

## **Regulating Blogs in Malaysia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The blogging culture has provided many Malaysians with an alternative platform to channel their views, ideas and opinions. The Government of Malaysia has taken a liberal stand on the usage of the Internet with minimal censorship taking place. Globally, however, various negative issues have been highlighted regarding blogs. The main objective of promoting healthy interactions may not necessarily be practiced. The freedom factor has caused many to misuse this new form media and spread controversial messages such as pornography, anti-government sentiments and racial remarks. This paper focuses on the laws and regulations surrounding blogosphere in Malaysia. The study consists of a descriptive review of major acts relating to the blog and three focus group studies in analyzing the bloggers' perspective. This is followed by a discussion of how the public sector can be involved in creating awareness on blog policies and participation in blogging activities.

**Keywords:** blogs, Malaysia, public sector, blogosphere, blog policies

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### **Introduction**

A blog or weblog is a chronological listing of online postings, containing personal opinions, comments on daily lives, or stories (Ip, 2005). It is also defined by Nardi (2004:43) as "frequently updated web pages with a series of archived posts, typically in reverse-chronological order". This new form of media has brought changes in the level of expression and interaction at not only the micro level but also globally. Blogging, the activity of updating one's blog is considered the new tool of democracy and as a new platform where people are able to express their views to an audience. Democracy, however, can be perceived as too much of an ideal concept to be true. Leaders and politicians in their speeches may play around on the importance of listening to people's voices, but how much power do ordinary people have when it comes to voting for leaders, having a say in state policies and decision making? Are citizens aware of the sense of power? In a country like Malaysia, that practices its own framework of democracy, the rise of the Internet and specifically blogging, has created a different form of communication altogether. This paper explores the blogging scene in Malaysia, specifically focusing on the regulation of blogs, the perception of bloggers, and the role of the public sector in dealing with blogs.

### **Technology and power**

The Internet has created a new phenomenon of change and transformation. Scholars like Gunaratne (2001), expressed the view that the power of communication revolution can create a big change to the structure of a society. For example, the writing revolution has

dismantled the monopoly of old people who wanted to cling on to oral tradition. The printing revolution, on another level, put to an end to monopoly of information by the church and manadarin (Gunaratne, 2001). Now, the rising question is: What will be the result of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) revolution?

Future press freedom depends very much on the digital revolution (Gunaratne, 2001). McLuhan and Powers, for example, have predicted that technologies will profoundly change human culture in the future, just as the written word, the printing press and electronic media have changed it in the past (McLuhan and Powers, 1989). There have been and will be particular changes seen in technologies, media ownership, community awareness and the contents and concept of news writing. At present, the most effective and widely used communication medium is the Internet. People around the globe are brought closer and information seeking is made easier. As a result, information has become the ultimate key to power and control, and what's best is that it is all free, all at a click of a mouse.

This new world centered on information has also created controversy regarding laws and regulations especially in the more conventional world. According to Hashim (2005), there are two main effects of the Internet on media industry. First, if the controlled media continues to publish only what editors feel the people should read or becomes a propaganda tool, readers will most likely shift to the Internet where they are free to publish and read whatever they want. Secondly, in countries practicing control of the press through ownership and regulations, there will be greater pressure for the laws to be repealed. There have also been various discussions on citizen empowerment. Brand (2005), for instance, emphasized the concept of citizen-innovator, where the citizens are able to express themselves at forums and utilize venues such as those provided by the new media. Dawoody (2011) discusses how the new media are growing extensively and work within a new set of structures. He stressed that how ICT has played a significant role in response to social and political problems, citing, popularly induced change in Egypt and Tunisia.

In the case of Malaysia, repealing laws on freedom of speech and total media liberty is highly unlikely to happen as the government fears that it may trigger much mischief and dissent among the public. However, referring to Safar's statement, there is a good chance that further media control and strict regulation will shift Malaysian readers to the Internet for information and even to express themselves freely in the open. The data from the *Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics* indicated that Malaysia already has 16.9 million Internet subscribers, which is almost 58.8% of the population. There has been a sharp increase in comparison to the Internet penetration of 2005 when Malaysia only had 38% subscribers and in 2000 only 15%.

Blogs, as online journals, allow anyone with basic ICT knowledge to write and publish text, pictures, audio and video with no editors or censorship other than the blogger's own sense of self-control. A lot of bloggers also encourage free two-way communication with their readers (bloggees) through tag boards, comment boards and even through online polls posted on the blog. This is something that is lacking in the traditional media

especially in newspapers. The simplicity of the software that is required for those engaging in social media is a key to their popularity and pervasiveness. Lampe, LaRose, Steinfield and DeMaagd (2011) stated that individuals will weigh the options and evaluate their participation in the new media. They will not participate if it is too complex or creates a barrier of entry and interaction. Blogging, however, provides easy access to creating a site and uploading content, and this makes blogging a favourable choice.

Blogging has created a space for free speech and freedom of expression; however, bloggers are restrained by various laws such as the *Internal Securities Act*, the *Sedition Act*, the *Communication and Multimedia Act* and the *Cyber Laws of Malaysia*, but with the number of blogs growing and the Internet being a very complex space, there is also the difficult task of monitoring and detecting the so called “subversive” and “rebellious” bloggers, blog commentators and blog postings. Moreover, the popular blog hosts domains such as BlogSpot, Blogdrive and blog-city are located in other countries, and Malaysian enforcement does not have the sole right to shut down the blog, unless through co-operation with the overseas entity which may have a different framework for freedom of expression.

The Malaysian government has shown strong interest on the ICT industry and the growth of new media. The government has introduced policy towards maximizing the perks and benefits of these new media (Salman, 2005). Nevertheless, as much as the blogging phenomenon has succeeded in promoting freedom of expression among Malaysians bloggers, it has also sparked some controversies on certain entries or comments published in popular local blogs that are perceived as being a bit abrasive, especially on sensitive issues. As a result, some blogs are being carefully monitored by the Malaysian Communication Multimedia Commission (MCMC) to avoid any unnecessary content being made public.

Under the *Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission Act* of 1998 (Malaysia, 2006), among the powers and functions provided to MCMC include “to implement and enforce the provisions of the communications and multimedia law”, “to regulate all matters relating to communications and multimedia law”, “to supervise and monitor communications and multimedia activities” and “to encourage and promote self-regulation in the communications and multimedia industry.”

### **The Malaysian scenario**

Over the past years, Malaysians have been increasingly engaged in virtual communities and online interactions. Some have led to positive outcomes, but some of these virtual arenas have been exploited, tarnishing the true potential of the Internet.

In the local scene, Jeff Ooi’s *Screenshot* became a topic of debate when an individual left a comment demeaning and damaging the image of Islam. Jeff Ooi was investigated by the police. In 2007, *New Straits Times Press* of Malaysia initiated a defamation suit against both Jeff Ooi and Rocky Bru. This was the first time in Malaysia that a prominent media organization filed a suit against bloggers. One time famous blogger, Mack Zulkifli from the *Brand New Malaysia*, was called to assist police with investigations concerning

blog usage. In 2008, Raja Petra Kamaruddin, another famous socio-political blogger in Malaysia, was also arrested by the authorities. He was detained under the *Internal Security Act*.

Political leaders have also found the need to interact using blogs to reach a prominent clusters of voters. Prime Minister Dato' Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak and opposition leader, Lim Kit Siang have also developed their own blog accounts. Najib's 1Malaysia blog is promoting unity to the public and shares his insights with the public. Previous Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir Muhammad, is already a household name in the blogging arena. He now owns one of the most popular blogs in Malaysia. As of August 2011, he had over 35 million hits to his famous blog [www.chedet.cc](http://www.chedet.cc).

The last general election in March of 2008 changed the focus on bloggers and blogging in Malaysia. A few bloggers, including Jeff Ooi, were successful in the election and were elected as Members of Parliament. Prior to the election, the relationship between the ruling government and bloggers were rather hostile. Since discovering the importance of blogs in reaching out to the general public, however, there has been a direct shift where the government is now reaching out to the citizens of blogosphere. As well, there has been a strong emphasis on communicating with the general public via other forms of social media such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*.

*Mastika*, a local tabloid, recently published an article about Malaysian bloggers who share their intimate sexual relations with their readers. There are many blogs written by transvestites and homosexuals who found this as an avenue for them to speak on a very taboo Malaysian subject. Among the blogs cited were *Sherita*, *LeeUK* and *Leez*. In more recent cases, blogger *Aduka Taruna* created a stir when he made nasty remarks about the members of a Malaysian royal family. Currently there is a strong controversy over female blogger, *Makcik Hajjah Sitt Al Wuzara*, who is accused of undermining religion in her postings.

Blogs have actually allowed more people an avenue to express themselves in a way that they are unable to in the real world. However, as some of the controversies have shown, this may have been gone too far and may cause concerns for national security.

### **Blog regulations in Malaysia**

Below are some of the acts and regulations that touch on the freedom of expression and may regulate the freedom of speech in blogs as well.

#### **a) *Internal Security Act (1960)***

Labeled the most controversial act in Malaysia, *The Internal Security Act (ISA)* has functioned as the ultimate deterrent, for it allows the minister to detain any person who the minister fears will act in any manner prejudicial to the security of our country. Specifically, the *ISA* allows the detention of a blogger under Chapter III on Special Powers Relating to Subversive Publication, should the blog content contain incitement to

violence; counsel disobedience to the law; be seen as likely to lead to a breach of peace or is prejudicial to the national interest, public order or the security of our country. The *ISA* may not have a precise clause on online publications; nonetheless, a blogger who has published content which is considered subversive is still considered prejudicial to the security of the nation, even online. This can also be extended to prohibiting the printing, publishing, sale, issue or even possession of online documents. In 2008, Raja Petra was arrested under the *ISA* for being a threat to security.

**b) *Official Secrets Act (1972)***

Like *ISA*, the *Official Secrets Act (OSA)* also prohibits taking or distributing documents prejudicial to the safety or interests of Malaysia. Documents classified as official secrets may be in the form of a map, plan, photograph, disc, tape sound track, film or other visual images and these include documents that are being published online. Blog entries and posts can be in the form of text, audio and visual, thus this does fall under the term 'document' in this act.

*OSA* is very concerned with protecting confidential government matters and, with the emerging of free flow of information through the Internet, this has become more and more challenging for any government to keep official matters from being an exchangeable commodity in the free market.

**c) *Defamation Act (1957)***

A defamatory statement is an untrue statement which disparages a person in his office, profession, calling, trade or business. It is a false statement which injures a person's reputation by exposing him or her to hatred, contempt or ridicule. Under this Act a defamatory statement is a verbal or written expression that reflects on a person's reputation and tends to lower a person in the judgment of right thinking members of society generally, or makes them shun or avoid that person.

Personal feuds are normally the motive for defamation and blogs are one of the easiest ways to disseminate defamatory statements. Under the *Act*, defamation is categorized into two forms, libel and slander. Defamatory statements circulated through blogs are considered as a libel because they appear as a permanent form. There is, however, a qualified privilege under section 12(1) for the media if the statements made by newspapers are found fair, accurate and without malice. But this does not apply to blogs. Blogs are not considered as national media therefore are not entitled to such privileges. Bloggers, who mostly consist of ordinary people with personal disputes, usually write about personal matters and are more vulnerable to this act.

**d) *Sedition Act 1948 (Amended in 1969)***

Another act that touches on racial sensitivities is the *Sedition Act*. Section 2 of the *Act* states that any act, speech, words or publications are seditious if they have a "seditious tendency" such as bringing hatred or contempt against any ruler or government or the administration of justice, or promotes hostility among races or other groups. To question the provisions of the Constitution dealing with language, citizenship, the special

privileges of the Malays and the sovereignty of the rulers is not allowed. In blogs, these are some of the issues that are being discussed and sometimes it can enrage some extremists, as illustrated by what happened with Jeff Ooi's case when an individual left a comment demeaning and damaging the image of Islam.

An instance like this could encompass a very large number of situations including industrial action and political opposition to the government. The power of blogs to generate anger and conflicts among people is huge. The only safeguard against excessive use of the law to suppress free speech would be the forbearance of the government.

**e) *Copyright Act 1987 and Copyright (Amendment) Act 1987***

This act protects the intellectual property rights of individuals on their copyrightable products. It consists of the work eligible for copyright, the scope of protection and the manner in which the protections are applied. *The Amended Act* in 1997 took into account the growing importance of intellectual property and information technology. It updated the law on copyright, and included the provision that unauthorized transmission of copyright works over the Internet is an infringement of copyright.

**f) *Cyber Laws of Malaysia***

Currently the *Cyber Laws of Malaysia* only deal with a limited area concerning the Internet. The acts only cover areas of digital signature, computer crimes and telemedicine. Currently, the impact of writing in blogs is usually dealt with under the *Defamation Act* or *Sedition Act*, where the content is more of a concern. *Cyber Laws in Malaysia* is still very young, and the main concern for its development is global execution and implementation.

Different countries around the world have different policies regarding freedom of speech and expression. What is sensitive and offensive in one country may not be deemed so in others. Thus, how can charges or arrests be made for a blogger based in America writing seditious remarks about countries in Asia? Are these countries able to bring the blogger to their home country for the trial? Had a blogger actually commit an offence according to the country's law? These are problems that will be difficult to solve. Until countries around the world work on a compromise and Internet service providers come up with a consensus, the true nature of the cyber laws will remain untested and not fully utilized.

**g) *Communications and Multimedia Act (1998)***

The *Communications and Multimedia Act* makes it illegal for individuals to publish contents which are "indecent, obscene, false, menacing, or offensive in character with intent to annoy abuse, threaten or harass any person". This is clearly stated in Part 2 of the *Guidelines of Content in the Content Code*. As mentioned earlier in the cases and controversies section, there have been quite a few blogs that dealt with sexual issues in Malaysia. In a country where conversations relating to sexuality are considered taboo, there is an increase in the number of bloggers that share their sexual experiences and have discussions on issues of sex. Many bloggers also choose to come out of the closet over their homosexuality within the blogosphere. It is a lot easier to reveal oneself over

the net than the real world. Currently, with the existence of censorship board, it is more difficult for these taboo subjects to penetrate to the audience.

The new media faces a different form of control than the traditional media do. The government has decided that there should be minimal or no control of the Internet and that Malaysians should take the opportunity to information flow towards the country. It has, however, come to a situation wherein information is overloaded and the number of websites and blogs that deal with controversial issues has increased. Is there now a need for the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission to play a stronger role in monitoring these blogs, or are they even able to do so without the co-operation of international service providers such as the blog hosts themselves?

***h) The Printing Presses and Publications Act (1984)***

The *Act* requires the print media in Malaysia to obtain a license from the government and to abide with the regulations. The Ministry of Home Affairs is able to revoke a license or even ban a certain publication if it does not abide by the regulations stated under this *Act*. Though there is freedom of speech in Malaysia, it must not be at the expense of security or social order. This act, however, is currently restricted to the print media where even mainstream newspapers like *The Star* have once faced the ban.

Blogs, as a form of new media, are currently not considered as print media though the way people read a blog may just be similar to people reading a newspaper with a slight difference in medium. Bloggers currently do not need a license to publish their entries, and they are not even required to register ownership of a blog with any governmental body. However, blog hits are increasing massively and the content of the blogs are having more social impact. Maybe the *Printing Presses and Publications Act* may consider amendments by including blogs as a form of control.

**The Focus Group Study**

Three focus group sessions were conducted among Malaysian bloggers to see whether the regulations have any influence or impact on bloggers. The sessions were conducted as an exploratory study to understand Malaysian bloggers' awareness of the regulation policies, the responsibilities that they carry as bloggers and also their views on governance of blogs in Malaysia.

***a) Group One***

Group one consists of male bloggers in Malaysia. The respondents consist of individuals from diverse racial, career and sexual orientation backgrounds and their blogs covered topics from entertainment to politics.

The group agreed that the identity of a blogger plays a strong role in terms of the credibility of his work. If bloggers chose to remain anonymous, the group felt that such writers are unwilling to take responsibility for their work. It is important that bloggers should take full responsibility for any consequences of their writing. In the group of male bloggers, three chose to show their identity online while the other two remain



anonymous. The group also agreed that they are responsible to the society in terms of the content of their writings. Bloggers should realize that whatever they publish may have a social impact.

However the group failed to identify the various laws and regulations in Malaysia that they are obliged to obey as bloggers. Generally, they believe that there is freedom of speech in Malaysia as long as you do not touch on sensitive issues of race or religion. They are not aware of any content code, though they more or less know what is not allowed to be part of the content, such as obscenity, vulgarity etc. The only *Act* that they know of is the *ISA*, stating that they are aware that, if they criticized the government, they would be charged under the *Act*. They also stated that they know that their writings are monitored by the MCMC, and that they should abide the general rules and norms of Malaysia. Bloggers should be educated to write in a responsible manner and do not write lies or initiate personal attacks on other people.

There was a consensus within the group that there is a fine line between freedom of expression and displaying pornography. They will not post any illicit content on their blogs; however, they will not tell others to start bringing their postings down. The group believe that individuals have the rights to display what they want to and, as a group, they are not the moral police with the right or obligation to tell others what to do. Once you start blogging, they said, you should choose to be responsible.

This group also believed that bloggers should practice self-censorship in their postings. Being a blogger is different from being a journalist. They have no editor to approve or disapprove their writing. So, they should think of themselves as their own editors. Ethical values and moral conscience are important guides in writing. One blogger mentioned that one of the Malaysian bloggers posted pictures of his male students in the blog asking the general public to vote on which ones were sexually attractive. Personally, that action is already an invasion to the boy's privacy; professionally, it is a misuse of power and, as a school teacher, he should not have taken advantage of his situation as a man in authority to exploit students in this manner. Bloggers really need to know where to draw the line.

When asked whether blogs are the best avenue for freedom of expression, the group mentioned that the blog is just an extension of technology, an easier form of personal WebPages. However, the group agreed that, with blogs, there has been an increase in the number of information seekers. They agreed that it was good that the Internet is not being controlled by the government; however, they did express worries that this freedom may not last long if many people begin abusing it. If the public is not educated on the proper use of blogs and the Internet, perhaps the government needs to exercise control over it.

The group cited the case of Jeff Ooi, where he never wrote any vicious remarks in his blog, but readers left malicious and seditious remarks on his blog. Though bloggers are not directly at fault since they did not write those remarks, it is important that they are responsible, since they have provided the opportunity for people to do so. Monitoring of comments and tag boards is a start. One of the bloggers even mentioned that he

moderates his tag board because he does not want the public to use the tag board as a battleground for religious or sexual issues.

In the end, the group agreed that it is good that there is minimal monitoring and moderation because there are still the deviant few who may not use the blog positively. Aside from the various regulations that exist, the group proposed that there is a need to provide guidelines to bloggers as to what is suitable to be posted in the web.

**b) Group Two**

Group two consisted of female bloggers in Malaysia. The respondents were individuals with diverse careers and interests, and their blogs mostly cover topics of daily life, family and their personal outlooks on the world issues.

When asked whether they are true to themselves in their blogs, all the respondents said yes. However, almost all of them kept their identity secret, and choose to remain anonymous by using nick names in their blogs. Only one of the bloggers used her real name as she is using her blog to keep in touch with her circle of friends. One of the bloggers had a blog revealing her true identity at first, but was forced to shut it down because she realized that by disclosing her personal activities in the blog, she had somehow invited a stalker. Now she has started a new blog and decided to remain anonymous.

This group agreed that blogging is not just an urban phenomenon. With a basic knowledge of ICT and an Internet connection, anyone can become a blogger. One of the bloggers stressed that blogging has nothing to do with an urban and rural knowledge gap. She cited housewives and old folks from small villages and rural areas who are also bloggers. This group agreed that, if people have the interest and later became addicted to blogging, they will continue to blog no matter where or how old they are.

All of the bloggers in this group share the same opinion when it comes to discussing the positive and negative aspects of blogs. They concurred that freedom of expression provided by blogs can be misused, and that it depends on the bloggers themselves to be responsible and accountable for what they write and publish in their blogs. They all agreed that pornographic and sexually illicit blogs are a disgrace to the blogosphere and that these kinds of blogs should be shut down. The group agreed that there should be some regulations against these kinds of blogs. They said that it is upsetting that, although the media had highlighted negative blogs such as *Mastika*, the government has not taken action against it. On the contrary, the government is more concerned with monitoring blogs that play on issues sensitive to the government.

On a positive side, this group highlighted that the blog phenomenon has promoted some freedom of speech, if not entirely. They feel free to discuss and write about anything in their blogs. One even said that the government has no right to detain a blogger under the *Defamation Act* because the Internet and blog is all about freedom of expression. However, she also said that it all depends on how receptive one is on an issue discussed. If one person thinks that a topic on sex is okay to be discussed, then it will be okay. If the

government thinks that critical comments can improve its performance, then it should accept criticism with respect.

This group has some knowledge of laws that they think could affect bloggers such as the *ISA*, *Defamation Act* and *Sedition Act*. However, all of them are still unsure about their scope and how much power these acts have in the cyber world. All of them agreed that *Malaysian Cyber Laws* are still not strong, and there are still many loopholes in the clauses which touched more on copyrights and intellectual rights rather than on the content.

This group believed that, as long as bloggers take responsibility for what they write and maintain their integrity in cyberspace, they should not be afraid of the laws. With the freedom given, they should be more responsible. However, this responsibility depends on the bloggers themselves, and because of that, one of the bloggers said that Malaysia needed a special law on blogging as a basic guideline to prevent violation of this responsibility.

On discussing whether bloggers enjoyed full freedom of speech, some agreed with the statement. However, one said that she believes in guided democracy. Although blogs are powerful communication tools, and people are free to blog about any topic, Malaysians are not ready to be open about some issues. This is mainly because our actions are still confined by certain regulations. In addition, Malaysians are not ready to be open about some topics due to our cultural and social upbringing that is full of moral values and committed to certain ethics and principles.

As a conclusion, all the bloggers agreed that the blogging phenomenon will continue to be popular as long as there are no strict regulations that could limit the contents. If not, blogging can only survive in countries exercising total freedom of speech and expression. The group also agreed that there should be certain controls especially regarding obscene and illicit content and that Malaysia should initiate some basic regulation of blogs. As a whole, blogging is seen as a positive trend and, as long as bloggers are responsible and behave ethically, they can be good bloggers.

**c) *Group Three***

This group was composed of both male and female bloggers who write about film, football and daily life activities.

A blogger stated that the more mature bloggers tend to emphasize quality writing and discuss more critical issues. He even mentioned that Lim Kit Siang and Jeff Ooi are popular with both local and international audiences.

When asked whether they are aware of the regulations and laws limiting them in their writing, the group clearly stated that, as long as you do not criticize the government, or write about anything racially or religiously offensive than you are safe. The *ISA* was again mentioned as the biggest act one can be charged under for any malicious writing. A few of them stated their knowledge of the *Communications and Multimedia Act*; but, they

were not aware of what the *act* covers. One knew that there is no *Obscenity Act* in Malaysia but that this is addressed in the *Communications and Multimedia Act* under the *Content Code*.

One of the bloggers highlighted the interesting fact that MCMC is unable to ban certain blogs because the blog hosts are not in Malaysia. For example, as mentioned earlier, blog hosts such as BlogSpot, Blog-city and Blog-drive are not based in Malaysia and are therefore not confined to the national laws of Malaysia. MCMC is only allowed to intervene with blogs registered in Malaysia. Unless they obtain the co-operation of these hosts, therefore, they will be unable to curb the problems that arise.

There was a debate on whether one is still considered an ethical blogger if one does not disclose one's identity. One blogger mentioned that it is not the identity of blogger that is important but it is more his or her writing. The writing should speak for itself regardless of physical features or celebrity status.

The group admitted that they do visit blogs with sexual content. They feel that individuals have the right to express themselves as long as they do not hurt others. They do, however, feel that they will not write about this of material and that they have already established a niche group of readers relating to their subject matter. They read these blogs just for fun and for the sake of reading, and they are very amazed with the content of these blogs. Among the sexual blogs mentioned were *Blown Away to Heaven* and *Bakerina*.

All the bloggers admitted to practicing self-censorship and using moral conscience and common sense as their guide, also knowing the social structure of the Malaysian community. However, they will never preach to others in terms of what should or should not be written. If one can write in a blog than one should know that his or her writing may have impacts on others.

They agreed that Malaysians need to be more open minded in accepting blogs as a new and powerful tool for communication. Many felt that Malaysians get offended with petty things and things that lack substance. Malaysians should also look at the bigger picture when criticizing certain issues. When we get overly sensitive and everyone tries to be territorial, it worsens the situation even more. We need to be able to accept that blogs provide alternative ideas and not necessarily negative ideas. Bloggers, too, should be more considerate in writing their contents, and should refer to the proper content code. Bloggers should be reminded that whatever is illegal offline should also be illegal online.

The group stressed that there should not be a guideline for bloggers. The current regulations are sufficient though they are not directly focused on blogging. There should be self-expression. Technically, there is already a guideline when you agree to the contract with your blog host. Guidelines are again open to various interpretations, and they can even create more tension when people are told as to what to do.

## **Discussion**

From the discussions with the focus groups, there was a consensus over the importance of the existence of MCMC for monitoring and controlling Internet usage. However, there was also a strong emphasis that the role should be kept to a minimum. With regard to having a blogger's guideline in blogging, most probably being laid down by MCMC, the comments were split. Some acknowledged the importance of a code of ethics, while others believed that it should be self-guided and individuals make judgements over what is appropriate and what is not.

Some insisted that blogs should remain free, a true avenue for self-expression in Malaysia, and condemned the proposal of a guideline. They did not want to be limited by a regulatory body. Another group felt that there should be some guidelines to create order within the blogosphere. Could a guideline or strict censorship bring new life to blogs or should bloggers be educated to know what is right or wrong within our society? Possibly an ethical guideline would be an appropriate form of manual for bloggers to know the importance of self-censorship.

In 2007, the Deputy Minister of Energy, Waterworks and Communication, Datuk Shaziman Mansor, stated that the government does not plan to enact a new law in response to the growth of blogging in Malaysia. He emphasized the importance of self-censorship. Though to date there is no specific law on blogging, MCMC is still active in monitoring blogging activities. In 2010, MCMC shut down over 80 websites which featured sensitive content. MCMC has also had cooperation from other blog hosts and YouTube in dealing with these problems.

In 2011, the Information Communication and Culture Deputy Minister, Datuk Joseph Salang Gandum encouraged participations from the general public in filing and lodging complaints about websites (including blogs) that are deemed inappropriate for the Malaysian public. Having a complaint bureau allows participants to make complaints easily to the authoritative body. Among the avenues provided for the public to lodge a complaint is the MCMC Complaints Bureau ([aduan.skmm.gov.my](http://aduan.skmm.gov.my)), the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Content Forum (CMCF-[www.cmcf.my](http://www.cmcf.my)) and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Consumer Forum (CfM-[www.cfm.org.my](http://www.cfm.org.my)). This is a progressive move, and brings the public closer to the authoritative bodies. There is a point of contact to address such an issue.

With some of the concerns raised on issues of credibility and identity, the national television broadcaster of Malaysia, Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) has initiated a television program called *Blog@1* on its main channel. *Blog@1* is a weekly talk show that invites bloggers as guests or members of panels to discuss issues relating to blogs or about the content of their blogs. In an innovative move, RTM invited bloggers from various backgrounds and blogging genres to bring them closer to the general audience. Controversial bloggers also had guest spots in the locally produced show. This is an interesting approach toward merging both the traditional and new media as both have strong and distinctive audiences. Bloggers need to reveal their identity when appearing on this television show, which emphasized the need to owning up to one's own writings.

RTM and MCMC could work together in creating a public forum for deliberative democracy. D'Agostino, Schwester and Holzer (2006) promote the concept of the electronic town meeting of AmericaSpeaks, which allows for greater citizen participation in giving their feedback on issues or policies. RTM has given bloggers a voice through the television show and a future collaboration with MCMC could lead to a bloggers' town hall meeting to discuss future prospects of blogging in Malaysia.

Malaysia has also been taking a proactive stance on working with bloggers, The recent "World Bloggers and Social Media Summit 2011" which was held in June 2011, in Kuala Lumpur, shows that government is making an effort to work together with bloggers. This type of forum allows individuals to be more interactive and permits intellectual discussions on issues surrounding the blog phenomenon. This is also a move toward educating the public on the role of blogs and their capabilities.

Many of the younger generation are now exposed to blogging, and they should be aware of the policies surrounding blogs. They should not only be told that it is wrong to write malicious lies or vulgar words, but they should also know the reason as to why they are not supposed to write on sensitive or offensive matters. To resolve this issue is not a matter of ALT+F4, but actually going back to the roots of their educational, social and spiritual background and educating them about the rationale and importance of these policies.

The blogging phenomenon, along with other social media, has affected some of mainstream media's outlook towards journalism. More importantly, blogs have become one of journalism's main sources for news. Blogs are quoted by mainstream media and sometimes are the first to break news to the public. Although journalists may use blogs as news reference, it should be noted that Twitter is arguably more popular among journalists for the purpose of news sourcing. In any case, the wedding of Malaysia's then Prime Minister Dato' Abdullah Badawi is a pertinent example. It was announced in Jeff Ooi's blog before it was reported in the mainstream media. The speed of social media as a news source is primarily because of the non-existent editorial policy and the consequent capacity to expedite the news reporting process, unlike the traditional journalism practices and protocols. This may also have altered news consumption patterns, for audience may no longer be dependent on mainstream media for news.

The changes in technology and the blogging arena have also changed the Malaysian government's approaches and policies, particularly in relation to freedom of speech. Although the government now seems more relaxed than before when addressing critical views expressed in blogs, there are constant reminders of the law and the importance of self-censorship when blogging that are often expressed in official forums. Furthermore, as discussed earlier in this article, citizen empowerment through ICT can result in social and political instability; therefore the government has taken measures to embrace blogs and bloggers as part of national democracy, trying to improve their approach to address issues more transparently. This is of course, a strategic move for the government to advance forward into the future of social media.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, most bloggers are still unaware of the regulations that they are obliged to follow; but, they are generally aware of constraints on their writing where certain large issues such as race, religion and sexuality are concerned. It was also agreed that bloggers should be ethical in their writings and should take full responsibility for them. It is strongly advised that bloggers actually practice self-censorship and know whether their writings will offend anybody. Though the freedom of bloggers can be differentiated from those of a journalist, a blogger should be well educated and ethical in making judgments and criticisms in their writings. There is a strong need for the public sector to educate bloggers on the roles that they play and on the issues of regulations concerning blogging in Malaysia.

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