Occupying the Internet: Responding to the Shifting Power Balance

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ABSTRACT This paper examines how the internet and information communication technology have resulted in a shift in power with regard to who defines and controls content for consumption. Individuals can now take on established institutions in defining and constructing reality; and with the much lower entry point for just about anybody to be a publisher, the traditional media are being contested as never before. At the same time, this shift in power has meant it is also easier to hold media accountable—not a bad thing at all for democracy.

KEY WORDS: internet, online, media, power, The Nut Graph, MalaysiaVotes.com, 8 March, Malaysia, general election, control

Introduction

My favourite question while I was covering the March 2008 general elections for MalaysiaVotes.com was ‘Where’s your headquarters?’, followed by ‘Where’s your office?’ It was perhaps revealing that these questions came from journalists from the traditional media. MalaysiaVotes, comprising three journalists, had no headquarters. We did not need one. Our office was wherever we could access the internet, whether it was home, an internet café or on the ceramah trail somewhere if we had a mobile broadband connection.

After working as a journalist for 14 years in the traditional print media, one of the most startling discoveries I made when I quit print in early 2008 to establish an online news site was the fact that it had become so easy for me to publish. MalaysiaVotes was set up on a limited budget. Using our own cell phones, digital cameras, laptops, free WiFi, some knowledge of WordPress.com, and the combined experience and skills of three seasoned journalists, we launched the site in just a week so that we could cover the 2008 elections.

We had no clue when we started, of course, that the elections would prove historic. In the beginning of MalaysiaVotes, what was most significant for me as a journalist was just how easy it had become for me to publish with so little institutional support;
and even though we had neither this nor big branding behind us, we were read and, in some critical circles, respected. Saying that the internet has changed the media landscape and the way journalists work would be stating the obvious. Both have already happened and will continue to happen. Even back in the late 1990s, when Malaysiakini was launched and quickly became the leading trailblazer in online news reporting, the traditional media already knew things were changing and that we, too, had to change.

I am reminded of a quote that a professional acquaintance from the advertising industry shared with me in 2008 with regards to change. ‘It’s not the strongest or the most intelligent who survive, but the one who is most adaptable to change’, Prashant Kumar, Universal McCann’s chief executive officer said to me. This would be true not just in today’s world—it has always been true.

As a journalist and the co-founder of first MalaysiaVotes and then The Nut Graph, what interests me is how power has shifted from the traditional to the new, from big capital to angel investors, from institutions to individuals, from governments to the people. And as power shifts—sometimes in expected ways, and sometimes unexpectedly, such as the way Malaysians voted in March 2008—how have the different stakeholders, whether citizens, the government or the marketplace, responded? And how do journalists and the media themselves engage in and respond to these changes? As we move forward, the other critical question I have is this: As media practitioners, what values and principles need to underlie the work journalists do in a demanding environment that is marked by rapid changes in technology, expectations and power relationships?

Who Controls Content?

What is clear is that neither established media organisations nor the government is totally in control of content any more. Those who work online know that the power has shifted from establishments to individuals. With the power of the internet and the affordability of gadgets, anyone with minimum resources can define, write and publish the news, as MalaysiaVotes amply demonstrated to me.

At a time when demand for news was at an all time high, even a small and new outfit such as MalaysiaVotes could garner readership. The site received more than 61,000 page views and about 18,000 unique visitors in the seven days after it was launched. Our daily average of 2,200 unique visitors in February 2008 went up to 4,500 in March. On 8 March, the day Malaysians went to the polls, we had nearly 7,400 unique visitors. Hence, the power of defining what the news is, and to some extent also what the ‘truth’ is, no longer belongs to an elite few. Indeed, there was already ample evidence that, even before the 8 March elections, individuals already had the power to publish their own ‘truths’, hence circumventing traditional controls on the media and undermining the communications of the powers-that-be. Several examples spring to mind.

The Bersih Rally

The traditional media were told they could not report on the 10 November 2007 rally that called for free and fair elections before, during, or after the event. In the week
after the rally, because of the political climate and the scrutiny to which the paper I was writing for was subjected, my editor was compelled to plead with me not to write anything about Bersih in my *Shape of a Pocket* column. I was also not to mention ‘yellow’ (yellow is the colour of the Malaysian monarchy and the Bersih organisers appealed to marchers to wear that colour as a mark of respect to the King), ‘free and fair elections’, how big the crowd was, and how the police had arrested people and dispersed marchers with chemical-laced water jets. I was instead told, in desperation, to ‘write about the weather’. That resulted in my 15 November 2007 column in *The Sun*, ‘Not everyone needs to demonstrate, please’, in which I took on a satirical Paris Hilton-esque persona in order to expose what happened during the rally. To *The Sun*’s and my editor’s credit, my column was published with not a word removed or changed.

In a climate where the media were allowed to cite only official sources, most reports in the traditional media before the rally could only quote the police as saying that they would take stern action against the demonstrators. After the rally, the same rule applied. Those in the traditional press defied the ruling at the expense of losing printing permits—not at all a pretty or acceptable prospect for any media outfit that wanted to stay the course from both the journalistic and business perspectives. Hence, the day after the rally, the traditional media quoted the Inspector-General of Police as saying simply that there were only 4,000 demonstrators; but the pictures on the internet told a different story altogether. These photos, taken and published by citizens, and supported by coverage from *Al-Jazeera*, clearly showed a much larger crowd, possibly 10 times as large. Additionally, *Al-Jazeera’s* live reports of the demonstration, which was eventually distributed virally on *YouTube*, also showed the use of heavy-handed police tactics in dispersing the marchers.

In his 2008 paper ‘Successful role of the internet in the 2008 general election’, Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research Director Ibrahim Suffian noted the following:

Aside from appearing in numerous online photo galleries and shared among those participating in social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, the more creative activists began posting videos of the event as well as making feature presentations of the event, many of which caricatured and made ruling leaders the object of humour for their apparent powerlessness in halting the will of the public. In one case, the on-air clip as well as the transcript of the interview between the Malaysian minister of information and the international news channel *Al-Jazeera* became the *de rigueur* item to be forwarded—as an object of humour at the minister’s poor grasp of English and his blasé statement that ‘we are not stopping them to demonstrate’ at a time when the visual showed riot police in full gear pummelling pro-democracy marchers and spraying them with chemical-laced water.

Indeed, it was not only the Bersih rally that benefited from different perspectives of what transpired on the ground. The Hindraf rally of 26 November 2008, held two weeks after the Bersih rally, also saw individuals taking control of what content would reach the masses. Merdeka Centre’s Ibrahim describes the phenomenon of the 30,000-strong Hindraf demonstration, in the same paper, thus:
Likewise, cheap and widely available technology in the form of the cell phone camera made each bystander and participant a witness and documenter of events. As the day wore on, charges emerged that the riot police, in their attempts to disperse groups of protestors had shot tear gas canisters into a Hindu temple where they were sheltering. These charges were denied by the government but within hours there emerged video postings on YouTube showing the contrary. Such video postings became a standard feature for most civil society and opposition campaigns. In the case of the Hindraf protests, some of the postings generated more than three hundred thousand views.

Not Just Demonstrators

Even leaders from the ruling Barisan Nasional have been embracing the power of the internet in order to control their message and the way it is disseminated. At the 60th Umno general assembly in Kuala Lumpur in October 2009, Umno Youth Chief Khairy Jamaluddin used his Twitter account to put out his radical message about the need to replace ‘Malay dominance’ with ‘Malay leadership’. Khairy, a consummate user of social networking, correctly gauged that he would need the new media and social networking tools to spread far and wide the message contained in his maiden speech as Umno Youth Chief, no less because it was a challenge to established ways of thinking. Indeed, his message, which was a huge departure from the ethno-nationalist rhetoric of previous Umno Youth Chiefs, made immediate headlines in the online media. Tweets of the points he raised during his speech, either by his aide or by news outfits such as The Nut Graph, were also re-tweeted and gained a keen following online.

The very next day, however, the establishment Malay-language newspapers of Berita Harian and Utusan Malaysia made no mention of Khairy’s call to ditch ‘Malay dominance’ even though both dailies gave extensive coverage of the Umno Youth meeting and of Khairy’s speech. The establishment English-language paper, The New Straits Times, reported on the speech but did not highlight Khairy’s radical message. Instead, it chose to pussyfoot around the issue by only referring to Khairy’s call for the Malays to get out of their ‘siege mentality’ (New Straits Times, 2009).

In the days before the internet and Twitter, the establishment papers may have been able to define what reality to feed readers; but as it was, they were unable to monopolise the construction of reality. Indeed, one reader of Khairy’s tweets about his speech opined that it did not matter if the traditional media did not highlight his call for the end of Malay dominance because it had been reported by the online media and on Twitter. The reader, JeffriMS, wrote in response to Khairy on Tweeter on 14 October 2009 at 9.02 p.m., saying: ‘jgn risau bro. @TheNutGraph pun ada buat live tweet. But from different perspective lah’ [literally, ‘don’t worry brother. @TheNutGraph also did live tweet. But from a different perspective’].

Taking on an Institution

With the availability of affordable technology and the internet, readers also have at their disposal multiple readings of what is put across as the news, and they can now contest everything that is presented to them. In some instances, readers can put out
their own readings quicker than the established media, as was the case when the New Straits Times featured a ‘warning’ of sorts to Malaysian voters a day before the 8 March 2008 elections. See, for example, Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Artist Boh Jun Kit’s reconstruction of the New Straits Times’ propagandistic message about rejecting the opposition. The paper’s front-page illustration ran on 7 March 2008, a day before Malaysia’s historic general election. In less than 24 hours Boh had circulated his reconstruction through email.
Responding to the paper’s front-page headline on 7 March, artist Boh Jun Kit very quickly reconstructed the paper’s propaganda message. In less than 24 hours, the artist’s counter-propaganda was disseminated to voters. Such then is the nature of technology today that no established media outfit can ever assume that its version of an event or an issue will be the only and absolute version that is available to readers.

No Censorship

Apart from the ubiquity of affordable information and communications technology, one other phenomenon in my experience has reduced the control over what content is disseminated for public consumption. Having worked in both the traditional print media and now online, one of the biggest differences in how my newsroom is run boils down to this: although the government could and did issue threats either overtly or otherwise to the different newspapers I worked at because of the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the government cannot use this tool against the internet. The online media do not need publishing permits. When we set up MalaysiaVotes, we did not need anybody’s permission. The same was true of The Nut Graph, as I am certain was the case for the other online media organisations such as Malaysiakini, The Malaysian Insider and Merdeka Review.

‘The internet’s introduction in the mid-1990s represented a fundamental dis-continuity in this decades-old approach to media management. It became the first medium that citizens of either country (Malaysia and Singapore) were allowed to use for mass communication without first having to secure a government license’, noted Cherian George of the School of Communication and Information at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University. In Malaysia, this was due in large part to the 1997 promise made by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad that there would be no censorship of the internet. At the time, the Malaysian government was trying to attract foreign investments in the proposed Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) and, indeed, one of the provisions in the MSC Malaysia 10-Point Bill of Guarantees was that there should be no internet censorship.

Of course, George argues that neither Malaysia nor Singapore ‘disavowed post-publication punishment as a legitimate response to contentious online journalism’. Conversely, ‘both governments made clear that writers and publishers in cyberspace would enjoy no immunity from prosecution if they broke the laws of the land. Both lived up to this threat’. George cites two examples: the 1998 arrest of four individuals for spreading rumours on the internet about knife-wielding Indonesians rioting in a Kuala Lumpur neighbourhood, which led to panic buying; and the 2003 confiscation of Malaysiakini’s computers as part of an investigation into the publication of an allegedly seditious letter. Still, George admits that by ‘refraining from imposing prior restraints on internet communication’, the internet has become ‘considerably more hospitable to contentious journalism than print and broadcast media, both of which are subject to discretionary licensing’.

In real terms, what does this mean to a newsroom? It means that while my Shape of a Pocket column in The Sun newspaper about the prohibitions on the use of the word ‘Allah’ (see Surin, 2008) could not be published, a similar column could be published on The Nut Graph. Hence, while government restrictions on the
traditional media can result in stories being spiked, online media have a crack of opportunity that allows for more critical reporting and analysis. This is also in line with reader expectations of the role of the media, as pointed out by the Centre for Independent Journalism Malaysia’s ‘Media Independence Survey’ conducted by the Merdeka Centre in May 2008. To the question ‘what kind of changes [leading to greater media independence] do you think are needed’, the response ‘have more critical media’ attracted the largest segment of support at 26%, followed by ‘set up a complaint mechanism on the media’ at 23%, and ‘make it easier for the public to start a media [organisation]’ at 19%. Additionally, what does it mean really if a government decides to shut down a website? ‘If the government shuts down Malaysiakini, we can set up mirror sites in 10 minutes which readers can access. And the publicity we gain will more than compensate for the disruption to our operations’, Chief Executive Officer Premesh Chandran said in a Yahoo Messenger conversation on 9 March 2009. Indeed, when the Multimedia and Communications Commission (MCMC) blocked the controversial blog site Malaysia Today in September 2008, it did not take very long for alternative domains to be set up, which in turn rendered the MCMC’s actions ineffective. ‘The internet is more than just websites. It’s also about platforms such as Facebook, MSN, e-mail, widgets, etc. Information is flowing in so many ways that there is no centre point. Hence, cutting out one website, or a few websites, cannot stop the flow of information’, Premesh added. Trying to censor the internet in the same way that the government has censored and continues to censor the traditional media is thus a futile exercise.

Readers Talk Back

There is no doubt that the grip with which government regulators used to hold the media is loosening because of the internet and the speed at which information and communications technologies evolve. On the other hand, it would seem that readers now have more say about what is and is not published as news; and because technology allows for easy publishing, as evidenced, for example, by the mushrooming of blogs, just about anybody can pass him or herself off as an ‘expert’ on a particular subject. As a print journalist, I hardly ever felt exposed to the ire or dissatisfaction of readers. Readers’ ability to hold a journalist or an editor directly and immediately accountable, however, has skyrocketed with the availability of spaces such as blogs and the comments sections on news sites.

Target Practice

In our experience running MalaysiaVotes, feedback was mostly encouraging, but we also received brickbats, including those by contributors to the somewhat influential People’s Parliament blog. This was especially so after we published (on 23 February 2008) Danny Lim’s interview with then-Umno Youth Deputy Chief Khairy (now the Youth Chief following the March 2009 party elections), who ran and won the Rembau parliamentary seat in the March 2008 general elections. MalaysiaVotes readers also took the opportunity to voice their displeasure on our website after the Khairy interview was published a day before nomination day. These comments showed readers’ alliances to be
abundantly clear and that they expected the so-called ‘alternative media’—of which online media are considered a necessary part—to support the underdog candidate. Failure to do so was seen to be a betrayal of the ‘alternative media’ cause. This sentiment was apparent in another response to the same Khairy interview on MalaysiaVotes, reproduced below:

wan | Feb 24, 2008 11:21 AM
I am absolutely devastated. How naive can I be? I totally, totally bought the idea of this site (coming into) being to cover what is ignored in the mainstream. I thought, great, an inch towards levelling the playing field in election coverage. I had great hopes. I even bookmarked it to watch for potential evidence for my thesis. If anyone can’t find any Khairy coverage in the mainstream, they must be blind. Quite blind. This site is like an election promise . . . (Author’s emphasis)

To be sure, Khairy was popular target practice for those disgruntled with the administration of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, or with Umno and Umno Youth, and thus any interview of Khairy was construed by his critics to be either a ‘waste of time’ or ‘planted’ by the Barisan Nasional. The Nut Graph received the same kind of reader comments when it conducted its interviews with Khairy in the lead up to the 2009 Umno elections; but the point of this is not about Khairy. Rather, it is about the kind of expectations that readers have of online media and the subsequent pressures that are placed on an online news site. Without doubt, many readers of online news expect the sites to present ‘alternative’ positions to those of the ‘mainstream’ media, and in most cases people expect to read anti-Barisan Nasional (BN) or anti-establishment opinions online. A Peninsular Malaysia voter opinion poll conducted by the Merdeka Centre between 14 and 21 March 2008 showed that 60% of respondents rated the slant of newspapers as being ‘strongly’ and ‘somewhat’ pro-BN, while up to 71% thought the same of television. By contrast, only 2% of respondents felt that way about internet media.

Just as it is problematic for the traditional media to be perceived (and sometimes even unabashedly positioned) as pro-BN, it should be just as troubling that online media are perceived as, or expected to be, anti-BN or pro-opposition (although the term ‘opposition’ in reference to non-BN parties has been a misnomer since the March 2008 elections resulted in the Pakatan Rakyat governing five states). Good journalism cannot be partisan. It must be independent so as to be able to report without fear or favour in the public’s interest; and when reporting, the ideal to which good journalism should aspire is not the support of one political faction over another, but the support of principles or values that serve the public good. What matters then is not the question of who is being interviewed or covered by the media, but what questions are being asked so that another layer of the onion is peeled back to reveal an intrinsic truth about a personality, an issue or an event. Instead of being critical or defensive about reader comments, I believe readers’ responses provide a wonderful opportunity for us to clarify the principles of journalism that are at work. The two reader comments to the Khairy interview on MalaysiaVotes begged clarification on what our site and our journalism was about; and respond we did in the interest of being held accountable.
Firstly, we’d like to point out that we’re not a blog even though some readers expect us to be one, probably because we operate on the Internet as all blogs do. We are a *news site*. This means that we will try our best to provide content that is written and edited according to the journalistic standards of fairness, accuracy, balance and accountability, which is what we promised from Day 1. We didn’t set out to be a blog which was partisan or which wanted to promote one particular view only. We started out to be a news site that would provide a space for as wide a spectrum of legitimate and interesting views as possible on the issues we cover. That, after all, can only be good for democracy . . . Whatever our personal views about Khairy Jamaluddin, he is a phenomenon in this election that has made the Rembau parliamentary seat he is contesting a hot seat that people are watching . . . Good journalism requires that no matter what our personal beliefs and leanings, we will still endeavour to provide space in our writing for all legitimate stakeholders and views.

There is also criticism that we have failed to be an alternative to the mainstream media; but we did not promise to be an ‘alternative’ to anything because that suggests that there is no good journalism in the traditional media, and that there is no bad journalism in the online media. We know from experience that good and bad journalism exist in both.

Although responding to reader comments was a principled choice made jointly by the *MalaysiaVotes* team, the truth is that in all my years as a journalist in Malaysia, I have not known readers to have as much compelling influence as they do now. Few older editors from the traditional media would think it necessary to explain to readers why they reported in the way they did. In the ‘good-old-days’ prior to the internet and self-publishing, readers had less ability to hold journalists directly accountable; and, just as reader comments can reveal the slants inherent in a reader’s viewpoints, so also can they expose bias in a newsroom, as the next example shows.

**Whose Malaysia?**

At 8 a.m. on 6 March 2009, *The Nut Graph* published as its lead story the latest instalment of Wong Chin Huat’s *Uncommon Sense* column, titled ‘Perak today, Malaysia tomorrow?’ To illustrate the story, we uploaded graphic representation of a map of Peninsula Malaysia. Criticism of our peninsula-centric worldview was quick and unreserved, such as in this comment:

*ilann Posted: 6 Mar 09: 10.56AM*

Ah yes, good main graphic picture you have up there. Very telling. A picture speaks a thousand words. ‘Malaysia’ is of course the tail of the Asian continent AKA Semenanjung. The Borneo states as usual don’t count. Never mind that Sarawak alone is five kilometers short of being the same size as the peninsula. Yes, in this article you’re referring to Perak state but you’re also referring to ‘Malaysia’. This kind of graphic is extremely common and reflects the Malayan mentality of Malaysia and is offensive to the Borneo states. But yes, I know, who cares, right? Out of sight, out of mind, Sabah and Sarawak are just those
far off colonies of Malaya, not part of parliamentary or constitutional concern. Shame on you, Nut Graph.

Although it was embarrassing to have such mistakes publicly pointed out, in such instances reader feedback was invaluable in ferreting out unconscious prejudice and holding journalists accountable for our biases.

What Do We Do Next?

I grant that my experience of being an online journalist began only in February 2008, and indeed there were scores of other journalists who embarked on online journalism way before MalaysiaVotes and The Nut Graph teams did; but some lessons and observations, I believe, are common to all of us.

One is that power has shifted. Neither governments nor established media companies alone control content any more. Government propaganda now faces stiff competition from the counter-propaganda of artists, activists, opposition political parties and well-followed bloggers. So it should not have come as a surprise at all that while former Information Minister Datuk Zainuddin Maidin was calling bloggers ‘goblok’ (Indonesian slang for stupid), it was bloggers such as Jeff Ooi who won the Jelutong seat as a Democratic Action Party (DAP) candidate. Other first-time bloggers who succeeded at the polls were Tony Pua (DAP-PJ Utara), Elizabeth Wong (PKR-Bukit Lanjan) and Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad (PKR-Seri Setia). Zainuddin, meanwhile, lost his parliamentary seat of Sungai Petani, Kedah, to PKR’s Johari Abdul by a margin of 9,381 votes.

While some space has opened up for the online media, the same technology that allows new media to thrive is also allowing readers more room to scrutinise and hold accountable journalists and editors. Neither phenomenon is bad from a democratic point of view. Those in power—and this includes journalists who wield the power of words and the power to construct realities—must be held accountable. At the same time, a willingness to be held accountable provides opportunities for principles and purposes to be clarified in the public’s interest. The question for the media is how do we let ourselves be held accountable? Even though the technological terrain has shifted and reader expectations and demands of the media have altered, some journalistic goalposts, I propose, must remain solidly in place.

Editorial Policy

With growing competition from other online content, including user-generated content, how can the Malaysian media continue to be counted on to be a reliable and credible source of information and analysis? If credibility is the media’s most precious currency, being accountable is key, especially in an environment where information and the framing of an issue can be altered with just a mouse-click. After all, there is no reason at all to assume that online media cannot suffer from a credibility crisis in the same way that the traditional media have, especially when there are so many competing viewpoints in a churning 24/7 sea of information.

Accountability keeps the media (and others, too) honest, and honesty is what will keep us credible and reliable. The good news is that accountability can be made
manifest through editorial guidelines that are publicly declared. At The Nut Graph, for example, we publicly spell out what practices we will adopt in order to achieve the journalistic principles of accuracy and accountability, fairness, and ethical, independent, inclusive and responsible reporting. The principle of accuracy and accountability is also demonstrated in our Corrections page, which to date has not been replicated by any other known online media agency in Malaysia. These principles are not new. They have, in some form or other, been a part of all good journalistic endeavours. Indeed, The Nut Graph’s editorial policy was grafted from best journalistic practices we were familiar with from around the world, including those used in Malaysia. These guidelines serve to inform readers about the values we are committed to, hence establishing the strength of our brand as a media outfit. It has also become our default compass in the newsroom when difficult decisions have to be made quickly, and this ensures that we are consistently principled to the best of our abilities; and perhaps, in the long term, having and subscribing to such editorial guidelines will also provide ‘proof’ to the authorities that the media can regulate itself, thus making media-repressive laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act a thing of the past.

**Comments Policy**

Being open to readers’ views and the multiple-way communications that today define the relationship between journalists and readers also requires a particular clarity that can be achieved by having a strong comments policy. At The Nut Graph, we were inspired by, among others, NowPublic’s Flaming Policy. Our policy clearly spells out the rules of the game to encourage respectful, constructive and rational dialogue and discussions. Although some have opined that this restricts expression, we do not believe that flaming comments are helpful towards engaging people, nor are they necessary in shedding light on an issue. Going forward, having such guidelines in the newsroom also helps journalists manage the multiple-way communications that we need to engage as constructively as we can. By doing so, I believe that we will not lose sight of our role in creating and facilitating public discourse that is inclusive and responsible.

**Positioning The Nut Graph**

While new power relations exist today because of the internet, blogs and social networking tools, some power relations remain the same; for example, the relationship between the state and marginalised groups such as the indigenous people. In one spectacular example, it took the government of Malaysia nearly a year to reveal the findings of a taskforce that was sent into the interiors of Sarawak to investigate reports that Penan girls and women were being sexually violated by employees of logging companies. Even though the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry knew as early as November 2008 that the reports of molestation and rape were true, the government refused to make the report public. I believe that the government would have been shamed into making the report public immediately if the media had played its role of exposing the culture of secrecy that is so deeply embedded in the Malaysian government. In the case of the
Penan girls and women, the need to hold accountable the perpetrators and the urgency of protecting vulnerable citizens did not seem to be the government’s priority; but it was surely also the media’s failure for not holding our government accountable for its inaction despite the evidence of crimes having been committed.

Here was an instance where The Nut Graph demonstrated how it would be different from the other media, whether traditional or new. We would focus our energies not on every single breaking news story that happened during the day, but rather, we would stay focused on unresolved issues that had fallen off the media’s radar. By doing so, we hope that we can uphold public interest through our journalism, rather than just provide a constant stream of content that may not be significant in equalising the existing relationships of power between citizens and the state. Indeed, we were the only Malaysian news agency that repeatedly followed up on the story until the taskforce report was finally released to the public in early September 2009. We continuously exposed the government’s lack of accountability over the issue and its reluctance to make the task force’s report public, including by employing traditional journalistic strategies such as visiting the relevant government department to demand for the report.

The traditional media, nearly all of which have many more resources to keep following an issue of public interest, only picked up on the story again when the taskforce report was eventually released. I have no doubt that if they had run the same stories that The Nut Graph did on the issue on their front pages, the government of Malaysia would have been pressured to release the taskforce report far earlier than it did. Indeed, although I have no proof at all that it was The Nut Graph’s faithful reporting of the issue that helped to make the report public, I am certain it played a role in keeping up the pressure on the Malaysian government to act responsibly.

The Business of the News

Critically, one other thing has also not changed. The economics of running a newsroom as a business remains just as challenging for the traditional media as it does for the online media. Although it may be cheaper to start an online news portal than it would be to launch a newspaper or a TV or radio station, it is still costly to keep a newsroom running.

Good journalism is expensive. It is expensive because hiring good journalists and editors costs money and as in any other media, hiring the best in order to produce the best means having the capacity to attract and keep the best. As I write this at the end of October 2009, it is unclear whether The Nut Graph will be able to keep running because we are running out of funds and have yet to find ourselves a sustainable business model. The seed money of RM2m that was given to us to last for two years will dry up in March 2010. At the same time, our original funders have informed us that they will not be able to keep funding us beyond that time. In order to continue running, The Nut Graph needs an estimated RM80,000 per month, the bulk of which is used for salaries and ensuring that employees have fair employment packages.

One of the lessons we have learnt since we started operations is that relying on online advertising to keep us viable as a business was naïve and short-sighted. Online
advertising has yet to take off in Malaysia, especially in an environment where there is an excess supply of online advertising space and dwindling advertising budgets. Additionally, in the case of The Nut Graph, which has steered away from quick, sensationalist reporting prone to inaccuracies and a lack of research, readership has not grown in ways that would make us attractive to advertisers. Traffic to the site may have increased by 500% from 10,000 in August 2008 to 60,000 in August 2009, and we may have established a professional reputation for insightful, fair and accurate reporting,45 but our readership is still lagging far behind that of Malaysiakini,46 which is able to attract advertisers and charge a premium for its ad rates. As The Nut Graph is not about to compete in the same ‘fast news’ category as the other online news sites, preferring instead to believe that it is ‘slow news’, like ‘slow food’,47 which is what nourishes a democracy, we shall probably forever pay the price of not having as many readers as the likes of Malaysiakini, The Malaysian Insider, and even the blog, Malaysia Today. This just means that The Nut Graph needs to develop a different kind of business model in order to survive; but the world over, every other online news site is searching for the Holy Grail, and there are no guarantees that The Nut Graph will make it, no matter what our new business model may be.

The Irony of Change

It may have been ironical that when I started this paper, I began with a quote about survival being dependent on adapting to change. That may be true of how the media use technology to bypass traditional controls over publishing, and how journalists employ multimedia to present the news, and how much more open we need to be to criticism and being held accountable by readers.

The truth is that, although these are necessary changes that the media need to embrace and sometimes grapple with, age-old journalistic principles must remain the pillars that keep us grounded in the work we do for the public’s interest. Perhaps it will be the internet and its immense possibilities that will remind us of the need to reclaim these principles to help us navigate the changes ahead.

At the same time though, whether the business environment makes it sustainable for media practitioners to embrace such principles is still to be seen. If good journalism is expensive, the question is not just which newsroom is willing to practise and uphold it; it is also which reader will be willing to pay a premium for it.

Notes

1. See, for example, http://www.aliran.com/elections/2008/03/malaysiavotescom-stirs-controversy-in.html
3. See www.thenutgraph.com
4. See http://www.sun2surf.com/article.cfm?id=19973
6. Under the Printing Presses and Publications Act (1984), the minister in charge has absolute powers to deny, suspend or revoke publishing permits. Additionally, these permits must be renewed on a yearly basis.
7. The paper was generously made available to the writer of this article.
8. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMFY1-z2Lk0
9. See http://www.rembau.net.my/
14. Khairy had written: ‘Lucky I decided to live tweet my speech this morning since MSTV news bulletin tonight apparently gave perfunctory coverage’. See: http://twitter.com/Khairykj/status/4861109821
15. See http://www.thenutgraph.com/khairy-sultan-rules-all
17. George defines ‘contentious journalism’ as ‘the reporting and commenting on current events with at least some intention of serving a public purpose (the “journalism” half of the definition), and with the explicit objective of challenging the authority of elites in setting the agenda and forging a national consensus (the “contentious” half of the definition)’ (2005, p. 907).
19. See http://twitter.com/JeffriMS/status/4861185368
20. See http://twitter.com/Khairykj
22. See http://mt.m2day.org/2008/
23. For a fuller discussion, see http://www.thenutgraph.com/curbing-the-net
26. See ‘A tempered view’ (http://malaysiavotes.com/wp/2008/02/23/a-tempered-view) for the original interview and the comments it elicited.
27. Badrul Hisham Shaharin, better known as Chegubard.
28. See, for example, reader comments for this story: http://www.thenutgraph.com/khairy-sultan-rules-all
29. The poll, titled ‘Perspectives on issues, the economy, leadership and voting intentions’, was supported by the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung. It is available at: http://www.merdekafile.org/download/FNS%20poll%20election%202008%20v1.pdf
30. See http://malaysiavotes.com/wp/letters-to-the-editor/
31. See http://www.thenutgraph.com/perak-today-malaysia-tomorrow
32. See http://www.thenutgraph.com/corrections-200903 for the original, uncorrected graphic of ‘Malaysia’.
34. George writes that through Malaysia’s 1998 reformasi crisis, ‘the mainstream media took a predictably pro-government line, to the point of eroding their credibility and losing as much as a third of their readership’ (2005, p. 914). Meanwhile, Ibrahim Suffian notes that a ‘Merdeka Centre poll conducted in July 2008, four months after the general election, found that only 25% of Malaysian voters felt that they had some trust in the political news coverage of the local mainstream media. Of this number, less than 10% stated they had “strong trust” in the medium’.
35. See http://www.thenutgraph.com/editorial-policy
36. See http://www.thenutgraph.com/category/corrections
37. See http://www.nowpublic.com/newsroom/tips/fine_print/flaming_policy
38. See http://www.thenutgraph.com/comments-and-columns-policy
40. See http://thenutgraph.com/unclear-if-penan-report-will-be-public
41. See http://thenutgraph.com/penan-girls-and-women-sexually-violated
42. For the list of stories and opinions that The Nut Graph ran about the issue when the other media had long given up on the story, key in ‘Penan task force’ in the Search box on www.thenutgraph.com
43. See http://thenutgraph.com/penan-task-force-report-not-available
44. See http://www.thenutgraph.com/the-nut-graph-needs-your-support for a fuller explanation.
45. See http://www.thenutgraph.com/the-nut-graph-needs-your-support for endorsements from public intellectuals and institutions.

47. See http://www.slowfood.com/ for an explanation of the philosophy behind slow food, and the benefits of it compared with fast food.

References


