



INTERVIEW WITH DATUK AHMAD TALIB, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF NEWS, MEDIA PRIMA

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Interview conducted by panel members Shona Leppanen-Gibson (SLG), Vicknaraj Thanarajah (VT), and Wai Kiong Chan (WKC)

(Please note, sound problems have caused some parts of the original recording of this interview to be inaudible at times –blue text indicates areas in which the content is an approximation and may not be exact)

VT: Datuk Ahmad, what is your perspective on new media freedom and censorship?

AT: Well, freedom comes with a price I suppose, you know. And for the ordinary people, now they have really an opportunity to express themselves through the new media. They can make themselves heard. They probably ought to make themselves known who they are, because the new media gives quite a number of people a rather faceless element when they get into the new media. For instance, you have blogs whom you do not know who are the owners, and that probably is one example of freedom that you see. Perhaps they ought to, like I said, come out and say who they are so that we will know and be able to judge them not purely from the content, but at least you know where they're coming from. And I think that is important. So the new media to me is a tool that can be used effectively and efficiently for whatever goals and purposes the promoters have in mind.

WKC: Datuk Ahmad Talib, in your view, is the influence of new media on the political system significant and has it altered the dynamics of the relationship between politicians and citizens?



AT: The fact that you have politicians managing and promoting their own blogs to me is a good example how the new media changes the method of engagement between politicians and people or the voters. How much of an impact it has on politics, I'm not too sure, but there are signs that the new media have gained ground in terms of influencing sentiments in some places. But it all also depends on how much access the voters have on new media, because in some places that

activity is not there. But the people involved in politics, the sympathisers, the members, they are quite creative people, so what they do is they make printouts of postings found in news portals and blogs and distribute them. So now you have, at least here in Malaysia, you have politicians from both divides, from both sides of the divide, having their say, engaging the voters directly and they are able to share their views, they are able to interact and quite a number of them have got good hits, I think.

SLG: What is your perspective on the Bill of Guarantees under the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 which guarantees non-censorship of the Internet and what is your view of its legal status?

AT: Well, we wouldn't want legislations to curb us in terms of what we can write in this particular case in the new media. This was a particular promise given the Multimedia Supercorridor before, I believe it was Dr Mahathir, and that is something we wouldn't want it to change. Well, why would they want it to change? It enables the people to interact with each other. You can be hundreds of miles apart but you can effectively be connected. And so my perspective to that is it should remain, it shouldn't change. I don't think at this point in time the Government would want to do that because there is wide acceptance of the Internet this age, and I don't think you want to go back to where it was before. If you speak to other bloggers and those fellows who have their own portals and things like that, I think they wouldn't want that to.

VT: Datuk Ahmad, what are your perspectives on social networking applications and sites like Facebook, Twitter, websites, from a sociocultural standpoint?

AT: Actually it is [something that I think you know here, huh? I think you fellows know that too and wasn't it Obama who used this effectively, and his campaign managers did a marvellous job in promoting him? And here is a guy who had to be asked not to use his Blackberry and I gather that is something that is you know, protect his use of the Blackberry.](#) The kind of social networking provided by Facebook and Twitter and things like that, I think it is something we should all get into and try to learn as much as possible. It's something like a car, it is no longer a matter of luxury owning a car, you need to use it to go from place to place, isn't it? In my opinion a lot more people are getting into social networking tools and its usage and application will even be more in the coming years.

WKC: Datuk Ahmad, in terms of the democratic process, how has new media shaped the manner in which politicians communicate and the environment in which they operate?

AT: Well as I said, I'm not sure – a far number of politicians have blogs, as I said. And for me this is a pretty clear example of this opinion that this thing works for them. Here in this country you saw a politician who had difficulty in the elections, I think two weeks after that they had their own blogs and starting to campaign already, hoping that they will be able to reach out to as many voters as possible. The Prime Minister has got his own blog. The former Prime Minister is the number one blogger in the country. And Opposition bosses and politicians have their own blogs. So everyone has their own space so they have to compete and try to be credible. So it's here to stay.

SLG: Taking into account the results of the 12th General Elections in 2008 and its new media participants do you think the Malaysian government is likely to introduce any measures to curb or limit the effects of new media on the political process particularly?

AT: I wouldn't be able to second guess them, but it would be to their great disadvantage to the people if something like that is to be done. Today people are a lot more intelligent than before, they can think for themselves, they are not easily influenced by others. They can see for themselves and make comparison what is happening on the ground. And any attempt to curb would not be well received I think. You would get a lot of noise on the blogs and in the portals about anything of that

sort. And that would not be good also, if the number one man in this country has his blog and someone in his Government want to curb, it wouldn't be good politics.

SLG: I understand it would be very unlikely, and I appreciate that. A lot of people have commented that it would be very unlikely to occur, but sometimes Governments act in ways we don't expect. And if the Malaysian Government was to go ahead and curb freedom of speech on the Internet, what would your reaction be and how do you think it would affect Malaysia's future?

AT: I think there would be an uproar. I don't know how it would be manifested but at least there would be an uproar and you would probably be reading about it on the front pages for quite a while, and probably they would be showing it on TV too. And I think if something like that should happen I think there would be a backlash of some nature, of some kind. I doubt that they would go to the streets or anything of that sort, but it would be seen as something unproductive.

WKC: In your view, under Prime Minister Badawi's leadership, did the national Government deal with the challenges of new media adequately?

AT: I will *(inaudible)* for a second, but during that time, I mean the new media started even before his time when Mahathir was the Prime Minister. Mahathir himself was often criticised heavily in the new media and he didn't do anything about it.

During the Prime Ministership of Tun Abdullah, he didn't do anything about it too, and same thing now. I don't think those challenges, and if anyone wants to address them, they should address them in the blogosphere. Rather than by some – rather than introducing some measures that would cramp the growth of such a thriving industry. And I think investors wouldn't want to come here. We bill ourselves as a country with such an IT *(inaudible)* and then you tell people



use it sparingly or not at all. I don't think it would be good, lah. But to your question about whether it was addressed, you said something about the challenges. It was well, it was good during that time. I don't think the Government saw that as a major threat, so it was allowed to flourish as we now seeing today. It continues to flourish and I think it will be a permanent feature in our lives. I mean today's children, quite a number of homes, especially in urban settings have wi-fi in their homes, so they are probably looking at their computer first thing in the morning and when they go to bed. So it is very interesting.

WKC: I suppose – I was going to ask you about Najib. And really, following on from what you said, is what you are saying that it would be unfair to criticise former Prime Minister Badawi for any failings in new media simply because no one else said anything anyway in his Government.

AT: Criticise him for?

WKC: Any failings in relation to the challenges of new media.

AT: New media during his time that was quite different then and now. And even during his predecessor's time there was no change.

WKC: So it was pretty much the same.

AT: Yes, the Government was slightly different, you know, but the challenges by the new media, even before his time, during his time and even now exist. Those challenges are being met now by the Government themselves having their own people to run their own blogs. I think it is a question of how much you win the battle for intellectual superiority. So it is a mind game maybe, (inaudible), you win, but if not, you have to improve on it.

WKC: I suppose looking at today's administration under the leadership of Prime Minister Najib, the Prime Minister has played a very prominent role in new media. What is your view of his approach?

AT: I think it is a recognition on his part that the new media is a tool that can be used to advance his ideas and that is what he is doing and from what I gather, he is not going to stop there, and probably you can see in the next year or two more of his cabinet colleagues will also have their own blogs but it will be a bit late. I mean if you want to compete in three years time when the election takes place, you have to clear the ground now. Otherwise you will be a late starter and probably people will hardly notice you unless you shout and make controversial statements in your blog.

VT: Datuk Ahmad, one of the hypotheses of this report is that new media engagement, political engagement is more advanced in Malaysia than it is currently in Australia. Do you agree with this theorem, and if you so, why do you think that might be the case?

AT: I'm not too sure about the Australian situation, yeah. So I won't be able to comment on the Australian part of it. But here in Malaysia going to a blog is almost second nature now. The only thing I notice is that some people who make comments about blogs without knowing how a blog looks like. I notice people who make comments that blogs are not good, when I ask them 'which blog are you referring to?' and they say, 'well, I don't know. This is what somebody else said.' You know? I think here in this country there is acceptance of blogs, of the new media and many people are using it, and if we take another aspect of the new media application, even traditional media, like the print media and broadcasting, they themselves are using the new media to reach out to a new audience. And the NSTP is now embarking on a lot more inputs into new media to reach out to younger readers or younger audiences who don't read as much of the newspapers as the older folks. Even the TV stations have got a department, more than 60, 70 people, just to look into new media. At least where I come from which is the TV 3, the Media Prima Group, we have got [a department of about 70 people just to look into new media applications to reach new audiences](#). And that's quite an investment. Quite revealing data we get from them when we do our own analysis.

VT: Is it because – why do you think this is so? Is it because Malaysians are suckers for fads or fashions? Or is it because they are curious?

AT: A combination of all! I think, we like to try new stuff, you know, and some credit might go to Government for pushing people to seek knowledge and information using new media. There is a programme dedicated to schools applying new media techniques to teach. Ok it needs improvement, but it was quite a radical change for Government to introduce this in school. And corporate citizens who spend money through their CSR programmes to make sure schools are covered. The telephone companies too are spending money to reach out because it is good for their business to have people connected. All the ISPs are pushing for this. The Government is spending about 12 billion Ringgit, that is about 4 B, to make sure there is broadband connectivity throughout all the country. So to me it is a positive thing. Ok lah!

VT: Thank you very much Datuk Ahmad for your time today.



The NMIC Project Team with Datuk Ahmad Talib