

**A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF
TWITTER POSTS DURING THE
SHERATON MOVE:**

**A CASE STUDY OF THE ONLINE PUBLIC
SPHERE IN MALAYSIA**

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Abstract

My thesis is a study of Malaysian political communication on Twitter by political elites, media organisations, and societal users. Using the Sheraton Move as a case study, I deconstruct 102 872 tweets during the period which witnessed Pakatan Harapan losing its hard-fought victory of the 14th General Elections in 2018. An exploration of literature showed that research of the effect of Twitter usage remain fragmented. Against the theoretical backdrop of Habermas' public sphere, I propose a framework to better understand the Malaysian Twittersphere. For this, I divide the Malaysian Twittersphere into three communicative levels: the structural, representational, and interactional. I used a mixed method approach that combined critical discourse analysis of expert interviews, focus group discussion of users, archival research with quantitative content analytics to examine the reactions during the Sheraton Move on Twitter.

At the interactional level, societal users report they 'felt' democratic agency, particularly in the use of hashtags, mentions and retweets. Findings elucidate how the platform's architecture amplified and suppressed these vernaculars impacting the reach of tweets. Community detection analysis suggested ways to understand the formation of echo-chambers and illustrate how what each user sees on the platform is algorithmically curated to optimise engagement. Put differently, social media platforms allowed each citizen to exist in individualised media environments. At the representational level, my analysis demonstrated that political communication on Twitter is often constructed as 'emancipatory', although almost 90% of tweets were produced in the societal sphere, thematic analysis findings of narratives challenging oppressive structures of power were almost absent. At the structural level, I was able to explain the reinstatement of the political elites on top of the societal hierarchy challenging prevailing notions of net neutrality over themes of deliberative democracy on digital platforms. This suggests that while democratic agency was found to exist in the interactional and part of the representational level, democratic impediments were found to be rife at the structural level.

Overall, the integration of the interactional, representational, and structural levels into a framework provides a basis to advance the understanding of the historically contentious political communication in Malaysia considering the intersectionality of race, class, and technology. Findings from my research offer some reflections about why cautious optimism is needed when viewing technologies that offer the promise of transforming the public sphere.

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Dedication

Daddy & Amma, your dream fulfilled!

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Acknowledgments.....	3
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	14
1.1 Research Statement	14
1.2 Research Motivations, Aims and Scope	15
1.3 Background of Study	18
1.3.1 Research Context: Malaysia	19
1.3.2 The Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC)	30
1.3.3 Role of Digital Natives	33
1.3.4 Rise of Constitutional Patriotism	34
1.3.5 Media Organisations	37
1.4 Overview of the Thesis.....	40
Chapter 2: Theoretical Foundations of Research Framework	42
2.1 The Habermas Public Sphere	42
2.1.1 Principles of the Public Sphere	43
2.1.2 Critique of the Habermas' Public Sphere	47
2.1.3 Considerations moving forward.....	50
2.2 Conceptual Framework of the Malaysian Twittersphere.....	50
2.2.1 Malaysian Political Communication on Social Media Platforms.	52
2.2.2 Malaysian Politics on Twitter	54
2.3 The Structural Level	56
2.3.1 Constitutional Patriotism.....	57
2.3.2 Media Organisations	58
2.3.3 Autonomy from Political, State and Corporate Power	59
2.3.4 Power and Control	61

2.3.5 Conceptualisation of the Structural Level	63
2.4 The Representational Level	66
2.4.1 Producers: A roadmap for representation	66
2.4.2 Illusions of 'Inclusion'	71
2.4.3 Spectacles on Twitter	75
2.4.4 Conceptualisation of the Representational Level	81
2.5 The Interactional Level	84
2.5.1 Spaces	85
2.5.2 Positioning Public Opinion on Twitter	87
2.5.3 Affect	91
2.5.4 Immediacy	94
2.5.5 Talk on Twitter	95
2.5.6 Knowledge and Trust	105
2.5.7 Conceptualisation of the Interactional Level	111
2.6 Conclusion	114
<i>Chapter 3: The Sheraton Move & Twitter</i>	<i>116</i>
3.1 Case Study: Sheraton Move	116
3.1.1 International Developments	117
3.1.2 Trends in Malaysian Politics	119
3.2 Why Twitter?	121
3.2.1 Twitter to study interaction	121
3.2.2 Twitter to study representation	123
3.2.3 Twitter to study structure	125
3.3 Research Focus	128
3.3.1 Theoretical Focus	130
3.3.2 Research Gap	133
3.3.3 Integrated Conceptual Framework	134
3.4 Research Questions	137
3.5 Limitations	140

Chapter 4: Research Methodology	142
4.1 Research Design.....	143
4.1.1 Mixed Methods: Rationale.....	143
4.1.2 Validation	144
4.1.3 Ethical Considerations	146
4.2 Pilot Study.....	147
4.3 Qualitative Phase.....	152
4.3.1 Purposeful Sampling	152
4.3.2 User Focus Group Discussions (FGD)	154
4.3.3 Expert Interviews.....	155
4.3.4 Archival Research	157
4.4 Quantitative Phase	159
4.5 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)	163
4.6 Fairclough's CDA Model	164
4.6.1 Textual Analysis	165
4.6.2 Discursive Practices	167
4.6.3 Social Practices.....	168
4.7 Operationalisation of the Structural Level of Analysis	171
4.8 Operationalisation of the Representational Level of Analysis	173
4.9 Operationalisation of the Interactional Level of Analysis	175
4.10 Summary	176
Chapter 5: Findings & Discussion	178
5.1 Findings at the Interactional Level.....	178
5.1.1 Politicians	179
5.1.2 Media(tisation?).....	203
5.1.3 Societal Sphere.....	223
5.1.4 Summary.....	247

5.2 Findings at the Representational Level	248
5.2.1 Fairclough's CDA: Overview of Findings	250
5.2.2 Summary.....	272
5.3 Findings at the Structural Level	274
5.3.1 Archival Research: Overview of Findings.....	274
5.3.2 Media Control & Twitter Inc.....	277
5.3.3 Autonomy in the Malaysian Media Landscape	286
5.3.4 Constitutional Patriotism in the Malaysian Public Sphere	294
5.4 Summary	308
<i>Chapter 6: Conclusions</i>	<i>313</i>
6.1 Bringing all three levels together	313
6.2 Contribution of study	317
6.2.1 Methodological Contribution.....	317
6.2.2 Contribution at the Interactional Level of Analysis.....	318
6.2.3 Contribution at the Representational Level of Analysis	319
6.2.4 Contribution at the Structural Level of Analysis.....	320
6.2.5 Theoretical Contribution	321
6.3 Limitations.....	323
6.4 Future Research	325
6.5 Where we are now	326
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>329</i>
<i>Appendix.....</i>	<i>387</i>

List of Figures

FIGURE 1 CONCEPTUALISATION OF STRUCTURAL LEVEL OF ANALYSIS.....	65
FIGURE 2 MEDIATISATION OF PUBLIC INTEREST.....	84
FIGURE 3: TRI-TIERED COMMUNICATION MODEL.....	112
FIGURE 4: COMMUNICATION AMONG SPHERES.....	112
FIGURE 5 CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE INTERACTIONAL LEVEL OF ANALYSIS USING THE O-S-R- O-R MODEL.....	114
FIGURE 6 STUDY THEORETICAL FOCUS	131
FIGURE 7: RESEARCH FRAMEWORK	136
FIGURE 8: WRONG FLAG SHOWN ON LCD SCREEN DURING A BASKETBALL EVENT.....	148
FIGURE 9: TWITTER USE AMONG POLITICIANS.	181
FIGURE 10: ANNUAR MUSA'S TWITTER DURING THE SHERATON MOVE	182
FIGURE 11 WEAPONIZATION OF IDENTITY POLITICS "IT IS OBVIOUS HOW DIVIDED THE MALAYS ARE...CERTAIN QUARTERS ARE WOLF IN SHEEP CLOTHING..."	184
FIGURE 12: ANTI-FANDOM TWEETS. "PH'S LIST OF 114MPs IS AN ATTEMPT TO FOOL AND INSTIGATE THE PUBLIC. IT IS ALSO TREASON AGAINST THE KING. A POLICE REPORT SHOULD BE LODGED TO IN THE INTEREST OF THE PUBLIC".....	185
FIGURE 13: CONSTRUCTION OF THE ENEMY ON TWITTER. " <i>DONE ACCOMPANYING THE LEADERSHIP AND REPRESENTATIVES FROM SEVERAL PARTIES TO THE NATIONAL PALACE FOR AN AUDIENCE WITH THE KING IN SUPPORT OF TAN SRI MUHYIDDIN...FOR THE PEOPLE AND COUNTRY, STOP POLITICKING, YOU ARE HURTING THE PEOPLE...</i> "	185
FIGURE 14 JUXTAPOSITION OF ENEMIES AND ALLIES.	186
FIGURE 15: HANNAH YEOH'S TWITTER DURING THE SHERATON MOVE	187
FIGURE 16: POLITICIANS AND MEDIA OFFER 'FRONT-ROW' SEATS AS EVENTS SURROUNDING THE SHERATON MOVE WAS UNFOLDING.	188
FIGURE 17 ARGUMENTATION ON TWITTER. (LEFT) HANNAH YEOH CALLING MPs WHO DEFECTED 'TRAITORS'. (RIGHT) SARCASM TOWARDS ANNUAR MUSA.	190
FIGURE 18: 'ACTIVE CONVERSATIONS' ON TWITTER.	191
FIGURE 19 'DIGITAL LISTENING' ON TWITTER. NUMBER OF VIEWS ON VIDEOS POSTED MEASURES HOW MANY USERS HAVE VIEWED THE TWEET WITHOUT OTHER LEAVING OTHER EXPLICIT TRACE.	193

FIGURE 20: POLITICAL COMMUNICATION BY POLITICIAN TO SHOW POLITICAL ALLEGIANCE.	197
FIGURE 21: POLITICIANS' PRIVATE SPHERE.	198
FIGURE 22: REVERENCE TO ROYALTY.....	198
FIGURE 23: A THREAD OF 'EMPTY CONVERSATIONS' WITH THE CITIZENRY LADEN WITH 'SELF- PRAISE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS' (LEFT) AND CORRESPONDING REPLIES FROM FOLLOWERS (RIGHT).....	199
FIGURE 24: POLITICAL ARGUMENTATION STRATEGY IN THE FORM OF CONVERSATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS (LEFT). USERS' ANTAGONISTIC RESPONSE (RIGHT)	200
FIGURE 25: COMMUNICATIONAL HIERARCHIES ON TWITTER. BRIN NODE LEGEND: RED = POLITICIANS, BLUE = MEDIA, GREEN = SOCIETAL USERS	201
FIGURE 26 DICHOTOMY IN THE MALAYSIAN TWITTERSPHERE	207
FIGURE 27: CENTRALITY OF NEWS MEDIA (BLUE NODES) RELATED ACCOUNTS ON TWITTER	213
FIGURE 28: MAINSTREAM AND NON-MAINSTREAM MEDIA ACCOUNTS AND HYPERLINKS.	218
FIGURE 29: COMMUNITY DETECTION ON TWITTER	220
FIGURE 30: NETWORK CENTRALITY ON TWITTER.....	222
FIGURE 31: REPLICATION OF OFFLINE STRUCTURES IN THE NETWORK WITH POLITICIANS AND MEDIA IN THE MIDDLE AND SOCIETAL USERS IN THE PERIPHERIES.....	228
FIGURE 32: POLITICISATION OF TWEETS.....	234
FIGURE 33: AUDIENCE REACTION TO POLITICAL TWEETS.....	235
FIGURE 34: GRABBALITY OF TWEETS	239
FIGURE 35: WORD CLOUD OF FREQUENTLY USED TERMS DURING THE SHERATON MOVE.	252

List of Tables

TABLE 1 OVERVIEW OF KEY TERMS IN REPRESENTATIONAL LEVEL OF ANALYSIS	83
TABLE 2: RESEARCH FOCUS.....	130
TABLE 3 ENCAPSULATION OF KEY CONSTRUCTS AND RESEARCH FOCUS	135
TABLE 4 OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	140
TABLE 5 TOOLS TO OBTAIN TWEETS	161
TABLE 6 OPERATIONALISATION OF THE STRUCTURAL LEVEL OF ANALYSIS.....	173
TABLE 7: OPERATIONALISATION OF REPRESENTATIONAL LEVEL OF ANALYSIS.	174
TABLE 8 SOCIETAL USER INDICATORS.....	175
TABLE 9: OPERATIONALISATION OF THE INTERACTIONAL LEVEL OF ANALYSIS	176
TABLE 10: MEDIA ACCOUNTS ON TWITTER.....	206
TABLE 11: CURATION OF NEWS ACCOUNTS ON TWITTER AFTER MAHATHIR'S RESIGNATION ..	211
TABLE 12: MEDIA PRESENCE ON TWITTER	215
TABLE 13: DEMOGRAPHY OF FGD PARTICIPANTS	225
TABLE 14: TWITTER DATA USED IN ANALYSIS.....	250
TABLE 15: THEMATIC ANALYSIS FINDINGS	251
TABLE 16: OWN STANCE: WHATABOUTISM.....	254
TABLE 17: OWN STANCE: DISMAY OVER STATE OF DEMOCRACY	255
TABLE 18: SOCIETAL SPHERE ADDRESSING POLITICAL PARTIES.....	258
TABLE 19: POLITICAL ELITES ADDRESSING THE SOCIETAL SPHERE.....	258
TABLE 20: TWEETS ABOUT POLITICIANS.....	262
TABLE 21: ROYALTY' S CONSTITUTIONAL FUNCTION	264
TABLE 22: ROYALTY PROVIDE FOOD & SHELTER	265
TABLE 23: ROYALTY - POPULAR CULTURE REFERENCES	265
TABLE 24: RACE, ROYALTY, AND RELIGION.....	266
TABLE 25: PERCENTAGE OF POP CULTURE REFERENCES.....	267
TABLE 26: POPULAR CULTURE REFERENCES IN TWITTER POSTS.	269
TABLE 27: POLICY TWEETS	270
TABLE 28: EXCERPTS FROM TWITTER CEO	279
TABLE 29: MEDIA PRACTITIONERS ON TWITTER.....	292

List of Appendices

APPENDIX 1 ORIGINS OF HABERMAS' PUBLIC SPHERE	387
APPENDIX 2: DEVELOPMENTALISM ARCHIVAL RESEARCH MATERIAL	389
APPENDIX 3: LIST OF EXPERTS	390
APPENDIX 4 INDONESIAN FLAG IN SEA GAMES BOOKLET.....	391
APPENDIX 5 LIST OF INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED.....	392
APPENDIX 6 PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC	393
APPENDIX 7: ANNUAR MUSA'S TWITTER RECIPROCAL ANALYSIS	394
APPENDIX 8: HANNAH YEOH'S TWITTER RECIPROCAL ANALYSIS.....	394
APPENDIX 9: EXCERPTS OF ROSS TAPSELL INTERVIEW.....	395
APPENDIX 10: POLITICAL PARTY AND ANALYTIC FIRMS	399
APPENDIX 11 THE ORIGINS OF EASTERN PUBLIC SPHERES.....	400

Chapter 1: Introduction

“...when awesome technological powers are in the hands of a very few, and no one representing the public interest can even grasp the issues; when the people have lost the ability to...knowledgeably question those in authority...our faculties in decline, unable to distinguish between what feels good and what’s true, we slide, almost without noticing, back into superstition and darkness.”.

Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan

Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark

Published by Ballantine Books, February 1995

This thesis attempts to “grasp the issues” of social media usage for political communication in Malaysia. During the twelfth general election (GE12), social media was almost exclusively used by the opposition. Subsequently, GE13 in 2013 became the 'Social Media Election'. Progressively, the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalitions increased its presence on social media platforms. However, for various reasons, BN lost GE14 in 2018. After 2018, BN was the Opposition briefly and used social media platforms to challenge the ruling PH. Crossovers by parliamentarians at the end of February 2020, subsequently called the Sheraton Move, led to the collapse of the PH government and a take-over by the Perikatan Nasional or PN coalition. Naturally, activities on social media platforms were rife.

1.1 Research Statement

Reportedly, millions of Malaysians are using social media platforms, including Twitter¹, as a democratic means to express their opinions and even disapprove of how things have turned out when the Sheraton Move materialised. A general degree of scepticism, if not cynicism, with democratic processes, appears to have developed on Twitter. A core theme in this regard is the democratisation of political communication not only *on* but *by* social media platforms. In my thesis, I problematise the degree and complexity of that

¹ Twitter was rebranded to X in July 2023. Since the context of my research is the usage of this platform in February 2020, I will use the term Twitter and Tweets to refer to the platform and posts.

democratisation. Therefore, the main objective of this thesis is to better understand the current state of political communication on Twitter in Malaysia.

1.2 Research Motivations, Aims and Scope

I embarked on this study in September 2018 to further examine the phenomena reported by several international reports, placing Malaysia at the top spot for social media usage (Zaharom, 2017). In May 2018, the PH Coalition formed the government. While my initial plan was to study social media policy from a national perspective, it was understandable that in September 2018, when I started my study, the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia had other priorities and posed a limitation to my study. National policies are generally born out of long-term planning, and a novel administration in transition appeared to have more pressing matters to resolve. Therefore, I turned my analytical focus to national events, such as the Rome Statute and ICERD protests, the Wrong Flag incident, and the Malay Dignity Congress, and the ensuing conversations on Twitter. Shortly after these events, the Sheraton Move in February 2020 presented a compelling case study to explore through a critical digital social research lens.

There are 2.4 million Malaysian Twitter accounts (statista.com, 2019), and this study seeks to explain how its use has become entangled in the Malaysian deliberative democracy sphere. Further, this thesis aims to contribute to the debate about Twitter's role in facilitating what Dahlgren (2013) calls *alternative* democracy, with "efforts aiming at attaining social change by democratic means while circumventing electoral politics." I intend to expand our understanding of the intersection of social media and political communication, particularly in the context of Malaysian political discourse on Twitter and hope to contribute to efforts to rebuild the ethos necessary for effective democracy in Malaysia.

In this vein I aim to investigate whether and how much the notion of citizen production or *produsage* confronts the "vantage point of the powerful political and economic elites to tightly craft representations" as agenda setters and how much is Twitter a "conduit by which the powerful instruct the powerless what to think and feel" in the Malaysian political

communication context(Fenton, 2004). Furthermore, I aim to understand whether Twitter impedes or promotes inclusion ideals. To this end my research explores the concept of inclusion that insists "every citizen be allowed the opportunity to express their preferences and influence" the course of a nation(Wilhelm, 2000).

In this thesis, I propose an integrated framework for understanding the contemporary continuum of political communication that seems to take place on Twitter. This framework expands on Peter Dahlgren's (2005a) work which integrates three core areas: the structural, representational, and interactional. Correspondingly, this study draws on Habermas' public sphere, which is used almost unanimously used to explain *why* and *how* political communication occurs(Freelon, 2010). The broader Malaysian social canvas provides a backdrop that influences new technologies, their roles, and systemic inequalities within society (Nain, 1996). I acknowledge five of the following elements that engender political communication in Malaysia.

First, systemic inequalities exist in Malaysian society (Gomez, 2012b; W. L. Kim, 2014; Koh et al., 2016; Selvaratnam, 1986). Second, from a cultural standpoint, Malaysia is a high-power distancing society(Blunt, 1988; Kennedy & Mansor, 2000). Third, an explicit power structure exists that impedes the freedom of speech(Case, 1993; Means, 1996; Sani, 2011). Fourth, I recognise how hegemonic-party autocracies underpin authoritarian conditions (Nelson, 2014; Welsh, 2013). Finally, I discuss the challenges of a multicultural society and the adoption of emerging social media technologies in Malaysia (Chee-Beng, 2000; Kaboudarahangi et al., 2013; R. L. M. Lee, 1990; Zaharom, 1996). Simultaneously, society is posed with Web 2.0, and its promise is to level the playing field via social networking sites embedded within the daily lives of the Malaysian public. In this thesis, I address the paradoxes facing Malaysian society insofar as social control and personal freedom have historically been considered inversely related (H. I. Schiller, 1968).

As a central concern of this thesis, I explore *produsage* or the art of 'producing and using' online political content by Malaysian Twitter users and what it means in terms of democratic culture (Jenkins et al., 2013). My research falls within the fields of political

communication and new media. Political communication, in many respects, stems from Aristotle's *Politics* 335 – 323 BC and Plato's *Statesman* 360 BC (Waterfield, 2015). Fast forward two thousand years and halls of *The School of Athens* have now been replaced by social media platforms.

Contemporary iterations of political communication are multidisciplinary, borrowing heavily from political science, communications and media studies, philosophy, organisational behaviour, and social psychology (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Kaid, 2004; Ryfe, 2001). The time is long past when a single discipline could interpret social reality with comprehensiveness (Habermas, 1990). Therefore, this thesis draws from various studies that have examined the factors under which Twitter is used in politics. How does the platform offer an exposition and application of Habermas' public sphere and tests the benevolent and messianic promises of social media in enhancing democracies? Overall, I used Twitter posts during the Sheraton Move to understand how social media usage can be conceptualised using the Habermasean public sphere principles. Specifically, the aims of this thesis are threefold:

First, I investigate whether political interactions on Twitter signify incremental reforms in the case of democratic agency to the citizenry. Second, I understand online political communication on social media platforms as a reality that should not be taken for granted therefore, I aim to explore the nature of representations made by politicians, media organisations and the citizenry. Third, considering how political communication ecology was augmented by online communicative technologies, I aim to examine the structural factors embedded within the discourses and on Twitter as a social media platform.

To this end, the overarching research question of my thesis is:

What effects, if any, does Twitter have on the Malaysian public sphere and if so, what are the attributes of this impact?

Considering the broad range of areas of study intersectional studies such as this covers, I address here what my study is not. First, this study is not a technical examination of Twitter content. While technical intricacies have already been the subject of research by scholars, as discussed in Chapter 2, my intention here is to critically examine the way the Malaysian public sphere has evolved under the pretext of social media platforms, particularly in the case of Twitter. I focus on the broader aspects of the sociology of communication observed in the political discourse on Twitter. I find this research focus relevant as a growing part of the citizenry associated with their presence on social media platforms with political agencies (Dennis, 2019, p. 198).

Second, this study is not comparative in nature. I do not intend to contrast the discourse on Twitter with that on other platforms. Comparing political discourse with other forms of expression on the platform is outside the scope of this research. I argue that comparative analysis reduces the social media platform to a smaller unit of analysis and may result in an oversimplification of the fundamental aspects unique to Twitter. Moreover, this field of research has not reached saturation, particularly in Malaysia. Studies dedicated to Malaysian political actors' activities on Twitter, despite their steady growth, are still underdeveloped. This thesis aimed to investigate the areas of this nuanced and novel research field. In the interest of specificity, I focus my research on Twitter posts produced during the Sheraton Move.

1.3 Background of Study

Online political communication has entered the third decade since the inception of the World Wide Web (Schwabach, 2014, p. xviii). As with previous communications technological advancements, the prospect of engaging with citizens directly via the internet was greeted with ambivalence by those with access to the technology. In Malaysia, the prevalent traction internet adoption garnered "put the government in a dilemma" to the extent that policymakers insisted that online activities were not above the colonial-era Sedition Ordinance of 1948 (Anuar, 2000, p. 189). Opinions about whether new levels and forms of participation improved, and further enhanced democracy varied

considerably between “techno-optimist and techno-pessimist”(Vaidhyathan, 2018, p. 25).

Taking the cue from Benkler et al. (2018), I argue in this thesis that the study of political communication on social media should not be confounded with just the technological aspects. In addition, following assertions of Economic Nobel Laurette, Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, in my thesis, I “resist the seduction of the obvious” and am “sceptical of promised miracles” of ‘new’ communicative technology, and “question the evidence” presented, in an attempt to bring to light the complexity involved in understanding narratives surrounding political communication on Twitter because society is “messy, irrational, emotional, superstitious and attached to the familiar” (Banerjee & Duflo, 2019). Here, I discuss the antecedents of the prevalence of political communication on Twitter in Malaysia.

1.3.1 Research Context: Malaysia

Scholars have long argued that political communication in Malaysia is contingent on race, religion, and royalty (3R). Despite promises of a progressive approach towards 3R issues in the Malaysian constitution, currents of fundamentalism and communalism continue to prevail. This section explores, the notion that this feature is historically rooted. Any attempt to investigate political communication in Malaysia must begin with (at least) a cursory examination of several historical stages of Malaysian politics. Johan Saravanamuttu (2016) examined politics in Malaysia in three stages: emergent mediated communalism (1950-1960), corporatised mediated communalism (1970-late 1990) and contested mediated communalism (late 1990 – 2013). I suggest the addition of two further phases to encapsulate and provide context for these periods. The first, origins of mediated communalism (before 1950), proposes that one needs to look at the pre-colonial period to trace the genesis of the “hegemonic truths” (Eriksen, 2000, p. 58) of royal, political, ethnic, and religious elites even in recent Malaysian politics. Second, polarised mediated communalism (2013-2020) reflects the state of post-social media society when the Sheraton Move took place.

Origins of Mediated Communalism (before 1950)

As a starting point, I suggest a brief look at pre-colonial Malaysia. Since the 1400s Malaya's² strategic location in the middle of the trade path between China, India, the Middle East, and the West early trading communities of foreigners were centred in Melaka and Kedah. Malays at that time came from Indonesia and eventually formed the Malay Malacca Sultanate. Local aborigines were scattered throughout Malaya in the interior. Most interactions among the trading community, rulers, and indigenous communities were based on exchanging goods, agricultural produce, and hunting gains. Society was organised in villages, mostly among themselves, mixing only for enterprise.

Beginning with the Portuguese in 1511, followed by the Dutch in 1641, the British in 1800 and finally the Japanese in 1941, foreign powers ended the Melaka Sultanate and displaced royals to form settlements all over Peninsula Malaysia. Among these powers, British legacy has remained a blueprint for modern Malaysia. Notably, the engineering of society in the 1800s included polarising communities along economic and cultural segments. Malays were mostly farmers and fishermen and pledged loyalty to their respective state Sultans, village heads and religious leaders. The Chinese and Indians were brought to work in tin mines and rubber estates (K. K. Kim, 1981).

Early newspapers in Malaysia were largely commercial endeavours of the British, Arab, and Indian traders. As such, the British imposed control, first informal and later formalised after 1876, on papers, particularly vernacular ones to control subversive content (Kow & Khoo, 2023). In 1806, the *Prince of Wales Island Gazette* and *Government Gazette Penang*, Malaya's earliest national newspapers were launched. Naturally, the early development of vernacular mass media in Malaysia was fragmented. Since each ethnicity had newspapers in their own language, often reporting news from their country of origin with a Malayan flavour factor such as the literacy rate and conditions in the country of origin influenced the circulation.

² known as Malaysia after 1963

Such was the case in 1815, when British missionary William Milne produced *Chinese Monthly Magazine* or a *Monthly Record of Social Manners* in Malacca to evangelise Chinese settlers, as proselytising was prohibited in China. The missionary press produced Chinese papers until the 1840s. Subsequent publications were dominated by tycoons such as *Lat Pau* by See Ewe Lay in 1843-1931, *Nanyang Siang Pau* by Tan Kak Kee in 1923, and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* by Aw Boon Haw in 1929. During that time, political exiles from China who settled in the Straits (Singapore and Malacca) transformed the tone of reporting mundane and trivial to reformist and revolutionary. *Tangai Snahen* was launched in 1880. However, Tamil publications mushroomed after the 1920s when more educated Indians and Ceylonese migrated to Malaya (Lent, 1974). Muslims of Arab and Indian origin pioneered local Malay newspaper production (Chia, 2016). *Jawi Peranakan* the 1st local newspaper in Malay, was launched in 1876. This local paper covered news not only from the Straits³, Johor, Selangor, and Kedah. Coverage of news from Brunei, Labuan, Jawa, and Sumatera was a testament to the Malay diaspora during that era.

The Japanese occupation influenced the Malayan media landscape. The Japanese 'took-over' publication of mainstream papers and produced *Shimbuns* with content in the Japanese, Chinese and Tamil languages. During that time, the Malay Peoples Anti-Japanese Army produced 23 vernaculars 'underground newspapers', to offer counter narratives during the invasion. Notably from 1942-1950, papers such as *Suara Rakyat*, *Lenin News*, *Peasant News*, *Upset Press*, *Student News*, *Newspaper of the Masses*, *Emancipation News* and *The Democrat* were "cyclostyled weekly in a mixture of Jawi, Chinese, English and Tamil published from a cave during the war, printed on thin rice paper and distributed in toothpaste tubes, brain cavities of dried fish or bicycle handle-bars" (Lean & Ahmad, 1974). The titles of the papers are emblematic of the tone of emotions and conflicts experienced by readers during that time.

Among others, four crucial aspects played a defining role in the rise of identity politics in Malaysia, which continued to define Malaysian politics from the 1930s to the present. First, the Islamic revival from 1920s to 1930s that saw a skew toward religious nationality

³ now Penang, Melaka, and Singapore

(Nagata, 1980). Second, Chinese and Indian immigrants, who were largely considered transient workers, showed trends of permanent settlement in Malaya, as with the rise of citizenship and representation issues witnessed in the political discourse. Third, the Japanese invasion of Malaya in 1941 posed the earliest form of resistance to British and local rulers. Fourth, following the surrender of the Japanese, the British-imposed Malayan Union with clauses to transfer sovereignty from Malay rulers to the British crown and automatic citizenship for the Chinese and Indians in 1946 as an architecture to remain in power in post-colonial Malaya.

The layering of these factors provoked the rise of widespread nationalism that resulted in the formation of the first fully-Malay-funded newspaper (Zain, 2019), *Utusan Melayu* in 1939, and the subsequent rise of UMNO in the late 1940s. Protests by royals, local leaders, and commoners were organised under the leadership of Dato' Onn (Ken, 1982). Emerging communist infiltration that left Malaya “nearly paralysed” between 1942 and 1947 (Tregonning, 1956) prompted the British to compromise and ultimately agree to the inauguration Federation of Malaya on February 1948 which enshrined the position of rulers and guaranteed Malay rights. Exposure to common enemies in the form of the Malayan Communist Party rebellion and pro-Indonesian movements prompted the British and UMNO to set aside their differences.

I have discussed a few formative events that played a defining role in the formation of early Malaysian politics before independence. I focus on political deliberation and representation threads to elucidate the makeup of the Malaysian public sphere. Relevant to my thesis were (supposedly interim) measures introduced during the state of emergency, which included media restrictions foundational to what is currently used to curb dissenting voices. In terms of the divide in Malays identity politics, it was this proximity of UMNO and the Malays aristocracy with the British that earned UMNO the ‘elite-based’ association and this translated as them failing the rural Malay triggering long-standing rivalry between ethnocentric UMNO and the Malay Nationalist Party (which eventually splintered into the Pan Malayan Supreme Islamic Council in 1948 and eventually Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) in 1951). In this regard, the contestation of

issues pertaining to citizenship caused the Chinese and Indians to be viewed as immigrants. While some narratives paint a picture of a unified Malayan front in the early 1950s, a look at the elements discussed above suggests a fragmented Malaya as she ushered into independence in 1957.

Emergent Mediated Communalism (1950-1960)

The era spanning from 1950 to 1960 was formative of post-colonial Malaya. During this time, the nation witnessed several milestones including our first elections in 1955, attaining independence and the enactment of the Constitution in 1957. Additionally, racial riots in May 1969 left an impact that was felt for decades to come. The pre-independence racial division of labour and the ensuing geographical separation of commoners was felt as nationalism and anti-colonialism sentiments arose in the 1950s. My intention here is to further explore the commencement and subsequent reinforcement of hegemonic forces related to race, religion, and royalty (3Rs). I argue that while much fuss was made about regaining independence from the British in terms of cultural and geographical space, the dominance of “epistemological spaces” was simply “transformed, reconstituted and reshaped” to benefit local elites by retaining certain institutions and policies (Baharuddin, 2003). As such, the maintenance of the very structures of powers that repressed and divided society goes to show how much of the idea of independence falls short of emancipatory ideals.

Notably, populist tendencies trumped broader national interests during the 1955 General Election. The formation of the Alliance Party was a marriage of convenience between UMNO, MCA and MIC (Nadzri, 2018a). First, the use of the greater goal strategy (such as achieving Merdeka or independence from the British and countering Communist insurgency) rather than a more progressive approach suggests an intention to uphold structures of power albeit under a different authority. Next, the positioning of the political ‘other’ as propagandist and enemies of the state formed lasting narratives when referring to political parties outside the Alliance Party (comprising UMNO, MCA and MIC). For example, parties such as the Parti Negara Pan-Malayan Islamic Party, National Association of Perak, Perak Progressive, and Labour Party were portrayed as racist, tools

of ultra conservative British elements inferring that their ideologies threatened the nation building process (Saravanamuttu, 2016, p. 15). Muhammad M.N. Nadzri (2018b) asserts that elections in Malaysia took the mantle of authoritarianism from the start as it guaranteed British hegemony over the economy particularly in the tin and rubber industry while placing “British made” UMNO elites who were “more lenient and diplomatic” while banning “radical” UMNO rivals such as the Malayan Communist Party and the Malay Youth Union from contesting in the elections.

Consequently, in 1952 and 1955 the Alliance Party’s victory was “a Malay rather than a Malayan victory.” Turnout data indicate that only 12% of the Chinese and 7.5% of the Indians who were eligible voters participated in the election (Carnell, 1955). It was this ‘support’ that fuelled the fixation that a united and progressive Malayan front that was ready to govern. It could be argued that beneath this seemingly unified front there was no cohesive agreement (yet) among races about issues such as national unity, citizenship, economics, and education. As a new nation, much effort was needed to create a Malayan identity in the face of the drive for fundamental Islamisation. F.A. Noor (2003) attributes this to certain factions within UMNO and PAS, who regarded all Malay-Muslims as their natural patrons while upholding “anti-colonial, anti-communist, ethno-nationalist, communitarian” and orthodox Islamic perspectives. In this vein, even though their citizenship was addressed in the Malaysian Constitution, Chinese and Indian immigrants (still) identified strongly with their country of origin.

The Malaysian Constitution solidified all 3Rs within the fabric of Malaysian society at the onset, through the guarantee of the position of the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* or King of Malaysia’s appointment as the head of Islam. Furthermore, the authority and presence of Rulers became evident through titles and “officialising procedures” such as ceremonial processions, and coronations. It was also manifested through the usage of titles and accolades awarded by the King. It was on this basis that a national culture was formed. Scholars have established that culture is a malleable product of history, institutions, and policy, and even more so as a new nation. The UMNO-led government demonstrated a

clear alignment with the British, as evidenced by the considerable attention that was placed on security measures to protect their business interests during that time.

The Internal Security Act (ISA) was launched in 1960 and remains a prominent feature of Malaysian politics. Under this Act, anyone who opposed the ruling party, was considered a subversive deviant. Initially, this Act was a tool to counter the Communist Party of Malay's intention to "wrest political power through armed struggle" (SUHAKAM, 2003). The government's interest in curbing critical voices and forming favourable narratives, particularly those targeted at educated Malays, was apparent in the *Utusan Melayu* saga in the 1960s. Notably, UMNO's meddling and subsequent take-over of the paper resulted in a structural change that turned the representation of (mostly critical) grassroots voices into a mouthpiece for UMNO.

A (ultimately unsuccessful) ninety-three-day strike was carried-out by disgruntled employees who disagreed with the interference of colonialists and politics in the newspaper"(Chia, 2016). The subsequent fallout of *Utusan Melayu's* editor, Said Zahari, and the usage of the Immigration Ordinance by Tunku Abdul Rahman to "bar his entry due to security considerations" (Chua, 2016) in 1961 is evidence of a lack of political will towards representative and deliberative democratic progress. Such 'security considerations' continued censorship of dissenting public opinion under the precipice of *Operation Cold Storage* a collaboration in 1963 between Singapore, Malaya and the British. In September 1963, the Federation of Malaysia, including Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak, in the Malaysian polity mix notwithstanding the lack of "integrating powers and increased heterogeneity" (Oh, 1967) was formed with Singapore leaving the union after 23 months.

There exists a preoccupation to paint the racial riots of 13 May 1969 as an isolated event. From the events of the 1950s through the 1960s discussed above, I suggest that this incident was decades in the making. This fixation of painting it as a singular occurrence without historic context and structural complexities allowed conceptual reconstruction to influence future decisions to increase control in the deliberative sphere and participatory

democracy passivity. Apart from the results of the 1969 General Election and the threat of communist insurgents, high unemployment among youth, a lack of early education opportunities, and farmer indebtedness was contributed to the unrest (Wicks, 1971).

Corporatised Mediated Communalism (1970-late 1990)

In a response to the riots in 1969, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was launched within the Second Malaysia Plan (1971-1975). Vast affirmative policies in the name of wealth redistribution and social reengineering were carried out under this plan setting the stage for political elites to marginalise and legitimise the exemption of large portions of citizenry access to Malaysia's resources. Relevant to my discussion here is the way the NEP's incentives brought about party capitalism and restructured society through pork barrel politics (Lancaster, 1986). This meant that economic and educational opportunities were centred in BN-controlled cities, causing the migration of young people from rural to urban areas.

The 1970s Islamic revolution in these cities was directly attributable to this move (Nagata, 1980; Jomo K.S. & Cheek, 1988). Islamic uprisings in Egypt, Iran, and Pakistan contributed to the rise of organisations such as the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM), the Tabligh and Darul Arqam movements. Among these, ABIM and PAS were vested in the development of political Islam in Malaysia with the former particularly interested in university campus student. Such was valour of the youth movements, that the University College Act was introduced in 1971 to neuter political uprising on campuses. Islam at this point was heavily regulated with far reaching influences in all socioeconomic and political make-up of Malaysia and was under the purview of both the federal and state (Abbott & Gregorios-Pippas, 2010).

The NEP, increased Islamisation and nationalist Malay discourse, which marked a shift toward this group's exceptionalism during the 1970s and subsequently caused a cultural shift in terms of language and lifestyles in the mainstream media. Scholars link this to the loss of political, economic, and cultural grounds for non-Malays that manifested in increased emigration to Canada, the UK, and Australia (J. Singh, 2021). Apart from that,

the NEP changed the political communication landscape particularly in terms of media ownership which favoured Barisan Nasional⁴. This mix of state-run mainstream media⁵ and heightened Islamisation paved the way for a handful of government departments, interest groups and journalists who represent political elites to curate (and even cover up) narratives that would systematically configure the entire nation's outlook on laws and policies that impacted them. In essence, this posed an epistemological crisis as mass media channels were void of a critical perspective from the outset. The absence of evaluative and reproofing qualities at the core of Malaysian media is emblematic of the fact that political sovereignty (from external colonisers) does not always equal the liberation of thought for the commoner.

John Hiley (2001) referred to the 1980s as the *Mahathirism* era. Mahathir's move to include outsider and ABIM president Anwar Ibrahim was part of plan advanced and advocated for state backed Islamisation in countering the "Arabisation" of PAS Politics (F. A. Noor, 2003). Much of this thesis will explore the notions of technological developmentalism during the Mahathir era. After all, he was etched as *Bapa Pemodenan Malaysia* (Father of Modern Malaysia). Mahathir often dealt with voices of discontent harshly, sometimes with state-sanctioned violence, particularly those with the potential of affective energy to mobilise. Over the course of his tenure the weeding operation or *Operasi Lalang* in 1987⁶, and the usage of Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 to suspend or block publications⁷. Print permits for opposition publications were also controlled. Mahathir's tenure was largely unchallenged. As such, after the 1969 racial riots, only two other political incidents were considered a rupture of Malay hegemony: Tengku Razaleigh's 1987 decision to challenge Mahathir for the UMNO Presidency and the 1998 removal of Anwar Ibrahim (Temuttu, 2016, p. 11).

Contested Mediated Communalism (late 1990 – 2013)

⁴ founded in 1973, replacing the Alliance Party

⁵ discussed in Section 1.3.5

⁶ discussed in Section 1.3.4

⁷ discussed in Section 1.3.5

The late 1990s marked a period of upheaval and contestation in Malaysian politics, with socio-political movements mostly rooted in the 1997 financial crisis and the ousting of Anwar Ibrahim reshaping the landscape of political communication. During the 1999 General Elections, the Malaysian media's coverage of the killings of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia reverberated concerns about political stability in Malaysia as it aimed to curb the opposition's influence. The entry of *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) changed the composition of oppositional politics in Malaysia through *Barisan Alternatif*, a coalition of PKR, DAP, and PAS. This strategy was successful (for the first time) in eroding *Barisan Nasional*'s (BN) two-thirds majority in parliament, signifying the "loss of significant support from the Malays" (Martinez, 2001). The emergence of *Barisan Alternatif* coincided with the rise of alternative media and therefore offered hope to challenge the hegemony of the ruling coalition. For example, *HarakahDaily* an online version of *Harakah* was launched in 1997, and *Malaysiakini* an online news portal, was used along with traditional methods such as *ceramah* (rallies), posters, leafleting mailboxes, and loud hailing (using megaphones), with or without police permits during the 1999 and 2004 general and state elections (Ficher, 2009).

Several successful public marches were organised during this time for the factors discussed in following sections. Notably, in 1998, the Reformasi movement saw a crowd of almost 40,000 Anwar Ibrahim supporters. Mahathir stepped down in 2003 and handed premiership to the more liberal Abdullah Badawi (Hamid & Ismail, 2012). In 2007, the Malaysian Bar, The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH) and Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) held protests that attracted tens of thousands. These events along with post 9/11 sentiments which "pitted the West against the Muslim world" and PAS shift to a moderate image increased PAS' stronghold in Malaysia (Fauzi Abdul Hamid, 2010). Even though mainstream media control was held either by ownership by UMNO, MCA, and MIC and legislative barriers, the establishment was continuously challenged, and it was these alternative views on online platforms that mobilised these protests (W. L. Kim, 2001). Significantly, these gatherings were jointly organised by civil society organisations which signalled a struggle that was not purely political and instead reached broader narratives of justice, equality, and liberation to citizens.

During Abdullah Badawi's tenure as Prime Minister in 2007, Malaysia ranked 124 of 169 the countries surveyed. Transparency International Malaysia attributed this drop of 32 ranks in a single year to the harassment of "internet bloggers and their families, problem of access to official information"(Navaratnam, 2008). He stepped down after losing the "internet war" during the 12th General Election's, which was popularly described as the political tsunami of 2008. Najib Razak (2012), son of second Prime Minister took over with promises of "emphasis on human rights and civil liberties". Since Najib Razak's premiership was full of scandal, the natural response was to place stringent control on the media. Notably, the suspension of *The Edge*, *Medium.com*, *The Malaysian Insider*, the banning of *The Sarawak Report* founder and *Al Jazeera* journalist entering Malaysia, and the threat to sue *The Wall Street Journal* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Tapsell, 2016).

Polarised Mediated Communalism (2013-2020)

As reflected in earlier sections, the media ecosystem in Malaysia was characterised by multiple controls, both epistemological and material. The passing of The Anti-Fake News Act 2018 which regulated "any news, words or ideas" with "extraterritorial" reach toward any harmful content "prejudicial to public order or national security" and gives the police authority to "take the necessary measures to remove such publication" (Abu Seman et al., 2019) is testament of these stringent controls even with the advent of social media technologies. Such policies are difficult to enforce in an environment void of an apparent mainstream media. Media consumption has shifted from generic public to personalised, often polarised private spheres. As may be deduced from the discussions above, regardless of whether Malaysia was under colonial or local leadership, the powerful always upheld the hegemony of the ruling class while fostering political passivity among commoners. Peter Golding's question (in Amon Prodnik, 2023, pp. 320–321) "how is it that we live in a society with such huge inequalities, and we are not living through a revolution?" resonates when analysing the events that surround the Sheraton Move. I argue that heavy-handed manipulation within the mediatic spaces of the private sphere is part of the answer to this question.

I recognise that online political communication is not produced in isolation and the landscape in which this occurs is constructed by various factors, such as the state-backed implementation of The Multimedia Super Corridor, the role of digital natives, the rise of constitutional patriotism and the role of media organisation in the Malaysian context. These discussions are vital as Malaysia has a high mobile technology adoption rate as evidenced by the high smartphone penetration rate. Papacharissi (2015a) characterised a population that is increasingly accessing politics through digital means as a “transient public”. The proximity of the technologies suggests a blurring of what the citizenry considers public or private. As a result, a certain degree of reflexivity is experienced in the political realm where “impromptu, casual and unforced” reactions that was previously associated with informal spheres is now formative to democratic expressions (Papacharissi, 2015a, pp. 117–121).

1.3.2 The Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC)

In this thesis, I argue that democracy is something innate within society and sprouts out when it is presented with a medium, or even what appears to be a medium. This is especially apparent in Malaysia, as prior to social media, all mainstream media had some form of state stronghold in its structure. Politically expressive freedom was suppressed. However, in the late 1990s, this status quo appeared to be challenged by the introduction of the internet. This is akin to what Papacharissi (2010, p. 3) calls “the mystical connection between technology and democracy”. Time and again when civilisation encountered technologies with “expressive capabilities” from cave drawings to the printing press to the telegraph, radio, television, and social networking platforms, society have become accustomed to conveying notions of “emancipation, autonomy and freedom” (Papacharissi, 2010).

Apart from the lure of an open, truly democratic platform, the adoption of social media is rooted in the advent of the internet and related telecommunication technologies. I argue that while these technologies appeared to present opportunities to invigorate political communication with liberating capabilities, capitalist tendencies seem to seep in under

the pretext of modernisation. The key to this normalisation is the introduction of the MSC in 1996. The fourth and seventh Prime Minister (1998, p. 30) explained that “MSC is a pilot project for harmonising our entire country with the global forces shaping the information age”. He understood the internet wave as “the evolution of a new way of life in the unfolding age of information and knowledge”, and MSC was deemed to usher Malaysian society “into a developed and informational society” by the year 2020.

This asserted that the internet was here intended to broaden the social and political basis of citizen representation because it was promoted as a public service amenity. Scholars have argued that this vision was not accompanied by the corresponding systemic legal, economic, and political changes; such desired goals entailed (Jomo, 1990; Nain, 1991, 1996). For instance, the state stronghold in the media was not revised to allow the flourishing of information in society (Zaharom, 1994). Despite all its grandiose ideas, the MSC failed to transform the “information poor to information rich” (Howkins, 1982; Nain, 1996) due to the omission of transformation within the “political, social, and symbolic processes far beyond the economic and geographical spaces” (S. Jackson & Mosco, 1999; Jomo & Chowdhury, 2012).

The fact that MSC was only coupled with several economic incentives and changes to accommodate investors meant that the initiative was purely a developmental commercial endeavour to ‘modernise’ instead of revitalising the democratic agency of the citizenry. So, was the promise of an “uncensored internet” under the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 and the Multimedia Bill of Guarantees (M. Lim, 2016, p. 215) a commitment by the Malaysian government. Nevertheless, the actual implementation has been subject to debate and scrutiny (Kenyon & Marjoribanks, 2007; Rodan, 2004). Evidently internet freedom monitors such as the Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) and Freedom House continue to demonstrate how this promise is still unrealised (Schenkkan & Repucci, 2019; Xynou et al., 2016).

Similarly, a closer look at the development of MSC mirrored what Garnham (2000) predicted. The initiative was "driven not by the demands of consumers but by the

demands of the corporate sector, and that other social uses were an almost accidental by-product of this demand” (Garnham, 2000, p. 80). Most gainers of the MSC were international technology giants who secured huge procurement contracts (Zaharom, 1996). In contrast, the losers of MSC were public goods such as the Smart School initiative, which remained without electricity (S. Jackson & Mosco, 1999, p. 36). Such failures confirm the argument that looking at technology in isolation promotes myth expansion and adoption of gadgetry, to exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities in the Malaysian society (Zaharom, 1987).

The Digital Evolution Index 2017 stated that Malaysia was leading the “Break out” pact to be a “Stand out” nation: “nations that can be considered the digital elite; both highly digitally evolved and advancing quickly”. In addition, Malaysia recorded a Trust surplus which emphasised the fact that Malaysians are “patient and engaged users despite high friction experiences online and relatively less trustworthy environments” (Mastercard, 2017). In addition, *The Reuters Institute Digital Report 2017* revealed that Malaysians were the highest consumers of news via WhatsApp applications in the world (Zaharom, 2017). The Internet Users Survey 2022 revealed that Malaysia’s internet penetration rate has exploded from almost non-existent in the 1990s to 92.7% in 2022. Of that, 96% of users are “active internet users” with 75% spending more than 5 hours online. 98% of internet users use social media on a daily basis (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2023). Naturally, politicians adopted these platforms to reach their constituents.

Arguments brought forward by Zaharom (1987) as Malaysia embarks the adoption of 5G networks are relevant: First, the initiative fails to mention the actual adoption cost. Second, the project is wildly optimistic and adopts one size that fits all stances. Third, there is heavy reliance on foreign providers for processors, hardware, software and the ecosystem in which the technology operates – in this case, Huawei and Ericsson, both international technology firms (Bernama, 2019a). Finally, this will widen the information gap between those with access and vice versa, especially among those with no internet access.

1.3.3 Role of Digital Natives

Digital natives were born and grew up in a networked world (Barlow, 2008). Malaysian lawmakers unanimously agreed to further empower digital natives by reducing the voting age from 21 to 18, automatically registering voters, and allowing 18-year-olds to stand for elections (Channel News Asia, 2019). Another aspect of this cohort is they are increasingly literate. The Department of Statistics figures attest to the rise in the number of educated Malaysians. In 1982, there were 955,000 of the total population of 14.5 million Malaysians with a minimum education level of SPM. In 1990, this number was more than double to two million of the total population of 18 million. By 2000, there were 4.2 million of the total population of 23.2 million Malaysian with a minimum O' Level of education. From 6.6% in 1982 to 18.1% in 2000 to more than 50% in 2010 Malaysia had a minimum secondary level of education (Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal, 2019). Vaidhyathan (2018, p. 130) calls social media users "global cosmopolitan technology elites".

Social media usage reinforces "literacy as a form of social control, designed to keep people in their place" (Golding & Murdock, 1997, p. 201) and problematises the term 'digital native'. Further complicating this is the actualisation of "digital depression" sometimes in the form of language disparity between the urban and rural population (D. Schiller, 2014). Although connectivity continues to improve, language barriers continue to exist on social media platforms (Beaton et al., 2017, pp. 563, 574). Such technological fixes will continue to widen the divide as these groups will be treated as different market segments or worse as "underserved markets" (Jenkins et al., 2013, pp. 188–189). Apart from this, research demonstrates how the nature of political participation involves fewer in-person activities, such as volunteering, but more virtual and non-local events (Bennett, 2008). Therefore, the notion of the "new poor" continues to exist in its more contemporary form (Hoffer, 1951).

Data from the Ministry of Rural Development reveal an inequalitarian picture. When comparing the education levels of rural and urban areas, a gap begins to emerge,

especially when higher levels of education are compared. In 2017, 75% of the total population was classified as urban dwellers and comprised 95% of graduates in the country (Ministry of Rural Development, 2018). This demographic is what Golding and Murdock (1997) calls the “educationally and socio-economically advantaged”. To this end, the illiterate, and those unable to speak in English (and/or Malay) “lack the social capital” to use these technologies (Pankaj, 2010, p. 228). In this study, I aimed to investigate the 'inclusiveness' of Twitter in representing those with no presence on the platform (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 193). Therefore, the class struggle in Malaysian society is real, and not all youths may be identified as digital natives.

This demographic has brought about the rise of authoritarian populist leaders known as digital demagogues (Fuchs, 2018). Citizenry, which is identified as marginalised is drawn to these personalities as digital demagogues due to the architecture of social media platforms. While earlier versions of authoritarian leadership are usually associated with military strength, this new breed of leaders have armies of programmers and content creators that circumvent traditional editorial processes. These analytic firms are public relation firms in their most contemporary form, tasked with manipulation by repressing and amplifying online posts to aggregate engagement (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). Demagogues usually successfully achieve attunement through media spectacles.

1.3.4 Rise of Constitutional Patriotism

The task of creating a just, free, and prosperous Malaysia is a work in progress (Jomo K. S., 1990, p. 247) calls for fundamental solutions towards nation-building include “the restoration of the constitution and legal system, guaranteed human rights and civil liberties”, and a “return to the national ideology 'Rukunegara' towards a progressive society” (Jomo K. S., 1990, p. 247). This thesis tests whether political communication on Twitter has brought us a step closer towards these ideals of nation-building. Could a Web 2.0 enabled platform provide Malaysians with a more vibrant public sphere? As these principles are already part of the Malaysian Constitution, could Twitter play an emancipatory role in challenging the dominant social, political, and economic forces that impede the application of free democratic deliberation among citizens?

Essential to this section is the brief discussion about the Malaysian constitution. Article 10 clauses 2, 3 and 4 of the Malaysian constitution enshrines fundamental democratic liberties concerning political communication such as the “freedom of speech, right to assemble, and right to form associations” respectively. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that Malaysians have always been free to exercise their political freedom. The history of political prosecution in Malaysia has left many with the opinion that those rights in the Constitution are better suited for a matured democracy than a country previously known for imprisoning vocal members of the opposition. This resonates with what Noam Chomsky (2015) calls a totalitarian state where “internally one can think what one likes, but one can only express opposition at one’s peril”. It might be argued that contradiction is essential to authoritarian political cultures, where a nation is built on the premise of cooperation, compromise, and respect for individual rights, but those principles are trampled when the government of the day is challenged.

Freedom of political communication has been a topic of controversy for decades in Malaysia. There were events long before the discussion of Malaysian politics on internet-enabled social networking sites such as *Ops Lalang*⁸ in 1987 when authorities detained over a hundred people of opposing political views without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA). As discussed earlier, the publishing licenses of *The Star*, *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, *The Sunday Star* and *Watan* were revoked by the authorities for producing *dissenting* ideas. Two decades earlier, in May 1969, the public witnessed constitutional curbs on the freedom of speech in the public sphere and parliament was put into place (Beng, 2018). Decades later, new media would severely undermine mainstream media that had been a mainstay of BN power.

In Malaysia, from the beginning, the rise of independent news in the form of online portals became a radical democratic movement. The events of September 1998 in Malaysia marked the genesis of online political communication in Malaysia, which was viewed as an alternative to the mainstream. The sacking and consequent arrest of then deputy prime

⁸ Literally translates to weeding operation

minister, Anwar Ibrahim, in 1998 provides a useful point of departure for my outline of contemporary electronic democracy practices in Malaysia, providing a dramatic case of the intersection between traditional mass media, a new social networking media and a democratic movement. It was the inception of what Yonchai Benkler later called “process-oriented peer-production” (Hutchby, 2001). “The people formerly known as the audience” as Jay Rosen described, were now active proponents of “the politically infused ‘participatory media’” (Bar et al., 2015).

Soon after his sacking, Anwar rallied supporters by tens of thousands in street protests and via the Internet. Later, with Anwar behind bars, and the government cracking down on demonstrations, the campaign he had waged shifted mainly to the internet (Heryanto & Mandal, 2003). The news media personified and personalized the political process; therefore, events and crises were associated more with individual actors than with political institutions or broad social movements, (M.Y. Lee, 2006) further promoting reactionary politics in Malaysia. Meanwhile, out of the resistance of state-controlled mass media, a seemingly proletarian public sphere, with its networks of interaction, solidarity and forms of association was formed (Leong, 2018). Furthermore, as was evident from the end of 1998, digital intermediaries have allowed technological affordance in Malaysia. Scholars argue that media representation can have seemingly favourable effects on democracy (Cottle, 2005; S. Young et al., 2007).

Reducing the struggle for liberties such as freedom of speech to straightforward punitive actions such as imprisonment would injustice to the complexity of the larger struggle for a healthy democracy in Malaysia. More recently, citizens have been imprisoned after being formally charged and convicted of their posts on social media. Headlines such as *Hawker pleads guilty to insulting Prophet Muhammad* (Bernama, 2019b) and *Anger at arrests in Malaysia for alleged royal insults* (AFP, 2019) state the reason for the arrests for “causing racial disharmony, incitement, and misusing communications networks”. In the case of civil servants’, apart from their Code of Conduct and Discipline orders, their online posts are subject to Penal Code 505 and The Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (Act 588).

1.3.5 Media Organisations

Scholars lament that “communications media have failed democracy” as it has fallen short in terms of keeping the public informed about “social and political processes” that affect them the most (Golding & Murdock, 1997). Cherian George (2007) argues that the state of mainstream media organisations in Malaysia mirrored an authoritarian regime. This was the case of mass media in Malaysia. As it was society and society’s problems were only viewed from the “official perspective that asserts press freedom as long as they do not threaten national interest” (Zaharom, 1991, p. 39) hence limiting its usage as the government’s public service announcement channel. The media was stripped to the barest “functionalist” form and was used to portray “leaders as always benevolent and responsive to the crying needs of the ordinary citizen” (Anuar, 2000, p. 184).

Challenges such as censorship and increased barriers to entry called for creative thought and prompt action during the Reformasi era from September 1998 onward (George, 2007; Sani, 2005). Legislation, such as the Sedition Act of 1948, the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984, the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, and Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (SOSMA), the Peaceful Assembly Act 2012, and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) 2015 all impeded the development of independent and free mass media in Malaysia. Nonetheless, social networking technologies lowered the barriers to entry for smaller media organisations to compete for attention with large well-funded and established media organisations (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 280). This was evident with the rise of independent news portals such as *Malaysiakini* and *The Malaysian Insider*. Before that, running a brick-and-mortar media agency were only endeavours of the “wealthy media barons” (Golding & Murdock, 1997) which in the case of Malaysia were government-linked companies (GLCs).

For a long period, state-run media was the norm in Malaysia, as is evident in the case of radio and television channels under Radio Television Malaysia (RTM). Apart from entirely state-run channels, private television channels such as TV3, NTV7, TV8, TV9, and ASTRO were indirectly controlled as they were owned by government-linked companies

(Zaharom, 1994). As described by Michael Foucault (1980) contemporary methods of power are "operations not ensured by right but by a technique not by law but by normalisation, not by punishment but by control" (cited in Halperin, 1998). Such structural features within the media organisation translate into mechanisms whereby the basic patterns of power and social hierarchy detrimentally shape the character of the mass media in the public sphere through planted material, disinformation, and trivialization (Turner, 2009). Backed by stringent authoritarian enforcement mechanisms that operate by institutionally delimiting the public sphere, the state, together with vested interests, pursued media policies that hindered the flow of any form of accountability while constricting the range of formal opinions (Rodan, 2004).

These controls were challenged in the 1990s. *Asiaweek* then reported the sudden blossoming of alternative news portals online in response to the frustration of local news curbs during the Anwar saga (Erickson, 1998). It would appear that the ruling coalition was still under the impression that government-controlled media was the only news source that reached the masses. With the amassing of opinions from multiple credible sources, mainly wire stories, and posting them online, many Malaysians were privy to alternative news. It was during this period that independent, private or activist-run online news organisations were made available. *Malaysiakini* (Chin, 2003) and later *The Malaysian Insider (TMI)* began challenging the status quo of the mass media landscape in Malaysia (W. L. Kim, 2014; Leong, 2018).

Such news portals were the central focus of studies about online Malaysian politics of the Reformasi era illustrated by the dozens of websites with names like "*Voice of Freedom*" and "*Where is Justice*" which sprang up (Anuar, 2000; G. C. Khoo, 2014; W. L. Kim, 2014; Lemière, 2018; J. Lim, 2017; Weiss, 2013b). These sites purveyed content ranging from Anwar Ibrahim's recorded speeches, to attacks against draconian politicians, to news reports deliberately left out by state-controlled media. In turn, this online political bombardment could have played a role in recruiting thousands of previously quiet publics as supporters who pursued this further by attending politically charged rallies in Dataran Merdeka. Hence this thesis argues that the internet did not cause the political uprising, in

the late 1990s, but instead allowed for “instant political education” and “amplified and accelerated the already existing political struggle” among citizens. The Web seems to have provided citizen journalists and political commentators with the alternative “communicative tools” that they needed (Vaidhyathan, 2018, p. 130,144).

Before the *Reformasi* movement which utilised the internet, political news was obtained mainly from state-controlled mainstream media for the first time in Malaysia. As ownership was entirely by groups aligned with the ruling government (George, 2007), the media mirrored another form of public service – neither questioning nor challenging notions of openness, transparency, and accountability. Realising that controlling minds was the ultimate form of control (Ghuman, 2010, p. 93), they were consistently at the forefront of promoting government services (Zaharom, 1994). Alternative political news was only available via a few opposition-run newspapers (Sani, 2005), books, *ceramahs*, international news, interviews, internally circulated brochures and recorded media (VHS and later CDs). Communication was almost entirely hierarchical and top-down. Interactions with politicians were limited to physical meetings during town halls, public events, letters, and meetings with representatives of elected officials. Social media, an integral part of Web 2.0, promised to change this in the vein of Marshall McLuhan's (1964, p. 21) “the medium is the message”, characterised by “relations structured by power and difference” (Morley, 1993, p. 15) where “the media has a role in constructing the message” (S. Young et al., 2007, p. 52).

In this thesis, I aim to explore whether these promises of new media are met or whether the inequalities that exist with previous communication technologies will continue to exist if not exacerbated by Twitter. As argued by P. Jackson (2005), democracy is not granted and fixed forever, far from finished business, democracy is an ongoing project that requires eternal vigilance and continuous reform. Military coups or wars have not endangered Malaysian democracy. Instead, it has been the state-run media's storyboard, the absence of a mainstream transparent accountability medium, marginalised minority voices, and a widened information gap. In light of the Pakatan Harapan takeover after GE14, Malaysia has shown improvements in political rights and civil liberties

(Freedomhouse.org, 2019; Schenkkan & Repucci, 2019). Looking forward, the glass may be half-full or half-empty, and the role of Twitter in this respect is investigated.

1.4 Overview of the Thesis

This thesis attempts to investigate Twitter's role in Malaysian democracy through an examination of the political communication by politicians, media organisations, and societal users. While my approach is not technologically deterministic, Twitter is nonetheless used as a political communication tool by political actors (Murthy, 2013; Vaidhyathan, 2018). This was the case during the Sheraton Move and hence what appears to be a public sphere on Twitter is investigated against Habermasian standards.

Given the focus of my thesis, terms such as the public sphere, democracy, Twitter posts, politicians, media organisations, and citizenry featured prominently throughout my research. I offer a general operational definition of these key concepts as these terms have been central to research in numerous contexts. Foremost, the term 'public sphere' in my work refers to the political public sphere and draws mainly from the Habermasian public sphere. The term 'democracy' is used in the context of liberal tendencies often associated with social media platforms, such as freedom of expression in online deliberations in the form of rational critical debates on issues of public interest. Twitter posts were mainly tweets, retweets, @mentions, and #hashtags. 'Politicians' refer mostly to members of parliament. The term 'media organisations' is difficult to define because platforms such as Twitter have augmented what media organisations do. Therefore, I attempt to add nuances to the existing understanding of media. Finally, the term 'citizenry' refers to the societal class on Twitter. Twitter users in Malaysia mainly belong to the urban middle class.

Chapter One delved into the historical context and introduced recent developments surrounding political communication in Malaysia. Political participatory trends characterising democracy in Malaysia through structural, representational, and interactional levels of analysis set the context for the rest of the study. Chapter Two lays out the theoretical dimensions of the research framework, identifies and defines

terminology and concepts. It begins by providing a parallel between Habermas' public sphere and the levels of analysis found in the framework. Consequently, academic literature on political communication in Malaysia and Twitter was reviewed.

In Chapter Three, I focused on how the Sheraton Move and Twitter are approached in my study. Subsequently, I bring together the discussions in Chapters Two and Three to lay out the research framework. I find this organisation helpful as it provides a systematic approach to funnel the wider aspects of democracy and media to form a viable way forward for the empirical phase of my thesis. Chapter Four explains the mixed-method methodology used and describes the various procedures and methods used in operationalising my thesis. In Chapter Five, I combine both the presentation of findings and discussion of analysis because it is simply the case that the empirical work was not as clearly demarked as intended. Finally, in Chapter Six, I conclude my research by bringing all three levels of analysis together to answer the research questions and suggest future avenues of research to overcome the limitations of my study.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Foundations of Research Framework

In this chapter, I aim to provide a conceptual framework through which political communication on Twitter can be theorised and consequently approached. It identifies and defines relevant terminology and concepts. The chapter is divided into three sections. First, I investigate the possibility of extending Habermas' notion of the public sphere to explain Malaysian political communication on Twitter. Second, an appraisal of notable Malaysian political communication on social media studies is offered. Third, I offer a review of the proposed research framework that will be used to explain political communication on Twitter. Expanding from the work of Peter Dahlgren, the research framework consists of three dimensions which are the structural, representational, and interactional levels of analysis.

2.1 The Habermas Public Sphere

My use of Habermas as my focal point of critical attention, besides its relevance, is strategic for three reasons. First, Habermas provides notions such as *Lifeworld*, and *the Public Sphere*, as will be discussed in the later sections, to examine the state democratic discourse in a society. Second, using Habermas avoids the trap of a research that is ahistorical. Habermas provides a historical depth to the formation and development of public opinion outside the ruling aristocracy. My research uses Habermas as a theoretical foundation and accounts for more recent themes in subsequent sections. Third, Habermas provided precedence in studying the 'transformation' of citizen political communication from private dialogue to society-wide, democratic, decision-making discourse. Habermas says "these public spheres in the early period extended gradually...from art to politics" (cited in Cao, 2006, p. 44). I delve into the origins of Habermas in Appendix 1.

Natalie Fenton identifies Habermas' public sphere for its emphasis on discourse analysis as a fundamental element of Bourgeois societies, which is 'between' or 'out of' market economy and sovereign state." As Fenton (2016, p. 20) put it "any debates that draw on ideas relating to political engagement, citizenship and the media inevitably fall back on criteria proffered by Habermas in relation to the role of the media in a fully functioning

public sphere". Further, the appeal of this theory of discourse to conceptualise the discursive nature of online communication platforms is important for four interrelated reasons as presented by Fraser (2013). Foremost, this theory provides insight to how "social identities" are formed and subsequently evolve. Second, it provides my research with a relevant theoretical lens to investigate the ways in which society reacts given the inequalities posed by online platforms. Third, a framework to understand the formation and subsequent questioning of "cultural hegemony of dominant groups" is offered. Fourth, with all this added insight, and considering the political nature of discursive actions, it presents an opportunity for examining "emancipatory social change" (Fraser, 2013, p. 127).

Habermas (1984), in his seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* in 1962, introduced the concept of a healthy public sphere as a space with three main characteristics. First, the establishment of a rational-critical argument as a criterion of judgment, as opposed to social status. All members are assumed to have equal status. Second, a restriction to discuss common concerns topics only. Third, openness to all members of the public" (Habermas, 1984). According to Habermas (1990), the ultimate purpose of a public sphere was to facilitate the "abolishment of the state as an instrument of dominion altogether". Habermas poses a level field that allows discourse to occur in the public sphere. This discourse provides for what Bohman calls "a link to radical democratic and reformist politics," as the public sphere allows a better platform for public decision making and self-rule (1996: p.21). Further, the notion of "public opinion" was enshrined as the answer to "rationalise politics". Considering the pioneering nature of this idea, STPS has been widely cited in research on theories of the public sphere and deliberative democracy.

2.1.1 Principles of the Public Sphere

This section discusses six principles derived from the public sphere, as presented by Dahlberg (2004, p. 2). One of the most influential and utilised theories of the public sphere describes it as "a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the

circulation of information, ideas, debates, ideally in an unfettered manner, and the formation of political will and public opinion” (Goode, 2005). Habermas defined what it meant to be public and advanced the notion of the ideal communication of politics between citizens not only outside private homes, but also outside institutional circles (Freelon, 2010; Hannu, 2007). According to Bohman (1996) and Dahlberg (2004), six principles further expand the criteria above that provide ideal conditions for democratic communication. Adjusted to the contemporary schema of things, these principles provide a parameter for measuring the democratic potential of political communication purposes on social media platforms.

The first principle is *Inclusion and Equality*: addresses how to create new, more extensive, inclusive public spaces for deliberation and mobilising existing communication networks to formal power invested in institutions to develop and enforce an egalitarian public sphere. This discourse lies at the heart of Habermas' public sphere. Second, *autonomy from state and corporate power* echoes Horkheimer's goal in traditional and critical theory, which is “the emancipation of human beings from the circumstances that enslave them”. Third, *public interest above self Interest* or reflexivity or a set of self-understandings by which a group of persons see themselves as a collective or public. Fourth, the notion of *prioritising public opinion* sets rational critical debates as the basic structure of communication in the public sphere. Fifth, in the *formation of the community* when the public sphere is successful, communal boundaries will be more diffused and overlapping cultures embraced. Finally, *sincerity and rational interaction* where communication is based on trust, credibility and discursive openness.

2.1.1.1 Inclusion and Equality

Habermas' theory is grounded in normative communication and communicative power within society, and this mandates the principle of inclusion as a criterion of political structures. Inclusion in the context of political communication is relevant for discussing discursive equality. Inclusion increases the appeal of notions of justice while moving away from merely focusing on self-interest because involving many decision-making processes engenders differing opinions (Bohman, 1996). The public sphere is open to all affected,

and each participant is given an equal opportunity to question and react. Instead, civil society is tasked to point out when inequalities or exclusion happens. The notion of digital inclusion is recognised as a construct of equality among citizens and tasks the government or municipal to address that inequality (Karpowitz et al., 2009).

2.1.1.2 Autonomy from State and Corporate Power

Historically the term 'private' was a form of "demarcation" and sent a clear message that authorities were not welcome. Opinions and deliberations represented "private individuals"(Nathans, 1990, p. 622). As explained in the earlier section, advertising and commercialisation set in motion the decline of the public sphere and instead brought about intervention from the state in terms of regulation (I. M. Young, 2011) and corporate power in terms of ownership and capital control. Bohman (1996) claimed that wealth and power became conditions for public autonomy. Moreover, the notion of autonomy is characterised by hybridity particularly in the sphere where citizens come to contact online. A scholar argues that the distinction between private and public is not merely "territorial", instead of the dynamics and "tensions between these two that set the stage for political interaction" (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 25). American political philosopher, Jean Bethke Elshtain goes on to state that "only in the space opened up by the ongoing choreography of the public and private can politics exist – or at least any politics that deserves to be called democratic"(Elshtain, 1997, p. 180).

2.1.1.3 Policing Public Interest

Dahlberg (2004) describes general norms as the basis for the recognition of issues that represent a public concern. According to Habermas, claims brought for argumentation in the public sphere need to be representative (Plotke, 1997) and "encompassing all humans". Plotke (1997) rejects the Cold War proponents of "minimal democracy with slight notions of representation". Moreover, authentic representational politics is needed to champion public interests (Coleman, 2011). From a broader perspective, this principle defines what Habermas means by 'public' and therefore sets the tone for what can be seen as 'public interest'. Several terms that take new meaning when viewed from this lens, for example 'public opinion' stating that it is possible for "different minds" to work

together (Bohman, 1996; Dahlgren, 2005a), 'public relations' and even 'mass media'. This principle stems back to the philosophical foundations that define the 'social' in 'social media' and attempt to answer the question by Fuchs (2017b) "What is social about social media?".

2.1.1.4 Positioning Public Opinion

In this study, I argue that law and institutions play contentious roles in cementing the position of public opinion in society. My research suggests that democracy becomes a reality only when public opinion is taken seriously in a society. In this vein, the notion of reflexivity or the occurrence of "respectful and impulsive deliberation demanded by self-seeking individuals to be transformed into publicly orientated citizens and public opinion to develop that can feed into formal decision-making processes"(Glynn et al., 2018). To some extent, this principle is at the core of public opinion formation. Public opinion is created through dialogue. An exchange of views allows for balanced judgment of interests. "The partisan nature of political discourse would never escape personal prejudice without open exchanges of informed and compelling expressions of preferences and reasons that could contribute to achieving a shared understanding (Dahlgren, 2009). Consequently, as accentuated by seventeenth-century philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, the aggregation of this expression is crucial to the establishment of the state and opposed the Machiavellian philosophy that "statesman design society, whereas the solitary, poor, nasty public plays no positive role" (Dahlberg, 2007, p. 34).

2.1.1.5 Formation of Community

I seek to explore whether Twitter affirms or negates the formation of a better community. To this end, investigations are informed by another principle of Habermas' public sphere, which is 'ideal role-taking'. This principle speaks of the unfettered self and communitarianism. Habermas stated that participants apply empathy to their fellow citizens. Hence, they put themselves in the position of all those potentially affected by the arguments under consideration, and accordingly consider the situation from these other perspectives during the process of deliberation (Glynn et al., 2018).

Further expanding this notion of civic agency and pluralism is Manuel Castells' work on the rise of 'networked society' and Robert D. Putnam's exposition of social capital. Castells identifies 'virtual communitarians' as a subculture within the web that are 'content managers' who facilitate online communal spaces that allow social interaction (Castells, 2007). On the other hand, Putnam argues that instead of contributing toward 'stronger ties' a networked society enabled by social networking sites has a further fragmented society and exacerbated the vanishing ways of orthodox communities resulting in the collapse of society (Putnam, 1994).

2.1.1.6 Sincere and Rational Interaction

To be meaningful, the previously mentioned ideal role-taking must be coupled with honesty and discursive openness. This thesis examines the form in which sincerity, truthfulness, and rightness are expressed on Twitter. Dahlgren (2005b) demonstrates that the apparent deficit within democratic societies is proven by a dwindling voter turnout and overall detachment from politics. This deficit can be attributed to functions of intergenerational change, rising levels of education resulting in a crisis of trust in mainstream political parties and the government in general, according to which citizens feel misrepresented and as a result, manifest in the form of alienation from legitimate political participation (Bohman, 1996). Similarly, the level of trust and support for social welfare policies has an inverse relationship (Dahlberg, 2004). Evidently, public trust or distrust is a particular type of resource in democratic societies as reflected in online political communication. Fortunately, this is not a scarce economic resource that is depleted by use. Rather, it is a "moral resource" that increases through use (A.R. Lee, 2003). Hence, some users take the role of gatekeepers to enhance the credibility of information on social media (Hetherington, 2006). Moreover, the influx of pre-programmed bots, paid PR content, propaganda fabrication, fake news creation and the notion of sincerity begs investigation.

2.1.2 Critique of the Habermas' Public Sphere

First, Habermas' public sphere claims to be a "purely deliberative" institution where stakeholders congregate to debate on issues affecting them. David Morley (2007) called

this a masking of commercial establishments by invoking “symbolic function” to avoid scrutiny toward capitalist goals (Morley, 2007, p. 27). This is not a practical reality, as the oligarch does not seek to include common citizens in the high-stake discussions (White, 2014). (Koivisto & Valiveronen, 1996) suggest that not all are fair, and a level playing field for citizens in its entirety is not a practical idea. The notion that deliberation will always be rational is also flawed, as public meetings often get “irrational, illogical, and nasty” (Dahlgren, 2013). Notions of rationality in the sphere have been challenged and labelled as a display of “herd mentality” (Ghuman, 2010, p. 88). The Malaysian public sphere is part of a broader multicultural, multi-class context, is inequalitarian and relates to the views of the scholars mentioned above.

Second, a public sphere is as the name suggests, means that only issues that involve citizens are deliberated. Some scholars point out that it is impossible to distinguish between public and private life as the line between the two have been blurred owing to social networking sites (Megele, 2014). Habermas insufficiently theorised that any democratic society would operate in a division between a well-defined public and private, and those two would not overlap in a “free and healthy social life” (Dahlberg, 2001) as is in Malaysia. For example, the Malaysian society is not purely secular considering that laws govern private matters such as religion (Aziz & Shamsul, 2004; Guan, 2011), family matters (G. C. Khoo, 2014), and sexual orientation (Ng et al., 2015; Offord, 2016). Political communication in Malaysia often intersects with these aspects.

Third, the Habermasean principles are based on communitarianism which assumes that all citizens are politically inclined. However, few are interested in political discussion (C. S. King et al., 1998). Several studies have pointed toward a decline in democratic participation due to a lack of interest (Goos et al., 2011) and even fear of being labelled (J. Lim, 2017). The notion of “universal value” is deemed incompatible in metropolitan societies (Garnham, 2000). In this regard, scholars point out that *Reformasi* and BERSIH rallies were “acts of citizenship”, where Malaysian displayed sensed a sense of community (G. C. Khoo, 2014; J. Lim, 2017). In this vein, Peter Dahlgren suggests that political communication on online platforms could be framed more accurately in terms of

“civic cultures” instead of Habermas’ “discursive rationalism” (Dahlgren, 1995). While the latter insists on the “demanding”, “high ideals” the former recognises that interaction is “not always rational or civil” (Dahlgren, 2005a, p. 156). Furthermore, such “rationalist bias” may overlook what Noam Chomsky calls “popular activism” in the form “day to day pressuring” (J. Chan, 2020) or the role of “affect” as argued by Zizi Papacharissi (2015a).

Fourth, Habermas's discussions of the public sphere were originally homogeneous as it only included a "privileged political public" comprising the rich, white, male (Morley, 2007; I. M. Young, 2011). Particularly, the voice of the poor, minority groups, and women were not represented (Simpson, 2014, p. 17). While Habermas envisioned a sphere where "all affected by the claims under consideration are equally able to participate", in reality, this vision remains unattainable even in the contemporary, fragmented public spheres of today. Fuchs (2020, p. 207) explained that for this reason that “it is not a true public sphere, but a class-structure political space”. Furthermore, scholars argue that even the 17th century salons and cafes which set the background for Habermas’ public sphere were business establishments with vested commercial interests (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 173). This critique resonates with the inegalitarian, encroached with political and economic powers, nature of Malaysian society. As expressed in Section 1.3, there exists layers within the Malaysian society, where some are not as privileged as others.

Most critics view this theory “exclusively in spatial terms” instead of its “overarching conceptualisation of the public sphere” (Sinekopova, 2006). This concept remains comprehensive as it includes elements of “self-management, inter-public coordination, and political accountability” integral to any democracy (Fraser, 1990). Section 2.6.2 focuses mainly on the public sphere as a space for deliberation. Despite these limitations, the Habermas’ public sphere remains relevant in investigating political communication on Twitter, and it accounts principally for the structural, representational, and interactional dimensions that will be explored in my thesis.

2.1.3 Considerations moving forward

Habermas' notion is theoretically inclined toward providing an 'ideology of the subjugated classes' hence characterises the public sphere as a space where participants, outside the ruling elite, have the conviction that what they say collectively ultimately challenges the hierarchy and structures present in society. Alatas (1977) provides a historic but not archaic segue to the discussion of public sphere in modern Malaysia. A lack of an account of public opinion from the 'subjugated classes' as explained in the previous section often results in an inaccurate or worse derogatory narrative of the common people. Fast forward two centuries, and we are now known as an 'information society'. At its core, a technological fetish has emerged in the face of many structural and hierarchical problems Malaysia has inherited from pre-independence era. The following section looks closely at this technological and social pretext.

2.2 Conceptual Framework of the Malaysian *Twittersphere*

In this section I present the three levels that form my conceptual framework. It will map my endeavour to theorise and contextualise the public sphere present in Twitter. To this end, a review of studies of social media and Twitter users in the context of political communication was taken. In the previous sections, I argued that political communication does not occur in a vacuum. Instead, they are shaped by social, political, economic, and historical constructs. Further, communication on Twitter is an amalgamation of speech and spectacle. While the technology may be new, research of communication on a medium is one well rooted in intellectual traditions. The following sections will attempt to unravel how much of the 'what' of political communication on Twitter is a result of the 'how' and more importantly the 'why'. Accordingly, the aim of the following sections is to connect various theories and conceptualisations that underpin and shape political communication on Twitter.

The first construct of this research framework is the structural level. It addresses the underlying architecture of a democratic society. In essence, the public sphere principles discussed in earlier sections informs the research framework of this thesis. The first two principles, formal inclusion and discursive equality and autonomy from state and

corporate power, respectively discussed in Section 2.3, relate to democratic forces within society. Studies discussed in those sections reveal basic ideas of democracy such as an equal opportunity (Karpowitz et al., 2009), inclusiveness (Bohman, 1996), autonomy (Bohman, 2004), deliberative rights (Nathans, 1990).

The second construct of this research framework is the representational level. The Habermas' concept of general norms and reflexivity discussed in Section 2.4. Here I provide the building blocks of this construct. It also relates to the formation of civil society (Fuchs, 2017b), public opinion in the decision-making process (Glynn et al., 2018) on issues that affect them (Dahlberg, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005a). I will discuss this level further in Section 2.5.

The third and final construct of this research framework is the interactional level. Here, the principles of ideal role-taking, and sincerity and rational argument presented in Section 2.5, is condensed and updated to a discussion of spaces, knowledge and affect. Review of previous studies reveal several important aspects such as communitarianism (Dahlberg, 2007; Freelon, 2010) and the process of deliberation (Glynn et al., 2018) are relevant to this level. Moreover, the notions of civic agency and pluralism (Castells, 2007), honesty and discursive openness, which sincerity, and rightness (Dahlberg, 2007) also shapes this level of analysis. Central to this construct are the tensions that exist within the online deliberative spaces, which have been "commercialised and individualised" by the respective platforms (Dahlberg, 2001).

In summary, this framework draws from relevant literature to allow an understanding of political communication on Twitter. Scholars iterated that the construction of a participative society is a result of the actors from the ruling and mediatic classes all working together "to support rather than restrict" the flourishing of democratic practices especially in terms of the cultural access to for those in the societal class to participate in it (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 304). Here I argue that structural elements in Malaysia are Janus-faced. On one hand we have enshrined in the constitution democratic virtues such as freedom of speech and expression. On the other hand, laws originally meant for a

country in the state of emergency is enforced on those exercising those very rights. Informed by theoretical foundations of the Habermas public sphere and further discussions of more recent models, this thesis proposes three levels of analysis: the structural, the representational and the interactional. Before reviewing scholarship about this study's framework, the following sections provides a discussion of Malaysian studies focusing on political communication on social media platforms in general and Twitter in particular.

2.2.1 Malaysian Political Communication on Social Media Platforms.

This section reviews studies on political communication in the Malaysian context. As this field is relatively new and nuanced, research mainly focusing on Twitter is scarce. Therefore, this section includes studies in the broader social media context. Most of the early studies on this topic address how internet technologies challenged the mainstream media restrictions thus introducing the term "alternative media" and "new media" (G. Brown, 2005; George, 2005; Harper, 1996; Liow, 2012; Zaharom, 1987; Netto, 2002; Sani, 2005). This review finds that among the earliest social media studies were studies on political 'friendship' on Facebook (Smeltzer & Keddy, 2010). Early scholars to explore Twitter in the Malaysian politics are Julian Hopkins (2014) investigating #merdeka55 and other scholars looking at the usage of #pru13 (Hopkins, 2014; Kasmani et al., 2014). From a chronological, thematic perspective, early studies focused on the existence of an alternative voice to mainstream mass media, focusing on websites and blogs (Abd Wahid et al., 2011; George, 2007). This section proceeds with a review of the evolution of political communication on social media in the Malaysian context.

Political communication is free and independent when it is done on a media which features economic inequalities, serves as 'watchdog' and reports dishonest practices and mismanagement of government funds, fosters interfaith and interethnic relations, actively refutes propaganda that spurs hatred, highlights unfairness and exposes the abuse of power and restores dignity with well-balanced reports grievances of the under-represented including the poor and rural citizens (Netto, 2002; Sani, 2005). Apart from the absence of these features in the Malaysian mainstream media, heavy regulatory,

political, and legal pressures have led to the rise of alternative sites online (G. Brown, 2005; George, 2007). Prior to the advent of social media in Malaysia, alternative news or political communication in Malaysia took place mainly on internet portals such as '*Laman Reformasi*' (<http://members.tripod.com/~mahazalimtwo>), '*freeMalaysia*' (freemalaysia.com) and '*Reformasi Dot Com*' (reformasi.com). During the late 1990s, Malaysiakini was the only online independent news site. Sani (2005) concludes that the quest for free media to allow political communication is "a demand for the freedom of expression" (Sani, 2005). However, these expressions could potentially be limited to the virtual world without any essential spill-over to "physical realities" (Ghuman, 2010, p. 92).

A study that interviewed 526 Malaysians in 2013 after the 12th General Elections (GE12) revealed a favourable attitude towards the role of the internet in political communication. Subjects felt a renewed sense of "online activism" and "communalism" (Liow, 2012). However, this study is not representative, and this sense was mostly driven by demographic factors, as all those interviewed were "average Malaysian city dwellers" who "actively sought" alternative information in the face of a controlled mainstream media. In comparison with Singapore, this study found that the availability of internet alone "did not guarantee oppositional success" (Liow, 2012). The study found that online political communication in Singapore was mainly used to challenge existing lawmakers to make a policy change. On the other hand, in the Malaysian context, most communication online had anti-governmental sentiments that eventually led to the 2013 "political tsunami" (Willnat et al., 2013; Wu, 2009). Cherian George (2005) called this the "penetration/participation paradox". For him, while Singapore enjoyed a better internet penetration rate, Malaysia had more significant levels of political participation online (George, 2005).

In another study covering GE12, (Liow, 2012) backed the influence of technology and found that BN "failed to anticipate the equalising effect of new media". Liow (2012) stressed that post GE12, BN asserted its influence on social media channels as a means to "serve the interest of the ruling elite" and in some cases even "distort public information". Further confirming this, was the result of analysis of the voting patterns

during GE12 that revealed "a step backwards" for Malaysian democracy. The study found a deep ethnic polarisation divide. Furthermore, the majority of BN voters were of the same lower end of the socioeconomic demographic. Finally, this study also revealed an increased East Malaysia voting turnout in support of BN (Welsh, 2013). An important conclusion from these studies was that social media influence "did not operate in a vacuum", instead was a manifestation of other political, social and economic factors. Also, it was noted that social media engagement brought about a high feeling of contentment with activities that only involved low levels of commitment resonating with what Malcolm Gladwell (2010) called "weak ties" or "slacktivism" (Gladwell, 2010; Thomas, 2014). Nevertheless, these aspects were not explored in said studies providing an avenue for me to explore in my research.

2.2.2 Malaysian Politics on Twitter

Building from the failures of GE12, BN heightened their presence on social media via a three-pronged strategy; first by transforming the bloggers-sphere by inducing a new breed of salaried pro-BN writers. Next to the placement of cyber troopers to "counter" and "distort" the oppositional content. Thirdly, prominent use of "personalisation and interactivity affordances" of Facebook and Twitter by the then prime minister Najib Razak. The first major Twitter campaign to "occupy Twitter" by the BN government was the then Prime Minister Najib Razak's personal invitation: "to meet my 500,000th Twitter" and the hashtag #merdeka55 was able to garner 3.6 million tweets ended with a setback as a large number of those Tweets were generated by automated bots. Scholars revealed that BN approached Twitter "in the context of a long-standing controlled" mainstream media and adopted the "transmission mode". In this vein, the use of Twitter was superficial, with a focus on the "content of the message" and ignored the "contextual interpretation". Unsurprisingly, most messages were toward the end of painting the opposition as "divisive, dishonest and self-interested" (Hopkins, 2014).

A study of 5511 tweets carrying the #pru13 hashtag during the 13th General Election found a lack of diversity in terms of participation on Twitter (Kasmani et al., 2014). In addition, pro-BN tweets dominated the #pru13 hashtag (Sun et al., 2018). Next, Twitter was used

to persuade, educate, and provoke the opposition. Also, the primary method of communication on Twitter was @-mentions and retweets. Scholars found the lack of mature political discourse on Twitter and concluded that the BN's political campaign on Twitter was prominently using bots. Moreover, researchers found that a prominent presence on Twitter is not indicative or predictive as BN lost the popular vote during GE13. This leads to the bleak conclusion that new media users are "not active", "irresponsible" and are mostly interested in "rumours and personal attacks". On the positive side, this study revealed that users became aware "unintentionally" as there were "pushed" trending topics from both sides of the political divide (Kasmani et al., 2014). Broadly, politicians in Malaysia are coming to terms – progressively, with the normalisation of connective media (Graham et al., 2014, p. 4) but also the demands of the perpetually online constituents.

Sun et al. (2018) who studied 1.1 million tweets produced before and during GE13 concurred with Faizal et al. (2014) and found that the BN was more influential on Twitter. Both studies interpret BN's winning of GE13 differently. While Faizal et al. (2014) highlighted the fact that BN lost the popular vote and hence concluded that Twitter data is not representative, Sun et al. (2018) pronounced that BN had won the election and that fact jived with BN's presence on Twitter. Another significant exploration by Sun et al. (2018) was into the power of "influential spreaders" for example, non-politicians and activists. Contrary to popular belief, the group that influenced the election via respective "propagation networks" as influential opinion spreaders were not those with "highest number of connections" but were those "rightly positioned" at the core of networks (Sun et al., 2018). However, this quantitative research did not provide the 'whys' of the correlation between engagement on Twitter and electoral outcome – an avenue that this thesis aims to explore through qualitative means.

The review of scholarship on Malaysian politics and Twitter demonstrates what some may call an achievement in garnering social media as a mode for political communication. However, this adoption appears to be haphazard and superficial, since it carries forward inequalities present in pre-internet mode of political communication. In that vein,

scholarship has also revealed areas overlooked, especially in terms of why such inequalities persist. These gaps suggest that a more nuanced exploration is warranted. An appraisal of studies indicates that factors that shape citizens' political communication on Twitter are a result of structural features, the promise of representation, and interactional affordances of the platform. Therefore, I use a tri-level framework, to approach my investigation of Twitter in the context of political communication in Malaysia. The following sections further elaborate these levels and insights thereof form the conceptual way forward for my thesis.

2.3 The Structural Level

The structural level explores institutional features that shape democratic inclinations in a society (Dahlgren, 2005a). Democratic expression "takes on the form and colouration of the social and political structures within which it operates" (Siebert et al., 1956). The first construct of my study looks at the mediation of power structures (Dahlgren, 1995, p. 42) in two complimenting ways. Structures of power are evident through influences of constitutional patriotism among the public and the political economy of media organisations. Informed by (Benkler et al., 2018) this section concentrates on "the long-term dynamic between institutions, culture, and technology".

In the earlier section of my thesis, the current state of basic democratic tenets of the Malaysian public sphere, namely the rise of constitutional patriotism, political participation, and mass media control were introduced. Further, aspects of the Malaysian political institutions and mainstream media organisations in terms of their ideologies, power flow, control, regulation, financing, and legal frameworks and how they define freedom of speech as well as constraints on communication are analysed (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2003; Thomas, 2014). These factors are crucial to understanding democratic forces that ultimately translate to engagement on Twitter. Therefore, I use the

three forms of power: sovereign power, biopower and control (Sadowski, 2020, pp. 60–68) to encapsulate the first level of my research framework.

2.3.1 Constitutional Patriotism

“A constitution is not just a legal document. It has a heart and a soul and is animated by purposes. It is linked with philosophy and politics. It has as its backdrop the panorama of history, geography, economics, and culture. It reflects the dreams and demands, the values and vulnerabilities of the body politic” (Faruqi, 2019). This politic is manifested in the notions of constitutional patriotism can be defined as a set of principles which enables and uphold “liberal democratic form of rule” (p.72), provides a “particular form of political rule” (p.77), and provides the answer to “how do we want to live together” (p.77) (Muller, 2007). As explained in the introductory chapter, constitutional patriotism empowers citizens to hold political powers accountable. However, in Malaysia, implicit “tensions between ethnonationalism and constitutional patriotism” is rife (G. C. Khoo, 2014). Further, social media platforms may exacerbate this tension as it provides avenue for personalised network-based politics (Loader & Mercea, 2011, p. 762), disclose government secrets (Bernama, 2018), organise protest (J. Lim, 2017), mobilise opposition (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Zulkifli et al., 2018), orchestrate an election campaign (Leong, 2018), and even lampoon politicians on YouTube (Mejova & Srinivasan, 2012). The Malaysian political sphere is full of examples of the above.

A view of the structural dimension is important as scholars warn that transforming representative democracy by mere adoptions of these platforms, in the context of this thesis, Twitter, does not mean an automatic embracing of their apparent interactive or democratic potential – let alone achieving that potential (Graham et al., 2014) . A mere functional glance of the platforms is the main cause why critical political communication studies of the media usually conclude that the media does not achieve its democratic potential (S. Young et al., 2007).

The perspective adopted by this thesis is one which has been informed by Habermas (1990, p. 118), who offered the notion of constitutional patriotism as a favourable way

forward from the “national tradition”. In the Malaysian context, constitutional patriotism could be the solution to what Jomo (1990, p. 241) expressed as the “most difficult imperative of seeking unity while recognising cultural diversity”. An “elaborated institutional structure” to promote a more “egalitarian public sphere” (Bohman, 2004), in tandem with Habermas (1990, p. 120), assertion to make constitutional patriotism a “cornerstone of the political system” is vital in this vein. Such empowerment of the citizens will bring Malaysia closer to become a genuinely democratic country instead of an “authoritarian democracy” (Heryanto & Mandal, 2003).

2.3.2 Media Organisations

Media and political communications in the public sphere have had an inseparable relationship. The media has played a vital role to disseminate political news and convey public opinion (Habermas, 2001). Political institutions and media have always relied on each other's resources in terms of negotiating how political agendas are framed to the public. In return “journalists used politicians as sources of information” (Blumler, J.G. & Gurevitch M., 1995). Media usage or access to information has been attributed to higher political knowledge among citizens; however, this has not always contributed to policy satisfaction (Fraser, 1990). This “media reflexivity” since journalistic endeavours are first able to “know” then present in the form of a “report” and in doing so “represent” the reality of the masses (Cottle, 2005). As a result of this, we have the phenomenon of mediatisation ‘where political institutions are increasingly dependent and shaped by mass media’ (Brants & Voltmer, 2011; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). Moreover, there appears to be a reversal of Garnham’s assertion of media that is “specialised and autonomous from social realms” (Garnham, 2000, p. 10)

For example, in 1970 Britain, the process of mediatisation in the form of an “independent press” brought about massive democratisation of political institutions as the media exposed them to the “full blast of public opinion” (Golding & Murdock, 1997). The case of political communication in Malaysia was the opposite as mainstream media was fully owned and controlled by political institutions and the regulatory barriers in place against an alternative media made difficult for any competing, let alone dissenting media to exist

(Nain, 1991, 1994). Such a phenomenon is neither new nor exclusive to Malaysia as it was witnessed in 18th century France, resulting in the media not achieving the intended democratic role (S. Young et al., 2007). I suggest two reasons for this. Firstly, media organisations are not benevolent institutions but instead are in the business of making profits by “selling news to their audience” and more importantly, to advertisers (Chomsky, 2014). Secondly, state-controls not just impede on media freedom but stifle a more engaged citizenry, especially in developing countries such as Malaysia (Jenkins et al., 2013; Zaharom, 1991; Zaharom & Anuar, 1994).

2.3.3 Autonomy from Political, State and Corporate Power

Political authority, judicial discretion, and economic power are the most important symbols of power and influence in a pluralist society (Hoffmann-Lange, 2008). In Malaysia, all three exist together (Jomo, 1990). In writing about how the political elite managed to hamper the efforts of a mass public protest, (Jomo et al., 2014) posed that the "political institutions through its continued incumbency have successfully undermined dissent and opposition" in Malaysia. I argue that effective political institutions are those that not just demand transparency and accountability from those in power but also encourage the formation of a democratic society (Di Palma, 1990; Mattes, 2008; Norris, 2003).

This section expands the discussion on autonomy introduced in Section 2.1.1.2 and is considered the hallmarks of the Habermas' public sphere. This feature presumes that deliberation in that space is free from “dogma, domination and manipulation” (Dahlberg, 2004, p. 10) by state institutions or corporate interests. Furthermore, as presented in section 2.1.3, scholars have also contested this feature. Media in Malaysia is not free and is constantly challenged from political, economic, cultural, and societal perspectives. In an interest to not be repetitive, this section will focus on two aspects of state control: censorship and the way Twitter's architecture indicates emancipatory potential from institutional democratic impediments.

Censorship is an important determinant of how effective the rational-critical or cognitive engagement process within the public sphere produces discursive participation and

eventually evolve into mobilisation or other democratic action. This is because censorship regulates not just the availability but access to democratic discourses (Robertson, 2018) on civic web spheres. At this point, it is useful to consider two forms of content control as propounded by Neil Postman (2005). The first form is outright censorship of content or the Orwellian method, where either the legislative or political elite block dissenting voices. In this vein, Twitter functions as a “surveillance tool” that authoritarian regimes use to “find, suppress and prosecute” dissenting initiatives (Gizbert, 2019). The second and more potent method of censorship is the Huxleyan mode where viscerally radical political movements are trivialised/sterilised by an abundance of non-political content, usually in the form of entertainment and popular culture (Postman, 2005).

Both Orwellian and Huxleyan forms of censorship are rife in Malaysia. Apart from the apparent control of state-owned media, examples of direct censorship were rife even in the case of foreign magazines and newspapers (Anuar, 2000) and broadcast via satellite television (W. L. Kim, 2014). Despite a commitment not to censor the internet, “media-related and libel laws” were used to control online content (J. Lim, 2017; Miner, 2015; Weiss, 2013b). Astroturfing or cybertrooping (Johns & Cheong, 2019) were employed to carry out Huxleyan deflecting tactics such as framing (Entman, 1993; Entman & Usher, 2018) and sentiment polarities (Kušen & Strembeck, 2017). These subversive juggernauts were used to “devalue normative democratic discourses” (Bratslavsky et al., 2020).

In face of these circumstances, by using hashtags, citizens could not only search, but they could also contribute or 'reciprocate' to a specific topic enabling 'rational-critical and reasoned' discussions involving a multitude of participants or "ad hoc publics" (Bruns & Burgess, 2011) that could otherwise be unable to deliberate on issues. Such “many-to-many communication of multilogues” (Megele, 2014) mirror Habermas’ public sphere in essence, and it could be said, brings about "radical pluralisation" (Dahlberg, 2009). In situations where mainstream media are suppressed, as in the case in Malaysia, citizens can overcome regulatory and even structural barriers to play a more active role, like being

a “watchdog” to ensure accuracy in discussions or educating other “diasporic” members of a society (Papacharissi, 2015a).

However, these discussions were not observed in all settings. A Dutch study revealed that there was hardly any interaction between the police and citizens on Twitter. Instead, use of the platform was asymmetrical; citizens were passive recipients, or ‘listened’⁹ to information shared by the police with no response from the public (Meijer, 2015). Viewed from a critical Internet and society theory lens, such mixed findings suggest “the potential to negate existing structures” through the formation of “partisanship for the oppressed”, challenges “one-dimensional thought” concerning democratic agency among citizens and proposes that society’s interaction on such platforms signal a creation of “a universe that is complex and dialectical” (Fuchs, 2008, p. 6). The next section focuses on the dynamics of institutional power and control to understand this dialectic.

2.3.4 Power and Control

This section summarises the discussion of this level with insights about how institutional power and control materialises in private and public spheres of citizens. This dialectic of power, media and society has been conceptualised as “lifeworld” (Habermas, 1984) or “networked societies” (Castells, 2007). In both arguments, scholars present that such mediations, whether the printing press or internet enabled social media technologies, morph procedures of institutional power with society. For example, replacing the traditional method of “restricting access” through printing permits (Willnat et al., 2013) by increasing participation of elites on social media enable “gatekeeping” abilities to maintain hegemony (Leong, 2018). In that accord, it has long been established those communicative technologies allow powerful capabilities to the political, economic and, more recently, technology elites. Therefore, I use frameworks of power to conclude the discussion about constitutional patriotism, media and political organisations and autonomy within the public sphere.

⁹ Discussed in Section 2.5.5.4

Scholarship discussing power in society are generally presented in three themes: sovereign power, biopower, and control. While sovereign power and biopower are exercised in distinct ways, appraisal of literature about controls suggest that it is a combination of the aforementioned. Sovereign power is rooted in monarchs, authoritarian and militant regimes and are usually related with the use of severe physical punishments. On the other hand, biopower is vested in institutions who determine social practices and norms which are enforced through surveillance mechanism (Foucault, 2008 [1978-1979]). In the contemporary schema of things, scholarship present control, as the most recent and relevant form of power in a digital communication era. As mentioned above, control is a combination of sovereign power and biopower in at least two ways.

First, the construction of the discourse surrounding the entry of internet technologies in Malaysia. Building from Section 1.3.1, development in the 1980s through 1990s was presented as 'positive' and 'good' for Malaysia. Relevant here are how a certain model of development was propagated using tenets of biopower. The production of "domains of objects and rituals of truth" (Escobar, 1995, p. 104; Foucault, 2008, p. 194) surrounding these technologies were seen in the continuation of industrialisation policies in Malaysia ushering a shift from manufacturing to internet (and the subsequent communicative) technologies. This application of power was important to prioritise these projects ahead of more pressing issues such as urban poverty (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023) and education (OECD, 2018). Second and more operationally, the extent citizens are tracked, expected to behave within the confines of universal norms and apparent oligarchy in terms of platforms used to express oneself depend heavily on the autocratic or democratic inclination of political reigns. At this point, I find Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's (1987) metaphor of rhizomes useful (cited in Sadowski, 2020).

Building on the scholarship of rhizomatic constitution of technology (Carpentier, 2016; Gimmler, 2001; J. Lim, 2017), my work intends to combine that wealth of research, with an additional perspective, of the indication of societal rhizomes present in the Malaysian context. As seen from the early development of the Malaysian public sphere in Section 2.2.5, I argue that notions of race, religion, and royalty or 3R is characteristic of social

rhizomes. As both societal and technological rhizomes morph, elements of race and religion (Anuar, 2000; W. L. Kim, 2014; Leong, 2018) striate the configuration of constitutional patriotism, media organisation and political institutions through the affordance of social media platforms.

This configuration resembles the four rhizomatic principles: connectivity, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and signifying rupture and suggest more than just an adoption of the technology but embeddedness within social, economic, and political practices (Bar et al., 2015). Scholars use similar characteristics such as apparent individuality on the outside but seamlessly “tied together through an invisible but submerged network” (Sadowski, 2020), “fluid civil society network” that “connects any point to any other point” (Carpentier, 2016) to describe this configuration. However, only few studies have investigated democratic tendencies as a result of technological and societal rhizomes in the Malaysian context (J. Lim, 2017). It is the intent of my study to address that gap and to add to the understanding of the complex nature of shifting technologies and its effect to democracy.

The structural level sets the democratic stage for the next level of analysis. From the literature reviewed in at this level, I suggest that how well or poorly citizens are represented are a manifestation of the freedoms provided via constitutional patriotism and the political economy of media organisations. Only when democratic tendencies are healthy can society expect adequacy in the representational dimension (Dahlgren, 2005a).

2.3.5 Conceptualisation of the Structural Level

On the structural level, I intend to investigate the systemic frameworks of power and control that influence political communication on Twitter (see Figure 1). This section avoids the troubling consideration of technological determination that attributes Twitter as an “independent force” (Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017, p. 55). Instead, this level of analysis locates deliberations on Twitter within the wider political and societal landscape (as shown in Figure 1) in which it occurs to address research gaps identified. With crude quantitative indicators pointing toward an adoption of idealistic liberal democratic patterns

on Twitter, this level of analysis is an attempt to examine if these contemporary tendencies are congruent with “Malaysian democracy” (Mahathir cited in B. T. Khoo, 2002). To this end, I draw from the discussions about societal and technological rhizomes in Section 2.3.4 and seek to identify how and to which degree institutional power and control strengthens or weakens the public sphere and if these forces encourage or impede discourse on Twitter. To this end, I trace ‘submerged’ forces, identified, that shape how political communication occurs on Twitter via its manifestation in three democratic dimensions: media control, autonomy from political, state, and corporate powers and constitutional patriotism.

Hence, I organise the structural factors that shape how users engage with Twitter using a ‘appropriation of democracy’ perspective, which addresses how citizens, news organisations and elites depend on Twitter as an avenue for (potentially improved) democratic discourse. According to Hall and Morley, what exactly ‘democracy’ entails, may vary depending on the “class and cultural location” of the user, further complicated by philosophical and ideological stances (cited in Zaharom, 1994). At its core, a healthy democracy is one that encourages debates, which serve as “necessary irritants” by an empowered citizenry (Zaharom, 2002). This perspective is helpful to identify “power relations” and locate the emergence of Twitter against the larger Malaysian political and societal backdrop (Zaharom, 1996) in two ways. First, the political scene in Malaysia is a “complex interplay” of race and religion (W. L. Kim, 2014). Second, such a view offers an understanding of the discursive affordances of Twitter in “multicultural societies” where “social bonds are weak” (Jomo et al., 2014). A look into the ‘appropriation of democracy’ in Malaysia needs to avoid blind spotting these tensions and recognise the layered and intricate preconditions before political views are expressed online.

My ‘appropriation of democracy’ perspective is informed by two constructs. First, I use a state-centric view to examine the influence of “a powerful hegemonic party at the helm of the state, and the resulting complex nexus of politics, bureaucracy and business” (Gomez, 2012b) on political communication on Twitter. I further encapsulate these influences into two sub-categories: media control in terms of content censorship or

publication permits along with autonomy from institutions, political and corporate powers that influence propaganda initiatives. Broadly, this approach is concerned with extending the long established, pre-internet “re-feudalisation of the public sphere via the interweaving of the public and private realm” (Habermas, 1997, p. 118 [1964]) in the context of Twitter. Second, a citizen-centric view offers an equally vital dimension to gauge if Twitter further strengthens (or weakens) democratic discourse within society. I further draw on the concept of ‘constitutional patriotism’, which are liberal expressions enshrined in the constitution that citizens use as a frame of reference to justify “more deliberative form of democratic practise” to counter the loss of trust and interest in the ‘state-centric’ approach, witnessed on the platform (Rosenberg, 2007). Figure 1 provides a summary of the conceptualisation of this study’s structural level of analysis.

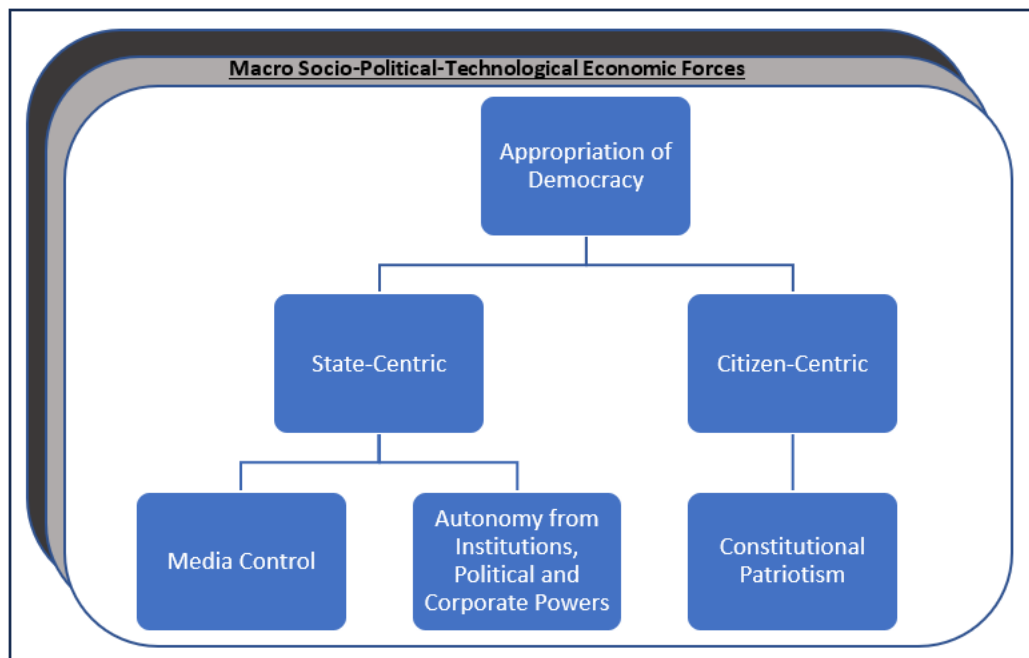


Figure 1 Conceptualisation of structural level of analysis.

Aside from structural tendencies, another issue that is relevant when studying political communication on social media platforms is representation. The next section appraises scholarship examining representation as a “democratic value” and essential “procedure” in the face of variable political life preferences among citizenry and contemporary forms of engagement. In this vein, representation is potentially the first step towards, or away

from, realising emancipation, particularly for the disenfranchised. In this vein, the second component of my research framework will investigate the notion of representation.

2.4 The Representational Level

When it comes to the question of representation on Twitter three lines of theory predominate. First, scholarship providing a pathway towards representation on Twitter using the active audience (Morley, 1993), *mediapolis* (Dahlgren, 2016b) and produsage (Bruns, 2008) perspectives are presented. Second, political communication research that presents Twitter as egalitarian and unconditionally inclusive is discussed. Third, my review is informed primarily by Guy Debord's (1994 [1967]) *The Society of the Spectacle*. As presented in the following sections, the latter two (less democratic) perspectives seem to interrogate the first (more favourable) notion.

2.4.1 Produsage: A roadmap for representation

This section brings together four approaches presented in literature and argues that Twitter may present a roadmap for better representation for society. First, representation on Twitter may be favourable due to the notion of produsage. Second, when citizens play a 'journalistic' role, a counter-hegemonic force is created to challenge the conventional stronghold of elites present in society in determining what is represented in media. Third, a look into the role of state-owned media to build on content and features within Twitter to embrace the 'public service' model. Fourth, the affordances of Twitter pose an opportunity for citizen's discursion to be tangible and measurable.

In the first approach, I bring together test the notion of produsage against Stuart Hall's communicative ideas. Whether and how much the notion of *produsage* confronts the "vantage point of the powerful political and economic elites to tightly craft representations" as agenda setters and how much is Twitter a "passive conduit by which the powerful instruct the powerless what to think and feel" in the Malaysian political communication context, is an important aim of my thesis (Fenton, 2004). To this end, expanding from the ideas of first- and second-generation reception in culture studies, Stuart Hall (1982) provides a critical framework to first explain and then problematise the receiver's

‘encoding/decoding’ process. David Morley (1993) later coins the term ‘active audience’ with the advent of television viewer research pointing out that the audience is not a ‘passive receiver’ of messages and representations they see. Applying Hall’s (1982) and Morley’s (1993) suggestion in the context of Twitter is an assertion by (Fenton, 2004) that users are able to “subvert the course of conversations” on the platform. She adds only when users are “critical” or as what Morley (1993) calls “counter-hegemonic” that “the power of the author to frame audience reception is challenged”. In other words, there is a possibility when ‘active’ can be associated with actual agency or power to “not share the text’s code” and ideally “bear an alternative frame of reference”.

In the second approach, I examine how this agency affords citizens a journalistic role. Axel Bruns (2008) proposes the term *produsage* to explain what unfolds from Web 2.0 affordances. In this context, *produsage* is a scenario where “authors and audiences are not simply producers or users... instead there is a form of engagement that is collective, distributed and participatory... enabling them both to become hybrid *producers*” (Bruns, 2018, p. 30). This challenges the notion that citizens are passive recipients. Produsage can partially explain how Twitter provides “visibility” that in turn allows for more accurate and impartial representation which is seen as an important way to communicate “self-affirmation for communities to defend their interest and values in the public space”.

In addition, Twitter can function as a public sphere or *mediapolis* that facilitates democratic representation (Dahlgren, 2016a). In a *mediapolis*, the media is characterized as ‘environmental’ in the sense that these platforms are “symbolic ecologies that penetrate just every corner of our existence” and concludes that “media positions us in the world”. Dahlgren suggests “mutual responsibility” from all actors within the public sphere and recommends “the imperative of moral response” as a panacea to “inequalities of representation and other mechanisms of exclusion”. Bruns (2018, p. 130) agrees with this notion by pointing out the “heightened altruistic motivations” of “networked” citizens. Morality and civility could potentially be the possible linkage between an inegalitarian society like Malaysia and democratic representation.

Research suggests that a sense of “personal achievement and self-worth” (Bruns, 2018, p. 129) is achieved when users are able to constructively garner social media's grip among citizens by obviating fake representations via the creation of credible, legitimate news sources. Studies show that the number of followers, shares and likes provide users with “personal status” (Kümpel et al., 2015; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015) and they “genuinely” (Tiwari, 2012) post or disseminate information that are they feel will benefit others. In his work, Henry Jenkins describes convergence as the “spreadability” of communication seamlessly across new media channels and devices and makes the point that this is more of a “transmedia culture” development rooting in “humans need for feeling a permanent connection” instead of mere technological advancement (Jenkins, 2006). Some discussions in Twitter, takes the form of discourses in the public sphere and are rational-critical discussions in the Habermasean sense, with reasoned claims. Twitter's ability to allow topic-specific discussions points toward the creation of “a new forum or public discourse” (Morley & Robins, 1995).

Prior to 1990s only mainstream media and state-controlled communication apparatus were privy to images from actual conflict zones. The availability of hand-held video recording technologies brought about self-representation of issues through “the power of citizen video surveillance” (Dobkin, 1996). Elisa Adami's (2016) “visual language” study of the Arab Spring movement provide further scholarship exploring citizen journalism on Twitter. By investigating the notion of “emancipated spectatorship” or “attentive gaze” by citizens and this research concludes that “looking, by itself, is a form of political action”. In extreme conditions, such as wars and authoritarian regimes, powerful elites are able to express exclusivist bias that ascribe to desired “aesthetics” and “spectacles”. Challenging such deflections by the elites, are efforts to “annihilate the image maker” by citizen organised “mediatized struggle”. Witness accounts or “self-representation” depicting “dangerous proximity of image-makers” were available to an international audience. Such images from the Syrian conflict zone, when coupled with accurate interpretation, had potential to “lead to their political emancipation” (Adami, 2016). Similarly, a Nigerian study found the use of political memes to “amplify” political yearnings of the citizenry (Yeku, 2018). These findings echoed research that suggested that tweets

were “subversive cultural products” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 223) providing the above-mentioned discursive forum.

The third approach is concerned with the role of state-owned media. A discussion of *produsage* in the Malaysian context will be incomplete without discussions about the role of state-owned media to “cohere internal tensions” (Morley & Robins, 1995). Examples of such internal tensions identified are: “state-led” communal separation along racial and religious lines (Weiss, 2013b), widening income gaps (Koh et al., 2016) and money politics funded by dismal macro fiscal policies (Saravanamuttu & Mohamad, 2019).

State-owned media, for example, Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) should champion ‘public service’ instead of being a functionalist (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Garnham, 1986; Zaharom, 2018) ‘government propaganda’ channel. State-owned media is ‘environmental’ and pervasive in the context of a *mediapolis* argued above and poses true democratic potential if benefits from “mediation and publication frameworks that underlie social media” (Bruns, 2018, p. 159). Set against this landscape, RTM could benefit from Twitter by returning to its ‘public service’ calling, by narrowing the information gap. State owned media could tap into intrinsic nature of why users share links on Twitter to provide urban Malaysians “the right to look” and carefully construct a united and favourable “invention of Derrida’s other” (Mirzoeff, 2010, p. 16). State-owned media could play a pivotal role in “the real test of self-reflexivity” among Malaysians and provide a more “constructive” and nuanced “outside” for both ends of the digital divide (Radhakrishnan, 2010, p. 48).

The state-owned media’s response to the changing landscape of content production on social media is vital. “Habitual” (Bruns, 2018, p. 159) sharing by citizens challenges controlled, scripted production of traditional media. In this vein, at the technologically savvy end of the digital divide ‘meaningful’ participation is easier to notice as “everyone is a creator” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 157). Unsurprisingly, research reveal that users with higher disposable income are more likely to experience better internet connection (Chakravarty & Caldwell, 2011; V.-L. Chan, 2006; Ruffini et al., 2019;

Techatassanasoontorn & Kauffman, 2005). The issue here is 'what is being created?' by these users online. Such users are referred to as 'lurkers' (Jenkins et al., 2013) and 'singular publics' (Moy, 2020). These users are the less passive demographic of social media 'public' who experience content differently and are able to spot, highlight and spread what mainstream media overlook and spread this content. In principle, they have the potential to improve inclusiveness by motivating producers to highlight the plight of the disenfranchised.

The fourth approach addresses affordances of Twitter, the effects on discourse research and how those studies are able to examine representation of issues in users' private spheres. Twitter through hashtags allow users to pin certain topics and even locations while providing "stakeholders unprecedented opportunity to track and analyse resonance" (Highfield et al., 2013). For example, researchers in Australia were able to use 3.72 million Twitter accounts to map "thematic network structure of an entire national Twittersphere" which allowed analysts to visualise a change in conversation themes on Twitter (Bruns et al., 2017). This response could reduce the asymmetry between the societal and media spheres (Dahlgren, 2013).

Important in creating credible and accurate representation are the 'viewertariat' which is a citizen group, who participate actively in online discussions in real-time to "to persuade, educate, bond, have fun and provoke" while engaging in "critical conversations" about content laid out by the professional journalist and media organisations (Kasmani et al., 2014; Loader & Mercea, 2011; Sampedro, 2011). In this context, research patterns show optimism with actors within the media sphere to build on the convergent nature of Web 2.0 social networking platforms to instead of using draconian regulations to counter misrepresentation.

Despite these potentials scholars continue to dismiss Twitter as a marionette for societal, political, and economic elites. Therefore, the *elite* sphere, is the 'strongest' sphere, with the power to narrow inequalities that exists within the public sphere to make systemic institutional amendments may consider giving heed to this "counter-power" (Fenton,

2016, p. 174). In this context, (Bohman, 1996, p. 133) suggests ways society can move towards healthy forms of representation. First, by creating new public spaces, which are “controlled” by the disenfranchised by utilising existing communication networks for citizen deliberation to allow a wider reach among ‘the unrepresented’ and “ideologically marginalised” (Larsson, 2017). Twitter as an “already existing informal network” facilitates “mobilisation” via hashtags and mentions. Secondly, by strengthening formal power invested in institutions to create and enforce inclusivity within the mainstream sphere (Benkler et al., 2018; Vaidhyathan, 2018).

In this vein, Noam Chomsky's (1997) opposition "of an old anarchist commitment" targets the concentration of power within the elite sphere appears valid. It includes state power, or corporate power, or the control of the upper echelons of society. Chomsky further states that "the concentration of power and privilege is a major threat to democracy and stressed that "any structure of hierarchy and authority carries a heavy burden of justification", even if it just involves personal relations or a broader social order. Chomsky (1997) concludes that "if it cannot bear that burden – then it is illegitimate and should be dismantled." As a result, what may be observed is “an explosion of counter-publicity are small, cause-specific and alternative” communicative channels which unfortunately has not resulted in enhanced “balance of power between civil society and the political systems” Habermas (1997). This imbalance is the focus of the next section.

2.4.2 Illusions of ‘Inclusion’

Research of media representation is not new. During each phase, how favourable or otherwise, inclusiveness of media representation has been a subject of scrutiny by proponents of media studies. This section finds that studies, regardless of era, location or platform investigated, findings tend to favour the latter. Notably, researchers provide insight to what representation on media entails. “Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also *how much importance* to *attach* to that issue from the amount of information in a story and its position...the media may *set* the agenda” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). They note that for much of the citizenry “media is the *only* contact with

politics". Despite that, they found that representations on television, newspapers and magazines "reproduce the political world *imperfectly*".

Imperfect in the sense that representations tend to be on either side of extremes and hardly present a moderate, neutral, or balanced depiction of society. For instance, Dutch research about LGBTQ+ representations on Scandinavian media, fell into the dichotomy of "pre-modern or inferior" or "expressively modern or superior" (Vanlee et al., 2020). Albeit in non-western cultural and national settings, similar themes were observed. In a study which set out to investigate "questions of inclusion and exclusion" on mainstream satellite television channels, researchers found that representations not only "oppressed" but "delegitimised" minority "voices and identities" (Mohammadpur et al., 2017).

In researching inclusiveness on Twitter, it was found that this platform adds nuance to the discussion of: Who is the public? Important to the notion of inclusion in this context is knowing at which point does everyone constitute 'the public'? Social media has "redefined" the shift from individual to social, where all objects, including the conception of private conversations, are public (Megele, 2014). Clearly, "*all* cannot be made public except through ideological interpellation and institutional instrumentalization" (Radhakrishnan, 2010, p. 39). As such, in this section I aim to examine if studies found that inclusion on Twitter is either; a manifestation of ideological renaissance as a result of systemic interpellation where every citizen constitutes the public – or is it superficial. These insights will shed an important perspective especially, "in a government perpetuated semi-democracy" like Malaysia, where the societal sphere is situated at the inferior end of the power and influence spectrum (Case, 2009, p. 124).

Inclusiveness is not a "new normative concept" (Blumler, 2015) but has remained an underlying principle since the inception of Habermas' public sphere. In an attempt to understand if Twitter impedes or promotes the ideals of inclusion, my research explores the concept of inclusion that insists "every citizen potentially affected by a policy be allowed the opportunity to express their preferences and influence policy" (Wilhelm, 2000). In that context, (Bohman, 1996, p. 100) adds that "minorities should be able to

affect future outcomes” in an inclusive societal sphere. This section presents a review of several studies that poses Twitter as a bastion for equality and inclusiveness. Problematising that optimism, several studies about how the disenfranchised within society is (or is not) represented on the platform is discussed. Further informing this section is an enquiry about ‘filter-bubbles’ and ‘gatewatching’.

From its onset, studies have claimed that Twitter “encourages sociability” due to its “niche technology” (Keenan & Shiri, 2009) that allows it to function like Short Messaging Services (SMS) (Murthy, 2011). Affordances, as described in Chapter 1, and communicative features of Twitter has been associated with “empowering” (Toscano, 2015, p. 70) and “bridging” (Karlsson & Åström, 2018, p. 3) people from various spectrums of society together. Studies show Twitter can serve as an awareness system (Maireder & Ausserhofer, 2014) that offers widespread dissemination of information, opinions, and emotions (Kwak et al., 2010). Further, Twitter is an “open, transparent, and low threshold” platform that allows communication of information and ideas that allow political communication through three networking functions; hashtags, mentions (Maruyama et al., 2014) and hyperlink sharing.

Non-mainstream sites have claimed to benefit from these features. An American study on small news sites revealed that Twitter allowed the potential to tap into a “broader range of news gatherers”. As a result, an even larger number of readers not just read but discussed how the issues reported impacted them personally (Lasorsa et al., 2012). Smaller news sites also benefit from faster news cycle, due to more straightforward editorial process. This was observed in a study when, Twitter was used by right-wing populist politicians in Europe using the “direct linkage” as an alternative route bypassing “journalistic gatekeeper” (Engesser et al., 2017). Research has shown that 97% of news gets shared within the first 24 hours of being posted online (Ackland et al., 2019). Furthermore, a study of political parties in Switzerland revealed that “smaller fringe parties” experienced a “level playing field” as a consequence of using Twitter (Rauchfleisch & Metag, 2016).

The term echo-chambers was coined by Eli Pariser (2011) to characterise Google's decision to personalise search results using at least 57 data points such "the things you seem to like, the actual things you've done, the things people like you like...constantly creating and refining a theory of who you are and what'll you'll do and want next" to replace its initial Page Rank algorithm (Pariser, 2011). Terms such as 'cyberbalkanization' or 'internet balkanization' are used to encapsulate the "separation in virtual space" (van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 1996). In the similar vein, 'splinternet' was introduced as an alternative "to escape the regulation trap of the commons...and allow prespecified ground rules" to determine content (Crews, 2001). However, 'splinternet' and 'cyberbalkanization' referred to a more physical sense of separation because scholars presented an entirely separate internet infrastructure, in terms of servers and legislation from the one available to society. This is unsurprising as both these terms were popularised before the advent of social media.

A study into the browsing history of 50,000 Americans who read news online regularly, researchers found strong evidence of echo chambers as readers "mimicked their offline reading habits" and were only inclined to reading content from their ideologically leaning, even though they were "exposed to content from lesser preferred end of the political spectrum" (Flaxman et al., 2016). These results were echoed by a study of online news consumption in Australian, South Korea (Ackland et al., 2019) and Greece (Theocharis & Lowe, 2015).

Researchers observed distinct information patterns which supported "political polarisation" among users, albeit at different "intensity levels" and "were able to predict" which side of the political spectrum they belonged to, regardless of whether they were from Australia or South Korea. Following Pariser (2011), scholars attribute 'homophily' or exclusively following people of the same political leaning, to the formation of such bubbles (Cargnino & Neubaum, 2020; Kwak et al., 2010; Papacharissi, 2015a). Being inclusive is somewhat paradoxical in the sense that in wanting to be inclusive, users make it impossible for political 'others' to enter into discourse with them (Froomkin, 2003). This is further compounded by the fact that there is too much 'noise' due to multiple digital media

outlets or simply access to relevant communication channels are not ‘pushed’ to the attention of the user.

Inclusion and the civic participation are part of the larger notion of polarisation. A fragmented public has led to an "inability to communicate across differences" (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). At the heart of this issue is the question “who are the people?” and the “survival of democracy itself” hinges on the attempt to answer it (Beaufort, 2018). While some studies present an optimistic outlook about the potential of Twitter others opt for a more critical stance and find that claims from earlier studies problematic. For this reason, I argue that representation should be approached as something that is not dichotomous but ranges in the form of a spectrum. Therefore, earlier sections have presented representation in Twitter as approving because the affordances it presents allows *produsage* which has provided a way forward for a democratic deliberation to take place. Next, studies investigating inclusion on Twitter reveals the less favourable as both quantitative and qualitative studies mostly conclude that despite technological affordances, polarisation continues to exist. Against this backdrop, I turn to the opposing end of the spectrum of representation on Twitter.

2.4.3 Spectacles on Twitter

Key to understanding the intersection of a purely capitalist corporation, free speech and society is Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle, Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (Debord, 1994) and the later revised to fit the social media context *Spectacle 2.0* (Briziarelli & Armano, 2017). Debord offers a viable idea to conceptualise the undermining of the complex ideological impetus and semiotic processes that underscores the production of emancipatory political communication on Twitter. I use *spectacles* here to describe one of Twitter's most salient features, the compulsion to use algorithmic driven virality of content measured in terms of who users follow, topics read, number of shares, likes and followers on Twitter, as a form of currency in the political communication realm. To this end, I continue the discussion initiated in Section 1.3.3 about the Rise of Digital Natives, and present works from scholars investigating the “politics of never-ending spectacles” (Persily, 2017) enabled “trappings of late capitalist modernity” (Thatcher &

Dalton, 2017, p. 135) such as Twitter to deflect society to pursue the deep inquiry of the status quo and multi-faceted democratic representation required for social emancipation.

Debord's ideas are helpful in my discussion of representations for four reasons. First, Debord's critique of post-war capitalist-induced consumerism resonates in digital capitalism in the form of commercial determinants to the question 'who are the public?' and 'what constitutes public opinion?' on Twitter. The second idea posed by Debord is a corollary to the first and relates to an assertion of the obsession with aesthetics instead of actual substance is echoed in the curation of content on Twitter. Third, Debord's inclusion of citizens both as producers and participants suggesting forms of what is understood recently as *produsage*, are accentuated by the affordances on the online platform. Fourth, against this backdrop, Debord ties the insurgent forms of participation with inconsequential spectacles; a phenomenon that, as studies have found, can arbitrarily be witnessed on Twitter.

2.4.3.1 Spectacles are commercial encroachment.

It is not within the scope of this thesis to present an exhaustive historical account about how the shackles of capitalism have long stifled the full emancipatory potential democracy. Instead, my aim here is to indicate how Debord's critique of post second world war capitalist's stronghold of society through induced consumerism and "augmented survival" is still relevant. This is because the role of power and equality in a digital capitalist system, that Twitter operates in, is hardly challenged, and reiterates classic strongholds of socioeconomic barriers and access to means of communication (Golding & Murdock, 1997). In this accord, this "economic mediation of connectivity" (Murthy, 2018) equates consumers and users with society. Scholars find this problematic because marketing demographics inherently favours the flow of purchasing power (Dean & Shabbir, 2019; D. Schiller, 1999, p. 140) instead of democratic ends.

In fact, the blueprint for political communication on social media platforms is one that reaffirms the role of *spectacles* of development and modernisation through the introduction of "push-button democracy" (Wilhelm, 2000) to deflect society from

challenging the actual threats of capitalism. Several scholars recognise digital capitalism is simply a “deeper and wider” extension of its conventional form resulting in a vanishing public sphere “under the pressure of market forces” exacerbating inequalities within society (Castells, 2007; Jenkins et al., 2003; Wilhelm, 2000). Particularly, commodification of information by Twitter allows the platform to “push attention and distraction to new limits with endless streams of information” (Crary, 2001; G. King et al., 2017).

2.4.3.2 Spectacles are curated.

This shift from *having* to *appearing* could be examined using a two-fold perspective. One is purely aesthetic and another more intrinsic. While the former addresses an external manifestation, the latter suggests that users self-censor, to be seemingly neutral ideologically, to avoid content policing by authorities. Therefore, online presentation is less of a “window into people’s imaginations, motives and ideas” and more of an “interface of actual life” (Manovich, 2012). This “performance of self” in the public has been extensively explored by pre-internet era scholars such as Erving Goffman (1981). More recently, Twitter algorithms ‘push’ content and recommendations to users, especially when they just join the platform or follow a user (Chiregi & Navimipour, 2016; Helberger, 2019). The Harvard Business Review defines this feature as “curated offering” or a “personalised recommendation process” which acts as a virtual concierge, especially for new users, and acts “*after* the customer have figured out *what* they need but *before* they’ve decided *how* to fill that need” [emphasis mine] (Siggelkow & Terwiesch, 2019, p. 70).

An examination with this obsession of *appearing* to accumulate likes and retweets to survive and thrive on Twitter, is as Debord cautioned, how capitalists, have successfully “augmented survival” (Debord, 1994, p. 20). To this end, viewed from the earlier described framework of produsage, users are also producers who act as marketeers for their image online. The rise of online personal branding, as a field, is testament to this relatively recent trend (Beckett & Deuze, 2016; Rajput, 2014). A transfer of marketing strategies meant for trading goods and services to democratic deliberations has

problematised the notion of representation to the extent that users are more concerned with the optics of their actions over actual complexities and inequalities. Such an overemphasis on appearance coupled with Twitter features, present citizens with an ultimate binary mode, for example, like or dislike, follow or unfollow, share or block to form perspectives over larger themes of class, race and politics.

Several studies provide insight to suggest that these some users have commercial motives (Kitchin, 2017) and appeal to instil “couch potato democracy” (Ward et al., 2003) involving little or in most cases no civic agency. One study makes the argument that this has brought about “compassionate capitalism” and is aligned with “slacktivism” and is “forever destined to deal with the symptoms... but never the causes” of inequalities within society (Thomas, 2014, p. 10). In 1969, Sherry Arnstein suggested that political participation is an indication of “tokenism” – a monosyllabic and hyperbolic kind of participation devoid of the legitimacy required to “tackle complexities of class and racial inequalities present” within society (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Toscano, 2015). In fact, this sense of appearing is extended to what is covered in online news. For example, it was observed that commercial interest trumped when, instead of triggering a national conscience via earnest conversations about race, “news ratings, increased advertising and social media traffic” were the driving force of media coverage of police shootings (Noble, 2015). Scholars agree with foresights presented by Neil Postman (2005) and concede Postman’s “dystopian warnings” that communicative affordances do not necessarily translate to democratic prowess when it’s focus is to “promote style over substance, or image over issues (Theocharis & Lowe, 2015; Wilhelm, 2000; S. Young et al., 2007).

2.4.3.3 Spectacles *by* the people

Implicit in this are citizens themselves. To Debord, one of the perils of *the society of the spectacle* is when citizens eventually become participants, who not only sustain, but relentlessly defend this phenomenon. Accordingly, Jenkins’ characterisation of fan culture, oddly but accurately, describes spectacles on Twitter. In what appears to be a defence of fandom, Jenkins asserts that “imagery is immediately accessible... facilitates

communication...is a source of pleasure for fans, offering them utopian possibilities do not present in the realm of everyday experience” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 273). This culture is “transmitted informally” blurring boundaries between producers and users. As a result, Twitter’s algorithms act on cues provided by users (Bratslavsky et al., 2020), and is seen as being complicit to why “banal” spectacles form citizenry “worldview” (Debord, 1994).

Citizen adoption of spectacles was found in an investigation of communicative patterns on Twitter, researchers found that users with smaller accounts deliberately mirrored messaging styles of the top 300 Twitter personal accounts with 10 000 to 100 000 followers. Researchers concluded that the smaller users “curated” their messaging to match larger accounts, although, as interviews with the famous users revealed, that the tweets were personal in nature (Marwick, 2013). Another example of this was seen in a study, during the debt crisis and corresponding political turmoil of 2011 in Greece where researchers investigated the role of Facebook in mobilising society towards political participation. Even while experiencing a tumultuous period, citizen data consumption patterns suggest that social media stifled constructive civic action by acting as a “distraction”. As a direct result of using the platform, users “demonstrated negative relationship in all forms of political participation” (Theocharis & Lowe, 2015).

In the similar vein, instead of the broader, systemic sociocultural, economic, and political antecedents, early investigations observed activity on Twitter and suggested a causal link and indicated albeit wrongly (Zuckerman, 2011), that the Arab Spring movement was the collective action of keyboard activist (Chouliaraki, 2015; Price, 2013). The prevailing mood of optimism among scholars were evident through statements such as, “Facebook and Twitter key to Arab Spring uprisings” and “in the 21st century, the revelation may not be televised – but it will likely be tweeted” (O’Donnell, 2011). In this regard, ‘spectacles’ are akin to the rise of consumerism in 1950s Paris, in the form of millions of tweets were given credence and the actual oppression that took place for decades is hardly regarded (Debord, 1994). Similarly, empirical findings of a Nigerian study showed how “emotionalization, simplification and negativity” deflected hashtags to mobilise political

participation and tweets that addressed the suppression by the political elites (Yeku, 2018).

2.4.3.4 Spectacles Foster Passivity

Debord (2004, 1967:26) raised concern that the ruling elite would go beyond the Huxleyan approach of “trivialising” dissent (Postman, 2005) and eventually “sterilise” and ultimately “spectacularise” democratic attempts to reform. What is achieved through media censorship in a more oppressive regimes are accomplished using spectacles in more liberal societies (Bucy et al., 2020). Debord argues the interplay of aesthetic and reality through “recuperation” and “co-option” sustains the spectacle. This results in a phenomenon observed by scholars studying communication on Twitter and found that “truth becomes irrelevant” when “facts are a flexible tool to reinforce certain worldviews”. This is because misinformation on Twitter is facilitated by the affordance of anonymity of “authorship” which makes it impossible to trace the source or political, economic and social context of information shared (Zúñiga et al., 2020). Algorithms “manipulate social signals” through the way content is presented and this lends support for spectacles to either encourage action or passivity (Murthy, 2011, p. 786). The point to be made here is that Twitter affords such spectacles and manipulations in several ways as presented by the following studies.

In a study investigating “digital witnessing” or first-hand accounts of “spectacles of death” researchers examined the role of phone camera footage and how it challenged the “professional image monopoly” of journalist. This study found that representation of killings on amateur video footage was viewed as “intimate” and was seen as the “real thing” by viewers. Such spectacles through “recontextualization and humanisation” potentially reformulated moral boundaries and ‘manufacture consent’ for these killings (Chouliaraki, 2015). Further highlighting this point were studies of political actors with many followers. It was found that Twitter’s architecture favoured a small number of ‘elite users’ to disseminate existing information instead of facilitating discussions or debates (Yaqub et al., 2017). In a separate study, scholars found that elite users with “guru-like personalities”, albeit less likely to have any presence on Twitter, were three times more

active than regular users. They were able to “convince” users to “name and shame” followers who do not share similar political leanings. Findings suggested that users favoured “ideological loyalty” than capability or factual accurateness (Zúñiga et al., 2020).

From the examples of these studies, the spectacle itself helps to animate what Jean Baudrillard called ‘simulacra’ or representations which bear no similarity to what is true. Spectacles on Twitter is detached from historical, social and economic context and is devoid of political substance, as discussed above, for four reasons. First, spectacles seen on Twitter are not a result of deliberation by creators but is a result of the capitalistic architecture the platform is built upon. Second, spectacles lend heavily from the field of advertising and portrays an image that is curated only to present the favourable, and more problematically, the profitable. Third, users are implicit to the production of these spectacles. Fourth, as a manifestation of the first three factors, subversive debates may not be subject to censorship, but viscerally trivialised out of significance – nudging users towards passivity.

Representation determines how politics is seen. In this section, I attempted to problematise the way Twitter, which is fundamentally a commercial domain, regulates what its users see as the political. Borrowing from the 1966 movie title, I presented representations on Twitter as favourable because of making produsage possible, less favourable because of the illusions of inclusion and adverse for allowing Debord’s spectacles to permeate the platform. Critical research literature of the first two parts of my research framework generally dismisses the democratic potential of Twitter in the public sphere. Nevertheless, this has not fostered passivity among users as Twitter’s affordances appear to mediatise political concerns. To address this contradiction, I conceptualised this phenomenon as reflected in the following section.

2.4.4 Conceptualisation of the Representational Level

At the representational level, I examine the mediatisation of public interest on Twitter by locating to what degree the “basic precondition of a functioning democratic polity and full exercise of citizenship rights” (Golding & Murdock, 1997, p. 183) materialises on Twitter.

For Golding and Murdock (1997) these ‘basic preconditions’ are met only when: citizens are aware and pursue their rights, when they can constructively debate issues and have their aspirations accurately represented on mainstream communication channels. In this vein, an appraisal of related literature revealed that representation on online platforms remain under-theorised. Therefore, I suggest a framework to examine the mediatisation of representation on an online platform.

Such an examination is warranted as citizens have become participants of a public sphere that, presupposes the adoption of a liberal model as evident on Twitter. Scholarship suggests that the democratic potential and vitality of representations seen on such a platform are nuanced and may be presented on a spectrum. Scholars describe the favourable end of this spectrum as “diverse”, with minimal barriers to participate, and provides comprehensive and accurate discursive representations (Golding & Murdock, 1997). On the pessimistic end, representations on Twitter, presentations, mirroring Baudrillard’s notions of “simulacra, hyperreality and disappearance of reality” (Hjarvard, 2013). Therefore, in this level of analysis I suggest a dialogue between notions of representations, related theories of Habermas’ public sphere, and mediatisation research. I believe this analysis can furnish insights and scrutiny to the democratic legitimacy of representation by users of on Twitter.

To this end, I employ two corresponding theories of Habermas’ public sphere, and three mediatisation perspectives, to develop a novel conceptual framework to analytically investigate this dimension. In this vein, Habermas provides a two-fold ideological reinforcement. First, by insisting that a functioning public sphere should enshrine (police) public interest over state and commercial agendas. Second, Habermas stresses the formation of, in the context of my thesis, an online community, which may take place when representations within the public sphere, (that appear on Twitter) accurately mirror actual concerns faced by society. Against these two principles, I further conceptualise the perspectives of produsage, illusions of inclusion and spectacles (see Table 1) to characterise representations in the context of Malaysian political communication on

Twitter. Table 1 brings together discussions of the public sphere in Section 2.1 and mediatisation perspectives in Section 2.4.

Habermas' Public Sphere Principle	Mediatisation Perspectives		
	Produsage	Illusions of Inclusion	Spectacles
Policing Public Interest	Curated by the public and state-owned media playing a 'public service modal'	Curated by media and social media platform algorithm	Curated by Special interests, political and economic elite induced
Formation of community	Social media publics: collective, distributed, and participatory	Mass media, lobby groups and advertisers	Elite, construction of 'other', asynchronous
Examples	Blogs (Bruns, 2008), citizen journalism (Usher, 2017), hashtag activism (Zulli, 2020)	Filter bubbles, Echo-chamber, homophily, Global village	Algorithmic driven virality of content, digital demagoguery, push-button democracy

Table 1 Overview of Key Terms in Representational Level of Analysis

As discussed above, in the interest of avoiding a dichotomous view, I formulate a spectrum (see Figure 2) to present the idiosyncratic nature of representations on Twitter. At one end of the spectrum, I place produsage to epitomise the participatory prospects of 'favourable' representations (Bruns, 2018, p. 30). Representations here are citizen centric because the content are organic and appear to be uncoordinated. This pattern is counter hegemonic as agenda setting powers of the political elites are absent. Representations on the opposite end of the spectrum are spectacles. At this end, hegemonic forces ensure elite centric agendas are synthetically channelled to the citizenry via affordances of Twitter. While propaganda by the ruling elites is not new, it is worth mentioning that a growing body of evidence show that the algorithmic curation used allow for surgical precision, as opposed to broad strokes by conventional media, in targeting this content. While both extremes are distinct, the middle section of the spectrum reflects the

complexity of political communication accurately. Representations here exist in echo-chambers and ponders the predicament of democratic potentials as each user are in their own alternate reality. It is important to note that some echo-chambers serve democratic ends, and the understanding of such online tribes are under-theorised.

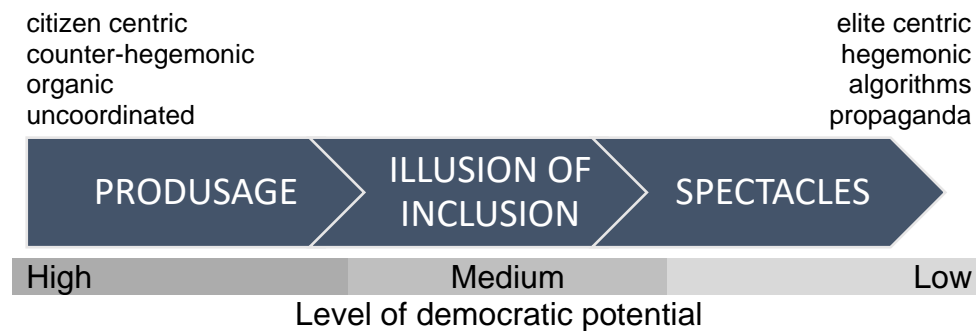


Figure 2 Mediatisation of Public Interest

To further understand this and in the interest of providing an ethnographic perspective, the following section presents the interactional section which investigates deliberative democratic notions *within* Twitter.

2.5 The Interactional Level

In the third level of my framework, I seek to extend and innovate the existing understanding of online ‘talk’ on Twitter. This level of analysis forms a continuum of the early research by John Dewey in 1927 demonstrating that “conversation is central to democracy” (Schudson, 1997, p. 297). Peter Dahlgren calls interactions “a cornerstone of the public sphere” (Dahlgren, 2000, p. 338). Habermas (1984) submits that through conversations and debates the “public sphere comes into being”. Albeit in a critical way, current studies have widely established the use of the Habermas’ public sphere to study the dynamics of online political communication (Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2013; Freelon, 2010; Goode, 2005; Nathans, 1990). In fact, the term public sphere has been appropriated to Twittersphere to better reflect the micro-blogging context. Additionally, this section proposes looking at political participation as a process and places this platform as part of that process, rejecting “simplistic binary” (Morley, 2007, p. 326). In

view of this, Alan Durant (2010) in *Meaning in Media*, urges an expansive view of political communication on media as being "transformed by the medium", instead of the reductionist just "ordinary conversation" or as "simply amplifying" (Durant, 2010).

My intention here is to see if the state of interactions on Twitter, is indicative of the democratic health of users from Malaysians. Therefore, the following sections are structured as follows. First, I focus on notions of spaces and the positioning of public opinion on Twitter that stem from the theoretical traditions of Habermas. Second, I offer a discussion of what appears to be the emancipatory potential of Twitter, affect, immediacy and agency of *talk* on Twitter. Here, I appraise research about interaction by politicians, media organisations, civic instigators, and listeners. Third, an address of studies that examined notions of knowledge and trust on the platform. Finally, a theoretical way forward is proposed through the formulation of my thesis' research questions.

2.5.1 Spaces

The central issue here concerns the effects of Twitter in blurring the divide between public and private spheres – geographical or virtual. As a result, new communicative spaces that allow the sharing, exchange, and debate of ideas as an expression emerges (Dahlgren, 2018). Habermas asserted that such transformations were emancipatory and should ideally result in autonomy from power structures (Dahlberg, 2004; Habermas, 1984; Spång, 2018). In that accord, this section asks: where is political agency in all of this? while the basic notion of media as a space for collective citizen organisation and deliberation has remained, its shape and form has evolved in tandem with the technology-of-the-day causing democratic efficacy to be a subject of constant research scrutiny (Dahlgren, 1995; Papacharissi, 2015a). At this point, a study of the active audience and "the geography of the new" as presented by Morley (2007) is warranted. Specifically, this section recognises ideas on what constitutes private and public identity, and spaces where 'the political' comes to being has continued to morph.

Pre-internet studies have generally presented a separated or even antagonistic view of the domestic, public and mediatic spaces. The three have mostly been discussed as distinct from the other with findings suggesting the technological enabling of an overlap of these spaces produced democratic expressions (Morley, 2007, p. 61). However, studies after the proliferation of internet communicative technologies suggest a “new understanding of the public and private in terms of convergence” (Pankaj, 2010, p. 269) and defines cyberspace as a “placeless space” (Dahlgren, 1995, p. 20) or “electronic elsewhere” (Papacharissi, 2010). Rather, what is observed is the “transgressing of sacred boundaries” that historically defined domestic, public and mediatic spaces towards what Morley observed as the “domestication and naturalisation” of technologies into the personal realm “to suit very traditional purposes”. Moreover, the internet did not mark the “death of geography”, instead “mirrored established structures of power and flows of previous forms of communication” (Morley, 2007, pp. 201–202).

Questions of the existence of a public sphere and democratic expression are bound together. Therefore, this section attempts to shed understanding on three visceral questions. Can a public sphere exist on Twitter? If it does; Can discourse on Twitter be likened to democratic expression? First, understanding the nature of online interaction is helpful in answering these queries. Sinekopova (2006) suggests departing and expanding from the pre-internet, purely spatial understanding of platforms to “an imaginary society” and subjectivity (Sinekopova, 2006, p. 519). Chakraborty (2010) asserts, in the similar vein, that Twitter’s affordances are idiosyncratic in the sense that while in some spheres experience a “significant expansion” other societal sphere have contracted, suggesting a “redefinition and reformulation” of Habermas’ public sphere (Chakraborty, 2010, p. 186). As a result of this, scholars suggest interaction on such online spaces point towards a contemporary form of communitarianism on this space (Dahlberg, 2007; Freelon, 2010). In an extensive study investigating the deliberative power of public forums, Karpowitz et al (2009) found that a formation of safe spaces or “enclaves” prompted significant increase in participation and the resulting inclusion of views of “marginalised” communities.

More specifically, scholars use the term Twittersphere to refer to this space on Twitter. This term started to gain popularity after a study analysing the “entire Twitter site” which at that time comprised “41.7million user profiles, 1.47 social relations, 4262 trending topics, and 106 million tweets” was presented at the International World Wide Web Conference 2010 (Kwak et al., 2010). From that point, it was first used in the professional public relations context (Gilpin, 2010, p. 238) and later expanded to characterise other collective communication of citizens, mostly in the electoral politics sense (Bruns et al., 2017; Kobayashi et al., 2019). Analysis of the Twittersphere, allowed for social scientists to plot the topological characteristics of online interaction, in the context concerned. Apart from political communication, researchers have studied, online public spheres, or Twittersphere in educational (Tang & Hew, 2017), financial (Behrendt & Schmidt, 2018), medical (Johnsen et al., 2019), risk and crisis management (Lachlan et al., 2016) and religious (Bokányi et al., 2016) contexts.

Scholars generally attributed interactions on Twitter to “the fluid and fuzzy boundaries and the decentred (or at least the appearance of) public life” (Johnson, 2010, p. 75 parenthesis mine). Another trend observed, is the use of use of social media extracting tools such as NodeXL (Jungherr, 2016) and RStudio (Naseerah et al., 2017), to provide visual representations of interactions. However, Brock (2018) argues that such experiments, is more hype and only reveal “what people do” without providing either insight of any meaningful discourse or impact of such interactions (Brock, 2018). Scholars making the argument against the democratic potential of Twitter interaction use the disputes presented in the previous, macro level of analysis. Considering this, I attempt to add to the understanding which addresses these primary concerns. What kind of political interaction occurs in each tier? How does each tier capitalise on affordances of Twitter? Are these tweets merely communication in a shared space, without any meaningful exchange of ideas? Plainly, how does one situate public opinion on Twitter?

2.5.2 Positioning Public Opinion on Twitter

For the normal citizen, democratic reality hinges on the form of government and mediums available to express and communicate public opinion (Glynn et al., 2018, p. 54). With this

realisation, my study takes an interest in the emancipatory potential of Twitter especially in situating the democratic agency of deliberation. In that accord, this section will appraise existing literature according to Dahlgren's three tier categorisation of the public sphere: the societal, mediatic and elite. I will focus on the societal sphere before evaluating studies investigating the mediatic and elite tiers. The objective here is to challenge the myopic notion of democratic euphoria of the formation and agency of public debates on Twitter and critically examine the reflexivity thereof.

One of the conditions of Habermas' public sphere that has remained relevant from the era of the printing press up until recent times is reflexivity. This condition situates public arguments or the process of how much of what is discussed can be reflected and disputed against one's own opinions, as a prerequisite of the public sphere. Jenkins (2013), building on the notion of produsage as presented by Bruns' (2008), suggests that another matrix characterised as "grabbability" of the message should be considered, especially in the social media context (Bruns, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2013). The notion of 'grabbability' suggests that these communications capitalise on an "iterative approach", with each actor having a fluid, non-hierarchical role, constantly spreading material that is "shared" rather than owned, suggesting "hive communities" with "granular and atomised approach" to deliberation on the platform (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 183). This feature engenders social media communication because as Jenkins (2013) describes, "if it does not spread, it is dead"(Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 188).

Notions of 'grabbability' are echoed in the use of internet memes. The term meme originates from the study of genes as the way it spread is likened to "genes propagation techniques". Relevant to our discussion of 'grabbability' are the three characteristics of "successful" internet content that spreads ideas from "brain to brain". They are: "high longevity, high fecundity or rate of copying and high fidelity" (Richard Dawkins (1989) cited in Zappavigna, 2014, p. 100). Nevertheless, as is discussed below in the context of a multiple-tiered model, studies are mixed on whether Twitter encourages or hinders interaction that entails political communication.

Along with the rise of convergent mass-media, scholars predicted the beginning of the end of “public scene from politics” pulling along with it the “theatrical and representative” form of public opinion, calling it “degradation of a functioning public sphere” (Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 195). In this vein, scholars pointed toward “generational displacement” inherited from the passive television culture (Bennett et al., 2011). This notion was challenged by studies that found internet communication, as opposed to face-to-face interaction, in general, “facilitated reflexivity” because of the additional effort and thought it takes to type a tweet instead of speaking or just watching something (Bamakan et al., 2019; Dahlberg, 2010). Further, such communications are a “cultural expression of the activities, interests, ideals and beliefs” especially among citizens seeking to exhibit an “alternative social identity” on online platforms (Jenkins, 2013, p. 253).

Various scholars have described the evolution of the societal sphere from the original ideals presented by Habermas. Habermas’ oversight of class and ownership and instead makes the case that studies focusing on the disenfranchised provides a “vantage point” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 53) that broadens the nuance of public opinion to include “reciprocal listening, political topicality and cross-cutting debates” (Freelon, 2010, p. 1177). Scholars argue that some societies contain a “nexus of multiple publics” which in turn consists of “multiple discursive arenas each with its characteristics” which allow discussion of “matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment (Bohman, 1996; Fraser, 1990; Hauser, 1998) goes as far as to emphasise that such “overlapping” spheres are a sign of successful “communal defusal”.

For instance, scholars assert about the surfacing of an alternative “proletarian public sphere or sub-publics” from interactions that emerge from “inequalities” and “institutional failures” in society (Delli Carpini et al., 2004). Homophily and polarisation result in ‘echo-chambers’, as discussed in Section 2.4.2, and filters out any form of plurality. These filters are often set deliberately by the account holder further reinforced by algorithms. (Benkler et al., 2018; Robertson, 2018). Researchers of a study involving 3.8 million Twitter accounts found that “information was exchanged primarily among individuals with similar ideological preferences in the case of political issues” (Barberá et al., 2015a).

Such a view within the societal sphere is relevant in a multi-cultural and inegalitarian society like Malaysia and politics is generally contingent on effective identification with or advocacy of ethnic issues (Jomo, 1990). Apart from ethnicity, the discussion of political communication also happens in this sphere across a wide dynamic generational and geographical spectrum. To illustrate, Abdul Rahman Embong (2002) reveals the new Malay middle class as a “first generation” middle class which has experienced intergenerational mobility not only geographically, but socially, economically, and pertinent to the context of my thesis, politically. As a result, a dichotomy is formed within this middle class. One group consists of Barisan Nasional (BN) supporters in favour of authoritarian political parties signifying ‘implied democracy’. The second group have been more critical and “assert their ideological independence from the state” (Embong, 2002).

The mainstream sphere in Malaysia is infiltrated with state-owned mass media (W. L. Kim, 2014; Miner, 2015; Zaharom, 1991, 1994) and is used by the ruling elite to keep its control over political democracy by journalist and broadcasters acting as “stenographers” (Moeller, 2004) for the state. As a result, traditional mass media lacked structurally in its DNA the “new media mindset and ethos” (Kee, 2008, p. 256). Such failures, caused by structural deficiencies echoes to what (Golding & Murdock, 1997, p. 407) explained as the communications media having failed democracy and instead of being triumphant in “manufacturing consent” while persecuting those who were critical of the mainstream ideology (Hackett, 2002; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). These scepticisms of democratic potential are compounded by what Jean Baudrillard (1985) (cited in Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 195) predicted as the loss of legitimacy of media organisations to technologies unleashing “the force of images” as discussed in the previous section.

The elite sphere is in the favourable end of the power and influence spectrum as opposed to the societal sphere. Dahlgren (2012) warns that among the key dilemmas facing democracies are “powerless citizens in the face of powerful elites”. He attributes this to the loss of government control due to the “onslaught of neoliberal versions of societal development” and emphasis on “market dynamics instead of civic participation” in making

societal decisions (Dahlgren, 2012). As a direct consequence of such inequalities and mismatch of power within spheres, several democracies have witnessed turmoil, for example in South Korea with “more elites, challenging forms of political participation” (A.-R. Lee, 2003) as well as the ‘Umbrella Protest’ in Hong Kong (Chai, 2019).

The earlier levels of my research framework highlighted how the elite and mediatic sphere has undermined modalities of democracy. At this point, long serving British parliamentarian, Tony Benn’s “five little democratic questions: What power have you got? Where did you get it from? In whose interest to you exercise it? To whom are you accountable? How can we get rid of you?” (cited by Sadowski, 2020, p. 32) guide the inquiry into political communication on Twitter. Recent studies suggest that political communication within the societal sphere has shown potential of agency and political power. While still a far cry from the ideals of being a democratic bulwark, the following section, appraises scholarship highlighting the narrow but emancipatory potential, or “thin modalities of solidarity, contestation and civic engagement” of interactions in social media platforms. To this end, three prospects that were deemed trivial or banal in previous mediums but now through affordances of Twitter “carry symbolic weight, voice and visibility” have been identified; affect, immediacy, and reification of talk (Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2015a).

2.5.3 Affect

Earlier sections problematises the notion that political power nested within the societal sphere are potent to enable citizens through the rite of passage towards civic agency (Murthy, 2013). Even so, citizens continue to express civic cultures on these platforms. Research suggest that this is attributable to “affect” or “soft, storytelling structures of feeling” that these platforms capitalise on affording “spontaneity” and an “always-on social environment that sustains political conversations”. Imbued by a “feeling of democracy” users are convinced that their political expressions on social media serves as a mode of civic engagement. Collectively, this feeling brings about “affective attunement” or the feeling that describes crowds singing or dancing along in musical concerts (Papacharissi, 2015a).

A notable mention about affective attunement is offered by Paul Williams (1967) when he called rock concerts “induction centres” of “new social configuration or counterculture” brought about by “enlivened sense of community and possibility taking over public spaces” (cited by Kramer, 2013). Thus, as a concept, affect is not new or unique to social media platforms. Earlier works have examined affect and democracy through television mediations (Morley, 1992). Therefore, recent scholarly work carries over traditional elements when describing Twitter as a medium for not only collective rational sentiment, but for political “fantasy, storytelling and play”.

Existing research prove the preponderance of studies that focus on the materiality of social media platforms. An unchallenged asynchronous platform such as Twitter begs an examination that includes not just physical affordances but an expanded conception that considers notions of affect. This inclusion is helpful to capture the transcendence from the binary of physical and emotional to include “multisensory” experiences among users (Massumi, 2002). Patricia Clough (2007) appreciates the complexity that not everything is expressed by language while stressing the need to trace such “epistemological challenges” when “theorising the social”. Further, the inclusion of affect in the interrogation of technological advances links emotions felt by users with intersectional and power relations (Ahmed, 2010).

In her research of Twitter users, Zizi Papacharissi found elements of “fantasy, storytelling and play” which paralleled with Erving Goffman’s notions of personal communications laden with “ego, gestures and personal feelings” (cited by Murthy, 2012) with one significant addition – it occurred on a computer mediated network. Users were found to exhibit political inclination and antagonisms, in a personal, make-believe way while proclaiming personal political (p96) agency. Normal citizens on the platform expressed their own renditions of political aspirations from their perspective but targeted towards an audience suggesting a paradoxical “publicly private” phenomenon. This is compounded

by the fact that political news presented on Twitter are curated¹⁰ by algorithms in a manner to elicit the most response.

This response, because of “newer modalities of civic engagement”, can be characterised as “organic, intrinsic and spontaneous” (p115). Henry Jenkins (2013) explains that users view media inputs from the lens of their cultural experiences resulting in the production of posts on social media platforms. For example, users tend to align pop culture references to what they see politically to generate tweets. He calls this activity “poaching” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 223). Moreover, media scholars have always tested the notion that experiences of a particular event, may vary, depending on the media of choice. Historically, such notions have been researched in the context of the telegraph (Murthy, 2012) and for television audience (Papacharissi, 2015a). The architecture of Twitter affords embeddedness, from a wide range of media outlets encouraging a “culture of convergence” (Jenkins, 2006). As a result, Twitter user reception patterns are fluid and subjective to personal “micro-celebrity”, challenging the otherwise “fixity of norms” within the public sphere terrain (Papacharissi, 2015a).

My study seeks to extend existing scholarly work regarding the public sphere in online platforms, especially in the context of the Malaysian Twittersphere. Given The Democracy Index’s 2019 rating of Malaysia as a “flawed democracy” (Bernama, 2020), the offerings of a seemingly impartial and safe platform may attract (p109) “performative tendencies” among citizens in expressing dissenting views. Collectively, studies have shown, these views have the tendency for political mobilisation (J. Lim, 2017). What can be observed is the traversing of civic agency from the private citizen reacting to something posted on a public platform, through the homophilic nature of algorithms, allow a like-minded audience to listen (Castells, 2007).

¹⁰ see discussion on spectacles are curated in Section 2.4.3

2.5.4 Immediacy

All communicative technologies have continued to push the threshold of immediacy posed by the incumbent form. This section attempts to present research in argument against critics who are dichotomous in evaluating social media platforms and are convinced that this obsession with the instant, as presented by David Morley and Kevin Robins, comes at the cost of depth and significance (Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 115). Research suggest immediacy and civic agency can co-exists (Murthy, 2012; Price, 2013) in three ways: digital micro-activism, immediate publicity, and constant proximity.

James Dennis (2019) in *Beyond Slacktivism*, introduces the term “digital micro-activism” to describe how Twitter produces political agency that could be characterised in four ways. First, immediacy is experienced with both “synchronous and asynchronous communication” and can be observed through online surveys (Winter et al., 2019) and petitions (Chu & Welsh, 2015; Goos et al., 2011; Yates & Lockley, 2018). Second, this view appreciates the “procedural nature” of democratic activism and suggest, the instant, spontaneous actions on online platforms such as Tweeting or touching the like button are “political outcomes” of both online and offline engagements.

Thirdly, considering the internet penetration rate and usage statistics, as discussed in Chapter 1, suggest a convergence of online and offline, lifeworld realities. Additionally, digital micro-activism challenges attributing causality between time invested and engagement quality and alternatively, urges a consideration of “the granularity” provided on online platforms. Fourth, research also show that user’s political participation is reflective of genuine ideological inclination, especially in the absence of autonomy from the state and corporate interests (Dennis, 2019, p. 54).

I argue that emancipatory potential is presented when publicity is sustained by immediacy. Publicity in the Habermas’ sense is when an “individual transforms into a political actor” (Gimmler, 2001, p. 22). Therefore, the potential of political agency is witnessed when individual opinion, regarding a current issue whether political, economic, social, or even disasters, are expressed instantaneously and a dialogue or debate

ensues, via unrestricted communication, interaction and information sharing affordances on Twitter (Murthy, 2012; Semaan et al., 2014). Research indicate that this is especially the case for Twitter, even when subjective instantaneity (Ernst et al., 2019) and “social time acceleration and click-bait criteria” (Himma-Kadakas, 2017) inhibits inaccurate or outright misinformation. Immediate publicity is possible even when these deliberations are not compatible to conventional newsroom editorial standards (Papacharissi, 2015a). Nevertheless, such messaging immediacy, brevity and more importantly apparent authenticity is enabled by Twitter and has shown discursive potential.

The potential for political power can be viewed from the affordances of immediacy on Twitter that compresses both time and space to sustain “constant proximity” (Athique, 2013, p. 119). Although virtually, real time availability allows participants divided geographically, to participate in the “fluid process” of social organisation (Castells, 2007, p. 252). According to Jenkins, et.al (2013) constant proximity is particularly significant to diasporic cultures as studies show immigrant communities constantly scan platforms for real-time news of their “motherland” signalling emotional proximity (Chouliaraki, 2015). The shifting of focus from just the local to “beyond immediate geographic proximity” indicates “transformation of power relations” (Jenkins et al., 2013). This brought about BERSIH participation from Malaysian diaspora (J. C. H. Lee, 2014; J. Lim, 2017). In the face of Arab Spring uprisings, though paradoxical in nature, content reflecting “dangerous proximity” of the producer allowed viewers worldwide an “amplified and intensified dynamic of self-empowerment” (Adami, 2016; Papacharissi, 2015a).

2.5.5 Talk on Twitter

Scholars equate posts on Twitter with “phatic communication” (Zappavigna, 2014, p. 34) or talk (Murthy, 2012). In an attempt to expand 3rd generation reception studies, in this section, I attempt to locate the user (audience) engagement on Twitter within the macro environment. Contemporary communication channels on social media platforms, and particularly the emergence of Twitter in the political communication context, have given a new urgency to the question of reification of political talk. This is because, Twitter architectures add to the already “complex specificities such as class, education

attainment and politico-ideological posture of the reception process” (Clarke, 2014, p. 106). Thus, scholars have noted the bigger challenge posed by the elite sphere policing the freedom of political expression within the broader Malaysian political landscape mirroring the predigital status quo. This is because, all three mechanisms of curbing societal political agency, namely “sovereign power, Foucault’s biopower and legalistic control” as highlighted by Jathan Sadowski (2020) as discussed in Section 2.3.4, are rife in the Malaysian context (Sadowski, 2020). Nevertheless, voices of dissent, exist echoing Erving Goffman’s conceptualisation of talk ritualisation, participation framework and embeddedness (cited by Murthy, 2012).

2.5.5.1 Politicians

Studies of the communicative strategies of politicians on Twitter point towards recognisable populist rhetoric. "Populism has become mainstream" as studies show that politicians have used this platform to "unite citizens" around central themes, mirroring the Habermas’ public sphere principle to prioritise public opinion, to counter "the others" (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). Central to the notion of populism is the creation of a “hero”, “the common, hardworking person, victimised by the system” (M. B. Brown, 2009; Gerbaudo, 2014). This is prominent among politicians who are excluded from mainstream media and thus, rely heavily on the “characteristics and affordance” of platforms such as Twitter as explained in a study examining the communication strategy of the reportedly racist and fascist Golden Dawn party of Greece (Siapera & Veikou, 2016).

Twitter allows a politician to tap into the age-old "power of the visuals, in particular, their portraiture in construction of their public image" contributing to the "celebrification of politics" (Ekman & Widholm, 2014; Karadimitriou & Veneti, 2016). Recent studies categorise politician selfies as a "communication quiver of modern politicians" because they are self-generated and disengaged by traditional media, provide a sense of intimacy, can be used as a political branding tool and it is a form of media attention device (Karadimitriou & Veneti, 2016; Routh, 2016). The candid and informal nature of Tweets encourage politicians to use “constant verbal reassurances” encouraging constituents to reciprocate (Jenkins, 2013, p. 257). On a more subversive note, candid communications

by politicians especially pertaining to race take a dog whistle nature (Bailey & Nawara, 2019).

In addition to presenting visuals, politicians were found to 'listen' on Twitter (Crawford, 2009). On the favourable end of the spectrum is 'reciprocal listening' where politician hears and respond via comments and direct messages. On the flip side, are those who adopt the 'broadcast-only' model where there is no interaction but use Twitter for what 'informative' purposes, or exclusively to diffuse information (Compagno, 2016a). In comparing politicians' interactive patterns during an election period to regular time, studies found that it was paradoxical (Kalsnes, 2016). Another example of this point is presented by research into the tweeting pattern of the 45th President of the United States Donald Trump "suggests just how much Twitter's form inhibits reflexivity" (Ott, 2017). In the centre of this spectrum are politicians who employ 'delegated listening' where staffers manage all aspects of the Twitter account. This technique could result in politicians looking with "little personality or life" like "animated corpses" (Compagno, 2016a; Crawford, 2012).

Research point to the 44th President of the United States of America's campaign as the pioneer of social media data mining during an electoral campaign (Glynn et al., 2018, p. 367). In this vein, scholars studied vocal inflexions of the then-presidential candidates Donald J. Trump and Hillary Clinton during debates. Through an investigation into 428,185 live tweets during the debate, they found that nonverbal cues were necessary as the positivity or negativity of tweets corresponded with the candidates' pitch while speaking of the party they represented. A high pitch prompted favourable tweet and vice versa (Dietrich & Juelich, 2018). Such are the examples of new forms of analysis that is made possible by convergent social networking platforms.

2.5.5.2 Media Organisations

In earlier sections I have discussed that media organisations are commercial endeavours and are part of "socially controlled institutions" that favour "powerful political and social groups" or as this research defines the elite sphere, "at the expense" of the societal

sphere (Glynn et al., 2018, p. 362). Therefore, here I focus on the way traditional mass media use Twitter on the grounds that the role of media is extensive as it “involves shaping and changing citizens’ orientations and behaviour” in relatively new democracies (Voltmer, 2006). Studies show that news agencies are using Twitter in four ways.

First, to fulfil their traditional role to disseminate news. Second, to market stories via sharing of hyperlinks. Third, to establish relationships with news consumers through @mentions. Fourth, as a tool for reporting where journalists are encouraged to use their accounts (Lasorsa et al., 2012) to share stories as they happen (Graham et al., 2014). Further examination link emancipatory notions to "democratise broadcasting" through "participatory programming". Scholars indicated that access is given to advocates to achieve social or political change by "minimising editorial commands to technical support". While this notion was far-fetched during that time, recent studies have shown Twitter enabling "participatory programming" (Golding & Murdock, 1997).

Among the early works was Alfred Hermida (2010) showing the growth of 'ambient journalism' describing Twitter as a "broad, asynchronous, lightweight and always-on system" having an effect on how news is made and thus expanding the role of a journalist to "analyse, interpret and contextualise collections of intelligence, rather than in the established practice of selection and editing of content" (Haigh et al., 2018; Hermida, 2010). Subsequent studies have shown how 'ambient journalism' was used in conflict reporting during the 2011 UK riots (Vis, 2013) and the Ukraine crisis (Pantti, 2019). As a result, research also shows how Twitter was also used to counter this organic reporting through propaganda (Boyd-Barrett, 2017; Gerber & Zavisca, 2016; Watanabe, 2017) and fake news (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016), especially in the context of the Russian versus Ukraine conflict.

Participatory practices have also allowed for several relatively new areas of research. Firstly, research into the comments sections of online news. A study of more than 100 million online comments on The Guardian between 2006 to 2017 concluded that many journalists have now moved 'participatory practices to Twitter' as a result of 'perceived

lower journalistic benefits'. Second, in line with the sharing of stories via a hyperlink on Twitter, or algorithmic news recommenders, studies have linked this to a possible democratic role of the media. In this vein, Natali Helberger (2019), developed Artificial Intelligence (AI) that identifies democratic leanings of Twitter accounts and is able to customise messages that ultimately ensure that news shared nudge readers with pro-democratic information they “ought to read” (Helberger, 2019).

In concluding this section, I highlight the critique of restriction of democratic discourse in media outlets by suppressive elites (Leong, 2018). Studies have shown that plurality on mainstream media continues to shrink (Beaufort, 2018). In addition, journalist have also experienced professional demotion and threats because of challenging the powerful elite ('A Letter on Justice and Open Debate', 2020). Research findings continue to suggest that media organisations should continue to “act in public good” (Metzgar et al., 2011) against the oppressors and advocate on behalf of the citizens from the less favourable end of the societal spectrum who face “technological restrictions to online activism” (Zulli, 2020). In this regard, a coalition of the elites may ensure the continuity of the flow new ideas of civic engagement (Johannessen et al., 2016). Actions by “repressive governments” (Ahmad & Othman, 2014; Willnat et al., 2013) and an “intolerant” society (Koh et al., 2016) hamper democratic participation along the lines of “labour and class” (Adami, 2016; Fuchs & Qiu, 2018). The following section discusses how the societal sphere reacts in the face of these impediments.

2.5.5.3 Civic instigators and Contributors

This section reviews literature that defines civic instigators, contributors or active societal users on Twitter and how new patterns of political communication research have emerged as result of this. Among the earliest studies that “rejected the notion that influence flowed directly from the media to the individual” and introduced the role of influential societal users were Robert Merton's 1946 *Mass Persuasion* on 'influentials' and 'reference groups' followed by Katz and Lazarsfeld's 1955 *Personal Influence* where the two-step flow of communication – illustrating uses social support and social pressure to influence personal network was introduced (Morley, 1992). An early study of their role of in the political

context concluded that there are three types of active societal users: activist, talkers, and passive leaders (Kingdon, 1970). He asserts that broader issues such as "class formations, economic processes, and sets of institutional power-relations" should be acknowledged when classifying commoners (Hall, 1982, p. 55).

However, political tweets and retweets indicate "subtle disruptions to (conventional) power hierarchy" (Dennis, 2019; Papacharissi, 2015a). The former attributes this to the "structures of feelings" that allow ideas to gain traction in Twittersphere. The latter attributes this to a greater appreciation of the granularity of "citizen typology" afforded by Twitter. First, citizens or normal users' source and share their personal political story, which could be from any platform, mostly originally from the elite or mainstream sphere. They eventually form what network visualisation experiments attest as "elite nodes" on Twitter and eventually exercise power through "processes of networked gatekeeping and framing" and use this influence to curate content characterised by "immediacy and reciprocity". Further content analysis found these communicative patterns to replicate an act of digital "solidarity" with likeminded followers, where "personal narratives connect". It is through these mediated connections that researchers concluded that democratic agency is evident not in the conventional political economic sense, but at a "semantic, liminal and granular" and instigating manner (Papacharissi, 2015a).

Reviews of related studies show most current studies refer to the diffusion of innovation context of influential societal users (Vishwanath & Barnett, 2011). These instigators play the role of advocates that champion public opinion (Lang & Lang, 2008) and gain recognition as articulate, imaginative, public intellectuals (Dahlgren, 2013). Further, societal users influence the information flow within their network (Hu et al., 2017; Kavanaugh et al., 2009), and can either filter or amplify media effects (Lang & Lang, 2008). Studies also note that these users exist in all hierarchies of society. These self-ordained influencers are apparent in even politically underrepresented demographics such as young adults and minorities (Kavanaugh et al., 2009).

In a study involving 648 American public university students, researchers compared attributes of active users on a digital platform versus their counterparts in conventional settings. They found outside internet-enabled scenarios, "opinion leadership resembles a pyramid" with only a handful influencing the masses and unsurprisingly they were of a higher 'socioeconomic status' and "more educated" (Park & Kaye, 2017). In respect of similarities of active users from both online and offline environments, studies revealed that they shared similar 'soft skills' (Chiregi & Navimipour, 2016) and cognitive abilities on the platform, particularly in being innovative (van den Nieuwboer et al., 2016), highly knowledgeable, driven, extroverted and take deliberative initiative in discussions. This study also found that offline attributes such as "occupational or professional status" or "favourable image on mass media" had a spillover effect on societal users. Nonetheless, the single attribute that overtook attributes such as socioeconomic status or personal characteristics and made these users more influential than their offline counterparts was the quality of information shared (Park & Kaye, 2017).

Research identifies influence or 'centrality' on Twitter through social network analysis that measure "the most relevant user" on a platform (Riquelme & González-Cantergiani, 2016). Studies suggest that 'retweeting' reflects the influence and is the most accurate measure of influence within the societal sphere (Gruzd et al., 2011; Xu et al., 2014). The use of centrality to measure influence on social networks have been used in various contexts such as identifying potential customers, information diffusion, expert recommendation, and social customer relationship management. In a related study, the term "broad linking" is used to describe how users are able to push content to a massive audience but concluded that while this mass sharing of links promoted participation and mirrored the reach of established mainstream outlets (Bennett, 2008).

In a study of Canadian politicians on Twitter, scholars used six metrics to measure the influence of various political actors and found that societal users were most influential only to those within their networks while key journalist and politicians displayed significantly more influence (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014). In an American survey of 648 Twitter users, researchers found that influence in the societal tier on Twitter was not

determined by demographic attributes, but by online network size and civic participation (Park & Kaye, 2017). A common trait observed is the quantitative nature used to measure political communication of these users on Twitter. This section will inform the operationalisation of my research in the following chapters. While my focus on this section were the outwardly active and vocal societal user, the next section looks at a more dormant version of societal users or the listeners. In an interest of research inclusion, I argue that reading patterns of users with few followers but still comment, react, like and follow (and unfollow) others on Twitter point towards a silent revolution and warrants examination.

2.5.5.4 Listeners

While the previous sections investigated the delivery of ‘talk’ on Twitter, this section situates listeners within Stuart Hall’s (1973) theorisation of the encoding/decoding process. Particularly, I investigate the users’ who privately read or consume content but do not express their views publicly. I use the term *listeners* to describe users who amid “decoding” used dominant, negotiated, and oppositional theoretical lenses (Hall, 1973; Shaw, 2017). Broadly, scholars have conceptualised this shift from “dutiful citizenship” to a form of political participation as “self-actualising citizenship” or the “micro-activism” (as mentioned in section 2.6.5) and further subset them as “listeners” (Bennett, 2008; Coleman, 2005; Dennis, 2019).

Other scholars have used parallel concepts such as “monitorial citizens” (Schudson, 1998, p. 311), “stand-by citizens” (Amnå & Ekman, 2013) and “the forgotten man” (Sumner, 2007 [1883]) in exploring alternative approximation of political agency among citizens using “everyday markers” (Amnå & Ekman, 2013) such as “scrolling” (Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017), reading (Procter et al., 2013) and liking (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015) Twitter feeds. This view challenges the notion that political participation should solely be measured in terms of resources spent and physical effort. Instead, I argue that notions such as agreeableness of a common agenda, fairness and inclusivity suffice to indicate political participation. Underlying those notions are ideas rooted in capitalist interests of oppressing what it cannot exploit (Fuchs, 2008, 2017b),

formal offline forms of engagement (Vromen & Collin, 2010) and oversimplification of online political participation (Morozov, 2011).

There, as argued in previous sections of my thesis, exists vast empirical basis on which social media technologies can be, and has been repurposed and reformulated in light of civic cultures (Dahlgren, 2016a; Jenkins, 2013) and political engagement (Benkler et al., 2018; Fenton, 2016). Furthermore, in Malaysia political expression particularly in the societal sphere occurs largely in private spaces (B. T. Khoo, 2002). Thus, giving credence exclusively to publicly observable interactions, disenfranchises the listener and does not account for those interactions. Furthermore, listening integrates the mundane everyday scrolling of information into a participative process (Vromen & Collin, 2010). In that vein, and in the interest of providing a framework that recognises seemingly passive participation as “cognitive engagement, discursive participation, political mobilisation and symbolic acts of active citizenship” (Dennis, 2019, p. 18), this section presents a review of scholarship about online listeners.

Characteristics of “the forgotten man”, are explored to shed light to the polarised nature of Twitter users. Studies describe ‘the forgotten man’ has lower levels of formal education, rural, is a religious conservative, and consumes right-wing biased media (Chin, 2018; Evans et al., 2018; Morgan & Lee, 2019). He is most vulnerable to disinformation (Entman & Usher, 2018; Muller, 2007). Voter demographic studies reveal that support for autocracy and authoritarian rulers come from this base are attributed to “habitual voting” (Chang, 2017). Furthermore, studies identify them for their populist nationalistic (Persily, 2017) agenda and are against globalised corporate agendas (Beaufort, 2018). Some also report high suspicion levels over institutions of democracy (Venturini & Rogers, 2019). However, “standby citizens” or “monitorial citizens” are identified with the opposite of ‘the forgotten man’s’ education and economic levels (Amnå & Ekman, 2013). Though their political leaning is unclear, this group is more aligned with an ‘informed citizenry’ and only consume social media posts with minimal ‘outward’ civic participation.

Key to understanding the political agency of listeners is in viewing participation as a process instead of a dichotomy. From this perspective, a more nuanced and layered view may be considered. In strategic literature review appraising findings of over 50 years of political participation studies, scholars offer eight steps before any physical participation is witnessed. Of the eight, namely, “initial characteristics, early socialisation, education, television avoidance, general identification, social capital, political capital, positive attitudes toward politics and government, and mobilisation”, the first six phases occur passively (Zukin et al., 2006). In the similar vein, research of militant groups’ communication patterns reveal that these groups armed teams of soldiers with “data plans” to send messages during the initial stages of “cognitive engagement” or listening by followers (Dennis, 2019). It is fundamental to the ultimate “battle of the heart and mind viewed as any war waged over territory” (Singer & Brooking, 2018). When viewed as part of a political participation process, then these passive users take the form of “standby citizens” (Amnå & Ekman, 2013).

Media scholars and international media freedom reports have long established that both levels of control are actively used in Malaysia (Leong, 2018; Nain, 1994). Within this context, the Twittersphere in Malaysia potentially builds on the long tradition of “counter-content” from the pre-internet days and affordance of the platform to provide an alternative to mainstream (Funston, 2018). As Eric Hoffer (1951) describes in his book, *The True Believer*, when a part of society is denied political agency, the resulting resentment will most likely result in contained political fission and fusion. This seemingly passive ‘energy’ just awaits “any proselytizing mass movement” to be propagated upon with promises of agency and recognition (Hoffer, 1951). Such is the repudiating power of outwardly inactive listeners, and this is consistent with findings from studies about social media platform users and political mobilisations (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Lelkes, 2020; Leong, 2018).

In summary, I have discussed research investigating talk of political actors such as politicians, media organisations, civic instigators, and listeners on Twitter. These reviews have contributed toward the aim of this study to understand the role of Twitter in affording

regular citizens the agency to participate discursively in the form of listening, and more importantly, challenge the notion that they are but passive users. The controversy and tension observed in the literature between proponents and opponents of the emancipatory potential of talk on Twitter demonstrates the need for theoretical innovation aimed at explaining the procedural nature of engagement on Twitter.

Further complicating this position taking of the democratic efficacy of Twittersphere is the presumption that communication on the platform is “rational and honest” (Dahlberg, 2004). I intend to problematise the equation of ‘new’ with ‘smart’ and ‘truthful’. The haphazard use of terms such as ‘smart’ phone, ‘smart’ watch, reflects a critical disconnect. We live in an era where we rely on specialised technologies, powered by machine learning, that we do not understand beyond the user interface. While on the surface it is tempting to assume that all are equal on technological platforms, scholarship caution that this is not the case (Morley & Robins, 1995). Studies reveal that users are suspicious of expertise that do not represent their view. Therefore, in the final section of this level of analysis, I address notions of knowledge and trust on Twitter.

2.5.6 Knowledge and Trust

Every time society is posed with a mediating technology, issues of “sincerity and rightness” (Dahlberg, 2007) are reconsidered within the societal sphere. Despite of its many trajectories the theory of public sphere has taken, from the origins of Habermas (see section 2.1.2) to the reconceptualization of the public space on Twitter, scholars (Canovan, 1999; Hannu, 2007; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016) reaffirm that notions of knowledge and trust remain relevant in maintaining, what Peter Dahlgren calls, “civic cultures” (Dahlgren, 2018).

Viewed within David Morley’s “pessimistic mass society thesis” and “hypodermic model of the media” where ideology is “injected” into society (Morley, 1992, p. 41) and Noam Chomsky’s (2017) government propaganda operation framework, I suggest two reasons for why it is relevant. First, it becomes complicated to present truth and knowledge to an increasingly “balkanized” society, constantly splitting and forming individualised terms of

reference to what they consider as knowledge and truth. Second, the corresponding unfettered availability of unverified information and customised versions of truth for users to consume, in their private space as afforded by mobile technologies. Before explaining this further, it is necessary to address the squaring of knowledge and truth in the societal sphere.

Adding to “pessimist” (Morley & Robins, 1995) and “bewildered” (Chomsky, 1997), Syed Hussein Alatas (1977) in *The Intellectuals and Developing Societies* introduced the concept of *bebalisma*, from the Malay word *bebal*, which simply means ‘stupid’ or ignorant, to characterise reasoning lacking a scientific and critical worldview (Abaza, 2002, p. 128) within the societal sphere. However, in the contemporary schema of things, the *bebalisma* notion may be challenged by an “informed and engaged citizenry” which “enrich” the political communication process in two ways (Michael, 2004).

First, by holding politicians accountable through whistleblowers (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018) or sharing of related hyperlinks. Second, it legitimates the process by which decisions are made through initiatives to crowd-source inputs for policies (Goos et al., 2011; Leong, 2018). Specifically confronting the ‘bebal’ label are findings from explorations of political participation among youth. Studies of youth political participation, (Abdu et al., 2017; Abdulrauf et al., 2017; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010) revealed that due to online political participation, political knowledge and behaviours are articulated and nurtured at a younger age. In addition, democracy is real only when it involved the participation of an informed and rational electorate (Beng, 2018).

To this end, the notion of ‘balkanization’ on social networking sites are prominently used to characterise “internet publics” (Bohman, 2004). Both (Bohman, 2004) and Dahlgren (2013) agree, that “internet publics are weak publics”. This is because, though vibrant, the societal sphere is secluded from the “major centres of decision-making and is thus a ‘weak’ public sphere” (Dahlgren, 2013). This feature is further exacerbated by not only a decline of trust toward the mainstream and elite sphere, but also between segmented groups within the societal sphere (Bennett, 2008). All this points to the absence of an

arbitrary point of truth, as each sphere looks at the other with scepticism regardless of the sincerity and focus to facts. Anything outside one's own sphere is deemed as misinformation. As networked communicative technologies become increasingly pervasive, Peter Dahlgren (2018) advances the notion that there are attempts to a "contemporary rejection of standard rational thinking" through the normalisation of terms such as 'fake news', 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts' (Dahlgren, 2018).

Such terms share broadly the same ideological stances often associated with elite sphere propaganda research. Noam Chomsky draws a relevant parallel between democracy and state media control. His examination of the origins of propaganda in recent history point to the success of Creel Commission during the Woodrow Wilson Administration in 1916 and suggests that state propaganda when backed by the "educated class" coupled with the filtering out of the voice of dissent, can successfully shape the opinions formed within the societal sphere. This success held true in the post second world war context of Adolf Hitler who propagated the German term 'Lügenpresse' or 'press of lies' (Snyder, 2019) and eventually by Donald Trump, the 44th President of America, who popularised the term "fake news" (Sloan et al., 2017). So embedded to democracy are the notions of knowledge and truth, that how a society obtains knowledge, and perceives what is true, determines if what is present is a true democracy, or totalitarianism disguised as a democracy (Chomsky, 1997). The affordance of Twitter provides access, with surgical precision, to 'fertile' fragments of society to allow such misinformation to flourish.

Apart from a deliberative effort of manipulation via misinformation, digitally compartmentalised citizens, are now more exposed to forms of journalism which is produced by peers without sufficient skill, scale, experience, expertise, and corporate memory necessary to hold the government, business corporations and other members of the elite sphere accountable (Dahlgren, 2009). Here lies the real threat of the "seductive sweeping vision" of a renewed impetus of participatory political culture created by digital media or "horizontal communication channels" (Castells, 2007).

There are two main reasons that have given rise to this phenomenon. First the "presumption of goodwill" (Sloan et al., 2017) due to the "glow of benevolence" (Vaidhyanathan, 2018, p. 114) and "unfiltered, primary source of information – unlike traditional mainstream media" (Allan, 2005) image social media typically enjoy. Secondly, the mere convenience of sharing information as opposed to the diligence required to fact check (Sloan et al., 2017). Such 'convenience' has brought about several shades of misinformation from "satire, false connection, misleading content, false content, imposter content, manipulated content and fabricated content, with increasing "intent to deceive and do harm" (Haigh & Haigh, 2019, p. 304).

Precipitating the complexities of the presentation of knowledge and truth is the constant availability of personalised versions of truth in the citizen's private space. David Morley cautioned the physical placement of, modern mediating technologies, then television, in the centre of the living room as "transgressing sacred boundaries of private and public" as it was deemed to create an "artificial context of consumption" at the "heart of the home" (Morley, 1992, p. 62). Research into the spatial effect of using Twitter on mobile versus desktop versions found that users' Tweets were more personal and focused on their feelings and thoughts when they used the platform on their smartphones (Murthy et al., 2015).

This technological proximity is found to bring about "a string of calamities – such as addiction, depression, fake news, trolls, online mobs, alt-right subcultures" to this phenomenon considering the pervasiveness of mobile devices (Seymour, 2019). In this vein, a Stanford Addiction Medicine Dual Diagnosis Clinic study found that online activities including tweeting afforded an unparalleled "high-reward, high dopamine stimuli" access, echoed Morley's assertion of hypodermic model of the media and concluded that "the smartphone is the modern-day hypodermic needle, delivering digitally induced dopamine 24/7 for a wired generation" (Lembke, 2021). The common denominator observed, regardless of technology examined, is the dependence of members of the societal sphere on empathetic participative technologies.

Therefore, at the heart of the public sphere are nodes of empathy that connects intention of common people to participate either through debates, without fear of favour and arrive at their own rational and critical understanding of issues pertaining to them (Fenton, 2016, p. 59). Empathy in communication occur when the sender can put herself in another's position to achieve mutual understanding (Sæbø, 2011). In these circumstances, public opinion “steps into the breach” and scholars have found the emergence of “small, cause-specific and alternative” counter-publics (Fenton, 2016, p. 71). Studies of the 2016 #metoo movement about women worldwide exposing sexual discrimination at workplaces concluded that the campaign was founded on the notion of “countering cruelty with empathy” (Rodino-Colocino, 2018). An African traditional media study that investigated “homophobic representation on mainstream media” found “unfettered Twitter representations of empathy” on the platform (C. King, 2017, p. 193). In the societal sphere, empathy and not critical rationality, is a determinant of trust on the platform and the resulting knowledge acquired. Next, I examine the notion of knowledge and truth in the mainstream and elite sphere.

Central to the notion of dissemination of fake news is the “involved media” which operates with the interests of business entities as well as political institutions (Garnham, 2000). Traditional formats of news production are effortlessly circumvented and have reduced media organisations to the “middleman” that needs to be eliminated (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 173) which has hit the financial performance of these organisations as presented in the structural dimension. In turn, has set off a vicious cycle of “corporate-sponsored mass-media that suits the privileged and powerful” (Chomsky, 2014). Typically, the response of the mainstream sphere to counter the proliferation of misinformation is by reaching towards the elite sphere for regulation that increases the barriers to participate in mainstream news production. Zaharom (2018) offers a more pragmatic solution to this problem. Instead of being part of the problem by not offering any alternatives, existing media establishments should fill the void of a virtuous, accountable media and therefore be the solution to the problem.

The elite sphere neither has the will nor the incentive to curb the spread of fake news on its channels. Historically, Thomas Jefferson's cautioned in 1787 against "aristocrats," who "fear and distrust the people, and wish to draw all powers from them into the hands of the higher classes" (Chomsky, 2014). Other scholars identify this involvement of "objective, invisible and unaccountable elites" as "stealth democracy" (Delli Carpini et al., 2004). Further explaining this is "the development of generalised structures of social coordination through the media of money and power" (Garnham, 2000) as evident in the "five public companies with the largest market capitalisation" of the digital economy, Alphabet (Google), Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, and Amazon (Vaidhyanathan, 2018, p. 119). Such power, if used positively, could induce knowledge, discourse, and deliberation within the public sphere but if used unfavourably, represses what it seeks to control (Foucault, 1980). Studies show that trust can be rebuilt by "demonstrating a strong link between public opinion and policy outcomes" (Hetherington, 2006).

A few conclusions can be drawn from the discussion regarding the third and final stage of my research framework: the interactional level. Firstly, the topic of interaction is complicated and nuanced. Therefore, the use of a multi-tiered communication model, encompassing three spheres, the elite, mainstream and societal is warranted. Secondly, debates surrounding the spatial implications of interaction on Twitter such as the characterisation of spaces for deliberation and the positioning of public opinion within that space were explored. Thirdly, an appraisal of studies regarding the emancipatory potential of Twitter revealed three underlying themes: affect, immediacy, and agency of talk on Twitter. Finally, notions of knowledge and trust among scholarly work regarding mediating technologies is persistent and continues to be relevant in the context of Twitter as evident in the proliferation of propaganda, misinformation, and the normalisation of terms such as fake news on the platform.

As a result, this thesis introduces 'characteristics of interaction on Twitter framework' to map how users 'perform' in their respective spheres and further study the various lines of communications and asymmetrical influence (Dahlgren, 2013) especially in the Malaysian

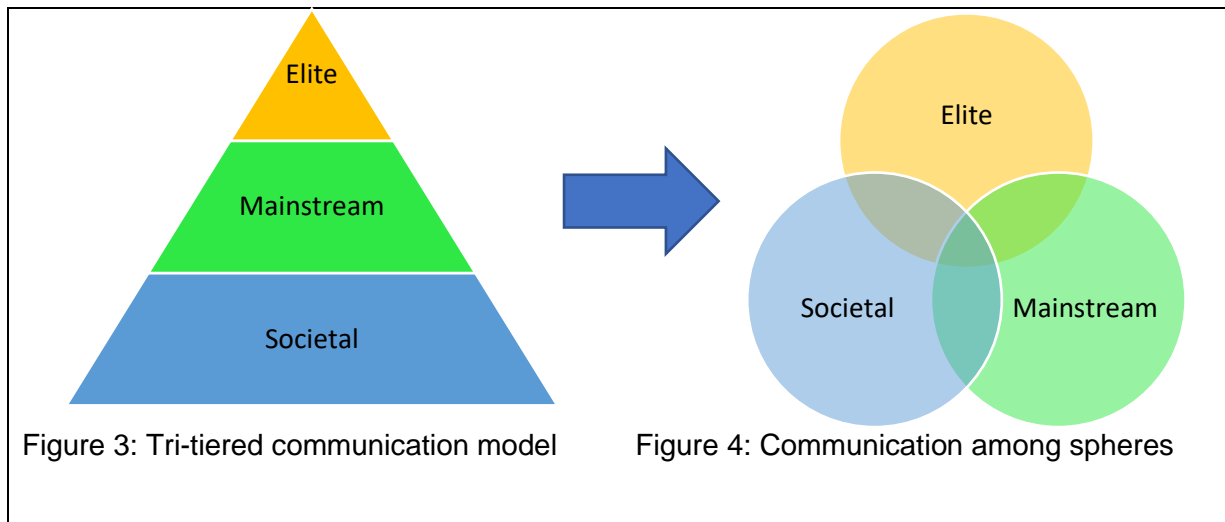
political communication context. My framework will be used to operationalise this level of analysis as reflected in the following section.

2.5.7 Conceptualisation of the Interactional Level

In my third level of analysis, I draw from the O-S-R-O-R or Orientation-Stimuli-Reasoning-Outcome-Response model to investigate if the quantitative increase of online chatter is commensurate with, if any, qualitative political agency of users, especially for the disempowered and marginalised social segments. Does an active audience, who are producers at the same time, automatically mean they are a ‘strong’ deliberative democratic force? Insofar as systemic inequalities exist, critical media scholars agree that not all voices are equal (Karpowitz et al., 2009). Concerns of inequality have been at the heart of critical media studies every time society was posed by modern versions of communicative technologies. Compounding this, in the pre-social media Malaysian context, F. Loh (2002) suggested a “withdrawal and privatisation” of deliberations especially in the case of provocative issues which included, racial and religious sentiments or statements challenging hegemonic political groups.

Paradoxically, via the affordances of Twitter, the space where these ‘withdrawn and privatised’ interactions, or “enclave deliberations” as Karpowitz et al. (2009) identifies, occur are now public. These interactions are “publicly private” (Papacharissi, 2015a) on the platform and more importantly open for empirical investigations. Although the review of scholarship predominantly reflects that Twitter is not insulated from conventional power relations, several under-theorised tendencies were observed. First, research points towards the existence of a tri-tiered communication model in the form of a pyramid on Twitter. At the bottom of this pyramid is the societal sphere, follow by mainstream and the elite sphere at the top (Dahlgren, 2005a). Given the varying power dynamics carried forward from traditional forms of political communication and the current scenario of ‘convergent’ technologies, the manifestation of the public sphere within these spaces are nuanced. Further, it potentially signals a shift from a pyramid (Figure 3) to overlapping subsets as illustrated in Figure 4. Therefore, the concerned here is “if, how, and to what

extent” political communication occurs between these spheres as illustrated in Figure 4 (Dahlgren, 2013).



At this level of analysis, I avoid the simplistic assumptions of ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ effects of Twitter to each sphere respectively and launch an examination into the composition of discourse and the eventual positioning public opinion on the platform. Helpful at this point are insights from the field of deliberative democracy (Karpowitz et al., 2009), digital micro-politics (Leong, 2018; J. Lim, 2017; Papacharissi, 2015a) and micro-activism (Barendregt & Schneider, 2020; Dennis, 2019). An appraisal of existing research reveals three emancipatory potentials of political interactions on Twitter: affect, immediacy, and reification of talk. Realising these prospects, Twitter is not impervious to threats of fake news. My exploration of notions of knowledge and trust on Twitter uncover proliferation of propaganda, misinformation, and the normalisation of terms such as fake news on the platform.

Unlike prior levels of analysis which were more interested in the macroscopic view, this level examines the micro, demographic composition, and collective culture of users at each tier and their rules of engagement on Twitter. Here, I examine participation, particularly digital micro-activism patterns and account for the demographic and qualitative characteristics observed within each sphere respectively. I also attempt to study emancipatory patterns such as affect, immediacy and reification of talk by using multiple approaches both direct and indirect. Further, I examine how well Twitter fulfils

criteria for inclusive participation, especially concerning the disenfranchised and influence (if any) among other spheres. My interest here is to provide theoretical expansion specifically in the context of political communication on an online platform. Therefore, I will also study the extent that interaction on Twitter satisfies (or fails to satisfy) Habermasian that prioritise public opinion with autonomous, sincere, and rational argument.

In understanding the interactions on Twitter, I use Peter Dahlgren's (2013) three tiers of communication, arranged according to political, economic, and social class and the reciprocity that ensues among them. For this reason, Karpowitz et al. (2009) enclaved deliberation perspective is helpful because it is built on several relevant and parallel premises. In this level of analysis, I adopt two core premises and recontextualise them to better fit the communicative patterns observed on Twitter. First, deliberative democratic ends are better met when citizens are speaking to their peers, instead of talking directly across societal spheres. This point of view prompts "the marginalised to participate, improve their civic capacities and create constructive tension between identifying their shared interests and considering how these interests relate to a larger common good" Karpowitz et al. (2009, p. 7). Second, democratic potential of interactions on Twitter should be viewed as a process with several phases and is better reflected on spectrum instead of a simple dichotomy of 'effective or weak'. Also, such an approach avoids looking at each interaction as a singular expression and affords a view of how broader democratic prospects are fulfilled.

My investigation of political interactions suggests the inclusion interdisciplinary frameworks from media, communication, and behavioural studies. As such, Figure 5 illustrates the conceptualisation of the interactional level of analysis using the O-S-R-O-R model. This conceptual circuit is inspired by the O-S-R-O-R or Orientation-Stimuli-Reasoning-Outcome-Response model (Cho et al., 2009). Originally, this model consisted of only O-S-O-R, was widely used in to understand the "complex and dynamic interactions" between media outlets' influence of the user (Azis et al., 2020). Famously, this model was used to investigate the techniques the American mass media used to

cover the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal in the 1990s and the effects thereof on civic engagement and political participation (Warren & Barton, 2019). As discussed above, the political communication process does not occur in a vacuum and is one that is characterised by multiple mediating factors. To this end, the O-S-R-O-R model is used with several adjustments to conceptualise this level of analysis.

The first 'O' represents 'orientations', or the structural, cultural, ideological, and demographic setting, or citizen enclaves as discussed above, in which political communication occurs. Next, the 'S' indicates 'stimuli'. My model treats deliberations as stimuli to recognise the significance such information seeking behavioural patterns on the political thought process (D. V. Shah et al., 2007). Next, the first 'R' in the O-S-R-O-R model reflects the 'reasoning' process because of enclaved deliberations on Twitter. The second 'O' or 'outcomes' in the O-S-R-O-R model is represented by the 'emancipatory potential' experienced by users. The existence of emancipatory prospects, particularly in the form of affect (see Section 2.5.3) and immediacy (see Section 2.5.4). Correspondingly, the second 'R' or 'response' in the form of Tweets occur, demonstrating the reification of talk in all three societal tiers in ways discussed in Section 2.5.5.

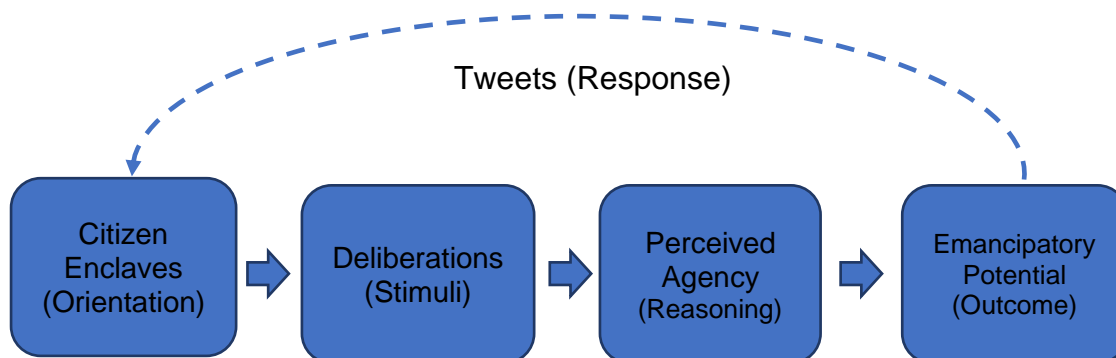


Figure 5 Conceptualisation of the interactional level of analysis using the O-S-R-O-R model.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have appraised existing scholarship to identify and understand the various factors that are fundamental and continuously shape political communication on Twitter in the Malaysian context. I include historical accounts to shifting trends of

algorithmic mediation of political communication to portray the crucible nature that surround and shape my field of research. A review of the emerging literature on political communication and Twitter demonstrated achievements by academic endeavours thus far, but also allowed the identification of under-explored areas and research gaps.

Broadly, these insights further suggest that factors that shape political communication on Twitter stem from structural, representational, and interactional factors. This corroborates the need of a multi-tier approach in my study's operationalisation. Next, I focus on my research context: the Sheraton Move and Twitter. I bring these key perspectives together to form my study's conceptual framework and research questions.

Chapter 3: The Sheraton Move & Twitter

In this chapter I discuss the how both Twitter and the Sheraton Move is approached in my research. Existing research appraised in Section 2.2 demonstrate how social media and urban politics in Malaysia are intertwined. In this vein, online conversations on Twitter during the Sheraton Move illustrated further, the influence of social media platforms on political communication in Malaysia. Politicians such as Annuar Musa, Hannah Yeoh, Tun M, Azmin Ali, and Saifuddin Abdullah used Twitter to break ‘developments’ to media organisations and the citizenry on the platform, challenging established channels of political communication. Events at the palace gates saw the traditional and revered royal institution experiencing increased visibility and proximity to the media and citizenry. Adding complexity to this mix was the spread of the highly contagious Covid-19, dampening efforts for physical protests or other forms of political mobilisation while heightening the reliance on online platforms such as Twitter.

In an interest to critically examine the construction of political events on social media platforms in the Malaysian context, I investigate how politicians, media organisations and the societal class used Twitter during a political crisis. To this end, Twitter availed public and downloadable data. Considering the intersection of broad and complicated fields of my study, I use this chapter to explain my research focus. First, I discuss the Sheraton Move, not from a purely political perspective. Rather, I view this event with a broader lens. Ironically, this provided a more fundamental avenue for research. Second, I present the various building blocks that enable traditional power structures that continue to oppress, flourish on this platform. In closing, I couple Twitter and the Sheraton Move to present my research context.

3.1 Case Study: Sheraton Move

The term Sheraton Move refers to a dinner-event involving approximately 130 Malaysian politicians and aides that took place at the Sheraton Petaling Jaya Hotel on the 23rd February 2020. This dinner per se was not a dramatic event. Politicians in attendance

described the event as “perjumpaan kopi-kopi¹¹” by Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor of UMNO) and “mesyuarat kawan-kawan¹²” by Datuk Seri Saifuddin Abdullah of PH (Abdullah, 2020). In fact, some politicians in attendance remarked that “nothing happened” (Sulam, 2021, p. 102). However, this event was significant as those in attendance, did so in defiance of the Pakatan Harapan government. Several scholars argue that the fall of Pakatan Harapan was set in motion from the 16 May 2018, the day PH took over Putrajaya. Therefore, I argue that the Sheraton Move was inherently a media event. Gathering everyone that mattered in the same place, at the same time provided what was needed to produce a media ‘spectacle’ (see discussion on Spectacles in Section 2.4.3).

On the scholarly front, scholars have discussed the Sheraton Move from the political perspective (Amin, 2020; Teik, 2021). One only has to reflect on the titles of books about the Sheraton Move to get a sense about what the Sheraton Move meant. For example, *Paradise Lost: Mahathir & The End of Hope* by Dennis Ignatius, *Hijack in Malaysia: The Fall of Pakatan Harapan* by Francis Paul Siah and *Menang dan Terbuang: Demokrasi, ‘Deep State’, dan Darurat* by Muhaimin Sulam. Some attribute the Sheraton Move to the failure of the two personalities at the heart of this crisis: Mahathir, the incumbent and Anwar Ibrahim, the aspiring prime minister, to follow through an agreed upon transition (Teik, 2021). Existing work present a mostly political examination of the Sheraton Move. I present two perspectives to further understand the Sheraton Move: international developments, and trends in Malaysian politics.

3.1.1 International Developments

In March 2018, a hidden video footage of Cambridge Analytica executives selling the manipulative potential of social media platforms to a potential client was leaked. This analytic firm was attributed to the success of the Vote Leave (pro-Brexit) campaign movement in the UK in 2016. In September 2018, following reports of foreign meddling in US elections, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey and Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg were

¹¹ Translation: meeting over coffee

¹² Translation: meeting of friends

summoned by the Senate Intelligence Committee to concerns about how these platforms were a “threat to democracy” (Miller & Vaccari, 2020).

The Sheraton Move marked the end of UMNO’s 60-year dominance in Malaysian politics. In this vein, I present three cluster of events notable political events that occurred from 2018 to 2020. The first cluster of events saw the rise of leftist politicians, also breaking norms in the respective countries. For example, in Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky the 1st anti-establishment president elected since independence in 1991 (Chaisty & Whitefield, 2022), in the raise of populist politics in Indonesia with Jokowi winning his second term with a bigger majority (Wicaksana, 2022), and in Taiwan, reformist Tsai Ing-Wen wins with the 57% (biggest) majority (Templeman, 2020). The second cluster of events were the rise of far-right movements. For instance, Jair Bolsonaro’s win in Brazil, Narendra Modi’s increased majority from 56% to 63% for his second term in India, Scott Morrison’s win in Australia, Tayyip Erdogan’s 53% win in Turkey (or Türkiye since June 2022) and Marine Le Pen’s victory in France. In the third cluster are countries such as Myanmar, Thailand and the Philippines that witnessed the reinforcement of authoritarian forms of governments.

I suggest looking at international developments circa 2018 to 2020 as an alternative starting point to understand the global landscape when the Sheraton Move occurred. I argue that the Sheraton Move gained momentum and sophistication from the exposure to these events. While I avoid connecting dots that do not exist, viewing the Sheraton Move as an isolated event of a handful of politicians shifting sides void of other political developments promotes a myopic view. Moreover, these events shared one common thing: politicians, media organisations and societal users prolific use of social media platforms, including Twitter for political communication throughout these events. Put differently, the machine learning at the heart of these social media platform’s architecture potentially aggregated global user patterns that served as a base to curate what users saw to optimise engagement.

3.1.2 Trends in Malaysian Politics

Malaysian politics has been one that identifies with religion, royalty, and race (3Rs). I use this section to present trends in the current form of the manifestation of 3R elements that provide background and perspective to view the Sheraton Move. On the onset, UMNO's stronghold has been gradually challenged since the 10th General Election in 1999, providing a glimpse of what may seem like a healthy democracy. For instance, between 2007 and 2016, The Coalition of Free and Fair Elections (BERSIH) has organised five marches in Kuala Lumpur. In the similar vein, in 2007, Hindu Rights Actions Force (HINDRAF) organised a massive rally, also in Kuala Lumpur. Such political mobilisation lends to what Khoo Boon Teik (2021, p. 19) called plebian reformism.

Nevertheless, some scholars were not optimistic of this and instead warned that such movements often associated with "the English-speaking urban middle class" (Chin, 2011, p. 85) and the marginalised minority (Sumner, 2007) may be seen as attempts to challenge to the single ethnic dominance resulting in "harsher authoritarianism" (Nelson, 2014). Whether this was the case or otherwise, Malaysian politics has seen a rise of far-right movements ever since. Divides along ethnic and class lines continue to expand particularly considering an institutionalised religious bureaucracy that traces back to organisations such as the National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia (MKI) since 1969. Known as Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) since 1997, receives close to RM1 billion per year in allocation. In contrast, the Ministry of National Unity received RM571 million in 2021. I argue that these provided all the characteristics associated with political parties predicated on theocracy such as PAS, to flourish. The only missing ingredient was access to granular media that would allow a (re)construction of the political other. And events leading to the Sheraton Move provided access to just that.

Post Pakatan Harapan's win in the 14th General Election, when Tun Mahathir prompted the idea to reform JAKIM, the administration was faced with rebuke from many religious groups including political parties and NGOs (Ignatius, 2021, p. 176). This fuelled the resentment against the PH government and was used to confirm the underlying suspicion

peddled during the election campaigns that the special position of Malays in the country was under threat (Azman, 2019). Despite this being untrue, since any amendments to items in the constitution needed a supermajority of two thirds of parliamentarians and the approval of the council of Rulers (Article 158), it appeared that UMNO took advantage and formed a new alliance with far-right PAS with the intention to reinstate its dominance.

What UMNO underestimated was the influence PAS would have over the fragmented citizenry. UMNO assumed that it would continue to have the upper hand in this mix of race (UMNO) and religion (PAS). Nevertheless, this marriage did not last. It is unclear if it was intentional or otherwise, but strategies were set in motion to resist the pro-secular PH government. Evidence of this shift towards the far-right to counter PH were the formation of Muafakat Nasional that comprised of UMNO and PAS September 2019. PAS traded partners to resort to religious politics through the formation of even more extreme partners. As a result, Perikatan Nasional that consists of BERSATU, PAS and GERAKAN was formed in February 2020. This was evident through rallies protesting Malaysia's involvement in progressive international treaties. Three notable protests were the protests against ICERD ratification on 8th December 2018, protests that resulted in Malaysia's withdrawal from the Rome Statute on 5th April 2019, and Malay Dignity Congress held on 6th October 2019.

These events solidified the presence of far-right organisations in mainstream Malaysian politics. Amidst the chaos of the Sheraton Move, PAS successfully capitalised on its proximity with UMNO and transformed the influence of PAS which was previously confined to just one East Coast state in Malaysia (Kelantan). Ever since, far-right narratives are publicly prominent in Malaysia corroborating the established success of far-right movements on social media.

3.2 Why Twitter?

Potentially millions¹³ of Malaysians conveyed their concerns on Twitter as the Sheraton Move was unfolding. During this period, Twitter was seen as a ‘tool’ and diverse ‘space’ for political communication. However, this ‘tool’ and ‘space’ was not one provided by any civil institution or was it a result of democratic advocacy. My thesis aims to provide a critical, contextualized perspective on the relation between technology and political communication in Malaysia. This allows an understanding of how politicians, media organisations, and citizens might perceive Twitter’s opportunities and limitations differently in the context of them using the platform.

From the beginning, the Internet has been ‘politically important because it expands the range of voices that can be heard in a national debate, ensuring that no one voice can speak with unquestioned authority’ (Jenkins et al., 2003). Since appropriation relates to affordance, it is the aim of my study to add nuance to the procedural understanding of how users adopt and adapt Twitter to integrate it into their political communication practices (Graves, 2007). In my thesis I caution the view that technology is neutral and organise a discussion of how I used Twitter to understand the sociology of communications and the political economy of media. Considering this complexity and the highly subjective nature of my study, in this section I describe how Twitter was operationalised in three levels as described in Chapter 2.

3.2.1 Twitter to study interaction

Twitter allows anyone with basic internet access, to connect or at least appear to connect, with a larger audience through hashtags (#) and mentions (@). Twitter allows users to share text, links, photos, and videos. As the earliest version of Twitter was similar to Short Messaging Service (SMS), Twitter initially maintained the 140-character limitation. This brevity has been a subject of criticism, as it seemed run counter to the narrative that newer communicative technologies should do away with such limitations. Recently, Twitter has doubled the character limit (Statista, 2019) and allows users who wish to use

¹³ 2.63 million active Malaysian Twitter users monthly, <https://seraphstudios.net/the-digital-landscape-2019-malaysia/>

more characters to communicate via 'thread messages'. Originally the # was used as a "indexical signifier" initiated by users. Hashtags of keywords are used as a tool for grouping tweets, or conversations that allow the potential of thoughts to consolidate into public opinion.

However, scholars are mixed when determining how much of this gains traction to have any structural or organisational significance. Research of 130 million tweets, hashtags facilitated the in focusing users' attention to allow "social annotation and propagation"(Lehmann et al., 2012; Stewart, 2016). Additionally, Twitter is an asymmetric medium, which means, users can follow accounts without being followed (Meijer, 2015, p. 599). As of the first quarter of 2019, there were 347.6 million active users on Twitter (Statista, 2019). Many major political players both globally and locally maintain a presence on Twitter and users can choose accounts they wish to follow. Put differently, users have the autonomy to curate their own political 'playlist' on Twitter.

Unlike other platforms, Twitter posts are predominantly text-based. While users need to create videos or photos for other platforms, it takes less to post on Twitter. This simplicity that allowed users to see, read, and share their opinion made Twitter an attractive option. Users' assumption that their tweets were analogous to actual conversations¹⁴ or worse, a 'magic' spell¹⁵ and would warrant reciprocity or change was rife. In the wider context, the dependency on such 'digital public spaces' like they are 'functioning public spheres' in the Habermasean sense beg more scrutiny. Using methods discussed in the following sections, my study explores the following: Who are the Malaysian Twitter users? If any, who benefits from its use?

Twitter was founded in July 2006, and posed opportunity for the average person to be influential by being platform to mediatise ideas. Twitter is available as a website and as a mobile application. Using a single username, users can access Twitter simultaneously on

¹⁴ See discussion of digital objects. Twitter: Digital Media and Society Series. Dhiraj Murthy (2013, p.26)

¹⁵ See discussion of "new communication as some kind of magic wand", a cure for of society's ills. New Communication Technology and The Third World: Some Cautionary Notes. Zaharom Nain (1987, p.8)

several devices. As a platform for interaction, affordances such as hashtags allow (at least appear to allow) the positioning of opinion in a the (online) public sphere. This feature is particularly useful at times of crisis as users tend to convey real time updates and emotions on the platform. The algorithm at the heart of Twitter architecture, use community detection capabilities to 'connect' like-minded users. As such, arguments are often rife, since besides general guidelines prohibiting extreme versions of hate and violent content, Twitter allows for any user to say anything to anyone with a public profile at any time. In studying interactions on Twitter, I consider the "structural constraints" and multidimensional nature of political communication in the Malaysian context (Nain, 1987, p. 8).

As such, the perspective of personalisation and interactivity affordances of social networking sites are relevant in testing the nature of democracy perceived from these participation (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016). While affordances enable certain actions (Dahlgren, 2005a), they restrict others. Affordance is a technology's materiality that is not subject to the user but assumes meaning based on a users' social context (Abdulrauf et al., 2017). In addition to "multiplying" the potential audiences, personalisation affords the presentation of self within a mediated environment enriched with attributes such as "autonomy, control and expression" (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 141). Moreover, political communication has always relied on the affordance of the latest communications technology. This reliance has been true, ever since the time of writing letters, printing, telegraph, radio, television, and most recently the targeted messaging via social media (Bohman, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005a; Kušen & Strembeck, 2017; Pal & Gonawela, 2017; Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

3.2.2 Twitter to study representation

In Section 2.4, existing work demonstrate how Twitter has been useful for representation of public interest particularly since it facilitates the formation of like-minded online communities. Moreover, Twitter's features support one-to-many, fluid, non-gatekept and relatively non-hierarchical communication. Although Twitter is often clustered with other mainstream social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok it is a

relatively small company both in terms of number of users and market capitalisation. Usage data show that the over 350 million followers do not use it for as long or as often as other social media platforms (Stewart, 2016).

Furthermore, when media and communication landscape shift, citizen participation also evolve "since media, communication and political participation are mutually dependent on each other" (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). This changing landscape has also introduced new complexities as discussions may also differ by the type of social media, and studies show that users put stronger self-censorship on Facebook due to the personal nature of the platform than on Twitter (J. K. Lee et al., 2014). Users trust Twitter to express thoughts, emotions, and reactions are mostly spontaneous and unfiltered (Robertson, 2018). Therefore, this thesis is an inquest of how Twitter is being used by "people who used to be called the audience" (Rosen, 2011) as a political communication tool.

From its inception, the offering that made Twitter unique was the proximity it offered societal users with celebrities, politicians, and media organisations. Twitter's blue tick verification feature allowed users access to authentic accounts that was not possible in the case of other social media platforms. Twitter introduced a stringent verification process, to avoid from being targets of lawsuits due to parody accounts. Unique to Twitter is also the fact that all tweets from 2010 to 2017 have been archived by the Library of Congress (Murthy, 2013, p. 16). After 2017, the collection has been limited to "tweets of interest to public policy" only. Evidently, tweets were considered to be "this generation's most significant legacies to future generations" (Wamsley, 2017). Although Twitter was never built for political debate, users particularly the young and urban have made use of features such as hashtags and @mentions for political ends (Rauchfleisch & Metag, 2016).

A discussion of representations on Twitter is not complete without mention of 'Twitter Revolutions' (Bruns et al., 2014; Goos et al., 2011) in the United States of America (Tremayne, 2014), Libya, Egypt (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011), Tunisia (Breuer et al., 2015), and Algeria. Techno-optimist scholars have gone as far as making causal relationships

between those political movements and Twitter (Gerbaudo, 2015; Khondker, 2011). While a confluence of factors accounted for those uprisings, the ease and speed to share first-hand, unedited content from 'ground zero' by common people to millions of people, helped these revolutions to gain an international audience.

I argue that care must be taken when drawing “cultural, emotional or pro-democratic association” (McCann, 1999) between the assumption of Twitter as a “digital public square” to social movements as witnessed in 1989 Tiananmen Square, China (anti-communist); 2011 Tahrir Square, Egypt¹⁶ (Papacharissi, 2015a, p. 33); 2011 Green Square, Libya¹⁷. Twitter has also been complicit in this by launching special political emojis such as the *#PHVote* and *#EURefReady* emojis respectively in the Philippines and Europe in 2016 (Singer & Brooking, 2018). Conversely, political powers have also “weaponised” Twitter for their benefit (Singer & Brooking, 2018). Instead of attributing these representations singularly to Twitter, I suggest an understanding of the “complex dialectic of communication and society” (Fuchs, 2017a; Murthy, 2018) based on the nature of representations seen in on Twitter posts during the Sheraton Move as discussed in Section 2.4.

3.2.3 Twitter to study structure

As evident in my review of literature in Chapter 2, there appears to be a growing interest into the interactive and representative levels of analysis on Twitter. However, I found the structural aspects of social media platforms are under-examined. Therefore, I add an investigation into constructs such as media control, autonomy from state and corporate power and constitutional patriotism to compliment the previous levels of analysis. Since Twitter data is publicly available, I use actual tweets to tease out these elements. I found a look at structural elements useful for two reasons.

First, Twitter is “digital capitalism” (Fuchs, 2017a) in action by way of managing a “public space” (Papacharissi, 2002) and profiting from the public discourse thereof. Second, the

¹⁶ anti- Hosni

¹⁷ anti-Gaddafi

over-emphasis of being ‘trending’, ‘top’ and ‘latest’ to be noticed on Twitter. The imposition and dominance of algorithmic platforms such as Twitter, was understandable in terms of temporality given the political volatility of the time. However, this substantiated Twitter’s goal of what Schiller characterised as “commercialisation” (H. I. Schiller, 1991, p. 75) and Fuchs (2020) would later call commodification of information.

At this level, I look at "the structural, not the novel" (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 384). By ‘structural’, I refer to the intersection of institutions, cultural, economic, social, and technological circumstances in which ‘novel’, digitally native political communication occur. I explore the “disruptive technological moment” as it occurred on Twitter (Benkler et al., 2018). In my examination in following sections, I set the construction of the Sheraton Move against principles of the Habermas’ public sphere, namely, inclusion and equality and autonomy from state and economic power as discussed in Chapter 2 are relevant for analysis at this level.

The question of Twitter as a capitalist endeavour is worth considering, particularly as urban middle class Malaysians’ opinion now adopt the ideal ‘participatory culture’ assumption that meaningful political communication can be seriously conducted under the auspices of Twitter as an egalitarian equaliser – when in reality the way Twitter came about and the way it worked reflected the capitalist doctrine that “puts everything and everyone’s online presence up for sale”(West, 2017, p. 8). I contextualise my work as a critique of capitalism in this contemporary form. As a frontier technological firm, existing federal laws does not offer much recourse as evident in the ‘lawless’ space in which Twitter exists.

Instead, Twitter operates with regulation and policies it helped to curate¹⁸. Compounding its ability to exploit, are structures of ownership. Twitter is “first and foremost, an industrial

¹⁸ In September 2018, Dorsey, in a personally written statement, formally acknowledged Twitter’s role as a “digital public square” where both “inspired ideas” and “lies and deception” flourish. He added that Twitter had been “weaponised and used to divide and distract people”. In March 2019, US Congressional Research Service refers to social media sites as “digital public squares”. In my opinion, this indicates how ‘technological elites’ shape the policy and regulation that governs them.

and commercial organization which, produces, consumes and distributes” (Golding & Murdock, 1997) commodified information. Hence, while it is somewhat free from laws to enshrine democracy, Twitter is obliged to capitalist objectives which in the name of remaining profitable may choose to defy notions of emancipation. In fact, via Twitter conversations during the Sheraton Move, an elitist class was seen to save itself only by way of creating spectacles and deflections.

Twitter avoids a public service stance that promotes autonomy from state or corporate power. Moreover, there appears to be a disconnect between the promotion of core democratic values on Twitter because of an emphasis on (the production of) sensational content to be relevant on the platform. These features treat political communication as an emergent phenomenon for the core purpose of eliciting views, likes and retweets instead of Habermasean qualities such as effective participation or equality. One can draw parallels of political discourse on Twitter with the longstanding capitalist practice of wage slavery, task isolation and constant ‘modernisation’, often coupled with added complication, to deliberately disempower workers, forcing them to work harder, faster, and for cheaper for tasks. As a result, it is increasingly difficult for workers (or in the case of Twitter, users) to truly understand the production process. Furthermore, said modernisation, often in the form of upgrades on Twitter, tend to also mean two things.

Foremost, it is difficult to gain traction on constantly changing grounds, which in the case of political communication, this might be an impediment to functional and egalitarian mobilisation that in turn dilutes the agency of the movement. Next, an increase in the quantity and quality of surveillance. Since internet technologies were originally developed for military and banking purposes (Curtis, 2016), surveillance is embedded in every feature. For Twitter users, more data-points from their interaction on the platform are mined and sold to not just advertisers but to analytic firms. While the former is relatively harmless, given the current dynamics of Malaysian politics, the latter seems to add a technocratic stroke to the existing wave of democratic repression. I examine to what extent this did or did not occur during the Sheraton Move.

Twitter algorithms appear to have successfully mechanised and brought about unprecedented automation to the flow of public opinion. Such sophistication has in turn brought about the rise of specialisation in the form of analytic corporations, such as Cambridge Analytica. It is therefore unsurprising that recent features launched on Twitter seems to further exacerbate problems such as echo chambers (Flaxman et al., 2016), fake news (Haigh & Haigh, 2019), and election meddling (Grassegger & Krogerus, 2017). These firms' add-on to the vicious market cycle in the sense that for a fee, they could dial up or down public sentiment, in the way traditional propaganda firms used to operate, only with surgical precision.

More significantly, as discussed above, this scenario has brought about several setbacks and repressions that echo what Marxist scholars have long cautioned against technological solutions. I therefore attempt to provide an examination of interactive, representative, and structural factors and the outcome thereof of political communication on a purely capitalist medium such as Twitter. Accurately describing and analysing events surrounding the Sheraton Move, therefore, requires situating instances of the interactive and representative level of analysis within the broader structural contexts as I describe in the next section.

3.3 Research Focus

This thesis understands Twitter as a contemporary communicative tool, relevant to the existing technological landscape. In this sense, Twitter conversations are not just passing reactions but are “natively digital objects” (Bruns, 2008) and since it is formatted as “structures of knowledge” (Bruns, 2008), “methods embedded” (Rogers, 2009) within Twitter is somewhat helpful to test the democratic potential such as inclusiveness and representation on Twitter. When viewed qualitatively Twitter datasets answer ‘Who is on Twitter?’ while revealing wider issues pertaining to “power structures, ideology and social struggles” (Fuchs, 2017b).

As discussed earlier, Twitter allows users to tweet, retweet, #hashtag, and @mention. Studies indicate user content on Twitter, mimics the concept of “spectacle”, “active

audiences” and are digital “images of real social interactions” (Morley, 1993; Velu, 2018). For example, political communication within the Malaysian society is fractured along inter-ethnic lines, and issues of ethnicity and freedom if at all pursued, is done in private spaces (B. T. Khoo, 2002; F. Loh, 2002). Since, most tweets are public “digital objects”, the said methods could potentially allow “means of inconspicuously observing” these spaces while adhering to research ethics policies (Highfield, 2014, p. 245). Such methods may provide a somewhat useful alternative to conventional research methods.

This study is an attempt to shed light on political communication on Twitter using a three-level analysis framework (Dahlgren, 2000, 2005a, 2005b). I stress that political communication does not occur in a vacuum, but instead is the manifestation of structural, representational, and interactional influences explained in this chapter. In this vein, I view Twitter neither in a techno-deterministic way nor as a neutral platform. Instead, to challenge this dominant understanding that social media platforms are purely tools with no agency, I suggest an examination of tweets produced by various political actors and the algorithms that form the architecture of Twitter.

In this vein, the Sheraton Move presented a unique situation for me. As mentioned above, this event has been interrogated extensively from the political and social angle (See Section 3.1). On one hand, it was a national political crisis that infiltrated the lives of the elites and public alike, disrupting the normal understanding of Malaysian politics, that is, the change of federal government via general elections. On the other hand, and more relevant to my research, it prompted people, media, and politicians to air their views on Twitter. Twitter posts provided viable data to examine the Sheraton Move case while the crisis was occurring.

Reviews of existing literature show that the mediatic perspective, in particular, Twitter’s construction of this event, is relatively under-developed. Table 2 shows, several avenues for research have been identified as reflected in the ‘trending on Twitter’ column. Due to the novel nature of the circumstance surrounding the Sheraton Move, developments were rampant during my study. Therefore, I contextualise my research from the resignation of

Mahathir to the swearing in of Muhyiddin Yassin as the 8th Malaysian Prime Minister. I consider tweets from 23rd February to 2nd March 2020 as focal to examine, from a mediatic perspective, real-time discourses surrounding the events of an abrupt government-change. I use the trending topics as suggested by Twitter to form workable clusters of data as illustrate in Table 2.

Date	Events	Trending on Twitter (Downloaded Tweets)
23 rd Feb	Sheraton meeting	#Tun M (3348)
24 th Feb	PH Collapses, Tun M resigns	
25 th Feb	King interviews MPs Muafakat Nasional wants GE15 Demokrasi Mati rally in Dataran Merdeka	Hannah Yeoh (2882) Agong (17474) Annuar Musa (3231)
26 th Feb	Tun M – Unity Gov Anwar – PH backs him as PM8, GPS rejects Orang Asli rally to save Kuala Langat forest reserve	#demokrasimati (675) Orang Asli (15597)
27 th Feb	Tun M – Parliament on 2 nd March to choose PM8 PH Rejects unity government	Muhyiddin (10442)
28 th Feb	The Conference of Rulers meets	Malaysia (18000)
29 th Feb	Tun M has the numbers PH and GPS supports Tun M	Sarawak (17998)
1 st March	TSMY sworn in as PM8	#NotMyPm (16456)

Table 2: Research Focus

3.3.1 Theoretical Focus

My thesis is a study of Malaysian political communication on Twitter by users from elite, mainstream and societal tiers. In Chapter 2, I theorised Twitter within Habermas' public sphere and the ways this theory has undergone stages of evolution to make sense of the current, social media ecosystem and ensuing synthetic idiosyncrasies, such as algorithmic determination of content, and echo chambers, in which political

communication takes place. As Fenton (2004) notes, the advent of social media in the political communication ecosystem has altered underlying social and political dynamics. I examine if these alterations could be explained by the ways in which social media platforms has (potentially) brought about what appears to be a globalisation of liberal democracy, which has, at least on the surface, refigured Malaysian politics. I locate my study within three theoretical frameworks (see Figure 6).

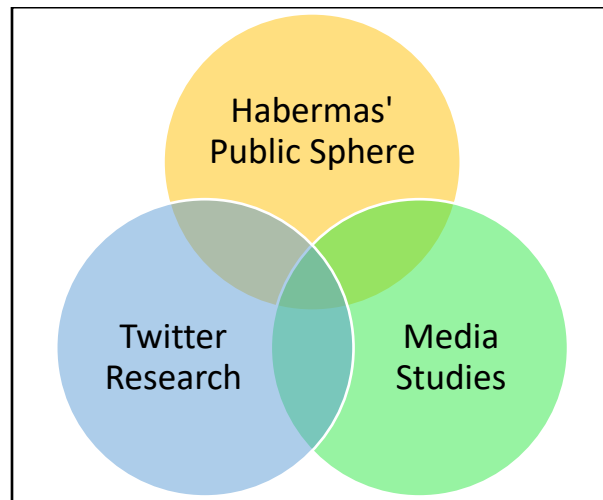


Figure 6 Study Theoretical Focus

First, a revised Habermas' public sphere theory, media reception studies and empirical work on Twitter. Following the discussions of the origins of Habermas' and discussions of Twitter and the Sheraton Move from the previous chapters, I aim to trace which underlying historical elements are still apparent in the complexities that surround the normalisation of the communicative space within Twitter in the Malaysian context. This invites the utility of Habermas' theory that provides six principles¹⁹: inclusion and equality, autonomy from state and corporate power, policing public interest, positioning public opinion, formation of community and sincere and rational communication to examine the robustness of what appears to be a public sphere on Twitter (Bruns & Highfield, 2015; Jovchelovitch, 1995). Further, these principles were critiqued, reviewed, and updated to inform my investigation into the question if: The public sphere is still a relevant idea? By adjusting for present scholarship of the public sphere especially in the social media

¹⁹ discussed in Section 2.1.2

context these principles are updated for relevance as presented in my research framework.

Second, my study is situated in what cultural theorists call a 3rd generation of media reception studies, where I propose a shift from the active audience participation of any platform per se, and examine the wider macro, meso, and micro context in which political communication occurs (Alasuutari, 1999; Hannu, 2007). Scholars have written-off users' engagement on Twitter as "banal" and is void of any meaningful political agency (Barendregt & Schneider, 2020; Bratslavsky et al., 2020). Nevertheless, my study parallels with Jungherr's (2015) assertion that platforms such as Twitter "offer a mirror image" of political, economic, and societal tendencies. Apart from that, it is suggested that the usage of social media, particularly Twitter for the purpose of political communication is not a fad, instead has normalised (Lasorsa et al., 2012) and more recently weaponised (Singer & Brooking, 2018). Therefore, my approach affords a recognition of political communication in its latest form, not because of technological determination, instead is visceral, and is both historically and culturally rooted.

Third, I locate my research within the current academic explorations of Twitter as a political communication tool. Throughout history, the latest media platforms available have always been used for political communication. My literature review in the previous chapter presents the evolving nature of political communication on Twitter. As a digital platform, Twitter research is dynamic as its features are updated regularly. Moreover, I am studying the relationship of Malaysian political communication, which has (or not) maintained the predigital status quo, despite being in a continuously evolving medium. Furthermore, there appears to be no existing established framework to account for the many shifting factors at play. Therefore, my study's conceptual framework consists of factors stemming from the democratic appropriation by the state and citizens, aggregation of public interest and agency of online talk that shape political communication on Twitter. These elements appear to be situated within the structural, representational, and interactional levels of political communication and warrants the use of Dahlgren's (2005a,

2018) analytic dimensions that lay the groundwork to instruct the empirical trajectory of my study.

3.3.2 Research Gap

Challenging prevailing notions of net neutrality over themes of deliberative democracy on digital platforms, several under-conceptualised ideas and research gaps were identified at each level:

- a. At the structural level, forms of elitism on Twitter remains unclear. Researchers paid less attention to understanding of how state and political elites can exert control on a platform they do not own. The focus on low hanging fruits such as censorship and legal prosecution is deemed dichotomous and rooted in an era when the political economic factors favoured those in power. As a result, notions of hegemony, privilege, and multi-dimensional oppression in its virtual form remained under-theorised.
- b. At the representational level, I problematise the assumption of what appears to be a carry forward of concepts from pre-internet era mediums. Most scholarly work regarding representations on online platforms have made little attempt to address the underlying assumption and application of notions from the print and television media era to social media platforms. Disturbingly, techno-optimist research views social media platforms as a representative-democratic redeemer. However, on close inspection, notions of mediatization and aggregation of public interest on Twitter were found lacking.
- c. At the interactional level, a dearth of critical studies is observed. In the face of favourable quantitative indicators, social media research findings tend to suggest that active equals powerful. The prevailing understanding of the online space as a unified, well-defined, and egalitarian sphere still dominates part of social media research. In contrast, critical theory scholars have found a replication of pre-internet power relations and the existence of an intersecting multiverse on these platforms. Therefore, I problematise the view that unifies publics with spectators, citizens with consumers, as they are speculative and under-investigated.

Considering these research gaps, I expand further the discussion of my study's structural, representational, and interactional levels of analysis. I organise my presentation here by providing a run-down of analytical facets I intend to investigate at each level. Subsequently, these discussions are encapsulated into key constructs. Consequently, I present the empirical stage of my study in the form of an integrated conceptual framework. My research framework brings together explorations of all three levels, to formulate research questions that will chart an empirical way forward to better understand these dynamics in the Malaysian context.

3.3.3 Integrated Conceptual Framework

My study adopts, six corresponding Habermasean principles. These principles formulate the foundation for the proposed framework²⁰. Against this theoretical background, my study disaggregates the process of political communication on Twitter into three factors: the structural, representational, and interactional levels. Uniting all these elements is the modified Communication Mediation Model (Cho et al., 2009; D. V. Shah et al., 2007). I find this model most relevant to chart an empirical way forward because it is comprised of similar themes. I place the themes from the Communication Mediation Model in parentheses alongside the building blocks of my study to illustrate this relevance. This model integrates the structural (orientations), representational (collective culture) and interactional (conversations) underpinnings as identified in earlier sections. Furthermore, this model broadly allows for a replication of Peter Dahlgren's analytic strategy to provide a better understanding of the convergence of 'liberal' political communication practices (political consumerism patterns) witnessed on Twitter with historical and inegalitarian power relations in the Malaysian context. Table 3 illustrates the links between these principles and constructs of the research framework:

²⁰ see Table 3

Corresponding Habermas' Principles of Public Sphere	Research Framework	Key Constructs	Research Focus
Inclusion and discursive equality	Structural	Media control, autonomy and constitutional patriotism	Frameworks of power and control
Autonomy from State and Corporate Power			
Policing public interests	Representational	produsage, inclusion and spectacles	Mediatization of public interest
Formation of Community			
Positioning public opinion	Interaction	affect, immediacy and knowledge and trust	Agency of enclave deliberation
Sincere and rational argument			

Table 3 Encapsulation of Key Constructs and Research Focus

Notably, the use of this model were found in studies examining; viral content on social media platforms (Tassel, 2010), impact of varying political advertisements themes on both online and offline platforms (Corrigan & Brader, 2011), influence of political information consumption from mobile device use on social behaviours and civic engagement (M. Chan et al., 2016, p. 206), and the role of media in the evolution, from World War I until the social media era on citizenship (Friedland & Wells, 2018, p. 420). Thus, this model provides an appropriate frame to host the culmination of all three levels of analysis under one integrated framework. While this model was used extensively using the quantitative approach, my study makes a theoretical extension by using this model in the qualitative sense. Figure 7 illustrates the convergence of all three analytical levels proposed in my study.

This model shows the conceptual placement of three blocks influencing political communication on Twitter. Although there appears to be a departure from the centralised agenda setting by political elites' model prevalent in Malaysia prior to the advent of social media platforms, I argue that political communication on Twitter occur against a rhizomatic backdrop of macro social, political, technological, and economic forces. These forces were formed hugely because of circumstances as discussed in Section 1.3.

Therefore, a change in modes of media do not insulate political communication from macroscopic and structural forces that continue to reinforce pre-internet power relations. Therefore, I set my research framework against these multiple imbricated macro layers as illustrated in my research framework in Figure 7.

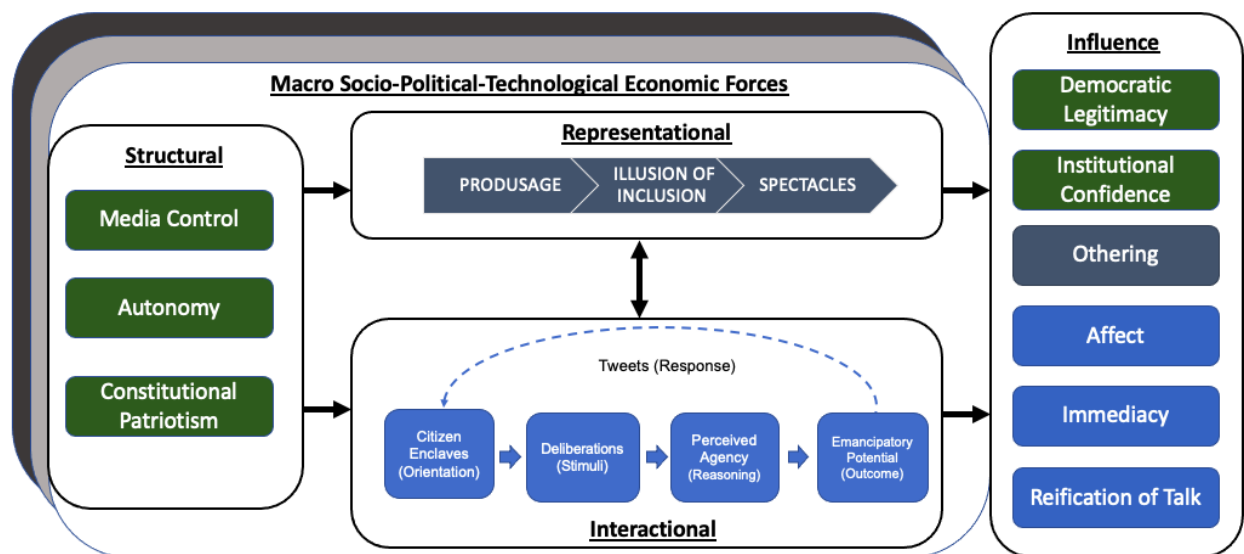


Figure 7: Research Framework

The first block of my research framework consists of structural tendencies that continue to establish governing legislation and set parameters for what is possible in the representational and interactional blocks. In more authoritarian political systems, forms of media control take an underhand approach to stifle any egalitarian discursive or deliberative potential to express constitutional patriotism in subsequent blocks. Probably for the first time in Malaysia, the political economic architecture of the (almost) all-permeating mode of media does not award autonomy to the political elite but rather are in the hands of foreign, neo-liberal, capitalist private entities that depend on the commodification and subsequent commercialisation of public debate, forcing the local ruling elites to embrace alternative form of controls. The inclusion of macro layers and structural block in my conceptual framework reiterates the argument that political communication does not occur in a vacuum but is a result of systemic forces.

The second block constitutes the representational level of analysis. Here the concern is the nature of the output of Twitter, and I use a spectrum from the counter hegemonic Producers to propagandist nature of Spectacles, to illustrate the range of representations witnessed on the platform. In the middle are the liminal illusions of inclusions where political echo-chambers or silos of varying ideologies, democratic or otherwise, flourish. I include this block as part of my research framework because media platforms provide the sole touchpoint to politics for a large portion of the population. Under these circumstances the discourses of 'othering' occur. Therefore, operatives within this block shape how the citizenry look at and think of politics. As a result, the powerful elite use structural forces to reinforce state propaganda to achieve two notable ends: democratic legitimacy and institutional confidence. More so, since electoral decisions are arguably made here because of interactions, which is the focus of the next level of analysis, about what is represented in this block.

The third block is concerned with the interactional level of analysis, conceptualised here with the revised O-S-R-O-R model. The focus here are the multi-tiered interactions that take place on Twitter. Both the representational and interactional blocks are interwoven. I argue that interactions occur as a result of representations witnessed on the platform. Conversely, representations are formed as a repercussion of interactions or tweets not just by individual users but by multiple sources due to convergent affordances of the platform. While this block is characterised by three democratic potentials; affect, immediacy, and reification of talk, it is also one that is most exposed to controls imposed by elements from the structural block. Since most constitutional expression by the citizenry is seen here, most surveillance, content control in the form of censorship or even incarceration of users as a direct result of their tweets are targeted here.

3.4 Research Questions

From the integrated conceptual framework established in the previous section, the rest of the research is concentrated on the following theoretically informed central research question (RQ):

What effects, if any, does Twitter have on the Malaysian public sphere and if so, what are the attributes of this impact?

At this point, my examination will begin at the interactional level, followed by the representational and finally focus on the structural level. The formation of the conceptual framework followed a macro to micro approach likened to an inverted pyramid. Nonetheless, the investigation phase of my research will begin at the interactional level, followed by the representational level and conclude with the structural level. Through this approach, I first examine the interactive and engagement patterns on Twitter. Subsequently, at the representational level, I look for themes that emerge from these interactions. At the third and final stage, using a macro perspective, I use insights from the structural level, to explain, both patterns and themes observed.

To this end, I developed the following three research questions (RQ) that is further expended in a series of sub-questions through the case study introduced in Chapter 3, suffice to say that my research departs from most social media and political communication studies which focus typically on election periods (Chin, 2018; Funston, 2018; Kasim & Mohd Sani, 2016), my research investigated the effects of Twitter to political communication during a non-electoral period. Therefore, this central research question is unpacked through the following complementary questions:

RQ 1: At the interactional level, who and how are Malaysians using Twitter and to what extent are enclaved deliberations apparent on the platform?

RQ 1.1 What demographic attributes describe users on Twitter?

RQ 1.2 What are the hierarchies visible and its possible effects on political communication?

RQ 1.3 How do users choose to use their Twitter accounts?

RQ 1.4 What form of user actions should be considered political communication (or participation) on Twitter?

RQ 1.5 To what extent do enclaved deliberations occur on Twitter?

RQ 2: At the representational level, what themes can be observed and how does mediatisation of public interest occur on Twitter?

RQ 2.1 What public interests and concerns are mediated through Twitter?

RQ 2.2 Who are the users who control or influence themes and representations that emerge on Twitter?

RQ 2.3 How do representations on Twitter construct, reproduce or challenge existing social classes and how do these inform wider patterns of established structures of power?

RQ 3: At the structural level, in which ways do frameworks of power appropriate democracy and how can this influence political communication on Twitter?

RQ 3.1 How do representations apparent on Twitter relate to wider frameworks of power and control?

RQ 3.2 How can we understand the manifestation, if any, of traditional forms of power and control, in both state and citizen centric contexts on Twitter?

RQ 3.3 What effects, if any, do frameworks of power and control have on the deliberations on Twitter?

RQ 3.4 In the context of what appears to be a contemporary form of democracy, what (new) forms of agency does, if any, usage of Twitter award to users?

These research questions were derived from corresponding public sphere principles, and search framework and focus identified from the literature²¹. In this chapter, I conceptualised under theorised sections. Next, I discuss the methods by which these research questions will be operationalised using frameworks of critical qualitative research. A critical perspective lens is relevant to view effects of Twitter in the context of Malaysia's stratified society. More importantly, as Henn et al. (2010, p. 28) assert, such a view would "reveal the underlying mechanisms and structures (which is now publicly

²¹ see Table 4

private) that continue to perpetuate empowerment and emancipatory potential” within the societal sphere.

Corresponding Habermas’ Principles of Public Sphere	Research Framework	Research Focus	Research question
Positioning public opinion	Interaction	Agency of enclave deliberation	Who and how are Malaysians using Twitter and to what extent are enclaved deliberations apparent on the platform?
Sincere and rational argument			
Policing public interests	Representational	Mediatization of public interest	What themes can be observed and how does mediatization of public interest occur on Twitter?
Formation of Community			
Inclusion and discursive equality	Structural	Frameworks of power and control	In which ways do frameworks of power appropriate democracy and how can this influence political communication on Twitter?
Autonomy from State and Corporate Power			

Table 4 Overview of research questions

3.5 Limitations

Twitter data during the Sheraton Move to study the Malaysian online public sphere, it is not without limitations. I highlight three limitations and my rationale or steps taken to overcome them. First the argument that Twitter posts are “data-light” and only represent a small demographic of the population. In response I suggest that it is incumbent upon social science research to find approaches to examine these posts and ways in which the challenge and expand existing understanding about the nature of conversations present on Twitter (Sloan et al., 2015).

Furthermore, contemporary insights continue to inform the way online data may be useful. For example, tweets are considered “searchable talk”, while hashtags are perceived as

an indicator to the “way of thinking”. These digitally native data are seen as “signatures” and “proxies for real world events and individual characteristics” (Zappavigna, 2014, 2018). Upon closer examination, Twitter data may reveal how the “tone and tenor” of conversations on the platform are shaped by the affordances of the platform (Pihlaja, 2014). I argue that usage of “fine-grained data” was justified as the Sheraton Move was a complex case and conversations thereof from all politicians, media organisations and societal users (Blank, 2017, pp. 636–637).

The second limitation identified was issues pertaining to user privacy, particularly if personal data was involved. While I discuss research protocols taken in the next chapter, suffice to say here that all ethical concerns were addressed in my research. Broadly, a user study indicated that 76% of users are aware that their online posts are public and is accessible to third party users, unless users opt otherwise (Williams et al., 2017). The third limitation concerns reflexivity or researchers influence in data collection (Probst & Berenson, 2014). In the case of my research, Twitter data collected was from the ‘trending now’ bar in Twitter. Therefore, datasets downloaded were topics trending during the Sheraton Move and not my deliberate selection. As discussed in the next chapter, I address this limitation by ensuring that qualitative research validation techniques were applied.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

Here, I present the research method and design to operationalise the framework identified in the previous chapter. Ontologically and epistemologically, I adopt an interpretive, constructivist approach and consider political communication on Twitter as a reflection of macro undercurrents. Twitter content is not viewed deterministically. Instead, I take the stance that Twitter compliments the larger economic, sociological, and technological factors key to understanding the “intermediation, mobilisation and organisation of politics”(Merwe & Meehan, 2011) in Malaysia. Given this dynamic, several methods were used in this study. Therefore, the discussion here will feature the threads used to operationalise my research questions. Considering that at the time of writing, Twitter research in the Malaysian context was relatively ‘new’, this section is deemed an important contribution of my thesis.

As explained in Section 3.1, the Sheraton Move is a complicated and multi-faceted event. I explained the context relevant to my research, particularly how Twitter²² was embraced to navigate this political disruption. In Section 4.1, I explain the overall research design. Here, I explain four fundamental aspects of my methods selection for my research. Several steps taken to avoid bias are addressed in Section 4.1.2. In Section 0, I explain the qualitative phase of data collection which includes purposeful sampling, focus group discussions, expert interviews, and the archival research conducted.

During the quantitative stage²³, I deal with what scholars’ call “digital artifacts” (Abidin et al., 2019; Jungherr, 2015). I sampled 102 872 tweets sent out during the Sheraton Move, between 23rd February 2020 to 1st March 2020. In Section 4.5, I explain my use of Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis (CDA), to identify stances taken by users from the elite, mainstream and societal spheres. I critically analyse dominant Twitter cues such as mentions, hashtags and retweets to study whether political communication has any indication, to paraphrase Horkheimer, “to liberate *Malaysians* from the *mediatic* circumstances that enslave them” (as cited in Milberry, 2014 italics mine).

²² see Section 3.2

²³ see Section 4.4

4.1 Research Design

A mixed method approach was used in this study. In reality, my work did not follow a strict sequential protocol, considering the *messy* nature of research on political deliberations on Twitter. Nevertheless, several validity steps were taken to ensure that the study was empirically robust. In addition, several expert and peer review sessions were held to ensure a constant flow of feedback for the data collection and analysis processes.

4.1.1 Mixed Methods: Rationale

As my intention here is to study public opinion (Glynn et al., 2018) and “publicist-kind of interaction at the societal sphere and circulation of information that is ephemeral and affect-based” (Caliandro & Gandini, 2016, p. 38), a mixed-method and subsequent data triangulation, where “diverse standpoints cast light upon a single topic” (Olsen, 2004) is warranted. Other scholars, use the term “multi-strategy research”, as mixing is not limited to methods only, rather, it includes “all phases of the research, including philosophical positions, inferences and the interpretations of results,”(Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Therefore, the concept of “flexible research” was relevant in my case (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 145).

Flexibility here does not imply an *anything-goes* approach. Instead, it means that increased scrutiny was used even though the process of data collection “evolved” and aspects of “who, where and what” were not “foreclosed on options about methods” at the start, but, refined as I progressed in my research (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 147). I found this approach helpful in addressing the under-theorised notions of hegemony, privilege, and multi-dimensional oppression in its virtual form. As such, I explain in section 4.4, the quantitative phase of my analysis is not entirely descriptive, since indicators such as number of follower/following, mentions, and popular hashtags, reveal critical insights “power geometries” (Caroll & Sapinski, 2012, p. 189) social norms that occur in the private sphere (Marwick, 2013). Existing research into this sphere has been typically done ‘indirectly’ using ‘secondary’ recollections instead of real-time expressions in the form of tweets.

In a review of 115 studies exploring the use of Twitter in politics, Jungherr (2014) concludes that mixed approaches provide "great research potential" for two reasons. First, it establishes patterns to search for in quantitative work. Second, it reveals nuance in the way political players use the platform. This review further suggests "qualitative content analysis" and "observation" of Twitter users (Jungherr, 2014). This study adopts a "multi-strategy" method because it overcomes the weaknesses of a single method approach. This strategy overcomes the bias from a single perspective. Moreover, such adoption gives the research a "complete overview" as it provides a "variety of different angles by allowing the inclusion of a variety of research questions, and interpretations regarding the area studied (Henn et al., 2010).

Apart from that, the field of Twitter research remains predominantly quantitative in nature and are algorithmic or computer science driven. Viewing communicative technology from an only quantitative standpoint leans to notions of 'advancement', 'modernisation' and 'progress'. This is particularly the case in Malaysia since the technological drive and the accompanying messaging thereof, have always been state-led. The literature explored in Chapter 2, serve as a cautionary tale for this positivist, deterministic, and myopic view. As the primary aim of my thesis, I addressed this lack of qualitative, critical exploration of political communication on Twitter in the Malaysian context.

4.1.2 Validation

There were two forms of potential biases considering the nature of my research. First, my research is primarily qualitative in nature. In conducting a critical discourse analysis, I was aware that the empirical processes were exposed to my subjectivities as a social science researcher. For example, since the literature establishes that a CDA would draw upon the researcher's experience and inclination, my profession as a civil servant and centre-leftist influenced my overall research aims. Moreover, as a Twitter user, tensions between etic and emic perspectives potentially informed the epistemological parameters of my research.

Second, the refusal of users from BN and Anti-PH to participate in both FGD and in-depth interviews resulted in findings from users who supported PH. I approached more than 1000 BN and anti-PH accounts via Direct Messaging in Twitter to no avail. Broadly speaking, my intention was to make my sample more inclusive. Here I explain four validation techniques I employed to reduce bias in my research.

My first approach was to include more than one coder in this thesis. Three research assistants, with media studies qualifications, coded the tweets and prepared the FGD interview transcripts. They were trained to understand research objectives and overarching research questions. I also developed a codebook as a guide and maintain a common understanding of themes. After one pilot study and several sessions, coders were able to assign codes to tweets with reasonable reliability (above 86%). My intention was to be separated during data recording phase to allow a more neutral stance toward data collection.

Second, I subjected my research design, framework, and preliminary findings to expert panel review sessions. A roundtable discussion was held on 23 April 2021, at the start of the data collection. During this session, I received feedback even before any data were collected. This session helped chart a way forward that was informed by five experts (see Appendix 3). For example, the need to look for voices of not just under-represented people (for example: women and Orang Asli) but also of issues (3R). In the case of online platforms, there was a request to look at the online media ownership patterns and challenges faced by civil society organisations to attain sufficient reach in messaging. Overall, I received 31 pointers that could be clustered into categories such as the state of the media, new allies, social media, aggregators, and independent media.

Third, mirroring other CDA studies, I used triangulation in various ways. First, several data sources were used. In selecting trigger points to download Twitter posts, I included non-political and key words associated with marginalised voices. I not only used Twitter posts, but also other datapoints such as personal bio, websites, and language. I also included an archival research phase to complement the data collection and analysis

processes. Next, I triangulated the data using several analytical methods. I incorporated a manual content analysis of Twitter posts, computerised analysis by a 3rd party analytics firm, and archival data from reports and speeches. Notably, I deliberately included users from BN and non-PH accounts in the list of accounts submitted to the 3rd Party analytics firm to counter the lack of these accounts in the interviews and FGDs.

Fourth, I selected a case study that was relatively novel to the Malaysian political context. While most Twitter research was conducted during electoral or mundane periods, my research focused on Twitter usage during political crises. Therefore, the findings from this existing work can be used to contrast my findings and see if there are any consistencies or vice versa. Similarly, the inclusion of datasets about marginalised communities allowed me to triangulate findings with mainstream topics to demonstrate the influence of power in shaping engagement on Twitter.

4.1.3 Ethical Considerations

The usage of Tweets, for academic research, brings to light several concerns - more so since users tend to use the platform anonymously. In the context of Malaysian political communication, the fear of being caught by authorities to be critical²⁴ is a concern. I will discuss this in detail in later chapters of my thesis. However, from a methodological standpoint, I explain the ethical guidelines adhered to and the administrative details considered.

Foremost, my work was conducted in accordance with the University of Nottingham, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) Research Ethics Policy. This policy is not a stand-alone policy. This is because, during the process of application, several references were made to external regulations such as the Malaysian Personal Data Protection Act (2020), The University of Nottingham's Royal Charter, the UK's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the University of Nottingham's Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics. As required, I sent an application that included my abstract, purpose of

²⁴ see Section 1.3.4

the study, and study protocol to the FASS Research Ethic Committee on 10th December 2020. Due to the innovative nature of this project, this process was understandably rigorous with several revisions and clarifications requested by the committee. Having satisfied these requirements, my proposal was “accepted with no further revisions” by the committee on 18th January 2021.

In addition to formal standards, certain administrative details need to be considered when conducting this research. To ensure anonymity, I separated the text from user information. Therefore, relevant tweets were studied in terms of text (Johnsen et al., 2019) and conversations (Blevins et al., 2019) regardless of user information. Nevertheless, while user consent is obtained in the event that “a word-for-word excerpt from an active account” is cited in my thesis (Tracy, 2013, p. 75), I exclude excerpts of tweets that have been deleted by the user. I say ‘active account’ since some accounts were no longer accessible either because they were shut down or suspended.

Even by bleeping usernames, and pseudonyms or using neutral representations, these excerpts can easily be searched and identified for via search engines. Furthermore, digital cues such as the number of followers/following, were used to establish user categories (Bruns et al., 2017). As suggested by Dahlgren (2005a), I use “elites”, “mainstream” and “societal” to group users. For focus group discussions and interviews, an index code was developed for citations. I was careful to omit user information and used pronouns randomly to report my findings and ensure anonymity. This was done in full cognisance that; one cannot assume liberal democratic stances when it comes to analysing political communication in Malaysia.

4.2 Pilot Study

Considering the scope of this study, I conducted a pilot study in a similar case. As discussed in the previous sections, I ‘searched’ for a case study, or corpus of tweets to analyse the intersection of technology, politics, and society in the Malaysian context. It was at that juncture, while using my formal data collection methods, that I ‘stumbled’ upon

tweets that I present here as my pilot study²⁵. I studied the response on Twitter to the wrong National Flag shown on the stadium LCD screen seen on Figure 8, as the National Anthem was played during the 25th November 2019 opening ceremony of the National Under-15 Basketball Championship in Kuala Lumpur. As a Twitter users myself, I could see but not fully understand how part of society reacts in a relatively free medium. Therefore, I used Peter Dahlgren's participatory framework and asked whether the stances of deliberative democracy can be modelled using critical public sphere theories, including scholarships from Jurgen Habermas and Zizi Papacharissi, while considering the historical social context provided by Benedict Anderson's imagined communities and William Case's Elites and Regimes in Malaysia.



Figure 8: Wrong Flag Shown on LCD Screen During a Basketball Event

Methodologically, my research strategy is informed by Richard Roger's 'digital methods'. Based on a corpus of 18,000 tweets, I conducted a qualitative analysis to understand what these tweets reveal about public discourse in the Malaysian Twittersphere. My analysis aimed to answer the following research questions; How do users use Twitter to interact? What themes could be observed? Are these views representative of the

²⁵ see discussions on research motivation in Section 1.2

Malaysian society as a whole? How do structural elements underpin the characteristics of the Malaysian Twittersphere? This pilot study was presented for peer review, with the title, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere? A Qualitative Analysis of Twittersphere in Malaysia* at the Malaysian Workshop on Political Studies on 20 April 2020. Based on the feedback received, several adjustments as discussed below, were made when approaching tweets from the Sheraton Move.

This pilot study was important for two reasons. First, it allowed me to operationalise the theories and studies identified in Chapter 2. As established in previous sections, critical social media studies in the Malaysian context, particularly in investigating current political events are lacking, and thus, under-theorised. My intention was to look at tweets in line with the theoretical trajectory that spans notions of critical rational engagement by Jurgen Habermas, technological capitalism by Herbert Schiller, data commodification by Christian Fuchs, and affective publics and beyond democracy by Zizi Papacharissi, within the digital methods framework provided by Richard Rogers using Fairclough's CDA. In the Malaysian context, I referred to works by scholars such as Jomo Kwame, Edmund Tarence Gomez, Zaharom Nain, Johan Saravanamuthu, Maznah Mohamad, Khoo Boon Teik, Meredith Weiss and William Case.

Second, apart from the theoretical approach, this pilot study also provided me with an opportunity to explore data collection using Nvivo. Tweets were downloaded using NCapture, which is a web browser extension. NCapture allows tweets to be downloaded by using keywords. This process was time-sensitive as NCapture could only download a maximum of 18000 tweets each time from the last seven days. For the pilot study, 18000 tweets between 9.01am and 3.04pm on 26 November 2019 were downloaded. This would prove to be an important realisation as it meant that I would have to be alert to political developments as they were taking place. It was this take-away that prompted me to begin downloading tweets as the events surrounding the Sheraton Move took place. With the benefit of hindsight, the Sheraton Move appears to be a series of systematic events even though I recall that in February 2020, the scene on Twitter was chaotic.

At the onset, the wrong flag incident seemed harmless. Considering the nature of this event, apart from the small group of local basketball enthusiasts, it would have gone unnoticed. A technical error by the organisers quickly received the attention of the ‘Twitter mob’ and turned into what some users called a full-fledged threat to national sovereignty. Even Indonesian users were vindictive when relating to the incident, as Malaysian organisers had made a poor choice in designing the 2017 SEA Games booklet²⁶, making the Indonesian flag look like an undergarment. My analysis found the existence of affective racial counterpublics rife on Twitter (Kuo, 2018). However, upon close examination, my pilot study reveals the dialectical role of social media platforms on discourse patterns. While societal users experienced liberation to voice their, albeit racist and antagonistic views, elite users and market logics found new ways to dominate and solidify their position in the narratives produced.

In answering the first research question: how do Twitter users interact? To some extent, my pilot study findings echoed Dahlgren’s modelling of the public sphere. While Dahlgren’s model was shaped like a pyramid²⁷, as, my results revealed that the Malaysian Twittersphere was in the shape of an inverted pyramid. 97% of the 18000 tweets were retweets of elite and media organisations. Active users²⁸ from Indonesia had also commented on this issue. Usage of hashtags were low. #benderamalaysia, #MABA, #jalurgemilang were only used in 16 out of the 18000 tweets. 36% tweets had mentions, largely by users calling-out politicians, particularly @syedsaddiq the then Minister of Youth and Sports, to task.

Secondly, I asked, What themes can be observed and are these views representative of Malaysian society as a whole? To answer this research question, I only analysed unique tweets (not retweets) by users from the societal sphere²⁹. I relied on Applied Thematic Analysis (ATA) for this stage of analysis. ATA involves 3 level of analysis to identify salient themes in my data. Since 97% of the dataset was retweets, only the remaining 3% or 539

²⁶ see Appendix 4

²⁷ discussed in Section 2.5.7

²⁸ users with over a million tweets

²⁹ users with the lowest quartile of followers, politicians and media accounts were manually excluded

tweets, were unique tweets by users. Among the tweets 63.8% did not contain hashtags, mentions or replies. Almost all users identified as Malay, urban, and male. Using Nvivo, a total of 621 references³⁰ were identified. These references were then coded to form three main themes: Antagonistic Speech (58.5%), Nationalistic Speech (32.5%) and Civilised Speech (9%).

While the first part of the research question was relatively easy, the second part about the representativeness of the themes observed proved otherwise since of 539 users, 91% of them were angry, bigotry, and uncivilised. Research has shown that interactions on social media platforms thrive in this climate³¹. Algorithms were designed to make these comments visible, by trending topics and top tweets. While I am careful not to make the claim that such thoughts are shared by the general population in Malaysia, this small sample, provides a look into what scholars call asynchronous ‘private spheres’, have a “high degree of anonymity that fosters a sense of impunity and loss of self-awareness” (Pihlaja, 2014, p. 4), and beg further examination.

Therefore, in the third research question I asked: How do social structural elements underpin the characteristics observed in the Malaysian Twittersphere? Here, my interest was to develop a method to empirically analyse the observed structural notions of racism, identities, languages, and the construction of the ‘other’ in Malaysian society that were apparent in the data. My examination suggests that the racist climate in Malaysia, as suggested by the data, is historically rooted not just in the way imperialists segregate colonies. A previously feudalistic society that existed in Malaysia. Scholars believe that these policies have not been removed after independence. Instead ‘incompatible ethnic subcultures’ remained and were institutionalised since 1970s to present³². Therefore, in analysing data from the Sheraton Move, instead of relying solely on liberal democratic lenses, I found that a critical historical context would further explain the themes observed in the data.

³⁰ since some tweets had more than one theme

³¹ see Section 2.5

³² see research background in Chapter 1

My pilot study has demonstrated that critical approaches are often complex (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020). Given the nature of Twitter and collecting data during the tumultuous political climate from January to March 2020 was likened to diagnosing for mechanical problems, while the engine was running or conducting research on a moving treadmill. As I learned in using NCapture during my pilot study, Twitter research is time sensitive. With so many 'moving parts', several datasets were downloaded during the data collection period. In my attempt to answer my research questions, I used several methods to gather data. Part of the contribution of my study is methodological, as I have developed a multi-stage process explained in the following sections. While phases were not sequential as is typical in mixed-method analysis, I organise them here in three phases beginning with the qualitative and quantitative phases before explaining CDA techniques employed.

4.3 Qualitative Phase

Four qualitative methods were used: purposeful sampling, focus group discussions, interviews, and archival research. Here, I outline the steps taken, the type of data collected and the matching of the research questions to the corresponding methods. My intention here, as highlighted in my research questions, was to examine discourse on Twitter and what it meant to elite, mediatic, and societal users. Such methods were also employed to uncover 'unknown, unknowns' in this study.

4.3.1 Purposeful Sampling

Political communication that occurred on Twitter during the Sheraton Move was the focus of this study. Therefore, purposeful sampling or relevance sampling was used. In this technique, a set of predetermined criteria and objectives drive the sample³³ selection process throughout the research. This method proved useful for navigating a vast number of tweets and trending topics. While I was aware of the criticism that this technique often garnered, several qualitative research scholars have provided principles to ensure empirical robustness. At this stage, I leaned on the recommendations of qualitative

³³ in my case, language, trending topics, users, and themes

research method scholars to use a multi-level process that involved several rounds of readings and examining of Tweets. The challenge here was to negotiate between publicly available “surface data” (large datasets) and “deep data” (tweets of certain individuals or groups) to capture what Manovich (2012) called “deep surface”.

While there is no consensus as to what exactly constitutes ‘big’ or ‘small’ data, the term ‘deep data’ is suggested when such data are used for critical studies (Brock, 2015). In this light, I purposefully sampled trending topics, tweets in Bahasa Malaysia and English (or a mix of both), users, and themes relevant to the Sheraton Move. I downloaded a total of 62 datasets with over a million tweets throughout the research period. From this, 12 datasets with a total of 137181 tweets. I do not intend to claim that my research is representative of the entire Malaysian Twittersphere. As discussed earlier, Twitter’s algorithm favours tweets and topics that are quantity and ‘engagement’ driven. My aim was to be strategic with the data-points within the datasets to explain the phenomenon observed on Twitter. Through manual extraction, I set an inclusive criterion for the 12 datasets.

To this end, I used a multi-stage process during which I was able to evaluate the tweets collected during each sampling stage. The sample for this study was aggregated from 23 February 2020 to 1 March 2020 via an iterative, five stage process. I deliberately included tweets from users with the lowest quartile of followers in each dataset to examine class relations and struggles on Twitter among Malaysian users. In addition, in selecting candidates for focus group discussions and interviews, I was cautious to include participants who absent a manual purposeful extraction process, would be marginalised. During the Sheraton Move fiasco, a fringe group of Orang Asli (aborigines) and NGOs marched in Shah Alam, Selangor to protest the land-grab in Kuala Langat. I included that dataset in my analysis to examine any contrast (if any) between discourses of large national events, versus “micro-activism”. As I explain in later sections, the advent of digitally native data is accompanied by tools³⁴ which enabled me to examine these data (Kitchin, 2017).

³⁴ as discussed in Section 4.4

4.3.2 User Focus Group Discussions (FGD)

Following my decision to use qualitative research methods employed primarily via FGD, I attempted to investigate the societal dimensions and structures experienced by Twitter users while using the platform. To this end the corpus of 137,181 tweets provided me with lists of over 3,000 users. I considered each of them to be a potential FGD participant. From this list I randomly selected users who fulfilled the five criteria. First, only personal users were considered for this FGD. Official accounts of organisations and commercial interests were excluded. Second, since the interest of my study was primarily the Sheraton Move, only users who joined Twitter since or before January 2018 were included. However, exceptions were made for users affiliated with movements that appeared to have been rooted in the Sheraton Move, such as PEJUANG, UNDI18, and MUDA. Third, only users who tweeted on political and current issues, predominantly in Bahasa Malaysia, English, or both, with more than 10,000 tweets were considered. This was done to ensure that only active users were included in the FGD. Finally, users must enable their 'direct message' (DM) function so that they can be approached personally. In the interest of being inclusive of the societal sphere the number of 'followers' was not a criterion to join the FGD.

Users were contacted via the DM. Understandably this process was challenging because of the low response rate. Of the hundreds of users, 21 responded from various demographic and political leanings, and 16 turned up for the FGD. While the initial contact was via DM, some users preferred follow-up via email or WhatsApp. Each user was provided with consent forms as per the University of Nottingham ethical guidelines. Therefore, I convened two FGDs with eight participants each, were conducted on 12 June 2021 and 3 July 2021. Since the Movement Control Orders and Covid 19 restrictions were in place both FGDs were conducted online via Zoom. RM100 was awarded to each participant as a token of appreciation. I was assisted by a repertoire throughout the FGD.

Participants were asked several questions based on two themes derived from the literature review and gaps identified in Chapter 2. The first is the power and control of platforms (Twitter), state, and commercial interests. In this section, my intention is to

explore policies, regulations, multi-tiered communication practices, and flagging content by both the platform and other users. Second, I sought insights from users regarding the potential of emerging online public spheres. Discussions here focused on why users were on Twitter, 'talk' on Twitter, how Twitter was used, notions of affect and immediacy. As established earlier, political communication is contentious in Malaysia, and it is important to seek input from active users. Each session lasted approximately 2 hours, and was recorded, and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

4.3.3 Expert Interviews

Several subject matter experts were interviewed using a multi-level approach. Prior to this, theoretically informed, research questions were drafted. To pilot test my draft, a roundtable discussion, was held to identify the salient issues that needed to be addressed. The input from this roundtable was used to refine and shape subsequent sessions. Next, five in-depth interviews were conducted in groups of 3-4 participants, in the form of panel discussions. I categorised these as group interviews instead of FGDs discussed above because different protocols were used to carry out these two methods. FGDs were informal and involved random users, whereas the interviews were more structured, and involved only specific experts. I used the findings of these interviews to conduct eight one-on-one Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). Appendix 5 shows a list of interviews and FGDs conducted for my study. I am thankful for the grant provided by the Malaysian Reform Initiative (MARI) and USAID, to conduct these interviews. All interviews were conducted online via Zoom due to travel restrictions during the Movement Control Order enforced in June 2021.

The recruitment of policymakers was challenging. At the time of data collection, it was just over a year since the Sheraton Move. These participants were still adjusting. Suffice to say political uncertainty was still apparent. Therefore, I negotiated with participants to snowball a pool of experts. Moreover, scheduling interviews was also a challenge because participants were experiencing Covid-19 lockdowns and were at home. Some also faces logistical and connectivity challenges. Hence, occurrences of last-minute cancellations, poor network connections, and audio or video were common during the

interviews. To address these shortcomings, I offered several scheduling options and an opportunity to send written answers to participants in the event of a technical problem. They were approached via Twitter direct messaging (DM) and email. Follow-up was performed via email or WhatsApp. Each participant completed a consent form as per the University of Nottingham research ethics guidelines. In the interest of transparency, each participant was provided with a detailed project proposal document, highlighting objectives, researcher profile, funding and themes that would be covered during the interview.

At the end of this process, 42 participants³⁵ agreed to participate in this study. While I discuss the demographics of participants in depth in the following chapter, it should be mentioned here that additional effort was made to narrow the gender gap in my study. In the interest of triangulation, in addition to random users, expert views from practitioners such as policymakers, traditional and online media practitioners, journalists, and civil society organisations were sought. As mentioned earlier, because physical interviews were not feasible, five group online interviews were conducted. Participants were clustered in groups as illustrated in Appendix 6. I have made every effort possible for a better inclusion from Twitter users and experts.

An interview guide was developed to ensure that each session followed a consistent protocol. I mentioned to the participants, both in the invitation message and at the beginning of each session, that the duration of each session would be approximately 2 hours and would be recorded and transcribed for analysis. As shown in Appendix 5 the shortest interview lasted 42 minutes and the longest session lasted about 2 ½ hours. Each of the five groups of experts New Online Media Practitioners, Traditional & Online Media Practitioners, Policymakers, Academicians, and Civil Society Organisation representatives were interviewed using a customised guide that determined the emphasis and flow of each session. Each session was divided into several themes in accordance with the research questions and framework.

³⁵ 18 female and 24 male

Generally, the participants were asked to discuss four areas of interest: the political economy of Malaysian media, online media and the potential of emerging public spheres, the role of institutions, censorship, and representation of the marginalised; and advocacy of a progressive and democratic way forward. Each interview started with me thanking each participant for their time and willingness to participate and a brief introduction to the researcher. Next, I explained the objectives of the study and the themes of the interviews. Each participant's right to anonymity, voluntary participation, seeking clarification, and leaving the session at any time was reiterated. Since all interviews were held online, the participants were given the freedom to on or off their cameras. To make the session more interactive the 'chat' and 'raise hand' functions were enabled throughout each. Although every effort was made to make these sessions robust, several issues required further archival research.

4.3.4 Archival Research

As previously outlined, my analysis of political communication would be incomplete without examining the structures prevalent in Malaysian society. Here, I make the case that the Sheraton Move should be viewed within the larger context of Malaysian politics, which include, among other things, a historical and political perspective. As I argue in Chapter 2, what occurred can be viewed historically for two reasons. First, the notions of elitism observed on Twitter, are rooted in the feudal and hierarchical society that was present even before Malaysia attained independence in 1957. Since these tendencies have not been addressed through national policies since, I argue that the construction of the political 'other' seen on Twitter is the manifestation of institutionalised racism and class hegemony. Second, an examination of the origins of internet technologies in Malaysia reveal how the same communicative computerisation was initially used by American military and financial institutions. I suggest that both the DNA of these technologies and the fervour by which they were implemented in Malaysia should be viewed together. Therefore, the permeation of internet technologies in Malaysia since the 1990s (which resulted in the vast online reactions during the Sheraton Move) was, as discussed above, an attempt to undermine political activism and (re)establish structures of power and control by the Mahathir administration (Weiss, 2011).

Archival research was conducted in this study in two ways. First, in my attempt to address the research question of how the structural elements that, I argue, predates the advent of social media in Malaysian political communication. Here, I examine documentary evidence mostly in the form of speech and newspaper archives, reports produced by both Malaysian and international organisations. In addition, historical records of not just the official but also of those of whom from the standpoint of the preeminent political and ruling elites, are considered an “alternative in the sense of otherness” (Doniger, 2009, p. 15). Scholars have long established that ‘official’ historic records often favour privileged classes in society (Alatas, 1977; F. Noor, 2008).

Second, in order to understand Twitter Inc. I analyse the testimonials by CEO Jack Dorsey in congressional hearings. I relied of secondary data to examine Twitter’s capitalist nature (S. Young et al., 2007). Twitter found itself in the middle of several political crises in the United States of America and was called to account for the platform’s role in the media warfare. In addition, the issue of Cambridge Analytica and Facebook’s interference in national politics and narratives of holding social media companies associated with the moniker Big Tech were rife. As of 2020, Twitter has made more than 15 appearances in the US Congress. I narrowed my data set to include two that involved Jack Dorsey on 5th September 2018 and 8th January 2020. They were the Committee on Energy and Commerce’s hearings on *Twitter: Transparency and Accountability* and *Americans at Risk: Manipulation and Deception in the Digital Age* respectively.

The data for this analysis were drawn from secondary sources. First, I watched videos of both hearings found on the official YouTube page of the *House of Energy and Commerce Committee*. Importantly, sources were authentic, credible, and important in the context of my thesis, representative of using documentary evidence to triangulate findings (Dunne, Pettigrew, and Robinson, 2016). Second, my analysis relied on full transcripts, witness statements, background memos and other related documents found in the Meeting Package available for download in the US House of Representatives Committee Repository.

As established in earlier sections, media control in Malaysia is rife with both Orwellian and Huxleyan forms of controls. While the former is more obvious and thus a prevalent approach as attested by existing literature, the former is under theorised. Therefore, I examine ‘alternative’ historic records made available online by Singapore’s National Library Board. My intention in examining historic accounts is to situate the notions of ruling hegemony and supremacy prevalent in political communication. To understand political discourse patterns, I compare “linguistic strategies” of speeches and tweets by politicians (Spencer-Bennett, 2020).

4.4 Quantitative Phase

While the analysis in my thesis is predominantly qualitative, an examination of Twitter conversations necessitates the use of several quantitative components, without departing from the epistemological stances of the former.

My use of quantitative methods was functional. Scholars are increasingly agreeing that digital methods can neither be qualitative nor quantitative. This phenomenon better known as *The End of The Virtual* has been attributed to the blurring of the virtual and physical (Rogers, 2009). Therefore, my use of quantitative tools was premised on “the medium is the message” instead of “follow the medium” principle that views the affordances of Twitter not as a mere source of methods, but as a cold/hot media (McLuhan, 2013). As argued in earlier sections, the algorithms within the Twitter architecture are AI driven to achieve optimum capitalist ends. I was able to achieve two things, that I believe would have not been possible had I relied on only qualitative methods. First, it was possible to examine big data, particularly Twitter’s interaction elements, such as tweets, likes, retweets, and hashtags. Second, through network analysis conversation patterns can be visualised, providing opportunities for critical interpretation and discussion.

I used two approaches NCapture & Python as summarised in Table 5 to tackle “digitally native” data from Twitter to investigate the use of social media and if it does (or does not)

undermine existing political or mediatic structures. Dealing with tweets, hashtags, retweets, and user information that are situated in the virtual environment prompted the use of tools (in parentheses) to download (NCapture, Twint, Phantom Buster) and classify tweets (Nvivo, Excel, traditional machine learning (ML) algorithms, rule-based modelling technique) and subsequently perform network (Gephi, Fructerman Reingold) and community detection (Louvain algorithm) analysis. Apart from NCapture, Nvivo and Excel, I did not have technical knowledge to run the other specialised software mentioned. Therefore, to focus on the broader theoretical aspects of my research, I sought help from a data analytics company to perform part of the technical analysis. I found this synergy to be useful for two reasons. First, I was able to focus my attention on scrutinising whether outputs produced by the technical team answered the research questions instead of the technicalities of using computer programming. Second, I approached this software as a tool to achieve my research aims instead of allowing the tools to determine the course of my research.

The use of such software meant that my data was subject to Twitter's application programming interface or API. Because the API acted as a gateway for external applications such as the ones mentioned above, several concerns around data transparency apply to my study. For example, it is unclear how APIs filter the data available to external instruments. Some estimates state that the Twitter search API provides access to the most recent 5000 tweets related to keywords whereas streaming API allows download of 1% of all available tweets in real-time (Caliandro & Gandini, 2016, p. 45). Overall, from both approaches, my data comprised 236,988 tweets, from 10,356 users. Both methods produced entirely different corpora of tweets, adding to the richness of the data used and the validity of my study.

	NCapture	Python
No. of Tweets	137181	99807
Period of Tweets	23 Feb – 3 Mac 2020	1 Apr – 11 May 2018 23 Feb – 2 Mac 2020 12-19 Jan 2021 9-16 Jul 2021
No. of Users	10256	100
Range of tweets per user	0-5407920 (overall)	42-400 (tweets/period)

Table 5 Tools to Obtain Tweets

In the first approach, I used NCapture to download tweets in real time during the Sheraton Move, from 23rd Feb to 1st March 2020. Once downloaded, my challenge was to organise raw tweets³⁶ into a format that was free of redundancies or other datapoints not relevant to my analysis. To this end, tweets were imported into Microsoft Excel where I organised the data into several columns that were classified to only relevant datapoints. While tweets and other Twitter vernaculars were imported into the NVivo qualitative analysis software, other data points such as username, number of tweets, number of followers, and public bio details were organised in an Excel spreadsheet. Here, I divided users into quartiles, depending on the number of followers to demonstrate tiers of users that exist on Twitter to address research question about power and influence on the platform (Caliandro & Gandini, 2016, p. 39).

Through NVivo I aggregated 137181 tweets into a manageable database. Subsequently, the tweets were coded into categories such as ‘Own Stance’, ‘Criticism/Arguing’, ‘Personality, Royalty, and Political Parties’, ‘Pop Culture’ and ‘Policy’. The query function on NVivo was used to examine the relationships between codes and study the co-occurrence of these codes (Pihlaja, 2014). To show politicians use of Twitter during the Sheraton Move and the corresponding engagement, I used Microsoft Excel was used to perform a time series analysis. I manually copied the date, time, number of replies,

³⁶ Raw tweets were 1000s of rows in form of NVivo Project or .nvp files. These files were obtained directly from Twitter’s streaming API. For example, if a tweet was retweeted 50 times, this tweet appeared 50 times in this file.

number of retweets, and number of likes garnered by Annuar Musa and Hannah Yeoh to investigate the different strategies used by these politicians during the Sheraton Move.

In the second approach, I sought help from programmers using Python package called Twint for two reasons. First, unlike NCapture, Twint could scrape tweets beyond the limitations of Twitter's API. With this added flexibility, I targeted users with a minimum of 400 tweets during each examined period. Three periods were of particular interest, in contrast to the usage of Twitter during the Sheraton Move. The first period, between 1st April 2018 to 11th May 2018 comprised tweets made during the 14th General Election and tweets made during the announcement of the State of Emergency due to Covid-19. Tweets obtained via Python were downloaded in October 2021. Second, several visualisation options important to studying communication patterns were made possible through the Gephi and Fructerman Reingold applications. These tools made it possible to add nuance to my examination of claims of big data research that "surface is the new depth" associated with political communication on Twitter (Manovich, 2012, p. 468).

This phase was not free of limitations. First, in identifying purely political tweets, I faced challenges, as users did not limit their Twitter usage for political communication. Classifying users as political or otherwise proved difficult because some accounts had more or less than the stipulated 400 tweets. In addition, owing to language barriers, traditional machine learning (ML) algorithms were unable to accurately determine political or non-political focus. Instead, a Rule-based modelling technique, using a list of 75 words was used to determine the tweet focus. Second, practical parameters were set to perform community detection analysis. For example, in determining the follower-following relationship of accounts with millions of followers such as @NajibRazak (4 million followers) I set a limit to just 100 accounts due to time and cost constraints. Third, not all tweets were text-based. Emblematic of changing forms of language on online platforms, some tweets were emoticons, hyperlinks, memes, contained non-Malay or non-English words. While a look at non-language-based communication is an interesting avenue for research, it was beyond the scope of my thesis.

4.5 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

I used CDA to answer the following research question: At the structural level, in which ways do frameworks of power appropriate democracy and how can this influence political communication on Twitter? Here my intention is to explore how political discourses in the form of descriptive and thematic patterns found in the previous two phases of research intersect with notions of power. This decision was influenced by my intention to apply Dahlgren's analytic framework³⁷ in the context of political communication in Malaysia. While both Dahlgren and Fairclough's approaches are foundational, I also draw on Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) techniques in managing Twitter vernaculars (Brock, 2018).

As explained in previous sections, the field of political communication has always been contentious and warrants the use of Fairclough's CDA (hereafter referred to as CDA). I selected CDA because it aligns with my ontological perspective grounded in Marxist theory. Furthermore, the inclusion of a look at historical and ideological viewpoints within the CDA framework would allow me to examine the structural aspects of political communication on Twitter. As mentioned in several parts of my thesis, I avoided approaching Twitter in a technologically deterministic way. Tweets were considered as discursive practices that do not occur in a vacuum. Instead, it is the manifestation of structural, representational, and interactional influences.

The use of data from the societal sphere to examine autonomy was previously limited particularly in the context of the citizenry as an audience (Fenton, 2004, p. 260). Therefore, I use similar CDA methods to shed nuance on how oppression of the marginalised occurs in the context of political communication on Twitter. In other words, themes derived from tweets produced during the Sheraton Move when deconstructed would provide insight into the structures that exist in Malaysian society. I found the descriptive analysis insufficient to explain the operationalisation of power in the context of online media (Noble, 2015). Such an understanding may suggest avenues of

³⁷ including structural, representational, and interactional

emancipation of users in this tier as it provides insights to evaluate the forms of discourses against the backdrop of wider social, technological, and political contexts.

To this point, my analysis was carried out in two phases. First, FGDs and expert interviews were conducted to identify salient themes and concerns regarding the use of Twitter during the Sheraton Move. In the second phase, quantitative analyses were conducted using software and other programming tools explained in Section 4.4 to investigate patterns found in digitally native data useful for examining discourses in the private spheres of both societal and elite users. Next, the stages involved in the 3rd phase of my research are explained. Here, themes and findings from the previous two phases were aggregated and analysed further using CDA techniques (Papacharissi, 2015a, p. 41).

In the following section, I explain my approach to CDA. First, I explain how I applied Fairclough's model in my research. Next, I discuss what text meant in the context of my thesis and how I selected texts to be analysed. Next, I report how these texts were coded to allow for interpretation. I close by sharing some reflections on the process of using language to find political meaning (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

4.6 Fairclough's CDA Model

Fairclough's CDA Model was selected for two reasons. First, the emphasis to the 'way' texts are produced, in the case of my study, Twitter. Second, Fairclough also stresses the socio-cultural context in which these texts were produced and consumed, or in the case of my thesis, the Sheraton Move. In this vein, following Bolívar (2018), Tweets fulfil five conditions needed for political discourse studies as Tweets are spatial³⁸, purposeful, Tweets embody a certain architecture, Tweets are deliberate and Tweets are consequential, (Ismiyati et al., 2021). Previous research has established the use of CDA to analyse both short texts (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 207) and a larger corpus of data

³⁸ see Section 2.5.1

(Ajiboye & Abioye, 2019). I subject both downloaded tweets and FGD and interview transcripts to CDA to understand the use of Twitter during the Sheraton Move.

I selected samples of tweets from elite, media, and societal users that were originally produced by the account and excluded retweets or copied texts for my analysis. I also set a minimum of 30 tweets produced during the Sheraton Move to ensure that only prolific Twitter users were included in this study. The selection process of FGD and expert participants is explained in detail in Section 4.3.2. Collectively, words used in tweets and transcripts convey “the imprint of society and denoted meanings” form a dataset that allowed it to be studied (Richardson, 2006, p. 47). Cultural texts are political events in how they have the power to intervene into a given zeitgeist (Rahmat, 2020, p. 39). Therefore, tweets are deemed fit for CDA analysis by means provided within Fairclough’s framework of critical discourse analysis (Sæbø, 2011). As my thesis involved summarising and analyses of several datasets, I relied on content analysis informed by the OSROR techniques discussed in Section 2.5.7.

I choose CDA to answer the research questions raised in my thesis on how discourses within the public sphere occur within a neoliberal framework on Twitter. My aim was to see how the online Malaysian public sphere either limits or liberates us, and how the free-market logic that is inherent to social media platforms shapes and translates how political communication takes place on Twitter. I used Fairclough’s CDA to examine both tweets and transcripts to research complex structures and hierarchies of interaction and social practises in the of context, society and culture (Gredel, 2017; Steele, 2016). For example, Fairclough provides tools for understanding the position of “insider knowledge” used by political elites during the Sheraton Move (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 217). Next, I discuss the three stages involved in using Fairclough's CDA namely textual analysis, discursive practices, and social practices.

4.6.1 Textual Analysis

I found Fairclough’s interrogation of “what wider socio-cultural processes is this text a part of; what are its wider social conditions, and what are its likely effects?” relevant to my

research. Fairclough suggests an examination of salient terms, expressions, verbs tropes, and metaphors to uncover the “many ways power, dominance and inequality” are conveyed (van Dijk, 1999). Alternatively, I suggest a review of tweets from the societal sphere to reveal perspectives on the receptive end of texts produced by political elites and media organisations.

I found that research on tweets is usually done according to user tiers³⁹. Studies either focus on politicians, media organisation, or societal users. However, I found that the relationship between these three tiers was understudied. At this stage, textual analysis may assist in recognising the often-covert strategies used. In particular, the linguistics strategies used may cause tweets to appear normal or neutral. Further examination may reveal ideological stances aimed at influencing the reader’s ideas. Moreover, the volume of tweets produced in a short span of time could compromise emphasis on knowledge and trust as stated by Habermas. Discourses on Sheraton Move in the form of newsbytes could nurture political amnesia instead of serving the ends of political emancipation. I aim to examine how the selection of events absent their wider democratic context feeds into the social construction of the Sheraton Move.

I selected statements from Twitter in the form of tweets, hashtags, and @mentions from trending topics on Twitter and excerpts from FGD and interviews to examine whether Twitter allows an inquiry into the structural inner workings (Highfield, 2016, p. 94). At this stage, conduct linguistic analysis to investigate the use of vocabulary, semantics, grammar choices, sentence orientation and cohesion of messages. My research follows the recommendation of analysing political text “along several dimensions to tease out discriminatory interaction” (Richardson, 2006, p. 40). To this end, the modified Communication Mediation Model discussed in Section 3.3.3 was useful. I found selected samples from all three tiers of users⁴⁰ and examined them using a multi-tier (interactional, representational, and structural) research framework (Engesser et al., 2017).

³⁹ see Research Gap discussed in Section 3.3.2

⁴⁰ elite, media organisations and societal

I avoid a primary focus on politician accounts because, part of the focus of this study to see if Twitter provides a voice for the voiceless. As such, I decided not to focus on retweets of politicians and political elites due to the use of third parties to manage (i.e. PR firms) their personal Twitter handles. Given my study's interest in the emancipatory potential of Twitter, looking exclusively at political elites stands in stark contrast to this study, as argued earlier, such inequalities and power struggles exists within Malaysian society.

4.6.2 Discursive Practices

At this stage, I further examined how non-text elements, particularly processes, are involved in producing Twitter posts. As presented above, Tweets have potential to reveal the “political and ideological aspects of discourse” (Richardson, 2006). Because this stage is concerned with the non-literal aspects of tweets, I relied on FGDs and expert interviews to learn about the production of tweets. Critical inquiry “takes partisanship for the oppressed” (Fuchs, 2008), I avoided sole dependence on tweets by politicians and media organisations. Instead, I took a special interest and spoke to users from the societal sphere to tease out their “informal” Twitter routines.

Fairclough's CDA provides a framework that includes a categorical analysis when examining the production of tweets and other Twitter vernaculars found on NVivo. I categorised the tweets downloaded into themes (Herzog et al., 2019). At this juncture, it was clear that I needed to classify users according to their role in the political communication landscape (Lotan et al., 2011) as elites, media organisations and societal users used Twitter differently. Politicians use of Twitter during the Sheraton Move was also established during the previous phase. Therefore, excerpts of politicians' posts were analysed for “simulated equalization” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 45), a discourse technique where elites use terms used by the citizenry to ‘fit in’ and appear to be ‘one with the people’. On the other hand, research has established that the citizenry that used Twitter was mainly conversational (Rauchfleisch & Metag, 2016). Twitter's algorithm has been found to favour argumentative deliberations rather than rational-critical debates (Karpowitz et al., 2009, p. 242). Since discourse practises are “at different levels of

abstraction or generalisation” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 94), I looked at both what was included and excluded in Tweets. Put differently, I focused on both themes that were salient and less prominent in providing an understanding of the nature of discourse on Twitter.

As mentioned earlier, I aggregated two corpora of tweets: from NVivo and Phyton. The NVivo corpus was coded into more meaningful segments (N. Noor & Hamid, 2021). At this stage I examined all 10 themes from the interactive level of analysis by categorising these themes into ‘Top Themes’ (what was said), ‘Least Mentioned Themes’ (what was not said/said less) and ‘Themes Omitted’ (themes outside the scope of my research). The data collected on from Phyton were used to generate word clouds of the top 75 and 50 words. While one word cloud represented the entire corpus of tweets, I generated separate word clouds for the periods of GE14, Sheraton Move and the Emergency Declaration. Furthermore, word clouds were generated according to politicians, media, and societal users. Findings from these were used to inform the modelling of questions asked during the FGD and expert interviews.

4.6.3 Social Practices

This stage of CDA addressed the gap typically revealed in the ‘future work’ sections of academic publications in this field. My review of the literature reveals that there is a need to further explore socio-cultural practices to explain the deliberative capacity seen on Twitter. For instance, in a quantitative sentiment investigation of 2.9 million tweets by over a million users during the 2016 US Presidential election, researchers were only able to identify the frequency of topics and “took sentiment as a proxy for public opinion”. As a result, the study by (Yaqub et al., 2017) concluded that Trump “offered a more optimistic and positive campaign message”. Scholars warn of measuring political communication effectiveness in purely technological terms while using “marketing centric perspective” that simplistically “equals participation and engagement” or worse – representation (Jenkins, Green and Ford, 2013, p. 165).

As reflected in my review of literature, this has been an area concern in media research. Prior to studies relating to social networking sites, scholars lamented that they were unable to accurately address the "complexities" found in television viewership (Morley, 1993; Turner, 2009). Previous studies have also found that besides technological limitations, theories explaining discourse are fragmented (Entman, 1993). As such, digital communicative features found on Twitter allows access to various viewpoints of such "complexities". As a result, I was able to study "active audience" who do not just consume, share, and comment but ultimately aim to shape opinions (Robertson, 2018). Furthermore, each tweet produced is intended for an audience explicitly, when @mention is added or implicitly through hashtags, (Megele, 2014). A relevant perspective to understand this in the context of 'talk' on Twitter is provided in Erving Goffman's *Forms of Talk*. Goffman argues that, "deeply incorporated into the nature of talk are the fundamental requirements of theatricality" where any "utterance projects the image of an actor" constantly in pursuit to of a "personal relation" from the "stage" addressing an "imagined audience" in the case of broadcasted communication (Goffman, 1981).

At this stage, I follow Fairclough's suggestion and expand from the textual and discursive perspectives to examine wider societal and cultural factors. Particularly at the structural level of analysis in the case of Sheraton Move, I investigate the "historic, economic, political and ideological features" (Richardson, 2006, p. 43) that formed the backdrop that enabled this crisis. I found that the features within Fairclough's CDA were helpful in examining how themes found in tweets reflect structures that are in place to maintain the concentration of power (van Dijk, 2015). Politicians such as Annuar Musa and Hannah Yeoh took to Twitter during the power vacuum experienced during the Sheraton Move. This provided a unique situation, as posts by these politicians provided the context for societal discourse. Put differently, a select few controlled how the resulting narrative of both media organisations and the citizenry. Moreover, events at the palace gates seemed to reconstitute conversations about the Sheraton Move. This raises the question of how power is "enacted in the trivial actions of everyday life" (Foucault, 1980).

In addition, I examined ideological stances, which are an important element of social practices, in two ways. First, in the context of journalist autonomy on Twitter. As, journalist data were in the form of Twitter accounts, FGDs, and expert interviews, I was able to compare community detection via network analytics and discourse analysis via transcripts. Though unintentional, I found this research opportunity important in explaining how private, professional, and public spheres can coexist on Twitter⁴¹. Second, we understand the mediatic perspective of the events surrounding the Sheraton Move. The Sheraton Move did not occur in isolation⁴². I argue that it should be viewed within the wider context of international geo-political developments, the single party dominance political system presents in Malaysia for over 60 years, ethnic and class friction that exist in society, and the mix of technology and media. Nevertheless, the focus of my thesis is the under-researched mediatic perspective of Sheraton Move. As such, my analysis at the structural level is concerned with explaining how historic narratives of the powerful, disarming the citizenry they wish to oppress are observed on Twitter. I investigate how Twitter as a capitalist endeavour, allowed Orwellian and Huxleyan operatives to flourish in an environment that potentially masked the oppression of the societal tier. My aim was to uncover superficial agency and explain the continued presence of power and control regimes on Twitter.

I aimed to deconstruct the underlying assumption that internet technologies and related communicative technologies provided the citizenry with agency to challenge existing power structures, from communities and mobilise in defence of democratic rights (Xenitidou & Gunnarsdóttir, 2019). This notion was legitimised on Twitter when thousands turned to the platform to reach out to the political elite to save Malaysia. Nevertheless, as the previous sections have demonstrated, reactions on Twitter were commodities to the platform and were potentially appropriated for profit. As such, I found Fairclough's CDA useful for investigating the materialist and hegemonic exploitation of the online public sphere.

⁴¹ see Figure 4: Communication among spheres

⁴² As explained in Section 3.1

4.7 Operationalisation of the Structural Level of Analysis

At the structural level, I employ archival research and critical discourse analysis to examine the compatibility of Twitter's construction of the Sheraton Move Twitter in fulfilling the emancipatory role of the media – equal access to all issues of public interest. Here, I examine the lure of deliberative agency (Dahlberg, 2007) afforded by Twitter and investigate the notions of access, power, and control within the Malaysian pseudo-democracy (Gomez, 2004) framework. From a theoretical standpoint, I echo Natalie Fenton's (2016, 2018) line of interrogation and ask if the public sphere theory sufficiently explains the Sheraton Move democratic crisis? Can a concept based on a Western liberal democratic frame, which in and by itself is problematic, provide a theoretically informed way forward? The Sheraton Move offers an opportunity to perform a case study analysis capturing Malaysians in the comfort zones of liberalism.

A closer examination of the structural elements witnessed in the reactions following the Sheraton Move, will allow a more concrete discussion of how what appears to be “contemporary democracy” (Papacharissi, 2010) or even “fake democracy” was appropriated and how it has been factored into “hindering emancipatory futures” for the Malaysians, particularly those on Twitter (Theocharis & Lowe, 2015). I intend to operationalise the structural level through the following research questions:

1. At the structural level, in which ways do frameworks of power appropriate democracy and how can this influence political communication on Twitter?
 - a. How do representations apparent on Twitter relate to wider frameworks of power and control?
 - b. How can we understand the manifestation, if any, of traditional forms of power and control, in both state and citizen centric contexts on Twitter?
 - c. What effects, if any, do frameworks of power and control have on the deliberations on Twitter?
 - d. In the context of what appears to be a contemporary form of democracy, what (new) forms of agency does, if any, usage of Twitter award to users?

Reactions in the form of tweets from 23rd February 2020 to 1st March 2020 was examined using a mixed-method approach. My intention here is to see how the notion of deliberative democracy was appropriated by both the state and proletariat. To accurately place Twitter within the Malaysian context, I began my investigation with the state-led, advent of internet technologies in Malaysia via the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) in 1996. I used archival research methods to study speeches, economic reports, and newspaper articles from that time. Next, big data analytics was used to study the network patterns. Finally, I conducted multiple in-depth interviews with users and policy makers to shed light on the phenomena observed in the methods mentioned earlier. Table 6 summarises how this level of analysis was approached. I then triangulated the findings to shed light on notions of media control, autonomy, and constitutional patriotism. In the following sections, this process is explained in detail.

RQ1: At the structural level, in which ways do frameworks of power appropriate democracy and how can this influence political communication on Twitter?			
Appropriation of democracy	Operationalised through	Archival research	Features
Malaysian democracy	Macro forces, MSC and Developmentalism agenda, linking military-banking-tech	Speeches National Budget Reports Newspaper articles Podcasts	Internet coverage, control/censorship, technology lobby
Citizen Centric	Liberal democratic elements	Quotes, democratic ideas, pictures of involvement, accounts followed, verified account	Call for action, to engage, participate, nature of accounts retweeted, nature of content shared, inclusion and equality
	Activism online and offline		Sharing of offline involvement.
	Portrayal of opposition	Account name, profile description openly criticising the opposition, pictures	Satire, undermining decisions made, nature of accounts retweeted, nature of content shared
State Centric	Media control	organisation website listed	most popular media, contains hard news, breaking news, type of news shared, call

RQ1: At the structural level, in which ways do frameworks of power appropriate democracy and how can this influence political communication on Twitter?			
Appropriation of democracy	Operationalised through	Archival research	Features
			to engage with content, nature of accounts retweeted, nature of content shared
	Autonomy from institutions, political and corporate powers	Owner disclosure, funding mechanisms, affiliations, inviting participation from readers,	Editorial autonomy

Table 6 Operationalisation of the Structural Level of Analysis

4.8 Operationalisation of the Representational Level of Analysis

The Sheraton Move provided an opportunity to observe and investigate various forms of representations mediated by Twitter. Discussions in Section 2.4 suggest that there is a contentious debate among scholars about what democratic representations mean. While political scientists say that representation conveys the grievances of the constituents, constitutional scholars lean on the ideals of democracy, the separation of powers, and the role of institutions in governing what Habermas calls “public interest above self-interest”⁴³. On the other hand, sociologists and media theorists argue that representations are about identity, nature of discourses, sets of relationships, and constructs of existing power relations in society. It is not my intention to pick the sides in these debates. Throughout my thesis, I argue that representations encompass not just those elements but often exist in hybrid forms of these conceptualisations given the added pervasive role of algorithms. In Section 2.4.4 a conceptual framework is proposed to better understand the representation that exist on Twitter.

As explained in Section 3.2, I approached this level of analysis using a spectrum to identify Twitter workings. Building on the structural factors of the previous level, I conceptualise representations in my thesis via the triad of democratic representations on

⁴³ see Section 2.1.1.3

Twitter. As discussed in Section 2.4.4, this triad forms a spectrum that encompasses issues of ‘produsage’⁴⁴, illusions of inclusion⁴⁵ and spectacles⁴⁶. This suggests that a tension exists between the far ends of the spectrum as various users decide how both interests and concerns are ‘mediated’ through Twitter (S. Young et al., 2007). To understand this tension, in addition to studying data analytics and content analysis, I interviewed those who feared that they have something to lose and those who seemed to benefit from this triad. While I am aware of the impediments to idealism being truly representative, I believe that “methods enact as much as investigate” social spaces (Taylor & Hamilton, 2014, p. 263). This section is an attempt to “recognise the centrality of the spectacle and the reality of representations” (Briziarelli & Armano, 2017, p. 166). Table 7 summarises how this level of analysis was approached.

At the representational level, what themes can be observed and how does mediatisation of public interest occur on Twitter?			
Construct	Operationalised through	Features on Profile Page	Features of Tweets
Produsage	Emphasizing the power of the common man	Quotes, democratic ideas, pictures of involvement, accounts followed	Public in interest above self-interest, most popular media, type of news shared, call to engage with content, nature of accounts retweeted, nature of content shared
	Advocating for people		
	Attacking the political elite		
Illusion of Inclusion	Information sharing strategy		
	Information seeking strategy		
Spectacles	Ostracizing others and identification of ‘the enemy.’		
	Invoking nationalist, racial and religious sentiments		

Table 7: Operationalisation of representational level of analysis.

⁴⁴ see Section 2.4.1

⁴⁵ see Section 2.4.2

⁴⁶ see Section 2.4.3

Societal users will be identified through the criteria (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013; Sue, 2016), as illustrated in Table 8:

Criteria	Indicators
A user who wrote the message with the top retweets.	Number of retweets
A user most widely followed by other users	Number of followers
An individual user, not an organisation or bot account	Self-disclosure in profile information
Recognised by media	Retweet or mentions by media or journalist accounts

Table 8 Societal user indicators

4.9 Operationalisation of the Interactional Level of Analysis

At this level of analysis, I examine the interaction in citizen enclaves on Twitter using the OSROR model explained in Section 2.5.7. This model avoids looking at political communication as something that occurs in a vacuum while embedding the principle of the “medium is the message”. Through CDA, I seek to study what Moshe (2020) calls “social negotiation” considering the frequent application of both legal and cultural controls to police expressions online. Tweets downloaded by NCapture provide a demographic analysis of these enclaves (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Meijer, 2015; Park & Kaye, 2017). While it may appear to be descriptive statistics on the onset, careful examination reveals enclaves that suggest the ‘orientation’ in which these communications occur. As established earlier, I view the Sheraton Move as a media event. ‘Deliberations’ within these enclaves in the form of tweets present several pieces of evidence for this suggestion. I used focus group discussions and in-depth interviews to examine users’ ‘perceived agency’ and ‘emancipatory potential’ in their use of Twitter. Table 9 summarises how this level of analysis was approached.

RQ4: Whether, how, and to what extent political communication occurs among political actors?			
Construct	Operationalised through	Features on Profile Page	Features of Tweets
Citizen Enclaves	Practices, Spaces, and Identities	Verified account, contact details, display of affiliations, header photo, the inclusion of a link to the organisation	Multiple overlapping spheres, positive self-representation, nature of accounts retweeted, nature of content shared
Deliberations	Knowledge	Education, professional role	Fact checks, empathy conversations, nature of accounts retweeted, nature of content shared
Perceived Agency	Inclusion	Followers profile, actively asking for ideas and questions	Polarisation, echo chambers, mini-publics, nature of accounts retweeted, nature of content shared
Emancipatory Potential	Trust	Verified account, contact details, affiliations, header photo	Disinformation, nature of accounts retweeted, nature of content shared

Table 9: Operationalisation of The Interactional Level Of Analysis

4.10 Summary

In this chapter, I presented the approaches and research design used to address the gaps identified in Section 3.3.2. As opposed to a homogenous approach, I used a mixed mode to operationalise my study's integrated conceptual framework (Semaan et al., 2014). I explained how FGDs, expert interviews, Nvivo, and Python were used to collect the data. Moreover, multiple data points were used to ensure the inclusion of insights from each tier of users (Jenkins, 2013, p. 53). I also explained the biases and validation techniques employed to ensure the robustness of the study. Ethical concerns were also addressed by considering questions about the usage of tweets that were publicly available data from private accounts.

I further elaborated on the rationale for dividing the discussion of my methodology into three phases. In the first phase, I explained the rationale of choosing a qualitative method

as the predominant approach in my thesis. In addition, I explained the steps taken to conduct the FGDs and the expert interviews. Here, I discuss the use of archival research. In the second phase, the quantitative methods used in my study were outlined. Although this was the secondary data collection method, I deemed it necessary, as I believe a study on Twitter would be incomplete without an analysis of digitally native data in the form of tweets, #hashtags, and @mentions. Quantitative methods were important for obtaining descriptive data that were used as inputs to conduct qualitative analysis.

In the third phase I present my application of Fairclough's CDA in my research. At this stage, my work focuses on the under-theorised 'critical' aspect of Twitter research, particularly in the context of Malaysian political communication. Fairclough's framework provided practicalities in approaching structural elements in my examination of Twitter political communication. I further elaborate on the use of the three stages as recommended by Fairclough: textual analysis, discursive analysis, and social practices. These stages allowed me to expand of my inquiry from linguistic analysis to an examination of discourses and social factors that included a consideration of ideological factors.

While the data collection was conducted in three phases, my discussion of findings was organised according to the integrated research framework. The interactional and representational levels of analysis used data primarily from both the qualitative and quantitative phases. On the other hand, my discussion at the structural level, almost entirely depended on data from the qualitative and CDA phases. My guiding principle in using data was its relevance in answering research questions, instead of a drive to achieve a balanced use of data. Although large volumes of data were collected, I omitted findings that were irrelevant in exploring the effects of Twitter on political communication.

Chapter 5: Findings & Discussion

This section is organised according to Peter Dahlgren's structural, representational, and interactional framework. Each section contains a recap of important definitions before the findings in the respective analytic phases are presented and discussed. My intention here is to present my findings and discuss the nuances of the emerging Malaysian public sphere on Twitter. As explained in Section 3.4, I began my analysis at the interaction level, followed by the representational and structural level.

5.1 Findings at the Interactional Level

Techno-determinist typically point to the 'success' in the interactional realm to sing praises of the deliberative potential of social media platforms like Twitter. The low entry barrier into the mass media environment is believed to be Twitter's accomplishment, particularly when viewed within the confined democratic space that exists in the Malaysian context. Nevertheless, my analysis of these 'emancipatory' notions at the interaction level presents mixed results. By triangulating my primary qualitative findings and secondary quantitative network analysis, I found several ways to interrogate the utopian associations of Twitter in awarding citizenry democratic agency. I tested the principles of the public sphere and examined whether this theory could be broadened and built upon to explain what was observed on Twitter during the Sheraton Move. In this section, I present and discuss the findings in answering the following, research questions⁴⁷:

RQ 1: At the interactional level, who and how are Malaysians using Twitter and to what extent are enclaved deliberations apparent on the platform?

RQ 1.1 What demographic attributes describe users (politicians, media, and societal users) on Twitter?

RQ 1.2 What are the hierarchies visible and its possible effects on political communication?

RQ 1.3 How do users choose to use their Twitter accounts?

⁴⁷ see Section 3.4

RQ 1.4 What form of user actions should be considered political communication (or participation) on Twitter?

RQ 1.5 To what extent do enclaved deliberations occur on Twitter?

5.1.1 Politicians

As identified in Section 2.2.2, most Malaysian studies have focused on the usage of by political leaders during elections. To address this gap, I expanded the scope of my study in two ways. First, I study politicians, the media, and citizens use of Twitter. Second, I focus my study on a non-electoral period and use the Sheraton Move as a case study. As a contribution of my study, I conducted an appraisal of members of parliament (MPs) on Twitter. I then looked at participation patterns of parliamentarians. Since my analysis was conducted in October 2021, politician affiliations and political coalitions have been volatile post Sheraton Move. Therefore, the data is presented in the form of individual political parties and not coalitions.

Although Twitter was founded in 2006, it was only taken seriously by politicians during the 13th General Election (GE) in 2013. This is evidenced by an increase from less than 1% of MPs on Twitter during the 12th GE in 2008 to 53.2% by the 13th GE and 63.2% in GE14. Further analysis revealed that 84.1% of Malaysian MPs joined Twitter outside the electoral periods. When aggregated in terms of coalitions, 7 parties, albeit with a small number of MPs, had a 100%⁴⁸ presence on Twitter. While PKR and DAP were typically associated with early internet and social media presence, newer⁴⁹, conservative⁵⁰, and even fringe⁵¹ parties eventually joined Twitter. Post GE-12 all political parties, apart from Parti Sarawak Bersatu (50%) and Gabungan Parti Sarawak (58.8%) showed a minimum of 77% presence on the platform. However, when the frequency of tweets was factored in, only MPs from PKR were the most active with 22.6% tweeting more than 20 times throughout the Sheraton Move. These were followed by MPs from UMNO (11.4%), AMANAH (9.1%) and DAP (8.6%).

⁴⁸ AMANAH – 11 MPs, MCA – 2 MPs, MIC – 1MP, PBRS – 1MP, PRS – 1MP, STAR – 1MP, and UPKO – 1MP

⁴⁹ AMANAH was founded in 2015, BERSATU in 2016

⁵⁰ PAS or Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party was founded in 1951 as a fundamental Islamist organization.

⁵¹ Mainly from Sabah and Sarawak: PBS, PBRS, SUPP, UPKO, PSB and STAR

As of the time of this analysis in October 2021, 85.5% or 189 of the 220 MPs were on Twitter. In terms of usage, 36.5% of Malaysian MPs tweeted at least once during the Sheraton Move. To put this percentage into perspective, a similar study of MPs from 5 European countries scored 77% and 73% for these factors, respectively (Devlin et al., 2020). This shows that, although Malaysian MPs are on par with the adoption of the platform, few are prolific users. In terms of demography, only 18 (9.5%) MPs, predominantly male, tweeted more than 20 times during the study period. All except one MP, had a minimum bachelor's degree, of which 61% studied abroad. The average age of the most active MPs on Twitter was 52.9 years, which was lower than the average age (55.9) of all Malaysian MPs (Parline, 2020). In this study, no significant relationship was found between MPs from urban constituencies and prolific Twitter use.

The usage of Twitter vernaculars such as #s and @s, was 20.6%. The most salient #s and @s used by MPs were: “#hidupbermaruah” by Syed Saddiq (BERSATU), “#kekalbersatu” by Mukriz Mahathir (BERSATU), “#PM8” by Azmin Ali (PKR), “#MuafakatNasional” by Zahid Hamidi (UMNO), “#MyPM” by Hannah Yeoh (DAP), “#114” by Saifuddin Nasution Ismail (PKR), “#kleptokrat” by Shamsul Iskandar (PKR) and Maria Chin (PKR), “#prayformalaysia” by Nga Kor Ming (DAP), “#BythepeopleForthepeopleTothepeople” by Bung Moktar (UMNO), “selamatkanmandat” by Mujahid Yusof (AMANAH), “#failed” by Sim Tze Tzin (PKR), “ourpm” by Khairuddin Aman Razali (PAS), and “#daulattuanku” Shahrizukir Nain Abd Kadir (PAS), “@drwanazizah” by Anwar Ibrahim (PKR), “@anwaribrahim” by Wan Azizah (PKR), and “@SyedSaddiq” by Khalid Samad (AMANAH) and Sim Chee Keong (DAP). Party affiliations in parentheses were as of February 2020.

A network analyst interviewed revealed that *“#s are not really prominent...word clouds do not contain #s. I found that drivers of #s are media and some influencers...#s in general does not play a big part in conversations...In addition, there is an apparent methodology limitation as Twitter limits # scrapping to one month, which means we are not able to extract historic data on #s.”* She also added that creating a hashtag in Malaysia's multi-

lingual environment is tough “...there is a language limitation since in Malaysia we speak many languages...”. She addressed media companies’ refusal to associate or amplify negative hashtags, “usually media does not pick up negative or improper #s such as #sibodohkaudengarsini, #kerajaangagal...maybe opposition government would”. She shared an additional impediment in analysing hashtags “...it is difficult to analyse policy related #s or tweets...because you need to know the context. For instance, a user unhappy with healthcare might just say #kerajaangagal...”

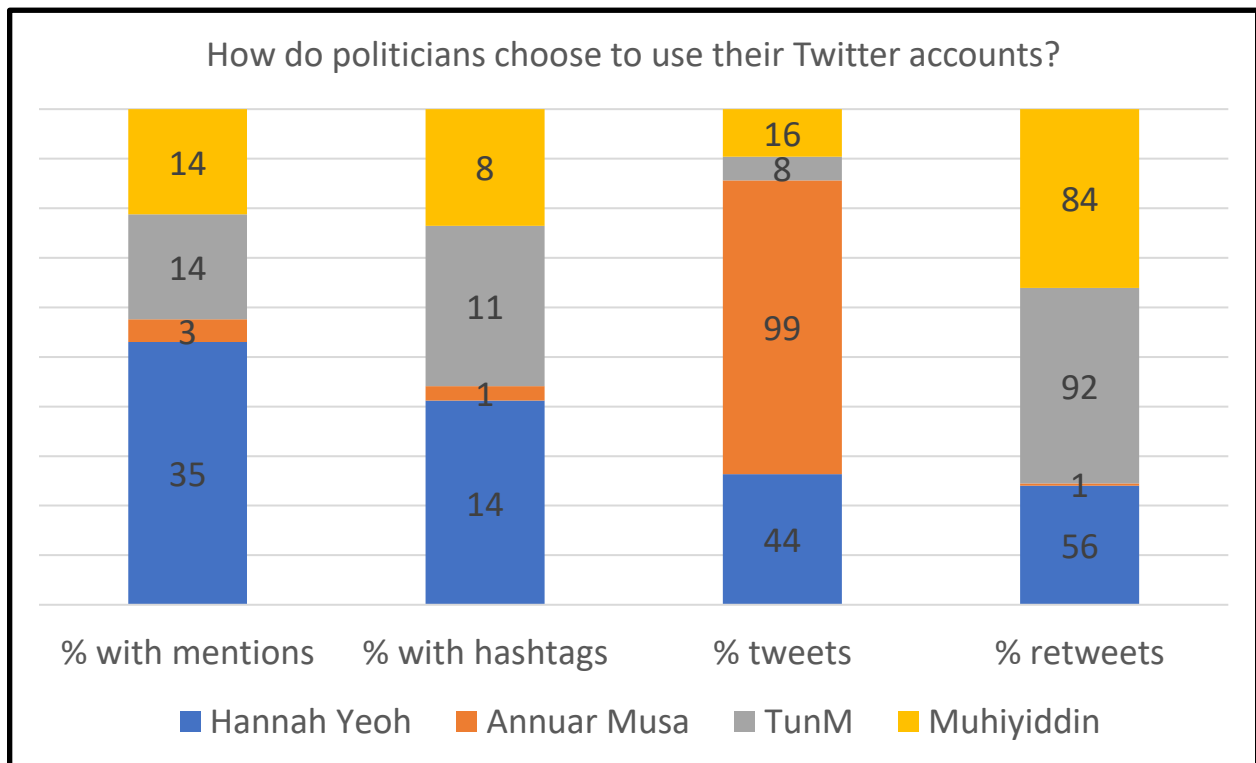


Figure 9: Twitter use among politicians.

Figure 9 shows the proportion of tweets and retweets in the corpus of *politician* tweets. As discussed in the previous chapter, tweets were downloaded while these politicians’ names were trending on Twitter. However, the downloaded tweets were not exclusively from the study period and could not be filtered out due to technical limitations. To overcome this, I used the ‘Advanced Search’ function on Twitter to extract tweets by politicians who were trending during the Sheraton Move. “Annuar Musa”, “Hannah Yeoh” and “chedetofficial” each produced 175, 29 and 8 tweets respectively. No results were

found for “MuhyiddinYassin” suggesting that nothing was tweeted out during the study period. This line-by-line, manual technique allowed for an examination of the Twitter strategy used by these three politicians. This analysis revealed that while all four politicians were trending: they were trending for various reasons. As explained in Section 2.6.6.1, politicians approach Twitter in two ways: through the broadcast-only model and reciprocal listening.

5.1.1.1 Annuar Musa

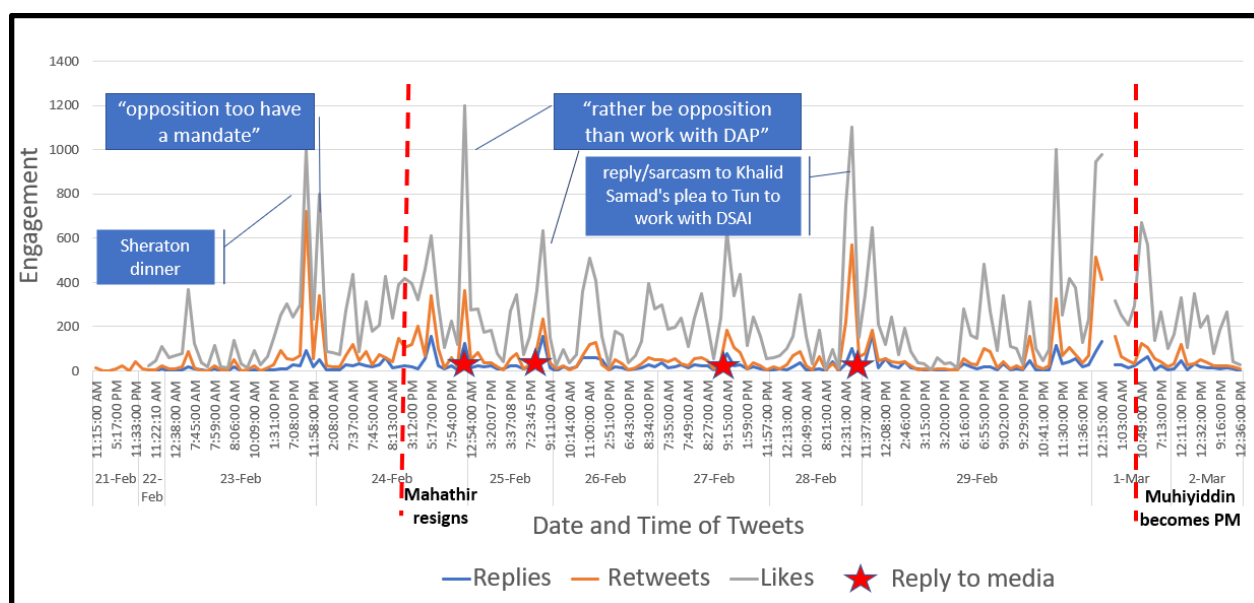


Figure 10: Annuar Musa's Twitter during the Sheraton Move

Twitter awarded “potential for motivated actors” such as Annuar Musa “to claim power” by giving the audience a narrative in a time of uncertainty in the form of frequent tweets (Papacharissi, 2015b). As Figure 10 illustrates, Annuar Musa believed that the flooding of information shaped people’s thinking. In fact, with an average of 22 tweets per day, Annuar Musa’s tweeting frequency mirrored that of Obama during his 2012 US re-election campaign (Conway et al., 2013). This is evidence that him trending was in fact self-instigated. The “Annuar Musa” corpus consisted of 3231 tweets from just 3 unique accounts. Apart from the three retweets, the rest were tweets by “Annuar Musa”. The 175 tweets during the Sheraton Move received 3987 replies.

There was evidence of ‘selective’ reciprocal listening, as he responded to only 22 of the 3987 replies. This ‘select’ few accounts had an average of 284727 followers, indicating a desire to amplify the influence of his tweets. “Annuar Musa” replied to 1 activist, 6 societal users, 7 media accounts, and 8 politicians. Most Annuar Musa’s responses were in the form of sarcasms and rebuttals to media reports, as evidenced by the highest score of average responses from those categories⁵². However, while he replied to politicians from opposing parties, he only responded to UMNO/BN-owned media outlets. Figure 10 shows that Annuar Musa gained 184 engagements from his interaction with oppositional users particularly from his jabs with activist and politicians. In comparison he received only 62 engagements from UMNO/BN users (see Appendix 7 for a list of tweets).

As mentioned earlier, @AnnuarMusa’s tweets were largely targeted at those from the opposite side of the political aisle. His usage of the platform suggests the exploitation of anxiety and polarisation that was rife during the Sheraton Move. As evident in Figure 11, Annuar Musa weaponised identity politics (Boler & Davis, 2021b, p. 6) by saying (translated from BM) “It is obvious how divided the Malays are...certain quarters (referring to DAP) are wolf in sheep clothing...”. In addition, tweets such as (translated from BM) “PH’s list of 114MPs are an attempt to fool and instigate the public. This is also a treason against the King. A police report should be lodged to in the interest of the public” Furthermore, in an attempt to appeal to the Malay speaking audience, Annuar Musa used idioms, metaphors, and similes such as “budaya kencing”, “mencurahkan petrol dan biarkan terbakar” “tak lari gunung dikejar”, “tidak bermoral dan mabuk kuasa”, and “lesung sama lesung berlaga, ayam yang kenyang” in his tweets. This figurative language is ‘untranslatable’ because ‘they are bound by the culture’ from which they originate (Lomas, 2018).

⁵² see Figure 10



Figure 11 Weaponization of identity politics "It is obvious how divided the Malays are...certain quarters are wolf in sheep clothing..."

At the onset, several tweets were found to damage DAP and PH. Tweets shown in Figure 12 indicates a strategy to instigate a phenomenon called anti-fandom (Jenkins, 2013). His tweets suggest that he sought to reach out to both party grassroots and supporters of opposing political parties and nudge users to not necessarily support PN but more to trigger doubt, hate, and portray the opposition as manipulative and destructive to the nation. Annuar Musa conveyed that it was incumbent upon him, as an elected official, to call them out for their in-fighting that caused the Sheraton Move. Several contoured tweets were produced, indicating that the opposition is not just undermining democracy by abusing the peoples mandate but disrespecting the royal institution by presenting their list of MPs after the King had made his decision to appoint the eighth prime minister (see Figure 13). Clearly, Annuar Musa provoked UMNO and BN supporters' emotions and incite their senses to view DAP and PH as enemies of the state.

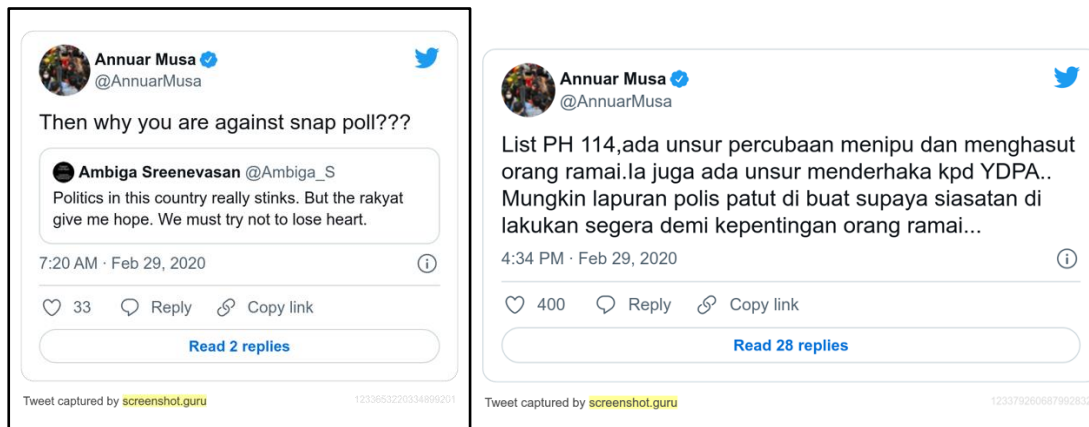


Figure 12: Anti-fandom tweets. “PH's list of 114MPs is an attempt to fool and instigate the public. It is also treason against the King. A police report should be lodged to in the interest of the public”.



Figure 13: Construction of the enemy on Twitter. “Done accompanying the leadership and representatives from several parties to the National Palace for an audience with the King in support of Tan Sri Muhyiddin...for the people and country, stop politicking, you are hurting the people...”

In canvassing his tweets on 29 February 2020, I found Annuar Musa juxtaposing himself with the enemy and allies (See Figure 14). For example, Annuar Musa thanked the media team for their tireless efforts, and even apologised for any inconvenience caused. Later that night, he retweeted a report by Malaysian Gazette, a pro UMNO online news portal,

about Anwar's bodyguard's scuffle with the media, even apologising on their behalf. In terms of his allies, a similar strategy, only in a positive light, was seen when Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) a party that "rules" Sarawak had announced their support for Tan Sri Muhyiddin. GPS support was clearly the deciding factor that sealed the win for Perikatan Nasional. Annuar Musa tweeted (translated from BM) "it has been more than a week since I had dinner with my family...having Laksa Sarawak tonight...I like Sarawak" (see Figure 14). I suggest that much of this is the "integral to populism" and should be seen in the wider framework of a populist strategy to "maintain social binaries", create "a common enemy" and ultimately "facilitate the consolidation of power by the ruling party" (S. Shah, 2019).



Figure 14 Juxtaposition of enemies and allies.

5.1.1.2 Hannah Yeoh

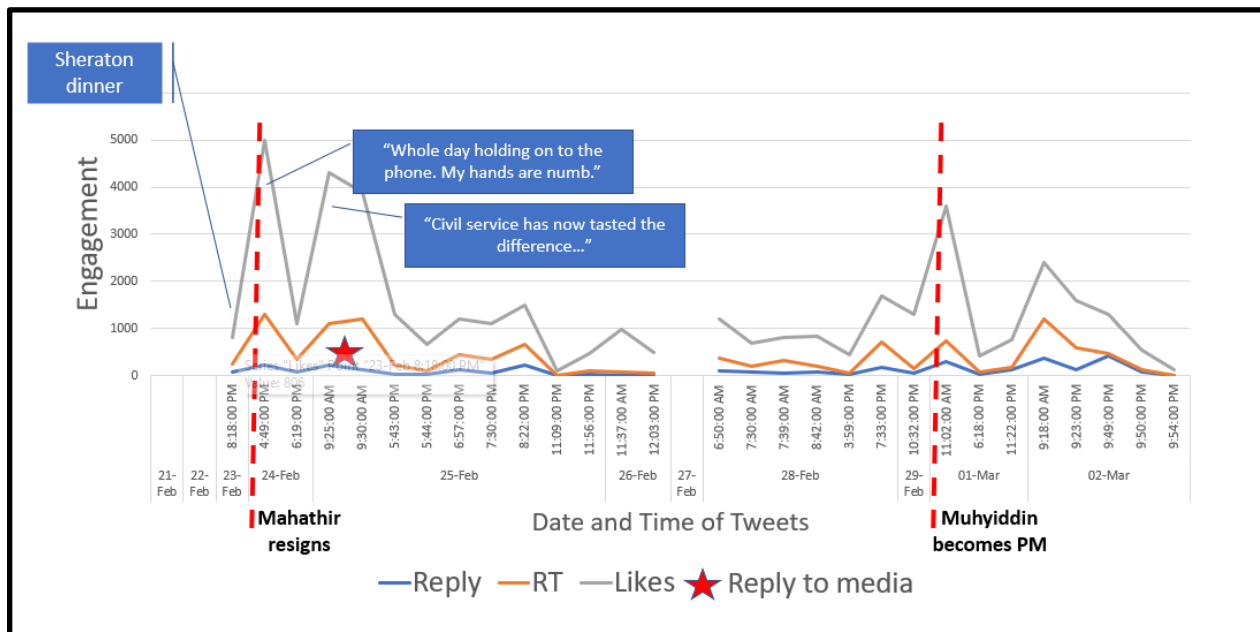


Figure 15: Hannah Yeoh's Twitter during the Sheraton Move

The Hannah Yeoh corpus comprised 2882 tweets from 400 unique accounts. 56% of the tweets in this corpus were retweets. Hannah Yeoh's trending could be attributed to the fact that this politician was already a prolific user even before being elected as a minister. Existing research suggest that Hannah Yeoh was experiencing "organic emergence" (Thelwall, 2014) or internal engagement generated by her followers. As illustrated in Figure 15, gaining an organic engagement audience such as the one witnessed on Hannah Yeoh's account, has been described as "too uncertain, too time consuming or even simply impossible" (Poell et al., 2022, p. 49). Nevertheless, this should be viewed within the context of Hannah Yeoh being an early adopter of Twitter (since June 2009) and producing an average of over 200 tweets per month. It could be argued that Hannah Yeoh's use of Twitter was due to the absence of both technological and legal barriers to media production on the platform (Wattam, 2013). Hannah Yeoh's account had almost double the amount of engagement from her own tweets and unlike Annuar Musa, she did not depend on reciprocal tweets⁵³.

⁵³ see Appendix 7

My analysis in the interactional level of analysis provides revealed the tacit complexity of how this ‘organic emergence’ holds up against key public sphere principles such as “equality of access, diversity, and freedom of speech” (Poell et al., 2022, p. 193). In terms of equal access and diversity, I examined the demographic patterns of Hannah Yeoh’s followers and found evidence of political homophily. Put differently, my findings suggest a resemblance to what scholars call an echo-chamber (Barberá et al., 2015b; Dubois & Blank, 2018; Flaxman et al., 2016). 71% of her followers identified a ‘professional affiliation’⁵⁴ compared to only 20% of users from the TunM and Muhyiddin datasets⁵⁵.



Figure 16: Politicians and media offer ‘front-row’ seats as events surrounding the Sheraton Move was unfolding.

Further evidence of ‘echo-chambers’ were observed when @HannahYeoh focused reciprocal tweets to the ‘favourable’ media. As mentioned above, while @AnnuarMusa

⁵⁴ Users identified in Twitter bio column as lawyer, advocate of women’s right, NGOs, director, CEO, COO, asst. professor, consultant, accountant, deputy dean, and ambassador.

⁵⁵ @AnnuarMusa’s dataset had too few unique users (n=2) for a meaningful user bio analysis

responded to the BN-friendly media, @HannahYeoh responded to PH-friendly media: @msianinsight, @mkini_bm, @bernamadotcom⁵⁶ and the parody news account @thetapirtimes (see Figure 16). Regardless of their ideological standing, central to Hannah Yeoh and Annuar Musa's interactions with the media were both political and value biases. One would assume that the advent of Twitter would have a levelling effect, and politicians could transcend ideological and ownership impediments and instead approach media in a more egalitarian way to reach the citizenry. Instead, in my analysis, I found a deeper and more fundamental fracture in the way media worked on social media platforms.

As discussed in Section 2.2, the media in Malaysia have always been highly partisan. Online media promised a greater ideological heterogeneity. Hence, politicians' power has always been associated with their presence in the media. In the context of social media, politicians on Twitter were able to 'respond' to media reporting, affording users 'front row seats' to politicians' reaction to media coverage regarding the Sheraton Move as it was unfolding (see Figure 16). Central to this discourse is the peeling of the façade revealing structural complexities that unless addressed systemically, political communication in Malaysia would continue to be polarised. Since I delve into this in the next section, it suffices to say that news accounts on Twitter resembled new channels trapped within the structures of old media.

Existing research suggest that "Twitter rewards argumentation" (Papacharissi, 2015a, p. 65). Twitter's algorithm is built to generate outrage and urgency, with network experts refereeing to argumentation as currency on social media platforms. I found evidence of this from several Hannah Yeoh's argumentative tweets produced between 27th and 28th February 2020. Clearly, the politician was in shock, and she conceded to defeat. As seen in Figure 17, her argumentative strategy involved calling the politicians that caused the collapse of the PH government as "traitors" and holding them responsible for the abrupt halt of several social safety net policies she had set in motion as the Deputy Minister of Women, Family and Community Development. In addition, Hannah Yeoh used sarcasm

⁵⁶ since PH was in power at that time

in her rebuttals at @AnnuarMusa. The bipartite political climate that presented itself post Sheraton Move was organised through the binary lens of winners or losers, and invited emotional responses from even elite users. Twitter's algorithm is designed to 'deliver' such messages to users affiliated with the politician with surgical precision suggests the obliteration of traditional gatekeepers. A dichotomous political followership was apparent from the comments garnered by these argumentative posts that demonstrated the "emotional impact or affective" responses from users (Carole Cadwalladr in Boler & Davis, 2021a).



Figure 17 Argumentation on Twitter. (left) Hannah Yeoh calling MPs who defected 'traitors'. (right) Sarcasm towards Annuar Musa.

Counter evidence to the problems Twitter poses in terms of the inclusiveness discussed above, my analyses suggest two forms of democratic potential. First, Twitter seems to provide a bottom-up flow of political communication. As during the Sheraton Move, comments from the citizenry were seen to apply tension to elite-dominated discussion on the platform (Sampedro, 2011). I offer an alternative argument to the Active Audience Theory notion that active does not equate to powerful. By distancing oneself from viewing democratic agency purely from a material standpoint and associating active conversations with dynamism and plurality, a new form of cultural power emerges. 'Active conversations' as illustrated by user comments as seen in Figure 18, seems to go against the "cultural dopes" (Morley, 1993) narrative. Rather, they appear to form cultural inertia by "playing on empathy" (Howard, 2020, p. 147).

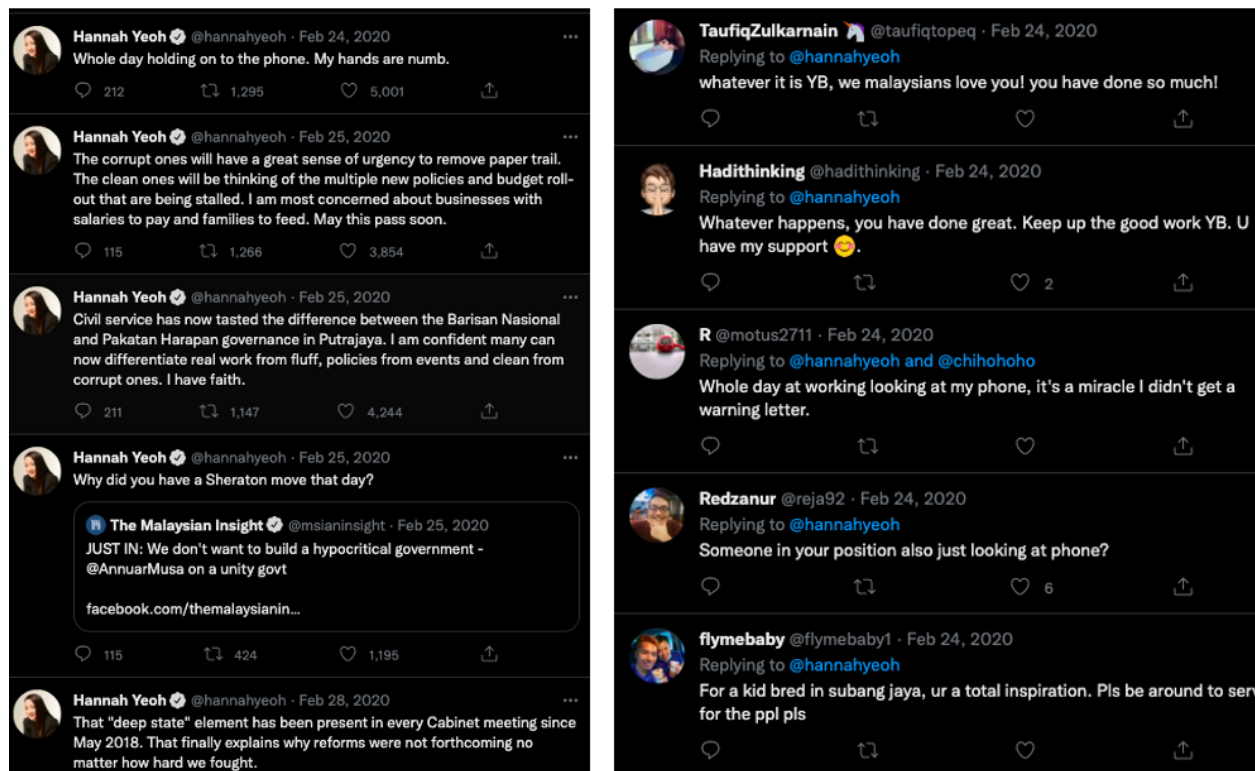


Figure 18: 'Active conversations' on Twitter.

Second, as discussed in Section 2.6.6.4, the concept of 'digital listening' may be useful in explaining why many users are listeners lurking on Twitter. These users do not leave any Twitter vernacular to evidence of their use of the platform but should be accounted for as users. Existing literature on Twitter, is dominated by research on user comments and retweets and ignores the more subtle view count in uploaded videos. Therefore, as a contribution of this study, I consider an embedded feature of posts as a form of engagement on Twitter; the view count of videos uploaded on the platform. Annuar Musa uploaded a video of an MP confessing allegiance to the Muhyiddin camp and a video of Tan Sri Muhyiddin, saying a prayer after receiving his appointment as the eighth Prime Minister of Malaysia. These videos obtained 27200 and 5036 views respectively. In contrast, @HannahYeoh shared a video of Dr Wan Azizah's farewell from the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. The video garnered 102,000 views.

Further analysis revealed that the ratio between the total engagement and video views was 1:16 for Annuar Musa and 1:65 for Hannah Yeoh. Put differently, users were four times more likely to reply, retweet, or like Annuar Musa's tweets than Hannah Yeoh's tweets. This possibly meant that Hannah Yeoh's tweets attracted more 'listeners' than Annuar Musa. Viewed from Marshall McLuhan's theorisation of 'hot' or 'cold' media and culture, it appears that Hannah Yeoh's tweets echoed a hot medium and 'high definition', so users did not have to 'fill in'. Furthermore, due to the 'high amount of information' in the tweets and video she shared, and the nature of her followers who were 'organic', the video posted could 'penetrate the audience'. Users may have acted as listeners because the video here was from The Malaysian Insight, which is a media account⁵⁷. Hence users were furnished with all relevant information and were not prompted to engage with the content further.

On the contrary, the video shared by Annuar Musa is better described as cool medium and 'low definition'. Since it was a video in portrait format and probably taken with a smart phone, by some who was at the table when the new prime minister was named by His Royal Highness the King of Malaysia. In addition, this video appeared to be an amateurish yet genuine attempt to provide users with a 'digital witness' experience⁵⁸. In addition, this video's caption was a prayer for thanksgiving a theocratic undertone. In terms of information, this tweet was vague, prompting viewers to 'concentrate', 'interpret meaning' and 'fill in the blanks' in the form of replies, retweets, and likes. For example, one user asked, "no plans to dissolve the parliament?". Some replied with "Amen" and "Alhamdulillah". Another user replied, "too early to celebrate". It could be argued that the uncertainty surrounding the Sheraton Move changed the temperature of Twitter to 'cool' prompting Annuar Musa's 'low definition' strategy on Twitter.

⁵⁷ see Figure 14

⁵⁸ see Figure 19



Figure 19 'Digital listening' on Twitter. Number of views on videos posted measures how many users have viewed the tweet without other leaving other explicit trace.

Every post was an attempt by these politicians to present their respective “social worlds” to their followers during the Sheraton Move. This implies that the ability to share videos, pictures, tweets, retweets, mentions, likes, and replies challenges existing notions of publicity. Posting of videos by politicians of key ongoing events during the Sheraton Move “challenged centralised and hierarchical” status of mainstream media. Production of political communication by way of “digital witnessing” (Howard, 2020, p. 89) are evidence that Twitter is a “complex site of interaction” (Pihlaja, 2014). Such proximity to ‘see’ political event as they are unfolding has been a predominant feature of elite privilege. Therefore, such a reorientation has been associated with the emancipatory potential of the societal sphere as it liberates the citizenry from shaping their reality through the singular lens of mass media productions (Boyd & Crawford, 2012; Dahlgren, 2016a). The differing positions presented by these politicians provided a context to shape the overarching themes of the discourses that followed as evident in the user comments (Pihlaja, 2014).

5.1.1.3 Mahathir

Even with only 8 tweets and no reciprocal Tweets, TunM was trending because of the huge volumes of users replying-to (4161), retweeting (86199) and liking (133653) the tweets produced. All posts from this account were copies of official press statements and demonstrated the account's broadcast-only purpose. The "TunM" corpus had the highest percentage of retweets (92%) from 1258 unique users. Likewise, of the 10442 tweets in the "Muhyiddin" corpus, 84% were retweets from 1010 unique accounts. Although these politicians were trending, their tweets and involvement on the platform had little to do with them. Instead, it was caused by the number of mentions of these politicians' names in the societal sphere during the Sheraton Move. Similar trends were observed for generic terms such as "Agong", "Malaysia" and "Sarawak".

In answering the research question: How do users (in this case politicians) choose to use their Twitter accounts? And what form of user action should be considered political communication (or participation) on Twitter? I conclude my exploration of politicians' use of Twitter during the Sheraton Move by investigating the Twitter activity of the 11 PKR politicians⁵⁹, referred to as the 'Azmin Camp' whose exit out of the ruling coalition and forming of an independent block caused the collapse of the PH government. Only 3 of the 11 tweeted between 23rd February and 2nd March 2020. Nevertheless, I was drawn to the fact that politicians who defected were communicating on a "mass personal" (Bratslavsky et al., 2020), and deliberative platforms such as Twitter.

While Twitter was seen as a platform that "enabled the citizenry to escape the mainstream media's confined reporting, observing politicians taking advantage of an interactive democratic media begged further analysis. It appears that the notion that state-controlled media (Weiss, 2011, 2013b) was a haven for such politicians was challenged. These media entities typically dominated the production of narratives and acted as the mouthpieces of the ruling elites (see section 2.6.6.2). Additionally, politicians were offered a mainstream audience that prioritised the "values, beliefs and codes of behaviour that

⁵⁹ Azmin Camp consists of Azmin Ali, Baru Bian, Zuraida Kamaruddin, Saifuddin Abdullah, Kamarudin Jaffar, Mansor Othman, Rashid Hasnon, Edmund Santhara Kumar, Ali Biju and Willie Mongin.

favoured institutional structures”. Challenging this notion was a handful of politicians, managing their publicity by defending the legitimacy of the abruptly formed government via messages on Twitter, thus breaking the traditional stranglehold of the mainstream media on journalism and vice versa.

A closer examination revealed that Azmin Ali, Saifuddin Abdullah and Rashid Hasnon produced 31 tweets with 36801 engagements⁶⁰, 11 tweets with 4543 engagements and 1 tweet with 8 engagements respectively. Interestingly, Ali Biju stopped using his initial Twitter account, @PKRSaratok created since July 2012 and opened a new account @AliBiju_me in July 2020. Ali Biju’s ‘rebranding’ indicates how his cyberspace identity transcended from the ideological (PKR) and geographical (Saratok) to a focus on the personal (Ali Biju) and national (my) (Thomas, 2019, p. 149). Rashid Hasnon’s only congratulatory tweet to the newly elected prime minister appeared to be banal as evidenced by the 8 engagements it garnered compared to the 41344 engagements received by Azmin Ali and Saifuddin Abdullah. Nevertheless, a closer examination of their tweets and ensuing engagements revealed three patterns and trends theorised as “socialisations, cultural discourses and self-representation strategies” (Caliandro & Gandini, 2016).

Patterns of socialisation emerged from the examination of comments by the citizenry considering the dramatic events that unfolded during the Sheraton Move. After the shock of the 11 MPs that left the Pakatan Harapan coalition, antagonistic cries of “Pengkhiran (traitor)” dominated the comments section of Azmin Ali and Saifuddin Abdullah. One user replied to Azmin Ali’s list of 11 “(you did not just betray your party; you betrayed all Malaysians) Kau bukan setakat khianat parti. Kau khianat seluruh rakyat Malaysia”. Another user replied to Saifuddin Abdullah’s post congratulating the 8th Prime Minister, “You truly have no shame. Congratulating an unelected PM and backdoor government. People will curse and swear every time they talk about integrity and uphold democracy. God knows the curses that’s going on in my head now and I am spitting at you”. Apart from that both politicians’ accounts were flooded with comments of users seeking

⁶⁰ Total of replies, retweets, and likes.

‘electoral’ vengeance such as “(You have been warned about the next general election. I will not forget what you have done) Pru15 jaga2 tau. Saya tak lupa tau apa yb dah buat”⁶¹.

Three theoretical frameworks are useful for contextualise these citizenry responses. First, anger and antagonistic comments from users of various walks of life is evidence of “will-formation and plurality within the public sphere” (Gimmler, 2001). Secondly, the cries of users determined to vote out the politicians responsible in the next general election mirrors “formation of rational public opinion through which decision makers can be held accountable” while demonstrating “resistance against oppressive norms” (Dahlberg, 2004). Third, and more importantly, when viewed through the lens of Active Audience Theory, the equation of the power of the citizenry to “reinterpret meanings” with the political elites’ “power over the agenda” was “simply foolish” (Morley, 1993). Apparently, users were subsumed into Twitter since the platform provided what scholars call a “lived space” or “lifeworld” where they experienced spatial and ideological proximity to events surrounding the Sheraton Move. Comments were rife with feelings of “anxiety and anguish”. Despite the broad range of deliberative practices in their responses, this did not translate to any material agency (Moinuddin, 2019, p. 96). Ultimately, despite all the tweets and retweets, both politicians stood their ground, and continued to defend the Sheraton Move.

5.1.1.4 Azmin Ali

Azmin Ali used the more impersonal “informative” approach on Twitter during the Sheraton Move as he used his account largely to “diffuse information”. For example, Azmin Ali shared 5 press statements, that received 3,885 engagements on Twitter during the study period. In addition, in trying to counter the predominant narrative in the societal sphere calling him a “traitor”, Azmin Ali is seen developing an “alternative social imaginary and identity” by posting pictures of him with His Royal Highness the King of Malaysia. This suggests that he built on the popular narrative of prolonging the hegemony of the

⁶¹ Azmin Ali lost his parliamentary seat in the following general election. During GE14 Azmin, then a PKR candidate won with a 48,721 majority. In GE15 Azmin contested as a BERSATU candidate and lost. The PKR candidate won with a majority of 12,729 votes.

ruling elites. As discussed earlier, this was a similar strategy used by Annuar Musa to show proximity to the monarch.

To understand the predicament in which these politicians now found themselves, it helps to consider not only the volatile state of political coalitions⁶² but also the economic and social instability⁶³ that confronted the nation during the Sheraton Move. Faced with the need to transcend politics, Azmin Ali posted less often as a politician or with a sense that politicians were exempted from the circumstances that engulfed the nation. Rather, his posts were identical to political communication by the citizenry, with obvious traces of allegiance towards a political party, see Figure 20, but also with private sphere posts of them spending time with their family and friends, see Figure 21, and ranting about the economy. Another prominent feature of their attempt to appear beyond the political mirror of the societal sphere was evidenced by a burst of religious phrases, while espousing the monarch and referencing patronage to the just ousted Tun Mahathir, see Figure 22. Through my study, it appears that Twitter provided politicians with a platform for political revival (and survival) since they could transcend between the personal and the public. Nevertheless, the proliferation of comments as seen in Figure 23 shows that the outcome of this strategy was mixed, from flare-up chastisement to congratulatory comments.



Figure 20: Political communication by politician to show political allegiance.

⁶² due to the Sheraton Move

⁶³ due to the Covid-19 pandemic



Figure 21: Politicians' private sphere.



Figure 22: Reverence to royalty.

Additionally, as shown in Figure 23, Azmin Ali's presence on Twitter was absent "substantive context" as evidenced by his "empty" tweets engendered by "self-praise and acknowledgement" (Thimm et al., 2016, p. 214). Apparent from Azmin Ali's tweets was his strategy to present himself and his camp as saviours of Tun Mahathir's administration in retaliation of leaders' from Pakatan Harapan forcing Tun Mahathir to set a date to hand over the premiership to Anwar Ibrahim. Even though he pandered the citizenry for their resilience in facing the tumultuous political crisis, this public staging strategy was met with antagonism (See Figure 23) as the 'mini-public' that was his followers on Twitter at that point, were largely with him by virtue of his capacity as a co-founder and senior leader in PKR. His abrupt cross-over to oppose Pakatan Harapan was not well received.

Furthermore, Azmin Ali insisted that he represented an exclusive, independent bloc in parliament that supported reform and Tun Mahathir's decision to form a unity government to 'rescue' the nation from the power-hungry supporters of Anwar.

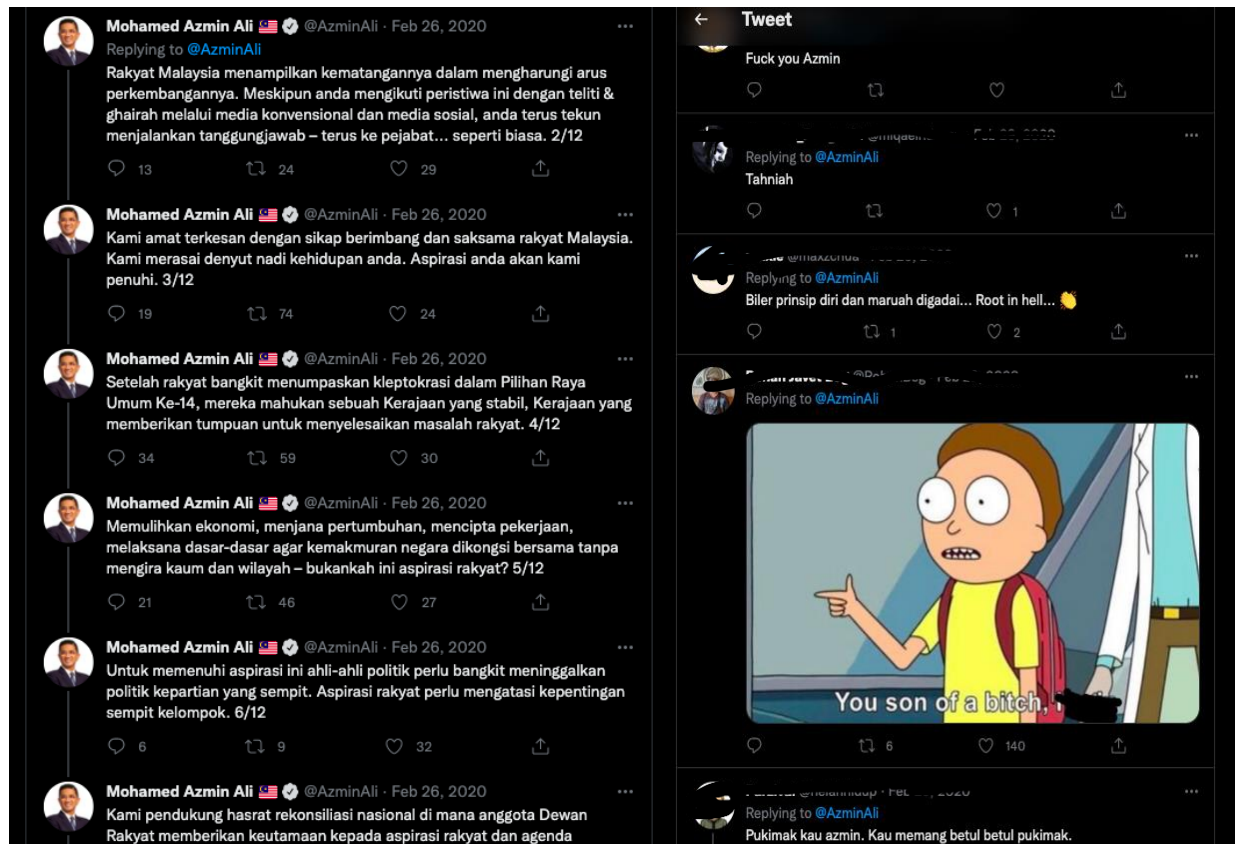


Figure 23: A thread of 'empty conversations' with the citizenry laden with 'self-praise and acknowledgements' (Left) and corresponding replies from followers (Right).

5.1.1.5 Saifuddin Abdullah

On the other hand, Saifuddin Abdullah's personalised, interactional approach was novel and contrary to the findings on politicians' use of Twitter, even in European countries where the use of Twitter is more mature. His interactional approach, albeit for only one day, was evidenced by Saifuddin Abdullah's use of Twitter to engage in direct conversations with societal users (Compagno, 2016b, p. 42). Over 80% of his tweets during the Sheraton Move were direct responses to other users. These users had an average of only 435 followers with little to no potential to amplify Saifuddin Abdullah's participation on Twitter, suggesting ingenuity and sincerity. By contrast, as discussed

above, the accounts that Annuar Musa replied to, had an average of 284,727 followers, an apparent attempt at amplification. Saifuddin Abdullah's usage of other Twitter vernaculars such as hashtags was minimal (1 - #measured), mentions (@chedetofficial – 7 times, and 3 mentions of the leadership of the Foreign Ministry).

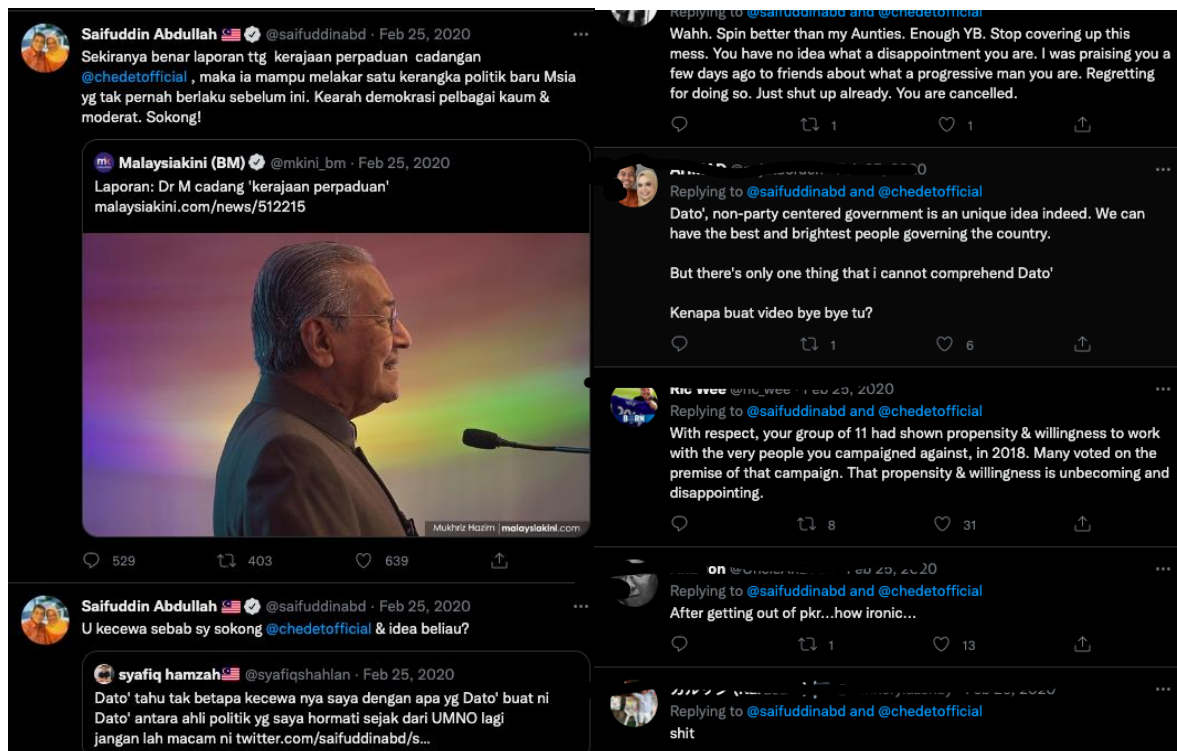


Figure 24: Political argumentation strategy in the form of conversations and discussions (Left). Users' antagonistic response (Right)

Saifuddin Abdullah's public staging strategy involved political argumentation (see Figure 24). As mentioned earlier, 80% of his tweets were in the form of conversations and discussions that centred around him defending his affiliation with the Azmin Ali camp and Mahathir's leadership. This was apparent when he used the @mention feature to tag Mahathir in 7 of his replies to the other users. Furthermore, he shared a Malaysiakini article titled (*Report: Dr Mahathir suggests unity government*) Laporan: Dr M cadang kerajaan perpaduan'. Technically using @mentions links both accounts and serves as a "conversational anchor" (Thimm et al., 2016, p. 214). By doing this, all Malayskini (BM) and Mahathir's followers would have been notified of the conversation. By implying an

association with Mahathir, Saifuddin Abdullah intended to dodge being labelled a ‘traitor’ to the Pakatan Harapan government. In addition, when viewed within the context of Saifuddin Abdullah’s political career, as a politician who has held a cabinet post since 2008 regardless of the ruling collision⁶⁴, he was a pragmatic opportunist with a broader mission of political survival and self-preservation.

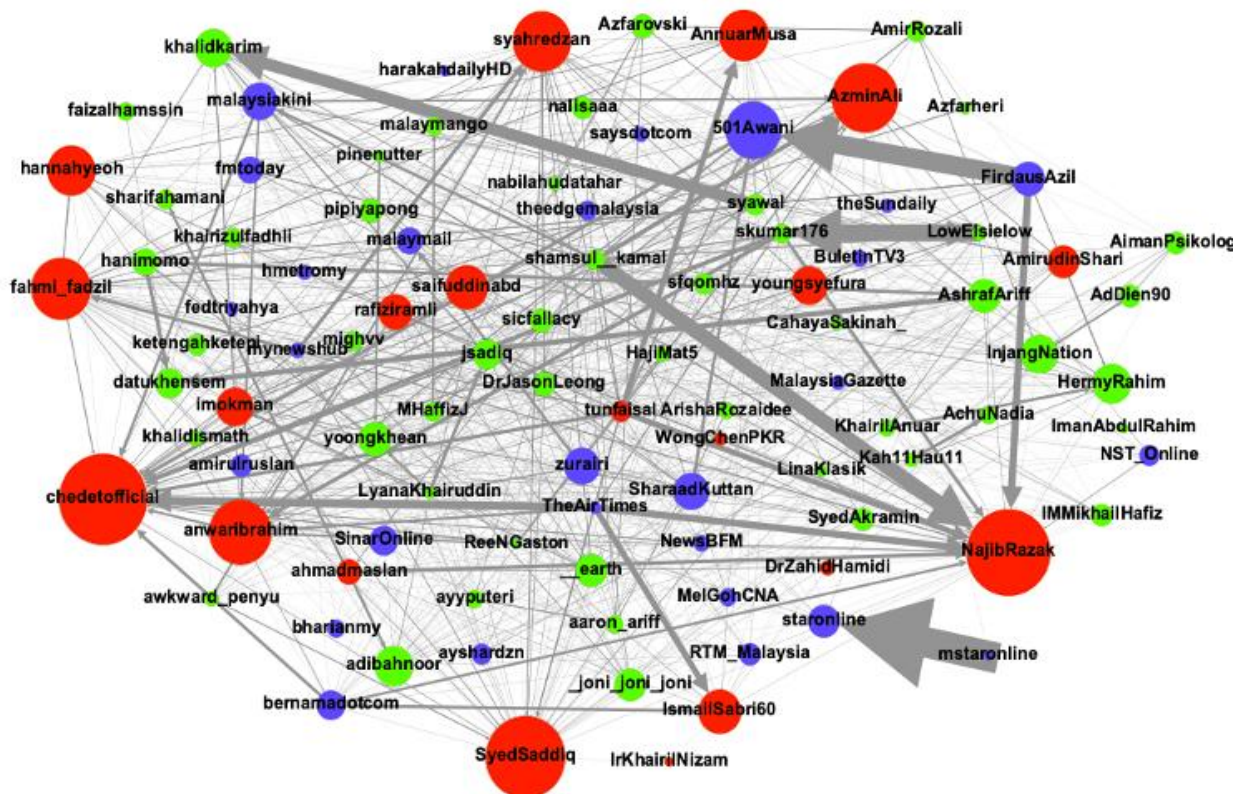


Figure 25: Communicational hierarchies on Twitter. Brin Node legend: Red = Politicians, Blue = Media, Green = Societal Users

One of the blind spots I observed in my analysis was Twitter’s interface which did not provide visualisations of the extent and volume of user interactions. This is something I intended to examine as it will answer the question of whether communicational hierarchies exist on Twitter, and if so, what were its possible effects? Using exchanges

⁶⁴ Saifuddin Abdullah is arguably the only politician who has held a cabinet position despite of the change in ruling coalition: 2008-2018 with Barisan Nasional as Deputy Minister of Entrepreneur and Deputy Minister of Higher Education, 2018-2020 with Pakatan Harapan as Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2020-2021 with Perikatan Nasional as Minister of Communications and Multimedia and 2021-2022 Minister of Foreign Affairs.

of @mentions from societal, media, and politician accounts, it was possible to visualise them as seen in Figure 25. The presentation of the network shows the social structures or hierarchies in existence. The arrows pointing toward and out of the nodes, demonstrate that politicians tend to be more densely connected to the network than to societal users.

Using this network analysis, I identified how Najib, and Mahathir dominated the mentions by both media and societal users. Nevertheless, they did not reciprocate, as indicated by the thin arrow pointing out of their nodes. On the other hand, Syed Saddiq, Fahmi Fadzil, Annuar Musa, Hannah Yeoh, Azmin Ali and Syahredzan had multiple arrows, albeit thin, pointing out of their nodes. Through this analysis, I was able to visualise how much these politicians used their Twitter presence to reach both media and societal users. Also visible from this analysis were two “bridging actors” (D’heer & Verdegem, 2017, p. 68) found to connect politicians to other politicians and media accounts. Both provided much needed centrality and reached the accounts they ‘bridged’ (see Figure 20). *The Air Times*, a media outlet associated with UMNO acted as a bridge between Najib, Ismail Sabri and Mahathir. In addition, Firdaus Azil, a journalist from Astro Awani, connected 501Awani with Najib.

5.1.1.6 Summary of Findings: Malaysian Politicians on Twitter

At this level, I present findings on how politicians used Twitter during the Sheraton Move. In this context, I found using a real-world political event as a case study relevant, because I was able to explore the composition of tweets laden with cues to “understand user behaviour, detect patterns, and identify generic approaches” (Kušen & Strembeck, 2017). I examined the patterns of tweets, retweets, mentions, and hashtags. As a contribution of this study, I have catalogued the demography of Malaysian politicians on Twitter. During the Sheraton Move, over 80% of parliamentarians were on Twitter and only 20% were active users. Prolific users were mostly male, younger, and foreign educated. The continuation of pre-social media practices such as posing proximity to the monarch and political elites, while upholding political affiliations went unchallenged. Put differently, the public sphere on Twitter was one with apparent hierarchies prompting inegalitarian outcomes for political communication on the platform (Hindman, 2009).

I locate Twitter strategies used by 6 politicians in their contrasting capacities. Annuar Musa and Azmin Ali allowed 'digital witnessing' to the citizenry through videos and photographs challenging traditional mainstream media's role. Even though Twitter afforded the same affordance to both politicians, Azmin Ali used a more "impersonal approach" while conversely, Saifuddin Abdullah leaned towards a more "personalised approach" of self-representation (Compagno, 2016b, p. 42). For Hannah Yeoh and Saifuddin Abdullah, personalised and argumentative tweets produced the most engagement. Mahathir and Muhyiddin used their accounts for 'broadcast only' and garnered the highest retweets. In this section, I found evidence that Twitter provided the ability to transcend between private and public whenever deemed necessary. Bridging actors were found to act favourably to strengthen the presence of politicians on the network. In the following section I present the findings on the presence of media on Twitter during the Sheraton Move.

5.1.2 Media(tisation?)

In this section, I present the findings from my research on media organisations on Twitter. My examination focuses on the underlying assumption that Twitter is aligned with egalitarian standards. To this end, I investigated the notion that Twitter affords "greater freedom and autonomy" and has "democratised broadcasting" news and information particularly for non-mainstream media organisations (Golding & Murdock, 1997; Stamenković, 2019). Is "participatory programming", an idea mooted almost three decades ago by Peter Golding and Graham Murdock (1997) finally a reality? On the onset, this 'democratisation' as existing literature suggest, has purportedly "expanded the power of (existing) media" by way of encroaching into the political realm; a phenomenon theorised as mediatisation (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999).

Therefore, using the Sheraton Move as a case study, my threefold objective here was to explain: the attributes of news media on Twitter, how news media use Twitter, and its possible effects (if any) on political communication. To this end, I draw from three data sources: transcripts of interviews with politicians, policymakers, executives of media organisations, and journalists, the activity of media accounts on Twitter and network

analysis diagrams. Two conventions were used to present the findings. First, the text in italics represent excerpts from interviews. Second, since the role of gender is not the focus of my research and to protect the confidentiality of respondents, pronouns in my report do not represent the actual person interviewed.

5.1.2.1 Attributes of Media on Twitter

The challenge of examining the attributes of Twitter media was felt from the onset, as I realised that there was no clear definition of the term. As discussed in previous sections, unlike social media platforms' predecessors such as print, radio, television, and the internet, scholars have found it difficult to determine the boundaries associated with platforms such as Twitter. Therefore, I used the term 'media' loosely because there is no agreement on what media exactly entails on Twitter. This concern was echoed by the two policymakers interviewed.

While asserting that regulation is not the only way to maintain a registry of media outlets, this participant said that *"we shouldn't regulate but certain guidelines (is needed) ...we should define what online media is about... If not...all kinds of media are gonna (sic: going to) come out (referring to self-production and 'news' accounts that cheery-pick news to make a certain politicians look good)".* This "intermediary" or "bridging" role of the media to "intervene and convey meaning" is likened the traditional role of media in the Malaysian society. The second policymaker cautioned about a more nefarious and sophisticated role seen particularly prevalent in the social media context: mediatisation. *"We need to define clearly what media is, for example the party organ (political party bulletins) or how to define mainstream, national, and local media...We have to clearly define, otherwise we may defeat our own purpose (to reduce political interference in media)".* Put differently these policymakers were concerned about the departure from a "sociological reconstruction of the public sphere" to the media's construction of a neo-liberal public sphere (Johns & Cheong, 2019).

In brief, their response foreshadows the larger phenomenon of "digital spatiality" and how it serves as a framework for analysing not just media practices on Twitter, but it appears

to augment political communication in the public sphere. Requests by participants to “define media” is evidence of how Twitter has challenged “of our sense of form, space and place” by shifting to exist in spaces, both material and cultural, that previously had clear “physical boundaries” to one that exists in the more blurred and permeated defined by “symbolic” delineations (Morley, 2007). Theorised as “digital spatiality”, the availability of media in “lived spaces” (Lefebvre, 1991) via smartphones etc. has suggested an augmentation to what we considered as media. Apart from its form, the participants spoke about the changing landscape of media ownership. One policymaker explained that *“despite certain particular individuals buying media outlets, it (media landscape) was no longer like before 9th of May (referring to the date PH won GE14).”*

These comments shed light on Twitter’s effects on political communication. In particular, the concept of the media is constructed in the Malaysian Twittersphere. While traditional media are concerned with being a legitimate source of information, these media outlets are concerned about maintaining a presence on the platform. I found that media accounts on Twitter challenged the established ‘distance’ from the societal tier by acting as informal mediators of political information (Prendergast & Quinn, 2020). The fact that the experts interviewed were unclear about what media meant on Twitter alluded to the blurring of boundaries between professional media and private public spheres. This adds a nuance to what is considered political communication.

In approaching an answer to the question of whether Twitter affords non-mainstream news organisations a level playing field, challenging the dominance of mainstream news providers, I appraised all news media related accounts from the downloaded datasets. From the 12507 accounts studied, I found 76 ‘media’ accounts. 73.6% of these accounts were “digital-only” news initiatives (D’heer & Verdegem, 2017, p. 64). While at the onset, this may appear to indicate “diversity in the democratic mediasphere” (Lewis et al., 2019), my examination⁶⁵ revealed patterns of ownership concentration. In total, 4 groups owned the top⁶⁶ 17 media accounts. This is an indication of the oligopolistic character of

⁶⁵ MARI ownership of media study

⁶⁶ In terms of followers. Each account had an average of 744,541 followers.

prominent media accounts on Twitter. Of the top accounts, 71% were owned by pro-UMNO/BN entities. An examination of non-mainstream news accounts characterised by the lowest number of followers⁶⁷ showed a similar pattern – dominant accounts in this tier appeared to be fringe media accounts affiliated with the 4 groups mentioned earlier. I believe that these accounts were formed partly as a response to counter independent, community, and alternative media such as @cilisos, @therakyatpost, and @thevibesnews. Table 10 summarises the findings:

Mainstream (average 744,541 followers)	Non-Mainstream (average 640 followers)	Owner/Affiliation
@bharianmy (Berita Harian) @malaymail	@newswav @sayseismik @ohbulan	Media Prima/ Syed Mokhtar (Tycoon)
@MsiaChronicle	@projekmm	Unclear/ Tian Chua (PKR)
@theedgemalaysia	@msianinsightcn	The Edge Communications Sdn Bhd/ Tan Sri Tong Kooi Ong (Tycoon)
@UMonline (Utusan Malaysia)	@malaysianewsmy @TMReserve	Media Mulia Sdn Bhd/ UMNO
@staronline	@mstaronline	MCA

Table 10: Media Accounts on Twitter

On the surface, these non-mainstream outlets appear to be independent of more prominent mainstream accounts. For example, in the case of @staronline and @mstaronline, no explicit mention was made of either account in their tweets during the Sheraton Move. However, the network analysis in Figure 26 reveals a strong connection between these two accounts. In addition, non-mainstream accounts were seen to fulfil their traditional role in disseminating news particularly by sharing hyperlinks to their websites. Once on the website, branding of the mainstream media was placed in prominent positions, completing the link between non-mainstream media, their parent organisations, and mass media politics. I find this mix of neo-liberal and participatory media strategies to be a prevailing feature of news media on Twitter. While they may seem contradictory at first, the fact that media on Twitter still has no coherent form,

⁶⁷ Average of 640 followers.

indicates that such confluence of propositions is expected to continue until media organisations are able to operate sustainably.

I conclude my discussion of media attributes on Twitter by presenting findings on the partisan nature of news media in Malaysia. This analysis that demonstrated the portioning was performed solely the follower-following relationship (see Figure 26). An analyst interviewed asserted that, “...when running community detection analysis using the Louvain algorithm...what’s really interesting...somehow (the algorithm) managed to perfectly partition politicians and media in two groups, without any additional coding...blue colour nodes representing pro-BN accounts and red nodes representing the opposing side”. Put differently, the dichotomy observed in the network analysis is evidence that political communication on Twitter follows the traditional fragments that exists in society. In the following section, I discuss the findings of my investigation in order to explain this apparent division.

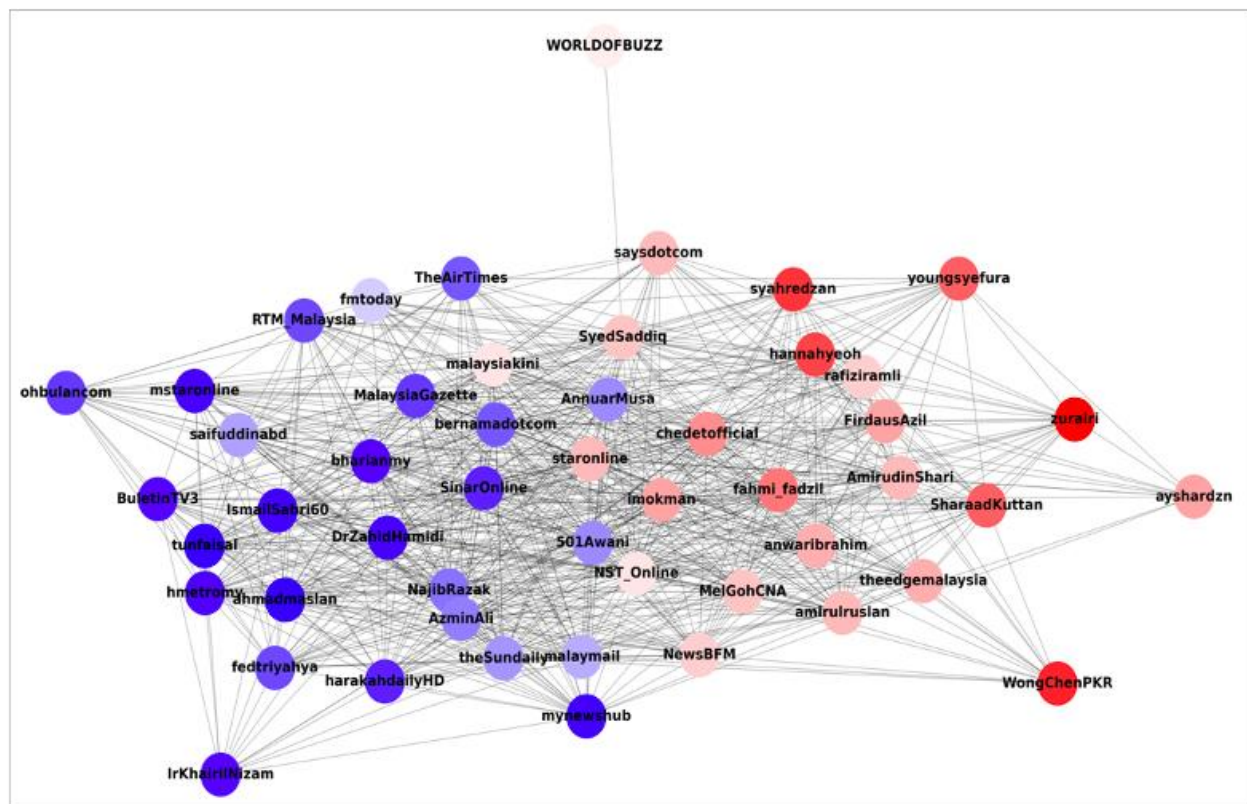


Figure 26 Dichotomy in the Malaysian Twittersphere

5.1.2.2 Media Practices on Twitter

Several participants who were part of the communications team for ministers of the Pakatan Harapan government spoke about how the media was ‘liberated’ from the political system. One who worked closely with Tun Mahathir affirmed the notion of media autonomy when he explained that *“The mandate I got from the then prime minister was, no one should be calling media, running these kind of stories in headlines, no one calls editors, none of those should happen. I can tell you for a matter of fact, I’ve not called a single newsroom over the 2-year period (during the PH rule) telling them what to publish...”* Apart from correcting factual errors, 2 policy makers said that ministers did not interfere with the editorial decisions during the PH rule, indicating that media was somewhat ‘emancipated’.

Another interviewee working in the inner circle of the then Minister of Communications and Multimedia said, *“about reaching out to editors or calling up editors...One thing is for sure that I can guarantee is that the minister’s office, we didn’t do that (feed narratives to the media)...as well, none... Gobind’s response (when asked by media agents) was to write the truth and be fair to all the parties.”* In this vein, one ex-minister interviewed provided insight into how media was approached. She affirmed that *“we just want the media to give a fair space, regardless of whether giving the fair space, fair portion of space to opposition or government. Just report it fairly, if you want to attack the government, they you should also request the government to reply...”*. Consequently, they recalled that, “RTM was the most trusted media in 2019” (Reuters, 2020).

Providing a counterargument to the exaltation of the free press by PH policymakers, was a prominent economist. She argues that this was an abrupt shift from the PH government. She asserted that allowing full autonomy to media organisations *“...could be possible...ONLY IF a democratic state with proper media oversight institutions which are autonomous (were in place) to keep an eye on the media and ensure the impartiality of the media with an independent editorial team.”* This key informant cited an example of an editor in chief of a national daily, *“was a running dog for BN”*. Put differently, for 60 years mainstream media in Malaysia up to 2018 served as a mouthpiece for the ruling

party. During this time, both journalist, editors and the media were “*controlled by politicians to boost their and their allies’ narrative and status*”. Another policymaker lamented that “*...my biggest worry is actually the rise of these portals which is inclined to individuals... they’re there not for a counternarrative but they are there for a certain (individual or party) agenda and narrative...*”.

Given these circumstances, I argue that the abrupt ‘freedom’ given during the course of the PH rule would have created a narrative vacuum. I argue that this void was swiftly filled by the pro-BN interests as evidenced in the previous section. However, in the absence of formidable institutions ensuring check and balance (as discussed in Section 2.3.3), the narrative in the media became politician and commercial driven, considering the market logic and algorithmic elements that underpin media organisations. One key informant explained:

“...EPF understands clearly that traditional media companies are no longer cash cows... Possibility of Syed Mokhtar realigning with UMNO...(name of media) is strongly aligned with (politician)...Cybertroopers play an important role when audiences (ie. middle class) do not subscribe to news media but obtain information from the headline and comments...Hard to know which individual's interest is being served unless links are able to be connected to the funder. New media are all owned by non-listed companies. A huge group of young people will enter the political arena soon (Undi-18). Could be game changers for the next election. Youngsters won't be reading newspapers but WhatsApp, TikTok, Twitter, or Facebook...The current political leaders are all looking into the new media...”

As explained earlier, mediatisation is characterised by how media logic dictates the form of political messaging. In this vein, I found further evidence to support the argument that platform algorithms posed an immediate threat to the emancipatory elements experienced by the media. The most prominent feature on Twitter was the ‘soundbite syndrome’ observed on news media accounts. This concept provides means of understanding the adoption of marketing, public relations and cinematic storytelling

practices in political communication. While existing literature has long established this link with previous communicative technologies, I find the dynamics of an artificial intelligence programmed to recognise 'soundbites' to determine whether an event, trend, or topic had news value unique to platforms such as Twitter. More importantly, network logics governs the dissemination of these messages to users with surgical precision.

One participant interview implied the 'soundbite syndrome' when he explained, "...*these online portals, they do misleading headlines sometimes, to make sexy headlines...clickbait so that their news goes viral. People don't read content...people just read headlines and they make assumptions...some news portals...it is obvious...when you look at the editors or individuals (behind it) ...so this is worrying...it is really a big challenge because people print screen headlines and they just share and the news end up going viral...because in newspapers and I think last time, everybody said news is about yesterday, today and tomorrow but I think with Twitter news is about what happened 1 hour ago, now and 1 hour later right..*"

To illustrate the 'soundbite syndrome' on Twitter, the following are selected tweets by both mainstream and non-mainstream media accounts on 24th February 2020, after Tun Mahathir tendered his resignation following the loss of support from parliamentarians. As seen in Table 11, the curation of both mainstream and non-mainstream news accounts included advertisements and celebrity news testament to their business model that diluted rational critical debates. Accounts owned by political parties, had hints of affiliations in the way events were covered. For example, @projekmm was affiliated with PKR and covered PH politicians prominently compared to others. Similarly, @bharian was pro-UMNO with tweets defending politicians that caused the collapse of PH. Bahasa Malaysia tweets had a higher number of celebrity news than English accounts. The language used resembled informal conversations, evidence that Twitter media saw users more as listeners instead of viewers.

<p>@bharianmy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Saya rayu kepada Dr Mahathir kekal sebagai PM – Anwar #BHnasional - Ali Puteh maafkan Aliff Syukri, enggan panjangkan kontroversi #BHhiburan - Kumpulan itu mendakwa pihak yang berusaha mengubah Perdana Menteri di tengah-tengah penggal adalah pengkhianat sebenar kerana mementingkan kuasa berbanding melaksanakan dasar kerajaan #BHnasional - Jamu ayam goreng kepada kira-kira 50 petugas media yang berkampung di luar pintu #BHnasional - Pendirian BERSATU keluar Pakatan Harapan adalah keputusan parti #BHPolitik
<p>@therakyatpost</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We heard it's really cheap to fly right now... #VacaywithAirAsiaX #AirAsiaXOkinawa #VisitMyJapan - It's a decent wage. Especially if they're in the government, too. (Just How Much Do Malaysian Parliamentarians Get Paid?) - Tun M & DSAI Status: It's Complicated - As of tonight, this is how it stands. #Malaysia #tomorrowidunno (infographic) - We'll keep an eye on the interesting things happening today
<p>@ohbulancom</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alamak banyak story nak kena catch up. Dahla data internet tak banyak! Jangan susah hati bertukarlah ke pelan yang menwarkan internet dengan data dan kelajuan tanpa had... #gx68 #xg38 #umobile - BERSATU, Azmin Ali & 10 Ahli Parlimen PKR Umum Keluar Pakatan Harapan - Tiada Pengumuman Kerajaan Baharu Dilakukan, Anwar Menghadap Agong Hari Ini - [FOTO] Sekitar Majlis Akikah Putera Sulung Anzalna Nasir, Macam Pengatin Baru! - Wanita ini Kongsi 15 Menu& Resepi Lengkap Untuk Turun Berat Badan, Yang Penting Semuanya Sedap
<p>@staronline</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cheerful Najib not giving statement after leaving UMNO-PAS meet - Some Azmin allies staying put in PKR - Ex-PKR members deny being traitors, claim 'conspiracy' against Dr M thwarted - Phew! Another eventful day in Malaysian politics. what will the morning bring? As always, we'll keep you posted. For now, it's goodnight, and stay tuned for more updates! - Dr Mahathir's surprises as PM4, PM7 and PM8
<p>@projekmm</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lepas LTTE, semak kes babit Isis – Syahredzan Johan - Terkejut letak jawatan, DAP mahu Dr Mahathir kekal PM - Selepas kematian Ashraf Sinclair, Aishah janji jaga BCL, Noah - Dr Mahathir letak jawatan, Dr Wan Azizah wanita pertama jadi PM? - Mana Dr Mahathir? Anwar cari sampai ke rumah

Table 11: Curation of news accounts on Twitter after Mahathir's resignation

Since my interviews took place in 2021, I asked my participants about the state of Malaysian media after the collapse of the Sheraton Move. One shared, that *“I still have friends in RTM now, where they’re back to the old days (referring to BN era.) RTM. They need to get approval from certain individuals or certain individuals are giving them narratives...which is very sad...”*. Explaining about journalist who were backed the PH agenda, whom she referred to as *“the good ones”*, she claimed that they *“have been kept in cold storage as they have been stigmatised as ‘you are a PH (supporter)’...”*. This issue pertains to a new production on Twitter in the sense of ‘agenda setting’ by the media. The power to control narratives on Twitter is concentrated particularly in news media related accounts (and politicians’ accounts as explored in the previous section). Evidence of the centrality of these accounts during the Sheraton Move is illustrated in the network analysis shown in Figure 27. Concomitantly, when advantage is concentrated in a particular user class, for example as seen in accounts such as @staronline, @NewsBFM, @SinarOnline, @MeiGohCNA, and @RTM_Malaysia, this tier becomes notably powerful. Power at this level is characterised by high a prevalence of follows, retweets, mentions, and replies, as reflected by centrality in the network analysis in Figure 27.

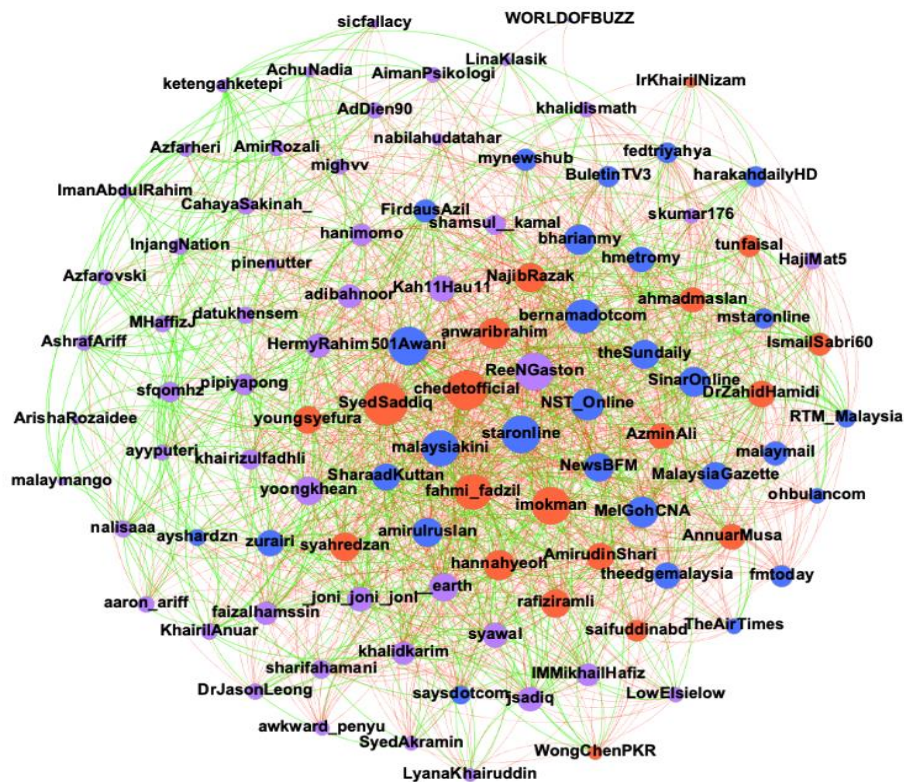


Figure 27: Centrality of News Media (blue nodes) Related Accounts on Twitter

5.1.2.3 Effects on Political Communication

I argue that the Sheraton Move expanded Twitter's political communication function for two reasons. First, the collapse of traditional political coalitions set in motion since GE14 meant that the citizenry was deprived of a familiar political scene, prompting them to rely on news media for information in times of political uncertainty. As explained in the previous section, users faced an entirely augmented media landscape; one characterised by dense partisanship made possible by direct communication with their followers. One interviewee brought to light intra-rivalry among political parties that was evident on their media outlets, *"...many outlets (refereeing to news accounts) coming from opposition who are killing off each other, exposing each other...It is both a struggle to survive politically and economically..."*. Another journalist, media activist and online media practitioner explained, *"...since the Sheraton Move, political parties are now reaching their audience directly, bypassing media altogether. For example, MUDA started their own news outlet..."*

Political parties turning to Clubhouse⁶⁸ or Twitter to spread their ideology and manifesto...Facebook Live sessions acting as mini-ceramah...DAP going onto TikTok...though the effectiveness is questionable...such is the influence of these platforms that politicians have shaped their approach to political communication according to the standards and format arbitrated by the platform itself...”

Second, in the absence of a government in power because of winning a clear majority in the general elections, Malaysia was posed with the legitimacy crisis of an administration disconnected from the electorate. During this time, the citizenry would heavily depend on media organisations and journalist for updates. The latter is a prominent feature of political communication on Twitter, compared to other social media platforms. Relevant to my exploration of this dependence, when media organisations were faced with operational, economic, and technological disruptions, is the notion that the Sheraton Move prompted a shift in the way political communication was carried out. Therefore, to investigate the democratic potential of this shift, I define media accounts as those that have (or imply) the word ‘news’ in the account name or bio. This examination revealed that media presence on Twitter was divided into two broad categories: organisations and journalists or other individuals affiliated with the media. Examples of these accounts are represented in Table 12.

Account	Description on Bio	Type
@AhmedNa23462227	Journalist working with News One TV, founder Parchar Islamabad.	journalist
@FNewsMalaysia	With the barrage of news that bombards us daily, F NEWS attempts to highlight the hottest headlines of the week. Here at F NEWS, we take our memes seriously.	organisations
@EzreenaNewsMPB	From Foreign Desk to National Politic Journalist & TV3 Newscaster, Malaysia	Individual affiliated with media

⁶⁸ Clubhouse is Twitter’s feature that allow users to participate in conversations real-time.

@nigelaw	Journalist with Malaysiakini. All views are my own. What happens in Twitterjaya stays in Twitterjaya.	journalist
@ Klchan3	Mouseketeer, news junkie, rambler. Views are strictly mine and mine alone.	Citizen journalist individual affiliated with media

Table 12: Media Presence on Twitter

I found this sudden reliance on a form of media, which as an industry by itself was facing unprecedented (economic) volatility, at a time of political uncertainty intriguing. A prominent political economist interviewed highlighted the fact that even huge fund managers avoided shares of media organisations. This was evidence that “mass media holds a privileged voice in the flow of information” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 165). On one hand, one interviewee argued that the challenge facing media organisations is not regulation stifling media freedom, but the “*falling revenue*” that forces the media to publish non-political content.

On a more fundamental level, he said that media organisations are undergoing shifts in the way “*they made money*”. Reiterating this point, one media company leader said, “*Revenue generating content is our no. 1 priority...Your content should be sponsored but...very few sponsors want political analysis... due to fear of backlash... As a result, online media are moving towards entertainment*”. I argue that this conundrum predicated on the Sheraton Move meant that media organisations was posed with an opportunity to change the way political reporting was done by capitalising on Twitter’s operating logic that was premised on ‘entertainment’ elements such as “proximity, conflict, drama and personalisation” (Caplan & Boyd, 2016).

In this vein, I present evidence of a political communication strategy inherent to Twitter’s market logic. As discussed in the earlier sections, I argue that Twitter is not a neutral platform. At its core, it is a capitalistic endeavour with algorithms that favour the amount of money to ‘boost’ content. This logic governs how political communication is shaped and performed by Twitter actors. Editors of online news portals interviewed agreed that this happens in two ways. First, various “*dummy accounts*” are created, “*to boost content*

on the site". Secondly, apart from alternative accounts, news sites also 'purchased' space and reach on the platform.

Metaphors such as 'cocaine', 'black hole' and 'hungry beast' were used to describe the nature of Twitter's algorithm. Another journalist interviewed explained that *"it's very easily hacked actually and for lots of media companies, that's their business model. The way to get your tweet amplified is by pushing it to as many influencers, genuine influencers and to people who have a lot of sorts of fake accounts which they, the term that they use is 'ternak', or breed these accounts. (For example) I'm one person, I have 10 accounts and they all look real...I've been breeding them for 10 years so they have a lot of followers...a company may have 100 people who have 100 accounts and that's how you amplify your tweet. So, when you see a trending topic, for me as a journalist, I have to check if it's someone genuine or if it's someone pushing it."*

One interviewee, who is the editor-in-chief of an online news portal, spoke about this phenomenon: *"...like boosted posts being cocaine right...So yeah, we used to snort a lot of cocaine (boosting) way back in the day (when the news portal was new). We've been boosting posts, since day one... We don't call it, you know, boosting, like we call it like seeding, we put about RM50 in, basically to hit a certain amount of people at first and then see how they, you know, take the story, do they share it more, do they whatever you know..."* Another interviewee further explained that, *"...if you boost an article, it actually becomes almost a quantum for you to boost the next article and the next article and next article in order to get more traffic... you have to keep throwing in money to a platform in order to get views...it becomes like a, almost like a black hole, that they're (the platform) just like a hungry beast that you have to keep feeding more and more and more..."*

One policymaker interviewed berated about the effects of the commercialisation of political communication on social media platforms. In particular, he was concerned about how 'new' media firms would eventually have to succumb to the consolidation of power in the hands of mainstream media and elite politicians. He asserted, *"I think when we were in government, there was a lot of concerns about this big giant tech*

firms...particularly on taxation issues... because I think they are not based in Malaysia, so they get away with tax... whereby our local Malaysia portals, they all need to pay tax in terms of the income they received...Twitter ads, Facebook ads, Google ads, and YouTube ads, they're really earning a lot of money and they are huge right? And then this definitely affects the income of the portal...ultimately portals or news media have no choice but to take funding from individuals. Once they take funding from individuals, they will have to take sides and then this will affect the entire content eventually."

In addition to locating the inner workings of the political economy of media accounts, I found that news was disseminated predominantly via hyperlinks in the tweets (Elmer et al., 2012, p. 36). While on the onset, this may seem mundane, Matthew Hindman (2009) insists that analysing hyperlinking patterns provide insight into "how the internet is (and is not) changing the political landscape" and is a "threat to internet's openness, because hyperlinks influence link structures important in shaping online political activity". As seen in the tweets downloaded during the Sheraton Move, media organisations, particularly mainstream media hyperlinks dominated tweets by both politicians and citizens. The chaos that followed the Sheraton Move highlighted the dominance of mainstream media. Although I found over 70 media accounts, the fact that network logics did not treat all media as equals was obvious and was counter to egalitarian notions surrounding social media platforms.

I found evidence that from over 70 active media accounts, 80% of the hyperlinks represented only 20% of the media accounts. Therefore, with increased visibility due to users who shared hyperlinks of mainstream media, more users were directed to these websites (see Figure 28). In addition, this feature is both visible and traceable. As if to form a virtuous cycle as far as these organisations are concerned, scholars associate this creation of more "paths" with increased traffic and ultimately advertising revenue (Hindman, 2009, p. 42). Interviewees provided insights into this practice and how it affected political communication on Twitter. First, a politician said that the spread of hyperlinks was an indication that "*online media is not necessarily an alternative one*

because there are so many different voices currently online so the online media can be very mainstream. For example, Malaysiakini is mainstream now”.

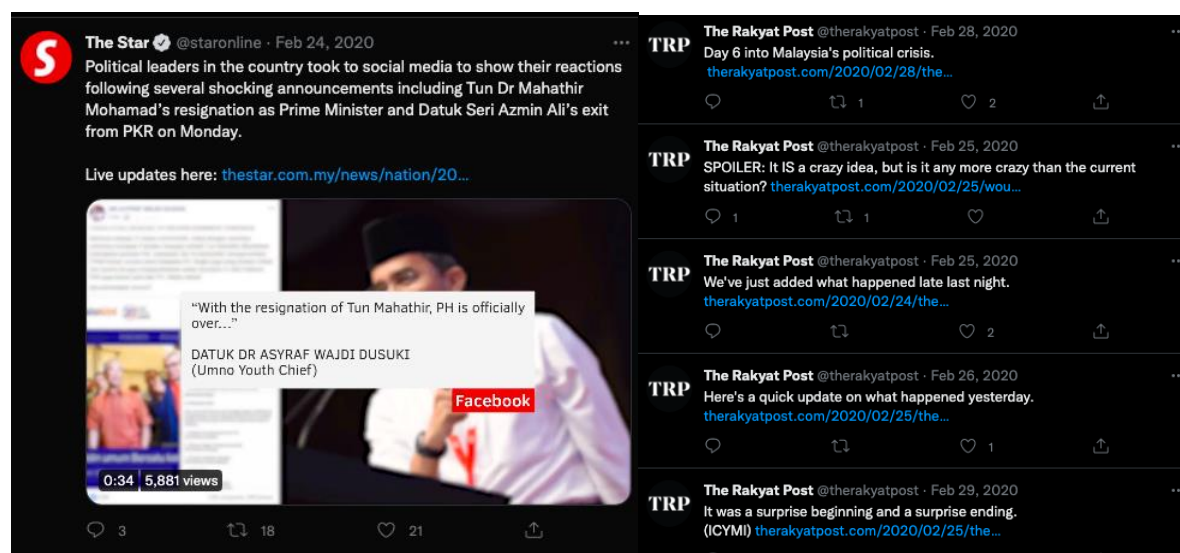


Figure 28: Mainstream and non-mainstream media accounts and hyperlinks.

She referred to an era in which online news was seen as divergent from mainstream media. Furthermore, in addition to news links, users opined about what the news article meant to them, providing news organisations instant feedback, and datapoints for user analysis. Albeit trivial and superficial, this was evidence of the state of openness and limited deliberative ‘power’ awarded to the non-mainstream media and the societal sphere. On the other hand, for the political elite, the spreading of hyperlinks posed an opportunity to control the narrative.

The politician I interviewed explained that “*(the political elite)* “use Bernama reports to update their news portals and their main purpose is to release certain news or analysis at the right time for the political leader in their favour... actually there are people grooming these news portals”. Another media advisor to a politician corroborated this claim when she explained that “*...all of us know how controlled press conferences are these days...*” eluding to the biggest void in Malaysian media whether mainstream or otherwise when she stressed that “*...it’s not a matter of media alone, it’s looking at the larger picture if we’ll be able to answer the most critical point of the country which is racial equality...*”.

This suggests that the public sphere on Twitter falls short of the criterion of freedom from political influence and rational-critical debates (see the discussion in Section 2.1.1).

In addition to media organisations, Twitter accounts of journalists and individuals⁶⁹ related to media were extracted. Consequently, 61 unique accounts were identified. These accounts were predominantly male (61%) and represented the national media (59%), mostly from AWANI (15%) and Media Prima (8%). 13% of these journalists were independent and posted links to their articles Twitter blogs. International journalists comprised 21% of the sample and were mostly from Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore. Journalists seemed to be selective, with tweets carrying @mentions of their news organisation. Evidently, this practice, as illustrated by the network analysis diagram, strengthened their organisation's presence and centrality.

⁶⁹ Profiles with words such as: journalist, ex-journalist, news junkie, live updates, correspondent, editor, anchor, presenter

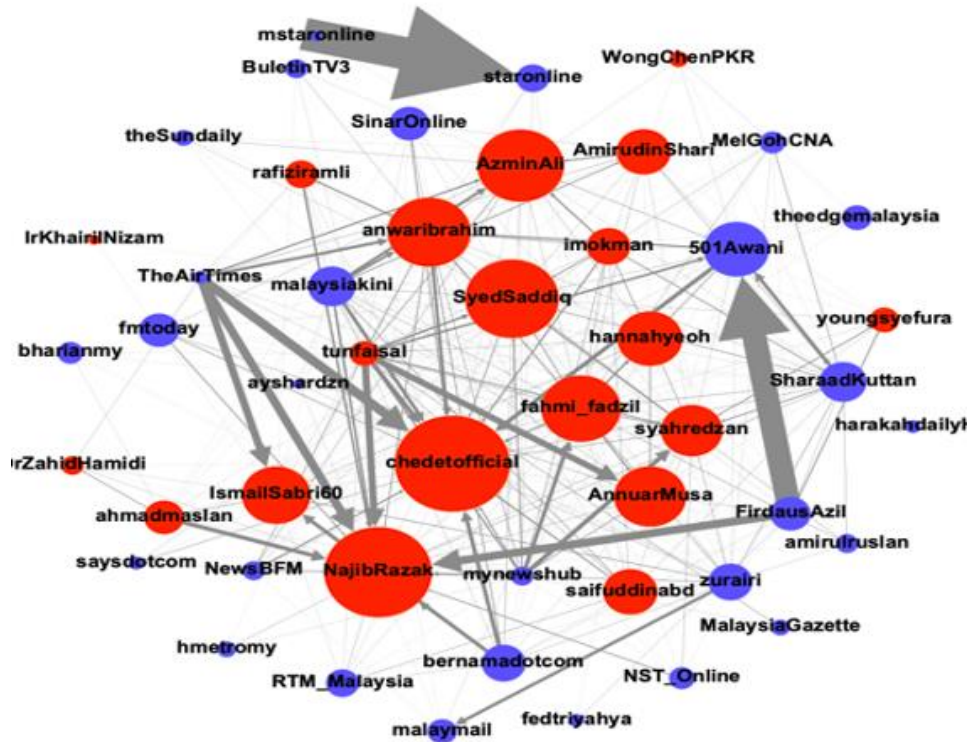


Figure 29: Community Detection on Twitter

As was the case with politicians (see discussion in Section 5.1.1), community detection algorithms divided both media and politicians into pro and anti BN dichotomy, as evidenced in Figure 29. In the case of journalists, @Zurairi, @SharaadKuttan, and @FirdausAzil, the organisation they represented appeared on opposing sides. In the case of journalists, @Zurairi, @SharaadKuttan, and @FirdausAzil, the organisation they represented appeared on opposing sides. Journalists were allowed such autonomy to hold alternative viewpoints, albeit not on the front page or primetime. They were afforded their own columns or shows in which they were allowed to prod powerful elites without fear of job security. However, empirically teasing out these complexities has been challenging. Therefore, explaining the divide between journalists and their affiliations is an important contribution of this study.

Journalists in Malaysia have long risked imprisonment and, red tapes, and have been subject to editorial discernment and self-censorship⁷⁰. Therefore, traces of journalist autonomy from the organisations they worked with, as evidenced in the network analysis suggest a liberating feature of Twitter. I use the term ‘autonomy’ here cautiously. Instead of drawing euphoric conclusions, I view this autonomous space through the lens of democratic enclaves (as explained in Section 2.5.7). Drawing on existing literature, journalists are encouraged to use their personal accounts (Lasorsa et al., 2012) to break stories as they happen (Graham et al., 2014). Such enclaves allow journalists to seamlessly transcend from private to public spheres on their Twitter accounts. As such, journalists act within their official roles to report news and then decouple from their employers (Figure 30), and act on their moral and ideological compasses when they tweet in their personal capacity.

⁷⁰ 2020 Report by Committee to Protect Journalist (CPJ)

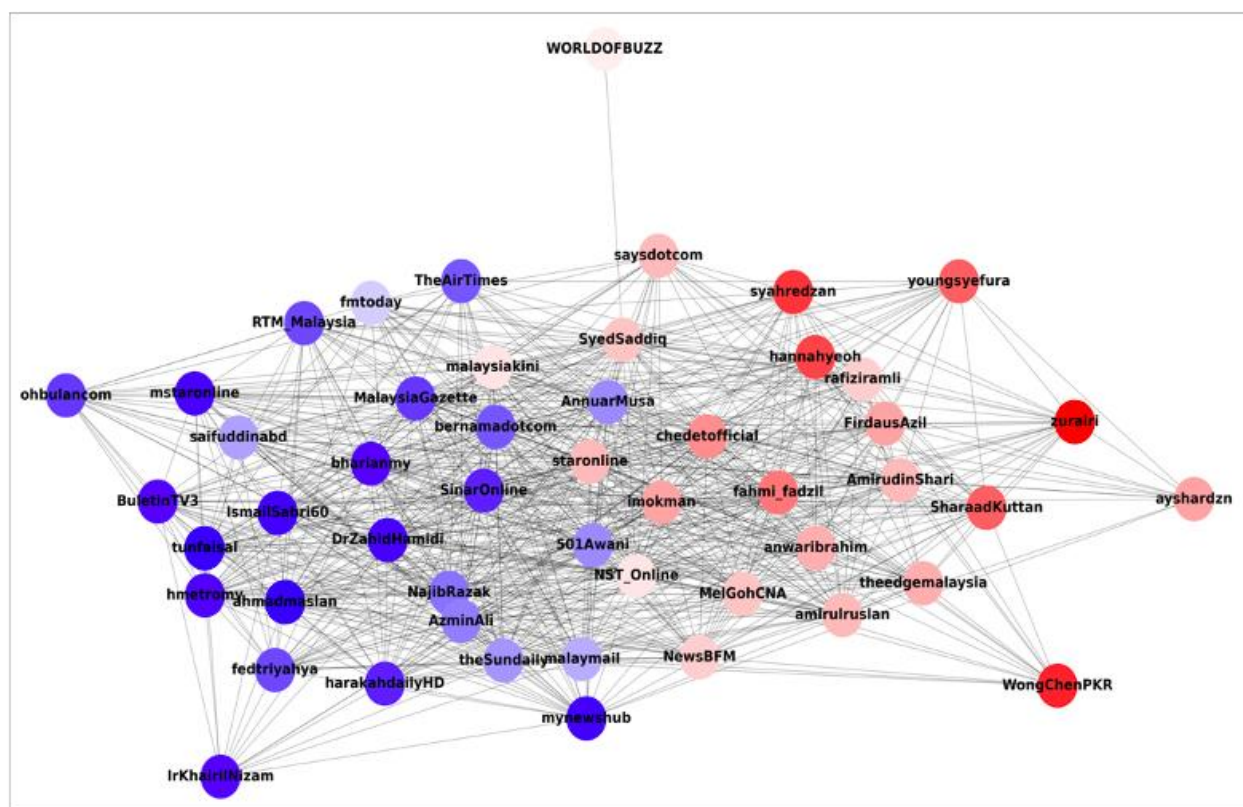


Figure 30: Network Centrality on Twitter

I conclude this section by presenting a view from an interviewee who was part of Mahathir's inner circle about how Twitter changed the way political communication, particularly the way political reporting was conducted by journalists. He asserted that *"journalists search accounts of users that are digging up (and exposing) leakage or inputs...they then point the question to the ministers if they are allowed to (however) all of us know how controlled press conferences these days (referring to the PH government) are."* Acknowledging and understanding such subtle ways in which citizen-journalist synergy impacts political communication is important in determining the democratic agency associated with Twitter usage. Evidence for this was found in the network analysis, as illustrated in Figure 30. Nodes representing journalists were situated at the centre of the network. Viewed in terms of the strength of the nodes, journalists are surrounded by citizens on the (weak) peripheries and mainstream media and politicians towards the (powerful) middle.

5.1.2.4 Summary of Findings: Malaysian Politicians on Twitter

In this section, I explore the findings that provide information about the attributes, practices, and effects related to media organisations and individuals affiliated with the media pertaining to their presence on Twitter. The absence of clear boundaries, and the concept of news media on Twitter were found to be vague. In terms of ownership, I found an oligopolistic pattern whereby over 80% of the news traffic on Twitter was concentrated in the whims and fancies of the 4 groups. Consequently, the predominant narrative in the media favoured the privileged few (Hindman, 2009). In cognisance of market and algorithmic logic, mainstream media organisations were seen to own non-mainstream accounts. Evidently, between neo-liberal and participatory values, the former was found to dominate media strategies, since the biggest challenge facing the media was not regulation curtailing their freedom but falling revenue.

In conclusion, media representatives lamented that in the case of online media, commercial concerns trumped traditional worries pertaining to freedom of speech. As a result, I found mediatisation practices such as the 'soundbite syndrome' which predicates entertainment elements over substance rife on Twitter. In this vein, media accounts were found to succumb to techniques such as dummy account creation or simply paying platforms to boost content. In my exploration of the democratic effects of Twitter, journalists were found to have shaped autonomous enclaves that enabled them to tweet in line with their moral compasses and ideologies while maintaining an opposing corporate affiliation. Finally, traces of citizen-journalist mini publics were found to form counter narratives, albeit in more of a cultural and not material way, constantly challenging the centrality of mainstream media in news production. In the following section, I turn to the societal sphere and focus on the users.

5.1.3 Societal Sphere

In this section I discuss the characteristics of citizen enclaves observed in the societal sphere as part of the contribution of this thesis is to provide empirical work of, at least in the contemporary sense, the public sphere in Malaysia. The existing literature discussed in Section 2.5.5, reveals that societal users are either active contributors or listeners.

Previous research has stated that these two groups use Twitter for different but complementary reasons. While the former is enthused to create and share content, the latter is dormant, and is on the platform to purely consume content. The dynamic between these two groups forms a citizen enclave as discussed in Section 2.5.7. Scholars call the community formed within these enclaves mini-publics, counter-publics, or refracted public. The findings discussed here are the result of data collected from both network analyses and focus group discussions with active contributors, journalists, and listeners. To appreciate the complexity and messiness of this sphere, I analysed data collected from several sources⁷¹ using different analytical techniques⁷², as explained in Chapter 4:.

As a result, several findings were obtained that explain not just the ‘who’, or ‘how many’ from this sphere. More importantly, I gathered insights that suggest a shift from just “hearing” to “active responses” and even possible “forming of communities” that seem to indicate an emerging online public sphere. In a broader sense, with these findings, I was able to explore seemingly “internal changes” within the sphere that point towards notions of emancipation and agency through the usage of Twitter (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 177). As a starting point, I summarise the profiles of the FGD participants. Subsequently, I discuss the findings from analysing a corpus of 11,278 unique Twitter accounts. I then sorted⁷³ these accounts according to the number of followers to identify the societal users. Using purposeful sampling techniques, 50 accounts were selected for the network analysis. All 50 users were invited to participate in the FGD. Despite efforts to have equal male and female participants, due to time constraints, I had to proceed with a sample of 9 male and 6 female participants. After several invitations via direct messaging on Twitter, emails, phone calls, and follow-ups, several users agreed to join the FGD, as summarised in Table 13.

⁷¹ tweets, focus group discussions and structured interviews

⁷² network analysis, word cloud analysis and content analysis

⁷³ Accounts of politicians, news organisations, businesses, NGOs, and groups were manually removed. Users from the lowest quartile of users with a minimum of 100 tweets during the study period were picked for this analysis.

	FGD 1	FGD 2
Participants (n=15, 9 male, 6 female):	n=8	n=7
Citizen Influencer	6 (3 female, 3 male)	1 (male)
Media Professional	1 (male)	4 (3 male, 1 female)
Societal User	1 (female)	2 (1 female, 1 male)
Median Age	28	37
Median No. of Followers	4909	1800
Median No. of Tweets	48050	17000
Joined Twitter:		
2008-2009 (n=8, 4 female, 4 male)	4	4
2010-2011 (n=2, 2 male)	1	1
2014-2016 (n=5, 3 male, 2 female)	3	2

Table 13: Demography of FGD Participants

15 Malaysian Twitter users participated in the FGD. As mentioned earlier, the FGD was held online due to Covid-19 movement restrictions. While I did not ask for specific occupational details, users were classified into three main categories: citizen influencers (47%), media professionals (33%), and societal users (20%). Two media professionals were journalist in mainstream media, while the rest were online content creators. In addition, two citizen influencers were associated with civil service organisations, working for migrants and women. One is a famous political blogger who participates in and organises Twitter clubhouse sessions. Others had 5000 to 17000 followers on Twitter. Finally societal users were those with the least number of followers but who used Twitter regularly. 5 of them admitted to looking at Twitter “*first thing in the morning*”. Correspondingly, participants were divided into two groups: one with citizen influencers and societal users and the other with media professionals. Nevertheless, due to the availability of participants and scheduling constraints during said dates, each group was mixed as reflected in Table 13.

Almost half (53%) of the FGD participants joined Twitter between 2008 to 2009 indicating that they were early adopters⁷⁴. 14% of the participants joined between 2010 and 2011. This is to say that, more than two thirds (10 of 15 users) have over 10 years of experience using Twitter. The remaining 33% had joined Twitter between 2014 and 2016. Therefore,

⁷⁴ Twitter was founded in 2006.

all participants had experience using Twitter during at least one general election and several by-elections during that period. In terms of political leaning, the participants indicated that they held liberal and progressive views. The general sentiment both from their tweets, and group discussions pointed to a clear resentment towards Najib and pro-BN cybertroopers. One participant had a profile picture of him with Mahathir. In addition to the thousands of invitations sent out, I specifically identified and invited additional 400 users with conservative, pro-BN and pro-Najib content for the FGD, but none responded. Therefore, the findings from FGDs are limited to representing the opinions of users with anti-Najib and anti-BN political orientations⁷⁵. This lack is addressed in Section 5.2.

A study of social media's influence during the BERSIH 2.0 rally in 2011, found that new media "furthered a surge in politicisation of young voters and critical, informed discourse...and does seem to expedite cleavage crossing, issue-orientated mobilisation...and stands to help shift the demographics of political participation significantly" (Weiss, 2013a). Prior to 2011, as presented in Section 1.3, scholars attributed the significant shift of election results to the proliferation of internet technologies, going insofar that "BN lost the internet war" during GE12. Against this understanding of the role of new media, I examine the role of Twitter during the Sheraton Move. Therefore, I broadly organise my findings from the FGD using the public sphere principles (inclusion and equality, autonomy from state and corporate power, positioning public opinion, affect, immediacy and knowledge and trust) introduced in Section 2.1.1.

5.1.3.1 Inclusion and Equality

Inclusiveness was saliently experienced by FGD participants. Most participants (7 of 15) explicitly perceived political communication on Twitter as "direct engagement". Particularly, 5 participants shared instances when they @mentioned politicians and police. One participant shared that one politician had even replied directly. It is important to note here that there was a clear sense of surprise, exhilaration, and admiration when the participant spoke about this incident, albeit once. Two participants addressed the

⁷⁵ Similar patterns were observed in a study of political communication during an election period in Korea. None of the Twitter users with conservative political views responded to interview invitations.

issue of equality when they asserted that Twitter provided a level playing field regardless of how they looked physically. They stressed that this was something that set Twitter apart from Facebook, Instagram or TikTok. According to them, other social media platforms were more visual, hence the added emphasis on outward appearance compared to the substance of discourse. In this vein, participants reported a sense of ease and felt that Twitter was a “*free space*” for “*people like them*”, explaining that “*sometimes you cannot say things you want to say to your family...so Twitter is the place I say my things*”.

The participants also shared two ways in which Twitter stifled inclusion and equality. First, FGD participants shared personal experiences that led them to believe that Twitter favoured users with more resources such as a production team and a large follower base due to professional affiliation. Moreover, they empathised with “deskilling” as Twitter required a new set of competencies, he was not familiar with to be relevant (Mueller, 2021). One disgruntled participant complained about “*how much energy*” was used “*to craft replies, content and viralise cool campaigns*” and lamented that “*not all of us have resources to do that*”. Secondly, a human rights activist, described how various non-profit organisations positioned their Twitter accounts within the context of their public relations efforts with no impact on the marginalised communities they posed to serve. This participant added that donors favoured organisations that “*do really good PR*” because “*people will see them as doing work*” as opposed to activists who were doing actual fieldwork. Furthermore, in terms of inclusion this activist stressed that “*in social justice and labour rights work, trade unions in Malaysia are not on Twitter and the migrant rights activists, I think 70%, 80% are from the old generation...they are not on Twitter*”.

In addition to the insights obtained from the FGD, several aspects of inclusion and equality can be derived from the network analysis presented in Figure 31. Centrality measurements quantitatively indicate the importance of accounts within a network (Alexandre et al., 2021). In studying the inner workings of the formation of mini publics, I found evidence that suggests a replication of offline structures that favour patriarchy and capital. This indicated a status quo for the state of ‘the forgotten man’ discussed in Section

suggested ways frameworks of power and control in existence since a non-digital era appropriate 'digital democracy' and influence political communication on Twitter. As observed in the notions of power and control remain rife within online communicative spheres. Participants were asked about their experiences in navigating the private and public spheres, particularly when the boundaries appeared to be blurred. Put differently, this section tackles the contentious debate about how the 'public relates to the state' (Simone, 2009) on Twitter. I found many instances in which participants reported asymmetrical experiences when describing autonomy on Twitter. In this vein, three themes emerged from the FGD: state control over Twitter, appropriation of the societal sphere by political elites, economic, and technological elites, and user autonomy.

State Control on Twitter

Here I report findings from my inquiry into the forms of state control on Twitter. I was careful not to lead participants to speak about such controls. Nonetheless, the FGD participants shared what looked like Foucauldian and Orwellian mechanisms of control. Similar themes were found in a study that investigated state controls on social media platforms experienced by Malaysian electoral reform activists in 2007 (Johns & Cheong, 2019). In fact, the findings were not limited to activities by 'cybertroopers'. Instead, FGD participants shared how they experienced control from sovereignty, politicians, and government institutions.

User experience of sovereign power

One participant said "*every time I attacked royalties, my account was hacked. (I know this because) I received authentication messages... (indicating that there were) sometimes up to 10 attempts to access my account... That is common-lah...*". Several participants shared their experiences of receiving backlash from the police and religious bodies. Another participant shared an experience of how he responded to a post by a royalty that contained a local song. This participant tweeted that the song was not applicable to royalties, since the lyrics were about the struggles of the commoners. "*benda ni mendapat perhatian daripada pihak Istana jugak tau* (this received the attention of Palace authorities)"

User experience of political elite power

One journalist recalled an experience in which there was no response to an official comment from the minister's office. When they went ahead with the story *"press secretaries like that so sometimes they would get nasty on me, against me, on Twitter or in private...you do get maybe ministers or politicians disputing your views."* *"actually, I kena tindakan saman oleh Menteri...I kena RM40 million... RM40 million! Dia menteri, dia saman seorang rakyat ni RM40 million... sebab pasal? Tweet! (I was sued by a minister for RM40million –for a tweet!)"*. In the case of political parties one participant shared how she was involved in a civil suit because of a Twitter post. She exclaimed that *"...juga bakal disaman daripada satu parti politik...khususnya sebab I keluarkan satu video yang mendedahkan mereka..."* (I will be sued by a political party soon due to a video I made exposing them)

User experience of government institution power

Evidence of the exertion of biopower was strongest when participants expressed dissenting opinion against royalties, discussed gender fluidity, or produced satirical tweets about politicians. One FGD share the following account when he was talking about producing Twitter posts regarding the wife of a politician and the royal family. *"A few of my tweets were reported to the police...my tweets were against Rosmah (Najib's wife) and royalty...my phone got confiscated...and they removed some tweets... they said they would return the phone in one week...I got back my phone a year later... dah tak boleh guna dah..phone tu sebab dia dah buka everything dalam dia (phone could not be used because it was dismantled)"* another participant shared an incident that took place during a live Twitter event hosted by an activist *"special branch (police) have called me... they're taking my phone tonight...I need to give all of... social media passwords and everything, for them to inspect...if I refuse, then I will be charged further"*

Apart from the police, religious authorities also imposed hegemony as is evident in this recollection. *"I would get tagged on Facebook when you know Islamist groups are taking issue to whatever I say. So, then you will get people attacking me on Facebook for*

something I said on Twitter”; “push back from authorities you know when they’re dissatisfied with our tweets...(that) portrays them negatively despite the accuracy or that they are disputing what we are reporting and call us fake news...”. One participant admitted to racial superiority when he stated that “I realize my privilege as, not only a Malay male of Muslim background, I know a lot of women, a lot of non-Malays, non-Muslims get it much much worse than I do”.

User Autonomy

Users reported that content moderation challenging notions of user autonomy on Twitter occurred in two ways. First, several FGD participants reported self-censoring their posts. This was largely due to self-cognizance in the interest of safeguarding employer policies and reputation. Participants reported that *“Twitter is not really a safe platform to an extent... you know what’s going on with (name of organisation) and the restrictions that they face. Even though you do wish to (openly) say certain things on Twitter, I really don’t expose myself much. I don’t even put my own face there...definitely not (using) my username...I try not to get viral... people can say ‘eh this person is from this (professional) background, how do they know this kind of stuff”*. One journalist said that *“I will wait until it goes out on (official portal) first because then there’s more credibility to it...you gotta (have to) disengage... since there will always be negative feedback...sometimes I have to care about the PR of my organization.”* One participant cautioned users with a large following saying *“if you think you have a big account, you should be mindful of what you’re saying, or else, you would be getting lawsuits”*.

Second, FGD participants experienced content moderation from the concerns external factors such as users’ families, fan groups, and their bosses. Several participants were asked to either remove or reword their tweets. One participant recalled questioning the price of art produced by local artists, saying it was possibly an attempt at money laundering. This participant’s wife asked him to remove that tweet and he obliged saying *“my wife is always right”*. Another participant received backlash from fans of a Korean Pop group saying the fans *“went batshit crazy”* when this participant claimed that *“...this is an attempt by (fast food company) to capitalize your loyalty to the group”* by charging

a premium for the same food items with packaging with this group's photos. Finally, one participant reported feeling "*intimidated*" because he was just an intern, when his boss who is a "*respectable figure*" asked that a tweet regarding his request for transparency for a crowd funding initiative be taken down.

Two novel forms of content moderation emerged in unpacking themes from the FGD. First, while top-down, or bottom-up controls are common, controls from within the societal sphere particularly from peer users are relatively novel. One participant had Twitter notified her that other users had reported her tweets criticising the royalty, exclaiming, "*Yes! Report... report... dia ada report tweet* (Yes, other users reported my tweets)". Similarly, one participant reported that, upon tweeting about transgender rights, he would receive so much backlash in the form of direct messages (DM) he "*would just stay off a couple of days until things die down*" and "*just turn them* (DM function) *off because there would be so much abuse coming in...*" from other users. Second, Twitter's algorithm automatically flags content that promotes violence (Esposito & Zollo, 2021), although in this user's case, he meant it as a joke. He recalls "*I got locked* (sic: out) *for 12 hours. I could not tweet; I could not retweet... umm... I could not even like uhh... any tweets, and the reason was because uhh... I think it was Muhyiddin's* (Malaysia's then Prime Minister) *birthday. Instead of wishing him Happy Birthday, I wished him a Happy Death Day*".

Appropriation of the Societal Sphere By Elites

Considering these findings, I observed "the conflation of social power with state power" (Paternek, 1987). This is evidenced in how the nature of censorship and content moderation has shifted from using the threat of legislation and authorities to being more psychologically normalised, resulting in peer-users acting as state agents. Lending from Foucault, Twitter affords these users "governable domains", in terms of public tweets in their timeline. Twitter's architecture includes functions for oversight (Henman, 2013). Apart from flagging content and reporting fellow users seen to be tweeting against the royal or political establishment, collectively these users, take the moral high-ground and take it upon themselves to rebuke dissenting tweets. As seen in the "Happy Death Day" tweet, Twitter's algorithm operates in the form of a virtual, artificial intelligence (AI)

powered panopticon, which removes any tweet deemed inappropriate, albeit wrongly in this case. At the time of this analysis, participants reported that Twitter's AI only removed English language tweets, while tweets in Bahasa Malaysia were only removed if another user reported it.

Participants also reported the appropriation of hashtags from the societal sphere by government and political parties. This scenario fits what Mustafa Anuar (2000) called the hijacking of peoples' genuine enthusiasm by institutional powers to morph procedures of institutional powers with society. Previous studies show that hashtags such as #KitaJagaKita are, in fact, an indication of ad-hoc publics (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). Therefore, when the government co-opted the hashtag, participants expressed remorse to the extent that *"founder (name) backed off from the hashtag"*. Another example was #RakyatGagal, *"...it was started by someone, not politically affiliated, it was basically a naive ignorant view of how the public has failed in adhering to the SOP, without addressing the systemic failures but it was later co-opted by pro-establishment and they use their accounts, their extra (followers)...to get that hashtag viral which inevitably made it a pro-establishment hashtag in the end..."* Conversely, one participant reported that *"...when we strategise the hashtags...dia akan berjaya bila kerajaan sabotage the hashtag (when we strategize hashtags, we consider it successful when the government sabotages the hashtag)"*. Apart from hashtags, one participant remembered when he tweeted about the role of the state's communication machinery, "all sides of political parties be it the conservative or the liberal side were trying to spin the thread to appeal to their interests".

In addition, participants reported dealings with cybertroopers or cytros. They reported that, *"cytros don't realise that their engagement is benefiting our tweets"* because *"engaging with that tweet, you'll (followers of cytro accounts) actually see it, even though you are not directly engaged with them"*. Participants explained that they would ultimately benefit in terms of reach when their hashtags were appropriated by actors on the platform. While such click-farming strategies are rife among commercial accounts, these insights support the adoption of similar practices by societal users.

In looking for new forms of resistance and liberation around user autonomy and agency, the participants' reactions were mixed. More than half of participants (9 of 15) experienced what (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 166) calls the “privatised model of power” and expressed liberation from “structural impediments”. They reported that while they received a backlash in the form of tweets, despite expressing dissenting views on Twitter, they never had their content removed. Evidence of this were seen in comments such as “*we have a voice and nobody can really contain it anymore to an extent*”, Twitter “*takes out the boundaries and formalities of interaction*” and has “*given everyone that power to voice out whatever you want*”. In the next section, subsuming broader notions of the agency of public opinion on Twitter, I analysed the politicisation of tweets and asked FGD participants about this contesting element of democracy.

5.1.3.3 Positioning Public Opinion – Politicisation of Tweets

As seen in Figure 32, even when compared with Twitter usage during GE14 and the declaration of the State of Emergency (Darurat) during the Covid-19 crisis, the Sheraton Move period revealed the highest rate of politicisation of tweets among societal users.

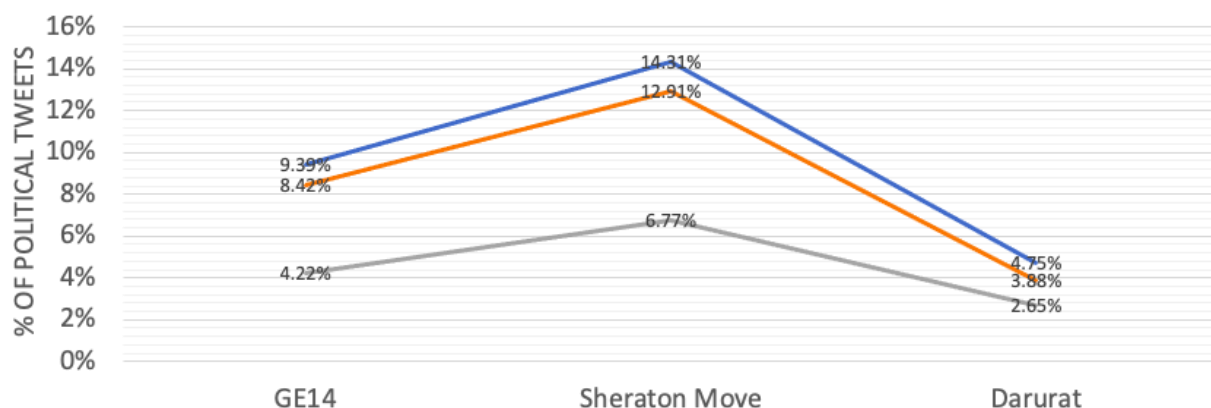


Figure 32: Politicisation of Tweets

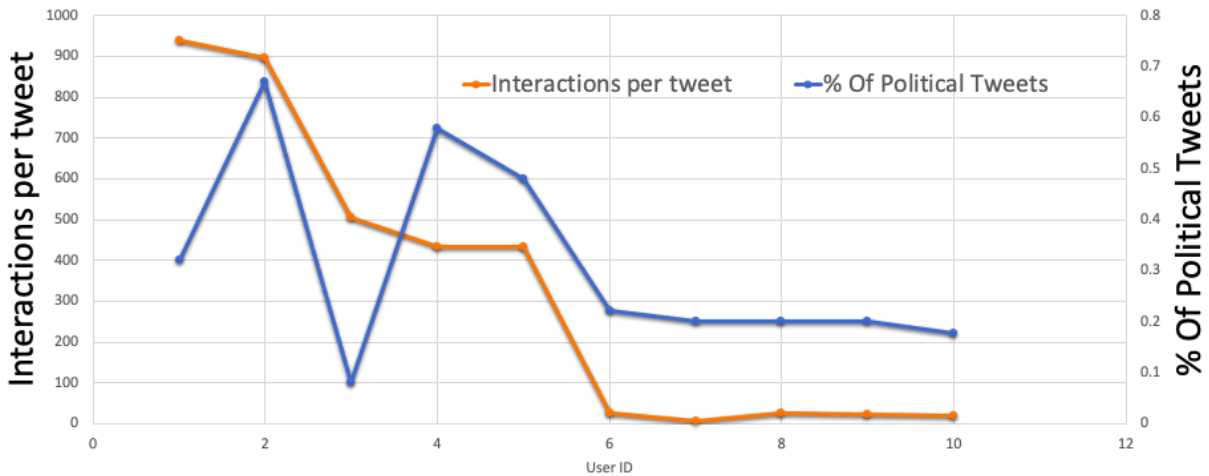


Figure 33: Audience Reaction to Political Tweets

Audience reactions illustrates how political tweets and interactions have an inverse relationship (see Figure 33). Users with the least to no political tweets managed to achieve the highest engagement. This pattern is uniquely observed in the societal sphere.

FGD participants revealed three ways that their deliberation on Twitter is central to their notion of democratic participation, particularly in expressing public opinion and the perceived agency thereof. First, participants claimed power over politicians. Upon receiving a huge backlash, one participant recalled that a politician had retracted his demeaning tweet about migrants. Participants spoke of what scholars described as boundary publics, ad-hoc publics, and hive communities. FGD participants description of the backlash mirrors that of a virtual mob whose actions are engendered by way of “iterative and ephemeral” tweets while occupying the politician’s Twittersverse with relevant hashtags and keywords (Jenkins, Green and Ford, 2013, p. 173). Apart from tweets, this ‘mob’ according to one participant is “*always monitoring for hashtags*”. One participant referred to this as the “*political and advocacy power of Twitter*”. In defence of these users, one participant argues that “*(what they are saying is representative of the majority of Malaysians, so they should not be prosecuted) apa yang mereka suarakan, apa yang mereka tweet itu sebenarnya mewakili sebahagian besar rakyat Malaysia*

ni...Jadi, tak sepatutnya orang-orang sebergini diancam dengan tindakan atatupun hukuman”.

Another way participants experienced agency was through the use of hashtags. Participants referred to hashtags as “*vessels to carry people’s voice or opinion*” while formulating “*disparate voices into an umbrella term...which then amplifies that traction*”. They witnessed non-hierarchal flows of communication and an upward mobility of views. When hashtags originating from the societal sphere, such as #KerajaanGagal and #pulangmengundi were adopted by political spheres. The third form of ‘power’ users experienced was the ability to scrutinise politicians’ private sphere. One participant reported that Twitter allows users to see accounts that politicians follow or like. While examining the accounts of one politician from a religious party, he found that this politician had followed and liked transgender pornographic Twitter accounts. Put differently, this feature was likened to a window into this politician’s attitudes and behaviours (Papacharissi, 2015a, p. 82). This participant asserted that “*(such individuals are still considered (religious) leaders. I will fight (this hypocrisy) to the end) orang macam ini masih lagi diangkat atau dianggap sebagai pemimpin, memang I akan lawan habis-habisan*”.

The second form of agency that the FGD participants revealed pertained to the principle of reflexivity discussed at length in Section 2.1.1. Several participants shared about ways Twitter allowed content to be tailored with surgical precision that they experienced what scholars call the “domestication of social institutions”. Therefore, I argue that participants have witnessed blurring of what constitutes private or public, allowing for the convergence of both spheres. To illustrate, one participant shared “*...I wake up to Twitter, sleep to Twitter...am a Twitter junkie*” and “*my full-time job requires me to constantly monitor media industries while being in contact with journalists, so I use Twitter...at the same time I tweet about environmental issues about Tasik Chini and Kuala Tembeling...they are retweeted many times... I think people are angry...so I try to (raise environmental awareness)...all environmental transgressions are usually caused by political and royal powers...*”. Here it is evident how this user navigates between their private, public, and

professional spheres on Twitter. Furthermore, it “points towards both a personalisation and de-professionalisation of political participation” (Svensson, 2011).

Also obvious during this process of deliberation was the emergence of a new style of political conversation amid the blurred distinction between interpersonal and mass communication. I argue that this positioning of public opinion by citizens directly toward the masses, is a relatively novel phenomenon in the Malaysian context, considering the problematic, obsolescent, singular, monopolistic and exclusion of conflicting point of views in the mainstream media. The ability for rational-critical or even dissenting discourse of issues are absent from the traditional state or commercial influence and control (Dahlberg, 2010; Glynn et al., 2018; McLuhan, 2013, p. 334).

Conversely, participants also felt confined by Twitter’s architecture. For example, Twitter’s asynchronous nature prompted one participant to complained that *“you cannot control who follows you, and what they reply or retweet”*. Furthermore, one female participant reported that when she tweeted about gender issues or women’s rights she would get *“a lot of patronising replies... then in the DMs, it might get a bit (sic: nastier) and you get sexual harassment and other things...”*. Two participants expressed a further decline in democratic potential. One participant asserted that *“...99% of the time, most of these interactions don’t materialize in any sort of understanding between one person and the other. When it comes to the internet...people already made up their mind on issues and they’re just looking for attention or looking for outrage or looking for like some cheap dunk to spend their time with...”*. One activist stressed that *“the civil society is weak, still backward in many aspects. What we are talking now today (in terms of human rights and freedom of expression), our friends in Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines were talking 30 years ago”*.

Third, expression of public opinion on Twitter depends on the iterative potential or ‘grabbability’ of a message. This appears to impede “the contestation of the discursive boundaries” of mainstream media (Dahlberg, 2007). Relevant here is my discussion of the notion of produsage in Section 2.4.1. FGD participants too, in this vein, provided

evidence of the complexities involved. For instance, one participant said that “good journalist manages to package those news...a poster design, there’s some catchy phrase... otherwise, no matter the critical the topic may be, it just doesn’t go viral and those kinds of things will go viral. But from the migrant rights movement, sadly it’s just not juicy enough”. When discussing this, an interesting exchange occurred between the FGD participants:

Participant 1: *#PembangkangLemah didn’t take off...as an activist who’s been following the scene for almost 20 years I strongly feel that there’s a core component in the failure of Malaysian democracy... you don’t have the check and balance just in your social advocacy...but I try to use #PembangkangGagal...it just didn’t take off...*

Participant 2: *No lah, it just cause it doesn’t roll off your tongue easily #PembangkangLemah. Not a very catchy one.*

Participant 3: *In order for a hashtag to become viral, it has to sort of cut through everyone. Because #KerajaanGagal, basically everyone feels the same so it’s easier for them to resonate with that hashtag. Whereas #PembangkangLemah it sort of needs your understanding, you need to understand how politics work and what check and balance and all that so it may be harder for people...*

In this exchange, it was evident that while one participant felt that the seriousness of the issue⁷⁶ would have appealed to the more politically aware prompting the hashtag to become viral. He looked at Twitter as a means of influence and expected his opinion to gain traction from what he saw as his social environment. Other participants responded that it was not the issue but the ‘grabbability’ of the hashtag and how it was important for hashtags to be easily understood and relatable to be able to gain traction. As evident in Figure 34, a relatively trivial post by a content specialist gained more than 20 times of retweets and 30 times of likes as compared to critical reporting by political journalists.

⁷⁶ failure of Malaysian democracy

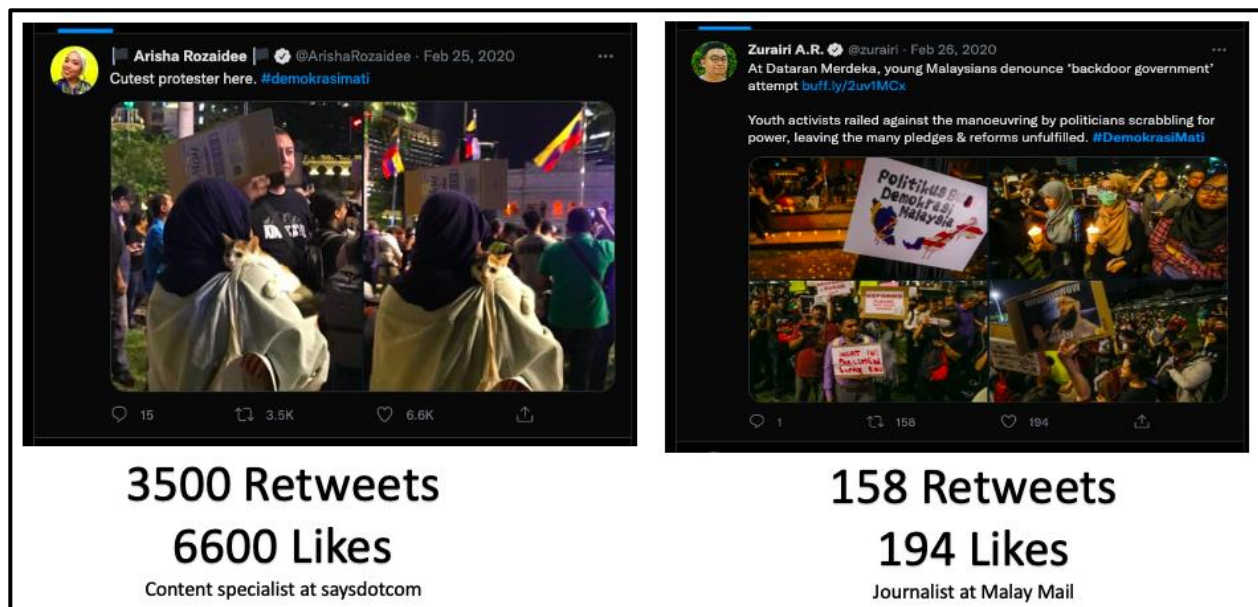


Figure 34: Grabbality of Tweets

5.1.3.4 Affect

One participant exclaimed that “*Twitter is a lot more closer to those who walk the corridors of power*”. To understand such comments in light of the emergence of political communication on Twitter, I use Zizi Papacharissi’s theory of affective publics as it provides relevant frameworks to understand what users experienced in terms of new political communication possibilities, and how these challenged underlying notions of the existence of a “quasi-democracy” in Malaysia. My analytic approach was heavily influenced by the theoretical lenses of affective publics introduced in Section 2.5.3. I based my analysis on the five principles, namely: storytelling structures of feeling, affective attunement, spontaneity, feeling of democracy and performative tendencies to analyse what FGD participants shared about their use of Twitter. I observed that I had clearly touched a nerve when asking participants about political engagement on Twitter as this section garnered lengthy responses from participants as they were eager to share what activity on Twitter meant to them.

First in terms of storytelling structures of feelings, Twitter users explain how they feel like their online political participation and online activism is organised around themselves. One user explained how Twitter was his choice because he wanted to avoid “*other*

mainstream social media (platforms)". Another asserted that "Twitter is better at curating. I like it for work because I get to see a variety of views based on who I follow and it's better at trying to gauge sentiments among a certain class...". As one participant succinctly put it, "makes you feel like 'oh yes I am part of this campaign...but you know, it doesn't necessarily mean that you go into the next stage of action...". One user admitted that "we all need a place for us to let off because sometimes you cannot say things you want to say to your family members. So you need a space to say what you want to say. So for me Twitter is the place I say my things.."

Another example of how Twitter has allowed affect or feelings to trump rationality is seen in this user's description of the platform, *"Umm... I don't know. Twitter is just a place for you to vent I think. For you to rant... my incoherent ramblings. It's like a one-sided kind of umm... you're talking alone, but sometimes people come and umm... come in and reply to your thoughts, and umm... I don't know. I don't take Twitter too seriously. I've been on Twitter for 11 years, I've had my ups and downs there but umm... I've met good people. I've met friends on Twitter...Twitter is just a place for me to vent off some steam. You just write what you want to write, sometimes you get a response, sometimes you don't...it's not a place that I'm looking for a lot of engagement. I just like to tweet, that's it. That's me".*

When this feeling of individual affect is compounded with other likeminded users a scenario called affective attunement is experienced. Twitter's algorithm allows for individuals with common interests and shared experiences to form collective identities. One participant shared that, *"Clubhouse and Twitter spaces and chatrooms on news and current affairs is the best way to reach out to people especially when we do not know their phone numbers or email address."* One activist explained that, *"it's a cheesy algorithm... you just contact as many people from your networks to put out a tweet with the same hashtag, all at the same time, and within an hour, it will blow and it will stay with that kind of traction for a couple of days...so there's a way to gamify the system..."*. The use of hashtags is seen as an articulation of group identities and invoked emotions that feel like shared experiences (Jenkins, 2013, p. 260). Participants recalled how this reinforced a

sense of community and shared culture, *“my favourite type of hashtags are the spontaneous ones like the #SiBodohDengarSini, like I love that one and it’s still alive even though it was never meant to be any sort of campaign...when campaigns are manufactured you feel like it’s not that genuine or whatever. It’s less fun...”*.

In speaking about spontaneity of tweets, many participants described how hashtags *“... has a life of its own...if you’re the first people to use it you may never can understand how it may turn out...”* Another participant recalled, *“... I make silly-silly remarks on things. Like, for example, umm... it was scorching hot earlier this year, right? So, I tweeted-lah like uhh... something like “Kenapa Malaysia ni panas sangat? (Why is it so hot in Malaysia?)... Is it the heat or our collective anger towards the government?”*. To his amazement, this tweet obtained more than 20,000 retweets, evidence of how locality and endogenous content tend to generate more interest, which in turn results in the strengthening of group identity, and reveals traces of homophily (Papacharissi, 2015a, p. 35). Users also adopt an always-on stance when speaking about their daily Twitter routine. One participant admitted, *“I use Twitter...it has become quite a routine... Wake up, and the first thing I do is open Twitter...I know it’s not healthy, but you know, when you crave that sense of connection with people online...Twitter is the way to go...”*

When describing the democratic agency of tweets in the context of Malaysia’s flawed democracy, much of what users describe point toward the cultural or the *“feeling of democracy”*. One participant described the typical Twitter users as *“...not ignorant...(and) have enthusiasm”*. One participant recalled how random users were interested in rational-critical arguments and obliged stating *“...I will reply to create a healthy argument punya environment...”*. Another participant added that, *“(users have ideals, and these ideals will sustain democratic efforts...users do not beat around the bush...are visionary, creative in both writing and thinking of issues... and think critically) Dia ni tentang pemikiran idealism, dan idealism ni akan membawa sesuatu tu, berpanjangan dan sustain benda tu. Idealism... Dia hanya sesuai untuk golongan straight to the point, mempunyai satu... mungkin idea ataupun sesuatu pandangan yang jelas, dan dia ada satu... kreativiti dari*

segi tulisan, dan... sebab dalam Twitter ni, I nampak banyak yang critical thinking dan juga golongan yang kreatif dalam sesuatu isu...".

Compared to pre social media eras, the proliferation of citizens on Twitter indicated an added intensity and complexity to the trajectory of democracy for at least two reasons. First, my research suggests while there is a replication of power structures in both pre and post social media platform environments, albeit in a 'soft' way, cultural shifts, particularly in the form of *"impromptu, casual and unforced forays of political interest"* users have been conflated with a new form of agency (Glynn et al., 2018; Papacharissi, 2010). Secondly, the publicity of 'performative tendencies' prompts users to behave as civic instigators as evidenced by this activist's comment, *"the whole world sees you and as a rights-based activist, you have to follow that particular standard...I don't have the luxury of playing around with opinions"*. Such conversations between users are deemed "crucial to the development and change in opinion" (Glynn et al., 2018). One user added that *"on a systemic level, having big mass movements, when you have thousands of people involved...I can only really say thousands because that's how big things get on Twitter. Yeah, you can really get the ball rolling on social media."* These tendencies seem to suggest a shift in traditional conceptions and redefine democratic agency in emotive, cultural, and performative ways.

5.1.3.5 Immediacy

The literature in Section 2.5.4 presents immediacy as a mode of possible liberation for Twitter users for three reasons: digital micro-activism, immediate publicity, and constant proximity. Of the potentials, the FGD participants experienced immediate publicity the most. Evidenced by comments such as *"Twitter is pretty good place to go if you're looking for, for like timely updates on what's currently happening"*, *"up to date, the real time search in Twitter. So, if anything happens and you want to search for real time news, you can just simply search"*, and *"Twitter's algorithm is to show you what's most recent, like the most recent tweets will be what you see first"*. These comments indicate patterns of instant and unrestricted information sharing keys to transforming individuals into political actors. One Malaysian participant currently living abroad shared that *"Twitter now is like*

my... almost my like (morning newspaper) surat khabar pagi... just to figure out what's happening in the world... especially because I'm 12 hours behind you guys, so the first thing (sic: when) I wake up and I immediately know everything that like... has happened in Malaysia in the past 12 hours since I've been asleep". The literature discussed informs us that such diasporic users experience 'constant emotional proximity' and suggests that political participation on Twitter is fluid and transcends geographical limitations.

Next, the participants shared how Twitter facilitated digital micro-activism. One participant described what he calls spontaneous activism "*the first thing that I do when I wake up, I would RT, I would retweet issues that are quite interesting but also like, random stuff that I like*". While retweeting may not fit the conventional definitions of civic action and activism, research reveals that such users take advantage of both synchronous and asynchronous communication when they use this feature. Next a participant spoke about what scholars call 'granularity' in political action. This phenomenon is experienced when a citizen learns about a 'public issue' comprehensively as evidenced when she said, "*...like if there's hashtag...from not knowing what it is, you click on the hashtag, you see all those tweets and fyout can base your opinions*". Participants also shared how they could pursue their personal ideological inclination, and bridge both online and offline lifeworld realities. Users embrace these tools and incorporate them into their daily lives, which are visible online. For instance, using hashtags one participant shared how "*because I have a lot of friends and I've been following up quite closely with the progress...*".

Scholars chastised that "immediacy, reciprocity and conversationality" could come at the cost of depth and significance. While one journalist concurred, his organisation constantly favoured immediacy because "*you don't want to be the fifth news organization to report because no one is going to read your news la, (it is a) waste of time*". Several participants indicated similar concerns when they commented that, "*...once an issue gets out there on Twitter, it gets spread across... like tons of people are talking about it. It's always bits and pieces here and there, there's no singular place to get the full scope*" and "*Oh this thing, it's viral, it's a Twitter hot topic right now', doesn't matter if it's right, doesn't matter*".

if it's wrong...". Such comments speak about the dilemma posed by Twitter to users. The risk of inaccurate or outright fake news is often linked to emphasis on immediacy.

5.1.3.6 Knowledge and Trust

In this section, I provide evidence of my exploration of the literature in section 2.5.6, where I identified several tenets to operationalise notions of knowledge and trust in the emerging public sphere on Twitter. FGD participants largely portrayed themselves as 'informed and rational' citizens. One participant asserted "...*I cross-check to see which facts are right and wrong. If you did some due diligence, so you expect like okay I can get more likes and retweets...we know that Twitter users are not ignorant, they want to know about politics but sometimes they don't know...for me to have more engagement is to feed them relevant and genuine information...*". Another participant added that "...*as for things that are harder to verify, either I just refrain from retweeting it or if it really is in my interest, I would really have to go through search the keywords, the hashtags to see what's happening, who's behind it...usually it would take some time la. I would just ask a couple of trusted friends or Twitter users, what the hell is happening??...*" These were among the many accounts of users indicating how they navigated the constant inflow of fake news in their Twitter feed.

Apart from that, challenging traditional notions of media organisations monopoly of news and knowledge production is the rise of citizen journalists. One participant provided details of how from being a regular user, he turned into a citizen journalist because his tweets were gaining traction among followers: "...*I love to dig (sic: up) gossip. I love digging (sic: up) information that is not out there. So, like, I think... I think, it just happened that umm... my more popular tweets were umm... about uncovering (scandal)...I love data...it started out as just a kind of hobby, but it turns out like umm... the way I convey it... Maybe it resonated with some people... whatever research that I can find, just try to convey it (sic: in a way) that's umm... in a language accessible to the audience. For example... when I found umm... certain links between (scandal) I had links...I would put links in my tweets if umm... people were interested to find out more, but I would provide like a one liner description of what I'm trying to convey, like "Look! This is the gist of what*

I'm trying to say here, and if you want to know more, there's the link right there that you can go to..."

Another participant provided insight into her tweeting process that mirrored Dahlgren's (2005b) description of "communicative rationality". She explained that *"(most of my successful tweets are the threads. I have a whiteboard in my office where I plan these threads... a lot of thought goes in the process) yang most hit selalunya bila I buat uhh... thread-lah. Thread panjang...I memang ada satu whiteboard in my office. So, I akan place everything. I dah matching all in, and then baru I akan tulis... maksudnya I akan berbuat uhh...a lot of thought-lah...before I tweet."* What this seems to suggest is how Habermas' (and later Dahlgren's) notion of communicative rationality couples with civic cultures in the deliberative realm of Twitter. Contrary to Dahlgren's point that "this rationalist bias tends to discount communicative modes such as affect, the poetic, the humorous and the ironic pertinent to democracy, I argue from my inference of the FGD transcripts, that these qualities are not mutually exclusive and have been seen to coexist on Twitter. Instead of a departure, there is evidence of the convergence of the rational, emotive and deliberative characteristics seen in tweets by societal users.

Another user who identified as a citizen journalist shared that Twitter *"...is a good place to get tipped off on what is happening and then you go further from there, you have to look for it yourself after that..."*. One participant added this insight into how she used these sources to produce tweets. Some of my informants have a *"...high level of trust, so those people I would have no qualms. I would usually just retweet what they say or quote tweet what they say because I trust them..."*. These comments points toward an ecosystem of news production that scholars attribute to the *"integration of social media platforms with the public sphere"* defined by the *"erosion of the distinction between journalism and non-journalism that results in a more heterogenous, dispersed and open"* form of news and knowledge production (Dahlgren, 2005a). In this ecosystem users, indicate that they counter fake news with *"due diligence"* and have trusted sources that are not necessarily traditional news outlets.

Comments from FGD participants opened opposing themes. Participants described the Syed Hussain Al-Attas' notion of bebalisme, or the dumbing down of society, particularly in how users favoured *"a nice beautiful, creative meme"* and *"definitely don't have skills, (to understand) complicated issues (that involve) a lot of legalities which nobody would want to read"*. Another activist echoed this complain about followers on Twitter who disliked reading, *"...if it's something long and lengthy, most people would not have time to read it... They don't want to sit down and read a 300-page report... we've shared research papers, but you don't get much engagement..."*. These comments point toward an audience obsessed with brevity, which may be a challenge in discussing rational-critical matters pertaining to citizenry. Worse, this inclination towards 'presentation', may result in the citizenry equating availability, conciseness, and attractiveness with truth and knowledge (see discussion on 'grabbality' in Section 5.1.3.3).

As a result, participants cautioned about two possible ways to favour political elites. First, such a media appetite would nurture situations such as this participant's view that *"...almost every day you see some level of propaganda or slightly twisting of truths to kind of make it genuine..."* and this participant's assertion that *"...certain government agencies would tweet something that is misleading...It's difficult to say if it's fake news because if they go by their interpretation of the law, it may not be fake but it is misleading because it doesn't expose the whole truth"*. These comments are a reminder of Noam Chomsky's notion of a "government propaganda operation". Furthermore, Twitter's architecture allows for this operation to materialise via David Morley's "hypodermic model of the media" by political elites. Such is the potential for bit-sized entertainment in the media environment that it led one participant to foresee that *"(Twitter is the best platform for the next 5 to 6 years, but the next General Election will be fought on Tik Tok) in the future, untuk politik Malaysia ni, Twitter is the best platform-lah. Sebab Twitter is here to stay-lah. I don't think dia akan pupus dalam masa 5/6 tahun ni. PRU 15 ni...PRU Twitter dan TikTok-lah...PRU 16 is totally TikTok"*.

5.1.4 Summary

Here I investigated who and how Twitter was used during Sheraton Move. First, I demonstrated how users became more politicised as evidenced by an increase in political comments. Even previously non-political users, such as religious influencers displayed greater politicisation, criticising the government. I was careful to tease out cybertroopers, to understand the wider workings of organic users on Twitter. My findings challenged notions suggesting a level ground for all users as I found the existence of multi-tiered political communication patterns in the form of hierarchies that placed politicians on top, followed by media organisations and finally societal users. The findings indicate that politicians, albeit only a handful of them, used Twitter vernaculars such as #s and @s to tap into societal users. Notably, politicians had a political bend on everything they posted even in a non-political context showing the blurring of lines between what was public or private on Twitter. Nevertheless, this analysis sheds light on how discourse is fuelled, shaped, and even manipulated on Twitter.

In the case of media organisations, by cross-referencing the findings from interviews and network analysis, I found two ways to understand media presence on Twitter. One is by obscuring the journalistic and editorial process that includes content selection and exposition of political nuances and centring content by party communications machinery directly to their supporters, which ultimately validates the mediation perspective. The second, more devious, way was through mediatisation. Central here is how platform logics influenced communication patterns as evidenced by three forms of messages sent by politicians: “digital witnessing”, argumentative messages, and breveted sound bite tweets, corroborating insights from other political communication research. I found citizenry’s interest for ‘political’ content during the Sheraton Move. However, I found that the way citizens interacted with political news was not characterised by rational critical debates. Instead, I found that political expression emphasised ‘grabability’.

I also explored societal users’ use of the platform. I investigated the emancipatory potential of Twitter in the often complex and messy space of societal users using the six aspects of the public sphere as determined by Habermas. I demonstrated how users’

experienced content moderation in 3 ways: their family, peer users and Twitter's algorithm. The latter appeared to be more prominent signifying Twitter as a 'governable domain' challenging techno-deterministic claims of an open and free platform. The empirical data from Twitter analytics place this cohort in the peripherals of the Twittersphere – emblematic of actual power deliberations on the platform award societal users. While the void of centrality in the sphere is a replication of pre-internet patterns, I argue that this tier is more vulnerable than ever to "machine learning powered agile manipulation of digital artifacts" (Howard, 2020), evidenced by the volume of content in the form of targeted news and Twitter vernaculars.

FGDs and structured interviews revealed that users felt that Twitter provided them with a platform regardless of their physical appearance. Instead of added emphasis (and burden) of looking attractive in visual platforms such as Instagram, Tik Tok or Facebook, users reported message 'grabability' as main feature for their Tweets or #s to gain traction on the platform. Some reported that their content was appropriated by media organisations and politicians. Nevertheless, users cautioned against emphasising the sensational aspects of the message over the substance. Empirical findings at the societal level show that societal users experience agency in two ways. First, several users reported an increased politicisation of tweets after the Sheraton Move and attributed this to the proliferation of political #s during that period that transcended the public into users' private spheres. Second, users established that they felt an increased 'feeling of democracy' and attunement to the collapse of an elected government on the platform corroborating the notions of affective publics.

5.2 Findings at the Representational Level

Despite the analysis being conducted independently of each other, apart from answering research questions pertaining to just this level of analysis, I was also able to expand the findings and overcome limitations from the previous section in two ways. First, to address the lack of a more representative datapoint, particularly that of non-PH supporters. I was deliberate in including both pro-PN/BN and Pro-PH accounts in my analysis. As mentioned in the previous sections, all efforts to include pro BN/PN supporters in the FGD

and interviews had failed. Second, pertaining to the findings of the previous level of analysis, a CDA offered the opportunity to validate the theme that 'resourcefulness dictates discursive agency'.

In this section, I further examine the underpinning notion that social media technologies are 'new' and are somehow going to change the future for the better. This theme emerged from the analysis of the interaction level of analysis and begged further investigation since scholars in chorus often present a contrasting view that Twitter is a platform that potentially affords visibility to marginalised people and their points of view (Papacharissi, 2012). Considering the limited sample of the interactional level of analysis, I continued the search, using a larger sample of users, to examine the promise of discursive agency on Twitter on a random corpus of downloaded data.

As discussed in Section 4.5, I used Fairclough's CDA approach to uncover stealthy evidence of the intersection of technology, power, and ideology found in tweets. While the previous level of analysis was an investigation of the interactive affordances of Twitter (technology) and how politicians, media and citizenry used the platform for political communication, my focus shifted to the remaining two tenets of a CDA analysis, notions power and ideology. To achieve this, 162,872 tweets from 12507 users (Corpus A) were downloaded and refined to more manageable 100 active users (Corpus B). Further retweets, and commercial, non-political, and unrelated tweets were excluded. Several methods have been used to approach data in the interest of research validity. Broadly speaking, I used a manual, line-by-line technique in the initial stage of my research (Corpus A). Subsequently, 100 accounts were selected using software (Corpus B). The two corpora of tweets are summarised in Table 14:

	Corpus A	Corpus B
No. Of Users	12507	100
No. Of Tweets	102872	99806
Nature of Datasets	12 datasets, 4 Categories: Politicians (Tun M, Muhiyiddin, Hannah Yeoh, Annuar Musa) Generic (Malaysia, Sarawak, Agong) Marginalised (Orang Asli, Dataran Merdeka) Hashtags (#demokrasimati, #NotMyPM, #TunM)	3 periods: GE14 (1/4-11/5/2018) Sheraton Move (23/2 – 2/3/2020) Covid-19 Emergency Declaration (2-19/1/2021 & 9-16/6/2021)
Method/Approach	Nvivo, Applied Thematic Analysis (ATA), manual line-by-line coding,	Python (Twint), Word Cloud, Sentiment analysis using rule-based modelling technique
Findings	Societal (Criticism/Argue, Own Stance, Personality); Media (News, Personality); Elite (Personality, Criticism, Giving Advice), user bio, tweet/retweet ratio, top @ & #	Word Cloud results: Most prominent: term ' Rakyat ' and ' Kerajaan ', names were male politicians (Mahathir, Najib, Muhiyiddin), political party (PAS, BN, PH, UMNO, DAP)

Table 14: Twitter Data used in Analysis.

As mentioned above, both manual thematic analysis and automated topic modelling were used to 'distil' these tweets into themes. Next, I present these themes and investigate the nature of the emerging political communication patterns in the public sphere on Twitter. I used the mediatization of the public interest framework derived from my exploration of literature in Section 2.4.4 to locate and compare the findings of this level of analysis.

5.2.1 Fairclough's CDA: Overview of Findings

In this section, I describe the themes that emerged from Corpus A and B. Borrowing from Fairclough's 3 phase⁷⁷ analytic approach, my findings deconstruct the socio-political realities evident in tweets. Overall, I identified 10 themes in the analysis of political tweets. Furthermore, 13% of the tweets were related to race, religion, and royalty. The inclusion of this theme, makes my research more representative of the Malaysian context while contributing to the larger aim of decolonising social science research. As illustrated in Table 15, of the 10 themes, 7 were found to be relevant to my analysis of political communication and 5 emerged to be salient. In addition, guided by my discussion of more dormant users I call 'listeners' in Section 2.5.5, I analyse "what was not said" (Saraswati,

⁷⁷ Phase 1: Text Analysis, Phase 2: Interpretation Analysis, Phase 3: Social Analysis

2021), by conducting a CDA of least mentioned themes. Factoring in, Peter Dahlgren’s multi-tier approach, I found that the elites, media, and citizenry, although triggered by the same event, processed them differently on Twitter.

Top Themes	Least Mentioned Themes	Themes Outside of My Research Scope
Own Stance (25%), Criticism/Arguing (21%) Personality (13%) Race/Religion/Royalty (13%) Political Tweets (12%)	Policy (1%) Pop Culture Reference (2%)	News Report (11%) Request Input (7%), Advice/Helping (4%)

Table 15: Thematic Analysis Findings

Additionally, the findings from Corpus B, are articulated in the form of a word cloud as shown in Figure 35. Part of my intention was to examine what users chose to tweet. Since it was not practical to present a detailed line-by-line analysis of all the 99807 tweets, a word cloud illustrating words that appeared prominently in Corpus B, was generated to provide a representation of Twitter usage by politicians, media, and societal users. This automated analysis allowed me to examine the “semantics structure” of tweets via a visualisation of the macro-discourse on Twitter (Grant et al., 2010). We can see that ‘rakyat’ is the top term that appeared frequently, signalling a microcosm that was sent out on Twitter during the Sheraton Move. To conduct manual CDA on a more manageable dataset, 403 (124 societal, 141 media, 138 politicians) of 99806 tweets with the word ‘rakyat’ were analysed through discourse provisions (Fairclough, 2010, 2013; van Dijk, 1999, 2015).

I used the ‘mediatisation of public interest’ conceptual framework developed from my review of literature in Section 2.4.4 to illustrate how tweets during the Sheraton Move reflected a continuum of mediatisation perspectives across a spectrum of produsage (high level of democratic potential), illusion of inclusion and spectacles (low level of democratic potential) (Chouliaraki, 2015). In the third phase, I focused on the ‘context’ of these tweets. As a contribution of my research, this framework guided this phase of analysis to investigate the socio-historical context, so it is theoretically informed to include notions of hegemony, the role of citizenry, platform affordance and the level of propaganda. My intention in this phase is to suggest ideological underpinnings that evidence how tweets not just relate to, but, in fact, reflect wider structural and social inequalities.

One final note about my reflections in analysing the datasets is informed by earlier sections that establish how easily the citizenry’s voice is marginalised. On Twitter, argumentation, number of followers, artificial amplification, and paid boosting of messages are emphasised, by design. Furthermore, on the onset of my analyses of these corpora, I found political elites regardless of party affiliation did not tweet on topics pertaining to civil rights as evidenced by the absence of tweets from their tiers when ‘Dataran Merdeka’ and ‘Orang Asli’ were trending during the Sheraton Move. These topics were trending on 25th and 26th February 2020 respectively⁷⁹. Therefore, in my discussion of themes I placed an added focus on such “marginalised” tweets by the citizenry⁸⁰. Although the algorithm deemed these tweets to be less appealing in terms of the number of likes or retweets and amplification potential, I “considered (the tweets) important from a sociological perspective” (Caliandro & Gandini, 2016, p. 163; Sharma & Pathak, 2022).

⁷⁹ ‘Dataran Merdeka’ was trending when groups of citizens gathered to protest the Sheraton Move. On the other hand, ‘Orang Asli’ was trending because a group of activists were marching to save Kuala Langat forest reserve from development.

⁸⁰ Accounts found at the lowest quartile of followers

5.2.1.1 Own Stance

This theme is potentially the most closely related to concepts such as “communicative rationality”, the hallmark of Habermas’ conception of the public sphere. From my analysis, 25% of the tweets were users stating their own stance on the events surrounding the Sheraton Move. Most of these stances appeared to be grievances as shown in Table 16 and Table 17. I found that while some societal users spoke in a neutral manner (see Table 16), others were critical of their discourse on Twitter (see Table 17). Both tweets were rhetorical in nature, absent personalisation, or verbs indicating calls for political action or mobilisation. Instead, the aim here is to express disposition. In Table 16, the user structured an argument surrounding other instances where PKR was induced by-elections⁸¹. One can sense that the user felt that those unnecessary elections set precedence for the Sheraton Move. While the user in Table 16 was more structured and composed, the user in Table 17, seemed to rely on the characteristics of politicians and instead focused on an emotive language scheme to convey their dissatisfaction. Both tweets were intended for peers in societal tiers.

Username/Tier: @sicfallacy/Societal	
Time/Date:	8:54pm/24 February 2020
Tweet:	Kenapa Langkah Sheraton Azmin dipanggil mengkhianati mandat rakyat tapi Langkah Kajang dan Langkah Port Dickson (juga Langkah 16 September) tidak? Kenapa Azmin dan kekawannya dipanggil pengkhianat negara tetapi MP UMNO masuk PPBM dulu tidak?
Translation:	Why is Azmin’s Sheraton Move a betrayal but the Kajang Move and the Port Dickson Move (both initiated by PKR) isn’t? Why are Azmin and his friends called national backstabbers, but UMNO parliamentarians who switched to PPBM aren’t?

Table 16: Own stance: whataboutism

It should also be stressed that both tweets were produced against different political backdrops. The tweet in Table 16 was sent at the start of the Sheraton Move. Mahathir had just resigned. Users witnessed intra-coalition party politics on an unprecedented

⁸¹ In 2014 and 2018 elected representatives from Kajang and Port Dickson resigned, triggering by-elections to make way for Anwar Ibrahim.

scale. Both Langkah Kajang and Langkah Port Dickson, although unnecessary, were individual events pertaining to single constituencies. However, the Sheraton Move was a crisis at the national level, resulting in the unseating of the Prime Minister. Using former examples to justify the latter illustrates the user's intent to reduce the crisis to an either/or position. Interestingly this user, produced 35 tweets on 24 February 2020. Viewed from theorisation of McLuhan that the medium "has the power to impose its own assumptions on the unwary", one could observe the shift from being a prolific PH supporter to the eventual pro-Azmin, anti-Mahathir stance as illustrated in Table 16. Ironically, Azmin stated that the reason for leaving the PH coalition in protest of PKR's demand is that Mahathir announces a date of handover, and supports Tun Mahathir's premiership.

Username/Tier:	@sfqomfz/Societal
Time/Date:	9:07am/1 March 2020
Tweet:	This whole political mess is just one big "fuck you" to the rakyat. Democracy is in our FC only for show. It doesn't matter that the rakyat's mandate is. This fiasco just proved how little politicians think of us.
Translation:	-

Table 17: Own Stance: Dismay over state of democracy

The tweet in Table 17 was sent out after the swearing-in of Muhyiddin Yasin. Malaysians experienced a roller coaster of events throughout the week. This user clearly felt betrayed by politicians. Refusing to state any political affiliation, this user used the collective term 'rakyat' to encapsulate Malaysians from both political divides. This allowed the user to have a distanced, critical standpoint. Projecting the Sheraton Move on Twitter in this manner is indicative of the usage of the medium as, what McLuhan called, "the extensions of man". Reading such a perspective leads, one to believe that there is no room for debate or reasoning to convince the user of an alternative stance. Borrowing further from McLuhan, Twitter allows such users to "construct counter-environments".

Whilst the optimism of the former tweet refers to users who, appeared to be justifying the Sheraton Move by using a rhetoric deflection strategy called 'whataboutism' (Islam, 2018) the pessimism of the latter is indicative of the reverse. As shown in Table 17, this user

expresses dismay and helplessness regarding the state of democracy in Malaysia. Such testimonials of the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan government illustrated a regular pattern of identifying Twitter with a preconceived remediating effect on the Malaysian publics normalising online discursive agency. In both examples, users expressed their own stances reflecting the notions of an 'active audience' who were 'speaking up'. As hallmarks of produsage, it reflects Twitter's presumed remedying impact on Malaysian political communication that has long been described as restricted, controlled, and not trusted (Islam, 2018). I view this theme as a sceptic, since a huge portion of tweets particularly from the societal tier, was found to express their stances on Twitter with a deterministic underpinning of democratic potential.

5.2.1.2 Criticism/Arguing

This theme somewhat resembles the previous theme, only here are, tweets⁸² lean more closely to what Habermas calls "rational-critical discourse autonomous from state or economic interests" (Dahlberg, 2010). The viewpoints represented under this theme contained one significant underlying tone: 'khianat' (betray). This perspective is typical of 21% of societal users' construction of the Sheraton Move. Such an apparent visibility of two verbs: 'khianat' and 'tipu' (lies) to express criticism and arguments as evidenced by the frequency by both pro-BN and pro-PH users triggered my curiosity that resulted in an investigation into the discursive strategies employed by the citizenry. From a lexical standpoint, I also observed that tweets in this category morphed from assertive to directive (Richardson, 2006). As illustrated in this section, most tweets transform from rendering an opposing standpoint to a request or call for action.

Broadly, for the pro-BN user, the term was associated with PH's unfulfilled manifesto and framed the Sheraton Move as positive. In contrast, the pro-PH user used 'khianat' to illustrate Azmin's group of 11 as traitors to the people's mandate in defence of the GE14 results as illustrated in Table 18. In addition to 'khianat', pro-BN users strategically framed the narrative of betrayal and used words like 'tipu' (lies) and 'fitnah' (blasphemy) in the

⁸² see Table 18, and Table 19

similar vein, to undermine PH's GE14 strategy. What can be inferred from the use of lay terms with religious connotations particularly to the predominantly pro-UMNO reader reveal an additional context that appears to be the weaponization of religion via tweets (Boler, 2010; Singer & Brooking, 2018). Apparently, there has been a carry forward from pre-internet practices of political communication along the lines of race and religion.

By virtue of the mode propaganda on Twitter, with an increasingly blurred line between an actual user and professional political communication machinery, it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between the prevalence of 'kianat' and 'tipu' in the social sphere. Therefore, Janks (1997) suggests that a look at the usage of pronouns may allow the reconstruction of the Sheraton Move and what it meant to users. A lexical examination reveals the absence of possessive pronouns such as 'kita' (we) or 'kami' (us), that would have been an indication of wanting to be affiliated with a certain community. Instead, the prominence of subject pronouns in the 1st and 2nd person such as 'aku' (I) to refer to self and 'kau' (you) for UMNO was evidence of the user trying to establish distance with the said political party (see Table 18). Moreover, the user simply addressed party leaders such as Zahid and Najib by their first name; indicating an apparent disregard for their political and social status.

Username/Tier:	@HermyRahim/Societal
Time/Date:	6:48pm/25 February 2020
Tweet:	Aku tak suka umno ni terlibat dengan Sheraton punya game hari itu. Maksud aku, umno kau tahan lagi lah lagi 3 tahun dan doa lah Zahid dah ke dalam dengan Najib. Masa itu percaya lah kau dapat undi rakyat. Tapi kau tak sabar, sekarang tunjuk perangai sebenar.
Translation:	I don't fancy UMNO getting involved in the Sheraton game the other day. I mean, all you (UMNO) had to do was wait another 3 years, a pray that Zahid and Najib would be in prison at that time. Trust me, people will vote for you. But you're impatient, and, now, show your true colours.
Username/Tier:	ReeNGaston/Societal
Time/Date:	12:34pm/25 February 2020
Tweet:	PENGKHIANAT bangsa, agama, negara dan rakyat keseluruhannya... – mereka fikir rakyat bersama mrk? Jijk dan memalukan!

Translation:	BETRAYOR of race, religion, nation and the people as a whole... – they think the people are with them? Nauseating and embarrassing!
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Table 18: Societal Sphere Addressing Political Parties

A look at tweets from the political elites provided fodder for an analysis of the political communication strategy for the clear winner of the Sheraton Move. While both, PH and MN had their positions challenged, the Sheraton Move was UMNO's way back into power. An expressive tweet sent out by @tunfaisal (see Table 19) who was part of UMNO's communications team⁸³ during the Sheraton Move, uses a dialogical technique to deflect acquisitions that UMNO was behind the collapse of the PH government. As illustrated in Table 19, this tweet relies on terms such as 'tipu' (lie) and 'menipu' (lying) and 'fitnah' (blasphemy) that by this time was typical of pro-UMNO users. The use of these terms appears to be a common code related to an in-group with shared values. @tunfaisal was committed to establishing a persona that UMNO was above reproach and defended the interest of the citizenry by mentioning supposedly new taxes and fines imposed under the PH government.

Username/Tier:	@tunfaisal/Political
Time/Date:	8:54pm/24 February 2020
Tweet:	Kamu menang pun cara menipu rakyat dan memfitnah orang lain, ada hati nak sembang hebat. Slps menang kamu khianati pulak rakyat, tipu mereka, perlekehkan rakyat, cukai rakyat banyak2, saman rakyat atas macam2 undang2, pastu kamu nak kata org lain penyamun? haramjadah
Translation:	You (PH) won by way of lying to the people and blaspheme against other and yet you have the gall to speak. After winning (the election) you betray the people, you lie to them, mock them, tax them relentlessly, fine them over all sorts of laws, and then call others outlaws? (slur for illegitimate)

Table 19: Political Elites Addressing the Societal Sphere

⁸³ @tunfaisal is UMNO Youth Exco and Head of Strategic Communications in JASA 2014-2018. JASA or Special Affairs Department, at that time, was part of UMNO's propaganda machinery.

Criticism and argumentative tweets, in this case, by the political class comprised of rhetoric aimed at not just building but strengthening the existing repo among followers that UMNO remained true to the founding principles and shared political struggles. Table 19 shows a tweet laden with sarcasm to undermine PH's discourse post-Sheraton Move as evidenced by the term “seimbang hebat” (self-aggrandising). Moreover, by criticising PH for “mocking” the citizenry, @tunfaisal appears to fuel both the dissatisfaction among PH supporters while detaching UMNO from the current political crises and disappointed UMNO supporters who had not come to terms from the GE14 defeat. By repeatedly using “kamu” (you) and “mereka” (them) to represent PH politicians and the citizenry respectively, there appears to be a palpable populist effort to foster identity politics by refocusing political communication toward the idea that UMNO is there to defend the ‘helpless’ citizens.

I argue that these criticisms must be understood in the broader context of the multi-faceted incident that was the Sheraton Move and the seemingly established correlation between liberal democratic tendencies and the supposed centrality attributed to the affordances of Twitter presented to a destabilised citizenry. From the political chatter on Twitter, it was fair to assume that the 22-month-old PH coalition was imploding at this point, with the resignation of Tun Mahathir as the Prime Minister, with part of the citizenry feeling defeated, betrayed, and eventually not buying into the reform agenda presented to them during GE14. Concurrently, my analyses of discourse found at this point was how UMNO politicians established an in-group by emphasising shared values and portraying an image of themselves as righteous, self-denying stalwarts of the people thus occupying the moral and political higher ground. In addition, while both PH politicians and supporters were emotive, UMNO's approach to Twitter included pragmatism.

While on one end their tweets interrogated PH politicians for their failure, UMNO accounts were seen to plant the idea that they were a viable alternative. Their strategy to tweet predominantly in informal Malay language could be seen as a concerted effort by political elites to impose togetherness while moulding a favourable public belief surrounding the Sheraton Move. My analysis takes advantage of the patterns of usage by the various

political actors that emerge. UMNO politicians seemed to relentlessly use a shared vernacular targeted at providing a narrative to structure citizenry's reactions. I found my examination of this theme crucial as it attempts to capture an augmentation of the way political communication is mediated and a contemporary form of power relations seen on Twitter is negotiated.

What is observed here is a feature of the digital public sphere particularly how users navigate the “quasi-democratic”, historically single party dominance, quintessential to the Malaysian context to voice dissenting political views. I argue that it helps to view the broader trend in deliberative liberties through the mediatisation of the public interest conceptual framework⁸⁴. The historical parallels of the state of representation in Malaysia have been documented by several scholars (Nadzri, 2018c; Sani, 2011; Weiss, 2011). Therefore, while citizens have always been expressing political outrage, the addition of an artificial intelligence infused platform mediating what users see and shaping “reactionary digital cultures” (Topinka, 2022) is relatively novel and of primary concern to my research. To avoid repetition, I aggregate my findings and discussion of the structural embeddedness in Section 5.3. Prior to that, I discuss the findings of the thematic analysis.

5.2.1.3 Personality, Royalty, and Political Tweets

Here I argue that tweets about personality, royalty and political mentions provided a spectacle, espousing Fairclough's (2013) social construction. These tweets came at the cost of narratives about how policies that impacted the citizenry came to an abrupt halt during the Sheraton Move (Noble, 2015). Critical technocultural discourse analyses methods allow an interrogation of how Twitter algorithms affect how liberal democratic practices materialise in the Malaysian context. This section aims to provide alternative ways to approach the discussion of free speech on online platforms. My discussion here provides an added nuance to the discussion about how freedom of speech on Twitter often also meant ‘freedom’ for existing power structures to naturalise the Sheraton Move

⁸⁴ introduced in Section 2.4.4

and its impact. I argue that the spectacle of these ruling class on Twitter distracted and deflected a more profound discussion on policy and the state of democracy in Malaysia.

Overall, 13% of the tweets examined were classified as ‘personality’ tweets. These were tweets that included the names of politicians, were addressed to, and described them, either positively or negatively. From my sample, only 6% of the 102872 tweets in Corpus A contained @mentions. Naturally, the most frequently @mentioned politicians were Mahathir or chedetofficial (1592 mentions), Anwar (416), Hannah Yeoh (392), Wan Azizah (170), Syed Saddiq (140), Muhyiddin (108) and Najib (52). Moreover, the usage of @mentions is often linked to the users’ desire to “engage in one-to-one, yet still public, conversation” (Maruyama et al., 2014; Semaan et al., 2014). These @mentions point towards the influence of political elites and should be viewed within the context of events surrounding the Sheraton Move. Mahathir and Anwar’s prevalence can be explained by the former’s abrupt resignation and the assumption of the latter’s succession. Nevertheless, as Muhyiddin was ultimately appointed as the 8th Prime Minister, a surge in @mentions targeting him with the hashtag #NotMyPM gained traction.

An example of a tweet categorised as a ‘personality’ tweet is shown in Table 20. At the onset, this user did not @mention Muhyiddin’s name, indicating amateurish or plain inept Twitter usage tendencies. The use of verbs ‘tertinggal’ (remain), adverbs ‘setitiskah’ (tiny bit), and adjectives such as ‘dicatat’ (recorded) by this user suggests that this tweet is a genuine lament. Notably, this user omitted Muhyiddin’s formal title, and used the pronoun ‘anda’ (you) to refer to the senior politician. Unlike the word ‘you’, the Malay language has several pronouns to refer to the second person depending on the formality of the conversation and the power distance between the ones engaged in the conversation. In this case, ‘anda’ suggests a polite but impersonal reference to Muhyiddin. As stated in the limitation of my study⁸⁵, the act of translation from the Malay language to English is problematic. Therefore, it is worth noting that the translation in Table 20 is more literal and it is possible that the intended sarcasm, remorse, and contempt, notwithstanding my best attempt for it to be otherwise, are not conveyed accurately in the translation.

⁸⁵ see Section 3.5

The user's use of rhetorical tropes such as "tidak ada setitikah maruah" (no dignity), "bakal diingati ratusan tahun lamanya" (will be remembered for hundreds of years) and "kekal jijik" (perpetually disgusted) to represent views about Muhyiddin dramatizes this derogatory tweet. While these terms may appear to be either hyperbolic or euphemistic depending on the political leaning of the reader, the user clearly meant it was the former and evidently connoted disgust toward this politician. This user felt the need to place political expression not in literal terms but in what appears to be whimsical malevolence which nonetheless suggests the formation of discourse where the citizenry has agency over the tone of messaging in their Twitter accounts.

Table 20: Tweets about Politicians

Username/Tier: @SyedAkramin/Societal	
Time/Date:	12:17pm/1 March 2020
Tweet:	Tidak ada setitikah maruah yang tertinggal di dalam darah Muhyiddin Yassin? Bentuk kerajaan hasil dari sikap pengkhianat terhadap rakyat yang memberikan mandat. Perkara ini akan dicatat dalam sejarah, bakal diingati ratusan tahun lamanya. Nama anda kekal jijik selama tempoh itu.
Translation:	Not a tiny bit of dignity left in Muhyiddin Yassin? Forming a government borne out of a betrayal toward the people's mandate. This history will be recorded and remembered for hundreds of years. Your name will be perpetually disgusting for all that time.

Race, religion, and royalty or 3R form a triple helix that continue to exist in Malaysian society. A thematic analysis of random tweets extracted from Sheraton Move in 2020 resulted in tweets containing 3R elements. However, in a contemporary form, this occurrence exemplifies its ingrained prevalence. Overall, 13% of the tweets were categorised under the 3R theme. However, because the datasets were downloaded throughout the week, the number of 3R tweets peaked at varied periods. For example, tweets about royalties were more apparent when the King of Malaysia himself distributed food to reporters who camped outside the palace gates. Several events during the Sheraton Move nudged the King into the limelight. Beginning with Mahathir submitting his resignation to the palace, followed by the King's decision to meet each parliamentarian

personally, the meeting out the council of rulers, and finally the swearing-in ceremony of Muhyiddin.

In an act of benevolence, the King walked out of the palace gates, exchanged niceties and even shared food with the media representatives. Subsequently this triggered businesses to take advantage of the national coverage outside the palace gates, and distributed goodie bags containing food, and product samples. Amidst national political turmoil, a spectacle of neoliberal and what appeared to be neo-feudal values intersected. The structural underpinnings of this event are discussed in detail in Section 5.3. The King's 'descending' from the throne spurred tweets that eventually meant something that the citizenry could concur with. Politicians had failed the nation – 'leaving' the citizenry outside the palace gates. Here I discuss three discourse patterns that emerged because of this event: the royalty's constitutional function, the royalty as a provider and royalty and popular culture references.

Tweets addressing royalty showed that reference to the monarch was not limited to the constitutional role of electing the prime minister (see Table 21). Instead, users referred to the royal institution's function as provider (see Table 22). Furthermore, as illustrated in Table 23, users also used popular culture, in this case their favourite English Premier League team, references what they felt about the Agong's role during the Sheraton Move. The usage of popular culture representations (in tweets) suggests a crossover of informal and communal into mainstream discourse about Malaysian royalty. Since this political crisis is relatively unprecedented, the success of the royal institution in controlling the way the Sheraton Move was reported has set the standard for successive conflicts⁸⁶. One may suggest that such representations of the royal class reaffirm the King's role in contemporary Malaysian politics. What was once limited to ceremonial or cultural symbolism was now central when discussing the intersection of politics, culture, media, and technology in the Malaysian context.

⁸⁶ At the time of writing in December 2022, three Prime Ministers have been elected since the Sheraton Move. Each time the incumbent lost a simple majority, reporters would gather at the Palace gates.

Example #1	
Username/Tier:	@ReeNGaston/Societal
Time/Date:	9:15am/ 24 February 2020
Tweet:	Dia pulak nak ajar Agong buat kerja? - YDPA bkn raja utk kelompok tertentu. YDPA adalah raja utk semua rakyat Malaysia. Setiap pertimbangan beliau adalah pertimbangan utk rakyatnya.
Translation:	Teaching the King to do his job? His Majesty is not the king of a certain group only. He is the king for all Malaysians. All his considerations are for the people.
Example #2	
Username/Tier:	@HermyRahim/Societal
Time/Date:	1.00pm/ 25 February 2020
Tweet:	Yang mana hina kata Agong takda kerja bla bla bla boleh tengok salah satu fungsi dia sekarang. Tenang mengawal keadaan.
Translation:	To those who insinuated that the Agong has no function, His Majesty's role at times like this is apparent. Calmly handling the situation.
Example #3	
Username/Tier:	@mighvv/Societal
Time/Date:	9:30am/ 1 Mac 2020
Tweet:	Tengok PC Tun pun tahu dah member ni gila kuasa teruk. Dah tak dapat majoriti support, duduk diam-diamlah main congkak ke apa ke. Beriya buat PC, tapi baguslah Agong pun malas jumpa sebab semak dengan muka berlapis-lapis, perangai macam hantu!
Translation:	Just from the press conference it is evident that Tun (Mahathir) is power crazy. Absent a majority, you should just strategize your next move. In haste you call for a press conference. Thank goodness the King just ignored your hypocrisy and abhorrent behaviour!

Table 21: Royalty' s Constitutional Function

Example #1	
Username/Tier:	@nabilahudatahar/Societal
Time/Date:	12:35pm/ 25 February 2020
Tweet:	@msianinsight thank God dapat Agong ada belas kasihan sebab panas kot
Translation:	Amid the heat, we are grateful for a benevolent King!
Example #2	
Username/Tier:	@Kah11Hau11 /Societal
Time/Date:	1:04pm/ 26 February 2020

Tweet:	Aku je ke atau Sukan Agong skrg ni paling prihatin psl pengamal media?? Mcm² Al-Sultan Abdullah sedia kan. Tak spt Sultan Agung sebelum² ini.
Translation:	Is it just me or is the current King the most considerate when it comes to media representatives. Unlike his predecessors, the King provided many amenities.

Table 22: Royalty Provide Food & Shelter

Example #1	
Username/Tier:	@pipiyapong/Societal
Time/Date:	4:43pm/ 25 February 2020
Tweet:	Dah Agong sokong Arsenal memang la power
Translation:	The is great since he is an Arsenal supporter.
Example#2	
Username/Tier:	@DrJasonLeong/Celebrity
Time/Date:	11:36am/ 26 February 2020
Tweet:	The real scandal and shame is that Agong didnt feed the journos at Istana Negara Ramlee burgers. Cos I love that shit. Also its #BuyMuslimFirst friendly!

Table 23: Royalty - Popular Culture References

Apart from personality and royalty tweets, political tweets comprised of 12% of the themes discussed during the Sheraton Move. I understand political tweets as tweets about party stance (6%), political processes (3%), and political mentions (3%). The fact that only 12% of tweets were explicit in their focus on politics during the Sheraton Move shows how many core issues are often admonished into the side lines amidst a crisis. Since the ‘trending now’ section on Twitter is algorithmically rendered, my findings reaffirm conclusions by existing research that Twitter ‘rewards’ argumentative and emotionally charged content (Compagno, 2016a; Elliott-Maksymowicz et al., 2021; Schudson, 1997). Possibly, the most consequential aspect of such computer mediation in this respect is the huge volume of tweets focusing on the nexus of race, royalty and religion illustrated in Table 24. The opening question “*Nak bubar Parliament dan masih mau jadi Pembangkang?*” (First you dissolve parliament and still want to be the opposition?) served to set the tone of the tweet. This tweet was clearly an attempt to undermine the deliberate dismantling of the Pakatan Harapan government. Since at the time of this tweet, no clear coalition had been formed, this user went on to say that “*Gov pintu*

belakang tak menjadi dan mula putar alam as always!" (Failed to form backdoor government, now manipulating facts as always!).

Username/Tier:	@skumar176/Societal
Time/Date:	1:52pm/26 February 2020
Tweet:	Nak bubar Parliament dan masih mau jadi Pembangkang? Gov pintu belakang tak menjadi dan mula putar alam as always! Kita tahu UMNO tu buruk tapi lepas episode COUP PH ini rakyat tahu UMNO itu iblis dan hanya pentingkan parti Kleptomania sahaja! Hope God will punish the guilty!
Translation:	Dissolve parliament and still want to be the opposition? Failed to form backdoor government, now manipulating facts as always! We know UMNO is bad, but after the coup, people know UMNO is a selfish devil, and only priorities Kleptocrats! Hope God will punish the guilty!

Table 24: Race, Royalty, and Religion

This user used what linguists call parallels, for example "*pintu belakang*" (illegitimate), "*putar alam*" (deceptive), "*iblis*" (devil), "*Kleptomania*" (compulsive Kleptocrats) to represent his antagonistic views. At the end, this user cries, "Hope God will punish the guilty!", eliciting religiosity, which seemingly represents both substantive and instrumental ends. This user invokes a 'Higher' power to deal with appalling UMNO while appealing to wider cultural norms quintessential to the Malaysian citizenry. Furthermore, this user used both English and Malay language to express abhorrence to UMNO. Apart from that, this language style, even though the user is clearly proficient in English, suggests an intention to appeal to both English and Malay speaking audience.

Whether this tweet gained popularity in terms of likes or retweets, they appear to contextualise what users do on Twitter. This speaks to wider sociality on this platform. Unlike personal communication, sending out (political) tweets, is something users do with the community of users, and not just closely knit followers. While this desire to speak to large communities was not caused by Twitter, the asynchronized component of Twitter seems to suggest an enabling mechanism. Challenging the notion of existing studies (Chung et al., 2021; Gimmler, 2001; Semaan et al., 2014) that political communication on Twitter tends to follow, not precede, participation, which points towards an augmentation

of what citizens consider political involvement. I argue that political communication on Twitter is sustained through such social interactions (see the discussions in Section 2.5).

5.2.1.4 Pop Culture Reference

I organised my discussion of the use of pop culture references in relation to my research question about representations on Twitter: How do representations on Twitter construct, reproduce and challenge existing social classes and how do these inform wider patterns of established structures of power? I approached this research question using Henry Jenkins' (2006) framework of participatory culture. Content analysis shows how users integrated popular culture references in two ways. First, I reconstruct and re-focus how they understood the Sheraton Move. Examples of these tweets are presented in Table 26. Second, references such as 'Endgame' and 'Thanos' were used to show how they felt during the Sheraton Move.

Broadly, this theme echoes my discussion of how common (political) interest aggregates within a non-institutionalised public sphere to challenge existing hierarchies, as theorised by Habermas (see Section 2.1.1). When viewed as a whole, only 2% of the tweets had pop culture references. However, upon closer examination, pop culture references were found to be more prominent in larger datasets ($n > 1000$ users) as illustrated in Table 25. Particularly, when #TunM was trending on 23 February 2020 – Mahathir resigned as Prime Minister. Such an observable nuance in my findings suggest that users are apprehensive in certain domains, as seen in the 'Agong' dataset (no popular culture references) but more spontaneous when referring to Mahathir.

No.	Dataset	No. of tweets in dataset	% of Tweets with Pop Culture References
1.	Malaysia	2756	4
2.	Orang Asli	1205	3
3.	#TunM	3348	23
4.	Agong	17474	0

Table 25: Percentage of Pop Culture References

Furthermore, popular culture references were exclusively found in tweets from the societal sphere. On one end, users were found to inhabit the intersection between the recently collapsed PH government and reports of the rise of Muafakat Nasional⁸⁷. On the other hand, in April 2019 the highly anticipated movie, Avengers: Endgame which was a conclusion to the Marvel Cinematic Universe was released⁸⁸. The iconic scene during the movie was when the protagonist used a magic gauntlet to save the universe from annihilation. As one of the highest grossing movies, the Avengers franchise was a global phenomenon. Naturally, references and associations from this movie were used to represent the contradictions and ironies of a nation in crisis.

Inherent to my discussion here is how societal discourse on Twitter appears to challenge historical modes of political event reconstruction by the media or propagandists. In the mainstream news media environment, hegemonic political rhetoric would have been used to appeal to a wide range of consumers. Conformity in reporting and repeated hammering of an elite driven narrative quintessential to Malaysian mainstream media was confronted by an arguably participatory model. Tweets about the Sheraton Move imbued with pop culture references, reflected the intersection of fandom, often characterised by obsession toward fictional characters and inclusive identities reflected in the tweets illustrated in Table 26. My exploration here revealed an augmented mode of resistance to political events by the often oppressed and marginalised societal sphere, one entangled with forms of fandom used to represent repressive socio-political realities.

Example #1	
Username/Tier:	@dhiaulhafiz_/Societal
Time/Date:	12:29pm/24 February 2020
Tweet:	Tun Mahathir = Thanos Malaysia (icon of Malaysian flag)
Translation:	-
Example #2	
Username/Tier:	@AsyrafFarhan27_/Societal
Time/Date:	6:52pm/24 February 2020
Tweet:	We are in the endgame now

⁸⁷ A right-wing coalition that consists of UMNO, Bersatu and PAS.

⁸⁸ According to IMDb.com Avengers: Endgame was the highest grossing movie in Malaysia in 2019.

Translation:	-
Example #3	
Username/Tier:	@tengkuharry_/Societal
Time/Date:	12:11am/24 February 2020
Tweet:	Last ah. Tun M buat politik twist ni macam gaya Tony Stark petik Gauntlet masa last scene End Game. DAP dan sekutunya lebur macam Thanos (laughing emoticon)
Translation:	In the end, Tun Mahathir can do a political twist as how Tony Stark snapped his fingers in the closing scene of the End Game movie. DAP and allies disintegrate into thin air as was the case with Thanos.

Table 26: Popular culture references in Twitter posts.

5.2.1.5 Policy

As explained in Section 4.6.2, I discuss what was least mentioned in the corpora of the collected tweets. I find a discussion of what-was-not-said relevant as it reflects a key success of the political elite-controlled media environment particularly on a platform exempt from the conventional editorial distillation process often associated with traditional media. As Van Dijk explains ideology is “gradually acquired” (van Dijk, 2006, p. 116). Relevant here is how decades of indoctrination and meaning making by the state influenced how citizens viewed political events. While Sheraton Move brought many government policies (including populist ones) to a halt, only 1% of all the tweets collected discussed specific policies as illustrated in the previous sections (see Table 15 in Section 5.2.1).

Example #1	
Username/Tier:	__earth/Societal
Tweet:	Yesterday to me underlines yet again the importance of hastening our reforms, so that institutions will prevail over personalities
Engagement: No. of Retweets/Likes/replies	67/164/7
Example #2	
Username/Tier:	LinaKlasik
Tweet:	@UncleLucq @mslengleng Do you think your rakyat happy to get MA63 right restored in the same time your rakyat to accept all these crooks back?
Engagement: No. of Retweets/Likes/replies	0/1/0

Example #3	
Username/Tier:	nabilahudatahar
Tweet:	The top world countries are trying to counter the coronavirus crisis and fight climate change and working for a better economy but Malaysia is so busy tryna make sure that a Malay-exclusive political party continues to rule Malaysia ugh
Engagement: No. of Retweets/Likes/replies	0/2/0
Example #4	
Username/Tier:	faizalhamssin
Tweet:	Malaysia imported food worth RM45bil in 2016. As the political uncertainties linger, Ringgit is expected to weaken further. Naturally, food prices will soar too. The B40s will be most affected - in %, they spend the highest portion of their income on food.
Engagement: No. of Retweets/Likes/replies	35/35/2

Table 27: Policy Tweets

Table 27 shows several examples of tweets about concerns regarding policies of the PH government. Such users realised that a sudden change in government would mean a subsequent halt and change in policies. Language modelling codes were not able to search for such tweets. Therefore, I read these tweets line-by-line to identify these themes. The lack of policy debates is noteworthy since the PH campaign largely focused to institutional reforms. My analysis here attempted to track the underlying explanation to the lack of policy debates. I found that this phenomenon could be explained by the dualism endemic to Malaysia's political communication genealogy that has placed an ultra-focus on 3R issues⁸⁹ compounded by Twitter's algorithmic gatekeeping that favour confrontationally or entertainment contingent tweets.

Additionally, Twitter's algorithmic gatekeeping appeared to favour the way politicians and the media portrayed a knee-jerk reaction to the events surrounding the Sheraton Move. With the prevalence of personal stances discussed in Section 5.2.1.1, users "provided a layer of opinion" that influenced how Twitter organised feeds on the platform. To prioritise

⁸⁹ race, religion, and royalty

personal and argumentative tweets, alternative narratives are expurgated by algorithms designed for 'optimum' engagement (Ito, 2013). Additionally, I argue that this is emblematic of political actors as a platform to act independently, minus the authorisation and editorial process typical of traditional media. My thematic analysis shows that this resulted in a contemporary blatant appropriation of Twitter to shape public opinion that the Sheraton Move was the fault and failure of the incumbent coalition while the perpetrators of the coup were judged based on their intentions. The fact that such a virtuous connotation to the Sheraton Move was shared by many pro-BN users instead of contempt is evidence of the successful deployment of a deflection political communication strategy and the successful use of "mass-personal social engineering".

The prominence of 3R as reflected in the frequency of tweets bearing this theme in my data appears to be related to Malaysia's political communication which has been historically informed by the quasi-democratic media. Apart from pockets of oppositional voices⁹⁰, mainstream narratives have mostly been top-down propaganda. The presuppositions surrounding 'alternative' or 'anti-government' media is testament to how discursive practices outside the mainstream media was constructed (Welsh, 2013).

Pre-independence, the ecosystem of the public sphere in Malaysia was characterised by feudalistic and colonial dominance aimed at "easing social conflicts and providing support for government programmes" (Gehl & Lawson, 2022, p. 165). Void of any deliberate reform to emancipate the societal sphere since, elitist superiority persisted through single-party dominance coupled and an authoritative pseudo-democracy scaffolding, up until Pakatan Harapan's electoral victory in 2018. I discussed how existing literature explain this shift in Section 2.3. My exploration here elicits the fact that the absence of policy-specific debates on Twitter is the fulfilment of decades of systemic oppression of the societal public sphere, a phenomenon Chomsky plainly calls 'the dumbing down of society' (cited in Falcone, 2013).

⁹⁰ see the discussion in Section 2.5.6

As a deeper sequence to the discussion above, my findings provide insights into Twitter's role in the larger media landscape. Scholars have long argued that the media is an "integral part of the hegemonic chain and an important institution in fabricating meaning" (Stamenković, 2019). My evidence explains this feature in its current form. Relevant here are two other findings from the earlier sections. First, FGD participants spoke above about how certain messages are boosted for a fee to 'flood' the platform⁹¹. Second, findings from the #demokrasimati demonstration dataset and the absence of policy debates highlights how the nature of political communication is contingent on "mass and interpersonal forms of social engineering or mass-personal social engineering" (Caliandro & Gandini, 2016, p. 208; Gehl & Lawson, 2022).

5.2.2 Summary

In this chapter, I investigated key themes that were central to the mediatisation of the public interest on Twitter. I explored which tier of users controlled the salient themes that emerged during the Sheraton Move. Here, I examined how these representations explain existing social classes indicating wider patterns of power structures that exist on Twitter. The findings suggest that themes from tweets were either externally⁹² or internally⁹³ focused. Further analysis revealed that a tweet's reach depends on not only on its content per se. Instead, Twitter's algorithm was found to 'favour' tweets that were argumentative and deemed tweets regarding social movements such as 'Orang Asli' or 'Dataran Merdeka' as less appealing. Here, I found recognisable differences in the overall tone of the tweets produced by political elites. PKR leaders were emotive while UMNO leaders were more pragmatic and aggressive in their messaging. In the societal tier, I found increased politicisation of tweets among societal users. However, the findings also showed that mainstream media outlets mirrored messages from the elite sphere.

The predominance of themes that exclude policy debates as demonstrated in the thematic analysis findings (see Table 15) is notable given the way in which argumentative,

⁹¹ see discussion in Section 5.1.2.3

⁹² Personality, Royalty and Political, Pop Culture References and Policy

⁹³ Own Stance, Criticism/Arguing

performative, or personality tweets are constructed as emancipatory. I argue that societal users use Twitter and execute their freedom to debate their conventional understanding of public forums as constructed by the powerful elite. Scholars have attributed this “illusion of power” and conception of the public sphere as a place to only “hang out, mess around and geek out” (Ito, 2013) to what the citizenry have been ‘told’ via whether through the mainstream media (Bell, 2018; W. L. Bennett et al., 2007), curricula of learning institutions (Fadhlullah & Ahmad, 2017) and more recently social media (Xenitidou & Gunnarsdóttir, 2019). What underlies this reluctance to free the social classes by focusing on the hope and agency of: substantial policy debate; targeted oppositional messaging towards anti-democratic government takeovers; and discourses that transcend the 3R brand of politics is a continuous effort to validate those in positions of power by amplifying favourable ideological stances on Twitter (Freelon, 2010).

This section also establishes how some representations on Twitter may be located towards the *Producers* end of the spectrum, while others may be located towards the Illusions of *Inclusions* or *Spectacles* end⁹⁴. I demonstrate that there is a need to make this distinction here as there appears to be an augmentation to what users consider political communication in at least three ways. First, I have shown evidence of *Producers*, particularly in how informal and communal discussions spill-over into the mainstream discourse particularly in the appropriation of societal #hashtags. Second, an observation of Illusions of *Inclusions*, which is likely to endure, is the ‘de-politicalising’ role of Royalty in contemporary Malaysian politics. Third, both quantitative and qualitative data indicated the successful use of spectacles to deflect meaningful policy debates on the platform.

As explained in Section 4.5, a CDA is helpful for understanding the hegemonic forces that exist in the construction of texts (tweets). The inclusion of macro layers and structural block in my conceptual framework reiterates the argument that political communication does not occur in a vacuum but is a result of systemic forces. In this vein, in the third and final level of analysis, I focus on findings that suggest the economic, political, and ideological forces that informed the structural level of analysis.

⁹⁴ See discussion in Section 2.4

5.3 Findings at the Structural Level

Here, I analysed frameworks of power in relation to media control, autonomy, and constitutional patriotism and how its intersection with Twitter affects conceptions of democratic legitimacy and institutional confidence⁹⁵ in the Malaysian public sphere. I take as a starting point the counterintuitive observation that liberal democratic tendencies seen in the context of political communication on Twitter seems to turn preconceived notions of freedom of speech in Malaysia upside down. Whereas content and thematic analysis from the interactional and representational levels of analysis have illustrated, distinct forms of elitism, augmented forms of feudalism compounded by Twitter's architecture and features presents a reverse image.

FGD with users, expert interviews, content analysis and critical discourse analysis of tweets have pointed to the fact that political communication on Twitter is often constructed as 'emancipatory'. However, the data suggest that tweets of criticism and policy debates account for a significantly smaller share of the total number of retweets, hashtags, and mentions, especially when produced in the societal sphere. Although almost 90% of tweets were produced in the societal sphere, thematic analysis findings of narratives challenging the oppressive structures of power are absent, raising questions about the notion of hope and agency often associated with Twitter. More importantly, I explored the construction of citizenry forms on Twitter that appear to mirror clientelism and consumerism instead of activism (Elstub & Escobar, 2019, p. 17).

5.3.1 Archival Research: Overview of Findings

In my third level of analysis, I found that guises of democratic tendencies presented by Twitter are structurally located. Peter Dahlgren's theorisation of 'structural' forces⁹⁶ provided a framework to approach notions of power and control. Moreover, the appropriation of democratic values by the various tiers that exist in Malaysia in their respective ways on Twitter has become a distinctive trait in political discourse, as

⁹⁵ see discussion in Section 2.3.5

⁹⁶ see discussion in Section 2.3

observed during the Sheraton Move. This observation problematises established knowledge pertaining to the media landscape and political communication studies favouring the dominance of social media platform technologies for political communication. In this section, I tackled a recurrent theme⁹⁷ in my theses: Twitter's influence on the notion of democratic legitimacy and institutional confidence, in Malaysia during the Sheraton Move.

The research question guiding my inquiry here was: At the structural level, in which ways do frameworks of power appropriate democracy and how can this influence political communication on Twitter? Specifically, how do representations apparent on Twitter relate to wider frameworks of power and control? How can we understand the manifestation, if any, of traditional forms of power and control, in both state and citizen centric contexts on Twitter? What effects, if any, do frameworks of power and control have on the deliberations on Twitter? I relied primarily on archival research methods to collect data to answer these research questions, since my aim was to examine Twitter's role within the theoretical trajectory of Habermas' notion of the public sphere, which critically and historically examines this 'transformation' in contemporary political 'lifeworld'⁹⁸. In the previous two sections, I applied a critical discourse analysis to the perceived positivity and flattery from the interview participants. Here, I focus on Twitter as a capitalist endeavour and how its use in a country with repressive structural underpinnings like Malaysia, served the interest of the powerful.

My Twitter analysis used my research questions as an index to measure democratic legitimacy and institutional confidence. My goal here was to critically analyse public statements and testimonials by top executives. I juxtaposed these specific and often extreme claims of democratic agency against what was observed during the Sheraton Move particularly in terms of media control, autonomy, and constitutional patriotism. Overall, I argue that political elites use Twitter to exploit the cracks in Malaysian

⁹⁷ See discussions in Section 2.3 – political participation devoid of actual legitimacy and legitimacy of media organisations; Section 2.4 – democratic legitimacy of representations; Section 5.1.1 and Section 5.1.2.3 – powerful elites use of Twitter to reinforce democratic legitimacy.

⁹⁸ see discussion in Section 2.1

democracy, in ironically familiar ways. Archival analysis findings point toward two main enablers of this phenomenon. First, the origins, ownership, and control of Twitter, the corporation, that manifests in the affordances of Twitter. Second, contemporary forms of media control, autonomy from the state and commercial hegemony and constitutional patriotism observed on Twitter are the result of decades of construction.

In an interest to distance my work from an analysis that focused solely on the affordances of Twitter, void of ideological and theoretical reflections, I explored Twitter as a purely capitalist endeavour. To this end, I examined at two sworn testimonials of Twitter's executives during the United States Senate Judiciary Committee hearings held between 2018 and 2020 at the height of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. I found a contemporary form of power that adds nuance to critical Malaysian media research. With Twitter, neo-liberal logic enters the Malaysian media ecosystem, compounding existing inequalities. Liberating not those in the margins, but those in power via privatisation and heightened specialisation of political expression. Contrary to 'promises' in the form statements in Appendix 2, Twitter freed those with actual powers to liberate from the persistent 'nagging' of civil society (Saraswati, 2021). Contextualising these promises through questions and statements, I argue that institutions now believe it is not incumbent upon them to provide free media.

An examination of periodical political circulation numbers from the pre-internet era and reports from activists revealed another irony. Previously, political groups were able to reach followers through newsletters, websites, and blogs (Weiss, 2011, 2013b). Paradoxically, with algorithms, it is more difficult for both producers to have substantial presence on Twitter. In Section 5.1.2, I discuss the financial and technical challenges faced by activists and civil society organisations in producing 'grabbable' and 'viral-able' content in navigating the attention economy. Here, I focus on statements that revealed a structural impediment – media ownership and the role of big data analytic firms.

To investigate cultural structures and their historic roots I examined historic references because they described the early public sphere of Malaya (Alatas, 1977; Clifford, 1897;

F. Noor, 2008). My intention here was not to provide an extensive historic exploration as these seminal writings already provide first hand and scholastic analysis of the state of the societal sphere during that era. Nevertheless, I argue that to understand *why* the ideals of democratic emancipation remain unachieved, a look at how the ‘political’ entered the public sphere was necessary. While on the onset, the Malaysian polity may appear to have experienced a complete makeover, the indoctrination of the superiority of religion or *adaat*, royalty and the ruling class was constant. Moreover, these elements stood the test of time by appropriating the latest available mediatic tools.

This suppression of the societal class has opened the door to alternative forms of discourse. Based on my analyses of policy documents, Hansards, and speeches⁹⁹ I can infer and provisionally capture what appears to be a universal truth of the state of the public sphere in Malaysia. My examination showed how developmentalism once again brought about and eventually normalised neo-authoritarianism. Every time some form of technology or mode of political communication challenged to disrupt the disenfranchisement of the societal tier particularly the urban liberals and narrow the gap of what the political elite say in the public domain versus what really happens, a more ‘intelligent’ form of stifling and neutering is witnessed.

5.3.2 Media Control & Twitter Inc

In this section, I revisit the hearings that were part of the US Congress’ investigation into Russia’s and Cambridge Analytica’s meddling in 2018 to explain the workings of Twitter during the Sheraton Move (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). Borne of those events during the same period, my intention here is not to provide an in-depth exploration of these political crises as they are outside the scope of my thesis. Instead, my focus is deconstructing the complex interdependencies among the three tiers¹⁰⁰ of Malaysian users identified in Section 2.5.7, and Twitter (media), in navigating this time of political uncertainty. I argue that promises by online platforms’ affordances are integral to their adaptation in the Malaysian context. I used excerpts from Twitter’s CEO (see Table 28)

⁹⁹see Appendix 2

¹⁰⁰ Political Elites, Mainstream (accounts of media organisations, political parties, celebrities) and Societal users

to understand these promises. In addition, these statements explain the privatisation and the ensuing commodification of free speech by Malaysians on Twitter. It is also worth noting that while countries such as the US, UK, Singapore, and Australia have taken steps to hold these platforms accountable by questioning top executives from social media firms at their respective parliaments, as of the time of this writing, Malaysia has not followed suit (Enikolopov et al., 2018).

[Line 243] “We believe many people use Twitter as a digital public square”

[Line 564] “I believe if you were to go to our rules today and sit down with a cup of coffee you would not be able to understand it”

[Line 570] “I think there’s a lot of confusion around our rules and also our enforcement and we intend to fix it.”

[Line 632] “First and foremost, we don’t believe that we can create a digital public square for people if they don’t feel safe to participate in the first place, and that is our number one and singular objective as a company is to increase the health of this public space.”

[Line 686] “Mr Shimkus: While listening to users is important, standards about what ‘distracts’ or ‘distorts’ are being handled fairly and consistently?...doesn’t this give power to the loudest mob and ultimately, fail to protect controversial speech”

[Line 693] “I don’t know if those are the right indicators yet. That’s why we are looking for outside help to make sure that we are doing the right work. But we should have an understanding and a measurement – a tangible measurement – of our effects on our system and specifically, in these cases we are looking for behaviours that try to artificially amplify information and game our system in some ways...

[701] “Mr Shimkus: “Would you consider...a bot would be...manipulating the system, right...what about if the users’ band together? Would that be a – you would consider manipulation?”

[Line 708] The same – and that’s why it makes this issue complicated is because sometimes we see bots. Sometimes we see human coordinations in order to manipulate

[Line 716] well, to be very frank, our verification program right now is not where we'd like it to be, and we do believe it is in serious need of a reboot and a reworking
[Line 724] ...the verified badge also is a signal that is used in some of our algorithms to rank higher or to inject within shared areas...
[Line 783] We are very different from our peers in that the majority of what is on Twitter is public. People are approaching Twitter with a mind-set of when I tweet this the whole world can see it.

Table 28: Excerpts from Twitter CEO

As such, Twitter's role during the Sheraton Move was unchecked. I became aware of the Cambridge Analytica case early in my research, circa February 2018. My following this case closely prompted my interest to investigate if Twitter, to use the words of Vaidhyathan (2018), "meddled" during the Sheraton Move. Similar concerns raised by scholars at the advent of other communicative technologies have long concluded that take-overs have always resulted in repackaging, oversimplification, reduction and ultimately the degradation of public goods (Chomsky, 2017, p. 110). Following of David Harvey's (2023) line of inquiry in the context of artificial intelligence, I argue that Twitter is another nudge on the "evolutionary path" of neo-authoritarianism via the appropriation and reinstatement of both new and traditional frameworks of power and control.

I argue that Twitter is a conduit for neo-authoritarianism in Malaysia for two reasons: affordances of the platform and the way Malaysians used Twitter. Firstly, from the transcripts of these hearings, I found that by admission of Jack Dorsey himself, Twitter "meddled" in "the digital public square" by "artificially amplifying information". Second, the construction of Twitter underlined by the notion "of when I tweet this the whole world can see it" – particularly in the Malaysian context where the mainstream voices have always been dominated by elites – was adopted by societal users. These excerpts triangulate the findings of the earlier sections and explain user behaviours on Twitter during the Sheraton Move. When viewed together, these affordances and conducive consumption patterns suggest that Twitter could have had a real impact, as it was seen as a part of the Malaysian media ecosystem. Given the novelty of the Sheraton Move, I argue that Twitter

shaped users' understanding of the events surrounding the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan government. Taking consumption patterns into account, users' used Twitter as a source of news and considered their tweets to express activism as well as political resistance.

The application of Twitter's affordances suggests a form of public sphere (re)engineering. Pre-social media political activism (almost always) resulted in the mobilisation of the citizenry, as seen during the REFORMASI, HINDRAF, and BERSIH movements. This was not the case for the Sheraton Move. Twitter affordances effectively meddled in the way news and information was disseminated by "fostering standardised thinking, complacency and decline in attention" (Dahlgren, 2018, p. 23). Reshaping and refocusing content and influencing the ways in which meaning is made in the hearts and minds of users. These excerpts reaffirm the findings from the network analytics in Section 5.1.3, and reveal that Twitter's algorithms afforded the political elite the upper hand to capitalise on the splintered nature of Malaysian Twitter users. The overemphasis on storytelling or the performative aspect of Tweets came at the cost of more critical investigations into the continued disenfranchisement of the oppressed and marginalised voices during the Sheraton Move.

Building on the analysis of the lexical composition of tweets in the previous section, I focus on the ideological stances of Twitter. Early in his statement, Jack Dorsey says "*We believe many people use Twitter as digital public square... I believe if you were to go to our rules today and sit down with a cup of coffee you would not be able to understand it... I think there's a lot of confusion around our rules and also our enforcement and we intend to fix it*". I find Jack Dorsey's loose reference of the term "public square" problematic, and an example of the oversimplification mentioned above.

Even more alarming was his consequent admission of the lack of sufficient guard rails to regulate Twitter. These statements provide two insights into Twitter's stance. First, it explains Twitter's role as a policy actor with international geopolitical reach and actively carving guidelines that would serve their best (commercial) interest (Popiel, 2022, p. 135).

Second, we witness a departure from Habermas' notion of the public sphere that predicated on the emancipatory participation of the societal tier to a public square that facilitates the domination of powerful elites.

As observed in the previous sections, Twitter's role as a policy actor presents users with several consequences. First, Twitter's construction of a public sphere would be centred around existing affordances that place engagement at the heart of its operating business model. With such a monolithic focus on engagement, Twitter engages in selling human attention through content sorting (Tristan Harris in Bernstein, 2023). Investigative documentaries such as *The Social Dilemma* (2020) and *15 Minutes of Shame* (2021) dive into the psychological impact of social media. Experts (many of whom were the founding architects of social media platforms) revealed that algorithms indiscriminately amplify content that can obtain the highest level of engagement. In most cases, this meant prioritising fun over morality, pleasure over misfortune, and providing a prolonged sense of superiority to users. With respect to my research, there have been several instances where participants, both media organisations and societal users, reported that their message did not have intended reach¹⁰¹. Users experienced what Marx's scholars call the fulfilment of "capital's nature and its reckless pursuit of fixed capital formation (Twitter's algorithm) as a primary means to disempower labour (users)" (Harvey, 2023).

Apart from manipulating content, Twitter's algorithm creates communities by the 'Suggested follows' and 'A set of accounts that work well with...' feature that has a "Follow all" button which automatically suggests and follow several other like-minded users. I believe that allowing users to "follow all" has deemed #s redundant as this feature instantly connects users with similar accounts, resulting in the echo-chambers discussed in Section 5.1.1.2. Evidence for this is the non-prevalence¹⁰² of #s and @s. My findings suggest that this can be attributed to two factors. Prior to this, users had to reach out

¹⁰¹ see discussion in Section 5.1

¹⁰² 97% of legislators from United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand used hashtags (Pew Research Centre, 2019).

using #s and @. Since Twitter has already been around for 14 years during the Sheraton Move most networks are mature as seen in the corpus of tweets.

Over the past decade, several movements have caused saturation and polarisation of followers. This feature explains the echo chambers found on Twitter and is contrary to that notion expressed by one of my FGD participant: “when I tweet this the whole world can see it”. Rather, such affordances highlight how users constitute their audience which is contentious, unclear and misleading. This implies that if societal users depend on their community on Twitter to mobilise and collectively form resistance, these users’ potential is limited to accounts that the algorithm deems similar. In the case of the Sheraton Move, an acute example of this latent political power was witnessed in Hannah Yeoh’s, account as opposed to engagement garnered by Annuar Musa’s account¹⁰³.

My research suggests that users use Twitter to carve out spaces, forming what scholars call counter publics or citizen enclaves, as identified in Section 4.9 in facing a government run mainstream media environment. I argue that this scenario should be viewed with caution. Even though Jack Dorsey said “...*we don’t believe that we can create a digital public square for people if they don’t feel safe to participate in the first place, and that is our number one and singular objective as a company is to increase the health of this public space...*” my findings suggest that features fostered stripped away the entire point of Twitter which was “*to serve the public conversation*”¹⁰⁴. Typifying my argument is the fact that the reach and engagement of Tweets was ‘authored’ by algorithmic prediction rather than critical discernment in the form of human curation. The core of Twitter’s response to questions about their algorithm was “*we rely on machine learning algorithms to help us organise content by relevance...is an incredibly energizing idea that is within reach...our algorithmic models uphold a high standard when it comes to transparency and fairness*”.

¹⁰³ see discussion in Section 5.1.1

¹⁰⁴ Both of Jack Dorsey’s written testimonies to the US House of Representative Committees on 17th November 2020 (Breaking the News: Censorship, Suppression and the 2020 Election) and 25th March 2021 (Disinformation Nation: Social Media’s Role in Promoting Extremism and Misinformation” begins with this statement.

Put differently, Twitter's algorithms not only calculated what was trending and interesting, but also determined what should be viewed by users. Although the role of the public sphere following Habermas' principles, as presented in Section 2.1, alludes to narrowing the political power gap between elite and societal tiers, the affordances of Twitter were seen to suggest the contrary, by not just maintaining but enhancing the divide between classes. In the context of CDA, I found Twitter's use of the term "incredibly energizing" to describe progress in taming its own algorithm a strategy to rely on what linguists call *pathos* or the usage of emotions as a persuasive strategy to seem credible. The problem here was Twitter's assumption that the only solution to a problem with their existing algorithm, as explained by Jack Dorsey was an even better, smarter "algorithmic models (that) uphold a high standard".

This rhetorical strategy of asserting that only more technology can save society from a problematic platform, in a Congressional hearing dedicated to problems caused by Twitter, was part of the construction of a techno-deterministic narrative whereby Twitter's innovation equalled improvement and deliverance. Jack Dorsey simultaneously ensured the US Congress that Twitter was dedicated to fixing the pathologies surrounding the platform, legitimised the usage of even more technology and drew on a deliberately constructed, coercive legacy of the way tech firms have historically positioned themselves as being responsible for liberating society from oppressive realities.

Dorsey's statement seems to echo Bill Gates' testimony two decades ago when he stressed that "*the beauty of the internet, is its openness, it cannot be controlled, nor dominated, or cut-off because it is a constantly changing series of linkages*" (CNN, 1998). Twitter's stance to defend something that was enshrined in the constitution provided a window into the intersections and blurring of boundaries between the three tiers of political communication discussed in earlier sections. Nevertheless, Twitter's vested corporate interest "that distorts the dynamics of mass communications" was found to run counter to Habermas' (2006) institutional design of an independent public sphere that is concerned with the political, social and economic power of the societal tier.

As a deeper sequence of Twitter's stance on algorithms, more power and control were awarded to data analytics firms. Building on my review of the literature on the rhizomatic nature of political communication in Section 2.3.4, I aimed to explain how Twitter allows powerful capabilities to the political, economic, and digital elites. My argument here echoes Carole Cadwalladr's expose of Cambridge Analytica's role in the Donald Trump's campaign in 2014, the Brexit Vote, and many other successful campaigns around the world that saw the reinstatement of far-right parties (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). Relatively, my intention here was to use my CDA findings on Tweet datasets to uncover contemporary elites influencing discourse on Twitter. My analysis found that these expert firms provided for a fee, Twitter's affordances to individuals or organisations. Understandably, these service providers operated within the purview of non-disclosure agreements awarding client confidentiality.

For this reason, my approach to using archival data was helpful in aggregating and bringing to light the covert workings of these firms (Appendix 2). To avoid circumstantial assumptions, I limited my analysis to excerpts and sources that explicitly mention relevant keywords such as "Sheraton Move", "Twitter", "GE14", "UMNO", "PH", "BN", and "cybertroopers". The most notable research was conducted by Ross Tapsell from the Australia National University (ANU) Malaysia Institute between 2018 and 2021. Some reports have used the term "modern-day colonialism" to describe the phenomenon of a *"company that goes around the world and undermine civic institutions of countries that are struggling to develop those institutions.... a wealthy company from a developed nation going into an economy or democracy that is still struggling...to profit from that..."* (Crabtree, 2018; Jaipragas, 2018). I used findings from investigations into data-driven political campaigns to corroborate claims of the proximity of big data analytics firms to political elites during the Sheraton Move.

I found that the entry of these actors into the Malaysian political communication scene could be traced to the advent of internet technologies. Until 2008, blogs and websites were used mainly by opposition to counter government and ruling party-backed mainstream media. BN's loss of the two-thirds majority in 2008 was attributed to BN losing

the ‘internet war’. This defeat prompted a shift to internet technologies, making Malaysia a lucrative destination for data analytics firms. Cambridge Analytica “*under a different name...a different entity*” reportedly set up their Southeast Asia operations in Kuala Lumpur before 2013. Between 2018-2021 all major political parties, except PAS, were associated with at least one data analytic provider (see Appendix 10). Nevertheless, the formation of the Muafakat Nasional brought together UMNO and PAS in 2019. This coalition was instrumental in the realisation of the Sheraton Move. Relevant to our discussion about Twitter, is the fact that The Community Communications Department (J-Kom) – a government propaganda machinery was reinstated post Sheraton Move.

The Sheraton Move enabled the alliance between PAS and UMNO, a move that would have been deemed inconceivable before GE13. Therefore, it is plausible that PAS, which was part of the ruling Perikatan Nasional government, began using the services of such firms with its newfound resources and influence. I argue that this marriage between a far-right PAS with big data firms awarding PAS pervasive potential occurred at some point post Sheraton Move. While Twitter is relatively less popular than Facebook, WhatsApp and TikTok in Malaysia, a large portion of journalists and politicians are on the platform. Twitter, through retweeting and hyperlink sharing, as suggested by the findings of network analysis in Section 5.1.2, afforded users, particularly politicians and media organisations with capabilities that bypassed existing traditional control mechanisms. As in the case of Pakatan Rakyat in the early 2000s and Barisan Nasional since 2008, granular big data manipulation is an irresistible affordance and consequential social media consumption is, in Noam Chomsky’s (1988) conceptualisation, a powerful tool for manufacturing consent.

Overall, my structural examination of Twitter in the context of media control points toward the reengineering of the Malaysian public sphere. I provided evidence to what scholars call internationalism, imperialism (Fuchs & Mosco, 2017), or modern colonialism (Mahelona, 2023) materialised in the form a governmental power shift from institutions to powerful elites with access to analytic firms (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006, p. 25). Furthermore, using transcripts of US Congressional hearings involving Twitter CEO to expose the

platform's ethos, I emphasised how Twitter operated in an environment void of oversight as was the case during the Sheraton Move.

Evidence of the proliferation of argumentative tweets and suppression of critical policy debates from the societal tier during the Sheraton Move, shows how users from the elite tier appropriated the 'digital public square' to advance narratives. Other countries have demanded answers from Twitter to manipulate public conversation by amplifying fear and argumentation at times of uncertainty. Absent scrutiny, my CDA and network analysis found a replication of these themes during the Sheraton Move. As of my study's contribution, in the event, of calls for accountability, my study could provide evidence of how Twitter's algorithm further enfranchised powerful and oppressed issues of public concern in the public sphere.

5.3.3 Autonomy in the Malaysian Media Landscape

In the Sheraton Move case, my findings on the issue of media autonomy on Twitter can only be understood when viewed as part of the Malaysian media landscape. In Section 5.1.3.2, I discuss autonomy in relation to the censorship and content moderation experienced by FGD participants. While the focus of that section was content and users' experiences per se, here I focus on autonomy from a structural perspective, particularly in discussing the ownership of Twitter accounts. While the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 and Multimedia Bill of Guarantees (see discussion in Section 1.3.1) promised an uncensored internet that theoretically meant freedom of speech and access for all, in practice this was never the case.

I argue that these laws were drafted in the spirit of developmentalism without addressing the undercurrents that continue to exist in Malaysian society. However, before discussing the findings related to constitutional rights, I will present findings on the state of the Malaysian media landscape. Based on interviews and conversations with media organisations, policymakers, and academicians, Twitter had any bearing, whether political or economic, on the Sheraton Move. I found it useful to position the notion of

media autonomy in two parts: media ownership and cultural autonomy in navigating intrinsic issues pertaining to race, religion, and royalty (3R).

5.3.3.1 Ownership

As a starting point for the discussion of media ownership on Twitter, I focus on the “formal institutional features” of Twitter in 2020 (Dahlgren, 2005a). In 2006, Twitter was formed as a start-up and received USD100,000 from a venture capital firm and continued to grow, resulting in it being publicly listed in 2013. Twitter’s corporate affairs since 2006 have been described as dramatic, with Jack Dorsey fired in 2008 only to return in 2011. Between 2018 up until the time of this research in February 2020 Twitter’s worth more than doubled from USD21.9b in 2018 to USD43.06b in 2020. Coincidentally, Twitter earned its highest revenue at the same time the platform was implicated with allegations of misinformation, resulting in Jack Dorsey having to testify to the US Congress several times, as discussed in the previous section.

I do not intend to replicate the extensive work on Twitter as a corporation, as it is outside the scope of my thesis. However, relevant to my discussion here is the ownership configuration of the most popular social media platforms – or “information corporations” (Fuchs, 2010) in Malaysia. Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and TikTok are 100% foreign owned. Scholars have focused on this foreign ownership domination of communicative platforms (Enikolopov et al., 2018). My research found that this concentration has resulted in three concerns: unclear ownership of media outlets, dwindling revenue for local media outlets, and embeddedness of journalists in political organisations.

First, ownership details were unclear in many cases. During the time of the Sheraton Move, I aggregated over 70 accounts claiming to be ‘media’ handles. This came up during my interview with a journalist, *“The concern is that there is a lack of transparency in the ownership and investors... Prior, it was direct ownership - MCA & the Star, UMNO & Utusan, NST & Media Prima...No longer as straightforward... (new media company name) moved into the same building as (established media company) ...assumed that they have the same owners (owner’s name)... Currently, with change of government*

(referring to Sheraton Move)...*funds are running out... change of political alliances - all affect these organizations and ownership (of media)*". I omitted the names of these accounts because these organisations did not respond to my request to publish their names. Nevertheless, the existence of 70 media accounts does not translate into any noticeable qualitative advantage. However, when scrutinised in terms of the number of followers, mainstream media accounts for over 90% of Twitter engagement. This is also not an endorsement of the creation of citizen enclaves as the media accounts did not have any meaningful political, religious, or entertainment content.

Further, echoing this argument was a media advisor to Mahathir. He eluded to how regime changes often rippled into media ownership patterns when he said, "*One thing that happened is the moment a particular party or group loses power, the media ownership changes to another group in power or who are close to power...in my view, yes political parties or individuals they can own a media, we see that DAP has Rocket, Keadilan has Suara Keadilan, PAS has Harakah, which is for me, I think it's okay, political party they can have their own media or portal to push their information or propaganda. But in terms of national media, we should- like we see MCA owns Star until today. So, I think that should be stopped, ownership of media by political parties or individuals who are in the political landscape...*"

One policymaker summed these discussions by saying that the "*lines of political communication have blurred*". She reminisced about pre-social media times when "*party newsletters and national media*" featured competing political content easily distinguished by readers. In terms of ownership, most media outlets were extensions of the political parties that they represented (Funston, 2018; G. King et al., 2017). One prominent political economist interviewed confirmed that "*(political) parties are trying to get control over at least one of the new media*". Furthermore, previous research has established that ownership concentration in the media typically favoured political and social elites (Nain & Kim, 2002; Noam, 2016). As a test to this techno-optimist pretence one policymaker commented that "*... there are news agencies that are cropping up (since May 2018... media ownership is very fluid...we have seen some new warlords coming into owning*

media...they might hide from publicity or the public eye but we know for a certain matter of fact, that the people that they choose are aligned to, people who run the newsroom are aligned to certain leaders."

In my investigation of media presence on Twitter during the Sheraton Move, I found 76 media accounts. While this expansion may seem like a healthy democratic indicator in terms of a more widespread dispersion of the media landscape with increased opportunity for the previously disenfranchised segments of media, quite the opposite proved to be true in at least two ways: difficulty in tracing ownership and homogeneity in content. First, my research finds that there are no publicly listed online news firms in Malaysia. This meant that details such the company or owner's name of the news channel needed to be turned to the Companies Commission of Malaysia for an official search. As evidenced in my findings, this process is not straightforward and often results in difficulty tracing the ownership of news channels on Twitter. Even when names or organisations were listed in CCM databases, one political economist I interviewed explained that they "*may be mere proxies – holding in the trust for someone or doing someone's bidding. Hard to know which individual's interest is being served unless links are able to be connected to the funder. New media are all owned by non-listed companies.*"

Second, my examination revealed that while the number of media 'channels' had increased exponentially, it was not commensurate with a qualitative improvement in terms of diversified ownership or news content per se. Instead, what was observed in the case of media on Twitter was an intensified "convergence or at least blurring" (Carpini & Williams, 2005, p. 166) of not just channels but of content. This meant that smaller and newer accounts spread topical 'pegs' (Jenkins, 2006; Larsson, 2017) in the form of hyperlinks from established news accounts increasing their dominance in the mediatic sphere. Moreover, I did not find evidence to support the claims of free or independent media (see the discussion in Section 2.2). Rather, the dichotomous and polarised nature of political content remained the same and failed to reflect what Habermas called "a substantive citizenship that enjoys independent, inclusive and egalitarian interactions" (cited by Ndhlovu & Santos, 2022). As the findings of the previous level of analysis

suggest, larger media firms acquired smaller accounts as tools to amplify content (see Section 5.1.2). While this affordance of interconnectivity provided convenient and free content for ‘organic’ journalistic attempts, absent systemic ramifications, a functioning public sphere in the form of debates around topics that stood for the societal sphere was overwhelmed and choked out of the platform.

The experts I interviewed explained that the form of media on Twitter challenges pre-existing notions of the common understanding of what mainstream or local media means in terms of revenue streams and discursive practices. Regarding the former this choked-out the revenue that once flowed from supporters to political parties through purchased party newspapers or material (Gomez, 2012a) to sustain content that commercial entities tended to avoid. In Section 5.1.3.2 I explain this in detail. Relevant to the structural discussion here is how this shift of ownership from political parties to individuals and corporations suggests a blurring of these channels and thus an overhaul in the economics of media channels that resulted in an augmentation of discursive practices. One expert said that unless “*we clearly defined (types of media that exist) – we may defeat the very purpose of having the channel in the first place*”. In a similar vein, another policymaker complained about “*reporters having to align their stories to benefit a certain interest...we are going back to old times (pre-PH era)*”. Consequently, she doubted if media on Twitter is still relevant to raise “*critical issues facing the country*”. One prominent political economist further expanded on the issue of dwindling revenues faced by media organisations. She alluded to tensions in the newsroom when she pointed out that “*Focus more on editorial controls...Editors know the conditions...editors are conditioned by the owners*”.

During the Sheraton Move, it was imperative for both sides of the political divide to “succeed in the information war”. To this end, the use of that media theorists call ‘embedded’ journalists particularly in the form of cybertroopers or as an expert interviewed called “crypto” was deployed. Post GE 12, scholars established the use of cybertroopers as intrinsic to political communication in Malaysia. According to Ross Tapsell “(in 2020) *more so than anywhere else is Malaysia where cybertroopers were*

central to Malaysian public discourse... since 2013 cybertroopers were a feature...even (in 2008 KJ mentioned in an interview that) there were 45 full-time bloggers, 175 part-time workers and 750 so-called volunteer activists". Another expert stated that, "DAP has a huge presence in the e-media and has cybertroopers polishing up their own image. Cybertroopers play an important role when middle class audiences do not subscribe to news media but obtain information from the headline and comments". I was able to corroborate my findings from the network analysis at the previous level with these statements.

In addition, embedded content creators can be understood within the context of 'shepherding journalists. The Sheraton Move occurred immediately at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. It was a time of unprecedented uncertainty in Malaysia that influenced tweets in at least two ways. First, most of these embeds would have possibly found themselves to be identifying with the political organisations they were affiliated with. Evidence of this was demonstrated using plural pronouns such as "we" indicated collective associations. Some tweets apparently impervious to social context connotations contained in the usage of person pronouns such as "I", "you", and "me". Accounts studied carried these indicators even in non-political accounts. Table 29 shows several salient examples of this phenomenon. Even in accounts associated with journalist and media organisations, tweets that portrayed an "abandonment of objectivity" and instead acted as a quasi-public relation extension of political parties.

Example #1	
Username/Tier:	FirdausAzil/Media
Time/Date:	23 /02/2020/3.06pm
Tweet:	Meetings we know are happening this hour. 1. MPT Bersatu. 2. Kartel Faction of PKR 3. MKT Umno 4. PAS GPS vows to support Tun M. Reshuffle card being played. Chaotic? Yea kinda, sorta..
Example #2	
Username/Tier:	SharaadKuttan /Media
Time/Date:	23 /02/2020/5.38pm
Tweet:	@DiMalaysia1957 Ha ha. Just stating a fact. Drew no implications from it. Indeed even those we zero followers can tweet. More power to you.
Example #3	

Username/Tier:	SharaadKuttan /Media
Time/Date:	23 /02/2020/5.44pm
Tweet:	@peoplespowerr I think most politicians think they will survive “voter disappointment”.
Example #4	
Username/Tier:	FirdausAzil/Media
Time/Date:	23 /02/2020/7.12pm
Tweet:	“Istana Segambut”, “Kartel” e.g.were not coined yesterday or recently. Those of you who know, know. Some people are sensitive as if it is derogatory kind of remarks ~
Example #5	
Username/Tier:	amiruluslan/Media
Time/Date:	23 /02/2020/7.27pm
Tweet:	Muhyiddin (Bersatu), Zahid (Umno), Abang Johari (GPS) Shafie (Warisan), Hadi (Pas), Azmin (PKR), saved you a fucking click eh.
Example #6	
Username/Tier:	amiruluslan/Media
Time/Date:	23 /02/2020/7.25pm
Tweet:	Today we see either a coup or a wet fart.
Example #7	
Username/Tier:	amiruluslan/Media
Time/Date:	23 /02/2020/7.53pm
Tweet:	Dah tak boleh tahan dah. I’m about to turun padang into downtown KL, gonna march to Sogo, march down Jalan TAR, really show everyone how I feel about today. Although by “turun padang” I mean have nasi padang at Sederhana Chow Kit. Pls don’t make me reinstall Twitter on my phone.

Table 29: Media Practitioners on Twitter

Second, since neither party held press conferences due to Covid restrictions, there was a void in the realm of official narratives during the Sheraton Move. Journalist and societal users rely on tweets from politicians or accounts closely affiliated with political parties. As most of the negotiations at that time were held behind closed doors in the homes of party leaders and party offices, users were left with scarce and splintered sources they could use as events were unfolding. This revealed that the small group with access to secret meetings yielded accurate details and decisions held tremendous power during the Sheraton Move. Therefore, apart from having limited sources of information, journalists and content creators were only privy to whatever this small group wanted them to know – indicating a repeat of pre-internet power relations.

As evident in tweets during the Sheraton Move in Table 29, these users could only tweet or retweet content about the events surrounding them and had almost no idea about what was happening in the opposing political parties. Their perspective on the events surrounding the Sheraton Move was restricted and skewed. Since both BN and PH were using cybertroopers as established in previous sections, this meant that they were already less dependent on official news channels. Most accounts provided a partial view of the Sheraton Move suggesting an “explicit aim of propaganda” machinery.

While my focus in the previous level of analysis was on content analysis, I traced the shift in ownership patterns. I found that there were several shifts observed. First, the task of tracing media ownership on Twitter is complicated, as most accounts are not directly owned by established media companies. Further analysis revealed that what constituted a media account was also blurred. The consolidation of embedded actors in the media landscape mix, formed by fusion between the personal, commercial and political was observed not only in terms of content but also in terms of ownership. This lack of transparency in ownership coupled with increased difficulty in tracking ownership presents of its own democratic challenges. One expert summed up by saying “*owners are becoming more sophisticated in publishing content to appear more neutral so as to not drive readers away to opposition media, but their bias and political affiliation still remains to be questioned*”.

Absent ownership transparency coupled with affordances on Twitter, political elites were able to hoard even more power allowing them to use embedded operatives to control narratives on Twitter, as witnessed during the Sheraton Move. My findings suggest the particular manner in which the Malaysian public sphere has evolved. In the next section, I trace the evolution of Malaysian polity from the colonial era to post independence and to its current state. I argue that the nature of the Malaysian public sphere made it more susceptible to the reinstatement of historic hegemonic forces surrounding constitutional patriotism.

5.3.4 Constitutional Patriotism in the Malaysian Public Sphere

If illustrated using a Venn diagram, this final section of the analysis, would be the backdrop of the overlap between Twitter and Malaysia. Using archival research, I trace the origins of the Malaysian Public Sphere and attempt to explain traditional themes – particularly surrounding topics concerning race, royalty and religion (3Rs), that surfaced in my content analysis of tweets during the Sheraton Move. Theoretical insights in Section 2.4.1 provide the building blocks and context of the three aspects I intend to examine in this section: the origins of the Malaysian public sphere, developmentalism and the 3Rs. While liberal democratic values are enshrined in the Malaysian constitution, their practise hinges on ideological and cultural realities. Moreover, notions surrounding these elements often add nuance to any discussion on emancipatory potential in the Malaysian public sphere. I organised my findings according to the timeline of the evolution of Malaysian politics. First, I present the findings of the earliest form of public spheres as presented by historians. Second, following the contextualisation of developmentalism, I look at reports and documents to study the entry of computing, internet, and social media technologies into Malaysia. These materials provided a crucial vantage point to examine 3R related themes and how their manifestation in tweets during the Sheraton Move could be understood.

5.3.4.1 Origins of the Malaysian Public Sphere

As presented in Section 5.2.1.3, 13% of the tweets during the Sheraton Move were attributed to royalties. Further examination of the discursive elements of these tweets revealed socially defined roles and corresponding language patterns of societal classes in (re)establishing those roles on Twitter. In this section, I analyse the construction of this scenario from a structural standpoint to further avoid a Western-centric, ahistorical account. In principle, I have focused on the historical developments of the Malaysian public sphere. I do not intend to make this part of the thesis entirely historical scholarship. However, a brief diversion is necessary, as a historical perspective may provide insights into understanding the origins of the emergent hierarchies and structures (Nain & Kim, 2002, p. 266) found in my data. I argue that the landscape of current structural tendencies, particularly pertaining to the agency of collective public opinion (to be explored in later

sections), is a culmination of centuries of worth of societal tectonic changes. Hannah Arendt traces the division “between ruling and being ruled” to the collapse of the Roman Empire and argues that this segregation has “kept growing in significance” throughout human history (Arendt, 2018, p. 123).

As part of the theoretical contribution of my thesis, I provide an account of the early development of the Malaysian public sphere and locate themes found on Twitter during the Sheraton Move within these findings. Scholars have noticed this gap in the works (even recent ones) of Jurgen Habermas. Jeffery Newmark (2017, p. 3) observes that “Habermas and his colleagues overlooked the extent to which agency in the public sphere is effective in non-Western societies”. Without giving an extensive account of other Eastern public spheres, it should suffice to lean on Christian Fuchs assertion that the notion of the public sphere as a purely Western idea is “short-circuited” (Fuchs, 2020, p. 207). Similar questions such as: “Can there be a non-European history of public sphere without the Western discursive sense of public rationality?” (Rahimi, 2011); and “Is the ‘public sphere’ and entirely unique historical product of Western Europe?” (Hanada, 2006) stressed this research gap. In this section, I trace the Malaysian public sphere. In addition, I appraised a brief history of China, Japan, India, and Iran in

Appendix 11 prior to major imperial invasions and highlighted additional nuances to the idea of non-Western publicness and political discourse.

I offer a two-fold explanation of the pre-colonial Malayan public sphere. First, on one end of the societal spectrum is common people. In *The Myth of the Lazy Natives*, Syed Alatas described indigenous Malay as “independent cultivators”, corresponding to the subsistence economic system at that time. The predominant economic activity was to provide one’s own household in a hunter-gatherer, and agrarian manner. In addition, Malays lived a communal and cooperative lifestyle and “did not require a formal and foreign government structure” (Baker, 2008, p. 34). Women were largely domestic helpers except in Kelantan engaging in “public conversations and were generally not veiled” (Milner & Drakard, 2008, p. 77). A village chief or Penghulu played the role of cleric, administrator, arbitrator, and caretaker of the community (F. Noor, 2008, p. 158).

Notably, records by Hugh Clifford, a 17-year-old son of a Major General in Perak, were commissioned to survey Northern Pahang, Trengganu¹⁰⁵ and Lower Kelantan in 1888 are helpful (F. Noor, 2008, p. 175). Clifford’s account, *In Court and Kampong* was written with “selective emphasis on the vulnerabilities of the Malay kingdom...that could be utilized or even weaponized”. He characterised Aadat (Adat) or customs as “the fetish of the Malay, before it even Hukum Shara (Syariah Law) is powerless” (Clifford, 1897, p. 139). Furthermore, common people could not own any assets as “the whole country was the Raja’s property” and in some cases common people were sold as “slaves” even though slavery was outlawed in 1819 by John Samuel Timmermann Thyssen. Although unwritten, these customs place common people at the bottom of the social strata, as in the Habermas public sphere era mentioned in Section 2.1.

On the other end of the societal spectrum, were royalty imposing a “complete feudal system” (Clifford, 1897, p. 3). F. Noor (2008) concludes that colonial records characterised the royalty of that time as “predators” who “tyrannise over local headmen as source income to enrich themselves”. The characterisation of the pre-colonial era public sphere of Malaysia largely depends on which of the two ideological lenses, as

¹⁰⁵ now Terengganu

proposed by Alatas, are used. If one uses the ruling class ideology (p.2), then society neither had the agency to question the status quo of Aadat practices nor the interest in challenge the authority of the ruling elite. Alatas points out that the “ruling ideology”, at least in the case of classifying Malays, was “veiled resentment” based on “his unwillingness to become a tool in the production system of colonial capitalism” and despite Malays not having “close functional contact” (F. Noor, 2008, pp. 2, 72, 181).

A study through the lenses of “ideologies of the subjugated classes” (p.2) provided in *Hikayat* by Alatas (1977) revealed a more nuanced explanation of the common people. Abdullah contends that Malays are either skilful seamen, fishermen or rice planters but never for commercial purposes. Nevertheless, these professions require a person to be industrious. Furthermore, Abdullah provides an account of the negative aspects present in society during that time especially of those of colonialist something that was rare in ‘ruling ideology’ accounts. For example, he details accounts of “terrorising behaviour of drunken English sailors”, port officials who “developed and exploited opium trade” (Abdullah Bin Abdul Kadir Munshi (1797-1854) in Alatas, 1977).

Relevant to the discussion of the public sphere during that time, Abdullah wrote about the “the oppression and cruelty of the Rajas” and how this in turn was an impediment for locals to succeed in their trade “and amass profits for these would be seized” (p.140). Another failure of the ruling class was to forsake the common people in education. Abdullah’s account of holding the ruling class accountable came in the form of “local chiefs who disputed the authority of the Raja” (p.28). There were neither accounts of a formal collective space to debate nor was there any record of a middle-class society (p.65). While “diligence and hard work pertain to the Malay system of values”, establishing the existence of a functioning public sphere continues to be a difficult endeavour. This is due to the lack of records from what Alatas calls the ‘subjugated class’ (Abdullah Bin Abdul Kadir Munshi (1797-1854) in Alatas, 1977).

5.3.4.2 Developmentalism

Mahathir has been notorious for his iron fist approach toward any form of political dissent (Wain, 2009, p. 80) and the advent of internet technologies, providing him with both a favourable facade of economic progress and tools to curb political activism in the long run as the effects were seen after almost thirty years during the Sheraton Move. My analysis of Twitter usage during the Sheraton Move provided evidence of how this concentration of power favoured hegemonic forces. However, earlier forms of internet technologies have been attributed to the opposition's relative victory since the 10th General Election in 1999. Understanding this irony, helps to view Twitter within the larger context of a continuum in the forms of control that morphed according to the latest form of technology available during this period. During the Malay sultanate as explained in the previous section, control was feudalistic. The British colonialists preserved the same form of control until Malaysia gained independence. Scholars believe that the process of nation building in Malaysia post-independence is driven by several phases. The earliest were headed by Tunku Abdul Rahman, Dato Onn Jaafar and Tun Abdul Razak. All three were part of the pro-British royal establishment and enjoyed a relatively unchallenged political legitimacy.

It was not until 1999 that the establishment was posed with an actual “epistemic threat”. While it is tempting to assign this rise to the Reformasi Movement, I argue in Section 1.3.4 that this movement began decades earlier. Nevertheless, in the interest of focusing on the scope of this thesis, it suffices to say that 1999 was a significant milestone in Malaysian politics. Some scholars went as far as to call an end to “BN's hegemony over Malaysian society”. This era of New Politics was characterised by the ‘real’ participatory nature particularly among urban Malays and offered an alternative that demanded justice, accountability, popular participation, and an autonomous public sphere” (F. Loh, 2003). Events surrounding the political scene in the late 1990s should be viewed together with the state-backed internet-for-all ideology.

My findings here suggest that the expansion of internet technologies in Malaysia could be viewed in two ways – first, the way the idea of internet was ‘sold’ to Malaysia, specifically the Mahathir-government-led developmentalism strategies used to promote

and implement the Vision 2020 and Multimedia Super Corridor initiatives and second, the political climate in the late 1990s that saw the single party dominance was being challenged for the first time since independence. I argue that the 'inseparable' nature of internet communicative technologies particularly in urban areas posed an opportunity in terms of reinstating contemporary forms of power and control. Ultimately, I trace the qualitative augmentation in political communication discussed, as in earlier sections.

Vision 2020 and MSC were officially launched on 28 February 1991 and 12 February 1996, respectively. My findings suggest that both initiatives could be considered as the state's intention to assert both Huxleyan and Orwellian measures to control the proletariat, particularly the counter-publics sphere which seemed to have found rejuvenation with the introduction of the internet. In earlier sections, using the Habermasian lens I discussed the emergence of deliberative democratic implications in Malaysia. Nevertheless, my investigation of the discursive in the previous levels of analysis has revealed that political communication is part of a broader process and any reworking that results in any actual agency being awarded (or otherwise) to the citizenry should be viewed with structural scrutiny, particularly in the political economy sense.

Computers and early internet technologies existed in Malaysia even before the Vision 2020 when the MSC was launched. In fact, the first computers were used in the 1960s and the privatisation of telecommunication services in Malaysia began in 1993 (Partridge et al., 1995). But these initiatives and political events in the late 1990s served to accelerate and broaden this process of 'modernisation' in Malaysia. I found that the idea of the internet was 'sold' to Malaysia by an International Advisory Panel that included Bill Gates from Microsoft, Imai-san from Sony, Scott McNealy from Sun, and Larry Ellison from Oracle (see Appendix 2). While Bill Gates was being scrutinised for creating a monopoly (Rohm, 1998), both Sun and Oracle were the main suppliers of military grade surveillance technologies (Breznitz, 2005). The involvement of these American firms was part of The Clinton Doctrine that believed in the capitalist version of globalisation and the "magical" power of technology for democratic enlargement (Brinkley, 1997). The entry of internet technologies in Malaysia favoured the concentration of power in political and

commercial interests contrary to the Habermasean goals of an independent, free and equal public sphere.

My examination revealed that political power was maintained by placing those in proximity to Mahathir as the individuals in charge of overseeing the implementation of the MSC. First, the *Minister of Energy, Communication and Multimedia*, Leo Moggie served in the cabinet from 1978 to 2004. During this period, he was the *Minister of Energy, Telecommunications and Posts* and the *Minister of Works*. While no guilty verdicts have been issued, Leo Moggie's tenure has been one laden with controversies and allegations of bribery (Malaysiakini, 2001). I find these findings relevant to illustrating how political elites allegedly abused power under the guise of bringing development to the citizenry. Therefore, it is unsurprising that from the beginning, as illustrated in the next section, internet technologies have served to further divide society.

These divides evidently supported the technological (re)organisation of society. While internet penetration rates in Malaysia were 97% at the time of this writing in 2023, it was 17.2% in 2000. Upon closer examination, in 2000, the state with the highest number of internet subscribers was Selangor with 38% of the population having access to these communicative technologies. In the same year, Perlis, Terengganu, Kelantan, and Melaka had penetration rates of less than 3% (International Telecommunication Union, 2001). At the same time, in the 1990s over 70% of homes in Malaysia owned telephones (Ministry of Finance, 1998).

Therefore, I argue that political intentions to maintain hegemony trumped when Malaysia was posed with an opportunity to narrow urban-rural gaps as the early internet in Malaysia was one that rode on existing telephone lines. Moreover, digitisation initiatives have been associated with broadening 'knowledge' and economical divide characterised by the geographical tendencies. Evidently, Mahathir installed controls right where liberal democratic tendencies were experiencing "rhizomatic" expansion (J. Lim, 2017). Put differently, centralising internet technologies in urban areas not only kept the technology away from the rural (mostly UMNO and PAS) citizenry, but it also "assisted in constructing

a state-citizen relationship” (Henman, 2013) that allowed a technological regulation of the digital participation surrounding the Reformasi movement.

Apart from the deliberate digital divide, this development drive awarded the state forms of control. Foremost, the power to form narratives around the construction of these technologies. Given what has been written by Mahathir’s work ethic, to meticulously study plans, documents, and listen from renowned experts prior to making decisions on his far-sightedness (Ignatius, 2021), it is not far-fetched to conclude that he was aware of what internet technologies meant not just for citizen surveillance, but more importantly, how eventually these technologies could contribute towards the dumbing down of society and stifling of Habermasean ideals for rational critical debates. My analysis of speeches and policy documents circa 1997 to 2000 indicated that Mahathir did not mention the positive (or negative) implications of internet technology to liberal democratic tendencies. For example, the words ‘democracy’, ‘equality’, and ‘free speech’ were excluded and not implied. Instead, he tied the idea of internet technologies to narratives of keeping abreast with developed nations and attracting foreign firms to invest in the MSC. I view this omission primarily as a strategy of systemic exclusion of the state’s intervention in popular narratives (Chomsky, 2014) surrounding the introduction of internet technologies in Malaysia.

Apart from narratives, it has long been established that leaders are often privy and use the latest forms of technology available, as was the case in the late 1990s. The fact that Mahathir, a known Machiavellian (Hwang, 2002), pushed the whole national internet agenda and satellite television must be in cognisant of “the constant distraction of digital lives, that the citizenry misses the larger play of ideas that shape them” (Adams, 2016) and what it meant for his longstanding disdain for liberal democratic potentialities. Overall, my findings paint a picture with two contradictions as far as positive associations of internet technologies and democratic rights in Malaysia are concerned: the Communications and Multimedia Act of 1998 and the abandonment of the public service ethos.

The first contradiction was found during my examination of speeches, which provides a critical perspective on the Communications and Multimedia Act of 1998. While this Act was first introduced as the “Multimedia Convergence Act” as a regulatory response since “the lines of demarcation between the telecommunications, computing and broadcasting industries are fast disappearing” (M. Mohammad, 1997). I argue that this was the first step towards “subjecting (Malaysians) to increasingly systematic, detailed and comprehensive interventions”. This Act is part of what Edward Said called the “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority” (Escobar, 1995). Following Said, I argue that the construction of internet technologies should be viewed as an “enormously systematic discipline” by which the (Mahathir) government was able to produce a ‘Bangsa Malaysia’ (Malaysian people) politically, sociologically, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively” (Edward Said in Escobar, 1995, p. 6).

In his speech Mahathir (1997) explained that this Act was “primarily aimed at addressing the overlap” brought about by internet technologies particularly in the communications and entertainment domain. Nevertheless, embedded within this Act were repressive control mechanisms such as in *Section 73: Offence for giving false or misleading information, evidence or document* and *Section 213: Content Code* that awards the Commission power to control “representation of Malaysian culture and national identity”. It should be mentioned that the same Act provided the Minister with powers over the decisions of the Commission (Section 7), grant (Section 44) and suspend (Section 38) licenses and even make regulations (Section 16). The provisions of these laws goes against the Habermasean principle that the public sphere should be autonomous and free from the state’s hand. Evident were mechanisms to (re)structure society and to deem which sort of participation was “normal or deviant” (Carmi, 2020).

This act granted state powers from the inception of the internet in Malaysia to determine the nature of the Malaysian public sphere in terms of what was considered acceptable and how the public and private lines were negotiated. For example, in Section 8, “*a person who has in his custody or control any program, data or other information which is held in any computer or retrieved from any computer which he is not authorised to have in his*

custody or control shall be deemed to have obtained unauthorised access to such program, data or information unless the contrary is proved". Apart from laws, government agencies such as the Malaysia Computer Emergency Response Team (MyCERT) were given sweeping powers to access personal devices and authorise the denial of internet services.

The second contradiction was the abandonment of the public service ethos by concentrating power on commercial interests, particularly government linked companies (GLCs). Once again, when posed with the opportunity to emancipate the public sphere, further power was awarded to powerful political elites. Until the early 2000s, MIMOS and Telekom (GLCs), were the sole internet service providers in Malaysia. It can be argued that if national progress in the name of public service was the priority other egalitarian forms of development (which were in dire need of the government's attention) for example public transportation and schools should have also been approached with similar fervours (K. S. Lim, 1997).

As a result, this emphasis to 'modernise' Malaysia served to deflect emancipatory notions and placed power to shape the public sphere beyond the confines of mainstream media channels. The findings here extend the insights of how internet technologies, and eventually Twitter, are measured in terms of autonomy from the state and corporate power discussed in Section 5.1.3.2. I demonstrate how the forms of control observed on Twitter are a manifestation of constructs from the onset of these technologies in Malaysia. With internet technologies entering the political communication sphere in the late 1990s, unsurprisingly discourses surrounding every political crisis beginning from Anwar's sacking in 1998 were subject to the whims of the online media landscape as examined in Section 5.1.2.

At its onset, internet technologies awarded authoritarian leaders, such as Mahathir, contemporary gatekeeping (as discussed in Section 2.3.4) tools to control the citizenry. It is important to highlight Mahathir's desire to influence and control the online mediatic landscape during the late 1990s. I argue that these developments should be viewed within

the context of the Reformasi uprising and concentration of internet access in urban areas. While these technologies appeared to have favoured this movement, internet technologies have provided architecture for contemporary forms of control. Considering the loss of control that manifested in protests and the rise of political parties such as PKR and DAP in the 1990s counter forms of power were presented to the ruling through procedures, permits and access to the internet. For example, personal information for registration to access the internet offers greater surveillance to authorities in the form of communication tower triangulation (S. Mohammad, 1997, p. 47). Furthermore, the internet serves as a medium to enable the shift of attention from the state to service providers while augmenting society both spatially and temporally (Carmi, 2020). Scholars attribute the centred development of the internet in towns that are traditionally opposition-led areas to the desire of political powers to exert control (Nair et al., 2010).

Apart from the physical laying of relevant infrastructure, new censorship mechanisms also followed the internet. In Section 5.3.2, during my FGDs, journalists and users admitted to self-censorship while using Twitter. Here I suggest the causal aspects of this phenomenon. I argue that the early targeted censorship of the internet and massive expansion of entertainment was part of a broader Huxleyan strategy to simultaneously hinder political emancipation and enhance “deep mediatization” (Cody, 2023, p. 18) of politics on the internet. While Western research associated the expansion of the internet with “open government state” (Chun et al., 2010; Robertson, 2018) and “transparency” (Porlezza, 2019; Rodan, 2004), it was hardly the case with Malaysia. The promise of an uncensored internet allowed even pornographic content in Malaysia but the fact that sites with opposing political speech was taken down immediately further complicated the concept of an ‘open internet’ in Malaysia. Organisations or individuals producing critical content faced legal action in the form of fines and imprisonment (Gomez, 2004; Nathan, 1989). Therefore, the “democratic innovation” brought about by internet technologies was one that “allowed participation but not empowerment” (Elstube & Escobar, 2019, p. 18)

Foremost, these projects were “urban-biased and ignored other realities in Malaysia” (Zaharom, 1994). Furthermore, I suggest that these developments did not coincide with

the rise of the Reformasi Movement. Instead, as discussed earlier, when viewed together with the enactment of the Communications and Multimedia Act and the centralisation of power it awarded Mahathir, these technologies could be viewed as retaliatory strategies to compromise the seemingly plebian liberating power of the Reformasi movement. Furthermore, the internet (spatially) confined PKR and DAP to urban areas, reflecting what Michael Warner called the “temporality of circulation that gives (these parties) existence”. Therefore, Malaysia experienced developmentalism laden with legally and “socially mediated” biopolitics.

Invoking the discussions in Section 2.3.4, the internet brought about Foucauldian-inspired components of governmentality, such as biopower and controls in Malaysia. While the first computers in Malaysia were in Lembaga Letrik Negara in 1965 (BERNAMA, 2019), decades later, the digital divide continues to be a reality. Ironically that same report states, “digital economy will be capitalised for the expansion and sustainability of businesses in rural areas to increase competitiveness and capacity of rural entrepreneurs as well as to narrow the urban-rural digital divide” (Economic Planning Unit, 2018, pp. 12–18) continue to stress narrative that assumes technological solutions for societal problems.

Technological developments in communication technologies have been painted as inherently good in Malaysia. I locate the discourse surrounding developmentalism in Malaysia within the framework of power and control, as discussed in Section 2.3.4. From my analysis of the tweets, it became clear that the three forms of narratives were prominent. First, mainstream news accounts acted mostly as extensions of politicians messaging apparatuses. Second, anti-PH users justified the take-over because PH had lied in their manifesto and did not have Rakyat’s best interest due to the introduction of burdensome policies especially taxes and fines. Third, pro-PH users called Azmin and his group of 11 traitors to the people’s mandates. In short, while the first was largely neutral, the latter two suggested us versus them narratives. In previous sections, I demonstrated how algorithmic manipulation was rife and fuelled argumentation often leaving no room for Habermasean rational critical debates that involved matters impacting the citizenry. I believe that the indiscriminate use of Twitter by various societal classes

was the manifestation of social constructions of presumed net neutrality in gestation since the introduction of the internet in Malaysia in the late 1990s.

Even so, political parties have continued to approach communication on the internet as a viable alternative to printed newsletters and brochures. In the early 2000s, there was a natural shift toward social media platforms. The continued control of mainstream media by the state has made social media platforms more attractive than, traditional mainstream media, websites, or blogs. I problematise this carry-over because, as indicated above, the online medium audience only included the urban part of the population. Additionally, a dumbing down of sorts was indicated in the form of reporting, which was augmented to fit the medium. Investigative pieces that used to appear in opposition papers were now things of the past. Moreover, social media posts ‘viral-able’ national events.

As a result, I suggest that such reporting influenced the nature of conversations that knit the civic fabric of democratic life together. Such conversations within the public sphere enabled reflexivity important for Malaysians to understand each other. Each time a platform influenced the reach of political content, this civic fabric was either strengthened or weakened. I argue that when more people rely on social media (along with its divisive architecture) for content such as news to shape their political sphere, fewer people are honouring what is important to ‘the other’. As a result, absent a common ground, and growing polarisation as demonstrated in Section 5.1.2 is observed.

In summary, notions of developmentalism have brought about two forms of control. ‘Power over’ as Foucault presented in sovereign mode of governmentality through the implementation of the Communications and Multimedia Acts and power ‘from below’ in the shape of self-censorship and content moderation (Carmi, 2020). In this section, I present the findings of the archival analysis conducted to provide a two-fold perspective to explain this scenario. First, the building blocks of this largely positive persona – uncover the structural construction of the idea of the internet in Malaysia. I argued that *how* and *who* sold these technologies laid foundations for their adoption and subsequent consequence to constitutional patriotism in the case of Malaysia. Second, I problematise

the spill-over of this (positivist) view in the social media era because as suggested in my findings in previous sections, political expression on Twitter was open to calculated media manipulation and in some cases during the Sheraton Move stifled emancipatory potential. Put differently, I suggest caution when assuming that social media technologies are merely extensions of the internet. Rather, since its inception in Malaysia, it has been used to usher in contemporary forms of control over urban populations by awarding higher concentrations of agency to powerful elites.

5.3.4.3 Race, Royalty and Religion (3R)

In this section, my aim is to present my investigations into the link between discursive practices found in my data as presented in the previous section and the broader social, political, and cultural structures present in Twitter's political discourse ecosystem as seen by users. As indicated in my third research question: At the structural level, in which ways do frameworks of power appropriate democracy and how can this influence political communication on Twitter? I sought to uncover, pre-internet ideologies embedded in the tweets. Drawing from the findings of the CDA, it was apparent that the King's actions reflected a qualitative element of the way Malaysian society is wired (see Section 5.3.4.1). The royal institutions in Malaysia are typically situated above the fray of politics. However, here I found evidence that the monarch appropriated the position of a constitutional monarch and neutrality to fill the political leadership void. Building on the affordances of (largely online) news media, the King transcended the realm of online mass publicity.

Considering His Majesty's religious representation as the Head of Islam in Malaysia, this move was seen as a 'divine' intervention. The Sheraton Move fiasco solidified the presence of royalties particularly in the context of the online news ecosystem. The dividing lines between societal spheres appeared to have blurred as the King entered the dynamics of the online media spectacle. Evidence from my analysis of tweets, particularly during the food distribution at the palace gates saga, showed that the King's actions appeared to users as a visual embodiment of the King's (soft power) and resulted in reactionary discourse not just in a literal sense but also in pop culture representations. This suggests a manifestation of the concept of *devaraja* or religion and royalty that is

intrinsic to architecture and forms part of the fabric of society as this institution is enshrined in both material and cultural national identities. For example, the Constitution, National Principles or *Rukunegara*, the national flag, and National Anthem or *Negaraku* all contain references to royalty and religion.

I observed that since Twitter is predominantly text focused, it provided a platform that allowed the mediatisation of “symbolic reproduction of systemic power, dominance, and inequality” that were “enacted and reproduced through the use of language” as argued by CDA scholars (van Dijk, 2006, 2015). Furthermore, in my study of media statements from the palace posted on Twitter, I discovered two salient patterns. First, the Comptroller of the Royal Household used language that promoted sovereign power vested in the monarch, condemned politicians and more importantly solidified the Kings remedial role during the Sheraton Move. Second, using a more evasive discursive strategy, rhetorically reduced complex issues encompassing inequality and exploitation to simple populist narratives espousing hegemonic tendencies, normalising and rationalising the royal institutions more material position during the Sheraton Move instead of the typical ceremonial role. I found this observation to be a relevant juxtaposition to notions of autonomy and societal agency in the Malaysian public sphere. When posed with opportunities to develop societal apparatus to overcome a political crisis rooted in democratic flaws, hegemonic forces, through deep mediatisation enabled by the affordances of social media platforms (see Section 5.1.2), opted to appropriate these vulnerabilities to bolster both sovereign and state power.

I argue that these two patterns should be viewed together with Twitter’s “power to (deeply) mediate political publicity” (Cody, 2023, p. 15). Considering the “recordability”, the King’s actions accordingly provided the impetus that fuelled the “integrated spectacle of mediatised circulation” (Cody, 2023, p. 14) at the palace gates. It is impossible to disentangle these co-production attributes from one another. The King’s actions at the palace gates enabled this institution to dictate the news ecosystem. When viewed together with neoliberal economic logics, online news depended upon, and I argue that social media platforms further augmented mainstream media news cycles. I suggest that

a shift of power from mainstream media organisations to social media platforms and analytic companies to contextualise political events occurred at the height of the Sheraton Move.

5.4 Summary

In this chapter, I investigate how elements located at the structural level of analysis are relevant in shaping political communication on Twitter. I explored how Twitter's digital capitalism logics, ownership patterns in the Malaysian online media landscape, and constructs of constitutional patriotism served as formative mechanisms that allowed elite political actors to use Twitter as a tool for appropriating democratic tendencies during the Sheraton Move. Archival research findings explain how traditional forms of power and control cross over onto the platform and the respective effects this exerts over political deliberations on Twitter.

Drawing from my findings, I argue that Twitter not only normalised market logic backed forms of media controls but also enforced neoliberal economic actors in the form of analytic firms within the Malaysian media landscape. In Section 5.1.2, I show how the emergence of this new actor has affected power dynamics within the online public sphere. For the elites, these firms afforded the power to manipulate reach and engagement, resulting in a bypass of traditional media channels. As a result, tweets were now considered 'sources' of media organisations. This form of curation creates further polarisation among followers. In the case of societal users, I found evidence that Twitter's algorithm suppressed the formation of new communities, further corroborated by the absence of a meaningful spread of hashtags, possibly stifling political mobilisation during the Sheraton Move. This indicates that while societal users reported a sense of superiority in enacting their agency as producers of political reactions via tweets and hashtags, algorithms ultimately determined the reach of their message.

Qualitative findings suggest that notions of autonomy on Twitter can be explained in at least 3 ways: blurred ownership, loss of revenue stream, and embeddedness of journalists in political organisations. The empirical data showed how media accounts

adopted a reactionary stance to cope with the Twitter news environment. The absence of media cycles in the traditional sense, void of internal barometers, created a news environment characterised by disaggregated, real time, and reporting of events curated by algorithms powered by machine learning. Revenue streams that depended on eyeball traffic meant that media accounts simply reproduced content from political accounts by focusing on the here and now, instead of contextualising reports. This suggests that political parties were allowed to frame and spin events surrounding the Sheraton Move, in the form of 'what's trending now' topics feature on Twitter. As a result, my analysis elucidated political parties were able to dominate Twitter by having embedded journalists and cybertroopers. Instead of autonomy to media accounts, Twitter provided for a capitalist system that commodified and polarised the citizenry's understanding, instead of creating a collective memory of the Sheraton Move.

My analysis of the factors surrounding constitutional patriotism focused on three underlying constructs: the origins of the Malaysian public sphere, developmentalism; and the ideology surrounding race, religion, and royalty. In this section, using historical analysis, I have shown that the idea of publicness and political discourse should be viewed from two perspectives. First, I demonstrate how the idea of publicness has been described as communal, with a fixation on cultural practises. Notably, there are only a few written records from societal classes. This created added significance to my research, as I was able to study written participatory notes from societal users in the form of tweets during the Sheraton Move. Second, I found historical records that characterised the royal class as feudal rulers. This indicates that concepts such as 'devaraja' or earthly gods has always been quintessential to the Malaysian public sphere. These findings highlight how these elements remain ingrained and appear to be relevant as observed during the Sheraton Move.

Unsurprisingly, notions of developmentalism that surrounded the entry of internet technologies in Malaysia were characterised as good and beneficial to society. I observed that the societal class in Malaysia was typically identified as ruled, with power concentrated in the ruling class. On the other end of the continuum are actions by the

ruling class that have been constructed in such a way that it was done with the best interest of the societal class in mind. One of the key findings emerging from this chapter is the assumption that social media platforms are extensions of internet technologies that made possible the decentralisation of political communication. Nevertheless, I problematise this notion as I found evidence of increased Orwellian and Huxleyan controls on Twitter. Further findings suggest that these technologies also result in 'hypernormalisation'. In this vein, a comparison of political communication on print, websites, blogs, and Twitter further illustrated a qualitative reduction of investigative and policy debates.

In addition, I demonstrate how the Reformasi movement's use of the internet as a mode to circulate emancipatory ideas in the 1990s brought about even more repressive control mechanisms in the form of legislation. Paradoxically, my findings indicate that the quantitative increase in the number of media accounts and societal user generated reactionary content on Twitter was not matched by qualitative improvement. Furthermore, users' admission to self-censor tweets due to the fear of their account being flagged either automatically or by other (societal) users evidenced a Huxleyan form of control. Recalling some of the users' recollections of Twitter use during the Sheraton Move, I was able to establish how Twitter only brought about the 'feeling' of agency instead of actual empowerment.

Here, I suggest an explanation of the prevalence of Race, Religion and Royalty (3R) themed tweets during the Sheraton Move. I demonstrate that the racialisation of politics in Malaysia has feudalistic pre-colonial roots. I established that converting Kingship into Twitter centred around the institution's source of power. The analysis of discursive strategies indicated that the principle that was a robust form of beyond-political narrative was used so that this institution would continue to exist. This institution sowed the narrative that democratic elements such as elections and participatory politics were futile. As evidenced by the reactions to events at the palace on Twitter, there appeared to be mistrust in the system because of narratives that fortify the citizen as victims void of agency. While the citizenry was not to be blamed, politicians were shown to be inferior.

Moreover, Twitter mediated the private spheres of politicians during the Sheraton Move driving conversations on how only the King could resolve this political crisis.

Finally, I have shown how 3R narratives have resulted in the grand conclusion that citizens are under no obligation to act. They were powerful in shaping discussions that tended to avoid transformative narratives to mobilise and empower democratic tendencies. The influence of this was a return to on royalty as an almost Pavlovian reaction whenever the situation was too complicated, and solutions were beyond the reach of the citizenry. I elucidated distinct usage patterns and demonstrated how the institution appeared to be aware that the buzz it created was a substitute for political mobilisation. Instead, this scenario was exploited as a conduit to bring forth the advantage and sense that the royal institution was in control. Plainly, considering how Twitter logic worked, if the citizenry and media were reporting events at the palace gates, it was unlikely that they were focusing on democratic reactions, further facilitating the elite instead of the societal class. These insights established that the route to staying ahead of reactionary deliberations is to shape the ways in which these narratives were created in the first place.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

In this section, I present findings of all three levels of analysis. While I discussed each level separately in the previous chapter, here, I synthesise and present key insights from the interactional, representational, and structural levels of analysis. Using the integrated conceptual framework developed from my appraisal of the literature, I demonstrate how these levels interact with and relate to each other. I discuss the contradictions and synergies, as suggested in the analysis. Furthermore, I have reported the limitations of this study. Next, I present what I hope is the contribution of my thesis in thinking about theoretical, methodological, and policy issues that confront those concerned with the increased role of social media platforms in the public sphere. Finally, I reflect on the current state of Twitter and propose future avenues for research.

6.1 Bringing all three levels together

I organised my study according into the interactional, representational, and structural level of analysis. Nevertheless, empirical findings demonstrate that each tier is inter-related although complicated on its own. Both analytical and user insights indicate the convergence of interactional, representational, and structural levels particularly in the realm of political communication. My overarching research question was: What effects, if any, does Twitter have on the Malaysian public sphere, and if so, what are the attributes of this effect? Empirical analysis demonstrates that the answers lie in the convergence of the three tiers as observed in the three forms: agency of enclaved deliberations offered to users, the mediatisation of public interest and frameworks of power and control that exist on Twitter.

In my research, I demonstrate how the nature of deliberations on Twitter appears in the form of an enclave. Here, societal users reported ‘perceived’ agency in terms of inclusion, affect and immediacy as lines separating societal tiers seemed blurred on Twitter. This claim was corroborated by the usage of Twitter vernaculars such as @mentions and #hashtags to directly position public opinion to media organisations or political elites and vice-versa. This pointed toward an extension of the conception of what the community meant. Traditionally, communities were horizontally linked, and these affordances

suggest an augmentation with the existence of a shared space between spheres despite the inequalities and exploitation experienced (Anderson, 1983, p. 7). Furthermore, deliberations across user tiers were reciprocal as these vernaculars allowed access to the media and elite users to participate in citizen enclaves. For example, users described how media organisations 'sourced' current and relevant hashtags such as #demokrasimati and #notmypm that originated from societal users. Under other circumstances, societal users shared positive affirmations when politicians replied to their posts.

In at least two instances, users felt that Twitter usage impinged their sense of agency. First, in terms of rational-critical debates users observed a preference for performative, particularly short messages with attractive graphics or photos over substance. This brought about a second reason why emancipatory potential seemed more elusive on Twitter. Users expressed far less enthusiasm when describing notions of knowledge and trust because of Twitter usage. I demonstrate how the trade-off between this obsession and the performative aspect is the devotion of all resources to how grabbable a post will be. Moreover, as established, relevance on Twitter is almost entirely centred upon immediacy. As a result, users' mental resources are occupied by thinking about technical rather than complicated problems facing the citizenry. While users used Twitter to express their existential urge to speak out politically, beyond societal tiers, they become deceitful when the feeling of being heard, by like-minded peers without being ridiculed takes the place of in-depth discussions.

In this vein, Twitter provided a medium for the mediatisation of the public interest, enabling the emergence of a spectrum of representations. In the case of the Sheraton Move, tweets produced speaks are representations of the reality users were presented. I demonstrated that these representations can be understood as *produsage*, illusions of inclusion and spectacles. Following on from my findings, elites functioned to discredit *produsage* and demonstrated a greater shift towards *illusions* and *spectacles*. On one continuum of the spectrum, societal users engage in *produsage* and report a sense of

autonomy and power. Interview data further revealed that they understood their ability to react on Twitter as a 'true democracy'.

While on the onset this may sound liberating, an examination of analytics revealed that politicians and media organisations benefited most from Twitter usage, complicating issues surrounding what we typically understand as 'true democracy'. I demonstrated how these 'illusion of inclusions' on media accounts illustrated the frailty of democratic potentials on Twitter. As an added nuance, I found that some journalists and their employers were on opposing ideological ends of the network, evidence of tensions emerging around representation on Twitter. Journalists described how autonomy to act within private enclaves and explained how realities around their line of work and where they stand ideologically can co-exist on Twitter. Enclaves on Twitter afford the mediatisation of their opinion both as an individual and professionally. This demonstrates how both the interactional and representational levels of analysis form inter-related private, public, and counter public spheres. However, events involving the King once mediated on Twitter, appeared to inhabit factors from all three levels of analysis.

In my analysis of discursive strategies, I was able to demonstrate how 3R issues burst onto the Twitter stage through media spectacles at the palace gates. I found that the possibility of entering the mainstream played an important role in the royal institution. Media organisations curated the institutional spectacle into bite sized news that played on the media cycle driven by Twitter algorithms. As a result of this amplification "Agong" (King) was trending as evidenced in network analytics. I argue that this observation should be viewed as an illustration of how spectacles are integral to the construction of narratives around the Sheraton Move. Although traditionally, the royal institution was seen to play a more ceremonial or symbolic role in the nation's politics, Twitter provided the algorithmic impetus to suggest an augmentation of power dynamics, particularly during the absence of political leadership.

Put differently, spectacles of the royalty on Twitter were formative of how the citizenry shaped views around their democratic agency during the Sheraton Move. The principles

surrounding spectacles appraised in my literature review corroborate, therefore, findings to inform a way of understanding representations by elites that do not support emancipatory notions. This points to a view beyond the interactional and representational levels of analysis to understand the instrumental deployment of structural factors during the Sheraton Move. I demonstrated that this was no longer a matter confined to citizen enclaves or mediatisation on Twitter but one related to media control, autonomy and constitutional patriotism permeating the media landscape with an intention to reinstate frameworks of power over what the Sheraton Move was or meant to the citizenry.

A historical look at the Malaysian public sphere highlighted the way cultural mechanisms shaped the role of the royal institution. I argue that – minus meaningful policy interventions, which played a role in the formulation of the citizenry's understanding of democratic agency during the Sheraton Move, were evidenced by the lack of push for mobilisation and rational critical debates on the platform. The thematic underpinning of Mahathir's speeches demonstrated the reinforcement that internet technologies were intended for the greater good of the citizenry. Instead, notions surrounding developmentalism were used to ensure the embeddedness of core structural dimensions which led to the avoidance of Habermasean principles such as inclusion and discursive equality and autonomy from state and corporate power. Empirical analysis revealed that devoid of these democratic ideals, manifestations in the form of 3R spectacles emerged.

Overall, the interactional, representational, and structural levels of analysis are intertwined and provide a critical explanation of what was observed on Twitter during the Sheraton Move. At the interactional level, societal users found instances of democratic agency, particularly in the use of the Twitter vernacular. At the representational level, representations are best described using a spectrum. While societal users benefited from produsage, some media organisations relied on illusions of inclusions to remain relevant to both the citizenry and elites. Spectacles were found to be useful in the reconstruction of the realities surrounding the Sheraton Move. At the structural level I was able to explain the reinstatement of political elites above the societal hierarchy. This suggests that

democratic agency was found to exist at the interactional and part of the representational level. Nevertheless, democratic impediments were rife at the structural level.

6.2 Contribution of study

My interest in Twitter's role began with the realisation that political communication was not produced in a vacuum. Although social media platforms have become a prominent feature of Malaysian politics, particularly in urban areas, little is understood about their inner workings and implications for the public sphere. Considering the shifts in the local media landscape and the adoption of 'social' media platforms such as Twitter by the political elite, I demonstrated that the political communication ecosystem was multi-faceted. This was further complicated by two developments involving political communication on social media platforms.

First, investigations by parliamentary committees in the United States of America, Britain, and Singapore into democratic meddling by platforms that were popular in Malaysia, particularly Facebook and Twitter. Second, compounding the relevance of the first, is the presence of international social media analytic firms in Malaysia and their proximity to dominant political parties. Therefore, not only were there factors on the individual users or media organisations stage, but also those involving political elites' actors when it came to understanding political communication on social media platforms. An appraisal of the existing literature revealed research gaps, particularly in the Malaysian online public sphere context, which I believed was through a multi-tiered approach. I demonstrated how an integrated approach was helpful in addressing concerns in existing research that presents political communication as fractured.

6.2.1 Methodological Contribution

From a methodological standpoint, I suggest a three-phased approach to understanding political communication on social media platforms. Here, I combine Twitter analytics, content analysis and archival research to demonstrate the construction of narratives found on Twitter posts by societal, media and political users during the Sheraton Move. At the pilot study stage, I found existing methods were unable to explain the complexity

and ‘messiness’ of the multi-tiered nature of political communication. Therefore, I found that a critical discourse analysis of tweets was helpful. While Twitter analytics showed how dominant political elites acted on the network, archival research on salient patterns showed how these factors were historically rooted. Accordingly, I incorporated implicit cues, such as video view count, to explain the ‘participation’ of listeners on Twitter. I identified listeners as Twitter users who are mostly viewing and not posting any comments on the platform corroborating the claims that ‘surface is the new depth’. Moreover, I explored not just salient themes, but also examined what ‘was not said’ and demonstrated how societal voices were algorithmically suppressed. Existing work has mostly focused on typical explicit engagement cues, such as the number of likes, comments, and retweets.

6.2.2 Contribution at the Interactional Level of Analysis

My examination of Twitter at the interactional level contributes to an understanding of citizen enclaves. I demonstrated that, contrary to techno-determinist views, political communication on Twitter exists in the form of a multi-tiered hierarchy evidenced by three main actors: politicians, media organisations and society. As a contribution of this study, I suggest a better understanding of Malaysian politicians’ presence on Twitter. During the Sheraton Move, over 80% of parliamentarians were on Twitter of which only 20% were active users. Prolific MPs on Twitter are mostly male, younger, and foreign educated. Moreover, I presented the topology of politicians, media organisations, and societal users.

I used a time-series analysis of both Annuar Musa and Hannah Yeoh’s use of Twitter during the Sheraton Move. In addition, I aggregated Twitter vernaculars and observable features, such as view counts of videos posted by politicians, to show how they dominated the Twitter landscape. From my exploration of existing research, it is apparent that these units of analyses remain unexplored. In the case of media, analytic community detection enriched our understanding by illustrating autonomous spaces where journalists were situated ideologically did not necessarily have to be consistent with the political leaning of organisations they represented. Therefore, my findings problematises the equation of

technological ease via affordances, and abundance, with egalitarian notions of participation.

Rather, Twitter privileges those with access to communicative technologies and skills to produce 'grabbable' content. This finding suggested that notions of 'new participatory publics' was confined to affect and immediacy. However, my finding challenged what the current literature presents as a factor that favour the reification of talk on Twitter. While existing work showed that levels of education, political ideology, and professional affiliation determined reach, my study found that talk on Twitter is headed toward a distinct form of elitism characterised by access to expert content producers, political celebrities, and covert operations of analytic firms. This also implies that pre-internet forms of oppression continue to exist in the societal sphere. As a platform, although Twitter raised the ground for political elites, it reinforced new forms of gatekeeping in the sense of specialised, technical skills and fenced the citizenry into societal enclaves, further obscuring democratic agency.

At this level of analysis previously unnoticed deliberations of the societal class took centre stage. My research revealed the process of producing Twitter posts, and how Twitter has ideologies that shape how political communication occurs. Previous research has mostly focussed on 'bigger' technological issues; I believe that focusing on a single level of analysis stifles the understanding of complex issues within the interactional level of analysis. This is especially true when the resulting discourse pushes against these structures. Moreover, this level of analysis contributed to the field of proletariat political communication in the sense that it revealed the ideological nature of those embedded controls. Nevertheless, I consider tweets from the societal tier as mediated by Twitter logics and begged exploration in the next level of analysis.

6.2.3 Contribution at the Representational Level of Analysis

At the representational level, my thesis proposed that the mediatisation of public interest on Twitter should be understood in terms of produsage, illusions of inclusion, or spectacles. In this study, I offer insights into *how* and to what degree these

representations construct what the notion of publicity means on Twitter. I demonstrated how representations on Twitter should avoid binary categories as they do not fit into formal dichotomies. Instead, I suggest a spectrum to capture the wide range of meanings associated with posts on the platform.

I explored the ways in which Twitter's architecture allowed the proliferation of personal stances in personal spheres but amplified argumentative posts. While previous research has focussed on what was said on the platform, I consider what was not discussed and appraised the state of rational critical debates on Twitter. While citizen-initiated democratic mobilisation events such as the #DemokrasiMati (democracy is dead) protest and the Orang Asli (aborigine) march (produsage) were unable to gain any meaningful traction, the events at the palace gates (spectacles) experienced favourable reach on the platform. This provides evidence of othering on Twitter, as user experiences during the Sheraton Move differed considerably.

6.2.4 Contribution at the Structural Level of Analysis

My findings at the structural level thus fill a gap in the study of the prevalence of pre-internet frameworks of power and control found on Twitter. I build on the findings of archival research to suggest that embeddedness 3R themes align with historically dominant narratives. The perception that internet technologies were inherently beneficial could be attributed to the historical construction that government backed modernisation was always done for the greater good. As part of my study's contribution, in the event, of calls for accountability, my study could provide evidence of how Twitter's algorithm further enfranchised powerful and oppressed issues of public concern in the public sphere. My analysis of archival material explained how the political elite appropriated the aesthetically decentralised and 'liberated' format of political communication on Twitter. I found the concept of rhizomatic forms of power and control useful for understanding what took place on Twitter during the Sheraton Move. While the internet was never sold to Malaysia as an emancipatory tool, these notions were appropriated, at least since the *Reformasi* movement in Malaysia. While the intersectionality of technology, media, and society has been commonly studied in other contexts, Twitter users in Malaysia have seldom been

the subject of such research. Therefore, in my thesis, I contribute to the understanding of state and citizen centric forms of power and control on Twitter. Findings at this level of analysis further indicate Orwellian and Huxleyan effects such as voluntary self-censorship in private online spheres, lacklustre rational critical policy debates, and decline in political mobilisation as evidence of the existence of these frameworks of power and control on Twitter.

6.2.5 Theoretical Contribution

Habermas' principles of the public sphere and Dahlgren's framework that encompassed interactional, representational, and structural factors provided a framework to recognise and position actors in the political communication landscape. My study contributes theoretically in the sense that we can appreciate the complexity of the inter-play of these actors in the public sphere. While my examination at the interactional level of analysis I made use of the OSOR framework (See Section 4.3), new conceptual models were developed at both the representational and structural levels of analysis.

These conceptual models could be used in future works to operationalise core elements in the public sphere. Building on Guy Debord's the *Society of the Spectacle*, I propose a spectrum to examine the mediatisation of public interest. In addition, I suggest that Habermas' theory should be viewed with an added emphasis on notions of affect and media convergence to better understand the hierarchical conceptualisation of the structural level. I organised these models with cognisance, which avoids the assumption that online platforms are natural and equal substitutes to traditional forms of media. These models demonstrate the deeper and enhanced role of social media platforms, particularly in the quasi-democratic Malaysian context.

Further, I provide an understanding of the relationship between the interactional, representational, and structural factors that manifest through political communication on Twitter. My findings corroborate Dahlgren's model and supports the notion that power is concentrated at the structural tier. Societal users reported the *feeling* of democracy, and generally understood their participation in Twitter as a legitimate democratic expression.

This suggests a contradiction between actual and perceived power among users. The findings from my thesis offer further nuances to navigate these conflicts in at least three ways.

First, any discussion of public opinion on Twitter in the Malaysian context needs to consider the neo-capitalistic nature of social media platforms that operate on market and technological logics. Second, and because of the first, while Twitter offers the promise of publicity of views, inequalities and oppression will be a naturalised feature for societal users, and the highest bidder will continue to enjoy features and affordances that allow covert manipulation of narratives. Third, conversation on Twitter occur in an environment that has minimal regulatory, or accountability mechanisms and moderation is algorithmically driven to favour engagement even if it meant conjuring notions of elite hegemony at the cost of societal enfranchisement.

The study of Twitter use during the Sheraton Move was a novel approach that added to our understanding of the complex realities in the urban Malaysian public sphere. I demonstrate how, emblematic of the state of democratic institutions in Malaysia, commercial, social, and political power structures, influenced the way, in which Habermas' terms, knowledge, and truth were disseminated during a political crisis. Through this multi-tiered examination, I was able to scrutinise the very notion of 'knowing' and suggest a look at the Sheraton Move from an epistemic perspective (Dahlgren, 2018). Evidence of epistemological problems was made apparent by the lack of the dependence and debates of factors endogenous to democracy in Malaysia such as electoral reforms, legislative-executive-judicial roles, and political organisation accountability.

Overall, my findings show how the void of democratic institutional confidence was filled with clientelist patronage factors, and made way for the reinforcement of Foucauldian forms of sovereign powers within the public sphere. Central to my argument was the qualitative augmentation of political communication on social media platforms particularly for media organisations and societal users. For the former, evidence of this trend was found to change their realities to the worst as seen in the reduced income and extraneous

digression of journalistic skills. In the case of citizenry, apart from a superficial shift in democratic agency, these platforms have changed the fabric of what constitutes as public, revamping traditional notions of communities. In my study, I found that the transformation from citizen to user does not entail the natural transfer of democratic agency.

Overall, the interactive, representational, and structural level analyses demonstrate how citizen enclaves, the mediatisation of public opinion, and frameworks of power and control explain deliberations on Twitter during the Sheraton Move. As such, I have advanced two central claims in my thesis. The first is that a technological organisation of elites, media organisations and societal users was observed during the political crisis as evidenced by their distinct use of the platform. As appraised in several parts of my thesis, this organisation aligned in ways that simultaneously left users feeling a heightened sense of democratic participation while moving them further away from spaces where political power remained concentrated.

Second, this points to the validity of the integrated conceptual framework developed to understand the complexities surrounding the urban public sphere, democratic agency, and Twitter. While the societal sphere was posed with affordances for political mobilisation and rational critical debates with arguably less state and commercial intervention, the societal adoption of these features was demonstrably low. Therefore, I suggest that political agency is not born into technological advancement per se. Instead, as suggested by my findings, emancipatory potential requires robust citizen enclaves that concerns themselves with rational critical debates about policy, mediatisation of produsage, transparency about algorithmic manipulation, and frameworks of power and control that are focused on empowering and protecting the democratic institutions.

6.3 Limitations

This study had several design and methodological limitations. First, using a mixed-mode approach, I relied on both qualitative and quantitative methods. While my intention in the qualitative phase was to conduct in-person interviews and focus group discussions, movement restriction orders at the height of the novel Corona Virus pandemic forced me

to use online alternatives. Therefore, a shift to a relatively new medium came with its own challenges and possibly affected my findings in at least three ways. First, only those with access to online conferencing equipment participated. In addition, participants had to be comfortable with online interviews in the first place. Although participants were on a public platform, I believe that it was entirely different to be interviewed about political participation. I do not take the comfort level with this arrangement for granted and my findings may underrepresent this segment of society.

Second, some potential participants voiced their concern about articulating political ideas in a format that could not ensure anonymity. In fact, some users thrived on Twitter because of the shield of anonymity and were concerned about exposing themselves despite repeated reassurance of confidentiality. Furthermore, some civil servants, avoided my study altogether, highlighting limitations in terms of reach and participation due to not just technological constraints, but also from fear of publicity of views from what they assumed was their private sphere. Third, this study focused only on Twitter users. Hence, the findings are may not apply to those who avoid political communication on the platform. This highlights an epistemological trade-off in which I had to make considering limited resources.

In the quantitative phase, several technical limitations were encountered. First, I had no access to geotagging feature on Nvivo. Due to financial constraints, I had no access to the full version of Nvivo. As a result, I was unable to tap into this feature which would have mapped the topology where the tweets were produced. To address this, I relied on self-declared data. Naturally, apart from political elites, and new organisations, not all users declared their location in the interest of protecting their anonymity. To overcome this, I looked out for mentions of places or indirect posts about where users were from. In addition, since I am neither trained in social media analytics nor possess coding skills, I relied on experts to perform the technical component of my analysis. I relied on third-party analytics firms for data on usage patterns and community detection. While I have an acceptable grasp of what was done at every stage, because of cost constraints, I was unable to perform a full range of analytics. In addition, there is a possibility that I may

have missed the analysis of the technical unknown. However, I was careful to avoid a technological deterministic approach to my analysis and refocused my efforts to tease out wider structural issues in my in-depth interviews.

I believe the generalisability of my findings is an area of concern for two reasons. First, I focused on users' who mainly use Twitter for political communication. This indicates that the findings apply to a relatively small percentage of Twitter users. Since it was not the aim of this study to make sweeping claims about all users, the findings of my study are confined to discussions of democratic agency. Furthermore, my research focused solely on politicians, media organisations and societal users from Malaysia. Consequently, the findings may not necessarily reflect the reality of users outside Malaysia who are subject to different political, social, economic, and regulatory contexts. Second, the study period was a time of unprecedented political uncertainty. Hence, usage patterns during the Sheraton Move could differ from those of the electoral, mundane, or longitudinal periods. If research examining the same research questions was conducted today, I believe that factors surrounding political communication on social media platforms would yield different outcomes, and testament of the ever-evolving landscape of this field.

6.4 Future Research

Future research could build on the findings of this thesis to further expand the understanding of political communications on social media platforms. Better-resourced projects could benefit from the full range of features in Nvivo. An examination of geotags in Twitter posts could be useful for understanding the spatial and temporal nature of debates about political events. A viable area to consider is the use of these geotags to study the political communication patterns of the Malaysian diaspora.

Since movement control orders around the Covid pandemic have ended, society in general has moved on and is more accepting of in-person research participation. Future studies could benefit from in-depth face-to-face interviews and FGDs. Considering recent political developments, groups previously uncomfortable with online interviews may provide insights into their participation on social media platforms.

While my research framework was used to examine interactional, representational, and structural factors in political communication, it can be used to explore at least three other contexts. First, future research should consider using these factors to explain conversations that occur on other social media platforms. Second, because Twitter is also used for non-political discussions, it would be interesting to see if these constructs are still relevant in celebrity, pop culture, or religious contexts. Third, the fact that social media platforms seem to be an automatic choice for discussions whether for the mundane or during electoral periods provides future avenues of research.

6.5 Where we are now

In closing this thesis, I offer reflections on why cautious optimism is needed when viewing technologies that offer the promise of transforming the public sphere. Considering this, I found insights from my research relevant to understanding two recent developments that prompted me to ask: Is Twitter broken? or Is it doing *exactly* what it was intended to do? First, the Malaysian political trajectory since the Sheraton Move. Second, there have been changes in Twitter ownership. While most mediatic advancements are done in the name of improving democratic agency, it seems like in accepting these inventions, what we did not account for, was how unprepared we were as a society, to embrace deliberative progress.

Since the Sheraton Move in February 2020, business has not been usual in Malaysian politics. At the time of writing in April 2024, Malaysia had 3 Prime Ministers. At each juncture, there was coverage of events at the palace gates that brought to relevance the discussions of spectacles in this thesis. Although, the Sheraton Move was unprecedented, tremors from this crisis still existed. It has changed Malaysian politics in ways that can be viewed from the interactional, representational, and structural frameworks. In Section 3.1, I discussed how the Sheraton Move could be associated with the uprising the of the far right pollical coalition. During Muafakat Nasional's tenure, PAS became acquainted with UMNO. I argue that this allowed PAS access to UMNO's

partnership with the analytic companies. Taking advantage of this, PAS solidified its presence on social media platforms, particularly on Tik Tok.

The findings from my research elucidate how the architecture of social media platforms amplifies and suppresses messages. Community detection analysis suggested ways to understand the formation of echo-chambers and illustrated how each user sees on the platform is algorithmically curated to optimise engagement. Put differently, social media platforms allow each citizen to exist in an individualised media environment. These customised environments redefine what the citizenry perceive as 'public'. Fast forward to August 2023, Malaysia saw the results of state elections that showed the manifestation of a citizenry living in separate private spheres constantly reinterpreting and reframing their reality. The power of spectacles was seen in Mahathir's racist statements regarding Malay supremacy and his campaigning under the PAS banner in retaliation for legal proceedings against him for enriching his family while he was in power. Coincidentally, the case in point one was regarding the alleged award of an early internet infrastructure contract to a Mahathir-linked company family (Yatim, 2023). Another example of such spectacles is the frequent posts on Najib's Facebook and Instagram accounts, even after his incarceration, painting him as a victim of political assassination.

On the Twitter front, three developments are noteworthy. First, evidence of liberal bias through the banning of mostly right-wing accounts through Twitter Files from December 2022 to March 2023. Second, Donald Trump's reinstatement and other previously banned accounts in November 2022, fulfilled Elon Musk's promise of returning free speech on Twitter. Third, the coupling of ultra-wealthy, Elon Musk and Twitter has potentially shifted the nature of political communication on the platform. For example, the once coveted blue tick, indicating legitimate accounts, is now available for a fee. Previously, users were subjected to an extensive validation process before 'the tick' was obtained. Twitter has also been renamed X since July 2023. Such was the enthusiasm to rebrand that Twitter icons from the headquarters has been auctioned off.

Political communication in Malaysia has historically been contentious considering the intersectionality of race, class, and technology. Dissent, or anarchy (as Noam Chomsky calls it) in Malaysia did not begin with internet technologies. I have argued that reactions on Twitter should be seen as part of the wider terrain and legacy of class struggle and the fight for democratic deliverance. Findings about the concentration of power and the argument of viewing Twitter as a commercial endeavour helped deconstruct what Matthew Hindman (2009) called the myth of digital democracy.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 Origins of Habermas' Public Sphere

Habermas draws STPS from the historical context of late seventeenth century France and the United Kingdom. During this time, public affairs were decided exclusively by the elites in the king's court. This detachment from the ordinary person was exacerbated by the tugging and pulling of power between the church and aristocracy (Best et al., 2018). Moreover, Nathan (1990:622) states that France had an ever-growing group of middle-class business communities known as the bourgeoisie. Subsequently, the bourgeoisie wanted rights and protection for the accumulated wealth. Self-propriety laws were a primary concern, and they had no formal representation in the king's court where the laws were made. This practice prompted an informal horizontal discourse between peers of similar social status, thus forming the public sphere. The formation of the public sphere marked a significant milestone in the formation of civil society replacing the "civic virtue model" by recognising the public or mass society (Athique, 2013; Theodor et al., 2017).

Subsequently, in the 1830s, because of the industrial revolution, France experienced the introduction of a working class. Prior to that, the non-ruling class was divided into two groups: serfs and landowners. Notably, this theme was observed in Asia. This formation resulted in the increase in the size of corporations and contributed to the development of mass media. Initially, this media was developed for commercial purposes. However, when the power to influence was observed, unions and business leaders alike, known as the *Men of Letters*, started using this media for political purposes. Initially, these literary journals and weekly periodicals served as passion projects that ran unprofitably (Popkin, 1990).

However, these bulletins eventually became unfeasible, owing to the growing power of the publishing industry. The emergence of authoritarian states has stifled the explosion of free speech. Moreover, the growth of advertising coerced editors into curating content to maximize financial gain. Soon after, publishing became accountable to the whims of the stock market. Habermas argued that this change had a destructive effect on the public sphere's ability to accommodate rational debate. This resulted in the blurring of the

demarcation between the private and the public spheres. Habermas asserts that, at this point, the pure and authentic nature of the discourse in the public sphere and the independence thereof had dissolved (Habermas, 1984). As a result, political and moral questions are guided by economic interests and the flow of capital. Nevertheless, better informed by their access to printed media, the educated members of society were able to come together and engage in a rational debate on social and political matters. Thus, for the first time, public opinion has had an impact on the reform process (Stone, 2014).

Appendix 2: Developmentalism Archival Research Material

Sources	Excerpts
Digital Entertainment in the Networked World 14 Jan 1997, Beverly Hills Hotel, Los Angeles	Malaysia and its Government is taking a single-minded approach to developing the country using the new tools offered by the Digital Age. The MSC is a pilot project for harmonising our entire country with the global forces shaping the Information Age
The Los Angeles Conference for Investors on MSC: Global Bridges to the Informational Age, UCLA, 14 January 1997	There are no legacies of artificial constraints created and perpetuated by entrenched interests. We offer the MSC as a gift to the world – a global bridge to the information Age that will enable genuine mutual enrichment for our partners possessing the vision to participate...special area will be a global ‘test-bed’ for new roles of government...Malaysia is taking a single-minded approach to developing the country using the new tools offered by the Information Age....Phase leapfrogging all of Malaysia into the Information Age will be complete when the entire country is living and working in these new ways.
The Meeting With Silicon Valley Chief Executive Officers of High Technology Companies, Westin Hotel, Santa Clara, California, 17 January 1997	I also received some excellent suggestions yesterday from my International Advisory Panel. Bill Gates, Idei-san from Sony, Scott McNealy from Sun, Larry Ellison from Oracle,
Ground-breaking and Officiation of Cyberjaya, 17 May 1997	The concept...was not conceptualised overnight. It took years of contemplation, research and planning to come up with a strategic master plan on how we can achieve Vision 2020...the lines of demarcation between the telecommunications, computing and broadcasting industries are fast disappearing.
SEMPENA TAHUN BARU 1992 MELALUI RADIO DAN TV (RTM)	Kerajaan akan memainkan peranannya dengan bersungguh-sungguh dalam usaha memajukan negara. Tanggungjawab Kerajaan memang banyak terutamanya perkara-perkara yang hanya Kerajaan sahaja boleh melaksanakan. Sudah tentu dalam proses demokrasi jika Kerajaan bertukar-tukar, pencapaian Wawasan 2020 tidak dapat dijamin.

Appendix 3: List of Experts

No.	Name/ Designation	Organisation/ Description
1.	Ding Jo-Ann Adviser	<i>Centre for Independent Journalist</i> Non-profit organisation concerned with freedom of expression, media freedom and ethical journalism
2.	Anil Neto President	<i>Aliran</i> Civil Society Organisation in Malaysia promoting justice, freedom, and solidarity.
3.	Serene Lim Partner Director	<i>KRYSS Network</i> Civil Society Organisation in Malaysia seeking to enhance human rights advocacy, gender equality, and non-discrimination in Malaysia.
4.	Tehmina Kaoosji Board Member	<i>Institute of Journalist (IOJ) Malaysia</i> Aims for a free and fair journalism, raise professional standard of journalism, uphold and protect the professional interests of journalists.

Appendix 4 Indonesian Flag in SEA Games Booklet



Appendix 5 List of Interviews Conducted

Date	Time	Method	Participants	Duration (hh:mm:ss)
23/4	3pm	Pilot Interview		01:52:17
22/5	10am	Group Interview 1	New Online Media Practitioners	02:29:47
	3pm	Group Interview 2	Academicians	02:37:25
28/5	10am	Group Interview 3	Traditional & Online Media Practitioners	02:21:30
29/5	10am	Group Interview 4	Civil Society Organisation Representatives	02:26:01
	3pm	Group Interview 5	Policymakers	01:57:46
12/6	10am	FGD 1	Twitter Users	02:05:38
3/7	10am	FGD 2	Twitter Users	02:11:30
15/9	3pm	KII 1	New Online Media Practitioner	02:04:19
17/9	11am	KII 2	Traditional & Online Media Practitioner	00:42:26
18/9	3pm	KII 3	New Online Media Practitioners	00:52:51
21/9	3pm	KII 4	Online Media Practitioners	01:31:10
23/9	6pm	KII 5	New Online Media Practitioners	00:42:41
	9pm	KII 6	Traditional Media Practitioners	01:47:49
25/9	10am	KII 7	Traditional Media Practitioners	01:19:52
28/9	8pm	KII 8	Policymaker	01:46:32
9/10	3pm	Results Review	All Participants	02:38:01

Appendix 6 Participant Demographic

Participant Characteristics		Pilot Test	FGD	Interview	KII	Total
Gender						
	Female	3	6	7	2	18
	Male	1	9	8	6	24
	Total	4	15	15	8	42
Age						
	20-29		8			8
	30-39	1	3	6	2	12
	40-49		2	4	1	7
	50-59		2	1	1	4
	60-69			1	1	2
	n/a	3		3	3	9
Education Level						
	Bachelor's degree	2	2	3	2	9
	Diploma			1	1	2
	Masters	1	2	5	2	10
	n/a	1	10	4	2	17
	PhD			2	1	3
	Undergraduate Student		1			1
Position/Affiliation Level						
	Consultant			1	1	2
	Executive	2	1	4	2	9
	Freelance		1	1	1	3
	Key Decision Maker	2	4	6	3	15
	n/a		7			7
	Senior Manager		2	3	1	6

Appendix 7: Annuar Musa's Twitter Reciprocal Analysis

Annuar Musa Reciprocal Tweets	Affiliation	Average Followers	Engagement			Total
			Average Replies	Average Retweets	Average Likes	
Activist (1)	oppositional	89100	99	148	525	257
Media (7)	UMNO/BN	779429	31	72	213	105
Politician (8)	oppositional	257425	57	167	541	255
Societal (5)	Oppositional	14348	18	25	80	41
Societal (1)	UMNO/BN	6460	8	6	38	17
Average Engagement from oppositional users		120291	58	113	382	184
Average Engagement From UMNO/BN users		392945	20	39	126	62

Appendix 8: Hannah Yeoh's Twitter Reciprocal Analysis

Type of User (n)	Average Followers	Average Replies	Average Retweets	Average Likes
Activist (1)	5477	41	143	1345
Civil Servant (1)	20900	96	370	1220
Media (4)	414650	115	436	1753
Politician (2)	377500	46	146	904
Societal (4)	10445	34	119	452
Average Engagement from Reciprocal Tweets	165794	66	243	1135
Average Engagement Own Account	376100	1833	7465	24508

Appendix 9: Excerpts of Ross Tapsell Interview

Keywords:	
Excerpt/Source/Date	Type of Data
<p>“computational propaganda which is where Twitter bots are created by computer scientists, in Ukraine or Russia or China or indeed locally, or we are talking about teams of say young University students who are given money to put out stuff in social media which is largely disinformation practices for quite some time in Malaysia because of the Cyber Trooper phenomenon...they are often connected to elections, paid by politicians, political parties or connections to those political parties... PR companies are now selling their expertise as a way to try and win through promoting their candidates product on social media of course in Malaysia there’s even a more local context where the previous the now government previous opposition was really good at social media campaigning because the mainstream media did not report them...disinformation producers in Twitter its mostly bots trying to manipulate hashtags, so increasingly when you see a hashtag that is trending on Twitter often you know sceptically I will think are that’s driven by bots or driven by cybertroopers or trolls on Twitter but that’s how you try and get your conversation out on Twitter...hiring people who are experts on social media to work on your Twitter profile...at some point you’ve got to think about a black campaign during negative campaign against you...which often means you’ve got to have a team of people who will counter a black campaign against you...”</p>	<p>Ross Tapsell in interview on Consider This, 28 January 2020 Interview, Astro Awani Youtube page</p>
<p>He “the challenge for people like MUDA in Malaysia is how do you appeal to youth outside of the capital city and outside of urban areas where sosmed is high and... Malaysia has had cybertroopers for quite some time...people are paid money to push a certain agenda...usually it is around election time but it can also be non-election times where these new form of digital labour which is very effective in South East Asia because a lot of people are on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and there’s the labour market there’s a lot of young people who are happy to be employed either casually or part-time...south east Asians are fantastic at using social media so its no surprise that south east asia has been really central to this new form</p>	<p>Ross Tapsell in interview, 15 February 2021 Interview, Buzzer, Media and Democracy in Indonesia, Faldo Maldini Youtube Page</p>

<p>of digital media practice...I ask them what do you fear most in your campaign the answer is usually like a campaign hitam like some kind of black campaign saying that I'm a communist or a womanizer, or not Islamic...we've seen the rise of the professionalisation of this kind of campaigning...there's now a lot of players trying to make money out of political parties and interest groups but the broader concern for me is what happens in non-election times...its one thing if everybody has equal access to money and the same resources and the same digital campaigners and its an even playing field but...its really an unfair playing field...that's why people use Twitter its not so much to reach the entire population its to try to set agendas which then gets picked up by the rest of the mainstream media or even other social media so a lot these digital campaigners they will tell me that they will try out a type of campaign on Twitter first and if it goes well on Twitter then they use facebook and instagram and whatsapp and tv...but if it doesn't go anywhere on Twitter they'll think well we won't continue it on other platforms so because journalists, politicians, academics are on Twitter...we're looking for agendas that can be the main platform that sets agendas...there's no rules around this...do whatever you want...give as much money...they just take up the money get a billion dollar company</p>	
<p>Cambridge Analytica's advice on the 2013 general election was provided personally to Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir...On its website, Cambridge Analytica stated in its Malaysia case study that it supported Barisan in Kedah with a targeted messaging campaign...which resulted in Barisan winning Kedah back from Pakatan Rakyat</p>	<p>The Star, 21 March 2018, SCL rep confirms reporting to Mukhriz</p>
<p>[5:27] If you're collective data on people and you're profiling them, that gives you more insight that you can use to know how to segment the population to give them messaging about issues that they care about and language, and imagery that they're likely to engage with and we use that in America, and we use that in Africa, that's what we do as a company. We've done it in Mexico...[5:46] we've done it in Malaysia...we're now moving in to Brazil, China...you mentioned intelligence gathering as well...we have relationships and partnerships with specialist organisations that do that kind of work...you know who the opposition</p>	<p>Dr Alex Tayler, Chief Data Officer, Cambridge Analytica, Cambridge Analytica Uncovered: Secret filming reveals election tricks, 20 March 2018</p>

<p>is...you know their secrets...the two fundamental human drivers when it comes to taking information onboards effectively, are hopes and fears and many of those are unspoken and even unconscious...you didn't know that was a fear until you saw something that just evoked that reaction from you...and our job is to get, is to drop the bucket further down the well, than anybody else, to understand what are those really deep-seated underlying fears, concerns...it's no good fighting an election campaign in the facts because it's all about emotion...in Kenya...we have rebranded the entire party twice, written their manifesto, done two rounds of 50 000 surveys, huge amount of research, analysis, messaging, we'd write all the speeches and we'd stage the whole thing...so just about every element of his campaign...we have to contract under a different name...a different entity, with a different name so that no record exists with our name attached to this at all...so we're not in the business of fake news, we're not in the business of lying, making stuff up and we're not in the business of entrapment...expertise if the deep digging to make sure people know the true identity and secrets of these people...oh we do a lot more than that...deep messaging is interesting...these things don't necessarily need to be true...as long as they're believed...we can set up fake IDs and websites...we can do in as students doing research projects attached to the university, we can be tourists...I've had a lot of experience in this...we use some Israeli companies...very effective in intelligence gathering..."</p>	
<p>Malaysia famously defined fake news in 2018 with its law as news information data and reports which is wholly, or partly false offenders could be fined up to RM500 000 and jail for up to 6 years. Malaysia's law was scrapped under Pakatan Harapan but a new anti-fake news emergency ordinance around spreading fake news around the pandemic was introduced by the Perikatan National government this year. My point here and throughout this presentation is to argue that the securitization framing has not led to a better society...it hasn't solved the problem of disinformation production despite what some governments including the Malaysian previous Malaysian might say an it hasn't meant society is more likely to distinguish between trustworthy information and fake news laws have</p>	<p>Ross Tapsell, Disinformation in Malaysia: From Cybertroopers to anti-fake news laws, 3 September 2021, Malaysia Institute ANU YouTube Page</p>

largely been used to crack down on powerless often to the benefit of the powerful like the police and military and sitting leaders often and despite the various media exposes of troll farms and cyber troopers political parties and political actors are now more likely to hire digital campaigners and cybertroopers than they were 10 years ago given the belief that these new forms of digital labour is now an essential part of any election campaign and indeed part of any seating government....perhaps more so than anywhere else is Malaysia where cybertroopers were central to Malaysian public discourse long before troll and buzzers became popularised in the region where global disinformation companies like [12:06] Cambridge Analytica first based their south east asia office not in Singapore or Jakarta but in Kuala Lumpur and where Malaysia is the highest in the world per capita for whatsapp usage an emerging form of digital campaigning...John Postill, Melina Lim, Nikki Cheong and others...Malaysia as a salient place for new media production in the political sphere largely because the opposition and civil society movements have been forced to be innovative...because they can't access government-controlled mainstream media...Meredith Weiss, Larry Diamond and Bill Case use Malaysia as an example of limitations of new media given the Barisan Nasional remained in power despite the oppositions use of new media technologies. The BNs use of cybertroopers was seen prior to 2018 as an example of how electoral authoritarian regimes can adapt new media technologies using their significant funds and resources to channel these new technologies....Najib 2008 BN lost the Internet War where they lost their 2/3 majority was seen as the turning point...take new media more seriously...by 2013 cybertroopers were a feature...[13:47] 45 bloggers 175 part-time workers 750 so-called volunteer activists KJ and Tun Faisal crucial to operations and would brief PM Najib in social media sentiment...trained 300 people on social media strategy. 4 work models: the state-sponsored model, the in-house staff model, advertising and PR model, the click-bait model...companies who are trying to sell their product and they will just sell to the highest bidder, Cambridge Analytica would be an example of this...malaysia's case...very difficult to define the disinformation industry...CA for example would say

<p>they merely targeted voters in Kedah around certain issues...and later during this Sungai Besar by-election in 2016 where they worked with BN candidate Budiman Muhammad Zodi...the by election was a chance to showcase to then PM Najb a case study to prove to the pm that we can win a larger contract...it was a showcase of what was described as behavioural data...weren't selling as disinformation producers...they could do it at a national level for a cost of what is around 12 million USD...there was plenty of other local and international who would offer services around behavioural data for a much reduced price...[18:38] invoke is funded by rafizi minimally (phone surveys) different from CA....marry big data campaigning with news information political...[19:44] Invoke wasn't the only big data company used in 2018, DAP hired Taiwanese company Q Research, while a number of other foreign companies were reportedly used including Singapore based AutoPolitic and US based Melt Water..the BN Used orbs solutions which was later renamed resonate asia</p>	
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Appendix 10: Political Party and Analytic Firms

Political Party	Analytics Firm
PKR	Invoke
DAP	Q Research (Taiwan)
BERSATU	Cambridge Analytica (UK), SCL (US)
BN	Cambridge Analytica, AutoPolitic (Singapore), Meltwater (Norway), ORB Solutions (US)

Appendix 11 The Origins of Eastern Public Spheres

The Chinese Public Sphere - Public Teahouse Culture

Similar to the Western model, the Chinese public sphere was born out of the need for an alternative to the existing political discourse space dominated by royal and state elites. However, unlike the orthodox church in Europe, the “ideals posed by Classical Confusion scholars” in China used the “natural law of Heaven” to award “access” through “kinship” to common people to participate in democratic discourse (Newmark, 2017, pp. 5–6). Hence, in China, discussions in these spaces gained so much momentum that government spies were assigned to monitor and even obstruct their activities.

Teahouses in Chengdu were more inclusive than the Western centric public sphere, as they were not confined to middle-class men and mostly discussing business interests. Instead, men and women (1930s onward) from different positions within the social strata participated in the discourse, which included satirical stage shows. Ultimately, these teahouses turned into places of contestation of “mass politics by ordinary people, elite politics by intellectuals and reformers, and state politics by the government” (Wand, 2008, p. 247). Furthermore, Di Wang (2018) explained about an undemocratic twist that came during the War of Resistance, when “reformist elites and government” attacked the teahouse culture by comparing “people whiling away hours at teahouses” to the “plight of fighting soldiers” (Wang, 2018, p. 8).

The Japanese Public Sphere – The *Kugai*

The Japanese idea of the public sphere in 1600 abdicates the notion of ownership and enshrines equality and is arguably the most inclusive. This model addresses what Fuchs (2020:207) calls the “immanent critique” or the “fundamental mismatch” found in Habermas’ notion of the public sphere. Particularly, ‘membership to the public sphere’ was by means of ‘property ownership’ and has naturally attached notions of “unequal access” to Habermas’ model (Fuchs, 2020). Hanada (2006) states that pertinent to the formation of the Japanese public sphere are three concepts, *Kugai* or which means ‘public world’, *Muen* which means ‘unconnected’ or ‘unbound’ and *Raku* which means ‘pleasure’ or ‘ease’.

The members of this public sphere were farmers, entertainers, and holy men. At that time, Japan shared the same Confucian values as China. Hence, religion was not an impediment. Membership in *Kugai* was achieved not by property ownership but by “special skills or qualities”. The Japanese model institutionalised *Muen* or the ‘unboundedness’ to assets or physical wealth, which in turn enabled independence from authority resulting in autonomy from the state. Evidently, this idea is revolutionary and emancipatory as members of the public were equal as they embodied *Muen*. It was only through this that the concept of *Raku* was present in the Japanese public sphere making it a ‘place of desire’ (Hanada, 2006) instead of the “colonised and feudalised”(Fuchs, 2020, p. 207) spheres of the West.

The Iranian Public Sphere – *Muharram* Carnivals

Babak Rahimi (2012) points to the Safavid imperial era of 1590 – 1641 as the formative years of the Iranian public sphere. Distinct from this model is the understanding of what constitutes public spheres in the Middle Eastern context, which is a complete departure from Habermas’ ideology that presupposes civil discourse in terms of debates and intellectual exchanges. Unlike the secular model of the West, the Iranian public sphere is a “Muslim public sphere” intertwined with culture and religious praxis (2012:89, 127 and 132). Religious “counter spheres” existed with “relative autonomy” (2012:164) to regulate culture and social norms. The public sphere in the Iranian sense is a “communicative and institutional space where the state and citizens enter into contact” (Ferrando, 2011, p. 164). Rahimi’s (2012:xii) analysis reveals that the Iranian public sphere is rooted in *Muharram* burial rituals and ceremonies under the patronage of Safavid aristocracy and moots the idea of dramaturgical power of a “theatre state” (2012:xiii) and the significance of “necro ideology” (2012:115). The carnival atmosphere provided the spatial and cultural prerequisite for communicative action to take place, parallel to the teahouses of Chengdu and the Salons of France. *Muharram* rituals are laden with “emotions and performative interactions” (2012:45) that was conducive to the formation of a collective Safavid identity albeit one of “imperial polity” (2012:235). Women were allowed to “abandon their domesticated boundaries” and the marginalised were allowed to engage in “an

underworld of public celebrations” (2012:294). Resistance to power in the form of “subtle parodies, covert, and satirical” (2012:274) performances orchestrated by common people.

The Indian Public Sphere - *Sabha, Katha, Panchayats, and Samaj Gatherings*

C.A. Bayley (1996) characterises the India of 1780 to 1870 as one with active “spies, news writers and knowledgeable secretaries” as part of a larger “system of intelligence” (1996: 58) as part of “a society of mass literacy” (1996:180) before India was colonised by the British. He defines the Indian public sphere as one with a sophisticated indigenous “information system” (1996:8) which depended on an “empire of opinion” (1996:218) obtained from both political and religious spheres because “state and religion were not separate institutions” (Howes, 2003, p. 129). He highlights *sabhas*, *kathas*, *panchayats*, and *samajs* (1996:187) as spaces of social discourse and engendered intellectual exchange between “big men among common people and authorities” and those with commercial interest.

These gatherings public hearings and offered ‘discursive platforms’ laden with false notion of equality (S. R. Singh, 2009) as these spheres were “segmented” (1996:368) by layers of caste strata. In particular, the *panchayat* dates back to 1794 (Chauhan, 1968). Additionally, the palaces were discursive spaces. However, instead of Habermas’ public/private distinction, scholars agree that the term interior/exterior better explains pre-colonial Indian society (Howes, 2003). However, Bayley (1996) contends that impediments to India’s public sphere came from the ruling class in two irreversible ways. First, they significantly dismantled any lithography progress made up to the late 18th century by discouraging “the use of the printing press because it threatened their authority” (1996:200). Second, their adoption of the “conquerors mores and lifestyle completely”, while abdicating traditional roles such as teachers and commentary readers, which in turn stifled knowledge transfer to the disenfranchised in society (Bayly, 1996, p. 374).