

Blogs: New Medium of Hate Speech Communication and the Implication on Ethnic Relations in Malaysia

Rajini Kumar Sreedharam¹⁺ and Faridah Jalil²

^{1,2}Law, National University of Malaysia

Abstract. Blogging has become a popular way for a Web user to publish information on the Web in Malaysia. Bloggers write blog posts, share their likes and dislikes, voice their opinions, and provide suggestions, report news, and form groups in Blogosphere. Blogs are used as an important medium of communication between people in exchanging ideas as well as creating hate speech among races. Bloggers use their blogs to express freely their ideas and opinions without realizing the implication on ethnic relations. The study of this research is to explore blogs as a new medium of hate speech communication. The objective of the study is to know the implications of hate speech communication on ethnic relations. This study will contribute towards awareness among bloggers on the importance of their blog information in contributing towards good ethnic relations in blogosphere.

Keywords: Blog, Bloggers, Medium, Implication, Hate Speech, Ethnic Relation.

1. Introduction

The growth of Internet websites offering weblogs continue to mushroom every day. A weblog or in short a blog is an online journal containing the personal reflections and comments provided by the writer i.e., the blogger. It is usually the work of a single individual or a collection of a small group of people and usually centered on a single theme or subject. Content of the blogs or the entry posted are usually of reverse chronological order where the latest or recent post appear first. In November 2006, Blogging Asia: A Windows Live Report released by Microsoft's MSN and Windows Live Online Services Business revealed that 46% or nearly half of the online population have a blog.¹ Blogging Asia: A Windows Live Report was conducted online on the MSN portal across 7 countries in Asia namely Hong Kong, India, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand. Interestingly, the report found that 56% of Malaysians blogged to express their views, while 49% blogged to keep friends and family updated.² Bloggers have used their blogs to express ideas and opinions without realizing that their statements may give implications on ethnic relations. The emergence of the digital era has unintended consequences for race, religion, civil rights, and hate speech among bloggers. Ethnic relations have always been central to nation-building in a multi-cultural, multi-religious society such as Malaysia. Understanding ethnic relations issues in the country is, therefore, critical to its future stability and wellbeing - especially as the population becomes increasingly globalized, more open and more educated.³ In the context of the democratic ethos emerging in Malaysian society, this paper will explore blog as a new medium of hate speech communication. The objective of the study is to know the implication of hate speech communication on ethnic relations. For this purpose a few blogs contents were analyzed to know the implication and sedition law is used as a tool in measuring the concept of hatred among races.

2. Hate Speech and Seditious Law

⁺ Corresponding author. Tel.: + 60389943409; fax: + 60389982148.

E-mail address: manoj15_99@yahoo.com.

¹ Blogging Phenomenon Sweeps Asia available at <http://www.pnewsire.com/cgi-bin/stories.pl?ACCT=104&STORY=/www/story/11-28-2006/0004480819&EDATE> accessed 25 January 2007.

² Sabrina Mohamed Hashim 2007 2 CLJ i.

³ Aida Idris, 2008. *An Analysis of Malay-Sino Relations in Malaysia*, Asian Social Science, 4(2), 3-12.

Hate speech is a communication that vilifies a person or a group on the basis of color, disability, ethnicity, gender, nationality, race, religion, sexual orientation, or other characteristic.⁴ Behind hate speech is the ideology of racial or religious superiority. Hate speech amounts to discrimination. It promotes denigratory stereotypes. It attacks basic premises of the human rights system, premises as deep as equal human dignity, respect for others and equal protection.⁵ Sedition Act 1948 in Malaysia, criminalizes speech with "seditious tendency", including that which would "bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against" the government or engender "feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races". The law of 'sedition' prohibits words or conduct that is deemed to incite discontent or rebellion against the authority of the State and historically it covered offences such as uttering or publishing seditious words and engaging in seditious activity, and doing so with a 'seditious intention'.⁶ A person found guilty of sedition may be sentenced to three years in jail, a RM5, 000 fines, or both. In Malaysia, various offences are provided for in the Sedition Act 1948 such as it is an offence for any person to print, publish or distribute any seditious publication.⁷ The act of hate speech clearly stated in the Sedition Act. For the purpose of this paper Section 3 (a) and (e) of the Sedition Act will be used in measuring the act of hate speech in the blogs. Section 3(a) and (e) state that it is seditious to bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against any Ruler or against any Government,⁸ and to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population of Malaysia.⁹

3. Blogs

3.1. Big-bigdot.com

Zakhir Mohammed, the author of the blog - bigdot.com, which first suggested the existence of the alleged conspiracy, was investigated following a slew of reports against him for his blog entry. Zakhir's posting had reported a hearsay account of a plan to make Christianity the official religion of Malaysia and for a Christian to be prime minister. He was questioned under the Sedition Act for his entry "Making Christianity the official religion?" The allegation was then featured on the front page of the Malay daily Utusan Malaysia. He stated in his blog that a local pastor and DAP's Jelutong MP Jeff Ooi who had attended a dinner in conjunction with the Unashamedly Ethical Marketplace Conference are the responsible parties in the conspiracy. However the involved parties refuted the claims as "unfounded and totally untrue", stressing that the conference was to discuss and address the issue of bribery and corruption, and Christians' contribution in addressing such issues. This message has created religious tensions among Muslims and Christians after 11 churches suffered firebomb attacks and vandalism amid anger among some Muslims over a court verdict allowing minorities to use "Allah" as a translation for God. Some Muslims say the use of "Allah" in Christian literature could be used to convert Muslims, who comprise nearly two-thirds of the population. Christian officials insist the accusation is a lie intended to create suspicion between ethnic Malay Muslims and religious minorities, but several Muslim activists have filed police complaints demanding an investigation into what they consider a threat to the position of Islam in this country. The accusations are "insidious, provocative and malicious lies" that have "the effect of creating religious disharmony, inciting hatred and heaping odium on Christians," according to Archbishop Murphy Pakiam, who heads the Catholic Church in peninsular Malaysia.

The situation above shows that the message of the blogs has promoted feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races in Malaysia. The tensions between the Muslim and Christian's community become

⁴ Definitions for "hate speech", Dictionary.com. Retrieved 25 June 2011

⁵ "Hate speech hypocrisy", by Prof Shad Saleem Faruqi., The Star Online, Thursday October 4, 2012.

<http://thestar.com.my/columnists/story.asp?file=/2012/10/4/columnists/reflectingonthelaw/12120527>

⁶ Australian Law Reform Commission, *Fighting Words*, op. cit., Para 2.2

⁷ Section 4 of the Sedition Act 1948.

⁸ Section 3 (a) of the Sedition Act 1948

⁹ Section 3 (b) of the Sedition Act 1948

more crucial again by the publication of many blogs on the raid by the Selangor state Islamic enforcers on a church function. The reason was on Christian proselytizing campaign at the Damansara Utama Methodist Church. However the church management denied the event was held to convert Muslims. A religion blog published a woman's statement said that "I am very unhappy with the way Christians are being portrayed and why authorities are treating the community so suspiciously," "We are not trying to convert anyone. We have friends of all races and religions and have lived happily for centuries. I don't understand why they are attacking us." She is a Kuala Lumpur school teacher and Indian Christian ethnic. The situation has worsened after the Sacked Selangor executive councillor Datuk Hasan Ali screened videos of three Malays who were allegedly converted by Christians from Australia. The video's screening comes after the mercury rose between Muslim and Christian groups over a seminar on the "Christian threat" organized by the Johor Mufti and Education departments that required the attendance of over 300 religious school teachers. Its original title "Strengthening the Faith: The Dangers of Liberalism and Pluralism and the Threat of Christianity towards Muslims. What is the Role of Teachers?" was changed to drop the reference to Christians after much outcry from non-Muslim religious groups. This led to the Council of Churches Malaysia urging Christian ministers such as Datuk Seri Idris Jala, Datuk Seri Maximus Ongkili, Datuk Seri Peter Chin and Tan Sri Bernard Dompok to raise the issue in the Cabinet. Christians form 9.2 per cent of Malaysia's 28.3 million-strong population. Conservative Muslim groups have also accused Christians of attempting to convert Malays, resulting in heightened tension between followers of the two religions. In referring to section 3(e) of Sedition Act, the blogs statements has promoted feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races in Malaysia, especially the Malays and Christians. This was evident in the reactions and violence involved by the people against each other.

3.2. Theunspinnners.blogspot.com & Yuseriyusoff.blogspot.com (Double-Y)

Theunspinnners blog reported that the non-Chinese in Malaysia see Dong Zong¹⁰ as an extreme, chauvinistic and racist¹¹ organization for its consistency and persistence in refusing every effort towards total unity of all races. It should stop the arrogance and be more responsible in doing their part to promote unity in this very fragile multi-racial country. It is hard to brush-off this perception when all the organization ever care about is ensuring that the Chinese continue to strap themselves tightly to their original motherland and that they will never blend in and embrace the Malaysian culture, or even history. This is the reason why Dong Zong doesn't see problems in Chinese students failing to master the National Language but only see problems if they can't master Mandarin which is China's official language. On the other hand yuseriyusoff's blog has also published an article on Dhong Zhong's Racist and Ridiculous Demands.¹² The article stated that Dong Zhong, the Chinese can no longer deny that Dong Zhong or they, themselves in majority, are hard-core racists. No other organization ever makes race separation in schools as their main objective, but Dong Zhong. Furthermore on 'race separation', Dong Zhong is now insisting that no teachers without the fluency of Mandarin be supplied to the Chinese schools. Obviously, Dong Zhong's only concern is that it doesn't want to have anything to do with other races. Schools are just a part of the whole racist agenda. In view of this, it may not be an exaggeration to say that the ultimate goal of Dong Zhong is to 'overhaul' Malaysia by erasing any traces of other races, especially the original settlers and claim the country as theirs entirely with the Chinese as the Master and others, as slaves. The comments came after Dong Zong has organized a rally as a protest against the seemingly unfair treatment of Ministry of Education against the whole universe of Chinese education in Malaysia. Dong Zong and Jiao Zong¹³ are saying that they do not want any teachers without the ability to speak Mandarin to be teaching in their Chinese vernacular schools.

¹⁰ United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia

¹¹ Non-Chinese see Dong Zong as extreme, chauvinist and racist, Wednesday, February 15, 2012. <http://theunspinnners.blogspot.com/2012/02/non-chinese-see-dong-zong-as-extreme.html>

¹² Dhong Zhong's Racist and Ridiculous Demands, Tuesday, March 27, 2012. <http://yuseriyusoff.blogspot.com/2012/03/dhong-zhong-racist-and-ridiculous.html>

¹³ United Chinese School Teachers Association

Therefore, they are asking the MOE¹⁴ to take back the teachers and at the same time, asking the ministry to train more teachers and send in more qualified ones. Dong Zong has the ultimate respect and trust among Chinese with believe that the association objective is to uphold Chinese education in Malaysia especially among academicians. They support the Malaysian Federation of Chinese School Directors Association's (Dong Zong) demands as the lack of qualified Mandarin-speaking teachers in Chinese vernacular schools has been a long-standing issue in the community.¹⁵ In publishing this kind of article especially the latter one will stir the relationship between the Chinese and Malays. Many Chinese scholars and teachers were not happy with the statements made on the association in these blogs. These bloggers content falls in Section 3(e), of Sedition Act that criminalizes any act that promotes feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races in Malaysia.¹⁶

3.3. Malaysianindian1.blogspot.com

This blog published an article on 'Interlok a classic work of Malaysian racism' which explains that Centre for Policy Initiatives (CPI) director Lim Teck Ghee has added his voice to call for the novel *Interlok* to be removed from the Form Five Malay literature syllabus due to its perpetuation of "offensive stereotyping" of minorities.¹⁷ This controversial novel celebrates the virtues of the Malay race, culture and value system. There is concern, furthermore, with the prospect of predominantly Malay literature teachers teaching students the novel and its racially-slanted messages. Several groups claimed that the novel contains elements deemed offensive to the Indian community. Prof Emeritus Datuk Dr Nik Hassan Shuhaimi Nik Abdul Rahman, the deputy director of University Kebangsaan Malaysia's Institute of the Malay World and Civilization urged politicians and academicians to sit together and discuss the content of novel to dispel any negative perceptions towards it.¹⁸ There has been a mixed reaction to the decision to retain with amendments the abridged edition of Datuk Abdullah Hussain's novel *Interlok* as a text for the literature component of the subject Bahasa Malaysia for fifth-formers. Some academicians and literary enthusiasts reacted happily to the news while others voiced concern. Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin made the announcement on ending the impasse. "The decision is to continue use the novel with amendments so it would not hurt the feelings of the Indian community."¹⁹ However some squatters protested and asked the government to charge the *Interlok* author and other related authority on sedition.²⁰ A NGO by the name of NIAT²¹ was established in protesting the use of *Interlock* novel in secondary school. NIAT' explained in its research findings that *Interlok* cannot be continued in schools as compulsory text book for SPM BM²² paper 2 due to following reasons:

- *Interlok* is against Islamic teachings and every other religious teachings
- *Interlok* is against educational guidelines, textbook guidelines and National Educational Policy
- *Interlok* is against all races in Malaysia including Malay, Chinese & Indians
- *Interlok* is against UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
- *Interlok* is against the 1Malaysia concept of our beloved Prime Minister to foster national unity

¹⁴ Ministry of Education Malaysia

¹⁵ Educators back Dong Zong demands, The Malay Mail, Tuesday, March 27, 2012. <http://www.mmail.com.my/story/educators-back-dong-zong-demands>

¹⁶ Marhalim Abas, "Blogger quizzed under Sedition Act," The Malay Mail Online, November 5th, 2009 <http://www.mmail.com.my/content/18005-blogger-quizzed-under-sedition-act>

¹⁷ *Interlok* a classic work of Malaysian racism, Saturday 25 February 2012 <http://malaysianindian1.blogspot.com/2011/02/interlok-classic-work-of- Malaysian.html>

¹⁸ 'Interlok' novel not racist, says scholar, Tuesday 10 January 2011 <http://malaysiansmustknowthetruth.blogspot.com/2011/01/interlok-novel-not-racist-says-scholar.html>

¹⁹ Mixed reaction to *Interlok's* fate, New Straits Times January 30, 2011 <http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-248084611/mixed-reaction-interlok-fate.html>

²⁰ Charge author for sedition, use Hindraf novel, Free Malaysia Today January 31, 2011 <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2011/01/31/charge-author-for-sedition-use-hindraf-novel/>

²¹ National *Interlok* Action Team (Team).

²² The Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), or the Malaysian Certificate of Education, is a national examination taken by all fifth-year secondary school students in Malaysia. It is equivalent to the O-Level. BM means Bahasa Malaysia, a Malay Language Paper.

Interlok is also against racial harmony in Malaysia with its embedded Biro Tata Negara principles and Malay Supremacy ideology, making the novel part of the process to indoctrinate our youth.²³ Anger has been expressed mainly by Indian groups and politicians against the negative portrayal of the community in the novel – including the use of the term ‘pariah’ – ire has also been raised on the perpetuation of stereotypes relating to **ethnic** Chinese. Many people stressed against the call for the book to be banned “in the same way in which the government has banned so many other books. It should be not made an exam text, furthermore, whereby students are liable to be coerced into giving the “officially correct” reading of the novel in their answer papers, and whose correctness is determined by the authorities marking the exam papers. The content of the blogs on Interlok falls under the Section 3(e), of Sedition Act which promotes feelings of ill-will and hostility between Malays, Indians and Chinese. Furthermore the same content would also fall under Section 3(a), to bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against any Ruler or against any Government, as the government’s decision to introduce the book with some amendments.²⁴

4. National Harmony Act

Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak announced the repeal of the Sedition Act in what he said was part of the government’s continued effort to improve civil liberties. According to him the 1948 law, which was often used to allegedly silence and intimidate opposition, is to be replaced with a new National Harmony Act.²⁵ Najib has instructed Attorney General Abdul Gani Patail to hold a full public consultation before the new legislation is drafted to ensure that the views of all Malaysians are represented. The new National Harmony Act will balance the right of freedom of expression as enshrined in the Constitution, while at the same time ensuring that all races and religions are protected. The new Act underlines the spirit of harmony and mutual respect that has been the foundation of our stability and success. Many were unhappy with the announcement especially the religious leaders. Two religious leaders say there is no need for the National Harmony Act as there are enough provisions in the Penal Code to deal with sensitive issues. Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism’s (MCCBCHST) Thomas Phillips said that the government should just repeal the law and allow the country to scale to greater heights. “We don’t need another draconian law. The government needs to learn to trust its people,” said Phillips.²⁶ The new law could be welcomed with hope it will be consistent with the best international practices and the new act should reflect substantive transformation which uphold the freedom of speech and prevents hate speech.

5. Conclusion

Blogsphere is one of the fastest growing, social media in Malaysia. The practice of blogging involves producing digital content with the intention of sharing its content with other audience. The content that they choose to share need to be free from any legal constraints. Justification in practicing freedom of expression in the virtual world needs limitation when it comes to create problems to an individual and especially to the security of the country. Bloggers literacy on words and information stated in their blogs are needed in avoiding the hate speech. Bloggers need to be more empathy on others emotions and feelings especially different races and religions. Self-regulation is important in order to avoid hate speech which could give negative implications on race relation in Malaysia. This paper has only begun to introduce blogs: new medium of hate speech communication and the implication on ethnic relations in Malaysia, leaving plenty of room for future research and analysis.

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²⁴ *PP v Param Kumarasamy* [1986] 1 MLJ 518 at 524.

²⁵ “National Harmony Act to replace Sedition Act”, by Syed Jaymal Zahiid July 11, 2012. <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/>

²⁶ “Scrap new law to replace Sedition Act”, by G Vinod July 20, 2012. <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/>

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