

Malaysia's 13th General Election: Political Communication and Public Agenda in Social Media

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Abstract

Everyone has a voice and can broadcast it to the world. We hear about the old maxim of media do not tell people what to think but what to think about. Under this theory or approach, a key function of political communication is to make the public think about an issue in a way that is favorable to the sender of the message. In a democracy, political communication is seen as crucial for the building of a society where the state and its people feel they are connected. Thus, this is a study on how social media (e.g., Facebook, blogs, and YouTube) were used in the domain of Malaysian politics during the 13th general election campaigning period in order to set the agenda to form public opinion. The study found that Facebook was the most popular social media tool that political parties actively engaged with during the 13th general election campaign period. Apart from that, issues pertaining to the election were significantly highlighted by the political parties in social media, especially Facebook. However, other issues that were also important to the people such as the economy, crime, and education were not sufficiently highlighted during the election campaign period. This indicates that the political parties influence the public on what to think about using social media.

Keywords: political communication, 13th general election, social media, social networking sites (SNS), agenda setting, public opinion

Introduction

In recent years, new web technologies, the social media, have opened up possibilities for rich, online human-to-human interaction which is unprecedented in the history of communication. The 2008 U.S. presidential election campaign showed how social media platforms such as social network sites (SNSs), microblogging services or weblogs can also be successfully used by political actors to circulate information to constituents as well as to engage and discuss various political issues with them (Stieglitz, Brockmann, & Linh, 2012). The U.S. politicians are said to already have a leading role in this regard, and Malaysia is now on the same track (Wattal, Schuff, Mandviwalla, & Williams, 2010).

Since the last election in 2008, a social media revolution has transformed the political and journalistic landscape in Malaysia. Research indicated Malaysia's 12th General Election in 2008 proved to be a historic event due to new media being effectively used as an alternative vehicle for information provision during the weeks of the election campaign (Liow, 2012). Blogs were the favorite back then (Ismail & Hasmah, 2008). Before the 13th general election took place, the Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Najib, had claimed that the 2013 general election would be Malaysia's first "social media election." He admitted that the proliferation growth of social media has encouraged greater openness, but it could be a double-edged sword for his party (UMNO) (Zahid, 2013).

If one uses social media networks correctly, it could have a positive impact or influence on the relationship between political parties and the public (Crompton, 2008; Wills & Reeves, 2007; Zittel, 2007). According to a monitoring website, socialbaker.com, currently there are about 13.6 million Facebook users (out of a population of 28.3 million) in Malaysia. Based on the figure, the overwhelming growth of social media networks has relentlessly changed the way we interact with each other and has an insidious influence on how the public consumes messages and news. With the mainstream media kept on the leash by the National Front (Barisan Nasional), politicians have increasingly turned their attention to social media like Facebook and/or Twitter accounts to reach out to their voters, especially during an election campaign. During the general election in 2008, statistics showed that blogging was an effective vehicle to attract more socio-political cyberspace election info-sharing and debate, but the trend has moved to Facebook and Twitter for information seeking, especially for issues related to politics (Ismail & Hasmah, 2008; Navarria, 2013; Idid & Chang, 2012).

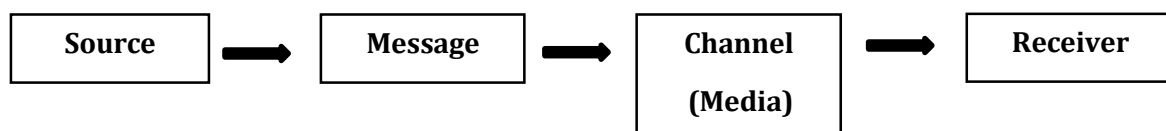
In a democracy, political communication is seen as crucial for the building of a society where the state and its people feel they are connected (Lilleker, 2006). Consequently, this study demonstrates how social media (e.g., Facebook, blogs, and YouTube) were used in the domain of Malaysian politics during the 13th general election campaigning period in order to set the agenda to form public opinion. This study was conducted with other research teams in Malaysia. This paper examined three social media tools: Facebook, blogs, and YouTube during the 13th general election campaigning period. Twitter, which is considered the most popular social networking, was examined by another research team. This study also focused on the issues that were discussed during the campaigning period via the social media tools.

Political communication and the social media

In the field of communication, Laswell’s maxim is well-known: who says what to whom in what channel with what effect (Gamble & Gamble, 1989; Agee, Ault, & Emery, 1997). Under the classical model of communication, four components play a significant role in attaining the objective of communication: Source, Message, Channel (media), and Receiver. The classical communication model (Figure 1) provides a one-way communication process. A range of messages are distributed, using all available media from reliable sources, thereby reaching an audience. In political communication, the source and message may come from political institutions or politicians, while the receiver may be politicians, journalists, members of interest groups, or private, unorganized citizens and, of course, the voters (Lilleker, 2006; Graber & Smith, 2005).

Figure 1

The classical model of communication

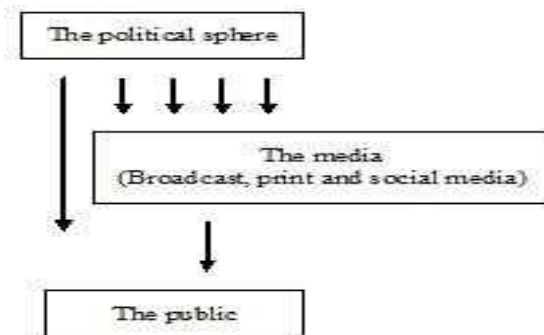


As defined by Graber and Smith (2005), political communication is comprised of the construction, sending, receiving, and processing of messages that potentially have a significant direct or indirect impact on politics. In accordance with the proliferation of communication in social media, political communication acts as a catalyst; feedback from the general public is paramount. In other words, political communication must allow

feedback from society and encourage participation in political discussions and debates. Political communication is as old as political activity; it was a feature of ancient Greece and the Roman Empire as well as across diverse political system in the modern age (Lilleker, 2006). In this modern age, the traditional structure of mass communication in the political context has changed (Chadwick, 2006; Zúñiga et al., 2012). Based on the advent of Web 2.0 technologies and associated social media, in particular, a traditional political communication (linear, top-down process from leaders to people) as shown in the Figure 2 has been improved.

Figure 2

A traditional view of political communication



Note: Adapted and modified from Lilleker (2006), p. 5.

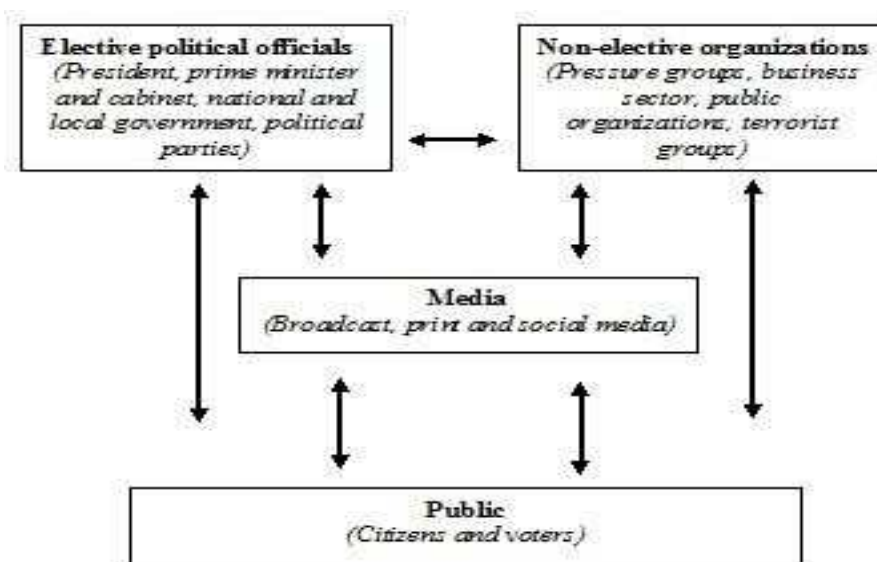
Consequently, within modern democracies, when one or another individual or party is elected, it is inevitable that they continue to communicate with them. Therefore, more groups are heard compared to only the three fundamental actors in the former's model (Figure 3). At the same time, two-way communication also exists in the modern level of political communication model. In this model, the public sphere (political actors) is no longer only transforming the messages to the constituencies, but also communicating with other non-elective organizations. This two-way communication between elective political officials and non-elective organizations has made the communication vary and both are competing with one another to obtain their communication objectives. The emphasis on reach and visibility by the social media allows for large amounts of cheap and fast coverage (Tham & Hasmah, 2011).

In the essence of political communication, it is actually practicing public relations activities in which media and information management tactics designed to ensure that a party receives maximum favorable publicity, and the minimum of negative publicity. That

is what we refer to as the process of mediation. Before a message passes through to the public, it would be caught by the media and then channeled out once again. At this level, the top-down process from leaders to people no longer exists. More communication goes from the bottom, society, into the political sphere via selected media channels. In addition, the public or voters are not content with the simple act of voting anymore. Instead, they are becoming more active participants in political discussions.

Figure 3

The levels of political communication



Note: Adapted and modified from Lilleker (2006), p.6.

Social media

The term social media is used to describe “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplen & Haelein, 2010; Mayfield, 2008; Newson, Houghton, & Patten, 2009). In other words, it is a platform that facilitates information sharing and participation from users of the media in order to create and distribute the content. Social media encompasses different forms, for instance social networks—Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, etc. – Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, micro blogging, wikis, podcasts, pictures, and video, to name a few (Kaplen & Haelein, 2010; Weber, 2009; Steenkamp & Hyde-Clarke, 2012). Why is social media so popular with the younger generation, even in the political realm? Social media is particularly fascinating because it differs from traditional media such as newspapers and television

in three ways: (1) it is able to facilitate two-way interaction with a large number of people at the same time; (2) actors are connected with each other directly; and (3) popular social media websites are relatively inexpensive or free to join, making the cost of usage very low.

Due to the fact that social media makes it easy for people to evaluate their counterparts' actions, it is therefore beneficial to incorporate it as part of an electoral strategy. Politicians use social media to communicate with their audience and to call them to protest or to vote (see Figure 4). Even during the election campaign weeks, the social networks and blogs become an effective campaigning platform for politicians to promote their dialogue with the community that they represent or to provide the public with a certain image of themselves (Momoc, 2013). In addition, politicians often use social media as a platform to attack each other, especially during the election campaign weeks.

Figure 4

Examples of Facebook pages to protest and vote.



Research Methodology

Quantitative content analysis was used to examine how social media was used by Malaysian politicians and what issues were discussed in social media during the 13th general election campaign period. The campaign period was divided into two time series: T1 indicates the first week of the election campaign (April 20 – 28, 2013), while T2 represents the second week of election campaign (April 29 – May 6, 2013).

Six political parties, namely the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the People’s Justice Party (PKR), the Democratic Action Party Malaysia (DAP), and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) were selected to have their respective Facebook pages, blogs or YouTube channels examined; leaders were randomly selected from each party. The unit of analysis in this study was the posts published on their respective Facebook pages, blogs or YouTube channels.

Each posting on the Facebook page, blogs or a YouTube channel of the political institutions was coded using a standardized code book and code sheet which was designed to categorize the variables. A master coding of the main issues (Table 1) was used to define issues based on the posts published on the party’s Facebook page, party’s related blogs or YouTube channel. Coders examined the social media tools of a party at three different times, 9am, 2pm and 8pm, to count as many postings as possible for the day.

Table 1
Malaysian General Election 2013: selected 18 election issues

(1) Economy	(6) Education	(11) Politics	(15) Religion
(2) Social	(7) Crime	(12) Environmental/Natural	(16) International
(3) Unity	(8) Leadership	Disaster	Relations
(4) Governance	(9) Traffic	(13) National Security	(17) Patriotism
(5) Foreigners	Problems	(14) Development Problems	(18) Health
	(10) Election		Problems

This study used 18 coders to code six parties’ Facebook accounts (three Members of Parliaments [MP] and three Members of States), blogs, or YouTube clips from April 20, 2013 to May 6, 2013. All the variables and categories were recorded into the statistical software Predictive Analytics SoftWare 20.0 (formerly known as SPSS). Then the data would be analyzed using the same statistical software. Descriptive analysis would be carried out to further answer the research objectives.

Inter-coder Reliability Test

The Holsti’s CR (1969) inter-coder reliability test was conducted in this study, and ultimately the coefficient for this study is 0.79 on average, with 0.72 for UMNO, 0.73 for MCA, 0.81 for MIC, 0.89 for PKR, 0.79 for DAP, and 0.82 for PAS respectively, indicating a satisfactory level of agreement reached by coders.

Results

In this research, a total of 3685 samples from the parties' Facebook accounts, blogs and YouTube channels were identified during the campaigning period from April 20 – May 6, 2013 (Table 2). Of that entire amount, Facebook had the highest number of posts from the six political parties during the election campaigning period with 2955 posts compared to blogs (382 posts) and YouTube (348 posts).

In terms of the party per se, DAP has 24.5% of the Facebook posts during the election campaigning period, followed by PKR (22.6%) and UMNO (20.9%). Looking at the usage of blogs, UMNO led the highest one with 57.9% over the others. Apart from the Facebook and blog usage, PKR secured the highest number of usages of YouTube (40.2%), followed by UMNO (26.4%) and DAP (24.7%). Both MCA and MIC contributed the least number of usages on these three forms social media during the election campaigning period.

Table 2

The usage of social media during 2013 campaigning period

Party	Social media			Whole Sample
	Facebook	Blog	YouTube	
UMNO	617 (20.9%)	221 (57.9%)	92 (26.4%)	930 (25.2%)
DAP	723 (24.5%)	64 (16.8%)	86 (24.7%)	873 (23.7%)
MCA	253 (8.6%)	0 (0%)	2 (0.6%)	255 (6.9%)
MIC	111 (3.8%)	10 (2.6%)	6 (1.7%)	127 (3.4%)
PKR	667 (22.6%)	69 (18.1%)	140 (40.2%)	876 (23.7%)
PAS	584 (19.8%)	18 (4.7%)	22 (6.3%)	624 (16.9%)
Total	2955 (100%)	382 (100%)	348 (100%)	3685 (100%)

Table 3 (below) shows the use of social media according to time frame by the six political parties during the election campaigning period. The researchers compartmentalized the election campaigning period into two time frames, T1 and T2. Based on the results, all six parties contributed almost equally during the two different time frames in terms of using social media as their election campaign tool. Specifically, UMNO contributed 5.7% more on T2 compared to T1 (22.3%). The reason may due to the

party trying to underpin some important issues and gain more voters' support before the polling day. Unlike the DAP, they tried to place more emphasis on the first week of election campaign, during in which they contributed 4.9% more compared to T2 (21.2%). The 13th general election was expected to be the fiercest in Malaysia's political history in that a change in government could happen for the first time in 56 years. During the first week of the campaign period (T1), each party displayed and promoted their election campaign motto in which UMNO coined Janji Ditepati (Promises Fulfilled), PKR used Ini Kali Lah (This is the Time), DAP selected Jom Ubah (Let's Change), PAS preferred Negara Berkeadilan (Welfare State). The first week most postings by each party focused on introducing their election campaign motto and their candidates to the local constituencies plus related election issues. During the first week of election campaigning period, postings were slower compared to the second week of the election campaign period. On the second week, postings were higher as candidates were trying to push many more issues and points before the polling date on May 5, 2013.

Table 3
The use of social media according to time frame

Party	Time Fame		Whole sample
	T1 (April 20 th – 28 th)	T2 (April 29 th – May 6 th)	
UMNO	395 (22.3%)	535 (28.0%)	930 (25.2%)
DAP	465 (26.2%)	408 (21.3%)	873 (23.7%)
MCA	134 (7.6%)	121 (6.3%)	255 (6.9%)
MIC	67 (3.8%)	60 (3.1%)	127 (3.4%)
PKR	397 (22.4%)	479 (25.0%)	876 (23.7%)
PAS	314 (17.7%)	310 (16.2%)	624 (16.9%)
Total	1772 (100%)	1913 (100%)	3685 (100%)

In terms of the average posting of each party in using social media during the election campaigning period, Table 4 shows that an average of 51.67 posts on election related issues published by DAP on social media during the first week of the election campaign period, while MIC only contributed an average of 7.44 posts a day during the first week of the election campaign. During the second week of the election campaign,

UMNO posted an average of 66.88 posts on election related issues on social media, compared to 22.99 posts on average during the first week of its election campaign (M = 43.89). DAP contributed the same amount per day during the second week of election campaign (M = 51) as its first week of the election campaign. Again, the table shows that MIC only posted an average of 7.5 posts on election related issues during the second week of the election campaign.

Table 4

Mean score of social media according to time frame

Party	Time Fame		
	T1 (April 20 th – 28 th)	T2 (April 29 th – May 6 th)	
MCA	UMNO	43.89	66.88
	DAP	51.67	51
	MIC	7.44	7.5
	PKR	44.11	59.88
	PAS	34.89	38.75
		14.89	15.13

Table 5 (below) analyzed the use of social media according to the time of day by the six political parties. It can be explicitly seen from the table that, again, most of the political parties' social media accounts posted equally about their relevant election campaign messages throughout the three different time periods, of which 8pm was the time with the highest number of posts by politicians on social media, with 1464 posts. With respect to party, UMNO posted more information on the election at 8pm (30.7%) during the election campaigning period compared to others. MIC was the party with the least posted messages on the election throughout the three time periods with only 3.4% as a whole. The fact that 8pm had the highest number of posts during the campaigning period by the six political parties may be due to most of the white-collar workers and blue-collar workers having returned home by that time, so they have more time to use social media to read updates about the latest information pertaining to the 13th general election by the respective political parties.

Table 5
The use of social media according to time component

Party	Time Component			Whole sample
	9am	2pm	8pm	
UMNO	273 (22.7%)	208 (20.4%)	449 (30.7%)	930 (25.2%)
DAP	259 (21.6%)	248 (24.3%)	366 (25%)	873 (23.7%)
MCA	108 (9%)	56 (5.5%)	91 (6.2%)	255 (6.9%)
MIC	37 (3.1%)	42 (4.1%)	48 (3.3%)	127 (3.4%)
PKR	328 (27.3%)	266 (26.1%)	282 (19.3%)	876 (23.7%)
PAS	196 (16.3%)	200 (19.6%)	228 (15.6%)	624 (16.9%)

Table 6 presents the issues that were discussed during the election campaign period. Overall, most of the politicians focused more on issues pertaining to the election (80.68%), followed by issues pertaining to politics which concern the strengths of BN or PKR, different understanding of politics, BERSIH's rally, etc. During the two-week campaigning period, it seems that most of the politicians were concerned about election issues pertaining to who are the new candidates or parties in the coming election, election's manifesto or campaign of a party, party switching, credibility of a party or candidates, phantom voters, integrity of the SPR, when is the polling date, and date of the dissolution of parliament, etc.

In terms of the party posting about issues in their respective social media tools, again, issues related to the election such as the abovementioned, the credibility of the party or candidates, phantom voters, and polling date, to name a few, turned out to be the prominent issue among the politicians. Specifically, UMNO published the most about issues related to the election (772) on social media, followed by PKR (736) and DAP (671). Issues pertaining to health problems and foreigners were the least covered or addressed by politicians during the campaign period.

Table 6
The issues according to the political parties

Issues	Political Parties						Total
	UMNO	DAP	MCA	MIC	PKR	PAS	
Economy	2 (0.2)	0 (0)	1 (0.4)	5 (3.9)	4 (0.5)	5 (0.8)	17 (0.5)
Education	5 (0.5)	3 (0.3)	1 (0.4)	9 (7.1)	1 (0.1)	1 (0.2)	20 (0.5)
Politics	65 (7.0)	53 (6.1)	6 (2.4)	4 (3.1)	23 (2.6)	96 (15.4)	247 (6.7)
Religion	22 (2.4)	6 (0.7)	1 (0.4)	1 (0.8)	9 (1.0)	28 (4.5)	67 (1.8)
Social	1 (0.1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	11 (8.7)	0 (0)	2 (0.3)	14 (0.4)
Crime	4 (0.4)	11 (1.3)	4 (1.6)	0 (0)	10 (1.1)	6 (1.0)	35 (1.0)
Environmental/Natural Disaster	0 (0)	1 (0.1)	1 (0.4)	3 (2.4)	1 (0.1)	2 (0.3)	8 (0.2)
International Relations	1 (0.1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (0.03)
Unity	1 (0.1)	12 (1.4)	0 (0)	1 (0.8)	2 (0.2)	3 (0.5)	19 (0.5)
Leadership	23 (2.5)	85 (9.7)	0 (0)	0 (0)	21 (2.4)	9 (1.4)	138 (3.7)
National Security	3 (0.3)	1 (0.1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (0.2)	0 (0)	6 (0.2)
Patriotism	2 (0.2)	1 (0.1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (0.5)	1 (0.2)	8 (0.2)
Governance	4 (0.4)	20 (2.3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (0.1)	4 (0.6)	29 (0.9)
Traffic Problems	0 (0)	5 (0.6)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (0.1)	1 (0.2)	7 (0.2)
Development Problems	6 (0.6)	4 (0.5)	0 (0)	3 (2.4)	7 (0.8)	2 (0.3)	22 (0.6)
Health Problems	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (0.2)	1 (0.03)
Foreigners	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Election	772 (83)	671 (76.9)	241 (94.5)	90 (70.9)	736 (84.0)	463 (74.2)	2973 (80.7)
Others	19 (2.0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	54 (6.2)	0 (0)	73 (2.0)
Total	930 (100)	873 (100)	255 (100)	127 (100)	876 (100)	624 (100)	3685 (100)

Note: Values in parentheses indicate percentage within the political parties.

Discussion and Conclusion

The essence of political communication in this particular study introduces the sphere of politics in the new media during the Malaysian 13th general election in 2013. This sphere constitutes a change that is equal in scope to those introduced by the mass media in the field of information and communication in which two-way communication is vital to informing public opinion during the electoral process. In the electoral process, both

political parties and candidates require the attention of both the electronic and print media to portray their image and promote policy proposals for the attention and consideration of voters. Reach and visibility of an issue are pivotal to influence the public agenda. It is postulated that the more frequently an issue is visible, the more the readers will form “pictures in their heads” about issues (Tham & Hasmah, 2011). Since political advertising was not allowed in the Malaysian media, politicians and political parties found social media as an alternative to ensure the election agenda was posted and repeated as frequently as possible to the public.

This study was carried out to understand the nature of how social media (e.g., Facebook, blogs, and YouTube) were used in Malaysian politics during the 13th general election campaigning period in order to set their agenda to form public opinion, and as a result what are the issues being discussed during that period of time. A quantitative content analysis was made on six political institutions’ Facebook, blogs, and YouTube pages during the campaign period from April 20 to May 6, 2013 to discover what issues were frequently discussed in the examined social media tools and to understand the pattern of usage of social media among politicians during the election campaign.

The findings showed Facebook was the most popular social media that was used by political parties during the campaigning period to interact with constituents. This indicates that social media, especially Facebook, is widely seen to play a significant role in the Malaysian 13th general election. The result is in line with the claim that Facebook serves as an indication of the phenomenal growth of social network sites in recent years (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009), and it proves that politicians have used Facebook more frequently than blogs in the 2013 general election campaign. It has been suggested that Facebook is a participatory media tool, and at its most basic, it can be used to communicate with voters in the same way that traditional media does. Even though previous studies showed that 38.3% of those aged 21-30 trusted blogs for reliable information (Sulaiman, 2008), the current results showed less usage of blogs and YouTube by political institutions during the election campaign period.

Moreover, opposition parties like PKR used YouTube frequently during the election campaigning period to upload public speeches to attract people’s attention. The use of YouTube might be even more effective in reaching out to a wired populace than TV appearances, given that online videos can be shared and re-shared repeatedly and across

the region. In addition, those who were unable to attend the public speeches and debates, can even watch them on YouTube. Such an approach gives an advantage to the opposition party to engage with the public more closely as video content went viral well and very quickly.

When a comparison was made between the use of social media according to time frame by the six political parties during the election campaigning period, all six parties contributed almost equally during the two different time frames. Specifically, UMNO used social media more during the second week of the election campaign week which is T2 (April 29th – May 6th). The reason may be due to the party trying to underpin some important issues and gain more voters' support before polling day. Unlike the DAP, they focused on the first week of the election campaign (April 20th – 28th).

Generally, during the election campaign weeks, issues pertaining to the election (e.g., new candidates or parties, election's manifesto or campaign, party switching, etc.) were significantly highlighted by the political parties in social media, especially Facebook. However, other important issues such as the economy, crime, and education were not sufficiently highlighted during the election campaign periods that were also important to the people (Idid & Chang, 2012). The researchers suggested that if issues were regarded as significant in affecting the votes, then these issues ought to be addressed. Politicians should better understand what issues the community or society is concerned about rather than merely focusing on election issues. Social media, as a public sphere tool, is an essential component for the social political organization because it is the space where politicians and people come together and articulate their views to influence the political institutions of society in Malaysia.

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