

The Fourth and Fifth cousins
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It was the week when everything and nothing happened, from statutory declarations to sodomy allegations to the bloggers' strike that wasn't. Only, the political morass took on a sudden stickiness that bewildered the public when the two prime ministers-in-waiting each warded off SDs and a sodomy police report.
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It also caused blogger Marina Mahathir to figuratively stop her ears and declare she would go on strike, not having "time to keep up with all these shenanigans". Not a few Netizens shared her sentiments in not knowing which conflicting narrative to believe among the conspiracy theories that abounded.

While there was no discernible snowball effect to Marina's pronouncement, some prominent bloggers like All-blogs pro-tem president Rocky, 'Bigdog' (pseudonymous blogger) who is aide to Jerlun MP Mukhriz Mahathir and a few other socio-political bloggers took up her cry. MP Jeff Ooi chimed in that he was fed up too, and Star's Wong Chun Wai capitalised on the impetus with his post headlined "Sick, tired and fed up".

Wong's newspaper – he's group editor – played up the so-called bloggers' strike devoting three stories to it on Sunday. A telling slant to one of the articles was a quote attributed to an undergrad who said she was "tired of reading about the political drama, especially online." Joe Public could well interpret the paper's running theme to be portraying cyberspace as chock-a-block with tiresome, time-wasting (if not altogether unreliable) political gossip, and the Pakatan Rakyat de facto leader as a nuisance factor instead of buckling down to governing the Opposition states.

However, to the wider blogosphere, one swallow does not a summer make, and the purported strike was a non-starter. Indeed, the high-decibel cyber chatter continued unabated, speaking of "a total loss of confidence in our system of administration of justice", from the judiciary to the prosecution to the police, a prominent lawyer-blogger lamented.

anwar ibrahim and pak lah 090108The main concern of that civil rights lawyer was how the present sodomy accusation against Anwar Ibrahim recalls the events of 1998 when the ex-deputy premier had been slapped with the same charge, and was – in the eyes of many – victim of a miscarriage of justice.

It's a rare day when I cite Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to endorse his statement (taken in isolation) but Bernama on Monday quoted him on something wholly pertinent. Abdullah observed: "What is appreciated is the perception, and along with it the lies. Perception negates the truth. The truth is no longer talked about. The important thing is the perception."

With recent developments clouding rather than clarifying the landscape, truth is lost in the wilderness, whereas perception is fore grounded.

Integrity of information

Mainstream media (MSM) have been steadily losing traction on credibility in recent days. Take the Star's reporting on the first SD made by private investigator P Balasubramaniam. Its initial report online was three paragraphs all of 85 words and failed to mention Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak, referring instead to "a senior politician" implicated.

By early afternoon, New Media and the blogosphere had already gone to town with the explosive revelations and Malaysiakini clocking in at 1.01pm. Yet the Star only put online its full article (naming Najib) at 7.37pm, a full six-and-half hours after Malaysiakini broke the story.

However, in comparison, when Bala made his retraction the next day, Star Online carried its version at about the same time as this news portal. The time-lag and discrepancy in speed of coverage between the two occasions casts doubts on the paper's editorial procedures and decision-making.

It's not surprising then that the average Malaysian's understanding of his world has never been greyer because his sources of information have become suspect. Consider the most recent big happening – the anti-fuel price hike gathering at Kelana Jaya stadium. Was Protes on Sunday a success or flop? It depends on where you get your news.

When Information Ministry-accredited media outlets fail to deliver, blogs step into the breach. This development is not well-received by the PM who said: "All the slander and lies spread through the blogs and YouTube do not contribute to ease and confidence in the people."

It was perhaps deliberate that he omitted inclusion of discredited MSM which featured identical items ... news, or slander and lies. Who slandered who in the mudslinging between Anwar and Najib? The problem is that the pro-Pakatan and pro-Barisan loyalists are already entrenched in their beliefs and preconceptions. Therefore, opposing arguments, evidence or plain commonsense, however persuasively presented, will still fail to sway them.

Abdullah is right about perception relegating facts, or the ascertaining of them, to the back foot.

Shaping or reflecting public opinion?

Currently in Malaysia, we're suffering an overall scenario of systemic breakdown, of declining confidence in the institutions and instruments of state. MSM is part of this crisis of confidence.

It's been touted that the blogosphere is one of the mechanisms able to return transparency to the disintegrating system. While MSM reporters have been accused of everything from lacking probity and wanting in veracity to selling their souls, would citizen journalists do better? Not all Malaysian bloggers are amateurs. There are a good number of socio-political bloggers who have a background in journalism.

Rocky is of the view that "the senior journalists who turned to blogging – A Kadir Jasin, Ahmad A Talib, Ruhanie Ahmad, Nuraina A Samad, Marina Mahathir and Maria A Samad to name a few – have changed the cyberscape and helped make blogosphere even more potent".

Potent how? What is the nature of blogs vis-à-vis the constituencies they serve?

The Fifth Estate does to some extent manufacture consensus. There is a tendency for the like-minded to gravitate to common interest blogs, and as such encourage a weighted concordance.

Where some commentators are cloaked in anonymity, the exchanges in blogs could turn rancorous or minority views could be shouted down or shut out. Thus blogs become 'self-selecting' discrete online communities, and therein open to the danger of polarisation.

On the positive side, finding in the Responses thread many Netizens who affirm the same positions as one does, a person might feel his opinions validated. On the negative side, this echo chamber which is the Comments section may solidify his biases. Or foster a herd mentality.

To allay the shortcomings and drawbacks, a diversity of views should be encouraged. Yet this is easier said than done, even when the blog owner follows the prescription. Alpha blogger Marina has avowed: "As long as you allow other views to come in, that will enhance the whole value of your blog."

Yet Rantings, her wildly popular blog, carries comments the majority of which are in the vein of "You're so right" and "I can't agree more".

Uniformity of thought

Have blogs helped make sense of our confusing current affairs?

In the economic sphere there's been a rise in absolute poverty, a great depression afflicting the large majority, and inflation, adversely affecting the most vulnerable stratum of society.

marina mahathir interview 181105 happyRantings ranks in the top tier of the country's most influential blogs. Backdropped against the strong inflationary pressures impacting Malaysia, Marina blogs about feeling the pinch from the high cost of petrol these days and "doling out money more frequently for [her] cook to buy groceries". For a 'Liberal Poses' elite like Marina to complain as if she's your Average Housewife is disingenuous posturing, say her critics who point out the blind spots in her writings.

But going by the warm reception to Marina's controversial 'I think I'll just go on strike' post, the readership she caters to is in perfect accord with her worldview.

The unanimity of opinion expressed in Rantings conveys the demographics of a class of people divorced from the social orbits of the disenfranchised and dispossessed. In fact, Marina is so hugely popular that her many blogger friends and fans empathise with the travails of an ex-premier's daughter whose conception of belt tightening in times of hardship is to rush "by the windows of boutiques so that [she] won't be tempted to go in and buy anything unnecessary", and exclaiming, "The only indulgence I allowed myself recently was lip gloss".

Malaysia's mass media clearly fail to reflect our mass reality. Earlier, there was some hope that the blogosphere could become the voice of the voiceless. I don't think so. Not when the denizens of the Fifth Estate – who can afford computer and Net access – are still living in their middle-class comfort zones in terms of outlook.

Yesterday morning at dawn I was returning from KL from the weekend's Protes rally when I caught a glimpse of the Hindraf 5. They were five homeless, rather elderly (but hard to tell as they were scruffy) Indian men sleeping, at interval distances, along the walkway of the Penang ferry terminal.

Since my prime minister is the fount of wisdom, I shall echo his quote in closing: "What is appreciated is the perception, and along with it the lies. Perception negates the truth."

The world, as segments of the blogosphere sees it, is just as much about perception as MSM. The Fourth and Fifth Estates are cousins who have yet to break their blood ties.

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