Melanie Radue:

The Internet´s role in the Bersih movement in Malaysia – A Case Study

Abstract:

Everywhere in the media, people talk about the so-called "Twitter and Facebook revolution" in regard to the Green Revolution in Iran or other new social movements which demand democratization in their countries and use the Internet for communication and mobilization. Libertarian advocates of the Internet state that the Internet has democratizing effects because of its reputed egalitarian, open and free technological structure for communication processes. Especially in countries in which the media is under strict control by the government, these characteristics are emphasized as stimulation for political liberalization and democratization processes. This essay critically examines the alleged democratizing effect of the use of the Internet on the Malaysian society exemplified on the social movement Bersih. The Bersih movement demands free and fair elections in Malaysia, often described as an ethnocratic and "electoral authoritarian regime".[141] The objective of this study is to demonstrate the dependency of such possible effects on context.

Agenda:

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[141] See Wong, C. H., Chin, J. & Othman, N. (2010). Malaysia - Towards a Topology of an Electoral One-Party State. 920-949.

Analytical approach – contextualization of the variables

The Internet in its variety of structures, uses and effects has multiple characteristics and faces; it developed in diverse ways in different settings, histories, and societies. Not everyone is included in the development of a digital modernity and of course not all in the same manner. These developments greatly depend on the specific context. Therefore, the objective of this essay is not the identification of general characteristics of the effect of the use of the Internet in social movements on socio-political change, especially democratization processes. It is about identifying and analyzing the specific context and the reciprocal effects of the relevant variables in their context.

The analysis is conducted in an explorative manner which emphasises the contextualization of the variables.[1] That means that the relevant variables are predominantly analyzed in their direct specific context spheres which interact reciprocal and with the national context sphere to a great extent. Likewise, global context spheres are considered to the extent they affect the interdependence of the use of the Internet in the social movement and society. Additionally, critical incidents which affect the different context spheres, their interactions and reciprocal effects are considered in the analysis. This obtains an inclusion of both, internal and external factors.[2]

The figure illustrates the different specific context spheres in which the relevant variables operate and interact. The open analytical approach encourages the enhancement of the perception of the Internet's role in social movements. For this purpose, these two variables are analyzed in their specific contexts as independent variables to derive a possible causation on a more abstract level.

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[1] Razak, A. (2000). Role of the Media Promoting Democracy. 78-96.

[2] Hudson, W. (2003). Problematizing European Theories of Civil Society. 9-20.
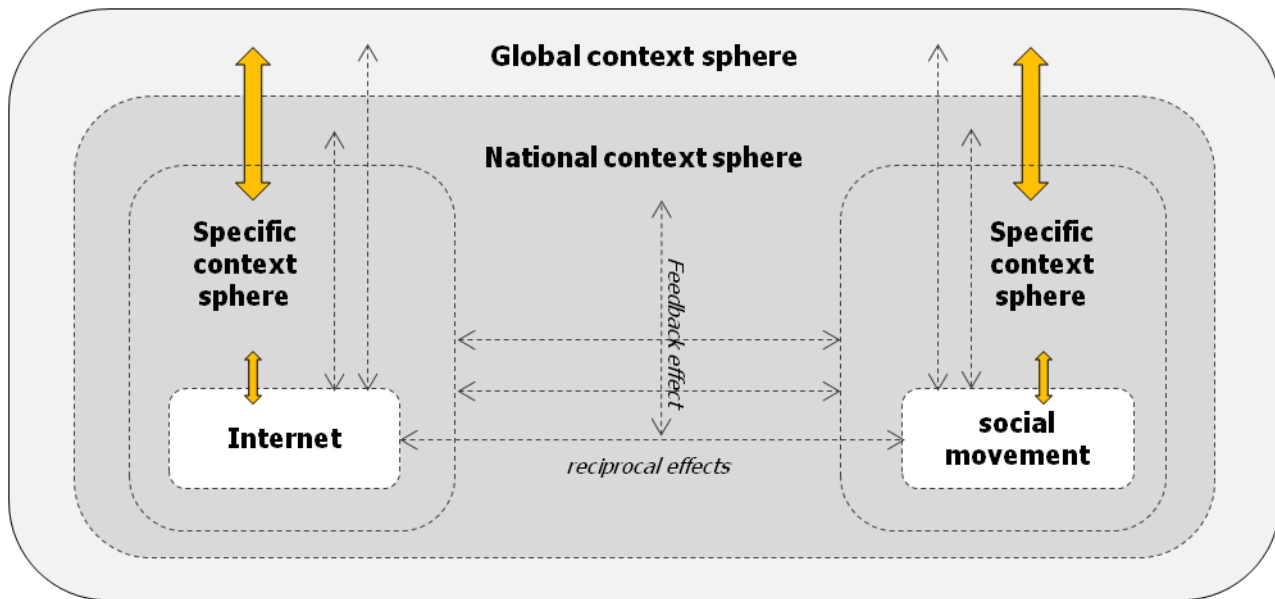
Context spheres in which the considered variables operate[3]

Based on Touraine's predication that social movements are a general representation of (civil) society, this article considers social movements as an extension of civil society. Furthermore, Touraine advocates the analysis of social dynamics in general instead of analyzing social movements themselves.[4] To create an open analytical approach without theoretical limitation for the analysis in the Malaysian context, this article considers the role of the Internet in a social movement within the framework of the concept of civil society as a dynamic concept, as a "project in progress".[5] For this reason, the analysis does not refer to theoretical models which were developed in Western contexts but rather analyzes the variables in an explorative, contextualizing manner.

These contexts, the mobilization and action of the social movement itself as well as other critical incidents ("tipping points") influence whether the Internet can have an impact on democratization processes or not. Here, these processes are understood as a "metaprocess of social change" as defined by Krotz.[6] This metaprocess is neither in its causes and effects nor in its processes clearly distinguishable from other processes.[7] Before democratization processes can evolve, there first has to be a disruption in the political system. Only then can a medium like the Internet provide a platform for the demands and the organization of social movements.[8]

The Internet is often proclaimed a space in which democratic learning processes evolve. The experience of a relatively free flow of alternative information and consequently the possibility to access alternative information, particularly democratic values, from a transnational public sphere indicates the assumption of these learning processes.[9] Kedzie explained these processes in his research into the "dictator's dilemma", as:

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[3] The Feedback Effects are not analyzed in this essay. They are interesting for further research (cp. 2. Conclusion and further research)

[4] Touraine, A. (1995). Beyond Social Movements? 371-397.

[5] Schak, D.C. & Hudson, W. (2003). Civil Society in Asia. 1.

[6] Krotz, F. (2007). Mediatisierung: Fallstudien zum Wandel von Kommunikation.

[7] Ibid. 12.

[8] Castells, M. (2007). Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society. 238-266.

[9] cp. Castells, M. (2001, 2007); Howard, P. N. (2010)

"New communication technologies enable citizens of prospective democracies to learn more about how other societies operate. [...] they are inclined to seek more freedom and democracy for themselves. [...] this is precisely the reason that non-democratic regimes, from the Soviet Union to Singapore, deem it necessary to attempt to control communication and information. Theirs is a prophylactic measure against the infectious nature of freedom."[10]

Therefore, the Internet is often considered a change agent within and for democratization processes.[11] For example Nisbet, Stoycheff & Pierce state that a country as Malaysia is more likely "to experience political change as citizen Internet use deepens and expands" because of the "high level of Internet penetration, a moderate amount of demand for democracy, and some freedoms".[12] Castells also emphasizes the potential of the Internet, particularly of the network society, to create social transformation processes.[13] He proposes a drift of vertical powers (hegemony) to horizontal "counter-powers".[14] Referring to social movements as representation of civil society, the Internet is especially in authoritarian contexts a good means of countering power and hegemony.[15]

Although there is a lot of research conducted into the interdependence of the use of the Internet and social movements, which gives evidence and postulates general democratizing effects of the Internet diffusion, most scholars agree about a certain dependency on context.[16] For instance, Best & Wade "found evidence that this Internet-democracy relationship is not absolute; for instance, consider the variability among regional results".[17]

Morozov condemns an implied "cyber-utopianism" and also emphasizes the context-dependency of the potential of the Internet for democratization processes.[18] Abbott declares in the Malaysian context that "the loudspeaker will always be more intrusive than the Internet will ever be".[19]

In fact, one of the main points which influences whether a medium has a democratizing effect is the way it is used and not the way the technology is structured.[20] This is supported by Castells: "Naturally, social movements are not originated by technology, they use technology."[21] Therefore, this article hypothesizes that it is not solely the medium itself which can effect democratization. The Internet itself is not a democratic medium only because of its technological structure. It depends fundamentally on its social, political and economic context and especially on how it is used by the actors involved.[22] The social actor who uses a medium in a specific context can use it either in a democratic or in a non-democratic manner. As Best & Wade maintain that "the Internet can be used both as a tool for democratization as well as an instrument for authoritarianism".[23] Consequently, one could say that no medium is inherently democratic, neither traditional media nor

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[10] Kedzie, C. R. (1997). Communication and Democracy: Coincident Revolutions and the Emergent Dictator's Dilemma.

[11] e.g. Kedzie, C. R. (1997); Howard, P. N. (2010); Somchai, P. (2006); George, C. (2006)

[12] Nisbet, E., Stoycheff, E. & Pierce, K. (2012). Internet Use and Democratic Demands: A Multinational, Multilevel Model of Internet Use and Citizen Attitudes About Democracy. 262.

[13] Castells, M. (2001, 2004)

[14] Castells, M. (2004, 2007)

[15] E.g.: Kedzie, C. R. (1997); Howard, P. N. (2010); Castells, M. (2001, 2004)

[16] e.g. Abbott, J. P. (2001); Bennet, W. L. (2003); Best, M. L. & Wade K. D. (2009); Howard, P. N. (2010); Howard, P.N. & Parks, M. R. (2012); Nisbet, E., Stoycheff, E. & Pierce, K. (2012)

[17] Best, M. L. & Wade K. D. (2009). The Internet and Democracy: Global Catalyst or Democratic Dud?. 270.

[18] Morozov, E. (2011a). *The Net Delusion. The Dark Side of Internet Freedom.*

[19] Abbott, J. P. (2001). Democracy@internet.asia? The Challenges to the emancipatory potential of the net: lessons from China and Malaysia. 111.

[20] Morozov, E. (2011b). Technologies Role in Revolution: Internet Freedom and Political Oppression.

[21] Castells, M. (2007). Communication, Power and Counter-Power in the Network Society. 249.

[22] Abbott, J. P. (2001, 2004); Best, M. L. & Wade K. D. (2009); Morozov, E. (2011);

[23] Best, M. L. & Wade K. D. (2009). The Internet and Democracy: Global Catalyst or Democratic Dud?. 255.

the concept of the so-called new social media. It is a tool which can be utilized for socialization, identity construction and mobilization but also for propaganda, surveillance and repression. Additionally, especially the so-called new or social media require a specific competence to use them.[24] Consequently, the concept of social media inherently encouraging democratic processes is not tenable; there are only social and unsocial, democratic and undemocratic actions of people evoked by the use of media.

The following analysis of a possible effect of the Internet, exemplified on the Malaysian case study, will be contextualized to avoid a Eurocentric perspective by applying a western media or communication theory concept. For this purpose, the Internet and the social movement have to be analyzed as dependent variables of political, economic, historical and social structures in Malaysia. Then, these two variables are analyzed as independent variables in order to derive a possible causation.

The Bersih movement – from elite to grassroots

Bersih means "clear" in Bahasa Melayu. The Bersih movement, also called "the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections", is "a group of 84 non-governmental organisations whose sole aim till this day is to comprehensively revise Malaysian's electoral system".[25]

According to Touraine's prediction that the role of social movements is considered a general representation of civil society in democratization processes,[26] I will proceed to delineate and analyze the accomplishments and contexts which influence the correlation between the use of the Internet and this social movement instead of expatiating on the claims and the institution of the Bersih movement. Because of its special role in the development of the movement, the emphasis of the analysis is on the Bersih 2.0 rally on 9 July 2011.[27]

As stated in Wong´s illustration of the history of the Bersih movement, it can be understood as an extension of and tied in with the Reformasi movement which prospered after the imprisonment of the popular former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1999. In the beginning, Bersih was an elite, party driven movement which developed into a non-partisan NGO and more of a grassroots movement.[28]

While in the first Bersih rally in 2007, the parties drew the people to the street and mobilized them, in 2011 when the police cracked down the Bersih 2.0 rally, the situation was a different one. In 2007, only just under 10% were non-partisan activists whose opinion leaders were a small number of bloggers. For this reason, in 2007, Bersih did not enter into the public consciousness. In the 2011 Bersih 2.0 rally participants were 50-60% non-partisan and multiethnic and the opinion leaders were thousands of Facebook and Twitter activists. Because of the different composition of participants and the behavior of the police, the people on the street experienced the rally in a different manner. The coercive police was a common enemy, hence a feeling of unity emerged through the common multiethnic experience and the success of the rally raising public attention.[29] Actually, in 2011 the rally became a topic of general interest for Malaysians.[30]

The behaviour of the government, which did not want to go along with the demands of the movement and the planned rally, was essential for the public attention of the Bersih 2.0 rally in 2011. Furthermore, the aggressive misconduct of the police during the rally itself provoked some unintended consequences. Without

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[24] Krotz, F. (2003). Zivilisationsprozess und Mediatisierung: Zum Zusammenhang von Medien- und Gesellschaftswandel. 15–39.

[25] cp.: http://www.globalbersih.org/about-us/

[26] Touraine, A. (1995). Beyond Social Movements? 371-397.

[27] The basis for various information for the analysis is an interview with Dr. Wong Chin Huat, a Malaysian political scientist and leading political activist in the Bersih movement.

[28] Weiss, M. L. (2012). Politics in Cyberspace: New Media in Malaysia. 36.; Wong, C. H. (2012, 23. January).

[29] Welsh, B. (2011, 10. August). People Power in Malaysia: Bersih Rally and Its Aftermath.; Weiss, M. (2012). Politics in Cyberspace: New Media in Malaysia.

[30] Wong, C. H. (2012, 23. January).

the numerous arrests, often only for wearing a yellow t-shirt (the symbolic color of the movement) and the brutality of the police the rally would not have gained so much public attention.[31]

The development of the movement from an elite, party driven movement to a more or less grassroots movement is reflected in the organization and the form of communication of the activists. Thus, the Bersih movement can be considered as both a cause for and an effect of the Malaysian democratization process.[32] Bersih contributed a new form of input to the democratization process because in Bersih 2.0 "the extent and the intensity of the mobilization was unmatched in [Malaysian] history".[33]

Wong highlights the role of the Internet as "amplifying the entire development" of the movement.[34] However, before the rally on 9 July 2011, the Internet played a more important role for the mobilization and organization than in the aftermath. After the rally, the Internet was used to disseminate news and to share experiences. Videos, photos and statements of participants were immediately spread all over the world. Consequently, we may state that the media can mirror such events, but ultimately they take place on the streets and are created in reality and by the actors themselves, not by the media.[35]

The Internet in Malaysia – Between Draconian Laws and Flourishing Industry

> "*The opposition parties, and those with a different view from the government, went into this new technology as ducks to water, adopted it and spread their messages across cyberspace.*"[36]

Though the Internet provides a platform for communication, information, mobilization and coordination to those who are already interested in politics, it does not necessarily facilitate political participation.[37] Nevertheless, liberal advocates of the Internet state that the Internet contributes to democratization in many places, to support the demand of human rights, and to identify deficiencies more quickly.[38]

In Malaysia, the Internet operates in a very restricted media system.[39] The media coverage in the so-called mainstream media in Malaysia works in favor of the interests of the government and is strongly biased.[40] The public sphere in Malaysia is regulated by the ruling elite.[41] This constrains the public sphere to a free discourse. To legitimate this biased news coverage, the government frequently refers to the ethnic riots in 1969 and to the stability needed on these grounds to prevent further riots. The ethnic riots in 1969, in which hundreds of people died, evolved because the Chinese diaspora had the economic power in Malaysia while Malaysians remained largely excluded from economic development. For a long time the government spread fear that new riots could erupt as a strategy to legitimate their policy and their exercise of draconian laws against opposition members and dissidents,[42] especially to curtail the freedom of speech.

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[31] Ibid., Welsh, B. (2011, 10. August). People Power in Malaysia: Bersih Rally and Its Aftermath.

[32] Wong, C. H. (2012, 23. January).

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Cp.: Weiss, M. L. (2012). Politics in Cyberspace: New Media in Malaysia.

[36] Pillai, M.G.G. (2001). The Internet Tail Wags The Media Dog In Malaysia.

[37] Feick, J. (2007). Demokratische Partizipation im Zeitalter des Internet. 221-239.

[38] Bettermann, E. (2010). Einschränkung der Medienfreiheit weltweit. 33.

[39] E.g.: Zaharom, N. (2002b). The Structure of The Media Industry: Implications for Democracy.111-137.; Anuar, M.K. (2002). Defining Democratic Discourses: The Mainstream Press. 138-164.; Weiss, M. (2012). Politics in Cyberspace: New Media in Malaysia.

[40] Cherian, G. (2005). The Internet's Political Impact and the Penetration/Participation Paradox in Malaysia and Singapore. 903-920.

[41] Zaharom, N. (2002b). The Structure of The Media Industry: Implications for Democracy.111-137.

[42] Zaharom, N. (2002a). The Media and Malaysia´s Reformasi Movement. 119-138.

Opinions that are published criticizing the government are not directly suppressed by curtailing the freedom of expression guaranteed in Article 10 of the constitution, but through indirect exercise of power constituted by a variety of laws, such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA)[43], Internal Security Act[44], Sedition Act and Official Secret Act.[45] Due to these often in an arbitrary fashion used draconian laws, journalists fear detentions and heavy fines hence they practice self-censorship and complaisant reporting.[46] Subsequently, the mainstream media do not criticize the government or social and political grievances to preserve "law and order" in the interest of the government.[47] In consequence, the mainstream media do not fulfill the tasks of critical journalism.

In this restrictive media system, the Internet plays a special role in Malaysia.[48] Since the launch of *Vision 2020*, which focuses on the development of the Malaysian society into an information society, various information and communication technology projects have been pushed forward to encourage foreign investments in Malaysia. Until the goal to implement a "Malaysian Silicon Valley" to construct a Malaysian knowledge society was pursued, there were hardly possibilities to disseminate and receive critical information in public. The mainstream media are almost invariably loyal to the government or even owned and controlled by government-related organizations and companies.[49] With the aim to implement the "Multimedia Super Corridor", former Prime Minister Mahathir promised a no-censorship-policy on the Internet. In order to not deter foreign investors, a "Bill of Guarantee" ensures the renunciation of censorship on the Internet for economic reasons.[50] Nevertheless, only the PPPA, which regulates the licensing of all publications in Malaysia and enables the Prime Minister to arbitrarily disbar Publications, does not apply to the content on the Internet. All the other draconian laws are still in effect and also applied on the Internet.

Regardless, the Internet developed into a convenient and popular medium to publish alternative opinions and information especially for dissidents and opposition members due to its possibility for horizontal communication, lower publication costs, and the omission of licensing.[51] The possibility to access alternative information on the Internet counters the bias of the mainstream media and changes power structures by creating a "counter-power".[52] Thus, the Internet in Malaysia has established itself as a kind of counter-public to the biased information of the mainstream media. One reason for this development was the enormous increase of interest for political topics and alternative information due to the imprisonment of the former vice Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim under Mahathir in 1999 for alleged corruption and sodomy.[53] For many Malaysians at this galvanizing moment, the mainstream media were no longer a trusted source of information due to their strong bias. Thus,

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[43] SUARAM (2012, 28. August). 2011 Human Rights Report says: "The requirement of annual renewal of permit has been removed. The irony is, the Home Minister retains the final say to suspend or revoke a newspaper's license."

[44] Amnesty International (2012, 12 April) states that "A draconian act first introduced in 1960, the ISA was used to imprison critics of the government and opposition politicians as well as suspected militants." Further "The ISA was replaced by the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act which (...) will allow police to detain suspects incommunicado for 48 hours, increasing the risk of torture. The law also permits detention for up to 28 or 29 days without charge or access to the courts. "This new Act merely replaces one oppressive regime with another," said Donna Guest, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Programme."

[45] Weiss, M. (2012). Politics in Cyberspace: New Media in Malaysia.

[46] Abbott, J. P. (2004). The internet, Reformasi and democratization in Malaysia. 81.; Zaharom, N. (2002b). The Structure of The Media Industry: Implications for Democracy.111-137.

[47] Zaharom, N. (2002a). The Media and Malaysia´s Reformasi Movement. 119-138.; Zaharom, N. (2002b). The Structure of The Media Industry: Implications for Democracy.111-137.

[48] Weiss, M. (2012). Politics in Cyberspace: New Media in Malaysia.

[49] Zaharom, N. (2002a). The Media and Malaysia´s Reformasi Movement. 119-138.; Weiss, M. (2012). Politics in Cyberspace: New Media in Malaysia.

[50] Abbott, J. P. (2004). The Internet, Reformasi and democratization in Malaysia. 82-83.

[51] Pillai, M.G.G. (2001). The Internet Tail Wags The Media Dog In Malaysia.

[52] C.p.: Castells, M. (2004, 2007)

[53] Anuar, M. K. (2005). Politics and the Media in Malaysia. 44.; Abbott, J.P. (2001). Democracy@Internet.asia? The Challenges to the emancipatory potential of the net: lessons from China and Malaysia. 101.

they used the Internet as alternative medium.[54] The alternative media on the Internet were not the sole beneficiaries of this development: The Reformasi movement also sprung up after these events. This progress exemplifies that at that time the Internet was a means of alternative information source but not the cause for political change and democratization process.

Nevertheless, some authors describe the structure and the communication that comprises the Internet itself as a social movement.[55] Derichs speaks of a virtual social movement that uses the Internet to connect the interests of different groups in the virtual space; hence not only activists and organizations can be reached but also like-minded supporters. This aspect has relevance also for the Bersih movement. Due to the Internet´s flat communication structure everyone could become a leader as well it provides a channel for the different oppositional groups to connect.[56] Consequently, the Internet as an information platform makes a significant contribution to building political awareness and discussion of political issues.[57] Derichs conceives the Internet in the Malaysian context as a promoter for new "political opportunity structures".[58] Some authors demonstrate in their analyses about Malaysia that the Internet is an instrument to communicate demands and goals and to organize and mobilize, but it does not directly change political structures and developments.[59] Although these technical characteristics promote an easier political participation, transparency and a free discourse in a re-stricted media system, the Internet itself has no direct democratizing effects because it is a goal-attaining instrument for the social movement but not a sole impulse for a democratization process.[60]

Conclusion and further research

Considering the development of the role of the Internet in Malaysia and the fact that the Bersih 2.0 rally drew public attention more through unintended incidents than the rally and the demands themselves, I argue that the Internet does not solely and directly provoke a democratization process. Without the numerous arrests and police brutality, Bersih 2.0 would probably not have attracted so much public attention.[61] The main role of the Internet was to organize and to communicate, and especially to spread the information about these incidents all around the world. This strongly demonstrates that context matters.

Though the Internet is an important means of organizing a social movement, in the end, the movement takes place outside on the street and not just within media like Facebook or Twitter. Castells also states that "social movements do not exist only in the Internet."[62] Therefore, as I stated above in my analysis, the action of people can effect sociopolitical changes and democratizing effects but not solely the use of the Internet. Weiss highlights this: "The freer flow of information [in the Internet] subverts authoritarianism, but only by informing, not transforming, the regime's subjects."[63]

It was not the Internet that caused the success of the Bersih 2.0 rally and the evolving consciousness for democratic values; it was a long history of different developments and political changes, the collective action of people as well as unintended incidents and consequences.

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[54] Abbott, J. P. (2004). The Internet, Reformasi and Democratization in Malaysia. 85.

[55] cp. Cherian, G. (2006)., Derichs, C. (2002a)., Castells, M. (2007).

[56] Wong, C. H. (2012, 23. January).

[57] Derichs, C. (2002a). Internet als subversives Medium?

[58] Ibid. 122.

[59] E.g.: Abbott, J. P. (2004); Derichs, C. (2002a); Derichs, C. (2002b); Weiss, M. (2012)

[60] Abbott, J. P. (2004). The Internet, Reformasi and Democratization in Malaysia. 96.; Weiss, M. (2012). Politics in Cyberspace: New Media in Malaysia.

[61] Welsh, B. (2011, 10. August). People Power in Malaysia: Bersih Rally and Its Aftermath.

[62] Castells, M. (2007). Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society. 250.

[63] Weiss, M. (2012). Politics in Cyberspace: New Media in Malaysia. 46.

In conclusion, it is difficult to make a positivistic proposition about the impact of the Internet on social movements. It is indisputable that the Internet plays a specific and important role in political processes in Malaysia as alternative information medium. In the end, the process of democratization highly depends on the political and social context in which it evolves. For this reason, a generalizing assumption about the democratizing effect of the use of the Internet in social movements is not tenable. As stated at the beginning, it is not the medium itself which impacts democratization or social change processes but rather their circumstances and actions of all involved.

Beyond this analysis, further research should investigate the interaction between the communication on the Internet and the information in the mainstream media regarding the Bersih movement. Feedback effects between the discourse on the Internet and the reporting in the largely controlled mainstream media could reveal another manner of impact of the Internet on social movements. Possible positive reactions of the government towards deviant opinions on the Internet could indicate a liberalizing impact of the Internet towards a culture of debate in terms of speech and objection, and vice versa. Also, empirical studies based on qualitative interviews with participants and experts would help determine more about the correlation.

I agree with Howards & Parks' demand for a broader dialogue and cooperation between disciplines and the connection of methodical approaches (both qualitative and quantitative) to improve the investigation of such complex developments and events.[64] Therefore, I propose further conducted research should connect qualitative analyses with quantitative data.

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[64] Howard, P. N. & Parks, M. R. (2012). Social Media and Political Change: Capacity, Constraint, and Consequence. 362.

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