



INTERVIEW WITH DATUK A. KADIR JASIN, PROMINENT BLOGGER AND PUBLISHER IN CHIEF FOR BERITA PUBLISHING

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

WKC: Datuk Kadir Jasin, when and why did you start blogging and what has the reception been?

KJ: I started blogging in early 2006. Why did I start blogging? Because I have always been a writer, and after some thinking I thought that blogs provide me with another avenue. I have used fairly common and well known in the mainstream press, on television, and sometimes radio. Blogging presents itself. I thought, well, I should try this new avenue. And also by that time I was already not doing very much. I was in semi-retirement, writing not more than four, five columns or pieces a month, so I have a lot of time. The reception has been good. My blog is essentially political and social. It's in two languages, in Bahasa Melayu, or the national language, and in English. But I write more often in Bahasa, in the national language. Because there are already, or back when I started, there were already many good English language blogs. But there were not that many national language blogs, so I decided to do a lot more writing in the national language instead of English. But I do post probably two or three a month in English. But a lot more in Bahasa. And you asked about the reception – I am quite happy, I have my following. Depending on what I write, I get something like 30,000, 40,000 hits per article. I don't update my blog very regularly; I do it once every two or three days. And depending again on what I write about I get anything up to 100 comments. So that to me is satisfying. It is very different from the mainstream media that I used to be in. And I still write in the mainstream media, like I said just now. But this is a new area, it is more interactive. And you are appealing to a slightly different audience. A very long answer to a very short question.

SLG: Given your reputation of taking a keen interest in principles that embrace ethics, integrity and transparency, do you see new media as having a significant impact on Malaysian society?

KJ: First of all, let me qualify a little bit about principle and ethics. There are differences in how principles and ethics are embraced and practiced here in Malaysia as opposed to probably a more advanced environment, like in Australia, your own country, Australia. Here, we are not very deeply schooled or educated in principle, in the sense that, people do not form strong basis for a belief,

right, or for why they do something. Then you can also say it is the Asian trait, very spontaneous. So when you go into an area as intricate, as impactful as journalism and media, I still believe that we do not really pay too much attention, or insufficient attention to principle. This in a way also reflects our politics. Our politics is not really based on deep political principle. Our politics are very much one of constant negotiations, constant give and take. So people think if you stick to your principles, maybe you don't get too many votes, or you don't stay too long in power. If we are discussing a political subject I can go deeper into that, but since we are talking specifically and more narrowly on the subject of new media, I will only touch on it briefly.

Ethics, yes – ethics is somewhat quite important in Malaysia. Because you have to stick to a certain number of issues – I will probably be contradicting myself here – you have to stick to certain principles. Race relations are very important in this country. We have diverse races, religions and cultures; even in geography we are quite diversified. So we are always reminded of ethics. Sometimes it is not voluntary. You are governed by law, you must stick to it. The simple rule is quite basic. They are mostly written in the constitution. Nobody is to challenge or question the position of the Malay rulers. Nobody is to challenge the position of Islam as the religion of the Federation of Malaysia. Nobody is to question the position of the Malay language as the national language, and nobody is to question the right to citizenship of non-Bumiputras. If you say, if you challenge any of this, either someone will take you to court, or the Government itself will take you to court and you can be punished and fined for it under the Sedition Act. So we are governed by this, and sometimes we mistake this as an ethic that we must follow. I would consider ethics as something much more voluntary but in Malaysia, ethical journalism would include the elements that I told you just now. Issues like integrity, transparency, these are things which had become fashionable in recent years and are still quite fashionable. People talk about transparency, people talk about integrity. Well you can say yes or no to whether they are being practised or not. Ironically there is very little – I am being unforgiving here – there is in fact very little ethics, and very little transparency, and there will be probably some integrity in the new media. And this is the irony of it.

Most bloggers do not reveal their identity. They blog under a pseudonym or pen name. Their commenters, debaters, generally as much as probably 95 per cent, will post their comments anonymously. There's a lot of freedom, there's a lot of participation, but without the people coming forward to acknowledge to say who they are, making this very strong critical comments, I don't think we can't say that the blogs, the new media are very transparent, and I think when you do not introduce yourself properly, you can choose to be less transparent, you are not bothered so much

about your integrity. So I would say principles, ethics, and transparency are still questionable in the new media.

WKC: How about in the old media? The established mainstream media?

KJ: The mainstream media, they are old and I think they have established their basic rules a long time ago.

WKC: So does that mean they are more transparent or more ethical?

KJ: I think by necessity, they have to be a lot more ethical and a lot more transparent, because two reasons. One, all of them are licensed and the Government can take away their licenses, or the Government can not reissue their licences, so number one. And number two, they are known to the public and they depend on the public for their survival. If the public loses confidence in them, they lose viewership, they lose readership and that's bad business for them. So in that sense, yes, they are a lot more ethical, a lot more transparent, but you can still question their integrity.

WKC: Even with the established or mainstream media?

KJ: Yes, because they do take sides. If you were to argue integrity to its bitter end, any statement that you make that can be challenged, is not a statement with integrity. And there is not very much debate in that sense in Malaysia because the majority of the mainstream media components are either owned by the Government, or controlled by political parties linked to the Government. And in the last ten years, it is that very situation that gave rise to blogs and new media. In fact people start to question the integrity, the fairness of the mainstream media. In fact, why the new media is expanding so rapidly in Malaysia and particularly the blogs is also because a lot of people are beginning to, one, disbelieve and distrust the mainstream media, and secondly, the new media provides a much fairer, a more equitable, more democratic space. So that is more or less the situation in Malaysia.

VT: Datuk, before I ask my question I would like to clarify one point that you said. Earlier on Datuk mentioned that if we question certain issues relating to the constitution, such as citizenship or (inaudible), the issue of Sedition, or issue of potential threat of action, what is your opinion Datuk, if I were to make this statement? Apart from those two, don't you think that with the influx and rise of new media, the consequences would also be a translation at the ballot box rather than just court actions? What do you think of this comment?

KJ: Firstly, even this very stringent Sedition law and its prohibitions have been challenged. You can challenge them in Parliament. It is only in Parliament that you can question them. Still the way you

question them matters. Action can still be taken against you even though you speak in the Parliament if you are seen as provoking uneasiness, they call it. If in the Parliament you say, you know, do away with the institution of the rulers, because we are living in a modern time, we don't need them anymore, they are a burden to the economy, action can still be taken against you. Because there will be enough people out there who will say ok, let us demonstrate against these people, because we want our rulers to be in place, we don't want them to be challenged, we like our ruler, we don't mind spending money. If you cause any kind of uneasiness, even say that in Parliament, they can still subject you to the Sedition Act.

VT: (inaudible)

KJ: And you say, 'Let us consider whether our rulers have too much power that infringe on our democratic rights', that ok. You can challenge their power, you can challenge their behaviour, but you can't challenge the institution. So, yes, although some issues are not allowed to be discussed, or are not deliberately discussed openly in public – people do discuss them behind closed doors – in the new media today, the rules are being broken. These very sensitive issues are being discussed quite openly, because the new media is somewhat protected, is more protected by the sets of laws that were passed some years ago. The new media somehow enjoy much greater freedom. Well, if you talk about an estimated 500,000 blogs in Malaysia, actually it's quite difficult (to censor). You would need an army of censors to look at every blog and every comment. So in a way bloggers and their debaters, their commenters, are getting away with the sheer number, and of course it has affected the ballot box, as manifested in the 2008 General Election. One of the factors, that was blamed for the massive rejection of the ruling party and the victory of the Opposition in many states is the blogs. Blogs were blamed for shifting public opinion in favour of the Opposition.

VT: What about online newspapers?

KJ: There are not many online newspapers or news portal. We have only one or two major ones. The most well known and most established one, and I believe having the highest readership is *Malaysiakini*. Then there are other portals, but they are less independent, meaning in their coverage they take sides. But *Malaysiakini* is basically quite independent. Until some months ago it was the monopoly of *Malaysiakini*. But since then, a number of fairly readable online newspapers have been launched. And interestingly all of them are by very, very senior journalists.

If you allow me I would also like to make another point about that. Why blogs and newsportals are becoming well received, or being well noticed, is they are, in the case of blogs, they are being written by very senior journalists; similarly the portal. See, the whole thing is that they are being

written, being managed by journalists who are a lot senior than those now working for the mainstream papers. Only recently, about six or seven very senior bloggers had been utilised, because they had been coopted back into the mainstream media; Rocky, Datuk Ahmad Talib, and a couple of others.

VT: Datuk, apart from blogs, what do you think the affect of YouTube was? Because, I will give you a certain number of examples from last year. We were seeing the Bersih Rally, we were seeing the March for Justice, we were seeing the VK Lingam scandal, we were seeing, apart from the Bersih one, a couple of marches, a couple of rallies, a couple of scandals.

KJ: Hindraf

VT: Yes, the Hindraf issue, and all these things, don't you think, that is a separate form of new media. Don't you think these digital bytes I like to call them, play a lead role in shifting mindsets, because apart from that I believe Malaysians also are not well known for their keen interest in reading, can you please comment on that?

KJ: Medium like the YouTube, Facebook are very popular with the younger people. I reckon that anyone who is 35 and younger. Remember, the people between the ages of 21, the age of voting, and 30, form the bulk of the voters at this stage. And these people are very, very aware, and they make good use and wide use of YouTube and Facebook. And definitely YouTube and now in more recent months Facebook, is going beyond the social networking. It has now become fairly political and activist. So, yes, I think in future they are going to be more and more influential, as YouTube, Facebook become more mature. And I think the current generation, the 21 to 35, they will probably carry on this, even when they become older, they will, instead of the newspaper, instead of the printed word, they will use this more visual medium.

But interestingly printed words on the Internet are also becoming more and more popular even with the people who started reading from the newspapers, because the technology is quite simple. So therefore, from my casual observation, all forms of new media are having impact on people's choices, including politically, more so politically in fact. And I think their influence will go with time. In fact if you had checked on the circulation of Malaysian newspapers, it has been off its best for so many years now. It peaked in 2003 and it has been falling since then, and I am quite sure if someone does a study, it will show that newspapers coming down gradually and the new media audience is going up.

WKC: Datuk, what is your perspective on the Bill of Guarantees under the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 which guarantees non-censorship for the Internet and what is its legal status?

KJ: I think that was perhaps the best thing that had happened to the country since the constitution was written back in 1957. The Multimedia – the three pieces legislation, the Multimedia Act, that I believe provided a new platform – maybe not intentionally, maybe the idea was quite different, the idea was to promote more information and communication technology – but politics, it found the usage, it found a most fertile ground in politics, in political news. And the politicians then realised, the very same politicians who promoted the Act, suddenly realised this is not what we intended. We did not intend for it to be used or exploited by all these irresponsible bloggers, and you know. So there had been attempts in the past in trying to see how control can be applied. But one thing is good. No one has suggested that the law be amended. I think that is good. They are looking at other means, they are looking at the technological ways of controlling it. Well, they succeeded to a degree, but to a large extent they failed. Some of us, we site our blogs not in the country, they are being hosted outside the country. So you can't go to a local server and they say take away because you have been naughty. Well, that is one thing they probably have not calculated, but has worked to our benefit. Attempts have been made but so far they have not been successful. And I believe that attempts will continue to be made to censor the political aspect.

We talk about censorship, actually in Malaysia it is a lot more free than a lot of countries, in terms of Internet, in terms of access to Internet, and also what can be accessed in Malaysia. You go in here you can get all the smut, and all the pornography that are been banned in Indonesia, that are banned even in Thailand, you can get here. They talk about censoring that, even that they have not done. They are talking about, every now and then some unhappy politician will speak to the press, and they naturally have an ally there, because if the new media is a threat, it is a threat to them. So every now and then, some disgruntled politician goes to the newspaper and says, well, 'the government should consider registering bloggers', right, and that has been said. And more recently, even the Minister saying, 'well you know, we want to see if we should register bloggers,' and there is a suggestion that bloggers need to be licensed. And when they ask me for a comment, I said, "I will not comment on such silliness, so I don't entertain that kind of – you know I don't give credibility to all this kind of thing."

VT: Datuk, just one point on the comments that you just made. Apart from the unintended consequences of bloggers having to go through foreign sites to host their blogs and writings, don't you think that it has negative impact on the industry, such as host farms, in a sense that we are losing out on that section of the market when we seem to be having the largest number of bloggers? Are we losing out?

KJ: Well I think people are not really confident that there will not be interference. The people are not really confident that they will not manipulate the promises made in the Multimedia Act. And some people, some bloggers, are just – what do I call it –

VT: Recalcitrant?

KJ: - recalcitrant, they have no intention of saying anything nice, or following a basic rule. They know if they host, if they get a local host to host their blogs, they know that actually the Government or even the public can ask for the removal of such blogs. So while it is quite easy to have your blogs hosted abroad, they go abroad.

SLG: Thinking about new media applications, like Facebook and so on, have you ever utilised new media applications to organise any activities or lobby for a cause?

KJ: Oh yes, in fact it happens all the time. In fact it happens all the time, mostly of course politically, almost exclusively for political and social-political activism. That is what it is used, anything from announcement of political gathering, of proposed meetings, protests, you don't get that in the mainstream media. The mainstream media won't publish that. So it is being widely used for purposes of organising protests, organising surveys, for opinion, collecting of opinion, the new media is being widely used.

SLG: Is it something that you yourself have utilised in that way?

KJ: No, I do not use my blog for that particular way. My blog actually is a very basic, almost technologically sterile blog. Mine is the simplest of templates. The whole idea of my blog is quite simple. What you read in the newspapers and magazines, is what you are going to read in my blog. Have you seen my blog? You've seen it? My blog is very boring actually. Some people have said why don't you put Twitter, why don't you put a counter, why don't you put tracker? No, that will make my blog slower and people may not want to come into my blog. So my blog is very quick, and I tried on Apple it is even quicker. So my blog is very boring. The only exciting thing on my blog is me and my orang-utan friend. You know why? Why - a friend of mine he is against journalists, he is a manager in the *Straits Times*. This is just off story. He took care of journalists, in the *Straits Times* we had a lot of journalists then, we had about 800 journalists. And we were all, back in the 70s, we were as poor as a church mouse, so we worked for three ringgit at a time, it was very important to us. So we would make a monkey of ourselves to get him to pay our three ringgit as quickly as possible. So he said, "you know, studies have found there is a 98 per cent similarity between us and higher primates. In the case of you guys, it's 100 per cent." So I was quite happy with that – he said

that to me, so I thought, why not. No I don't use that, I'm not technologically savvy enough to do that. But you see a lot of other bloggers they do daily, weekly, or monthly service on issues.

VT: Datuk, what are your perspectives on social networking applications and sites from a socio-cultural and political standpoint? This would include applications like Facebook, Twitter, blogging etc?

KJ: They are becoming big, in fact even the mainstream media, they have a long time ago recognised this, that is why everyone of them have gone online at the risk of their own printed product. They have gone online, they have gone interactive, video streaming. That is because more than the traditional media, the new media is proving to become a natural avenue for social networking. How do you track your friends that you have not met for 10, 20 years? In the Facebook. I have a large Facebook, many followers, but not as large as my son-in-law. I don't have time for that. So yes, particularly, ironically in a country like Malaysia. That you have to go back and study. In Indonesia it is not that big. That is because technology is not very wide spread, people can't afford it. But they are doing their networking different. Weekly protests, daily protests, monthly marches, meeting in the madrasa. We do that online.

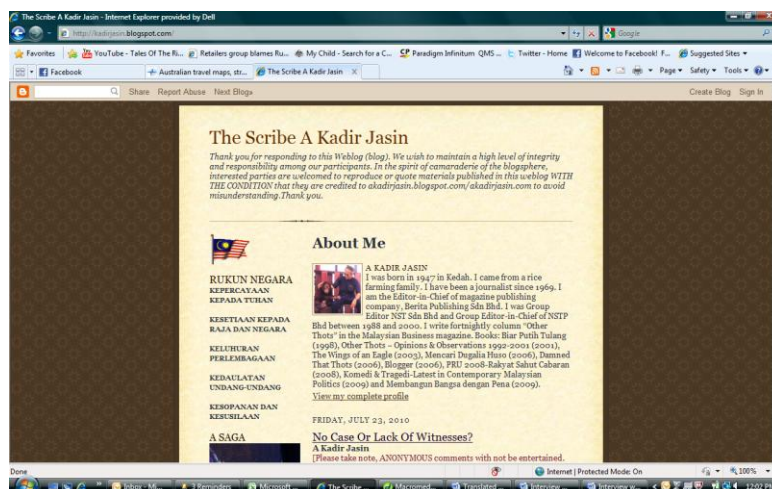
WKC: Datuk, in terms of the democratic process, how has new media shaped the manner in which politicians communicate and the environment in which they operate in?

KJ: I take Malaysia specifically. The use of new media started around 1998. Then I think it was quite primitive. I don't know, what was biggest then, was maybe 'Geocities'. Compared to today, ten or fifteen years ago in terms of technology is primitive. In 1998 with the sacking of a very popular Anwar Ibrahim, he and his supporters they went underground, because they almost immediately lost the use of the mainstream media. They continued to get support. Many journalists were sympathetic to their cause, but they cannot express it here, unless, you lose your job and everything turns against you. So he went underground and they resurfaced online. It was very interesting. They set up a few sites all going against Mahathir Mohamad, specifically to run down Mahathir Mohamad, because really there wasn't anybody else in the quarrel, only Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim – the rest were just players supporting one or the other. So they went underground and surfaced as these websites, and they are all against Mahathir. Then the material published in these websites which were not too seditious, defamatory, were used in a traditional way, in the Opposition party newspaper, in flyers, booklets, posters. That was the beginning, 1998. Of course, by 2005, 2006, it has gained momentum, and I think today it has its own momentum. And like I said earlier, the defeat of the ruling party in Parliament, losing for the first time, two thirds majority, has

often been attributed to the new media. And the methodology is still the same away from the urban centres where the people are not exposed, where they do not have good telecommunication lines. The Opposition would surf all the blogs and pick up all the postings they were seen to be beneficial to them, reproduce it and distribute it. To the point that people in the rural areas, if you ask them, “where did you hear about this, where did you hear about this Government minister having this stash of cash somewhere in Australia?”, “oh, from the blog.” Yes, from the blog. And they do not have the Internet so they just call it the blog. So just, it helps start to show considerable impact on politics.

VT: Datuk just to interrupt, about 1998 or 1999, the use of forums and perhaps also SMSs to organise social activities, but what is your opinion about the fact that the first generation of web applications were not as interactive or multimedia rich to stir up the passion of the locals to stir up this kind of participation we are seeing in the democratic process in Malaysia?

KJ: The momentum started by Anwar and his supporters in 1998, 1999, that momentum did not die down. Other people picked up the banner and used it. The problem then was that why the mainstream media and the Government lose out was that they rejected it all together and their approach was to run down the new media. They even, as recent as say three years ago, they were



Datuk Kadir Jasin's Blogsite: [The Scribe](http://TheScribe.blogspot.com)

running wild, running down every blogger, calling them monkeys, and all sorts of names.

In fact it had an unintended consequence. When the Government Minister criticised the blog, call bloggers names, and it was broadcast on prime time, and people said, “Hey, we

haven't heard about the blog?

What is so nasty about this

fellow?” So in fact we (bloggers) gained fantastic publicity. I became the subject of that kind of chatter, my colleague went on to become Minister, you know. So it was the Government's reaction to the blog that promoted the use and the access to the blog. I don't know how they are to reverse that. In recent months, every Minister had been asked to have their blogs, they have all started their blogs, and I don't really think – well, I'm not sure if people are really visiting their blogs.

I'm really sure if they want to be scolded in their blog, I don't know how they are. But the best example of politician turning blogger is Tun Mahathir, he is the biggest blog today.

SLG: Taking into account the results of the 12th General Elections in 2008, and the new media participants that did do quite well, do you think the Malaysian Government will likely to introduce measures to curb or to limit the effects of new media on the political process?

KJ: I think they will not do it. They continue to try to limit the damage that the new media, particularly blogs, is doing to the Government and Government parties, number one. Number two, themselves have embraced new media and blogging, number two. Number three, they are now aggressively befriending bloggers. Number four, gradually bloggers are being treated as equal to the mainstream. Some bloggers are being invited to attend Government press conferences, briefings. But having said that, I am quite sure that time to time the blogs will be made to limit access to blogs, technically it's possible. Well, the Government will probably use tactics or methods that will cause fear among the people. An example of this is happening now. Over the issues of the rulers, the Government decided not to charge the bloggers for making the comments and for posting those allegedly seditious statements. The Government decided to arrest and charge those people making the comments, and that has caused – not dramatic – but that did cause a number of bloggers to cease operating. Some have announced that they are ceasing to blog. And for a while, just for a while, it sort of intimidated some people to stop sending comments to the blogs. Having said that I think – although I'm not in support of the Government trying to control the blogs – I think that bloggers themselves, and people commenting to the blogs, must practice some civility. I think they have to be more principled, more ethical, more transparent, then only they can enjoy a higher level of integrity. I have always spoken against bloggers who blog anonymously. So I think, yes, they will try but I think the chances of them are growing lesser, it will not happen. We appear to be a community already.

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

KJ: You see, we have to take a series of events, it is unfair to comment or just to blame Tun Abdullah. We have to go back to the 1998 event, when the new media was given the impetus with Anwar's sacking. Then people got excited with the Government's own aggressive involvement in promoting ICT. Infrastructure, ICT infrastructure has improved very, very quickly, and thousands of computers and other communication tools, came down very, very quickly, and the economy was booming after the 97/98 crisis. So all this. And when Mahathir was in power he was quite

confident, he was so confident of himself that he allowed some measure of freedom to flourish in the new media. Then in 2003, he handed over to Abdullah, and Abdullah's first proclamation was that he wants a freer, more transparent, more accountable environment. That gave people like us the blank cheque. Now we monitor everybody, we comment on anything that we want to. So these are the events, or the milestones that gave rise to what has happened today. You can't blame Abdullah alone.

WKC: Datuk, do you think that perhaps Pak Lah has been unfairly blamed by even people within Barisan Nasional, or scapegoated?

KJ: Malaysians are used to very, very strong Prime Ministers. Malaysia is not used to a Prime Minister who is seen to be less than strong. Malaysians are used to very strong Prime Ministers delivering the goods, not making promises, but delivering the goods first. Then only saying, "Guys, I have delivered this to you." So Abdullah made a lot of promises and did not deliver. I think his mistake was he made too many promises and he did not deliver them. He should not have made those promises – I think if he had not made those promises but said he was going to continue the policies of the previous Government, of ensuring stability, economic growth, I think he wouldn't have had these problems. But when you in your first few months of your administration, you send a very high powered Royal Commission to investigate the police, and that went to Hong Kong, Australia, the UK, to study. In fact, we adopted the method of Australian and British oversight commission, so we came back with the recommendations, 125 of them, and until today they are not implemented. Until today the independent police – PCMC, the Police Complaint Commission – has not been formed, but even a law presented in Parliament has been withdrawn. So that's it.

VT: Datuk, Prime Minister Najib has taken a very public leadership role engaging with new media. What is your view of his approach?

KJ: He has no choice! He has no choice. Because his opponents have long ago embraced new media. So while, I applaud his decision to be very public about embracing the new media, I would say it is a matter of necessity.

SLG: One of the hypotheses of this report is that political engagement via new media is more advanced in Malaysia than it is currently in Australia. Do you agree with this theorem, and if so, why do you believe this is the case?

KJ: I cannot say about Australia, but what I can say about Malaysia, yes, the new media has flourished, it has gained some measure of credibility, and that is because the new media is providing



The NMIC Project Team with Datuk A. Kadir Jasin in his office at Berita Publishing

a totally different environment than the traditional media. Which is, it is giving the participant complete freedom, within of course the laws, it has given the freedom to be as independent in your thinking, in your pursuit. Having said that, it is not just— in Malaysia what touches the nerves of a lot of people is really the political and social blogs. There are other blogs also in Malaysia, so that also we have to bear in mind.