power, which had been true at least before the 2008 elections and which had motivated many UiTM students during 2010. Second, mainstream media had helped these students identify Mahathir as a hero and as a role model, which again contributed to their political aspirations by motivating them to become future leaders themselves. Moreover, some informants believed in maintaining the interests of Malays, which was reinforced through the promotion of Malay culture by mainstream media. On one occasion, I watched Kayangan, a mainstream Malay-language motion picture released in 2007, and found the on-screen representation of non-Bumiputra ethnic groups reinforced cultural stereotypes and could likely create inter-ethnic tensions. Nevertheless, there was a positive influence of mainstream media on political engagement and motivation among those students who viewed Malays as the main ethnic group.

Mainstream Media and Political Disengagement

For those who were politically inclined, there were other, perhaps more powerful, forces at work than mainstream media, such as parental and peer influences. However, mainstream media had a major influence on those who had decided to stay disengaged from politics at the time. As noted previously, these informants were dissatisfied and viewed the political control of mass media as a “failure” of the mainstream media system in serving the masses. Hence, the functioning of mainstream mass media had led to a general distrust in their reporting among many UiTM students. Consequently, many of these students had decided to move away from following mainstream media for serious purposes at the time. This not only included the state media, but also the private media that practiced self-censorship due to the fear of getting their licenses revoked. Many of
my informants indicated that they mostly used mainstream media for entertainment programming.

*Online Media and Political Engagement*

Past research, as noted in Chapter 4, has shown that the Internet had both positive and negative influences on political engagement. During this study, I found that the online media played a crucial role in either supplementing or driving the processes of both political engagement and disengagement among UiTM students during 2010. This section focuses on the process of political engagement through online media. In doing so, I note the advantages of online media as described by the informants of this study. First, online alternative media were more trustworthy to those who felt they could not trust the mainstream mass media anymore. Moreover, they allowed the dissemination of alternative viewpoints that were left out by the mainstream media. Second, online media offered interactivity, which enhanced the sense of engagement among many. Third, online media were generally more accessible than broadcast or print media and users could access information almost at will. Therefore, the online media had been more influential in engaging the students politically.

I found that most UiTM students—whether opposing or supporting the ruling alliance—were reading oppositional and alternative viewpoints online at the time. The shift in information dissemination through alternative media had led some to believe in a possible change in the country’s political landscape, including ruling parties, political structure, and the electoral process. And so, the online alternative media had shown the potential to engage individuals in oppositional politics. These students were becoming
more informed and active via websites, blogs, and social media—even if they did not acknowledge it. While blogs were not always deemed as credible, they were informative and also offered a platform for expression. On the other hand, the online media were especially considered crucial by those who had political ambitions since they understood the importance of online alternative media during the 2008 elections.

*Role of Social Media in Political Engagement*

The scope of online media ranged from blogs, alternative news publications, to social media, including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other Websites. Compared to online news and blogs, social media offered more ways to interact for the UiTM students. My fieldwork suggested that social media brought politicians and students closer and demonstrated the potential to engage the otherwise disengaged individuals. In addition, as acknowledged by one informant, the messages and personal reactions conveyed through social media could help in responding to the negative characterization of opposition politicians, such as Anwar Ibrahim, on mainstream media.
Figure 3. Screenshot of Anwar Ibrahim’s Facebook photos’ page. Captured from Anwar Ibrahim’s Facebook profile. Retrieved from: https://www.facebook.com/anwaribrahim1

While the UiTM students were generally cautious about sharing their blogging experiences, social media were considered “more fun” than blogging. Furthermore, these students could be connected to issues more conveniently via Facebook compared to following individual blogs. For example, there was less effort on the users’ part to connect with a political figure once they Liked (or joined) their fan page or added them as a friend on Facebook. Essentially, Anwar Ibrahim had a prominent and active Facebook presence—unlike some other well-established and influential politicians, such as the former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir or even the current Prime Minister Najib Razak, who did not appear to be as popular among the students as Anwar Ibrahim on social media. As
of October 2011, Anwar Ibrahim had an active and personable Facebook profile with over 1,600 photos offering glimpses into his personal life and frequent posts, which were likely to attract young people’s attention and followership (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 4. Screenshot of Anwar Ibrahim’s Facebook wall page. Captured from Anwar Ibrahim’s Facebook profile. Retrieved from: https://www.facebook.com/anwaribrahim1

However, as Figure 4 above depicts, there were fewer comments from Anwar’s friends and followers on his posts compared to his photographs on Facebook, which might be due to a political fear among people that prevented them from aligning openly with the opposition on social media. This was also visible when some of my informants had noted that they did not want to get into trouble (with the authorities) by posting comments about politics on Facebook.
Online Media and Political Disengagement

While the online media, especially the social media, given their interactivity, had a stronger potential to foster political engagement compared to the mainstream media, I also found the online media had lead to disengagement for multiple reasons. First, the information available via alternative sources online had led to an increased dissatisfaction with the political system and, as a result, many UiTM students had chosen not to vote during the elections. Second, the variety of information and conflicting coverage of events on mainstream mass media and alternative media online had led to selective media use among many—and confusion among some UiTM students. Those who felt confused had started avoiding political content altogether including on both mainstream and online media. In addition, some informants viewed blogs as sources of mere political opinion, rather than credible information, which had contributed to their further evasion from political content at the time.

Despite Malaysia’s free (or open) Internet access policy, I found that a majority of informants were afraid of blogging and were watchful of their comments and actions even on social media. The fear of the University and University Colleges Act (UUCA)—which was enforced more strictly on this campus compared to other institutions in the city—and the Internal Security Act (ISA) was so high that they had limited their freedom online. Many UiTM students, although sharply aware of the country’s politics, had deliberately muted themselves as a form of self-censorship and, in some cases, as an act of disagreement. They feared possible surveillance on Websites such as Facebook, where someone could possibly report their comments or posts to the authorities. And so, their
online interactions were mostly either non-political or, if political, highly indirect in nature.

Other Factors Influencing Political Engagement

*Parental Influence*

It is imperative to acknowledge the role played by parental influence since, as discussed in the findings, parents had a strong impact on some of these students to become politically engaged or disengaged. For those whose parents were in some way involved in politics, there was a tendency to continue the family tradition among the younger generation. On the other hand, those informants who did not have a family background in politics were still aware of political issues through interactions with their family. Politics was still discussed and opinions were formed or influenced within these students’ families.

Furthermore, parental influence could have different consequences depending upon the relationship between students and their parents. In cases where these students were positively influenced by their parents, they followed their parents’ political inclination. Conversely, those who had a different perspective and tended to be rebels, opposed their parents’ political position. It was also suggested through some informants’ accounts that older generations generally followed mainstream media content more closely compared to the youth. And so, the mainstream mass media also had an indirect influence on some of these students through their parents and teachers, although the students themselves were more likely to follow online media at the time.
Peer Influence

While I found parental influence to be a strong contributor in fostering political engagement in certain cases, I also found peer influence generally more active across both engaged and disengaged informants. Similarly, in making political decisions, peers could be more influential than either parents or media alone. I found that peer influence had prompted my informants to access alternative sources of information pertaining to political issues, such as blogs. As far as Malaysian youth and youth elsewhere had been concerned,

Peer groups are the classic example of contemporaries. The weight of peer group pressure can dictate the choice of clothing and interests of many individuals, but it can also have a significant influence on individual issues like moral decisions, ethical behaviour and social allegiances. (Leong, 2014, p. 99)

Pasek, More, and Romer (2012) also argued that Facebook users were “influenced by the interactions with and among their peers” (p. 28). I, on the other hand, also found that these interactions were often rooted in offline communication which supported the online exchanges among the UiTM students. For instance, Osman discussed Anwar Ibrahim on social media with his peers, which was based on his offline interactions with his friend and inspired by his personal meeting with Anwar Ibrahim.

Establishment

During my fieldwork, I found that the fear of UUCA and ISA was present primarily if one were opposed to the ruling alliance. It was clear that those regulations were in place to contain any attempts to join oppositional politics at the time. How else
was it possible to hear about students or teachers with links to UMNO, but not so easily about any of the opposition parties? On one occasion, I found the office building of UMNO Selangor, where one of my informants had reportedly interned—which did not seem consistent with the continued implementation of UUCA during 2010 since UMNO had been a political party. Another informant bragged about meeting Dr. Mahathir, but Osman’s account of meeting Anwar Ibrahim was subdued and cautious. And so, there were well-established means to reach out to university students for the ruling alliance, but such means to connect with the opposition were clearly missing. Nevertheless, the prominent presence of UMNO Selangor office building and possible interactions with the UiTM community was an additional influence that could encourage and support pro-establishment political engagement.

**Changing Realm of Political Engagement**

As noted in Chapter 4, there had been an inconsistency in operationalization of the term political engagement among the researchers who studied media and political engagement. In conducting this research study, I first considered engagement as an action of “a free moral agent,” which included a wide range of activities such as following political news, discussing politics, voting during elections, joining political parties, and participating in political rallies and demonstrations (Coleman, 2007a, p. 21). Such engagement could either be a reaction to dominant political power—trait of an actualizing citizen; or a mere submission—trait of a dutiful citizen; or any other state in between the two. Furthermore, as Dahlgren (2009) suggested, political engagement could
not be the same as political participation, although it must turn into participation at some stage.

A problem I encountered while reviewing available scholarship was the lack of consistency in operationalizing political engagement across different research studies. For instance, some studies had considered voting in elections as a measure of political engagement, which, arguably, was also an act of participation. So, is voting an act of engagement as well as participation? And does such participation qualify as engagement and does engagement qualify as participation at all times? While the answer to the first question is likely to be affirmative—depending upon the situation, the answer to the second question is negative. There might be a possibility of one without the other. But, what about participation without engagement? It is still a form of engagement, although forced. On the other hand, what about engagement that leads to a lack of formal participation?

In case of UiTM, where many students were unwilling to participate in the formally defined practices and process of the state apparatus due to a domination of the country’s political landscape by a single coalition. I found many informants were disconnected and, perhaps, purposefully unaware of the ongoing political issues in the country during 2010. Some of them were neither engaged nor participating, while some others were in the act of participating ritualistically because they felt they were expected to do so (without acknowledging any fear of UUCA). They all had varying knowledge of and interest in politics in part due to media, especially the online media, which had also fostered engagement to an extent.
Role of Social Media

First, given their interactive nature, the social media had allowed continued political discourses, which supplemented the political information obtained via both mainstream and alternative media outlets at the time. Second, the structure of the social media had allowed for a changing form of engagement that did not exist previously. However, such engagement was not solely dependent on social media alone. For instance, Park (2013) found that while Twitter contributed to political involvement, its use did not help political engagement. Similarly, Gibson and McAllister (2013) reported that online interactions that were built on offline networks were more effective in mobilizing people. On the other hand, my fieldwork showed that social media could bring the disengaged UiTM students closer to political issues and leaders, especially in the absence of offline contact and social networks with oppositional political parties. I also found social media were more conducive in fostering political engagement online than to cause protests offline. There clearly was a potential—given the possibility of fast dissemination of information through social media without a need for mainstream media—for mobilization. However, such mobilization was unlikely to bring a radical change in absence of other factors, such as offline social contacts and the willingness of the state to allow reforms to empower its citizens.

While social media had been changing the conventional ways of engaging the citizens, the role of mainstream media in dissemination of political news could not be discounted. For instance, Skoric and Poor (2013) found that while student activists in Singapore successfully used social media to achieve political mobilization, young
Singaporeans also paid attention to mainstream media reports on politics. The latter also appeared to be the case with UiTM students, although paying attention to mainstream media by no means implied that they were in agreement with the reporting of political issues during 2010. In addition, the UiTM students clearly showed a fear of open expression even on social media—given the strict on-campus environment that had abated free speech. Since Singapore had a stricter environment to limit free expression (see George, 2007), such a fear of expressing political views through social media was also likely to exist among Singaporean youth. Notably, the political mobilization studied by Skoric and Poor did not involve mainstream party politics. Hence, the potential of social media in bringing a noticeable change in a political system within Southeast Asia had remained untested.

Further Discussion

The media access among the UiTM students was defined by the country’s changing media landscape as well as UiTM’s institutional structure. The combination of changing media and institutional structure was both restrictive an enabling. While the political leaders in the making were dominantly pro-Barisan Nasional or pro-UMNO, there were also critical citizens who disagreed with the ruling alliance and were determined to either fight, or even abandon the country in some cases. Nevertheless, some things were hard to change, such as the political control of media in the country.

*Political Control of Mainstream Media*

A strong image of Malaysia’s former leader, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, among the UiTM students during 2010, points out two aspects of Malaysia’s mainstream media.
First, these media had been successful in creating a lasting image of the country’s former premier who was still seen by many Malaysian youth as a role model. Second, Mahathir’s stronghold on mainstream media had led to a perception of the country’s strong economic success during his reign among the informants. However, the change in media environment, which had started during the final years of Mahathir’s premiership had started to challenge the mass media in the country and by the time Najib Razak assumed the premiership of the country in 2009, alternative media online were blooming and had discredited the mainstream coverage of governmental claims. Thereafter, the alternative (online) media coverage, along with other key factors, such as continued corruption and political scandals within the government, and the negative portrayal of youth, had led to a lack of faith in Najib Razak’s leadership among my informants, and so, it had become increasingly difficult for the government to continue using mainstream media as a tool for social engineering.

Corruption

Following the first decade of Mahathir’s administration, Gomez (1991), among others, reported an increase in the involvement of political leaders in business (especially since the 1970s) that led to many scandals and an absence of accountability among government leaders. For instance, there were ministers within Mahathir’s cabinet, who had major holdings in businesses. And such conflicts of interests, along with the exposure of an increasing number of corruption cases, led to an increased public dissatisfaction. Furthermore, Gomez projected that the privatization efforts and changes in policy were going to increase the involvement of political parties with the corporate sector, while
decreasing public involvement—thereby shifting the power concentration in business
toward the ruling political parties. While analyzing the trends within the Malaysian media
industries, I found the prediction by Gomez held true in case of the country’s mainstream
media ownership since the 1990s and had continued to be so over the years (see Chapter
3 for more).

*Negative portrayal of youth*

Another problem for the ruling alliance in targeting the country’s youth was
presented by a history of biased mainstream media messages that had portrayed the youth
negatively. For example, Lewis (2006) had noted that from 1993 to 1995, the government
launched a large-scale media campaign against *lepak* (meaning culture of loafing) by the
government. News reports on mainstream media, including *TV3, The New Straits Times,*
and *The Star,* carried reports to support the idea that *lepak* and crime led to a lack of
morals among youth. Youth issues, such as premarital sex, drug use, alcoholism, and
crime, were connected with *lepak,* although there was no convincing evidence to prove
such a connection (Lewis, 2006). Such portrayal of youth, besides other reasons, perhaps
contributed to a continued failure of mainstream media messages targeting youth. In
another instance, McDaniel (2002) had reported that despite informational campaigns, the
number of drug users in Malaysia was estimated to be in hundreds of thousands by the
year 2000, which showed that the mainstream media messages were not effective in
limiting drug abuse in the country. I found that while mainstream media messages had
clearly reached the UiTM students, these students usually followed alternative media as
well and many, if not most, of them found the alternative media more credible than the
mainstream outlets. Moreover, some informants explicitly rejected the 1Malaysia campaign since they found the campaign as detached from reality and as a political stunt ineffective in uniting people.

**Limiting Student Voices**

It is noteworthy that student voices had conventionally been limited through UUCA and other policies. Subsequently, as Weiss (2011) also had suggested, these students had not only remained disengaged, once internalized, such disengagement was likely to continue after graduation as well. Leading student voices had been curbed over time and their exposure to critical media had been limited. Nevertheless, some students had not only bypassed but had also challenged the mainstream media messages through underground publications and official publications’ parodies, although they later faced threats and, in some cases, penalties from officials and administrators (Weiss, 2011). In his article, entitled “How to judge a good university,” published in 2005, Azmi Shahrom stated:

> The hard fact of the matter is that, by and large, our graduates do not have the sort of qualities that would make overseas employers want them, nor do our graduates have the qualities to go out beyond the coconut shell to offer their services to the world. . . This is because Malaysian public universities treat students like children. Their freedom of speech is curtailed. Their freedom of assembly is controlled. Their freedom to vote is interfered with. Without such freedoms, students can’t grow. (cited in Weiss, 2011, p. 276)
I found that despite the limitations and restrictions, the UiTM students had grown, and grown stronger, as what Norris (1999) had termed “critical citizens” (p. 27). For instance, Ali’s statement that “under extreme restriction people would become rebels and perhaps restriction is a reason behind crimes such as robbery,” echoed the growing discontent among many students at the time (Personal Communication, July 16, 2010). Such a viewpoint was reflected in the actions of those who appeared to take a guilty pleasure in becoming a part of political gatherings, perhaps just as it was banned for students to indulge in political affairs. Similarly, despite Islamic rules against drinking, some students reportedly went to bars and pubs to drink. The mainstream media attempted to create images of the country and society, which often conflicted with the realities according to my informants. It is at this point where media had started losing credibility and started raising concerns and eventually became questionable for the youth. To assume that youth were naive and could be convinced through social engineering had been a blunder consistently made by the polity and indirectly by the media. The role of the Internet had been crucial in raising youth awareness, but at the same time, the Internet had also contributed to the noise in the whole scenario, which could potentially be used as a reason by the government to block online content.

Earlier, McDaniel (2002) had noted that attempts to put restrictions on technology, such as blocking of certain websites, in Southeast Asia only resulted in delays, and those restrictions were not completely effective since some user were still able to access such Websites. My informants at UiTM had worked out alternative ways of accessing prohibited Websites during the daily limited Internet access period on
It was the restriction that had instigated many students to use a bypass or even buy a mobile Internet subscription.

**Continued Generational Differences**

I had found that some informants did not agree with the older generations’ political outlook irrespective of their political inclination, whether pro-BN or oppositional. However, I also found that some students were more likely to adhere to the conventions than their older generations did. These findings could help explain the contradiction that Müller (2014) found among the PAS Youth (the youth wing of PAS—an oppositional political party) leadership, which viewed Islam as the solution to any political question. According to Müller, while PAS Youth claimed to be progressive and inclusive, its neo-Islamist conservatism was also evident and the party appeared to be divided between pragmatists and hardliners. The repeated disagreement of PAS Youth, who categorically rejected any compromise of their ideology, with PKR and DAP had contributed to the weakening of the opposition coalition (named *Pakatan Rakyat*) during Malaysia’s 2008 general elections (Müller, 2014).

**Online Media and Political Change Until 2010**

I found many UiTM students, while sympathetic to Anwar Ibrahim, did not agree with the opposition, although some of them had a stronger dislike toward the ruling alliance compared to the opposition. This tendency was also reflected when Ooi (2013), among others, noted that BN’s losses in the 2008 general elections were because of people voting against the BN alliance rather than in opposition’s favor. Moreover, both
mainstream and alternative media reports attributed the election upset to technology rather than the opposition’s strengths (Smeltzer and Lepawsky, 2010).

The lack of a clear majority during the 2008 elections was an outcome of the diversity of opinion both among and within the electorates. A key reason behind such diversity of opinion was the increasingly wider variety of viewpoints and perceptions—heavily influenced by the dispersed online media. Earlier, while the opposition did well in terms of utilizing the potential of the Internet during Anwar Ibrahim’s trial and the 1999 elections, the number of Internet users was small then (Raja Petra Kamarudin, 2006b). By 2004, the opposition appeared to have lost the online war, which Raja Petra predicted would remain same during the next elections. Nevertheless, during the 2008 elections, the opposition performed much better than all the previous elections by winning in five states including the state of Selangor, where I conducted the fieldwork for this study and, which surrounds Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya federal territories. Much of this success for the opposition could be attributed to the alternative media online. In particular, Malaysiakini and Malaysia Today Websites were experiencing around 500,000 and 625,000 hourly visitors respectively at the peak times. Following the announcement of results, Malaysia Today witnessed around 15 million hits in a single day (Yong, 2008). These large numbers clearly showed the increased popularity of online alternative media among the Malaysian audience.

While Gong (2011) found online blogs crucial for the opposition during the 2008 elections, Azizudin and Knocks Tapiwa (2010) suggested that blogging, online publications (including the domestic ones), and YouTube had all helped strengthen
democracy and public deliberation during the elections by allowing people to contribute to this new marketplace of ideas (online), which could “not be disregarded by any democratic government and citizens alike in the future” (p. 13). Furthermore, Azizudin Mohd (2009) pointed out that because of the strengthening of civil society and online media, Malaysia’s democracy had been experiencing a transition. The BN government was facing a stronger opposition from PR, civil society, and the people, which led it to accept deliberative democracy so it could maintain its authority in the time to come. I, on the other hand, found that as the online media had become more accessible and widespread, they had contributed to a wider range of opinions and deliberations, which has prevented the formation of a unified thrust to bring on a substantial change in the country’s leadership.

Conversely, Liow and Afif Pasuni (2010) had found that while online media had influenced political campaigning, they had no significant impact on reducing ethnic friction, but had reinforced ethnic differences. While I found strong signs of such middle-class in the making, especially through some really open-minded and progressive UiTM students, it was hard to definitively predict the future of social ties and interactions across diverse ethnic groups in the realm of the online media. Nevertheless, I found that young Malaysians, who had grown up in an ethnically diverse educational environment, were more at ease with other ethnic groups compared to those who mostly lived in remote areas of the country and did not much witness such diversity.
Post-2010 Developments

The findings from my fieldwork had indicated dissatisfaction, agreement, criticism, and caution with regards to the country’s political and media systems among the UiTM students during 2010. Following up on the students’ reactions on different issues, this section touches upon some of the developments in the country during the years following 2010.

A continued fear of authorities was reflected in UiTM students’ limited expression of political opinion on online social and interactive media during 2010. This outcome also pointed toward a continued tendency to curtail oppositional viewpoints expressed by UiTM students online—demonstrated by multiple incidents resulting in penalties imposed by the authorities or pressure from the supporters of the ruling alliance both on- and off-line. On the other hand, those who were engaged had chosen to side with the existing administration for different reasons, including the ruling alliance’s continued political control since the country’s independence and sometimes fear of losing the privileges as Bumiputra among other reasons.Nevertheless, they also reported discomfort in openly expressing their political opinion online. Such restriction had also led to political disengagement, and in some cases, withdrawal.

Attempts at Reversing Brain Drain

A long-term continuation of the political culture in the country could lead to political withdrawal and brain drain. While political disengagement among UiTM was a sign of silent protest against the dominant political power, a withdrawal could mean a complete withdrawal among these youth that could continue throughout their lives. The
multiplicity of media options, which had allowed the Malaysian audience to bypass political content almost entirely, suggested that withdrawal was more likely than reversal of disengagement.

In some cases, disengagement from politics and dissatisfaction with the social conditions could lead to an escapist tendency (see Chapter 6). This tendency had also been reflected in the migration of a considerable number of talented Malaysians to the West and other parts of the world during the past several decades. According to one estimate, Chinese, Indian, and Malaysian students formed almost half of the international population across Australian universities in 2010 (“Where students go,” 2012). In addition to the education system, the corporate sector had also witnessed dissatisfaction. According to Randstad Workmonitor Report, more than 50 percent of Malaysian professionals considered themselves overqualified for their current jobs (Gilbert, 2012). Such lack of job satisfaction had further contributed to the country’s brain drain.

Some of my informants had expressed dissatisfaction with the events in their day-to-day lives, such as being victims of crimes, which they suggested was an outcome of the country’s politics and governance. This dissatisfaction was heightened by both the functioning of the mainstream media and the reports on online alternative media that exposed corrupt practices and inconsistencies in the functioning of the government. As a result, some UiTM students had developed an escapist tendency and were unwilling to stay in the country. Such unwillingness to stay in their home country could help explain the reasons behind the brain drain (meaning a loss of talented citizens to another country) issue, which had often been related to an outward migration of the ethnic Chinese and
other non-Bumiputra groups in the country [see, for instance, Koon (2012) & Ooi (2013)]. Specifically, the focus on Malays in the economy and the educational system had been identified by critics as a key cause leading to the country’s brain drain in the form of exodus of, mostly, non-Malays to other countries (Jayasankaran, 2014; “M’sian students,” 2014). However, my research suggested that it was likely for the youth across different ethnic groups, including Malays, to leave the country for a better socio-political environment. During the fieldwork, I found that even some Bumiputra, including mainly Malay, students were unwilling to stay in Malaysia in the long run. They noted that while they loved their country, they were unwilling to live in the same political environment for the rest of their lives. Therefore, the brain drain could not be limited to a single ethnic group in the country. Moreover, just like the urge to immigrate, political engagement and disengagement are not limited to ethnic distinctions in the country. And so, youth from any ethnic group could decide to engage or disengage with politics given their individual motivation and circumstances.

On the other hand, the choice to immigrate could be the ultimate political act—an outcome of continued disengagement and an accruing dissatisfaction resulting in an impulse to migrate. An outcome of such dissatisfaction stemming from an increasing

\[28\] Ooi (2013) argues that migration across Southeast Asian ports was the norm during the time before nation states and it included people from both within and outside the region. According to Koon (2012), there has been a preference for Bumipers for government scholarships to study overseas. However, those with political connections usually receive those scholarships despite of their ineligibility on merit- or low income-basis. Consequently, numerous non-Bumiputra parents criticize the discrimination and injustice in the process (Koon, 2012). On the other hand, I found that even some Bumiputra students, who identified themselves as Malays, were concerned about the government’s policy on scholarships following media reports (mostly alternative). Therefore, the dissatisfaction with the process had also existed among Malays.
awareness of corruption could be seen in the lack of reform in the school system, which had led some parents to consider sending their children to other countries, such as neighboring Singapore, for further education—intensifying the brain drain situation (“Malaysian Students,” 2014).

While the ruling coalition had implemented laws and policies that had limited students’ civic development for many decades, the administration did not view the outward migration of the country’s citizens favorably. To address the issue of continued migration of talented Malaysians to other countries, the Najib administration set up a Malaysian talent corporation (TCM) under its Economic Transformation Programme (Koon, 2012). The TCM successfully brought 680 Malaysians living abroad back to Malaysia following the first year of its implementation under the Returning Expert Programme (REP) (Hong, 2012). The REP offered tax exemptions and other benefits to the returnees. However, a majority of the returning expatriates were in technical fields and the REP aimed at attracting high-quality returnees. Moreover, TCM also invited criticism as a “quick cosmetic fix” to reverse the brain drain situation in Malaysia (cited in Hong, 2012). The mainstream media coverage of the TCM initiative, nevertheless, remained sympathetic to the government (for examples of such coverage, see Hong, 2012; Helmy Haja Mydin, 2012). And despite initiatives such as TCM to lure talented and high-skilled expats, building a socio-political environment conducive to university students’ political and civic development had remained absent.
UUCA Repeal

During 2011, while countries in the Middle East were witnessing the emergence of the Arab Spring in the Middle East, there was occupy movement with within the U.S. (Dahlgren, 2013). The occupy movement in particular generated attention due to youth participation, although the movement showed what Mitchell, Harcourt, and Taussig (2013) had called political disobedience. This disobedience resisted the way of governance itself, and, thus, had baffled the traditional political system and conventional understanding of obvious political categories (Harcourt, 2013, p. 47). Nevertheless, given the changing political environment within Malaysia during 2010 and the international political movements, which witnessed prominent youth participation, Malaysia was perhaps bound to witness some changes in the realm of youth political engagement in the country.

Among the key socio-political changes that Malaysia witnessed, in part, due to sharing of ideas and voices via online media, was the repeal of UUCA during 2011-12. As noted in the introduction chapter, Section 15(5-a) of UUCA, which prevented students from supporting any political party, directly contradicted Article 119 of Malaysia’s Federal Constitution that guaranteed the right to vote in elections to all Malaysians who were 21 years or older (DEMA, 2010). Hence, the repeal of UUCA was inevitable. However, at the beginning of 2012, some university students protesting against the UUCA at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, were reportedly beaten up by the police and arrested. One of these students named Muhammad Safwan Awang was reported to be in
critical condition afterward. Such cruel treatment had led to a distrust regarding Najib Razak’s commitment to reform (“Ushering in 2012,” 2012).\(^{29}\)

In reaction to the amendments, some student activists later noted that these changes were insulting since joining political parties would not hold any meaning unless the students were allowed full freedom of expression and to form unions (P. Lee, 2012). Although the mainstream media, such as The Star (daily newspaper), covered the news of UUCA amendment as a change for the better, even they noted that the change still meant that the students had to be careful about defamation, sedition, and other criminal offences while participating in political rallies (Ng and Chapman, 2012). Consequently, political engagement among Malaysian university students had remained a risky affair. This was indeed reflected in Ali’s pessimism during 2010 regarding political change in the country.

While there had been skepticism following the repeal, the fact that it took place before the 2013 general elections could not be denied. Nevertheless, the potential role played by social media in the process had suggested that by engaging with political issues through social media, it was possible to contribute to existing pressure to bring a political change. Therefore, media, especially social media, had remained at the core of youth

\(^{29}\) In another instance, Kedah’s chief minister, Azizan Razak, publicly supported the suspension of five students under UUCA since they protested against “the use of a religious teaching block to house a smart school” (Mustafa K. Anuar, 2012, p. 33). In 2012, seventy Malaysian civil society organizations, including youth and students groups, published a joint statement in Aliran monthly against the violence used by the government to curb political and social activism (besides continued demands for electoral reform in the country) (“Stop intimidation, violence,” 2012).
political engagement in Malaysia’s continuously changing political environment in the years after 2010.

Anti-Corruption Measures

While there had been anti-corruption initiatives in the country, such as the Government Transformation Program (GTP), Malaysian Institute of Integrity (IIM), and the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), the public confidence in such initiatives was lacking (Anis Yusal, Sri Murniati, & Gryzelius, 2013). In April 2010, the Malaysian Parliament passed a Whistleblower Protection Act to supplement GTP. However, in cases where offenders held a superior position or more power than the whistleblower (meaning the person reporting the case), they could sue the whistleblower for libel or defamation. Moreover, the whistleblowers in such cases might lose their job or get physically harmed (Anis Yusal et al., 2013). And so, the safety of a whistleblower is not guaranteed despite the Act. Moreover, the Act, at least in practice, had not been used to protect people such as Raja Petra Kamarudin (discussed in Chapter 3), who raised their voice against the powerful leaders within Barisan Nasional. As a result, despite continued restructuring and changes in laws and policies, the country had witnessed an increasing number of scandals exposing corruption within the government (H. Lee, 2012; Anis Yusal et al., 2013). My informants had noted a number of such scandals, including the murder of a Mongolian model (see Chapter 3 for alternative media coverage; also see Chapter 6 for informants’ accounts and reactions). Overall, an increasing number of allegations, exposed scandals, and failed inquiries had led to extreme dissatisfaction.
among many of my informants, which could help explain Malaysia’s 2013 general election results.

The relaxation of various laws prior to the 2013 general elections in the country essentially reflected the ruling coalition’s realization that certain changes were inevitable. While the Najib administration had announced various reforms, the public trust in Barisan Nasional was not increasing in the same vein. On the other hand, Leong (2014) noted that Malaysia’s legal environment had indeed been getting tougher against the expression of oppositional viewpoints. For instance, despite the repeal of ISA, the detainees already held under ISA at the time remained unaffected by the repeal (Chooi, 2012). Moreover, another law (SOSMA—see Chapter 4 for details) replaced ISA. Hence, despite relaxation in some laws, the state power had maintained an upper hand post-2010.

2013 Elections and Continuation of Political Hegemony

While Mohd Safar Hasim and Ali Salman (2009) had reported that the high cost of Internet had limited online access in rural areas, I found that students hailing from rural areas also had access to online media, although their political opinion was also heavily influenced by their family background and exposure to the information on politics. Unsurprisingly, I also found the mainstream media had penetrated well into rural Malaysia (see Figure 5 below). This was for the obvious reason to secure the rural votes through mainstream media by the BN government. Indeed, the ruling alliance won Malaysia’s 2013 general elections, even after losing the popular vote, just because they won more seats in rural constituencies.
The ruling alliance had remained in power despite a significant increase in the oppositional political discourse led by the alternative online media over the first decade of the 21st Century (C.E.). Following the outcome of the 2008 general elections, the ruling alliance became more cautious and also started using the online media to complement the already controlled mainstream media, especially to maintain its influence on the rural voters. Therefore, Internet had become a platform for both the opposition and the ruling alliance.

In one such instance, a glimpse at the social networking Website, Twitter, during October 2011 showed that Anwar Ibrahim had fewer followers (111, 886) than Najib Razak (323, 041), but had more followers than Dr. Mahathir (32,581). This situation showed an increased attention on exploiting the online social networks for political gains—not just by the opposition, but more so by the ruling alliance post-2010. The high number of Najib Razak’s twitter followers showed the extent to which the ruling alliance was trying to dominate the online wars prior to the 2013 elections that took place after
much delay. Furthermore, the high mobile phone penetration had enhanced the informal sharing of information via social networks among Malaysians (Leong, 2014). Nevertheless, the use of social media for political support was still in an early stage in Malaysia since, by comparison, U.S. President Barack Obama had over 11.4 million followers on Twitter in October 2011. However, to expect social media to overpower the state while leading to a radical change in government and governance practices overnight would be utopian and simply overconfident. Social media had essentially supplemented information dissemination via other online media, such as news Websites and blogs, including both alternative and mainstream sources.

In the 2013 general elections, Barisan Nasional had its worst election performance since independence (Grudgings & Al-Zaquan Amer, 2013). While the ruling coalition had only won 140 of the 222 parliamentary seats in 2008, this number had reduced to 133 after the 2013 elections (“13th Malaysian General,” 2013). Although the coalition won less than 47 percent of the popular vote, it still managed to win 60 percent seats in parliament and remained in power (“After a tainted,” 2013). The opposition led by Anwar Ibrahim alleged electoral fraud through vote-buying (“After a tainted,” 2013; “The government scrapes,” 2013). Nevertheless, the 2013 elections demonstrated that despite winning the popular vote for both the state and federal seats in the Malaysian parliament, the opposition coalition PR (Pakatan Rakyat) could not form the government since the key seats, which depended on results from certain rural constituencies, were won by the BN coalition (Su-Lyn, 2013). This was the first time since 1969 that the BN had lost the popular vote, but despite a prominent presence of online media and increased
public support, mostly in urban constituencies, for PR, even the election results could not yield a change in the country’s political power.

*UiTM’s Position*

During 2013, Dyana Sofea Mohd Daud, a UiTM alumna and Political Secretary to DAP leader Lim Kit Siang, went on the record acknowledging that UiTM admitted students with UMNO links, and supported the idea that UiTM should be open to non-Malays (see Chapter 1 for more on this issue). Dyana’s comments and stand on the issue generated a huge controversy, and she was labelled a “Malay traitor” by many Malays and pro-UMNO groups (Jong, 2013; Zaid Ibrahim, 2014). Eventually, the UiTM Malaysia Alumni Association publicly urged the political parties to stop using UiTM for political gains, although the appeal was clearly directed against Dyana and others who had supported that UiTM should be open to non-Malays (Liang, 2014).

*Censoring the Internet*

In June 2012, Dr. Mahathir (the country’s former Prime Minister) regretted that the commitment to not ban the Internet was made during his time in office. He also noted, “I think it is time we stop talking of the freedom of the press” (Asohan, 2014, Para 27). In 2010, Clare Rewcastle Brown, based in London, set up the *Sarawak Report* Website, which focused on exposing corruption in the government (Yi, 2015). In the years thereafter, the Website exposed many scandals—the most infamous being mismanagement of funds linked to 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) (a government-owned firm). Notably, Rewcastle Brown was denied entry to Malaysia during 2013. The *Sarawak Report* investigators who were examining the debt incurred by
1MDB reported that around US $700 million had gone to Prime Minister Najib Razak’s personal bank accounts (Yi, 2015). According to the reports by *Wall Street Journal* and *Sarawak Report*, a number of leaked documents from Bank Negara (Malaysia’s Central Bank) showed the money being transferred to Prime Minister Najib Razak’s and his wife’s bank accounts. While the Prime Minister’s name had been raised in multiple scandals previously, this time even the former leader Dr. Mahathir backed the investigation against Najib Razak (Fuller, 2015). Nevertheless, despite Najib Razak’s reassurance during 2011 that Malaysia will never censor the Internet, the *Sarawak Report* was blocked on July 19, 2015 (Malcolm & West, 2015). There had been an increasing number of instances wherein the alternative news Websites were being blocked. For instance, I found that as of March 2016, *The Malaysian Insider*, an alternative news Website, was no longer operating.

*Technology and its Limitations*

While technology had clearly helped challenge the dominant power, it still faced the risk of being regulated by the same power. George (2003) had argued that despite the promise of the Internet and globalization in general, “state power remains the single most irresistible and immovable force in the lives of billions of people around the globe” (p. 16). Therefore, although it is considered influential in strengthening democracy, IT alone is not enough by itself to foster significant political change (Taylor, 2004).

Furthermore, fragmentation of audience had prevented a united force from becoming a reality because the Internet had allowed an unprecedented multiplicity of ideas, opinions, and versions of reality, which had led to dispersion among audiences.
And so, despite strengthening a continued dislike for the ruling alliance, the online media had also led to a more divided political opinion across UiTM students. According to McDaniel,

audiences everywhere have become more fragmented. Even so, no longer are the primary program fault lines drawn by language or by rural-urban dichotomies. Audiences increasingly can be differentiated by lifestyle, by generation, by entertainment and information habits, and by taste. The media have tended to become more consumerist oriented, both by popularity of private media and by greater advertising content (2002, p. 191).

What McDaniel (2002) had argued regarding Malaysia’s changing mainstream media landscape, held especially true for the country’s online media environment during 2010—which was reflected in an unusually close election outcome.

Based on my fieldwork, even with changes in ISA and the repeal of UUCA, students were unlikely to get involved in a political rally. In addition to diversity of opinions and a lack of relevance (since many students might not find certain political issues relevant), a general dislike toward existing politics and political parties could likely prevent them from such participation. The online media had attracted their attention and interest, but were less likely to spur a political dissent either led or heavily supported by students. And so, it would be unrealistic to expect a student majority to support rallies such as Bersih (a series of rallies against Malaysia’s existing electoral system viewed as unfair to the oppositional political parties) that had conventionally been dominated by political parties. Nevertheless, continued pressure from the people had led
to changes in some policies, such as repealing UUCA and ISA, and the implementation of the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP).

Significance and Limitations of this Study

*Outcome: Revisiting 2010 as a Critical Year in Malaysia’s Political History*

My interactions with UiTM students had opened up a number of issues, which had become relevant in the ongoing public discourse on the push for increased liberties, through a change in policies and governance, to allow student political participation during 2010. As noted in Chapters 6 and 7, there were a number of findings, such as the loss of trust in the country’s mainstream media and the increased use of online media, especially social media, alternative news websites, and blogs, which had made 2010 an important year in terms of delivering a strong push toward policy level changes—at the very least—that took place in the years following 2010. The events following the 2013 general elections, as the later sections of this final chapter have shown, had only led to government and pro-BN factions strengthening their grips on the political system while exercising their agency through controlling the Internet—something that had been very rare, if not missing, during 2010. Therefore, 2010 had more liberties due to a more open online environment and open access to alternative content for all, which again had made it a unique year in terms of peaking thrust against the ruling alliance—witnessed, in this case, through UiTM students’ experiences.

In terms of student political engagement, the introduction chapter notes the discouraging stance taken by UiTM leadership during 2011. My findings suggested that during 2010, UiTM was a site for contesting ideologies and conflicting viewpoints,
although many among those who were against the ruling alliance did not express their political opinion publicly. Yet, in light of the 2011 announcement by the UiTM leadership and by alumni association during 2014 (noted earlier in this chapter), it would be even harder, if not impossible, for UiTM students to express dissent and engage in oppositional politics in the years after 2010. Hence, my experience in UiTM confirmed 2010 as a critical year in terms of student political engagement since the 2013 elections and events thereafter suggest that Malaysia had become a more authoritarian state.

This study has offered insights into the UiTM students’ perspectives on Malaysian media and politics as well as into the processes of political engagement and disengagement through media among those students during 2010. As a social institution, UiTM had been a unique site for contestation of values and ideologies. These contestations took place both among the actors and between institutional ideology and the actors. The actors in question during my fieldwork were essentially UiTM students, who held opinions that were, in many cases, informed by the alternative media online or, in some cases, by the mainstream media, which some UiTM students considered were in harmony with Malay interests. The institutional policies and stand against encouraging political participation had created structural limitation against political engagement, especially with opposition parties, among UiTM students. Nevertheless, the online media, including blogs, alternative news Websites, and social media, had helped these students’ agency or ability to develop as critical citizens or, in some cases, future leaders.

This study presents one of the many aspects of the functioning of institutional actors—the student body—at an affirmative action university during 2010—a critical
year in Malaysia’s political history, especially with regards to university students and the country’s changing media and political landscapes. This study demonstrates that the online media had helped create what Norris (1999) called “critical citizens,” who were not only careful and selective about the sources of information they followed but who also engaged mentally with the political discourses (p. 27). In the end, they had chosen to become either—a part of the system, a dissent, or to move away from political realm.

Those who had decided to align with the ruling coalition (BN) were determined to use the institutional structure to strengthen their agency as future political leaders. In both the cases—engaged and disengaged, however, the online media had played a crucial role in enhancing the agency among students to develop their perspectives more critically. Overall, when combined with non-media factors, the media had not only spurred active engagement, they also had led to long-term disengagement—as an act of disobedience—among the UiTM youth. This study had been a small step toward developing an understanding of the role of changing media environment in fostering political engagement in transition democracies. The process of political change in Malaysia had been slow and would likely be so in the years to come. Nevertheless, this study attempted to record the country’s changing media landscape and the processes of political engagement and disengagement at an affirmative action university during 2010.

30 The term discourses is used to emphasize that individual perceptions vary and so does the discourse when it is viewed by different individuals.
Limitations

Among the limitations of this study, I did not target student activism since my goal was to explore political engagement among students at a university that even discouraged political engagement. The findings of this study are specific to UiTM during 2010 and could not be applied to another, especially non-Bumiputera, institution or a different time period. Since the study involved informants from a single university campus in the state of Selangor in Peninsular Malaysia, it will be useful to conduct future research in other states in Peninsular Malaysia and also across the eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak, which represent a different cultural and political environment. Another possibility is to include more participants from non-Bumiputera ethnic groups to understand their perspectives on media, politics, and the changing state of democracy in the country. Finally, the fieldwork for this study was conducted before the government repealed UUCA. It will, therefore, be appropriate to conduct follow-up research on media and political engagement among university students, faculty, and staff in the post-UUCA era.

Summary

This chapter depicted a consistent distrust of mainstream media among the UiTM students, including the politically engaged and the disengaged, during 2010. The online media had played a key role in disseminating oppositional messages and encouraging both engagement and disengagement. Moreover, online media, especially social media, had led to a new form of engagement between youth and political leaders and issues.
While parental influence was evident, it could not surpass peer influence in fostering political engagement among the UiTM students.

This chapter noted some of the post-2010 developments within Malaysia’s legal, media, and political systems, albeit without any change in the country’s political leadership. Moreover, despite the changing media and policy environment, issues such as corruption and brain drain had remained at the core of challenges facing the country post-2010. While ICTs had strengthened the democracy in Malaysia, a shift in government away from BN had not realized until the completion of this research, and such shift was likely to be slower than most had anticipated. On the other hand, later measures by the ruling coalition, such as blocking of certain alternative websites, including the Sarawak Report and the Malaysian Insider, only pointed at a worsening media environment with regards to Internet freedom in the country. Continued generational differences and policy framework, which could still be used for dissent despite the repeal of controversial laws such as UUCA and ISA, had remained a threat to an increased student engagement with politics. Therefore, 2010 would continue to stand as a crucial year in that the combination of the country’s media and political environments at the time were unique and another year like that would be unlikely unless there was a significant public thrust that had the agency to change the power dynamics. Nevertheless, the interactions between technology and socio-political structure, defined by a combination of actors—as demonstrated by the case of the UiTM students—would continue to pave way for more freedoms, continued restrictions, and increasing complexities in the continued process of youth political engagement in the country.
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APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE (FOR STRUCTURED INTERVIEW)

PART A: Questionnaire

Television Use
1. Around how many hours do you spend on watching television each week?

2. Where do you watch TV? (You can choose more than one option.)
   a). Home
   b). Dormitory/ Hostel/ Residential College
   c). University/ College/ Department
   d). Others (Please specify.)
3. Please name your favorite T.V. channels.

4. Please name your favorite T.V. programs.

5. What type of programs do you like to watch on television? (You can choose more than one option.)
   a). Soap Opera/ TV Series
   b). News
   c). Current Affairs
   d). Sports
   e). Musical
   f). National integration
   g). Religious
   h). Educational
   i). Movies
   j). Others (Please specify: _____________________________

6. How many hours do you spend on watching news on TV each week?

7. What type of news you like to watch on TV? (Please rank the items from 1 to 8 in the order of your preference.)
   \[ RANK \]
   a). International
   b). Entertainment (celebrity news, entertainment industry news, etc)
   c). Political
   d). Sports
   e). Weather
   f). Science
   g). Religious
   h). Employment
Radio Use
1. Around how many hours do you spend on listening to radio each week?

2. Where do you listen to radio? (You can choose more than one option.)
   a). Home
   b). Dormitory/Hostel/Residential College
   c). University/College/Department
   d). Car (while traveling)
   e). Others (Please specify) __________________________

3. Please name your favorite radio stations.

4. Please name your favorite radio programs.

5. What type of programs do you like to listen to on radio? (You can choose more than one option.)
   a). Drama
   b). News
   c). Current Affairs
   d). Sports
   e). Musical
   f). National integration
   g). Religious
   h). Educational
   i). Others (Please specify) __________________________

6. How many hours do you spend on listening to news on radio each week?

7. What type of news you like to listen to on radio? (Please rank the items from 1 to 8 in the order of your preference.)
   a). International
   b). Entertainment (celebrity news, entertainment industry news, etc)
   c). Political
   d). Sports
   e). Weather
   f). Science
   g). Religious
   h). Employment
   i). Others (Please specify) __________________________

Internet and Computer Use
1. Around how many hours do you spend on Computer each week?
2. Out of the time mentioned in the previous response, around how many hours do you spend on the Internet each week?

3. Where do you access the Internet? (You can choose more than one option.)
   - Home
   - Dormitory/ Hostel/ Residential College
   - University/ College/ Department Lab
   - Library
   - Cyber Café
   - Others (Please specify: ________________________________)

4. Please name your favorite websites.

5. Please name your favorite activities on Computer.

6. Which of the following activities do you do on the Internet? (You can choose more than one option.)
   - E-mailing
   - Chatting (text)
   - Voice chatting
   - Video chatting
   - Surfing
   - Watching videos (on websites like YouTube.com)
   - Watching/ downloading movies
   - Listening to podcasts (online radio)
   - Browsing online newspapers
   - Browsing online magazines

7. How much time do you spend on browsing news websites each week?

8. What type of news you like to browse on the Internet? (Please rank the items from 1 to 8 in the order of your preference.)
   - International
   - Entertainment (celebrity news, entertainment industry news, etc)
   - Political
   - Sports
   - Weather
   - Science
   - Religious
   - Employment
   - Others (Please specify: ________________________________)

Print Media
1. How often do you read a real newspaper (not online)?
   - Everyday
b). Few times a week
c). Once a week
d). Rarely
e). Never
2. Please name the newspapers that you read/ like to read.

3. How often do you read a real magazine (not online)?
   a). Once a week
   b). Twice a month
   c). Once a month
   d). Rarely
   e). Never
4. Please name the magazines that you read/ like to read.

5. Which of the following media do you use for news? (You can choose more than one option.) Please provide the names with your choices.
   - Internet: Websites
   - Magazines:
   - Newspapers:
   - Radio:
   - TV:
   - Others (Please specify):

6. Which of the following media you trust as reliable source of information? (You can choose more than one option.) Please provide the names with your choices.
   - Internet: Websites
   - Magazines:
   - Newspapers:
   - Radio:
   - TV:
   - Others (Please specify):

7. Are you interested in politics?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Can’t say
8. Do you vote during the elections?
   - Yes
   - No
9. Do you think that the news helps you make the right decision/ choice during the elections?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Neutral
   - Can’t say
Personal Details
1. Age: ____________________________
2. Gender: a). Male b). Female
3. Major (Department/ Faculty): ____________________________
4. What is the current level of your studies?
   a). Bachelors Student (B.A./ B.Sc./ B.E., etc)
   b). Masters Student (M.A./ M.S./ M.B.A., etc)
   c). Doctoral (Ph. D.) Student
   d). Others (Please specify.) ____________________________
5. Native language: ____________________________
6. Ethnicity (Malay, Chinese, Indian, Iban, Kedazan, etc): ______________
7. Which of the following best describe your hometown?
   a. Village (kampong)
   b. Town
   c. City
   d. Metro/ Large City
8. Family/ Social Background (Upper, Middle, Lower Income Household) _______

Terima Kasih!
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

PART B: Themes for (Semi-structured) Interview

1. Use of various media and communication technologies, such as the Internet, cellphone, etc.
2. Interested in politics (Why/ Why not?)
3. Political news on Malaysian media
4. Political news on the Internet
5. Other activities on the Internet, such as blogging?
6. Do media influence the way you look at politics? How?
7. Do you think the Internet influences the way you feel about politics? How?
8. Stories/ anecdotes
9. Any other thoughts?