

The Role of Social Media in Society During The Movement Control Order in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Recently, social media has been viewed as one of the preferred platforms among Malaysian society, particularly by politicians who use these platforms as an approach to engage more closely with local communities and to expand their political activities. This study examines five aspects underlying the selection of social media as a universal medium for disseminating information to the public, namely the influence of the internet, the enhancement of political participation, social interaction, information channels, as well as the expression of opinions, ideas, and aspirations.

A qualitative research methodology was employed to obtain research data through interview techniques. The findings reveal that in today's context, traditional media (print) has become less appealing as a source of information for the public, whereas social media has emerged as a medium for rapidly accessing information. Consequently, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others have become key informational tools for politicians in advancing their political agendas.

Keywords: Media, Politics, and Society during Malaysia's Movement Control Order

INTRODUCTION

According to a report by Berita Harian (2020), the chronology of the COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia began on 23 January 2020 when the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH), through the National Crisis Preparedness and Response Centre (CPRC), identified three suspected cases of coronavirus 2019 (2019-nCoV), involving two cases in Sabah and one in Selangor. Subsequently, the MOH reported that eight close contacts associated with the first confirmed 2019-nCoV case in Singapore were traced to Johor Bahru and placed under quarantine. The then Minister of Health, Dzulkiyly Ahmad, confirmed that the initial cases involved three Chinese nationals who entered Malaysia via Johor from Singapore on the same date.

In response to the growing threat, the MOH issued a public advisory urging Malaysians to limit travel to China unless necessary. As the outbreak escalated internationally, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 31 January 2020. Subsequently, on 12 February 2020, the WHO officially designated the disease as COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019), replacing the earlier term 2019-nCoV.

Following this development, a report by Berita Harian (2020) indicated that COVID-19 cases in Malaysia increased dramatically when 125 new cases were confirmed, raising the cumulative total to 428 cases.

Preliminary investigations revealed that the majority of these new cases were linked to the Tablighi Jamaat gathering cluster at Masjid Sri Petaling. Consequently, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Muhyiddin Yassin, announced the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) for a period of 14 days, commencing on 18 March and ending on 31 March 2020, as an initial measure to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Government of Malaysia, through the National Security Council (NSC) and the Prime Minister's Department, following an inter-agency coordination meeting held on 17 March 2020, announced that the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) would take effect from 18 to 31 March 2020. The MCO came into force at 12:00 a.m. on 18 March 2020.

It was enforced under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases (Measures Within the Local Area of Infection) Regulations 2020, which were gazetted on the same date. Officers from the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) and the RELA Corps were appointed as authorised enforcement officers pursuant to Section 3 of the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 (Act 342). To enhance the effectiveness of the Movement Control Order, members of the public were advised to remain at home at all times except to fulfil essential needs. In addition, the practice of social distancing was strongly encouraged to minimise the risk of COVID-19 transmission (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2020a).

According to a statement by the Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia (2020b), on 7 June 2020 the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Muhyiddin Yassin, announced the National Economic Recovery Plan, known as PENJANA, which comprised 40 initiatives valued at RM35 billion to support the recovery of the national economy adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This announcement outlined several measures to be implemented as Malaysia entered the COVID-19 recovery phase.

The recovery phase formed part of the government's exit strategy from the Movement Control Order (MCO), which was first enforced on 18 March 2020, followed by the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) beginning on 4 May 2020. The implementation of both the MCO and CMCO contributed to a declining trend in COVID-19 infection rates in Malaysia. Statistics released by the Ministry of Health Malaysia indicated that transmission rates among the local population were increasingly low and well controlled. Consequently, the Government of Malaysia announced the transition from the CMCO to the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO), which was implemented from 10 June 2020 until 31 August 2020. During the RMCO period, greater flexibility was granted to Malaysians to resume daily activities, provided that standard operating procedures (SOPs) continued to be strictly observed.

Building on this development, during the periods of the Movement Control Order (MCO), Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO), and Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO), technological advancement became a crucial source of information and a primary medium of communication among Malaysian society. At that time, the growth of internet media usage in Malaysia expanded rapidly, reflecting a significant shift in communication practices. Consequently, the use of mass media varied according to individual needs and was widely adapted across society.

Nevertheless, mass media also clearly reveals differences in patterns of thinking, personal traits, attitudes, daily social interactions, and cultural practices within society (Abdul Hamid, 2016). These dimensions have had a substantial impact on contemporary social life, particularly in Malaysia. This development is evident in the high level of engagement among Malaysians with social media platforms, which form an integral component of the mass media ecosystem. According to Chinnasamy (28 February 2018), data from World Internet Stats recorded that out of Malaysia's 31 million population, approximately 20 million individuals were active users of Facebook. This indicates that nearly two-thirds of Malaysian society were exposed to Facebook usage, particularly in the dissemination and sharing of online information.

This trend intensified further with the involvement of politicians who increasingly utilised social media as a platform to engage directly with the public in Malaysia. The selection of social media by politicians is largely driven by the speed and convenience offered by these platforms. In this regard, data published by Socialbakers

(2020) clearly illustrates the leading Malaysian politicians in terms of Facebook usage, as shown in Figure 1 below.

		Total Fans
1	 Najib Razak MALAYSIA	4 154 584
2	 Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad MALAYSIA	3 671 596
3	 Friends of BN - Barisan Nasional MALAYSIA	2 543 761
4	 Anwar Ibrahim MALAYSIA	1 856 886
5	 Legasi Tok Guru MALAYSIA	1 695 402
6	 Zahid Hamidi MALAYSIA	1 689 971

Figure 1: Facebook Social Media Pages of Malaysian Politicians, 2020

Based on Figure 1 above, the findings indicate that social media has emerged as one of the preferred platforms for information dissemination and for engaging with the public in a more accessible and effective manner. As noted by Chinnasamy (28 February 2018), social media platforms are frequently used for sharing news updates, videos, and images with the public on a daily or weekly basis. At the same time, during election periods, social media particularly Facebook often becomes a central medium for political communication through initiatives such as Facebook Election, owing to its popularity and its capacity to disseminate information more extensively compared to other social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. The United States presidential election in 2004, for instance, was recognised as an “internet election” due to the extensive use of email by political leaders to connect with targeted voter groups in specific constituencies. In contrast, the 2008 United States presidential election marked a shift towards a “social media election,” driven by the widespread use of Twitter and Facebook among volunteers supporting Barack Obama.

In addition, Twitter is also an integral component of mass media applications. Twitter is one of the most influential microblogging social media platforms globally, where user-generated posts can be disseminated publicly and accessed by audiences worldwide. At the same time, Twitter has the capacity to function as a powerful medium for political discourse and holds significant potential in encouraging public participation in political processes (Salman, Yusoff, Mohamad Salleh, & Abdullah, 2018). Hong (2013) further noted that nearly all politicians in the United States maintain Twitter accounts as part of their political engagement and consultation strategies. Barack Obama, for example, was among the political figures who effectively utilised social media as a campaign tool during the United States presidential election. The strategic use of social media during the campaign was widely regarded as contributing positively to Obama’s electoral success. Furthermore, Hutchinson (2020) highlighted that, in response to contemporary needs, Twitter emerged as one of the leading platforms for delivering accurate and timely information related to the 2020 United States presidential election. Twitter provided opportunities for eligible American voters to use the platform as a medium for voter registration, to better understand voting procedures—particularly as the election was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic—and to access up-to-date information regarding the electoral process.

In line with contemporary political culture, society today demonstrates a growing preference for social media as a primary source for obtaining up-to-date information due to its ease of access and immediacy. Accordingly, this

research paper examines the role of social media in shaping public information flows, particularly within the context of political actors in Malaysia. This shift is further driven by the declining effectiveness of traditional media in fulfilling its role as a key information disseminator, prompting the public to turn towards newer communication media based on mass media and internet platforms (Awang Besar, Mat Jali, Ibrahim, Sidek, Amir, Fauzi, & Lyndon, 2012). Therefore, this study explores the role of social media in influencing Malaysian society during the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO), Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO), and Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) periods.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Chinnasamy (28 February 2018), the tracking of internet election trends conducted across Asian and Western countries from 2008 to the present has identified several critical factors that must be considered in determining the extent to which an election is influenced by the internet. The primary elements examined include the effectiveness of technological development and the formation of a technologically literate society within a given country. In addition, usage factors are assessed, including the number of individuals actively participating in online discussions, the amount of time spent using the internet, and users' levels of internet proficiency. Publishing-related aspects are also taken into account, such as the momentum behind posting activities and the scope and nature of information uploaded online. Finally, the analysis considers the types of websites utilised, emerging trends resulting from political communication, and the degree to which internet-related factors are involved in political debates and discourse.

Meanwhile, a study conducted by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project found that 25% of the 2,253 respondents in a political social media survey believed that debating, discussing, or sharing views on political issues with others on social networking platforms was either very important or somewhat important to them. This finding indicates that social media platforms are capable of enhancing political participation among the public, as issues presented online can attract users to seek further information and engage in discussions with others (Salman, Yusoff, Mohamad Salleh, & Abdullah, 2018). At the same time, social media has contributed to the formation of a virtual communication environment that facilitates social interaction and enables broader participatory freedom. The openness offered by social media platforms allows individuals to express their views regardless of socioeconomic background. This form of social media-driven virtual connectivity can be observed through platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and WhatsApp (Meijer, 2012). Historically, the role of mass media in Malaysia began to develop significantly in the early twentieth century, exerting a strong influence on social and political awareness, particularly among the Malay community. This influence is evident in the contributions of Malay-language newspapers that served as platforms for the dissemination of information and ideas at the time, including *Al-Imam*, *Saudara*, *Pengasuh*, *Majlis*, *Warta Malaya*, and *Utusan Melayu* (Saat, 2008). These publications illustrate how mass media functioned as a medium for social interaction and facilitated public participation. What distinguishes contemporary mass media—particularly social media—from earlier forms is its speed, accessibility, and online-based nature, compared to the earlier reliance on written texts and static images. While the role of mass media in supporting political processes has remained consistent, the platforms and tools employed have evolved in line with technological advancements. Media continues to serve as a central channel for political issues and campaign activities; however, contemporary politics is now increasingly dependent on online media (Chinnasamy, 28 February 2018). In addition to newspapers, radio also played a significant role in information dissemination. Radio was notably used as a coded communication medium between Tunku Abdul Rahman and Chin Peng during negotiations aimed at ending the communist insurgency in Malaya (Saad, 2008). Prior to independence, mass media served to stimulate nationalist sentiment among the people of Malaya by disseminating information that raised public awareness and political consciousness. Following independence, however, media platforms were increasingly utilised to disseminate the ideologies of political parties competing in elections. The reliance on media as a political arena, as well as the public's dependence on media for news and political information, became increasingly evident during this period (Aziz, Abdul Rahman, & Ghazali, 2009).

In addition, the control of mass media agencies by the ruling government—either through share ownership or by exercising its authority as the licensing body—represents a continuation of political influence being embedded within the mass media system. Consequently, opposition parties have often established and published their own

newspapers as alternative circulation outlets to counter dominant mass media organisations that are spearheaded or aligned with the government (Zakaria & Sulaiman, 2008). At the same time, the role of politics is clearly evident in sustaining the continuity and stability of a nation. This perspective is reflected in the work of Duncan McCargo (1999), who argues that:

As a crucial entity in the development of society, nationhood, and a developing state, the press plays a central role in managing the complexities of governance through the dissemination of news, opinions, ideas, and public aspirations to the wider society. In this context, the media has been widely recognised as playing a significant role in fostering and sustaining national unity and social cohesion. This view is consistent with the argument advanced by Duncan McCargo (1999), who emphasised the importance of the press as a key institution in shaping collective identity and maintaining political and social stability within a nation (McCargo, 1999).

The above discussion by Duncan McCargo is derived from a message delivered by Suharto in his address on National Press Day in 1989. The message clearly emphasised that, through the media, national unity and cohesion can be sustained by disseminating opinions, ideas, and collective aspirations to the wider public. In this context, the press was positioned as a vital institution responsible for nurturing social harmony and reinforcing a shared sense of national identity.

RESEARCH CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Accordingly, based on insights derived from prior scholarly literature and previous research, the author developed a conceptual framework for this study, as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

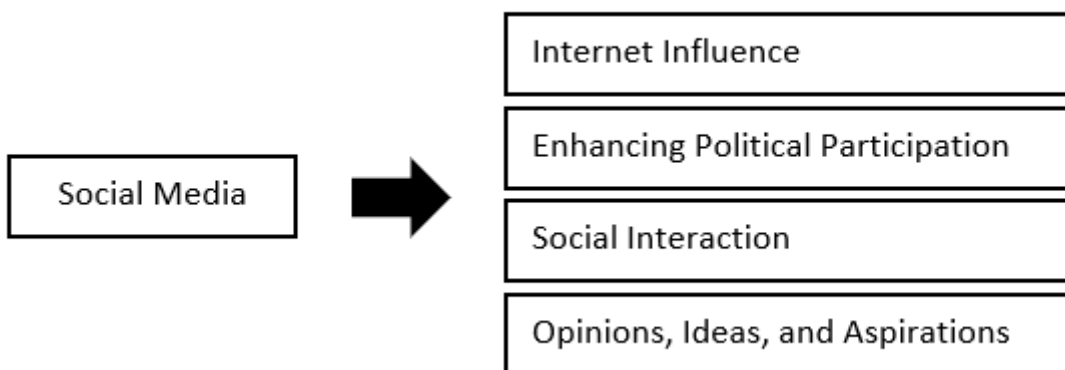


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Based on the conceptual framework presented above, this study explores social media from the perspectives of internet influence, the enhancement of political participation, social interaction, and the expression of opinions, ideas, and aspirations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach by conducting interviews with informants who were identified as being relevant to the objectives of the study. The qualitative methodology is grounded in the assumption that reality is not singular; rather, it exists simultaneously from multiple perspectives as observed and interpreted by the researcher. It is a process that examines the interaction between the researcher and the phenomenon under investigation. Based on this approach, real-world phenomena must be understood within their contextual realities, taking into account the subjective nature of reality (Mohd Tobi, 2018). In qualitative research, data are derived from two primary sources: primary data and secondary data. Primary data refer to raw or original data collected directly from the original sources and are not subject to prior processing or cleaning. In contrast, secondary data refer to data that have been collected by parties other than the current researcher; these consist of findings from previous studies and are utilised as supporting materials for the present research.

In summary, primary data are gathered directly by the researcher conducting the study, whereas secondary data originate from prior research and serve as supplementary resources for the current investigation (Mohd Tobi, 2018).

In this study, the researcher utilised primary data as the main source of research data, while secondary data served as supporting materials. Accordingly, five (5) informants from diverse backgrounds, age groups, and occupations were interviewed. The selection of this number of informants is consistent with the recommendation by Kirsti Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2016), who emphasised that informants in qualitative research should be capable of providing rich, clear, and relevant information that aligns with the objectives of the study. The informants selected for this research were active social media users during the Movement Control Order (MCO) period. Table 1 presents the list of informants who participated in the interviews.

Table 1: List of Interviewed Informants

Informant	Date of Interview	Age and Career
Informant 1	17 October 2020	41 years old, Freelance Writer
Informant 2	17 October 2020	26 years old, Freelance Writer
Informant 3	15 October 2020	34 years old, Journalist, Sinar Harian Sabah
Informant 4	16 October 2020	28 years old, Online Media Journalist
Informant 5	19 October 2020	49 years old, Online Media Writer

Based on the interview findings from the five (5) informants above, the data were transcribed verbatim and manually coded into themes. Data collection was concluded when the final informant repeated similar points to those expressed by previous informants, indicating data saturation. The research findings were subsequently synthesised and presented in the form of a Research Findings Framework.

RESEARCH FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The Influence of the Internet on Social Media Use in Society

The findings of this study indicate that the influence of the internet on social media use became a societal norm during the Movement Control Order (MCO) period in Malaysia. This phenomenon was driven by the fact that social media platforms, supported by reliable and high-quality internet access, functioned as a key catalyst for the rapid expansion and normalisation of this practice within society.

In line with this development, practitioners of traditional media have largely transitioned to using social media platforms for information dissemination. The increased reliance on social media compared to print or other traditional media can be attributed to contemporary technological trends and the pervasive influence of the internet.

The contemporary era of technological advancement has significantly influenced societal lifestyles across various sectors. Today, a wide range of information can be accessed instantly through digital devices and communication technologies, in line with the rapid development of 21st-century information and communication technology (ICT). This widespread adoption of technology has become a fundamental catalyst in everyday life, including among students and working professionals (Erdogdu & Erdogdu, 2015).

“The influence of the internet has brought major changes to the country’s print media industry today. In this decade, the internet plays a major role and can be said to have taken over almost 90% of operations, especially in the print media industry. Many publishers that were previously based on print media have transitioned to online media in line with current trends and developments”. (Informant 5)

The internet has not only created new opportunities but has also transformed the operational landscape of society from a print-based media market to an online-oriented marketplace. This development has compelled media industries and organisations to modify their platforms and transform their services in response to contemporary

public demands. At the same time, most mass media organisations in Malaysia have not merely shifted their operations towards digitalisation; rather, they have also recognised social media as the fastest information medium and a key attraction for public engagement.

“The transition from print (traditional) media is due to the internet being the fastest medium for delivering information or news at present, especially through social media”. (Informant 4)

In addition, the selection of social media is not solely based on its function as a medium for obtaining current information or news. Today, social media has evolved into a strategic agenda-setting channel for disseminating information and news at various levels, including among individuals, communities, elites, and political actors. This perspective aligns with the seminal agenda-setting theory proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972), who argued that: Mass media are able to exert influence by transferring the priority or significance of the issues they choose to highlight in their news coverage to the public's perception of what constitutes an important issue (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

Based on the work of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972), mass media can be defined as one of the most important platforms for disseminating information, news, and knowledge to the public. Certain types of information, although initially general in nature, can be framed and developed into specific agendas, or otherwise shaped through media emphasis. This dynamic highlights that media practitioners and media organisations are not only responsible for responding to contemporary environments in the dissemination of information, but also act as contributors to ongoing transformations in line with current conditions. For instance, the transition from print media to digital platforms reflects an adaptive response to contemporary demands, ensuring that issues and information can be disseminated more widely at both local and global (glocal) levels.

Social Media in Fostering Public Participation

Social media is not merely a new platform for the public to obtain news or information; rather, it functions as a medium through which active public participation is generated and mobilised. During the Movement Control Order (MCO) period in Malaysia, social media served as the most immediate platform for meeting public needs in accessing updates on current situations and official announcements issued by the government. This was largely due to the fact that several cabinet members and government agencies disseminated information through their respective social media accounts. For instance, the former Minister of Youth and Sports, Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman, shared a push-up exercise challenge using the hashtag #stayathomechallenge on social media. This initiative received a positive response from netizens, many of whom participated by uploading videos of themselves performing the same exercise throughout the Movement Control Order period (Mohd Nor, 2020).

This demonstrates that social media is not only a medium for disseminating current information but has also become an important platform for fostering political participation among the public. Most politicians in Malaysia now utilise social media as a strategic tool to engage and mobilise public participation. In the contemporary media landscape, social media represents a significant platform for advancing political agendas, often accompanied by minimal gatekeeping in terms of information verification. As a result, the relationship between public participation and social media has become increasingly interconnected, as politicians rely on these platforms to disseminate information and deliver the latest news directly to the public. This dynamic is reflected in the statement by Informant 3 below:

“Politicians now prefer to use online platforms to convey their views, criticisms, and other statements, including media statements that can be turned into news or commentary and criticism by various parties, including their political opponents”. (Informant 3)

Following this, it can be observed that social media is not only utilised by the public but has also become a key strategic instrument for politicians in communicating their agendas, whether in the form of news, information, or criticism. This perspective is supported by the work of Salman, Mustaffa, Mohd Salleh, and Ali (2016), who argued that social media functions as a platform through which political actors disseminate political agendas in order to attract and mobilise public participation. However, it is unfortunate that not all content disseminated through social media is constructive in nature. Some articles and social media postings instead convey negative

elements, which may influence public perception and discourse. This issue is highlighted in the statement by Informant 4 below:

“The definition of social media as a medium for political participation is quite effective because some news and information sources are generated through the political agendas shared on the social media platforms of political leaders”. (Informant 4)

The following statement highlights that the credibility of narratives or information sources obtained from social media is, at times, relatively low. This concern is echoed by local mass media, as noted in an article by Mohd Nor (2020), which emphasised that some of the information shared on social media is inaccurate and that such situations should not occur.

“The rise in political participation in the era of online media is not as convincing compared to the traditional era, where political participation before the existence of social media was more genuine in nature”. (Informant 5)

For this reason, information generated and disseminated through politicians’ social media accounts is sometimes perceived as lacking credibility, as such content may merely reflect personal views or criticisms without clearly verified sources. In other words, it may be characterised as speculation or rumours rather than confirmed information. This issue was evident in a recent incident in which social media was abuzz with claims regarding a Malaysian government cabinet reshuffle, despite the absence of clear and authoritative sources to substantiate the information.

A false list of a cabinet reshuffle circulated widely on social media following reports that United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) would consider withdrawing its support from Perikatan Nasional (PN) and imposing new conditions to continue political cooperation. Amid these developments, unverified claims regarding a cabinet reshuffle spread rapidly across social media platforms, despite the absence of confirmation from authoritative sources (Azil, 18 October 2020).

Therefore, not every post shared on social media can be regarded as accurate or credible. At times, such content is generated primarily as a means of attracting public attention or mobilising societal participation, rather than serving as a source of verified information.

Social Media as a Medium for Social Interaction in Society

In reality, social media today is widely recognised as a key platform for social interaction within Malaysian society and globally. This is largely due to the speed and immediacy of communication facilitated through social media platforms. Alavi, Mahbob, and Azha Soeed (2020) noted that Facebook remains the most popular social networking platform compared to others such as Twitter, Instagram, Yahoo Messenger, and similar applications. Through social media platforms, elements of political communication, public attention-seeking, and direct access to information and assistance have emerged as key factors driving the rapid growth of social media as an active medium for social interaction in contemporary society. This trend is evident in the way politicians and public figures increasingly utilise social media as a primary channel for engaging and interacting with the public. This observation is clearly reflected in the statement by Informant 1 below:

“In terms of interaction, social media is a basic concept, as it is created to mediate social communication among society. Politicians who open social media accounts do not only seek attention or promote political agendas, but also use these platforms as channels for information and direct assistance to the public without barriers”. (Informant 1)

Accordingly, it can be observed that public figures and politicians also utilise this medium as an approach to engage more closely and directly with society today. At the same time, social media serves as a platform through which the public can become familiar with and observe the political agendas of individual politicians in a direct manner, whether in terms of their views, criticisms, or the forms of assistance they intend to provide. This articulation of political agendas is reflected in the statement by Informant 2 below:

“Some politicians use social media as an agenda to gain votes and the trust of local communities, as well as to build confidence in how they carry out their duties”. (Informant 2)

The selection of social media as a medium for expanding political agendas is driven by the reality that contemporary society, particularly younger groups, primarily interacts through social media platforms. As a result, the spread of political influence and news via social media is perceived to be wider and more effective than through other media channels. This dynamic also reflects how current political actors strategically utilise social media, as some content shared by political figures is subsequently taken up and framed as news agendas by mainstream media, thereby extending the reach and impact of political messaging beyond the original platform.

“Social media is chosen as a platform to expand current political influence because most people today are more aware of and rely on digital media (social media) rather than print (traditional) media, as information is readily accessible at users’ fingertips”. (Informant 4)

Some mainstream mass media organisations are now clearly observed to source news details and information from the social media pages of political actors. This practice is largely driven by the clarity, accessibility, and ease of information flow on social media, which has become a convenient and immediate source for media practitioners and journalists in obtaining news and information.

“The rise in social media interaction occurs across media platforms because information flows across continents and globally, leading to a greater shift towards choosing social media as a key social medium for society and politicians today”. (Informant 5)

In conclusion, it can be observed that social media today is not merely a platform through which social interactions are formed, but also a space where two-way online communication takes place across social boundaries. Through social media, members of the public are able to explore and engage with the social lives of politicians, public figures, and elites including those in positions of authority simply by accessing their social media accounts, without significant limitations or barriers.

Social Media as an Information Channel for Society

Social media not only facilitates social interaction among individuals but also functions as a key channel for public information dissemination. For instance, during the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia, social media served as the primary platform for the active dissemination of information related to COVID-19 (Mohd Nor, 2020). Findings from the interview-based analysis indicate two main dimensions of social media as an information channel for society: first, the cross-border flow of information, and second, social media as a platform that enables openness and accessibility in information sharing by content creators.

“Social media is no longer just a social platform, but a medium where information is generated and obtained. Society has no option but to accept technological progress that is happening globally either be left behind or move forward with the mainstream and accept what is happening now”. (Informant 4)

The statement provided by Informant 4 is supported by the work of Abdul Manaf, Din, Hamdan, Mat Salleh, Kamsin, and Abdul Aziz (2015), who highlighted the presence of several globally popular Web 2.0 platforms, particularly within the Malaysian context. Among the prominent platforms identified are Google, Facebook, YouTube, Yahoo, Blogspot, Wikipedia, Maybank2u, and Mudah.my, all of which demonstrate the extensive integration of digital platforms into everyday information-seeking practices in Malaysia.

This situation clearly demonstrates that information seeking has become a critical necessity within society. In Malaysia, social media platforms such as Facebook are among the most frequently used media, serving not only as tools for social interaction but also for business-related purposes and other activities. Accordingly, social media has evolved into an integrated network of social interaction while simultaneously functioning as a primary source of information for the public.

At the same time, social media is also used as a medium through which individual expression can be openly observed. This is because social media is often classified as a personalised medium, where individuals are able to share their thoughts, experiences, and viewpoints freely within their own digital spaces.

“The openness of discussions and views allows netizens to express their opinions, ideas, and aspirations, and these are read by the parties who raise the issues”. (Informant 3)

This openness has led to the public sharing of opinions, criticisms, and ideas on social media without formal filtering, a practice that has increasingly become a new social norm and is commonly associated with the term netizens. However, this norm can at times reshape the contemporary social environment according to individual interests, resulting in outcomes that may be either positive or negative.

Social Media as a Space for Public Opinions, Ideas, and Aspirations

The openness facilitated by social media positions it as a space for the expression of public opinions, ideas, and aspirations. Findings from the interview data indicate that most informants defined social media as a platform for articulating opinions, ideas, and hopes within the context of Malaysian social norms, particularly the value of politeness. This suggests that while social media enables open expression, such expressions are still shaped by prevailing cultural expectations and societal values in Malaysia.

“If people are wise in filtering information and know how to use the sources they receive, they will benefit from social media. However, if the facilities are misused, the information obtained becomes meaningless. Society needs to be selective and not accept 100 per cent of what they read on social media”. (Informant 5)

The prudence of society and individuals in regulating social media use within the context of open expression of opinions, ideas, and aspirations must be given due emphasis. This is because the extensive openness afforded by social media can yield positive outcomes if it is utilised responsibly and constructively. Individuals must therefore exercise discernment in filtering information and avoid misusing the concept of openness in ways that violate the social norms of Malaysian society, which are strongly associated with values of politeness and decorum.

“The openness policy sometimes creates a norm where people speak out loudly without clear justification. Not all fast information is accurate as news, and this speed can produce a society that is less ethical and less polite in social media communication”. (Informant 3)

This is because some arguments or shared content uploaded to social media not only reflect defamatory elements but also undermine the normative values of Malaysian society, particularly with regard to politeness and ethical speech. The existence of an open-access environment has contributed to the emergence of a new social norm in which individuals speak assertively without clear justification or substantiated arguments. This issue warrants careful attention and examination in contemporary society, as social media when positioned as a space for opinions, ideas, and aspirations can only be constructive if used responsibly and ethically.

“Similarly, the involvement of power in social media writing gives rise to issues of defamation and the circulation of inaccurate information generated without proper controls”. (Informant 2)

Therefore, technological speed should not be exploited in ways that create an environment which erodes the foundational norms of Malaysian society, long recognised for its values of politeness and moral conduct. Such values are enshrined in Malaysia’s national principles, which emphasise civility, respect, and ethical behaviour. The advancement of technology should instead be harnessed responsibly to strengthen social harmony, rather than undermine the core societal norms that define Rukun Negara Malaysia.

Conceptual Framework of Research Findings

Accordingly, in summary, the findings indicate that social media was actively utilised during the Movement Control Order period across several key dimensions: the influence of internet connectivity, increased public

participation, its role as a medium for social interaction, its function as a channel for public information, and its position as a platform for the expression of public opinions, ideas, and aspirations.

Following these aspects, and based on the interviews conducted, the framework of research findings revealed notable changes and the emergence of additional, interrelated dimensions. These newly generated aspects are illustrated in Figure 3, which presents the conceptual framework of the research findings.

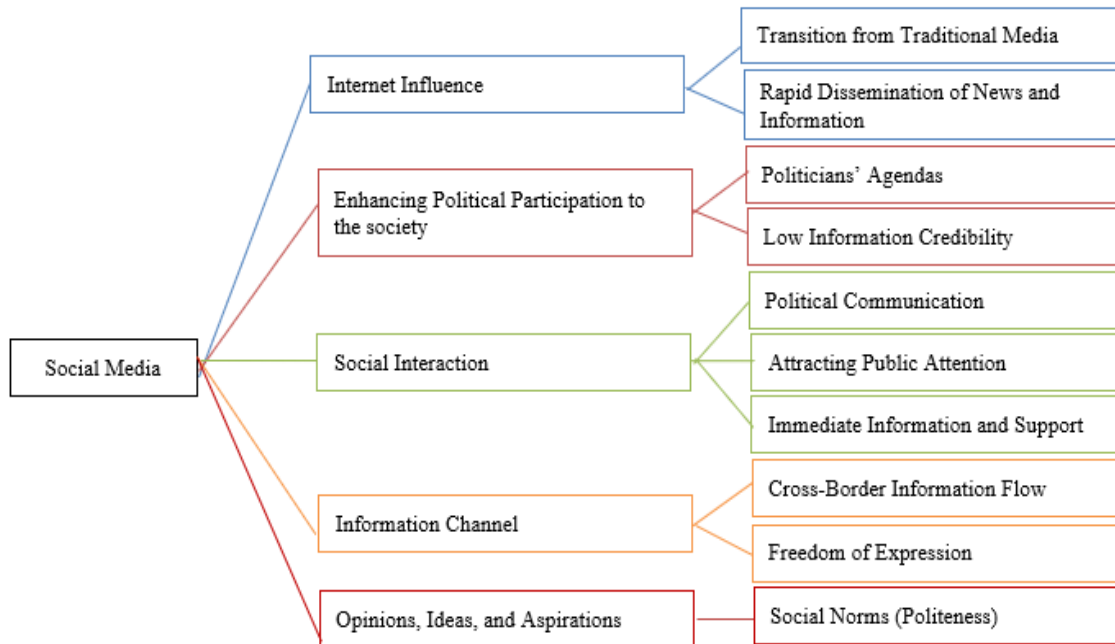


Figure 3: Conceptual Framework of Research Findings

CONCLUSION

Social media is a positive platform that offers convenience to society in social interaction, information acquisition, and the expression of opinions, ideas, and aspirations. However, it may also become a negative space when the traditional Asian norm of conveying messages with restraint and decorum is overlooked in the name of openness. At the same time, the emergence of social media has prompted a paradigm shift for print (traditional) media, encouraging it to play a more constructive role in news dissemination by exercising greater editorial filtering and adapting its platforms toward digital formats. This transformation is necessary for traditional media to remain relevant and responsive to the needs and expectations of contemporary society.

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