

School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry

**Personalised Communicative Ecologies: The role of social media in the
Bersih movement's mobilisation**

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Doctor of Philosophy
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DECLARATION

“To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for any other degree or diploma in any university”.

Human Ethics (For projects involving human participants/tissue, etc) The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated March 2014. The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00262); **Approval Number #HRE2017-0273**.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how a social movement uses social media in mobilising individuals to engage in the development of electoral reform and democracy in Malaysia. The way individuals engage with social media in their everyday lives and what encourages them to communicate and participate provides continual challenges for social movement activists.

My study uses Foth and Hearn's (2007) notion of ecology as a foundation to explain the interdependencies of citizens, place, and technology in the context of a social movement. A communicative ecology model sees social media as an environment and argues that communication and information should not be studied alone because there are different people, media, activities, and relationships involved (Tacchi, 2004; Foth & Hearn, 2007; Strate, 2017). I apply this approach to a case study of the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections ("Bersih" means "clean" in Malay) and argue that individuals develop their own ecologies to establish connections with others and use multiple social media platforms to attain their everyday political goals.

My theorisation is conscious of Foth and Hearn's (2007) technical, social, and discursive layers that work across online and offline communication, within local and global contexts, as well as collective and networked interactions. To complement my theoretical framework, I also use Habermas's (1996) theory of the public sphere, Papacharissi's (2010) work on private sphere and affect, as well as Lichterman's (1996) idea of personalism. These theories help to provide a personalised lens into the notion of ecology to make sense of the growing individualisation in contemporary society and the personalisation of social media algorithms.

My study observes the interaction between participants within an ecology to capture their pattern of media usage and political discourse within the context of electoral reform in Malaysia between 2017 and 2020—both before and after the 14th Malaysian general elections (GE14). A detailed mapping of the technological, discursive, and social layers of the Bersih movement contributes to the existing literature by recognising that individual citizens' personal expressions and self-fulfilment are becoming more centralised within the Bersih movement. Furthermore, the Bersih movement sustains its connectives and communication networks through social media as an organising tool, facilitated by a group of central committee leaders.

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GLOSSARY

BA	Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front)
Bersih	Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections
BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
DAP	Democractic Action Party
ISA	Internal Security of Act
KOMAS	Pusat Komunikasi Malaysia
MACC	Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCMC	Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission
MCI	Malaysian Indian Congress
PAS	Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Islamic Party of Malaysia)
PACA	Polling agent and Counting agent
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party)
PR	Pakatan Rakyat (People's Coalition)
SUARAM	Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Voice of the Malaysian People)
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation

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1 INTRODUCTION

Social media technologies have been regarded as having the potential to further democratic ideals due to the claims that they have characteristics such as hyperlinking, multimodality, and interactivity. From street protests in Egypt and the Arab World, to the Occupy movements to the Bersih movement in Malaysia, social media and its new algorithms are deemed to be a fascinating tool that can facilitate a new form of political participation. This includes new ways of news consumption and awareness (Woolley & Howard, 2018), discussions of politically contentious content (Johns, 2020), and personalised public engagement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011). The way media users consume news and discuss politics with others are likely to affect their political participation. Some research stresses that people consume political information via social media and converse on everyday practice (Neo, 2019). These political conversations mediate the relationship between people's consumption of political information via social media and their political participation (Kim & Chen, 2016). Scholar J. B. Y. Lim (2017, p. 224) mapped Facebook and Twitter users' political engagement through their online activities during Bersih rallies in Malaysia and found that "conversations between communities altered the dynamics of participation and encouraged the use of familiar expressions and cultural symbols". Therefore, the type of media content people consume affects their conversations and eventually their political participation.

The Internet provides people with political information that they can use everyday and a sphere for them to express their political views (Dahlgren, 2000). People are more inclined to talk about public issues that they are familiar with and support viewpoints that they are exposed to, hence more likely to be mobilised and engaged in relevant political activities. These regular political conversations provide opportunities for people to learn mobilising information, understand current affairs and eventually reach common understandings (Valenzuela et al., 2012). In Malaysia context, the Internet opened up strictly controlled political space by providing alternative news that encouraged more active citizen participation in the political process (Nadzri, 2018). All these are important antecedents for political participation. This suggests people's news consumption and their political conversations complement one another and are likely to produce political participation.

Social media users enjoy more autonomy to consume and produce their own political content today. The introduction of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Wikis and Instagram, users can personalise their own political conversation and participation. Social media algorithms encourage people to personalise their online political experience and engagement with others. They can express their political views to their personal networks, actively participate in debate groups and online forums, and access political information that is relevant to them (Hargittai, Gallo & Kane, 2008). There is also an increasing awareness that individuals are empowered by social media and personalised communication technologies to change societies on their own (Bennett, 2012, p. 21). Social media allows individuals to personalise their expressions and connect with loosely tied social networks. For instance, citizens use social media to form connectives and converse about physical protests through posting comments and exchanging opinions on their social media timelines. Smartphone usage became important for political discourse in Malaysia's GE14, and popular platforms Facebook and WhatsApp became important online sites for people to access alternative news and political views (Tapsell, 2018). This personalised political participation is a consequence of both social media technologies and the users. It also promotes a new form of political participation that promotes democracy and enriches an individual's political life.

The concept of personalisation addresses the rise of citizen-centred politics and the changing media environment that nurtured the emergence of large-scale, instantly forming political participation that focussed on different causes, ranging from local, national to transnational levels. Social media adopts personalisation by focusing on the personal characteristics and personal lives of individuals (Van Aelst et al., 2012, p. 207). It shifts from what is to be seen in the public to the personal, focusing on individual citizens. This process moves values from the private sphere to the public sphere. Personalisation also forms a new Internet democracy that integrates an individual's private sphere and their autonomous political identity to multitude of political spaces (Papacharissi, 2010). The use of social media has been absorbed into individuals' everyday mundane practices and shaped their social relations of power. When individuals interact with others, they are more likely to have open political conversations with like-minded people, especially those they know personally. This shows that social media not

only enables individuals to personalise their political conversation and participation, but influences their social relations of power with other social actors.

Social media is crucial in mobilising people and developing collective identity. In the context of social movements, scholars argue that the emergence of the Internet has changed the nature of collective action, reduced communication costs for activists (Chadwick, 2006), and encouraged efficient coordination and organisation (Earl & Kimport, 2011). Social movements have often faced challenges with mainstream media, with their ideas ridiculed or depoliticised (Atton, 2002). Therefore, the Internet provides opportunities for social movements to diffuse contentions, network, and mobilise cost-effectively. Other scholars such as Mustafa Kamal Anuar (2005), Zaharom Nain (2002), Meredith Weiss (2013), James Gomez (2006) and Bridget Welsh (2013) have also associated the Internet and social media with social movements in their research studies, and argue that online activism plays a significant role in shaping social protests in Malaysia. Indeed, social media has an impact on the users and their social connections. I set this as a starting point to establish my argument for how social media has been effectively used by social movements to link individual citizens' personalised conversations with their political actions. My study focuses more on the richly contextual human relations that surround the social actors, rather than simply the newness of the technology itself.

Furthermore, my study emphasises that it is important for social movements to see social media as an environment, especially one that encourages political conversations, to understand how social media technologies exist alongside traditional ways of mobilisation in Malaysia. My study focuses more on how social activists and citizens use social media, instead of how much they use it, because an understanding of the purposes of usage helps social movements in mapping their mobilising strategies, including framing narratives. I argue that people's online conversations complement their offline interactions, leading to potential political participation and shaping their levels of engagement. The next section provides a brief background of my case study, the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih) as well as the development of the Internet and social media in Malaysia alongside this movement. Then this chapter mentions the value and contribution of my thesis to the existing scholarship of social media and social movements in Malaysia. I also provide an

outline of my thesis chapters together with some descriptions and highlights of my contributions to the existing literature.

1.1 RESEARCH BACKGROUND

1.1.1 **Case Study: The Bersih Movement**

The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections started in Malaysia in July 2005 as the Joint Action Committee for Election Reform. Initially, it was a collaborative effort by civil society organisations and members of political parties who collectively demanded electoral reform (Bersih.org, 2018). The coalition was officially launched on 23 November 2006 and held its first rally in November 2007. After some of its political members were elected as members of parliament in the 2008 general elections, the coalition was relaunched as Bersih 2.0 and officially declared itself apolitical and unaffiliated to any political party in April 2010. Through a series of mass street protests, the coalition gradually grew into a movement that encourages citizens to support electoral reform in Malaysia.

The Bersih movement has gained prominence among Malaysians and received support across states. It is now operated by a group of full-time secretariat staff and several voluntary regional representatives that form the Bersih steering committee. The movement's cause for clean and fair elections is endorsed by many non-government organisations (NGOs), groups of voluntary individuals, local communities and people from around the world, including Malaysians residing overseas. Support for the Bersih movement is so overwhelming that an international advocacy group called Global Bersih¹ was formed after Bersih 2.0 rallies (2011, 2012) in supporting and extending the movement's demands outside the country.

The resurgence of protest culture brought by the Bersih movement signals a rise of civic participation and serves as an indication of Malaysia's maturing democracy. The Bersih movement actively sought electoral reform in the 14th general elections (2018) and remained active during the political turmoil after the collapse of Alliance of Hope

¹ Global Bersih is registered in Geneva as a non-profit association. It supports Malaysian civil society's efforts in promoting Malaysia's democracy through peaceful rallies or other legal means of action, particularly the citizens' right to a free and fair election. <https://www.globalbersih.org/about/>

(Pakatan Harapan in Malay) formed government in February, 2020. Figure 1.1 presents the phases of Bersih movement from 2007 to 2018, which was also the time the use of the Internet and social media became crucial in building the mobilisation capacity of the movement. During this period of time, five major Bersih rallies took place before GE14, with each contributing to the growing momentum of the movement. Therefore, it is important for this chapter to commence with an overview of the Malaysian political context, the emergence of the Internet and incorporate other social actors such as Bersih activists and volunteers, political parties, NGOs and concerned citizens, into the discussion to give a holistic analysis of how the Bersih movement uses social media to mobilise citizens.

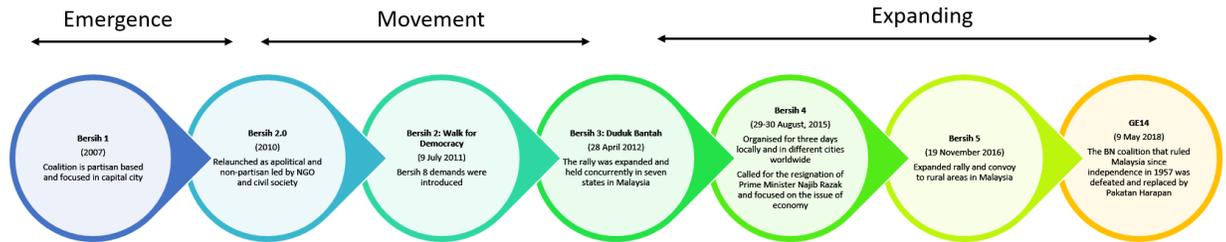


Figure 1.1 The phases of Bersih movement in Malaysia

In this thesis, I use the term “Bersih” to refer to the Clean and Fair Elections Movement and its local and global mass street protests. The Bersih steering committee refers to a centralised organising group comprising active Bersih leaders of different states that facilitate all the movement activities while Bersih 2.0 is used occasionally to highlight Bersih movement that was relaunched as apolitical and non-partisan in 2010, which excludes its first rally (2007). Other Bersih groups are categorised as Bersih-endorsed NGOs and people who support this movement are referred as participants.

This study intends to demonstrate that the Bersih movement uses personalised conversations, through social media in particular, to influence citizens’ communicative ecologies and thus mobilise them. These personalised political conversations could be the outcome of individuals’ personal political consumption, and in fact, it probably mediates their news consumption and political participation. My study suggests that when Malaysians read news about the Bersih movement, they are more likely to react and join

the online conversations with politically like-minded others than actively seek the information themselves.

Selvanathan and Lickel (2019, p. 230) took a psychological approach to understanding Bersih participants and found that if they participated in physical protests and experienced empowerment, they become more “supportive to movement identity and social change” after the protests. I contend that this everyday political conversation would eventually turn into political participation among people who are active on social media and have an interest in politics. Political participation here refers to activity, either online or offline, by ordinary citizens who intend to influence government actions or political outcomes. Finally, to address the complexity of this issue and avoid a simple cause-and-effect approach, my study emphasises that social media is embedded within social systems and the new media ecology, rather than just being “new technology”.

1.1.2 The Development of the Internet from Reformasi to the Bersih Movement

By using the Bersih movement as a case study, my thesis aims to examine the ways Bersih activists use social media to facilitate online mobilisation and manage the social relations between themselves and their supporters, the state, and civil society. My thesis acknowledges the personalised nature of social media, to provide a more nuanced perspective on how this new form of political participation is mediated by user-generated content and personalised conversations which eventually influence the social relations between different social actors. This section provides a historical context of the Bersih movement and situates it in an ethnic-centric Malaysian political landscape and state-controlled mainstream media. It illustrates the Reformasi movement (1998) as an important milestone for the democratisation process in the country and tries to make sense of the reasons activists and citizens use the Internet to express their political views and grievances. Moreover, this section introduces a historical account of the emergence of the Internet as an alternative medium that encourages contentious content and alternative voices in Malaysia as well as serving as a communicative and mobilising tool for social movements. My thesis proposes that we need to understand that the Internet is central to the formation and development of the Bersih movement because it provides new algorithms that can facilitate a new form of political participation since the Reformasi era, when mainstream media was strictly controlled by the state until present. In addition,

online political conversations among citizens that have multiplied through social media platforms reflect that personalised conversations are central to the Bersih movement's mobilisation.

The Reformasi movement (1998) was a protest movement initiated by the then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who was sacked by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis. This political injustice angered many to protest against the Alliance Party (Barisan Nasional, BN) Government and called for the resignation of Mahathir. In addition, the conflict between members of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) had caused Anwar's supporters to retaliate by leaving the party to form the People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR). Their rallies had also won sympathy from opposition parties and eventually formed a united front of opposition parties, known as Alternative Front (Barisan Alternatif, BA) (Nadzri, 2018, p. 146). The opposition coalition and their supporters had utilised the Internet as a means to express their dissatisfaction against political injustice and sought justice for Anwar. They turned to the Internet for alternative views when the print and broadcast media in Malaysia had lost their credibility during the Anwar Ibrahim affair (Cherian, 2005). During this time, new political, and anti-government websites mushroomed, such as Abolish the ISA Movement (AIM), Aliran Online (Aliran),² Harakah Daily (operated by PAS),³ Free Anwar Campaign (FAC), SUARAM⁴ and many more. According to Netto (2001, p.15), Malaysians were "like ducks taking to water when Reformasi found a ready home in cyberspace" because they could voice their opinions and make their political demands (cited in Tan, 2004). Later on, independent online news sites, for instance Malaysiakini.com, emerged just nine days before the general elections of 1999. Malaysiakini.com and other online news sites took advantage of the non-

² Aliran Online is a publication owned by Aliran Kesedaran Negara (The English name is "National Consciousness Movement"). It was launched in Penang on 12 August 1977 and always positions themselves as multiethnic, democratic, accountable and respect for human rights. <https://aliran.com/>

³ Harakah is a newspaper founded in 1987 and published by Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, an Islamist political party in Malaysia. <https://harakahdaily.org/>

⁴ SUARAM or known as Suara Rakyat Malaysia is a human rights organisation in Malaysia established in 1987 after Operation Lalang, when approximately 106 opposition members, union leaders, political activists were arrested by police and detained without trial under the Internal Security Act. <https://www.suaram.net/>

editorial board of the *Malaysiakini* newspaper, which provided a critical and independent voice online responding to the rise of the Reformasi movement. With the mainstream media under state control, the Internet was gradually developed into an alternative medium used by opposition parties and civil society to obtain and disseminate information.

The battle for media and information control is set to take on a new dimension due to the impact of online news websites such as *Malaysiakini.com*, when mainstream media disregards the ongoing discontent among Malaysians who wish for greater transparency, accountability and media independence (Nain, 2002, p.134). *Malaysiakini.com* and prominent bloggers such as Jeff Ooi published many scoops based on contentious issues that mainstream journalists were unable to make use of (Tan, 2004). Many contentious online sites originated from offline journalism (Cherian, 2005), including the political website *Aliran Online* that grew out of the organisation's monthly magazine while *Harakah Daily* originated from a fortnightly tabloid *Harakah*, until the government revised its licence. These independent political periodicals rode on the Internet that promised more freedom of expression and provided alternative online content sites that sound critical and usually anti-government. The emergence of the Internet during the political environment of the Reformasi movement had also pushed mainstream journalism in new directions and there were initiatives in encouraging less government manipulation and control over the media (Tapsell, 2013, p. 630). This new media had encouraged independent and alternative journalism ventures and increased debate among journalists and citizens.

Ten years on, blogging and social media have become crucial in disseminating information and pushing for reforms voiced by social movements. These online platforms have ushered in new patterns of mobilisation for political change by expanding the political space and reducing the government's monopoly over information (Loh, 2009). Despite state-controlled mainstream media, social movements can access information from online sources and generate their own content through blogs and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Likewise, many organisations and movements have utilised online tools to mobilise people for their cause. The Bersih movement tried nationwide protests to get its message out, but was "hampered by police

arrests, hence it turned to social media, specifically Facebook, to mobilise supporters in the Bersih 2.0 rally” (Weiss, 2013, p. 600). The movement’s online mobilisation seems to have had some spill-over effects on the citizens’ offline engagement when they marched in the streets to take part in the Bersih 2.0 rally—Walk for Democracy on 9 July 2011.⁵ During the protests, authorities used chemical-laced water cannons and tear gas to chase after the protestors. Many people took pictures of protestors screaming and running for safety with eyes reddened and posted them on social media. Moreover, protestors also posted useful information about police roadblocks and over 19,000 Twitter tweets were posted that day (Sheriff, 2011). This indicates that the Internet and social media provide alternatives for social activists and movements to disseminate information and build solidarities with politically like-minded others when they are denied access by mainstream media.

Other than organisation-initiated movements, citizens use social media to get to know about issues happening in their society that are relevant to their everyday lives. This information helps to direct their political choices and participation. For instance, in October 2010, a Facebook group called “1M Malaysians Reject 100-storey Mega Tower”, was set up to lobby against the construction of a RM5 billion 100-storey skyscraper that was located near a historical site in Kuala Lumpur (Ding, Koh & Surin, 2013). The Facebook page “garnered over 100,000 supporters within a month and the group managed to move offline by organising cake parties to subtly protest against the law that made police permits compulsory for all public gatherings”⁶ (Ding, Koh & Surin, 2013, p. 49; Malaysiakini.com, 2010). In another example, the Bersih movement organised its third rally, Bersih 3.0—Duduk Bantah⁷ (“Sit and Protest”) rally on 28 April 2012 to make

⁵ Before Bersih 2.0 rally, the organiser had an audience with the King and told media that they would accept the government’s offer to hold a rally at a stadium. But, their application for a permit to hold the rally at the Merdeka Stadium was rejected. They proceeded with the rally as planned. The government locked down Kuala Lumpur and barred 91 individuals, including the main organisers, from entering the city centre. Bersih 2: Walk for Democracy (9 July 2011).

<https://www.bersih.org/rallies/bersih2/>

⁶ The cake-eating activity aimed to ridicule the law that made compulsory for any public gathering to obtain a police permit and the police embarrassed themselves for arresting citizens over eating cake together. One such gathering at McDonald was successfully organised with the presence of some police seated next to the participants.

⁷ A court order was issued to bar any protest in the Dataran Merdeka, but protesters still gathered in several spots in the vicinity area centre before they marched in together. The call for the third rally

recommendations for the next general elections. Much content about the protest and citizens' political demands, ranging from texts, pictures, illustrations, poems, memes, and videos were shared by the rally organiser, participants and journalists over multiple platforms, including broadcast, newspaper, and social media platforms. These people are mostly techno-savvy citizens who are politically aware and stay in the urban areas.

Young urban Malaysians are concerned about issues and government policies that affect them and they respond to them through social media, which they find convenient. This was reflected in the voter turnout for the 13th Malaysian general election in 2013 (GE13), when the BN Government won the majority seats (60%) but only secured 47.4% of the popular vote to form government, while the opposition coalition, PR, won 50.9% of the popular vote (Election Commission of Malaysia, 2013). Based on mainstream news reporting after the election, one of the reasons contributing to the BN coalition losing its popularity was that Malaysian citizens were able to access news and information on social media that was more open to opposing views, especially given mainstream media was controlled by the government (J. B. Y. Lim, 2014). Citizens are more inclined to access information from social media than state and corporate-controlled mainstream media due to Internet freedom and transparency. Therefore, social media can be a significant mobilising tool because it has already been integrated into the everyday life of citizens as well as the dynamics of social movements and organisations.

My study adopts an ecology framework to demonstrate that social media can enhance democratic practices to a certain degree by personalising political conversations and making them daily and relevant to the people. Within a specific environment and ecology at a particular moment, such as general elections, this study considers the social relations between the Bersih movement and other actors such as citizens, political parties, and the state. This indicates that my study focuses more on the richly contextual human relations that surround media use among Bersih movement participants, rather than merely the affordances of the technology itself. The introduction of this chapter is contextualised within the socio-political environment of Malaysia since the Reformasi movement, to enable us to understand how the Bersih movement, despite being shaped

was to have a peaceful sit-in and it was held in seven states, including Sabah and Sarawak. Bersih 3: Duduk bantah (28 April 2012). <https://www.bersih.org/rallies/bersih3/>

by ethnic-centric politics, manage to morph into advocacy-based activism that builds solidarities among Malaysians based on common interests and beyond ethnic boundaries. It is within this nuanced framework that my study aims to understand the extent to which social media can organise connectives to promote democracy, and how the Bersih movement uses social media to mobilise citizens and shape social protest in the country.

1.1.3 Social Media Use in the Bersih Movement

Social media plays a significant role in creating awareness and communicating information about electoral reform to the public. Social media platforms grew prominent in Malaysian political discourse since 2008 and “the Bersih movement incorporated YouTube and Facebook into its communication and mobilisation strategy” (M. Lim, 2017, p. 222). Facebook allows Bersih participants to connect with their social networks through “one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many levels, making it easier to diffuse information in multiple overlapping networks and to mobilise across diverse populations” (M. Lim, 2013, p. 642). For example, Bersih 2.0 and Bersih 3.0 rallies relied heavily on Facebook for mobilisation and managed to bring multiethnic and culture citizens to the streets. However, after the BN Government won in GE13, many Bersih supporters became disillusioned and started to lose hope because they felt that nothing could change their fate. To sustain the momentum of reform, the Bersih movement has regularly “updated and exposed electoral irregularities through social media platforms” (Chan, 2018, p. 120). This use of social media to motivate empowerment has encouraged citizens to engage directly in the electoral process during GE14 by participating as polling and counting agents (PACAs). The Bersih movement uses social media to publicise their cause and communicate their demands for change to gain support from citizens.

Other than providing information, social media is vital in empowering citizens by enabling them to “facilitate and coordinate collective action that produce political change in their communities” (Tye et al., 2018). Bersih communities use social media to “search, gather, and distribute a variety of resources such as knowledge, volunteers and donations to help develop and strengthen movement strategies” (p. 416). Facebook was also used as an organising and mobilising tool in Bersih 3.0 and other rallies, for supporters to discuss, and share information such as maps, directions and safety tips (M. Lim, 2017). Bersih supporters communicated and interacted among themselves through social media

platforms and hence felt empowered to join the Bersih movement. By placing technology into human relations, social media platforms are indeed good mobilising tools for the Bersih movement.

The use of social media for activism enables citizens to receive updates about rallies and directly share their personal grievances against political, economic and social inequalities in Malaysia. M. Lim (2012, p. 231) argues that “the Bersih movement is successful in using social media to shape repertoires of contention, frame the issues, propagate unifying symbols, and transform online activism to offline protest”. Social media platforms and networked publics have allowed the enthusiasm of the street protest (Bersih rallies staged 2011–2016) to connect with the movement’s online formation (Johns & Cheong, 2019). Johns and Cheong indicate that the government has recognised the significance of social media and is determined to disrupt these digital networks by hiring cybertroopers to manipulate citizen’s emotion and affect, establish state surveillance and punish political dissent with existing laws. They emphasise that it is important to understand citizens’ emotions and affects when discussing about social media and human interactions with digital technologies because social media facilitates the feelings of engagement and activate latent ties that are significant in mobilising networked publics. Papacharissi (2015, p. 8) argues that “online activities may energise disorganised crowds and facilitate the formation of networked publics who are activated and sustained by feelings of belonging and solidarity”. The impact of affects and affective publics through social media is a growing concern in social movement research and it will be used to analyse my case study of the Bersih movement in the following chapters.

Other than technology, the content and narrative framed by movement leaders to foster intergroup solidarity among multi-racial groups in Malaysia is important to a movement’s collective identity. Bersih leaders formed coalitions with other groups to mobilise a larger audience through “communicating multilingual content and recognising intergroup differences to craft an inclusive movement identity” (Selvanathan et al., 2020, p. 235). The content and conversations shared by Bersih communities through different social media platforms potentially shaped the dynamics of participation and are constantly changing due to socio-political changes. The endorsed groups of the Bersih movement tend to regroup for separate causes when there is socio-political change and they are

connected to one another through social media which encourages multiple interactions between citizens, regardless of locations (J. B. Y. Lim, 2017). This shows that the social and political protest in Malaysia is constantly changing amid the new media ecology. Therefore, it is worthwhile for my thesis to analyse how each platform works, the type of narratives framed and how communities are formed around these stories.

1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: AN OVERVIEW

To understand the role of social media in the development of democracy and political discourse in Malaysia, my study adopts Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model together with Habermas's (1996) theory of public sphere, Papacharissi's (2010) work on private sphere and affect theory, and Lichterman's (1996) idea of personalism, to analyse how social media shapes the political discourse of Malaysia, and to rethink the relationship between individuals' daily conversations and their political participation in the light of a networked digital media environment. These theories are chosen because each discusses the context or space within which communication processes occur that involve people communicating with others from their social networks, in public and private, as well as online and offline environments.

The communicative ecology model is useful in understanding the way a social movement takes place within a particular local context (Altheide, 1994). The model was refined by Tacchi and Watkins (2007), who argue that to understand the real impact of technology, it is essential to put media use within the communication and information systems in users' everyday practices. They further explain that in the local context, each community and their communication has a unique communicative ecology. Foth and Hearn (2007) build on this literature and introduce the notion of three layers, including technological (technology used for communication), social (technology used to connect social circles), and discursive (themes that make the conversations). Therefore, my study tries to look into the communication practices of the Bersih movement by focusing on these three layers. It tries to offer an understanding of what each social media application offers to complement the existing communication portfolio that the movement is using to attract users' attention. My study argues that by understanding certain patterns of communication, social movements are able to design "interesting topics and places" to

interact within the networked public that foster the movement causes between individuals. These interesting places refer to the social media platforms used by social movements for transmitting multimedia content to its intended audience. Online spaces provided by social media platforms such as Facebook pages, WhatsApp groups, and Telegram messaging play an important role in our lives as they provide virtual space for people with common interests and values to interact and foster the process of building local and global communities.

On the subject of places of political interactions, Jurgen Habermas (1996) argues the public sphere is an area in social life where individuals gather collectively to discuss social/political issues and take actions to make changes. He explains that the public sphere engages citizens in political debate and provides a space for public opinion that puts the state in touch with the needs of society:

A mediated political communication in the public sphere can facilitate deliberative legitimation processes in complex societies only if a self-regulating media system gains independence from its social environments, and if anonymous audience grant feedback between an informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society. (Habermas, 2006, pp. 411–412)

Habermas's notion of public sphere describes a space, ideally, where all citizens are given access to be involved in forming public opinions. This theory provides relevance to understanding how individuals adopt new media to share information, converse about politics, and form social ties with others. Instead of focusing on technology as the stimulus of change, my study is guided by Habermas's concept of the public sphere where social media can enhance democratic practices and enrich the political lives of individuals in Malaysia. It also takes into consideration other competing factors in shaping democratic politics.

Papacharissi's (2010) work on the private sphere provides an important complement to Habermas's theory of the public sphere, as she deals with new civic habits that have emerged from the new relationship between democracy and the Internet, including social media. She argues that the private sphere can be established through the locus of the home or workplace, and that it is portable through technologies, thus facilitating multitasking of civic and other behaviours. She explains that convergent

technology grants to the private sphere, civic and social legitimacy, and allows individuals entering the public sphere through personalised communications. This means individuals can use social media to broadcast private content to public audiences, or send public content to private audiences. Hence, the environment in which individuals interact with one another becomes both privately public and publicly private. New media technologies have collapsed the public/private and rational/emotional distinctions and shifted the paradigm. Papacharissi's work provides my study with some understanding about how people connect in contemporary democracies and how technology transforms personal relationships that lead to new communicative habits. This is particularly useful because my study argues that the Bersih movement mobilises people by using conversations that are conducted in both public and private spheres. Papacharissi's views seem to correlate with my argument that technology does not directly influence the democracy of a country, but is a tool for promoting narratives of emancipation, individual political autonomy, and freedom in the collective imagination. My study is also guided by her concept of a privately public sphere in which the boundaries between public and private are blurred and have become hybrid. Now, political conversations take place in digital private spaces, and information is shared among people across different media. This points to the importance of my study in examining the communicative ecology of each media platform in this hybrid multimedia networked community.

Lichterman's (1996) personalism theory researches modern societies that are individualistic and constantly changing. He explains that people feel a personal sense of political responsibility rather than feeling obliged to a community. His work on personalism supposes that individuals have their own inherent values, but they are also shaped by the communities that surround them. Compared to the concept of individualism and collectivism, personalism is more suitable to be applied in my research because it sees humans as relational and in need of a community, individuals are engaged, and have inherent dignity that no one has the right to suppress. Personalism emphasises that individuals are free and responsible for their own life while simultaneously stressing that they can practice this responsibility only "in relation to others, but conversely, community may not take precedence over the individual" (Mortensen, 2019. p. 23). Moreover, Lichterman (1996) disagrees with the pervasive communitarian view that an emphasis on

self-fulfilment is incompatible with a sense of obligation towards others and argues that personalism can strengthen activism. My study builds on this personalism theory to explain how a collective electoral imaginary frames the pursuit of individuals' personal grievances in relation to larger social and cultural forces. This understanding helps the Bersih movement to develop a compelling online mobilisation framework for a multiethnic and broad-based electoral reform that comprises fragmented participants.

Based on Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model, Habermas's (1996) theory of public sphere, Papacharissi's (2010) work on private sphere and Lichterman's (1996) idea of personalism, my study argues that social media is a good mobilising tool that allows participants to easily access information, form opinions, and build social networks; therefore it is important for social movement actors to understand how social media ecologies function, to construct a narrative that their communities can relate to. When individuals converse on a daily basis within their online communities, this narrative will form solidarity among them and eventually mobilise them into taking actions offline. These theories and research work enhanced my study by providing a holistic view about how social media engages individuals in conducting their civic behaviours on an everyday basis, in both private and public spheres. My study argues that individuals use social media to link their personalised conversations to their political actions in a networked ecology. From there, they encourage one another through talking about politics and public affairs on a daily basis. My study builds on the existing new media scholarship that argues social media encourages participatory culture and decentralises conversations that used to be top-down peer-to-peer networks. It avoids a media-centric approach to the subject matter and recognises the hybrid uses of media among users.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Some existing literature on social movements and social media emphasises the democratising potential of media and its role in facilitating social movements. For instance, technology determinists such as Marshall McLuhan (1964) and Neil Postman (2006) prioritise the medium and argue the use of technology is determined by its structure and form. In other words, they look for technological developments, media as a whole, as

the key mover in history and social change. However, scholars like Andrew Feenberg (2002) and Langdon Winner (1977) criticise this determinist theory and suggest the acknowledgement of social consequences. They emphasise the social and economic systems in which the technology is embedded. Media ecologists such as Lance Strate (2017) emphasise the need to understand media as environments, identifying the differences between media and discussing them in a historical context.

The technology determinist approach assumes technology can alter a society's structure and cultural values while the communitarian approach sees individuals as inter-related with their community, but my study adopts an ecology approach by understanding media as environments and emphasises more on the individualism. My study stresses that the media plays a leading role in human history, and stresses that the relationship between society and technology is not a simple cause-and-effect approach. Rather, it is an intertwined relationship that prioritises the human involvement in shaping technology and society. My study argues that individuals' personal expressions and self-fulfillment are strong indicators of their public commitments. It also examines the role of social media in the socio-political context of Malaysia and explores the way individuals' personalised online conversations are linked to their offline political participation in a networked ecology.

My study recognises that Internet activism shaped social protest in Malaysia, and addresses the issue of effectiveness for the Bersih movement's communicative ecology in a deeply rooted ethnic-oriented political landscape. As a non-partisan and grass-root based movement, the Bersih movement has constantly faced challenges in bringing multi-ethnic individual citizens together. Therefore, it is notable for this study to explore the way Bersih activists communicate through social media and massive rallies, which collectively mobilise Malaysians, both locally and globally. Scholars who examined social media in Malaysia prior to 2018 have largely ended up exploring its limitations because the ruling coalition was never able to be overthrown since independence (Abbott, 2011b; Diamond, 2010; Weiss, 2013). However, the results of GE14 has prompted a reassessment of the role of social media and the significance of online activism in Malaysia. In response to that, my study concentrates on the pre- and post-GE14, from 2017 to 2020, that saw a

significant political transformation in Malaysia. This study attempts to shed light on the following overarching research question:

How does the Bersih movement's communicative ecology, with a focus on social media, mobilise individuals?

Two research sub-questions that support the central question, and help us understand the political change of citizens within the context of electoral reform through the use of social media platforms, are provided below:

1. How do Bersih activists use social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp to communicate with each other and their supporters?
2. How effective is Bersih participants' personalised communication and affect for increasing their engagement with political conversations?

1.4 RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE AND OBJECTIVES

My study is significant because most study of citizens' political participation is either taking a government's perspective or limited to offline forms of participation (Pandey et. al, 2019), so an activist or citizen's perspective would be significant. In addition, there exists a considerable amount of studies that explore the impact of technology on political participation and the increased use of social media by activists and citizens in developed countries such as the United States and United Kingdom, but less in a developing and multi-ethnic country like Malaysia. Therefore, my study sees potential opportunities for Malaysian activists to leverage these techno-changes for democracy development in the country. My study provides a detailed examination of the historical development of media and democratic practices in Malaysia, coupled with careful analysis of social media content, and interviews with activists and volunteers who are part of the Bersih movement. It attempts to examine how the Bersih movement uses social media for mobilisation.

My study aims to achieve these research objectives:

1. Explore the media platforms used by movement participants in communicating narratives about the Bersih movement to the general public and among themselves.

2. Analyse participants' personalised affect with the movement and their motivations to engage in political conversations.
3. Examine the interactions between movement participants in different communicative ecologies, both local and global.

1.5 THESIS OUTLINE

The core of this thesis is organised around the three parts of mobilisation central to the Bersih movement—the role of social media in movement participants' everyday conversations, their communicative ecologies, including online and offline social interactions, and how people use social media platforms for personal fulfilment and social obligation. In each chapter, I begin by laying out a relevant theoretical framework before turning to analyse how social media helps movement participants to build personalised conversations that eventually link to their political actions. Overall, this thesis is composed of eight chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces my PhD study. It outlines the background of social movements in Malaysia and the mobilising role of the Internet and social media, lays out the research objectives and the overarching research question: “How does the Bersih movement's communicative ecology, with a focus on social media, mobilise individuals?”

Chapter 2 makes an important contribution to the theoretical framework for understanding online mobilisation by bringing together concepts such as Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model, Habermas's (1996) theory of public sphere, Papacharissi's (2010) work on private sphere and affect, and Lichterman's (1996) idea of personalism. This is useful in discussing the contextual human relations that surround media use among movement participants. It briefly compares these concepts with technological determinism in understanding the impact of new media technologies on contemporary societies. Communicative ecology theory explores social media as environments, the differences between media platforms, and puts media in a historical context. Habermas's notion of public sphere and Papacharissi's private sphere provide a nuanced understanding of the role of social media in our everyday lives and the convergence of public and private spheres. In this chapter, these theoretical frameworks are reviewed and later put into perspective to reveal how the Bersih movement uses

personalised conversations to mobilise citizens and influence their communicative ecologies. It also defines the key concepts and terms of this thesis, including Bersih movement, personalisation, affect, and communicative ecologies.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach that guides empirical research. It details the process and the methods used to collect data for the study, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and online content analysis. It discusses the use of social media among Bersih participants, both activists and volunteers, during Bersih rallies and in the general elections. Participants were selected from each individuals' official portfolio in the movement, the Bersih-endorsed NGO list, and by referral within my personal networks. This is followed by a content analysis of Bersih movement's official Facebook posts to determine the pattern of social media platform use among local and diaspora Malaysians and the differences between them. Other sources include the Bersih movement's official website, WhatsApp groups, news websites, library archives, and user-generated content shared on social media.

Chapter 4 provides a historical overview of social movements in Malaysia. It mentions the socio-political background of Malaysia, ranging from the history of the Reformasi movement, the emergence of social media as alternative media, to the empowerment of citizens participating in street protests. It situates the Internet and social media within a restrictive environment and a relatively authoritarian society. This history helps to provide a good understanding of the characteristics of the Malaysian political landscape and public sphere. It also explains the development of the Internet and social media in the context of Malaysia, which helps in understanding the communicative ecology around the Bersih movement. The chapter finishes with a brief description of ownership of the current mainstream media, how social media fills the gap of democracy through its wide use by citizens, as well as politicians, in the general elections.

Chapter 5 makes an important empirical contribution to the work of the Bersih movement by providing a detailed analysis of the multifaceted nature of social media platforms that builds on Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model. It examines the interactions between movement activists and social volunteers by looking into the context in which the communication occurs and discusses how the interactions are organised. By using the three layers of communicative ecology—technological,

discursive, and social, I analyse how Bersih activists plan their mobilising strategies, frame their narratives, and form communication communities. The three layers also help explain the stages of mobilisation central to the Bersih movement and focus more on the role of social media in people's everyday conversations. This communicative ecology helps to offer an understanding of the uniqueness of each social media platform and how each of them complements the existing communication portfolio that the Bersih movement is using to attract participants' attention. The platforms are assessed to explain how Bersih activists and participants use social media to mobilise. I found that the Bersih movement uses multiple social media platforms concurrently to frame their narratives of street protests demanding for clean and fair elections. The analysis indicates that each social media platform is a unique environment that provides space for individuals to interact with one another.

Chapter 6 contributes to the existing social movement research by mapping the technological, discursive, and social layers of the Bersih movement with citizens' personal expressions and self-fulfilment. It argues that the Bersih movement's communications can best be understood by bringing together the communicative ecology model and Lichterman's (1996) idea of personalism to put media use among movement participants into the context of surrounding human relations. This chapter explores the personalisation practices within the Bersih communicative ecologies and emphasises a culture where individuals respect one another's personal fulfilment and hence become united. Personalism theory sees individuals as autonomous and active in their everyday social interactions. This demonstrates why individuals' communicative ecologies are important and how central their everyday conversations are in Bersih's mobilisation strategies. I drew data from semi-structured interviews and analysed the way Bersih participants personalised their talk about electoral reform, and used Bersih rallies and activities as an extension of their daily personal conversations with friends and families, and like-minded people. I found that their conversations did not function uniformly across the board but adapted to specific media environments and social, political, and historical contexts to achieve a particular goal in electoral politics. This helps to answer the research question of how the Bersih movement uses personalised conversations via social media to influence their participants' communicative ecologies and eventually mobilise them.

Chapter 7 builds on the previous two chapters and extends the local and global dimension of Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology. It analyses two Bersih Facebook pages and aims to provide a more nuanced view of the Bersih movement's communicative ecologies among local and diaspora Malaysians. I use Facebook as a case study to explore how affect or emotion affects citizen's social media use and how they use social media for personalised conversations. It examines user-generated content, such as images, photos, videos, text posts and comments, to analyse the motivations for social media use. The findings are later used to evaluate how social media promotes liberal democratic practices and enrich political life in electoral politics. It also explores the potential moderating role of culture among geographically dispersed individuals. This chapter suggests the Bersih movement should use personalised conversations to frame an affective narrative and build connective communities online, where people can be loosely connected and their social networks can contribute to the sustainability of the movement when it becomes global. It also adds a personalised lens to Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology.

Finally, Chapter 8 demonstrates the overall findings from this study and addresses the implications of my empirical and theoretical contributions to the related research fields. It highlights that the Internet and social media are blurring the boundaries between public and private, eventually creating a mediated hybrid space. I found that personalised conversations among participants of a social media environment could mediate their news consumption and political participation, and thus it is significant for Bersih activists to frame affective and simple narratives that could travel fast and capture the attention of participants. This chapter finishes with some recommendations for my research limitations, and lingering concerns on the issue of the development of social media in electoral reform in Malaysia. The tone of this chapter is intentionally more reflective and I suggest how I believe my work can be applied. This is the section where I conclude my research and connect the phenomenon of social media to the theoretical frameworks in reference to the Bersih movement. The future of social media is also addressed as Malaysia prepares for its 15th general election in the near future.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the existing literature relating to the mobilising potential of the Internet and social media in democracy, and explains how these concepts guide the themes and ideas that I applied in this thesis. It starts with some brief explanations of media theories and approaches about the use of the Internet and social media in social movement mobilisation. The main theoretical framework used is Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model. I adopt this model in my thesis because it provides a particular social and political conceptual lens when examining the potential of the Internet and social media networking in the Malaysian context. This theoretical introduction will lead to a discussion of communicative ecology and the hybridity of media use, which is the key concept for the thesis and main approach to the study of how the Bersih movement uses personalised conversations through social media to mobilise citizens.

Internet and social media research can be conducted in many ways; this chapter adopts an ecology perspective in studying social media and democracy. My contribution asserts that the Internet and social media can add significant value at both national and local levels if social media is integrated as part of systematic and sustainable online and offline mobilisation activities by the Bersih movement. Research shows the Bersih movement's advocacy suggests greater potential for effective, multi-ethnic mobilisation with an impact on the changing political landscape of Malaysia (Govindasamy, 2018; Weiss, 2013; Welsh, 2011). My study suggests that the use of social media by the Bersih movement is probably less obvious to influence the direct outcome of a particular event within a short period of time such as general elections. Rather, it serves as a significant medium in everyday politics that encourages individuals to develop and express their personalised views and come to understand and reach judgements about matters of public concern. My thesis argues that this political practice and everyday personalised conversations can mediate the consumption of political information and participation by individuals. Therefore, the use of social media for extended conversations, from online into everyday politics can lead to an increased civic awareness in Malaysia's society.

This chapter also explains how other theories, including Habermas's (1996) notion of the public sphere, Papacharissi's (2010) work on the private sphere and affect (2018), and Lichterman's (1996) personalism concept complement the communicative ecology theoretical framework. I argue that the Bersih movement's communication can best be understood by bringing together these theories to put media use among movement participants into the context of surrounding human relations. By putting these theories together, it allows me to develop a nuanced and unique analysis of the Bersih movement by examining how personalised conversations mobilise disorganised crowds and help to sustain networked publics within a personalised public sphere where political activities take place. The impact of affects and affective publics through social media on the Bersih movement explains how these multiple networks are established and facilitated by a sense of belonging and solidarity. The following section summarises the role of the Internet and social media in social movements and their mobilisation, and offers some insights about how this thesis contributes to the existing social media and social movement scholarship in Malaysia.

2.2 THE POLITICAL USE OF THE INTERNET BY SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

This section provides relevant research and literature regarding how the Internet facilitates social movements, helps movements to expand their sphere of participation and effectively construct communication content with certain media styles that are able to move their claims far and wide. The impact of the Internet on political participation, public sphere and movement's communicative ecology are discussed here in reference to Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model, Lichterman's (1996) personalism, Habermas's notion of the public sphere and Papacharissi's (2010) work on private sphere and affect. The literature review is organised around three stages that are central to the research topic of this thesis, which are social media use in social movements, the communicative ecologies of movement and its participants, and the impact of personalisation and personalism on a movement's narrative, and participants' everyday conversations.

Leaders within social movements use the Internet as an alternative way to shape modern democratic political life through communicating their ideologies when they are

denied by the mainstream media. The Internet is not only a medium, but a social setting where new norms, rules and procedures in politics, and network structures take place (Chadwick, 2006). For instance, many recent protests, ranging from the Egypt uprising (2011) to the Bersih rallies (2011–2016), used the Internet to demand alternative political spaces and press the ruling governments about social issues happening in their countries (M. Lim, 2012; Subramaniam, 2011). These individuals and organisations have incorporated the Internet as an important dimension in communicating their ideologies and causes for mobilisation (Atton, 2003; Downing, 2001). The Internet has also provided social movements and activists an alternative way to produce content that are rejected by mainstream media, without fear of being censored (Della Porta & Mosca, 2005). For instance, an independent media centre (IMC), Indymedia, was set up after the Seattle WTO (World Trade Organisation) protests in 1999 and a large number of alternative news websites, including Malaysiakini.com, Malaysian Insider and Malaysia Today flourished in Malaysia during the Reformasi movement in 1998 (Cherian, 2005). These news channels appeared on the Internet to provide alternative voices and perspectives so that all voices could be represented. The Internet has provided an alternative way for movements to directly communicate with their constituencies and the broader public (A. Boyd, 2003). From there, they communicate their ideologies and causes to shape people's modern democratic political life.

Social movements use the Internet to mobilise individuals to participate in the movements' causes and activities because it is low cost, fast, and flexible. The Internet quickly disseminates protest ideas and tactics across national borders (Norris, 2001), improves the accuracy of communication, increases interaction (Diani, 2000), and allows self-expression at a relatively low cost (Gleason, 2013). The basic processes of organising and participating in new social movements have changed in many ways. First, the cost of participation such as police repression, marginalisation, time and money have decreased to an insignificant level compared to offline participation (Bimber et al., 2005). Second, the Internet provides low-cost coordination and encourages participants to mobilise resources, hence decreases the need of a central social movement organisation (Agarwal, et al., 2014). The use of the Internet as a mobilising tool has encouraged leaderless movements and autonomist leadership in modern societies (Castells, 2012). This "liquid"

form of organising through social media does not require people to officially attach to any organisation, but freely join to support a cause or movement (Bauman, 2013). Despite the possibilities for online surveillance and government monitoring, the participants of social movements have regularly used the Internet to facilitate their everyday conversations with one another and keep themselves emotionally attached to the movement's agenda. The traditional membership system practised by organisation has gradually been replaced by a loosely connected but continuous communicative engagement within movement, and thus explains why the Internet is a popular tool for mobilisation in contemporary social movements.

Internet utopians always applaud the Internet for making a direct impact and significantly changing society. However, this technological deterministic approach was very much criticised by scholars for over-estimating the impact of technology (Webster, 2014; Cammaerts, 2008; Hindman, 2009). Rather, they embrace other critical media theories that could provide a more comprehensive framework to investigate the effects of technology on contemporary society. The Internet is a contested terrain, where ideally all parties could use it to promote their own agendas and interests, but in reality, questions such as who owns and controls the media, who gets represented and marginalised, should always be taken into consideration.

The dialogic communication provided by the Internet allows popular participation and critical debate. While mainstream media promote the government's propaganda, civil societies turn to independent media online for a more open-minded public sphere and space for political debate, information, and participation (Liow, 2012). These possibilities help to disseminate critical and progressive ideas, and invigorates democracy. The Internet facilitates a free flow of information, provides a space that allows rational public discourse for citizen to make decisions and scrutinise power (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Papacharissi, 2002). Based on this assumption, the following section talks about social media encouraging communication and mobilisation within social movements.

2.3 SOCIAL MEDIA ENCOURAGES COMMUNICATION AND MOBILISATION

Much research today highlights the technical convergences between mass and interactive media and argues that “social media has empowered the development of democracy and public debate” (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 148). Social media generates new ways of interacting that encourages users to generate their own content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). This interactive platform lowers the barriers of social exchange and effectively engage individuals and organisations in social issues. Many individuals have taken advantage of these multiple platforms and tools of social media to reach other people, get support, or persuade and advocate issues. For instance, social media facilitated the relationships between the Bersih community and other activism groups in Malaysia, including student youth movement and environmental group (Anti-Lynas), and allowed individual citizens to establish connections with others, mobilise them and helps Bersih movement to amplify their publicity (Tye et al., 2018). Social media also allows individuals to share personal opinions, experiences and insights (Marken, 2007), debate the issues within communities and connect with like-minded others or people who hold different views (Norris, 2004). Social movements and organisations, non-profits in particular, have engaged in social media because they rely on individuals’ support in the form of donations and volunteers, as well as moral support. Even though they never discuss politics on these sites, it is likely that social media can serve as a catalyst for potential political expression and participation (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2014). Social media has become part of people’s everyday life, providing a new platform for expression and interaction, and probably ideal forums for political persuasion.

Social media has provided popular platforms for information dissemination and interactive communication around a variety of contexts and actors, from politics and protests, economics to entertainment. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have been widely adopted for information diffusion and community building. In addition, social media platforms allow many people to interact, collaborate, provide information and demonstrate preferences (Katona, Zubcsek & Sarvary, 2011). Opposition members in Malaysia used social media as a pseudo-media centre. Some used “smartphone apps to inform supporters of the locations of their party’s public talks while

others used Facebook pages to interact with supporters online and promote ethnic sentiments” (Tapsell, 2013b, p. 45). This shows that social media platforms can be used as a means for individuals and groups to disseminate multiple types of information and encourage interactive communication among their personal networks. Such a phenomenon is worth examining and is the motivation of this research.

Social media helps social movements to effectively send their messages to large and dispersed audiences and engage with them affectively. Gerbaudo (2012) argues that social media constructs a common emotional narrative to make activists emotionally attached and sustain their coming together in public spaces. When activists post a status message on Facebook, they are not only expressing an opinion, but also inviting certain emotional responses from their friends or other users. When individuals personalise movements to their own ends by creating personalised blogs, tweets, and Facebook identities, they are able to attract like-minded individuals to form social networks and groups (Gerbaudo, 2012; M. Lim, 2012; Johns & Cheong, 2019). Similarly, in social movements, when an activist posts a message online, they are also eliciting physical reactions from the audience and these messages set up a scene where people’s collective action is manifested. The success of mass protests such as Occupy (Donovan, 2018), Indignados (Gerbaudo, 2012), the Umbrella movement (Lee & Chan, 2016), and the Bersih movement (Johns & Cheong, 2019) are often linked to their capacity in shaping repertoires of contention, framing issues and propagating unifying symbols through social media (M. Lim, 2012). The changing architecture of media has promoted a participatory communication culture where ordinary people are offered a stage to voice their concerns and contribute to collective decision-making.

Furthermore, social media platforms are popular storytelling mechanisms because they allow people to produce highly engaging messages and form close social networks. D. Boyd (2008) argues that social media platforms such as Facebook was initially organised by topics, but now structured around personal networks. These platforms are designed to allow users to explicitly tell others about “me and my friends” and get to see what their Facebook friends choose to share with them. People look for content that they can feel a connection with at a personal level and are mostly individually driven (D. Boyd, 2008). Even though Facebook is not designed specifically for political engagement, it

helps to expand social movement and political activists' social networks. This indirectly amplifies political information and improves its dissemination. M. Lim (2012) argues in regard to social movements in Egypt, that 54 out of 70 street protests recorded between 2004 and 2011 involved online activism. My study tends to prove that online activism has also greatly impacted the Bersih movement in the past decade. Hence, the power of networked individuals and groups are often intertwined with the power of social media that facilitate the formation and sustainability of social networks.

2.4 SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN THE BERSIH MOVEMENT

Several studies have been conducted to identify social media platforms' key features and abilities and how these are linked to the domain of political and civic engagement. In the context of Malaysia, the Bersih movement is popular probably due to its embeddedness in social media, its active engagement with the civil society and ability to empower people of multi-ethnic (Welsh, 2011). The Bersih movement has actively adopted social media platforms in its communication and mobilisation strategy (M. Lim, 2017). These platforms allow it to connect with multiple levels of social networks, which makes information diffusion and mobilisation across diverse publics easier (M. Lim, 2013). For instance, Bersih activists use social media platforms to expose electoral irregularities and motivate their supporters who were disappointed with the failure in electoral reform when the BN Government retained power after GE13 (Chan, 2018). This shows social media is a significant means for communication and mobilisation in the Bersih movement.

The prominence of smartphones for news and information has changed the avenues through which citizens receive and share political information. By 2018, more than 70% of Malaysians had access to the Internet and a majority were using smartphones (MCMC, 2018). Residents who stayed in semi-rural areas in the country that had Internet access were able to send messages through Facebook and WhatsApp during GE14 (Tapsell, 2018). Tapsell argues that social media platforms can be used as tools of resistance when people used them to spread information about political nepotism and corruption during election campaigns. Bersih supporters also use social media platforms to coordinate collective action that produces political change in their community (Tye et al., 2018). For example, the movement's official Facebook page titled "Bersih 2.0

[Official]” was created a few weeks before the rally on 22 June 2011, and the Bersih community used it as a central platform to check for updates, announcements, photos, and videos related to the rally. When the mainstream media in Malaysia is strictly controlled by the government, social media platforms have emerged as alternatives for news and information, and to enable citizens to shape the political discourse.

Furthermore, the Bersih movement has been successful in using social media to “shape repertoires of contention, frame the issues, propagate unifying symbols, and transform online activism to offline protest” (M. Lim, 2012, p. 231). This allowed individuals to directly experience the protests by participating in online conversations and the Bersih rallies staged from 2011 to 2016. This sense of togetherness and feeling of engagement is crucial to the mobilisation of networked publics. Papacharissi (2015) argues that affects and affective publics through social media help to energise disorganised crowds and form networked publics. Therefore, Bersih activists use affect to activate and sustain the feelings of belonging and solidarity among multiple racial groups nationwide as well as Malaysians who reside overseas.

Bersih activists use social media platforms to form a collective identity through framing common narratives and fostering intergroup solidarity. They embrace diversity by communicating in multiple languages and forming coalitions with other groups to craft an inclusive movement identity (Selvanathan et al., 2020). This multiplicity of interaction is made possible through social media platforms regardless of individuals’ geographical locations (J. B. Y. Lim, 2017). Each platform works in its unique style and frames the movement narrative based on a constantly changing dynamic of political and social protest in Malaysia. This leads to the next discussion about how each communication takes place within a communicative ecology, which involves multiple media that organise social interactions in specific ways.

2.5 COMMUNICATIVE ECOLOGY APPROACH TO SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has gained prominence in our daily routines. It provides us with channels that we can engage in for private and public discussions about issues of common interest, from small talk to political issues such as general elections. Many of our activities are mediated by the logic of social media. To understand the motivations that drive people to

participate in the Bersih movement, my study adopts ecology theory. This concept is relevant to McLuhan's (1962) research on media ecology,⁸ which demonstrated how the Internet can influence communicative content and affect human perception, understanding, and interactions. These works have further influenced David Altheide (1994, 1995) to develop the concept of communicative ecology. Altheide (1994) uses this concept to explore how social activities are created and modified through technology, with an emphasis on meanings rather than technology determinism. He defines the ecology of communication as the communication process in context that comprises three dimensions: an information technology, a communication format, and a social activity. The term ecology is used because it implies "relationship related through process and interaction, and it implies a spatial and relational basis for a subject matter" (Altheide, 1994, p. 667). Altheide's communicative concept examines the mutual relationships between social interactions, communication content and information technologies, and places these layers into individuals and organisations' social and physical spaces. His concept is "grounded in the search for meaning, rather than causation or technological determinism" (p. 669). This perspective is useful for my study because it recognises the impact of media on the flow of information between social actors, organisations, and governments, thus altering the way power is constructed.

Similarly, Tacchi, Slater and Hearn (2003) argue that each communication takes place within a communicative ecology, and this process involves a mix of media that organises the social interactions in specific ways. They do not think of an individual medium in isolation from other mediums, but each takes place within an existing unique communicative ecology. Different types of social media platforms serve different purposes, each has their own abilities in facilitating conversations and interactions among members. The communicative ecology framework is particularly helpful in my thesis because it can be used to explain how the Bersih movement uses social media to change the ecology of communication of their participants. In particular, my thesis focuses on framing better mobilising narratives to deal with more effective political conversations

⁸ The term media ecology is first formally introduced by Marshall McLuhan (McLuhan, 1962).

that encourage individuals to engage in sustainable political participation and increased civic awareness in Malaysia.

Likewise, Foth and Hearn (2007) revisit and broaden the concept of communicative ecology to include the context in which communication occurs. In their study of technology use in Australian apartment buildings, they divide communicative ecologies into three layers, including technological, discursive, and social. The technological layer is composed of media and technology devices which connect people and enable human interactions (for example, the Internet and cell phones). The discursive layer is composed of communicative content that involves conversational themes and ideas. The social layer refers to people who involve in the communication process. Foth and Hearn's research reveals that residents of the apartment seamlessly travel between online and offline communication, and easily switch between collective and networked interactions depending on purpose and context. Foth and Hearn (2007, p. 756) argue that location interaction is better than globally dispersed communication, and conclude that communicative ecology integrates the three dimensions of "online and offline," "global and local," as well as "collective and networked." This communicative ecology is used to analyse my case study of the Bersih movement in Chapter 5 and demonstrate that each layer is interrelated with one another.

Foth and Hearn's three-layer perspective focuses on the communication connections of individuals or of socio-demographic groups (Broad et al., 2013). It tends to ask questions such as what kind of communication activities do local people engage in everyday, the available resources (such as content, technologies, skills), and how they use resources in their daily life (Tacchi & Watkins, 2007). To enhance the movement's popularity and impact on a changing political landscape in a country, many movement activists are agonising over methods to attract individuals to participate and support their social media pages and groups. Therefore, Foth and Hearn's (2007) three layers allow me to research the technology-mediated communicative ecologies, for example social media adoption in the Bersih movement, and how each medium shapes its communicative content. This will advance the theoretical understanding of the overarching dimension of the Bersih movement's mobilisation and the continued usage of its social media by individuals who support the movement's cause.

The three layers of communicative ecology framework examines the phenomena that is related to individuals and groups' media preferences (Maddox, 2015). Some research explores the interplay between these media preferences and relationship, and the changes or alteration in communicative content in different fields and countries. For example, Smith et al. (2012) found university freshmen in the United States depend on various media technologies to connect with their parents, which sounds relevant to the communicative ecology framework. The use of these communication tools mediates the new students' social lives and closeness with, and independence from, their parents. More recently, Davison et al. (2014) researched how employees in China get value from social media technologies and are able to contribute directly to communication in their organisation. Similarly, I investigated the use of social media in social movements in Malaysia and how participants get value from using different communication tools that provide different ecologies. More elaborations on the case study are provided in Chapter 5. My study contributes a new dimension that Bersih movement activists do not define communicative ecology by the technology infrastructure or geographical location, but the intimate techno-social sharing that supports political communications that are a constant, lightweight, and mundane presence in everyday life. The literature about how movement participants personalise their social media use to engage in social networks and why personalised conversations are central in the movement mobilisation are reviewed next.

2.6 PERSONALISED SOCIAL MEDIA USE FOR A PUBLIC CAUSE

Personalisation has become a relevant concept in discussions about how individuals personally express themselves and their participation in the social movements. As D. Boyd (2008) mentioned earlier, people pay attention to what interests them, regardless of the technology. They go online, often looking for content that they can personally feel a connection with. Social media seems to capture that psychology and put individuals at the centre of their own social networks, which enables them to collaborate and distribute content to large audience (Bennett, 2012). Social media, by nature, entails personalised tools that provide individuals with their own communication channel (Ekman & Widholm, 2015). The personalised narratives by individuals may contrast with the media narratives by journalists or other members of their social networks. When individuals become the

basic unit of a movement, they are responsible for relaying messages to their personal social network of friends and acquaintances. This participatory communication culture enabled by social media allows people to freely express their personal views and personalise their interactions with others. By tapping into this logic, my study pays attention to how each individual uses social media to express their personal interpretations of political realities in Chapter 6.

The practice of “speaking out” has become part of the communication strategies of many social movements today. Gamson (2009) defines collective personalisation as having our own personal stories to be told in the public and being carried in media discourse. When a movement participant contributes their story to the existing stream of stories, their story not only serves as an individual witness but a collective one. Participants’ stories will accumulate and build into the movement’s narrative. This story gets multiplied and amplified quickly by social media. For example, when a citizen is unhappy to pay extra for groceries, this personal experience may turn into a public concern (such as inflation) when their story is told in the media. People who are unhappy with the increasing living expenses may gather to protest against the country’s slow economic growth, corruption, and poor governance. In the context of movement, Gamson (2009) argues that personalising encourages people to articulate collective identities and group’s symbolic interests. This personalisation can transform an individual’s personal experience into a public concern, which can later help an emerging reform movement articulate a collective identity.

The growing demand for personal expressiveness and self-fulfilment through social media makes personalised commitment increasingly central in movements. Generally, the focus of mobilisation seems to have shifted from organisations to individuals—either leaders, or participants. Bennett and Segerberg (2011) argue that globalisation has resulted the separation of individuals from their traditional bases of social solidarity such as religious groups, political parties, and other mass organisations. One sign of this growing individualisation is the way individuals organise their own actions and narrations when they are mobilised in a movement. They engage in causes that they can personally assign meanings to. They may resist formal membership, but personally join in selected actions (Bimber et al., 2005; Flanagin et al., 2006). Individuals

who are digitally well-connected, with multiple affiliations and identities are growing prominent in the developing of mass protests in terms of speed, scale and size (Bennett et al., 2008). They have adopted communication strategies that allow them to be more flexible in the way they may affiliate and act. When they have greater control over their actions, this creates the potential for a more personalised identification where individuals' expressiveness and self-fulfilment become prominent in mobilisation.

The concept of personalisation, in the context of social movements, has turned individuals' personal experience into a public concern, which can eventually form a group's collective identity. The concept of collective identity is a central concern for activists today, especially those who conceive social media as platforms that form new identities (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011). Social media allows participants to have a more relaxed affiliation and speed up mobilisation in these networked societies. McAdam et al. (2001) argue that collective identity is best understood as a part of social relations and interactions. They argue that identity is formed through interactions at sites also known as political and social interactions and thus, individuals are influenced by social ties and networks. According to Bennett (2012), the flexibility in newly formed online friendships are characterised by an informality or personalisation, which highlights a unique, personal self. The more diverse the mobilisation, the more personalised the expressions become, especially when individuals use social media to activate and sustain their weak ties and loosely tied social networks. The rise of personalised politics has becoming a cultural trend despite the existing conventional politics based on identification with political parties, ideologies, and common causes. This reflects social media as a means of constructing highly personal interactions and engagement with social movements.

Identities are multiple, dynamic, and comprise contested boundaries as well as having some connections with routine social life (McAdam et al., 2001). Individuals have to engage themselves in everyday interactional identity work to construct affiliations. The interactions between individuals form a collective action that further frames the movement's identity. In the context of network societies, McDonald (2002, p. 109) argues that the analysis of action and identity within social movements should "shift from solidarity to fluidarity, and from collective identity to public experience of self". Either it is an individual's personalised pursuit of public experiences or a collective solidarity

shared by members of a group, it is undeniable that collective action arises from social change when individuals actively participate in the public sphere. Many activists participate in organisations or movements because their personal pursuit agrees with the collective identity, and this encourages sustainability of support and participation (Saunders, 2008). However, when their individual identity does not reconcile with the social movement or organisation's collective identity, disputes can arise.

2.7 PERSONALISED EXPRESSIONS ENHANCE PUBLIC COMMITMENT

Sociologist Paul Lichterman (1996), who studies movement commitment in highly individualised societies, says personalised politics facilitates committed, long-term activism in some ways and limits it in others. His theory of personalism argues that “personalisation is highly participatory because individuals play an active role in social change, both in activism, and everyday life” (Lichterman, 1996, p. 277). He argues the personal self gets discovered when they develop their own preferences and individuality. An individual's personal fulfilment is a cultural accomplishment that happens in a group setting, between some individuals. The approach to culture as everyday practices enables us to identify a personalised form of public commitment by examining the cultural relations between selves and communities (p. 276). For example, when individuals participate in a protest, they probably share a common enthusiasm for personal self-expressions towards the issue, but are not really a true community of shared obligation. They may use social media to illustrate the interconnectedness of their personal problems and public issues through multiple content, and learn from one another. Personalism theory concludes these individual self-expressions are complementary to their public commitments.

Much research assumes that the growing culture of self-fulfilment, or personalisation, is ultimately incompatible with commitment to the public good. Lichterman's seesaw model (1996) rebukes this communitarian concept that emphasises interdependent obligation to a collective body and the arguments that individuals who pursue private ends would not be able to dedicate themselves to public good. He emphasises that personal expressiveness enhances public commitment rather than just tempering it with private needs (p. 279). Despite increasing individualisation, people still

pursue collective causes and commit personally due to a sense of political responsibility. When people engage with multiple causes such as electoral fairness, economic justice, environmental protection, and human rights, they tend to use multilayers of social media to facilitate their actions. During these interactions, they make meanings in specific social settings in relation to each other, as they perceive each other (Nina & Lichterman, 2003). Individuals not only indulge in their personal needs but also establish commitments to the public good. This personalised approach allows a more sustainable commitment that is required in a social movement.

There are many discussions about the impact of personalised forms of connective actions in social movements. Scholar Nina Eliasoph writes in her book, *Avoiding politics: How Americans produce apathy in everyday life* (1998), that the way movement activists communicate is different to non-activists. She argues that movement activists rely on emotional narratives and claims of personal identity, while non-activists avoid movement talk altogether. Eliasoph conducted two and a half years of ethnographic research, talking and listening to people, and wrote in her book that American political discussion evolves and diminishes quickly and easily. People tend to avoid expressing their political concerns, so it takes a great deal of work to expand their “close-to-home” interest to broader everyday political speech (Eliasoph, 1997). Ironically, she concludes that the farther people are from the public sphere, the more likely they are to engage in political discussions. The details that she provided comprise many voices and her insights for creating political conversations that help to produce a broad, public-minded talk. Her ethnographic work was based on suburban activists that sounds similar to my case study of the Bersih movement, which is more urban-oriented.

The language of individualism used in the collective representation encourages groups to speak out reasonably as sincere individuals (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003, p. 756). This culture of interaction also applies to the Bersih community where participants respect each other as citizens by giving each other space and not pressuring others into engagements. The individuals are expressive and treat electoral issues reasonably, deliberatively, and they emphasise facts over feelings. This forms a foundation for my thesis argument that social media allows people to keep a distance from the public sphere, but actively engage in political conversations within their private and personal space. I

call this new engagement setting a private–public sphere in Chapter 6. The next section explores the arena that everyday conversations take place to provide a context for the communication of individuals.

2.8 PERSONALISED CONVERSATIONS IN THE EVERYDAY PUBLIC SPHERE

Generally, political communication scholars seem to emphasise discussing politics in a deliberate and rational manner. However, for many individuals, they prioritise more on their personal social life than their civic life. In fact, their everyday political talk is more significant because self-interest can be reconceptualised to make possible civility and common political action (Barber, 1984). These two types of communication are the essential processes of deliberative democracy. Schudson (1997) argues that talking about politics is more important for democracy than sociable conversation. However, with the emergence of social media, political conversations have become more personalised and sociable. In this study, I conceptualise everyday political conversations as small interpersonal group interactions that are linked to politics, which happens outside of formal deliberation settings. These conversations are personalised in the social media setting, which allows citizens to construct their personal conversations in the public sphere.

The concept of “public” comes from democratic ideals that perceive citizens participating in public affairs. Some academic discussions about public opinion have arisen since German sociologist and philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, who identified citizens expressing public opinion as part of their social life and perform this in a rational public discourse. Habermas (1989) conceptualises the public sphere as the realm of our social life in which public opinion is formed, based on the belief that access is guaranteed to all citizens. It is a space of institutions and practices between private and public interests. His concept has become central in media studies when the media plays a significant role in facilitating democracy by providing people with equal access to information and opportunities to participate in political debate. Habermas (1989) outlines three forums for public space, from everyday communication between citizens which takes place on the streets (or anywhere), to public events including meetings or protest rallies, to mass media that has a significant impact on society because it reaches a large audience. The public

sphere acts as a realm separate to the state and the economy. These everyday conversations that take place in the Habermasian public sphere and are mediated by mass media have gathered people together to critically debate on public issues.

In Habermas's earlier position, he argued that mass media does not have room for alternative democratic media strategies. The media and public spheres are merely "sites of discussions" that function outside of the actual political-institutional system (Mohd Sani, 2009, p. 139). Later, Habermas (1989) explains that the commercialisation of mass media and the penetration of public relations strategies have caused mass media fails to provide a space for the public sphere. The pursuit of media corporations has led to the commodification of news, and these powerful organisations have "institutionally exerted their influence on the public sphere". Mohd Sani (2009, p. 142) mentions that even though "Habermas did not experience how individuals use the media to organise oppositional groups and thus expand the field of democratic politics, he has introduced the idea of communicative action". Mohd Sani argues that this concept has brought the idea of defeudalisation that involves people coming together in discussion when the society is not meeting their needs and the media ignores public interests. Putting this concept into the Malaysian context, the Internet has challenged the authoritarian regime and the controlled mainstream media by providing people with new ways to express and deliberate critical views. For instance, "the impact of the Internet is apparent when the opposition managed to take over five states and denied BN coalition's two-third majority in the 2008 general elections" (Mohd Sani, 2009, p. 145).

However, Habermas later revised his definition for public sphere to include the involvement of civil groups in influencing the mass media and establishing discursively-connected alternative public spheres (Calhoun, 1992). Thus, Habermas (1991) recognises a public sphere that is alternative, pluralistic and internally much differentiated to a mass public as well as their capacity for challenging domination. Habermas (1996) then pursues his thinking about whether autonomous public spheres are able to shift conflicts from the periphery to the centre of individuals' public life via the mass media to generate critical debate among a wider public. In other words, the possibility of the emergence of political public spheres rests on the ability of autonomous public spheres to create alliances and organise solidarity through networks. His concern is that when contacts and exchanges

between social networks becoming more pluralised, this may not necessarily expand the intersubjectively shared world. Rather, it causes a greater fragmentation in the civil society. Similarly, these shared networks may offer a sense of solidarity at the click of mouse but not the actual critical solidarity (Downey & Fenton, 2003). Habermas's concept of the idealised public sphere and political deliberation offers a perspective for my thesis in studying how social movement participants are empowered by the use of media. Along this line, my discussion about how the Bersih movement uses the Internet to build new forms of social solidarity, or possibly fragmentation, will be laid out in Chapter 7.

When citizens converse on a daily basis in the public sphere, they need to maintain a personal and collective identity as part of their complex relationships with others. They have to go through a process of struggle to gain social recognition. Their personal and collective identities are expressed and integrated within an arena of political and social relations called the public sphere (Gimmler, 2001). Scholars like Ikegami (2000) and Putnam (2000) argue that these personal interactions are important forms of shared public life (Breese, 2011, p. 137). It is possible for small groups of individuals to become political because they can mobilise one another to define problems collectively and react to common issues (Fine & Harrington, 2004). However, critical theorists like Habermas (1994), Arendt (1958, 1998) and Fraser (1992) do not include personal hang-out places as part of the rational and formal public sphere because they believe these do not contribute to changing state policy and power. However, they agree that the public sphere is "open to popular participation regardless of social status or identity" (Breese, 2011, p. 137) and forms the basis of rational public deliberation despite looking trivial (Habermas, 1989).

The development of digital media has further blurred the line between formal and personal in the public sphere. Individuals can use social media to enhance their bonding with other members of an organisation or group (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), initiate conversations and interact with others, and build collective identities based on mutual interests, common beliefs and ideas (Kelly, 2006; Yang and Wu, 2018). Generally, citizens who agree upon a general shared grievance are eventually motivated to protest collectively in a public sphere where both their personal and collective identities are

integrated. The next section further explores how the public sphere is extended or altered to facilitate participatory democracy when social media converges our public and private boundaries and provide us more civic spaces to interact.

2.9 NETWORKED SELF IN THE PRIVATE SPHERE

Habermas's (1962, 1989) ideal public sphere argues that the existence of a reasoning public allows public opinion to survive and distinguishes from mere opinions about public affairs. Unfortunately, commercialised mass media took over the public sphere and compromised rational and democratic public discourse (Habermas, 2004). My thesis argues that Habermas's public sphere model may have overestimated the civic engagement in societies and overemphasised the rational accord for a democratic public sphere. Therefore, I use Papacharissi's (2010, p. 127) private sphere model to complement it by arguing that the new media reorganises our daily routines and affords us spaces that accommodate new kinds of publicity and privacy. It is in the private sphere that individuals can become true and authentic selves (Heidegger, 1962). Individuals can freely express themselves in the private space, not merely giving rational interpretations as they do in public. This reorganisation of an individual's expression is affected by the mass media, which eventually forms the private sphere.

In late modern democracies, public and private boundaries are constantly blurred, resulting in the privatisation of the public sphere and politicisation of the private sphere (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 126). Networked individuals use the time and space that they occupy to follow private pursuits and connect to their offline and online social networks mediated by social media platforms. These platforms provide a stage for individuals' self presentation and social connection. These web-based services allow individuals to: (a) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (b) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (c) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd and Ellison, 2007, p. 211). This networked private sphere enabled by technology affords individuals autonomy, control, and expressive capabilities through a new space and sociability (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 167). Individuals are able to conduct civic and social activities in an online networked environment that comprises public and private spaces. My construct for a

networked self in this public and private space is an individual who is situated in a networked environment that remains autonomous and retains the ability to attain self-fulfilment through everyday online presentation. When individuals' public and private boundaries are blurred, it is more likely that people who are less active in politics may start to explore political activities (Johnson et al., 2011), starting from civic involvement online which they find more fulfilling and relevant to their everyday lives. A networked self engages in activities organised in the networked environment, where public and private spheres overlap to meet their needs for information, entertainment, socialising, and politics.

A networked self refers to an individual connecting themselves to others online (Baym, 2010; Papacharissi, 2010). There are two dimensions of the networked self, one is situated in the networked social media (technological) while another one is displayed between individuals (social) through networking. For technological layer, individual's self presentation online is shaped by the features of social media platforms (Merchant, 2006). The self presentation depends on the "staging and mediation of the interaction and its performance depend crucially on the detailed material and technological arrangements in place" (Pinch, 2010, p. 414). For the social layer, individuals appear and perform appropriately according to social situations (Azariah, 2012). On Facebook, this performance includes the content and discourses of posts, uploading visuals such as digital photographs and images, as well as emoticons and hashtags. For the discursive layer, the message and meanings used by individuals in different contexts and discursive forms can produce different interpretations in the text. The idea of the networked self in my thesis is *self* as a Bersih movement participant, either activist, or social volunteer, who is networked across multiple online platforms. They obtain information from news websites and extend their self presentation on social media platforms such as Facebook. However, the different discourses may bring an underlying tension to this content at the discursive layer. The concept of "networked self" is important in my study because it provides an understanding of how individuals use technology and socialise with others. This helps me to map my main conceptual framework, Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model with the multilayer interactions, within the Bersih movement's mobilisation.

Networks are important for social movements because: (a) they are where social movements are originated and built on as foundation, (b) a place where local contention is communicated, expressed, and disseminated widely to a large audience and potential participants, and (c) contemporary social movements are networks of various contentious politics and geographically actions that are associated with each other based on solidarity and collective identity (M. Lim, 2014, p. 54). In these networks, people interact with one another socially, and build a sense of unity, solidarity, and a collective identity. According to Vitak et al. (2011, p. 2), Facebook provides an environment that is likely to encourage people who are not active in politics to explore political activity because they have seen their friends engaged online and participated offline. This can potentially form multiple networks that comprise like-minded people interacting with one another in a networked online space (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Chapter 7 explores how Facebook users build relationships and maintain interaction with other users on the Bersih movement's official Facebook page. It analyses social network use among these networked individuals, how they associate with one another and form a sense of solidarity. These online networks are important to the Bersih movement because they impact individuals' awareness and involvement.

The "friend" social network on social media has also contributed to online solidarity. J. B. Y. Lim (2017) uses the concept of rhizome to explore the impact of social media among young Malaysians. She argues "rhizomatic assemblage explains the multiplicities (spatially) and the heterogeneity of events that occur on a consistency to form a single narrative, a unified purpose and a sense of community" (J. B. Y. Lim, 2017, p. 211). Bersih rally participants had posted updates on its Facebook page and shouted out for help from those at home for citizen monitoring including identifying policemen on the street (p. 219). Facebook was widely used for retrieving and disseminating information, including repost news articles, pictures such as official posters, letters on the use of Dataran Merdeka, memes, and many other items. J. B. Y. Lim had conducted a study on 60 Facebook accounts (2011-2015) and concluded that people were disappointed and dissatisfied with the Malaysian government and their leadership. The consensus was that the society had to unite, strive for their voices to be heard and show solidarity via individual and collective actions (p. 217). Other than Facebook, Bersih rally organisers

and independent online media used Twitter hashtags regularly for the platform's brief yet timely updates. Other than social media use, citizens who felt strong sense of civic responsibility were empowered to support and contribute to political discourse at different commitment levels by organising and forwarding message through their personal and public social media platforms (J. B. Y. Lim, 2017, p. 223). These social networks which collectively formed a Bersih community online and offline through a unified purpose of electoral change have created the strength of numbers dynamics that made the Bersih movement sustainable.

2.10 EFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONS AND PUBLIC

When networked individuals are engaged in online activities, they are not connected by technology but stories. Papacharissi (2015) argues that individuals who develop stories are actually part of the stories because they contribute their emotives through words, photos, and videos on social media platforms. She clarifies that it is the narratives that we construct that constitute the connective issues of social movement rather than technologies. Papacharissi also says that these personal emotions in response to conversations about protests are in fact political statements (p. 62). Rather than debating the role of social media as a space for political effect, Papacharissi's (2015) recent work focuses more on *how* people use these online spaces for political affect, express themselves and participate in the "soft structures of feeling" (p. 116) that make them feel that their personal expression matters at that moment. This perspective is worth consideration in my study of personalised conversations because it explores how people contribute and participate in social media with an affective manner. However, my study does not wish to overemphasise users' feelings about social media technologies or the impact of emotion and affection on individuals' social media use. Rather, it focuses more on the reasons they use social media and how they build connections with others.

The concept of "affective public" is built on the idea of "networked publics" who share opinions, facts, sentiment, drama and performance (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 126). Individuals tend to form networks with people they share conversations with. Their excitement interacts with their passion to facilitate their social media use (Wakefield and Wakefield, 2016, p. 140). They are more likely to be excited about an event if they are

more passionate about it. The act of interacting with technology may evoke emotions such as excitement, happiness or anger, and for those who are anxious about technology, they are less likely to use it (Beaudry and Pinsonneault, 2010). Therefore, the emotion or affect that influences individuals' social media use is not merely technology-derived, but more likely to be stimulated in the users by the environment the social interactions are situated in. With reference to Papacharissi's (2015) affect theory, the personalised design of social media technologies may challenge the traditional social boundaries and transform relationships between individuals, but it is the environment or media context that provides meanings to people's engagement and mobilisation.

2.11 CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided an overview of literature relevant to my thesis, and the theoretical concepts that I will use in my analysis. My thesis focuses on the growing concerns over the role of the Internet, social media in particular, in facilitating social movements, and its democratising nature that surrounds the concept of everyday political life. I am examining a case study of the Bersih movement and how it uses social media to link participants' personalised conversations to their political actions. Each social media platform represents a communicative ecology that organises social interactions in a unique way. By bringing together Habermas's (1996) notion of the public sphere, Papacharissi's (2010, 2018) work on the private sphere and affect, Lichterman's (1996) personalism and Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology, my study of the Bersih movement's media use can be best understood within the context of surrounding human relations. Communicative ecologies are not defined by technology infrastructure, but by the social interactions that support political communications that are constant, lightweight, personal, and mundane in everyday life.

Generally, people are socially clustered within groups—some even belong to multiple overlapping networks. Social media allows them to have more relaxed affiliations and speed up mobilisation in networked societies. Individuals can use new technology to activate their loosely tied social networks and personalise their social interactions. My study argues that by personalising their expressions, people do not compromise their public commitment but temper it with private needs. This growing

individualisation provides people with a personal sense of political responsibility and can make them commit to a collective cause. Individuals are not connected by mere technology but their personal narratives that constitute the connective issues of unfolding social movements. This explains why my study argues personalised conversations are central in the Bersih movement's mobilisation.

Social media creates a pathway for participatory culture to transform into civic engagement through the promotion of radical transparency and diffusion of issues in multiple weak tie networks (M. Lim, 2013). In these private and public spaces, people frame their collective identities and give political consent to make governance and the electoral system legitimate. The use of social media in social movements may not influence the direct outcome of a particular event within a short period of time, but serves as a significant medium in everyday politics that encourages individuals to develop and freely express their views about matters of public concern. People tend to get excited about events that they are passionate about and frame their stories in an affective manner. In fact, people's emotional responses to conversations about protests are their political statements. The Bersih movement's success is due to the ability of people to use personalised conversations through social media to mobilise people within their communicative ecologies.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This study is guided by Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model in an attempt to analyse social media use by the Bersih movement. The main focus is on how personalised conversations through social media are vital to the Bersih movement's mobilisation and communications. The communicative ecology model takes a critical approach in understanding social media use, with an emphasis on the concept that media is an environment, constructed through everyday practice (Altheide, 1995; Tacchi, 2004; Foth & Hearn, 2007; Strate, 2017). It puts social media within the context of personalised human relations to gain a better understanding of the interrelations between media, content, and social interactions. The perspective here is different individuals use social media for different conversations and expressions in different spaces, and thus they are mobilised for different political reasons; these reasons are likely to be derived from the same grievances and eventually contribute to a common good. The Habermasian critical tradition (1989) also emphasises a space in social life, mostly through the mass media, where individuals can come together to freely discuss issues of mutual interest. In line with this, my study also intends to explore how the public and private spheres in an individualised modern society can become intertwined, with a focus on social media to explain why personalised conversations are vital to social mobilisation in Malaysia.

One of the important aspects of the communicative ecology model is that social media is an environment. Therefore, my case study of the Bersih movement using social media to mobilise citizens should not be studied as merely exploring the newness of the technology itself, but should be placed in a richly contextual human relation that surrounds social actors. This study stresses the need to look at "relations" and "everyday practices" that form the relations. It also looks more broadly at whether these personalised conversations are able to expand the public space for mobilisation and political conversations in Malaysia. In addition, I wish to provide a more nuanced understanding of how social media allows social actors to bridge public and private spaces by using their personalised connections to mobilise political support. It explores the experiences of those involved in the movement to understand how personalised conversations are used to

mobilise citizens and why social media is the best mobilising tool that encourages democratic practices in political context.

By referring to the literature outlined in Chapter 2, most of the new media research perceives social media as an avenue for citizens to express themselves and exchange views among like-minded others because of its low cost and interactivity. My study tends to look more deeply into whether social media is able to expand the democratic space for mobilisation and political discussion in Malaysia. It aims to explore further on the existing dominant political discourses in Malaysia, the manner in which the discourses are articulated, and people involves. Moreover, this study does not adopt the binary reductive approach that looks at the Internet phenomena in a dichotomised manner; either social media is able or unable to promote democracy. Rather, it explores the interactions between participants within a social media environment in order to capture their pattern of social media use, and investigate the experience of people who are involved in the discourses to understand how they use social media to communicate content, how social media mobilises them to participate, change their perceptions, how social media might be able to promote a cause effectively, as well as what restricts their civic and democratic practices in certain political and social context. I contend that this information can be captured from individuals' everyday conversations within their communicative ecologies. This demonstrates that personal communications are important to social movements and thus worth examining.

3.2 CASE STUDY: THE BERSIH MOVEMENT

This study used a qualitative approach to understand the meanings of the Bersih movement to participants, the context in which they act, and the processes by which the movement has taken place. Johnston and colleagues argue that research strategies for examining social movements “must permit the complexity of identity to unfold in the data gathering process,” (1994, p. 29) hence a qualitative approach is particularly useful to this study. I used a qualitative method to analyse the Bersih movement's social media use by examining the richly contextual human relations that surround the movement's participants, particularly their everyday social interactions. This provides a more holistic view of individuals' social media use and their communication preferences and

differences. Given the complex and multidimensional nature of social media-enabled social movements, a case study method has been chosen because it allows unexpected findings to emerge (Siggelkow, 2007), and uncovers underlying structures and processes (Gephart, 2004).

There are three criteria that I referred to during my selection of a suitable case study: (a) the social movement is driven by civil members or ordinary citizens, (b) social media has to play an important role in communicating content relating to the movement, and (c) the social movement has to mobilise citizens to precipitate a change. Based on these three criteria, I chose the Bersih movement as my case study. First, Bersih is a non-partisan movement after it was relaunched in April 2010 as a coalition of like-minded civil society organisations unaffiliated to any political party. Second, Bersih and its 92 endorsing NGOs have organised hundreds of collective groups on social media platforms such as Facebook in several cities around the world.⁹ Third, the Bersih movement has mobilised communities through successful self-organised actions, which led to their increased awareness and participation over the five major rallies within a decade. Besides, my interest in how “people power” could make a change prompts me to further investigate this subject matter. Also, I have been living in this country for more than 30 years, experienced the political changes and equipped with multilingual skills under the multiracial environment and education system.

Furthermore, the choice of the Bersih movement as my case study rests on its suitability as a critical case with nationwide and international popularity among Malaysians who reside within the country and overseas. The Bersih movement is considered one of the most significant movements that has gained considerable popularity in Malaysia after successfully organising five mass rallies nationwide and globally between 2007 and 2016. The coalition started as a joint communique in September, 2006, and officially launched two months later in Kuala Lumpur, comprising opposition political party leaders, civil society groups, and NGOs. Since then, it has been very active

⁹ This number is valid until 2018. The Bersih movement has 56 endorsing NGOs by October 2019. The number has reduced over the years as some of the organisations or groups, which were organised on an ad-hoc basis to reform the election system, became inactive after the opposition scored victory in 2018 general elections. www.bersih.org

in online mobilisation, despite being subject to interference on several occasions by government authorities. I am interested in how this movement uses social media to mobilise loosely connected participants to respond collectively to electoral manipulation and attempt to place pressure on the dominant ruling coalition to concede electoral reforms.

To undertake this case study, I collected data mainly using a series of semi-structured interviews with 17 participants including Bersih activists, members of Bersih-endorsed NGOs, and active social volunteers from different states within Malaysia. Among them, three participants were from Sarawak (including one from Kuching and two from Miri), four from Penang, three from Kuala Lumpur, three from Johor, and four from Sabah. This selection was done through a snowball sampling method through referral, based on their position (within the movement) and geography (Peninsula, Sabah, and Sarawak). Although there was a gender imbalance in the samples that I collected in which there were 13 men and only four women, it did not have a significant impact on the thesis findings because my study does not consider gender roles to serve as barriers or enablers to the Bersih movement's decision-making, communication and engagement. My study implementation is tailored more to the participants' diverse geography, access level to technology and their experience with the Bersih movement.

I started my interviews with the Bersih steering committee members and secretariat in July and September 2017, and from there they referred me to other activists and volunteers. The first stage of interviewing was conducted over a roughly three-month period in Malaysia in 2017. There was a delay in the data collection, where I paused and waited for the results of the 14th Malaysian General Elections on May 9, 2018.¹⁰ After the opposition won and formed the PH government in May 2018, I updated my interview questions and interviewed some active movement volunteers and activists on referral basis; one was politically affiliated, while others were active volunteers.

During the interviews, I explored three areas that mapped with my research objectives. They were: (a) how Bersih participants use social media to communicate and frame their narratives about the movement, (b) what motivates Bersih participants to

¹⁰ The Pakatan Harapan (PH) had an unprecedented victory in the 14th Malaysian general election held on Wednesday, 9 May 2018.

engage in personalised conversations, and (c) how participants converse through different social media within the Bersih movement's communicative ecology. A method of focusing closely on the Bersih movement allowed me to develop a detailed understanding of my research topic "Personalised Communicative Ecologies: The role of social media in Bersih movement's mobilisation." More than 20 interview invitations were sent out, but some were rejected, or received no reply. A follow-up was conducted, some replied with answers sent via email while a few chose not to participate due to personal reasons. I understand the limitations of this method, which might produce an inductive argument about electoral reform in Malaysia based on a single case study Bersih movement, but I propose that it actually provides a more holistic and in-depth explanation for my study through a narrow but detailed contextual analysis of a few events, and the relationships between them. Moreover, I realise that the gender imbalance among my interview recipients and the small number of interviews does limit the perspectives of my research, but it allows me to do more in-depth interviews with the interviewees. I supplemented these interviews with other information that I collected from social media, including Facebook, and WhatsApp.

Before I started my primary data collection, I did some background research on the movement by following the Bersih social media news and websites. During my research field trip, I observed the movement activities and performed analysis and contextualisation after that. In the following section, I will explain further my research methods that included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and content analysis of social media. Semi-structured interviews and participant observation helped to provide a deeper understanding and explanation of the role of social media in improving democratic practices in Malaysia, while content analysis was used to track the extent of social media use for electoral reform purposes, with a focus on networked publics. The unit of analysis was individual postings and comments, either on social media platforms or communication applications that are related to the Bersih movement or electoral reform in Malaysia. The context of this study is Bersih activism between 2017 and 2019 in Malaysia, thus helping to situate this research within a particular socio and political context.

3.3 DATA SAMPLING

In the Bersih movement, participants usually distinguish between the roles of activists and volunteers. Bersih activists include members of the Bersih steering committee who work closely and actively in consultation with Bersih-endorsed NGOs and volunteers, as well as staff who work on full-time basis under the Bersih movement's secretariat that is responsible for executing the programmes and activities. People who are not part of the Bersih steering committee and secretariat, but have been actively involved in providing direction for the movement in terms of strategic decisions and mobilisation due to their expertise and social influence, are also labelled as activists in this thesis.

This leadership style is portrayed to the public through various means of communication by the Bersih movement. These activists provide access to different groups, each has their own friends and followers, and they are able to expand the Bersih network to broader cross-ethnic communities (Selvanathan et al., 2020). The activists form social networks, both formal, and informal, within the Bersih movement as well as the broader electoral reform movement in Malaysia. As for Bersih volunteers, these are the people who belong to Bersih-endorsed NGOs and active volunteers who regularly engage in various forms of communication with other supporters, but do not commit themselves in the movement's leadership and strategic planning. Movement volunteers usually interact among themselves on the Bersih movement's social media platforms such as Facebook by asking questions, or writing comments in response to interesting postings by the administrator. They also share information about their personal experiences with Bersih rallies, or share news relating to the movement. The social networks of volunteers are mostly informal compared to the activists, and limited to people that they know personally or met through Bersih activities (such as rallies, workshops, or voter registration activities) and online. The Bersih movement is a networked community that allows participants to communicate and express themselves on multiple issues. Everyone can select the cause that they want to support and participate, determine the reason for interaction on Facebook and form social networks among themselves. This flexibility has made the Bersih movement popular, and hence draws my attention to examine the reasons that contribute to its popularity in the Malaysian public sphere.

3.4 RESEARCH METHODS

This study combines traditional political science methods and tools, including interviews, participant observation, and content analysis. It employs several methods including: (a) *semi-structured interviews* with Bersih steering committee members, activists and volunteers to determine how and to what extent they use social media to mobilise and inform a course of action (b) *participant observation* is used to gather information and data that involves interactions, and conversations between activists and volunteers in events and social media groups within the context of movement, and (c) *content analysis* to understand the social conditions and processes involved in the construction of online communication through themes, patterns, and meanings. The following sections will outline and explain the methods used to conduct this research and describe the design of the study, the data used, research instruments, data collection methods, and techniques used to analyse the data.

3.4.1 Semi-structured Interviews

There are four types of semi-structured interviews that are used extensively in social movement research—oral histories, life histories, key informant interviews, and focus group interviews (Klandermans & Staggenborg, 2002). My study adopted key informant interviews because these yield detailed and contextual information from interviewees' personal experiences of the movement. I chose people who have knowledge of the Bersih movement's operations and are active participants. They are people who can provide information on movement's mobilising tactics or strategies, membership composition, and future plans and goals. This method allowed me to access a broader segment of Bersih movement participants than those represented in documents and recommendations produced by movement leaders. During interviews, the same question may not be interpreted the same way by different interviewees, so a conversational interview is more suitable to uncover meanings and experiences or subjective responses by people about a particular situation that they have experienced (Suchman & Jordan, 1997; Merton & Kendall, 1946; Morse & Field, 1995; Blee & Taylor, 2002; Richards & Morse, 2007). Compared to structured interviews which appear more rigid, semi-structured interviews are more flexible in response categories and in a standardised and straightforward format

(Denzin & Lincoln, 1998), and allow movement activists and volunteers to answer more on their own terms. This method was suited to my analysis as it emphasised the personalised conversations of movement participants because of its flexibility, allowing interviewees to talk freely about their experiences and interpretation of issues.

My semi-structured interviews, which took a duration of 60 minutes each at minimum, comprised three sections, starting with some basic information of interviewees, including their background, political awareness, their involvement with the Bersih movement in general, social networking activities during the Bersih rallies, and their relationship with their members. By referring to the three layers of Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model, which are technological, discursive, and social, I designed interview questions that cover participants' media use, their narrative framings, and the way they interact with one another within the Bersih movement's communicative ecologies.

The first section of the interview contained closed-ended questions related to the background of the activists, such as social or political affiliations, their involvement in activism and political organisations, and motivations for being actively involved in political conversations and activities at a personal level. The other two parts of the interview were semi-structured with open-ended questions, which required the activists to share their views about their social/political and movement activities, as well as their use of social media. These questions were used to obtain perspectives on interviewee social networking activities in general and specifically during the Bersih rallies.

A semi-structured approach acknowledges that interviews are conversational, not mechanistic and rigid (Hermanowicz, 2002, 482–483) and this flexibility accommodates different circumstances of each interview (Lodge, 2013, 187). Instead of rigidly following the question list, I kept the interview flexible by asking follow-up questions that derived from the answers given by interviewees. This helped to make the interviewees more comfortable and open up in sharing their views. The last part of the interviews attempted to explore the relationships of activists with their members and other activists. Some questions about their interactions with other members online, such as Facebook, and WhatsApp groups were asked. This was used to examine the dynamics between the activists and their supporters and between activists and other activists, including turning

their online conversations into offline political actions or vice versa, and when offline tensions spilled over to their online activity. This interview design helped me to analyse the Bersih movement's communications through Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model, with a focus on social media, demonstrating that personalised conversations are vital to the mobilisation of the Bersih social movement in Malaysia.

My interviews were not restricted to face-to-face; I also conducted online interviews using Skype with interviewees who were not available to meet in person. Skype was chosen because it mimics face-to-face interactions. Hammond and Wellington (2012) argue that it is not necessarily to have face-to-face encounters; they see online interviews as a valid way to approach interviewees who lives in different locations and time zones, and to allow them sufficient time for personal reflections.

Generally, my Skype interviews started with an overview and simple icebreaker, interviewees were asked about their awareness of socio-politics in Malaysia, their daily political conversations with friends and families, and initial involvement with the Bersih movement. Later on, they were asked to share their definition for democracy, and whether they believed activism or the Bersih movement had an impact on this. My questions then continued with their use of social media in movement activities. I had prepared the interview questions beforehand, but always ready to amend my line of inquiry when they provided answers/replies that were unexpected and interesting. With this semi-structured format, I could freely lead the discussion to areas that seemed relevant as the interviews progressed, following the topics that my interviewees elaborated on, instead of pending in areas that they did not have much to elaborate. The flexibility of my interview question list enabled me to understand the complexity of the subject matter and behaviour of the online communities without having my pre-assumed values imposed on them. Additional questions for the Bersih activists included their leadership approaches, namely during the five rallies, and communication strategies in discussing movement matters and issues related to electoral reform. I usually ended my Skype interviews by asking interviewees whether they had anything that they wished to add on to the interview and if they had inquiries about my PhD thesis. These conversations were recorded with their prior consent on a personal recording device. For interviewees who cancelled the face-to-face interview appointments due to some unforeseen circumstances, I always requested for a reschedule

to another date or alternatively replaced by Skype interview. However, for those who were not able to secure another date due to their busy schedule, most of them agreed to give me a written reply through email.

3.4.1.1 Sampling Selection Stage

I used the snowball sampling method in this research to select suitable candidates and obtain their consent for interviews. Bertrand and Hughes (2005) explain that this research method is a non-probability sampling technique which does not aim to be representative of the population. This method leads the researcher from one interviewee to another through referral. I found this snowball sampling method useful for my thesis because most of the Bersih activists participate in the movement on voluntary basis and their organisations' official websites or social media platforms do not contain their personal details. As a starting point, I used the contacts that I had established in the past 10 years as a social volunteer and journalist in the English press. Thus, I was able to get in touch with people who were active in electoral reform activities who then referred me to other Bersih movement activists and social volunteers. I also had the opportunity to attend some of their polling and counting agent (PACA) training,¹¹ voter education and registration activities, and to visit the Bersih secretariat office in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Sabah to conduct some interviews between July and September, 2017. At the meetings, I managed to establish contact with some of the secretariat members and movement activists who had participated in the Bersih rallies in Kuala Lumpur. From there, I managed to locate other activists who were actively participating in Bersih rallies in other regions such as Sabah and Sarawak, to take part in this study. These initial meetings helped me a lot in obtaining contacts of people from all walks of life, including student activists who supported the Bersih movement. Thus, the snowball sampling method proved to be useful in obtaining and establishing contacts with interviewees.

As well as this, I also used emails and online messaging applications to approach potential interviewees. I sent out electronic emails to some Bersih activists and active volunteers, seeking their agreement to take part in this research. Some of them agreed to

¹¹ Polling and counting agent is an individual appointed by the candidate standing for election, to oversee polling at the election count.

meet up face-to-face or chat through online Skype, while others were not keen to be interviewed for various reasons. Some activists who had left the movement for personal reasons did not wish to comment on the movement, citing a fear of misunderstanding between activists for their comments that are not in line with the current Bersih movement demands. A few, who had participated in the rallies as non-government individuals, did not want to reveal their true identities to anyone, including me. Usually, before I sent out the formal emails, I would text or call up the identified interviewees either through online messaging, such as WhatsApp, and Facebook messenger, to introduce myself, and explain briefly on my research intention. If they were keen to accept the interview, I would send them a formal email attached with some documents relevant to my research, including a participant information sheet and a sample interview question. A few politely declined to participate in the research even at the preliminary stage. Among those who rejected my interview, one cited that she had decided to quit activism and move on in her life, expressing disappointment with the results of the 5 May, 2013 Malaysian general elections when Barisan Nasional, led by the then Prime Minister Najib Razak, won a second term against opposition despite less popular votes. Another activist who agreed to accept my Skype interview did not appear online at the promised time after he accepted my interview and failed to respond when I follow up with him. Others declined for personal reasons such as family or work responsibilities. Emails and online messaging applications have been helpful in managing my follow-ups and rescheduling interviews especially for those who could not make it for face-to-face interviews.

3.4.1.2 Interview Stage

During interviews, I realised that seeking the agreement of activists who have political affiliations or a non-government background is much easier than people who were once active in the movement, as the latter would want to remain anonymous for the interviews. Some of them did not want to be identified for fear of the restrictive laws in Malaysia, such as the law of defamation and Internal Security Act. Some were afraid of backlash from the authorities at their workplace for their anti-establishment comments. For example, the word “Bersih” seemed too radical for some participants and they were afraid of being labelled as anti-government. Having these risks assessed, I kept in mind that the

order of my interview questions, the level of language, and the research space had to be confirmed to the interviewees so as to create a natural atmosphere for easy dialogue (Blee & Taylor, 2002, p. 101). I realised that there were some fears and doubts among the participants that I needed to eliminate before my interview. To overcome those fears, I chose to email them using my official Curtin University email account, using my full name, student identification, details on the supervisory team and Malaysian phone number. In addition, I would name my referral, either an activist, or a mutual friend from the electoral reform activism circle that they were familiar with. This indeed helped to put the interviewees at ease.

At the face-to-face interviews, I introduced myself to the interviewees and shared my previous experience as a social volunteer with them. This helped to prove my identity as a researcher was genuine and eliminated unnecessary fear among interviewees that I might be working undercover for Special Branch police.¹² It was quite common for activists or social volunteers to be sceptical and suspicious because of their past experiences involved with police brutality and authoritarian governance. A researcher has the liberty to probe to obtain additional details when necessary and our ultimate goal was to unearth detailed information based on the understanding and interpretation of participants to describe the actions and activities of participants as they related to the research problem (Klandermans & Staggenborg, 2002). For instance, there was an incident in which an activist who accepted my interview was reluctant to directly answer my questions during the interview. She avoided answering my questions, and always kept a far distance from the audio recorder. Rather, she diverted my question to something else and asked for my views. Another one requested to take my picture during the interview and posted on their Facebook page as evidence that I had conducted an interview for my PhD study. Some others would tactfully classify the information they revealed as personal opinion that is not affiliated with any political party and did not represent the Bersih movement. Most of the Bersih activists were quite open in sharing their activism experiences with me during interviews, some told me that they hoped to remain

¹² Special Branch is an intelligence agency under the Royal Malaysia Police. Their responsibilities include acquiring and developing intelligence on potential threats to the national security of the country, either internal or external. The threats range from extremism, sabotage, spying and many more.

anonymous because of the sensitivity of the information that they revealed. Some provided insightful information about how they were using the social networking site Facebook and mobile messaging platform WhatsApp and Telegram to mobilise supporters to join the Bersih movement. The perspectives on social media usage and how effective it is to link participants' everyday political conversations to their political actions were not uniform across the movement and their members. It was interesting to use semi-structured interviews to allow the interviewees to express their views. Their views suggest an insightful dimension to my study on social media which will be discussed in detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

As stated in Section 3.2, I completed 17 successful interviews with Bersih movement activists and volunteers, including Bersih secretariat committee members, Bersih-endorsed NGO members and non-government individuals (NGIs). The interviews were conducted after I obtained approval for ethics clearance from the university's ethics research committee. All activists and volunteers who took part in an interview were informed of the risks of participating in the interview, and they signed a participant consent document to acknowledge that they knew the risk and had agreed to voluntarily participated in the research. I went through the purpose of my research and its scope with them before I started my interview recording. I was cautious and took extra precautions to protect the identity of my research participants by using codes during the recording. For some activists who were uncomfortable with recording and fearful that certain information to be revealed, I took the conservative step of turning off the recorder and avoided naming them at all when I used this information for analysis. During the audio recording, I would not name my interviewees, but saved the file based on the interview date and location, followed by a serial number. This data management helped me to identify my sources, but kept them anonymous from people who were not from my research team, other than my PhD supervisory team members. After my data collection, the political environment in Malaysia improved when the opposition, PH coalition took over the government after winning the 2018 elections (Naidu, 2018). Since then, people seemed more open to discussing electoral reform and the Bersih movement on online forums and mass media.

3.4.1.3 Limitations in Sampling

Given my sampling method, I realised that there were limitations in my study due to selection bias. Most of my data were collected from interviewees who speak English (mostly bilingual in English and Malay, or English and Mandarin), more prominent, and more accessible Bersih members who either held positions in the Bersih steering committee, were actively involved in NGOs, or politically affiliated. In other words, most of the data were taken from urban middle-class, educated leaders' perspectives. The reason I chose English as the main medium was because the Bersih movement has regularly used it in their communications to ensure that their demands are accessible not only to a large community of Malaysians but also the international community (J. B. Y. Lim, 2017, p. 221).

I needed a different approach to engage people in rural areas who were more concerned about their local community issues than electoral reform, which they saw as a national issue. Based on my field trip observations, rural residents seemed to speak about electoral issues and the Bersih movement differently to the urban elites. Their main concerns were about the necessities of life, such as whether the government could provide them with land for agriculture, education for children, funding for village infrastructure, and public transportation to towns or cities. They were not very far sighted nor knowledgeable about the electoral system in Malaysia. However, some of them appeared vocal and critical of the poor governance and money politics during elections. Many of them seemed to believe that a change was necessary to improve their current living standards. For the urban elites who had lived years in the cities, they had learned the skills and techniques to make use of social media and public spaces in a civil and creative way, but those who remained in the “kampung” (“village”) and the traditional long houses tended to approach the issues through word of mouth and probably mobile texting, which they found convenient. Sometimes, Bersih activists would utilise alternative methods of communication such as flyers and holding traditional public speeches in mosques or community centres. They also organised a “Balik Kampung Bawa Berita” (“Bring News Back to Your Hometown”) project to encourage Malaysians to bring back online-based information in the form of printed hard copies or downloaded soft copies stored in portable disc to their families and friends in rural areas (M. Lim, 2016). The intermodality

of social media, mobile texts, flyers, discs, and physical bodies had elevated the movement's ability in diffusing its messages and expanding its network activism. In addition, the social control by the then ruling government through the village heads sometimes made the people feel alienated in their own public spaces, as they did not know how to claim authority over it and did not dare to make experiments with it. Rather, they related to the broad issues by assessing how the overall political landscape in Malaysia could benefit or affect their everyday lives, source of income, children's education, and other community needs.

Another limitation is the possible bias of these sources. My research focuses more on the people's views, mostly NGOs, or civil society, rather than bureaucrats or state officials because the Bersih movement derives from the grassroot level and aims to mobilise ordinary citizens to fight for clean and fair elections. I aimed to analyse the everyday conversations among participants within the Bersih's communicative ecologies, thus my interviews targeted ordinary citizens, their social media use, and everyday practices. There are some interviewees who, at the time of the interview, held official positions in the state; they were chosen because of their previous experience with the Bersih movement as activists, and thus they were required to speak from that perspective. Among the people that I identified for my interviews, a few declined to take part in this research even at the preliminary stage because of some personal commitments and reasons. This introduces a potential bias to my research as participants who used to be active in the Bersih movement, but ended up disillusioned with the movement or the current socio-political situation of Malaysia did not want to talk about it. Hence, my study may not be able to capture a strong alternative voice about the Bersih movement that could challenge the existing dominant discourse which positively sees the Bersih movement as impactful on society and that it has effectively mobilised crowds using social media. To compensate for this, I tried to interview people who held different roles in the Bersih movement, not just leaders but also followers, ranging from the Bersih steering committee, movement secretariat staff, members of endorsing NGOs, student activists, and regular volunteers.

Furthermore, I attempted to interview members who spoke Malay or Chinese, with a mixture of some local dialects that I could understand, by travelling to different regions

(including Sabah and Sarawak) and speaking with residents. Born in a multiracial country like Malaysia, I am equipped with multilingual skills and this makes communication easier. However, different regions have their own slang and local dialects and I realised I might not be able to truly capture the meaning so I would always cross check with the interviewees during my interviews. Sometimes I requested the movement member who referred the interviewee to be my translator for some content because they were familiar with the movement culture and the interviewees' values and beliefs, and thus could interpret the meanings and context more precisely and clearly. In this case, my multilingual capacity (speaking fluent English, Malay and Chinese) allowed me to perform the interviews myself most of the time. Furthermore, my experience as a citizen who has lived in Malaysia since I was young, studied here, and voted in several general elections, gave me an upper hand entering this field. Throughout this fieldwork, I constantly reflected on my assumptions and expectations as Malaysian while playing the role as a researcher. I always assumed that Malaysians could have a better future by supporting clean and fair elections. However, my assumptions were challenged after I talked to people from different social backgrounds. Different people had different ways of defining change and communicating their political concerns. I learned that it takes multiple approaches for a movement to engage and mobilise diverse individuals. Therefore, the Bersih movement has to pay attention to people's everyday conversations, and understand the way they frame their local narratives to mobilise them to fight for a national cause, which is clean and fair elections.

3.4.1.4 Interference by Authorities

It is important for me to include details about interference by authorities in this chapter so that we can understand the challenges that my interviewees constantly face that press them to expand their communicative ecologies within the public space to get more freedom. This section provides a context which helps us to understand that interference by the state could trigger Bersih participants to resolve their problems by communicating with each other through social media and escalating their grievances to public street protests. This demonstrates that conversations and social interactions within the Bersih movement's communicative ecologies are central in mobilising citizens to support electoral reform.

In Malaysia, movement activists have learned to deal with government propaganda and police surveillance. The authorities have continued practices of collecting information or intelligence about candidates whom they perceive as having the potentials to risk the security and stability of the country since Malaysia gained independence in 1957. Government control extends beyond the media industry; individuals are also monitored in a strict manner under the *Internal Security Act 1960*, a colonial-era law that authorised a minister to grant an indefinite detention without trial against any individuals that they deem as acting in manners that risk the security of the country. ISA was later replaced with the *Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012*, also known as SOSMA,¹³ to fight security and extremist threats. For example, the former chair of the Bersih movement, Maria Chin Abdullah, and Bersih activist Mandeep Singh were arrested and detained on 18 November 2016, after their office in Petaling Jaya was raided by the police (The Straits Times, 2016). The latter was released on bail two days later while Maria Chin stayed in custody for 10 days. The arrest was seen as state interference to stop Bersih rally 5 (19 November, 2016)¹⁴ which was organised to demand former Prime Minister Najib Razak to step down over his alleged involvement in the 1MDB scandal.¹⁵ The office raid and police arrests were made known publicly when other Bersih secretariat staff tweeted that the police and the Companies Commission officials had seized 10 computers, two mobile phones, and documents relating to their bank account and the payroll from the Bersih office in Petaling Jaya. Despite the raid, the Bersih steering committee assured the people that the rally would go ahead as planned, with no turning back (Borneo Post, 2016). On the rally day, about 14 Bersih supporters and some anti-Bersih people, known as the Red Shirts Group,¹⁶ were arrested by the police,

¹³ Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 is a controversial law that provides measures related to security offences for the aim of maintaining public order and security. This Act is to replace the Internal Security Act (1960). Under SOSMA, whoever is caught can be detained for 28 days without trial.

¹⁴ Bersih rally 5 is a protest organised by Bersih on 19 November 2016. It recognises the political crisis of the 1MDB scandal as a failure of Malaysian democratic system and institutions.

¹⁵ 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) is a strategic development company owned by the Minister of Finance in Malaysia. The company has been involved in a huge scandal when the former Prime Minister Najib Razak was accused of channeling over RM2.67bil from the company to his personal bank account.

¹⁶ The Red Shirts group is formed to oppose the activities of the Bersih movement, especially its criticism of the BN government. Many of its members are from the UMNO party.

reportedly to prevent rioting and breach of peace in regard to the Bersih 5 rally. The police arrests and penalties by the authorities had drawn great attention to the electoral system and human rights conditions in Malaysia, increasing citizen's political apathy towards the victims. These political challenges spurred me on to investigate how Malaysians talk about their political grievances and the way the Bersih movement mobilises them by influencing their communicative ecologies.

An understanding of people's protest in the country and the place of citizen's voices in Malaysian political discourse and narrative helps shed light on the protestors' motivations and reasons why the government sees these pro-democracy and human rights defenders as a threat and take actions against them. Over time, the Malaysian government seems gradually reliant on repression and suppression to maintain power as evident by the many public demonstrations, especially Bersih rallies, which were met with harsh repression using physical force by armed forces and the reinforcement of legal constraints. In the Bersih 2.0 and 3.0 rallies, participation was partly driven by "voters' anger about government-imposed restrictions on freedom of assembly and the police's hard-handed crackdown on protesters" (Chan, 2018, p. 112). The government also used media and security laws to arrest activists and ordinary citizens who dissented (Johns & Cheong, 2019). When the physical space for pro-democracy became narrowed, activists started to shift their mobilisation online using social media. Apparently, citizens were not all contented with the given political space and demanded more political participation. My interview findings reveal many participants seemed not to be easily swayed by the dominant voice in the mainstream media; they actively sought information from various sources, social media in particular, and formed opinions of their own. Some opted for mass protest while others preferred online spaces that were deemed more free and safer. Many firmly believed in social stability and economic growth, and therefore rejected any drastic political action that may have put Malaysian's future in jeopardy. Rather, they claimed their agenda, and made their own voices heard through the personalised public space online. This section provides a context that helps us understand the role of the state in the Bersih movement and how their interferences pushed Bersih participants to demand a broader public sphere.

Similar to the interferences faced by activists, but on smaller scale, my own university's ethical clearance committee also imposed some rules on my research application. When I first submitted an ethical clearance application for my PhD study, I was told that my research subject matter might pose threats to myself and my research team. Hence, I was required to document a risk assessment report and suggest precautionary steps to prevent unwanted interference by the Malaysian authorities. The university wished to avoid any incident happening outside of Australia that might cause unfavourable consequences on the people that I interviewed or put my sources of information at risk. Therefore, I needed to explicitly state the potential consequences to those accepting my interview in the email that I sent out. A disclaimer statement that included "Please think carefully before talking to me about any illegal activity you may have been a part of as this may have serious consequences for you." My interviewees were also required to sign a consent form to authorise the information they provided during the interview to be used in my research.

3.4.2 Participant Observation

Participant observation teaches us the everyday meanings of social activism. It is a method of data collection in which the researcher is not simply a passive observer, but also a participant in the case study (Yin, 1989). We learn about activists' experiences—the way they practise democratic citizenship in their groups, build group ties, and define the meaning of activism itself. Alongside conducting formal interviews, I attended workshops, talked to people, participated and contributed in social media groups and forums. I also had the opportunity to attend some of the Bersih movement's activities, including polling and counting agent (PACA) training, voter education and registration activities. The two-day PACA training was conducted by one of the Bersih endorsed group called Tindak Malaysia to recruit Malaysians for polling and counting for the Malaysian general elections (www.tindakmalaysia.org). The group started during the 13th General Elections (5 May 2013), with the aim of nurturing Malaysians to join forces in reforming the electoral system. The training was conducted mainly in the Malay and English languages, educating Malaysians about the responsibilities of the Election Commission, the rights of

voters, electoral mapping, constituency boundary delimitation,¹⁷ malapportionment,¹⁸ and gerrymandering.¹⁹ It also has its own online forum on Facebook under Chinese Tindak Malaysia, Malaysians4Change, and Projek Beres.

The participant observation method allowed me to provide a rich context and background history for my research, having experienced or been aware of many of the events that took place during the period of the study. Through the training and workshops, I learned more about the issues that the Bersih movement was working on and was able to meet people who were part of the movement's communicative ecologies. This helped me to identify potential interviewees whom I could not reach out to through my personal networks.

Another advantage of using participant observation was that I was able to gather information and data that was usually unavailable or difficult to obtain, including contacts or relationships with key informants, direct observation of interactions, discussions, debates, direct participation in events, meetings, and other interpersonal relationships. Jorgensen (1989, p. 56) explains there is always a tension between being a complete participant and complete observer in the method of participant observation. Increased participation reduces the potential for inaccurate observation because it allows researchers to gain direct access to what respondents think, do, and feel from multiple perspectives through subjective involvement. Unstructured participant observation—such as spending time around the Bersih activists and volunteers when they were organising activities or meeting up with other participants at personal level—either at their activity centre, secretariat office, or personal workplace, taking notes, and occasionally asking questions—was useful in understanding the cultural behaviour, context, environmental influences and social interactions (Mulhall 2003, pp. 306–307). As a participant-observer, my observation with the movement members was considered short but meaningful, being present at their regular hang-out locations, including a coffee house and action centre,

¹⁷ Boundary delimitation is the drawing of boundaries between states, precincts etc by the Election Commission. In the context of elections, it is a practice of redistribution and is used to prevent unbalance of population across districts. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boundary_delimitation

¹⁸ Malapportionment happens when electoral districts created have divergent ratios of voters to representatives. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appportionment_\(politics\)#Malapportionment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appportionment_(politics)#Malapportionment)

¹⁹ Gerrymandering is a term used to describe unbalanced delimitation that tends to favour one party or class.

helped me to understand how they conduct activities, recruit members, stay safe from the interference of uninvited third parties such as the Special Branch police. For instance, I spent an afternoon in their office getting to know their working environment and colleagues, and attended their film-screening²⁰ session at night, talking about human rights films. These interactions helped me to build rapport with my interviewees and people in their personal social networks who in return provided me different perspectives about the Bersih movement. I was surprised to see the activists and their volunteers not only devoting time to mulling over current events and exchanging news stories in civil tones, but holding evening café events with speak-out sessions, and workshops on local politics. They expressed themselves in personalised ways and contributed to the greater group well. Public commitment was personally fulfilling to them. Indeed, my observations gave me access directly to how members organise and communicate from multiple perspectives, something that is more difficult when viewed from a more distant, outsider perspective. These informal interactions and observations allowed me to engage my potential interviewees in a more casual and relaxed environment which encouraged them to talk more freely, instead of getting too excited by exaggerating the facts to impress the researcher. My interviewees seemed more relaxed and opened up to me when they were not placed in a formal interview setting, but rather as part of the activities they organised and surrounded by people they were familiar with.

3.4.2.1 Meeting People and Taking Field Notes

According to Tacchi et al. (2003), participant observation is the central research method of ethnography that explores what people *actually* do, as well as what they *say* they do (as in interviewing or documentation). Any conversation or encounter can be a source of insight to develop a researcher's understanding, hence I took note of every detail that I observe in my field notes. For instance, I had a casual chat with people that I met during activities at the Bersih secretariat office and listened to participants who attended the same

²⁰ Peddling Hope: Private Screening of film titled "The Borneo Case" cum democracy dialogue organised by Rise of Sarawak Efforts in Kuching on 7th July, 2017, voter education workshops organised by Tindak Malaysia and conversations with Bersih regional representatives and their friends including activist and researcher Dr Wong Chin Huat during my research fieldworks in Sibul, Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru and Sabah in June, July and September, 2017.

event about what they thought of the movement and what they were doing. I even had some conversations with Grab taxis during my field trip and with my family and close friends, listening to their views about political conditions in Malaysia and their perception of the Bersih movement.

Taking field notes was another very important method that I used in my study. It helped me to record all the important points that I observed, talked about, and thought about in detail. My field notes constituted a log of the main activities during my three-month research field trip in Peninsula, Sabah, and Sarawak. Even though I recorded my interviews, I also kept a full record of most of what was said in the interviews in my notebook by writing down the most obvious points or my interpretations of what I heard on the spot. All these helped me in building an analysis out of the data collected, especially in formulating themes. Themes such as democracy, mobilisation, power, and personalised conversations were identified. By analysing these themes, through my study I wish to advance social media research by treating social media not just as a communication medium, but also as a communicative ecology that surrounds human relations. I argue that the social interactions that take place online may have considerable offline consequences for users, and their offline contexts also influence how they use social media. In other words, Bersih participants' personalised political conversations had an impact on their communicative ecologies and were thus central in the Bersih movement's mobilisation.

3.4.3 Content Analysis

Content analysis is a sociological research method based on the examination and interpretation of human communication in various forms to recognise the patterns, themes, biases and meanings (Berg, 2009). This method sorts and summarises the informational content of the data, by item, and common characteristics within the data. My analysis used a qualitative content analysis approach because my data required some degree of interpretation. I applied this method to my data such as interview transcripts, social media posts, and press statements, by referring them as "text". Qualitative content analysis is flexible and requires researchers to focus their analysis on selected aspects of the collected materials, as indicated by their research question, especially those exploring personal or social meanings (Schreier, 2012, p. 8). This method focuses on latent meaning, requires

much context, contains more inferences to author and recipients, and is more flexible. The data that I collected was coded based on Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology that I had established earlier alongside the interview process. Notes from the interviews, participant observations, and content derived from online social media platforms or mobile messaging groups were categorised into three layers of communicative technologies, which are technological, discursive, and social. I also categorised the data and identified common themes in reference to my research question that explores how the Bersih movement uses personalised conversations to influence participants' communicative ecologies and mobilise them. In addition, I have identified areas that would benefit from contextual information and used relevant secondary sources.

After each interview, I transcribed most of my interview data and highlighted important words and phrases after reading the interviewees' responses to my semi-structured questions. I highlighted important words or phrases, such as "democracy," "personal network," "social media," "mobilise," "talk," and "power," and made notes on important features in each response. Then, I categorised the data under some common themes, patterns, and constructed meanings from there. The content analysis method provides researchers with an insight into how the respondents construct their social worlds and therefore how that information is reflective of society at large (Berg, 2009). From the repetitive common words, I tried to recognise similar themes and form meanings from there. The themes helped me to interpret how my participants perceived social media's role in movement, how they related power with democracy, and with whom they talk about politics, both online and offline. As well as interview data, online data such as Bersih press statements, their website, social media page (including posts and comments), and observation field notes were also useful in complementing my data collection. For instance, my observation in the WhatsApp group and Facebook pages helped to make sense of the extent to which social media can contribute to Bersih participant's public discourse and political life. From there, I drew analysis about whether social media helps to link people's everyday conversations with their political action, and the reasons personalised conversations are central in the Bersih movement's mobilisation.

The unit of analysis for this study was individual online comments and postings, either on social media platforms, or communication applications that were related to the

Bersih movement or electoral reform in Malaysia. Conversations that were deemed relevant included personal postings, or political writings and commentaries that were publicly available online. Some content was taken from closed groups, for which I needed to seek administrator's permission in advance, and declare my identity as a researcher to the members in the group. Online postings, comments and group conversations that were included for sampling were those that were created officially by the Bersih steering committee, secretariat, local coordinators, and members of Bersih-endorsed NGOs. Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups selected were those created by people who supported the Bersih movement, and contained conversations or postings focussing on public interest issues such as electoral system, human and civic rights, corruption, poor governance, and irregularities in elections. The conversation content was in various forms including text, emoticons, photographs, gifs, video, images, and forwarded documents or links. Facebook pages or WhatsApp groups that discussed personal matters such as food and dining places, travel reviews, entertainment, leisure, lifestyle, were excluded from this study. I set a broad time frame for my analysis, between the 2017 and 2019 Malaysian general elections, instead of merely limiting the postings to an event or a few days' spell. I believed that if I narrowed down the time frame to a single event or particular moment, it would give me a limited view that may be misleading. As I discuss later, access and visibility became core methodological challenges. My content analysis includes coverage of Bersih rallies and any online conversations that captured political discussions about Bersih rallies and the takeover of the federal government by the opposition, "Pakatan Harapan" ("Alliance of Hope").²¹ As such, the cut-off date for the online conversations to be considered appropriate for this study was the end of 2019, after the 14th general elections in Malaysia.

There were some limitations in using content analysis. This method is sometimes regarded as less viable and rigorous because it cannot test causal relationships, and is limited to pre-existing data. Despite these limitations, it also has numerous benefits. My study adopted qualitative content analysis that allowed me to explore the contexts of the

²¹ The Alliance of Hope or Pakatan Harapan is a political coalition in Malaysia. It is a successor to the People's Alliance (Pakatan Rakyat) that was established in 2015 as an opposition to the former-ruling Barisan Nasional.

data and to make more inferences with regard to context, author and recipients (Schreier, 2012, p. 16). Moreover, conducting content analysis was largely unobtrusive, less expensive than other methods, ideal for discerning social trends over time, able to assess group processes (with written records) and appropriate for both exploratory and descriptive studies (Berg, 2009, p. 365).

3.4.3.1 Defining a Focus for Social Media Content Analysis

During the interviews, I asked Bersih movement participants to reflect on their motivations for using social media in their everyday communications. They were asked about the expectations and their evaluations of the internal and external communications that they engage on those platforms with people they personally know and the public that they met online. I also encouraged Bersih activists and volunteers to ponder the implications for the Bersih movement from such communication. I conducted content analysis of social media because my study focused broadly on networked publics. Among all the popular mediums, I chose Facebook and WhatsApp for its popularity and high usage among Bersih participants in Malaysia. Both platforms host profiles and recruit participants of the Bersih movement. It was not possible to follow everyone on these two platforms, as I had a time constraint for my PhD study. Therefore, I sought help from the Bersih movement's steering committee members, who gave me the names of endorsing organisations that they actively collaborated with, and I used that as my entry point, by following the endorsing organisations' social media. I also requested to join their WhatsApp groups, but only two gave me the authorisation after they were convinced that I would handle the in-group conversations, especially the sensitive political issues tactfully, and use the data solely for research purposes. This process required much persuasion as I needed mutual friends who were activists to introduce me to them, and I had to meet the group administrators either face-to-face or over the phone personally to obtain consent.

From my preliminary observations, there were hundreds of Facebook pages created for the Bersih movement by supporters from all over the world, but my goal was purely to focus on the Bersih activists and active volunteers' communication content. Therefore, I decided to focus only on the Bersih movement's official Facebook page and

WhatsApp groups administered by the movement's steering committee. This was because I wanted to focus on how these movement participants framed everyday narratives, communicated with the general public who accessed the movement's social media, and the interactions between them. My definition for Bersih movement participants included the Bersih steering committee, the Bersih secretariat, activists, and active volunteers who had participated in the movement's rallies. The selection was made in reference to my research question where I analyse how the Bersih movement used social media to influence its participants' communicative ecologies. Looking into movement-initiated social media content rather than authoritative concentrated sources gave me a comprehensive view of how personalised conversations within the Bersih movement's communicative ecologies mobilised people to support their cause. In Chapter 7, I further explain the findings of how Bersih community communicate and collaborate to self-organise for their participation in rallies and form solidarity locally and globally across cities and countries. These indications of collaboration were further cross-examined through the data that I collected from semi-structured interviews and participant observations.

3.4.3.2 Content Analysis of Facebook

Facebook has been popular with Malaysian users, with up to 22.7 million users out of a total population of 32.6 million by 2019 (Statista, 2020). It is a platform that I regularly use to access information about social movements in the country, interact with friends, and make new friends. To examine the everyday practices of Malaysians, I embarked on participant observation of a sociotechnical phenomenon, focusing on how Malaysians construct and communicate content about the Bersih movement to one another. In some unmediated face-to-face contexts, observation usually makes a researcher visible to those observed, but for online platforms, it is different. When I follow the Facebook pages, and news feeds, I am practically invisible to other participants if I am using a normal username that does not stand out much. To make myself visible online, I picked a nickname that sounds like my real name and uploaded a recent picture as a profile picture. Under the "About" page, I explicitly mentioned my role as a PhD student who was researching social media and social movements. To make my presence known, I could "Like" content in

response to the posts that I read from the Bersih movement official Facebook page and other endorsing NGO's pages, as well as "Share" the content on my own Facebook timeline.

As a researcher, I used my existing Facebook profile that was created previously for work purposes to access Bersih official Facebook page. I decided to use this account to conduct my online observation because Facebook requires users to sign in to their personal account to read the public posts every time I did my analysis. My account has my real profile picture and a username that sounds similar to my real name but in different wording. Like many others, I did not reveal my hometown location. As mentioned earlier, my concern for potential interference by the authorities, especially the Special Branch of the police force, encouraged this practice. Among people that I interviewed, many had adopted Facebook personally before they heard about the Bersih movement. The majority of them used their personal profiles to follow the Bersih movement Facebook page and join the conversations online. When they opted for using personal profiles in public conversations, they made their presence visible and allowed others to know who they were offline, including their real names, and image. Some decided to opt for a semi-public profile, using usernames for their personal Facebook account and not listing their location. I noticed that while those who stay in city areas such as Kuala Lumpur or Klang Valley provided accurate location information, those living in smaller towns or suburbs did not. It is possible that some users might not have updated this information, keeping the location to where they last studied or worked.

I coded the Bersih movement's official Facebook page individually for the page's name, the administrator was by the organisation or individual's name, and the language used to write the posts. The coding check list included whether the "About" pages contained an electronic mail address, links to other social media platforms or contact details for the public to keep in touch with the organisation offline, and whether the public were allowed to give their feedback freely or censored. Other criteria such as whether the pages were used to solicit donations, place advertisements, or publicise for political parties or individuals were also assessed. As a researcher, when I came across some interesting comments on the official Bersih Facebook page, and I felt tempted to follow up with the individuals who posted the comments. However, I did not pursue this for

several reasons. Initiating personal contact with the participants online would have been socially inappropriate and it felt unethical, as if I would be judging their online communication and intruding into their private lives outside of Facebook. Based on the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR) 2019 ethics report, when a research study focuses on “publicly accessible archives,” (in my case this would be the online comments and posts), a “public notice” has to be put up so that participants are aware that their communications are monitored for research purposes. Therefore, I had to explicitly mention in my Facebook About page that I was a PhD student researching the Bersih movement.

I also consulted the Bersih steering committee and secretariat pertaining to any potential approach I might make to their Facebook members. Based on the feedback given, they thought their members would feel more comfortable with my presence if I could only observe their conversations relating to electoral reform within the social networking site. The assumption here is when an individual enters the public yet private space of Facebook, they prefer to retain the comfort and familiarity of the private sphere, which allows them to present their *self* within a mediated environment (Papacharissi, 2010). The need for autonomy, control, and expression by individuals are fulfilled through the Facebook features in the online environment. As mentioned earlier, people retreat from the public sphere of interaction (mainstream media that are state and corporate controlled) to a technologically enabled private sphere (Facebook), searching for more autonomy and expression. The promise of less state surveillance and interference contributes to the popularity of Facebook use among citizens as well as social movements, including the Bersih movement.

Moreover, the activists that I interviewed seemed reluctant to provide me with their members’ contact details or list of real names, or to encourage any personal interactions. This was due to the sensitivity of the issue, and also a form of precaution to protect their supporters from unnecessary harassment from the authorities. Therefore, I usually took the recommendations of the activists that I interviewed, or asked them to be my referrals for the next interviewee. This referral system allowed me to approach individuals on their contact list who were active in Bersih movement networks. I only selected people who fit the definition I set for activists and volunteers for my interview.

As mentioned earlier, “activists” refers to members of the Bersih steering committee and secretariat as well as people who are directly involved in the leadership, while volunteers refer to people who actively engage in communication and activities related to the Bersih movement, but do not commit themselves in leadership or strategic planning. I usually addressed the interviewees with names that they were comfortable with and named them in the thesis based on codes in reference to their gender, social role in Bersih movement and geography, for example: “Male 1, Activist, Penang.”

3.4.4 Secondary Sources

I adopted multiple sources for my thesis writing, including secondary sources. Before I started my thesis, I examined the secondary documents thoroughly to build a working vocabulary for the concepts that I needed, such as “power,” “democracy,” “technology,” “social movements,” and “communicative ecologies.” Secondary sources in the form of movement publications, leaflets, and newspaper articles, and commentaries were also used to supplement the interview data. In addition, social movement websites, Facebook pages, and WhatsApp group chats provided me with useful information on movement activities and views on politics. These websites included the Bersih 2.0 official website, Global Bersih official website, as well as some Bersih participants’ social media pages. The materials generated by the Bersih movement and disseminated on their official website and social media platforms such as press statements, infographics, posters provided many insights into their mobilisation strategies. Other secondary literature included the Malaysia Indicator website, the Curtin University Library database, Google Scholar, academic journals, and academic books about social movements. This information kept me informed about the developments that occurred after my primary data collection and during my thesis writing.

3.5 CONCLUSION

The above explanation reveals the methodologies that I used for this study, which were semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and content analysis. These methods were used to explore the way the Bersih movement uses personalised conversations, with attention to social media, to mobilise people. By referring to Foth and Hearn’s (2007) communicative ecology model, the data is analysed through technological, discursive, and

social layers in the next chapters. I chose the Bersih movement as a case study because of its popularity as well as its success in using the complex and multidimensional nature of social media in mobilising people to their mass rallies. More explanations about how the Bersih movement influences its participants' communicative ecologies and why personalised communication is vital in this movement are explained in Chapters 5 and 6. Furthermore, the personalisation practices within the Bersih communicative ecologies are explored within a particular social media context—Facebook—to analyse the personal and political topics discussed by individuals in Chapter 7. Overall, a content analysis of social media provides basic information on the social interactions within the Bersih movement's online ecologies, while the interviews provide a richer account of citizens' personalised conversations through social media can enrich their political lives and expand democratic space in a relatively authoritarian society. Finally, I found these methods were the best way to gather data on media use among Bersih participants, and to understand the surrounding human relationships by looking through the lens of Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model.

4 THE MALAYSIAN SOCIO-POLITICAL BACKGROUND

4.1 INTRODUCTION

It is important for us to understand the socio-political background of Malaysia to make sense of the multiethnic and multicultural environment of the country that provides a backdrop to the use of the Internet and social media. Furthermore, to understand the Bersih movement's media use in context, it is necessary to understand the ways in which the Malaysian state has historically held control of the mainstream media, as well as the possibilities opened up by the Internet and, more recently, social media in particular. This chapter provides a historical account of the social, political and economic forces which help to explain the power struggles between race-based political coalitions in Malaysia since British colonies until the present, and the forms of legitimate government.

Since independence in 1957, the UMNO ruled as the most dominant partner in the Barisan Nasional coalition until the 2018 general elections, when they lost the majority to another coalition, "Pakatan Harapan" ("The Alliance of Hope"). An overview of the historical background, from the racial riots of 13 May 1969, to the New Economic Policy that created the Malay middle class, to the introduction of the Internet in 1996, to the appeal for foreign investment under the multimedia super corridor mega project are mapped out later, to explain the increasing use of the Internet and social media for political reasons. Following that, an account of how the Internet and social media facilitate online activism and the Bersih movement in particular, and expand the space of participation through fitting into the online networks and communicative ecologies are discussed.

This chapter also provides a historical overview of social movements in Malaysia, especially the Bersih movement. It discusses the development of the Bersih movement within the contemporary media environment where digital media and social media platforms have become increasingly significant. It situates the Bersih movement and its use of social media within a restrictive environment and relatively authoritarian society. History helps us to understand the characteristics of the Malaysian political landscape and public sphere, while the development of media enables us to understand the communicative ecology around the Bersih movement. This historical account provides a useful context to explain how citizens use social media to talk about politics in their

everyday life and to what extent they understand and react to the meanings created, either individually or collectively as a group or network. This includes descriptions of my case study of the Bersih movement and the interactions between its participants between 2017 and 2020. This chapter finishes with an overview of the ownership of the current mainstream media in Malaysia and answers how social media is used by citizens and politicians in the general elections to fill in the gap of democracy.

4.2 ETHNICITY POSITIONS MALAYSIA'S POLITICAL PARTIES, 1957–1970

Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy, with a federal, parliamentary framework. Most power and fiscal resources are controlled by the federal government in Peninsular, while Sabah and Sarawak enjoy greater state autonomy than their Peninsular counterparts (Weiss, 2015). After Malaya gained its independence in 1957, ethnic-oriented political parties such as the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) forged a coalition with the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), forming the Alliance Party (Welsh, 2015). After the formation of Malaysia in 1969, the Alliance was expanded to include political parties from the two states of Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia, and renamed the Barisan Nasional. During that time, all four parties in the ruling coalition in Sarawak were local parties—Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP), Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) and Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS). In Sabah, four out of the six parties in the ruling coalition in Sabah were local parties—PBS, United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO), Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS) and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The main opposition parties historically in Malaysia also rested on ethnic foundations, namely Malay support for the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS, Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party) and Chinese support for the Democratic Action Party (DAP) (Welsh, 2015, p. 12). In fact, in 1973 when the Barisan Nasional was established, all parties were invited to join the coalition, including PAS which was later expelled in 1977. Only DAP refused to join the coalition (Chin, 2015, p. 89). The characteristics of these ethnic-oriented political parties in Malaysia have influenced the development of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the establishment of social movements in Malaysia in the nineties. The following sections will continue the narrative about how old

social movements in Malaysia which are characterised by racial politics have changed in the new media situation, where multiple social actors establish their presence and spaces of autonomy in a fragmented social and political space.

The colonial division of labour has drawn indigenous Malay communities and immigrant ethnic Indian, Chinese, and other communities into different roles in labour and capital markets. Besides political parties, the early NGOs were ethnically oriented too. Among the antecedents to contemporary Malaysian NGOs are “Chinese associations, especially secret societies, reformist Indian associations, and Malay nationalist or Islamic organisations” (Weiss, 2003, p. 19). Successful and rich merchant and entrepreneurs who owned agricultural plantations, mining, small-scale manufacturing, and retail and distribution sectors became the leaders of the early Chinese communities (Weiss, 2003). Weiss explains that for the Indian community, most of their early associations are organisations relating to religion, youth, social, and guilds. It was challenging for Indian communities to promote stronger organisations because of the multiplicity within their ethnic communities and their tendency to emphasise their unique in-group identity and differences across sub-communities, including Muslim and Hindu Indians, Western-trained elitists and masses working in the estates and rural areas. Likewise, there was a division between the aristocracy and the agrarian masses in early Malay societies. However, the community developed unstructured institutions for individual and communal benefit through “gotong royong” (a co-operative effort in maintaining the welfare of their village) and “tolong menolong” (mutual help in both urban and rural areas). Weiss concludes that both traditions and British policy have encouraged the Malay people to perceive that government and their political representatives have obligations to take care of their interests. Tham (1977, p. 63) observes that the motivational basis of the Malay associations is to pressure the government for special privileges and financial assistance while the non-Malay associations, especially Chinese, are more focused on protecting their own specific occupational interests by discouraging government interference, which is believed to lead to the lessening of their range of options. The ethnically based associations were gradually replaced by issue-based advocacy associations, and this transition serves as a context for the construction of my main narrative about contemporary social movements in Malaysia.

The ethnic bargain including constitutional rights and economic position has constantly been challenged when some Malay nationalists lobby to expand their dominance over the non-Malays while the non-Malays fear the institutionalisation of Malay identity symbols. Hwang and Sadiq (2010, p. 203) argue that this eventually caused the riots of 1969 that resulted in a restructuring of government policies which addressed the Malay's grievances in economy, and maintain ethnic's political stability through safeguarding non-Malays' constitutional rights. Later, these concerns pushed for the set up of the New Economic Policy (NEP) from 1971 to 1990, to eradicate poverty, and eliminate an ethnicised economy by absorbing more Malay people into the economy.

Ethnic issues in Malaysia have driven multiple movements by the Malays seeking to maintain their ethnic dominance and non-Malays over their equal citizenship. According to Hwang and Sadiq (2010), the Malaysian constitution recognises the “special position” of the Malays through several legal protections. For example, Article 152 defines national language as Malay, Article 153 acknowledges the special status of Malays in the establishment of quotas for education, scholarships, government jobs and land reservations, and Article 160 defines “Malay” as a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay customs. Likewise, the constitution also honours the rights of non-Malays through Article 8, which prohibits discrimination based on gender or race, and Article 11 which establishes the freedom of religion (Hwang and Sadiq, 2010, p. 207). In 1991, the NEP was replaced by the National Development Policy (NDP) that emphasises ethnic harmony and economic productivity. It was popularised by the fourth Prime Minister Tun Mahathir, with his vision of turning Malaysia into an industrialised nation by the year 2020. Under this policy, a new middle class with greater emphasis on financial progress than ethnic tensions have emerged. The rise of multiculturalism provides a context for my discussion of the increase of multiethnic interest-based civic organisations, including media outlets, NGOs, online blogs and news sites, and social movements in the following sections.

4.3 THE RISE OF MULTICULTURAL CIVIL GROUPS, 1970–1990

The post-NEP period in Malaysia emphasised greater multiculturalism (Hwang & Sadiq, 2010) and the ethnic-based associations have slowly faded after the rise of issue-based

advocacy associations which are organised around socio-political issues not inherently limited to any one race (Weiss, 2003). There are many ways to define NGOs in contemporary Malaysia, including by community-based organisations, community service associations, constituency and framework, worker-employer oriented organisations, youth organisations, women's organisations, professional organisations and coalition and campaign groups (Weiss, 2003). Others like Tan and Bishan (1994, pp. 3–4) differentiate NGOs into the categories of development and issue-oriented, and community service and welfare while Lim Teck Ghee (1995) categorises them into environment, consumer, human rights, development, and women's groups. Many advocacy NGOs today are urban-based, concentrated particularly in Kuala Lumpur and Penang, and are often led by highly educated middle-class activists or elitists. According to Weiss (2015, pp. 142–143), the Malaysian government has put “advocacy-oriented NGOs in the same category with the organised left, dissident student movements, labour groups, and opposition political parties”. Among human rights NGOs are Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Voice of the Malaysian People, SUARAM), Aliran Kesedaran Negara (National Consciousness Movement, Aliran), The National Human Rights Society of Malaysia (HAKAM), and Pergerakan Keadilan Sosial (Movement for Social Justice, Adil), among others. The transition from ethnic-oriented NGOs to advocacy-oriented NGOs provides a basic understanding of how emerging social movements in the country are moving towards to issues that embrace the common concerns of Malaysians from multiethnic origins and different localities.

Over recent decades, NGOs are seen reforming existing political norms and expanding the political imagination within and beyond institutional politics (Rodan, 2014). These issue-oriented advocacy NGOs championed social justice, human rights, feminist, environmental, governance, and other causes. They have collaborated in many major campaigns at the domestic level as well as forming solidarity networks. The development of advocacy-oriented NGOs in Malaysia is restrained by its “regulatory environment” (Weiss, 2003, p. 30). At the domestic level, there are movements that campaign against the repressive laws within the country. Among the most controversial laws are the *Internal Security Act 1968* (ISA), that permits detention without trial; the *Official Secrets Act 1972* (OSA, amended in 1986) that prevents the dissemination of any documents or information

deemed prejudicial to national security; the *Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984* (PPP, amended in 1987) that makes it compulsory for all media operators to have their licences renewed on an annual basis and they might face the risk of suspension for any operational misconduct; the *Universities and University College Act 1971* (UUCA, amended in 1975) that prohibits students from joining any society, political party, or trade union, and students will be automatically suspended if they are charged with any criminal offence; the *Societies Act 1966* (amended 1983) that requires the registered associations to submit yearly report and the approval of registration are solely at the discretion of the government; and the *Police Act 1967* (amended in 1988) requires organisers to apply for a police permit 14 days before any assembly of more than five people and anyone who is found at an illegal assembly can be detained. NGOs are seen continuously lobbying against these draconian laws and the authoritarian government, demanding political reforms for elections, institutions, and many more.

At the international level, local NGOs have participated actively in several campaigns including campaigns against trafficking women by Tenaganita, support of Muslims in Palestine and Kosovo by Islamic NGOs, and the movement for a democratic Burma, and political reform in Cambodia by human rights groups (Weiss, 2003). The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) promotes international human rights norms in the Malaysian context (Setiawan, 2013). These campaigns and advocacies have inevitably generated both local and international publicity on the issues and some unwanted pressure on the state. This publicity resulted in favourable responses from civil society where people give more moral dignity to opposition groups and parties in that they criticised the state powers threatening the powerless. People have increasingly accepted NGOs as mainstream political alternatives, judging from their response in letters to editors (Tan and Bishan, 1994). The growing social movements and NGOs in Malaysia have expanded the public sphere which allows for more active and deeper engagement by citizens.

4.4 DEMOCRATISATION AND THE REFORMASI MOVEMENT, 1990–2000

Since the 1970s, Malaysia has generally enjoyed significant economic growth, but this has further entrenched authoritarian regimes and weakened civil society (Laothamatas,

1997). This has led to a society in transition with the multiethnic middle class demanding greater transparency and accountability of politicians in office. Despite the demand for reforms, elections were consistently won by the same political coalition, Barisan Nasional, with a two-thirds majority in parliament between 1981 and 2003 (Gomez, 2016). Most of the social movements during this time were issue-based, with the exception of the Reformasi movement (Y.H. Khoo, 2014). In 1998, a major political upheaval—better known as the Reformasi movement—arose out of the controversial dismissal of Anwar Ibrahim as deputy to the fourth Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (Gomez, 2007). The Reformasi movement started after the then deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Anwar Ibrahim was sacked by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad during the 1997 Asian financial crisis due to many economic policy differences. Police then arrested Anwar Ibrahim after a raid at his home in Kuala Lumpur in September, 1998 (BBC, 1999). Anwar Ibrahim was charged with sodomy and corruption, and eventually sacked from his government and party post. His arrest impacted Malay society considerably, with tension most visible in urban areas. The Reformasi movement initially involved spontaneous mass street demonstrations, but eventually became institutionalised with the formation of a multiparty opposition coalition, namely Alternative Front (Barisan Alternatif in Malay) (Gomez, 2007). The Alternative Front party was formed on 20 September 1998 and dissolved after the 11th general elections on 21 March 2004, due to internal disputes. Later, all four former component parties of the original alliance—PAS, DAP, People's Justice Party (Keadilan) and Malaysian People's Party (PRM) realigned themselves to strategically work together in the 12th general elections through the formation of a new coalition called People's Alliance (Pakatan Rakyat in Malay).

The Reformasi movement challenged Mahathir Mohamad's domination of the state and called for human rights protection, which eventually led to the establishment of a human rights commission SUHAKAM (Setiawan, 2013). SUHAKAM was actively involved in bridging the gap between state and societal perspectives on human rights, including freedom of assembly, excessive use of force by security personnel, repressive laws, and the rights of indigenous people. Although the Reformasi movement failed to overthrow the then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, it managed to become a major site of resistance to him and his governance (Gomez, 2007, p. 1). UMNO was deeply

divided following Anwar Ibrahim's ousting, but there was no mass exodus from the party to the newly formed Keadilan. Loh (2003) argues that Reformasi movement emphasised discourses and practices of participatory democracy because many urban middle-class Malays were involved in the movement. Another scholar, Y.H. Khoo (2014), argues that the Reformasi movement is personality driven and only promotes certain objectives, hence it is unlikely to maintain its momentum. On the contrary, social movements that are issue-based and revolve around large-scale community interests are more likely to be sustained over a long period of time. Though the Reformasi movement might have lost its significance over time, it does provide a political discourse for civil society to discuss issues relating to electoral reform in Malaysia.

4.5 THE RISE OF A TWO-COALITION PARTY AND EXPANDED CIVIL SOCIETY, 2000–2008

The then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad continued to stay in power until 2003. After 22 years in office, Mahathir Mohamad stepped down on 1 November 2002 and handed over to his successor Abdullah Badawi who presented a more open leadership style and promised political and economic reforms. Abdullah Badawi led BN to an extraordinary electoral victory in the 2004 general elections. He projected the reputation of a humble servant who listened to the people and was keen on reforms. In his first key speech to the country, he requested the people to work with him, not for him, and later launched a counter-corruption drive that inquired into the police force and scrapped an extravagant construction scheme (Aeria, 2012). Abdullah Badawi introduced "Islam Hadhari"²² ("Civilisational Islam") that promoted a better understanding of Islam among non-Muslims and increased dialogue on interfaith issues (*The Star*, 2006). Likewise, his popular slogan "Cemerlang, Gemilang, Terbilang" ("Excellence, Glory, Distinction") was constantly used in the 2004 general election manifesto.

Before Mahathir Mohamad finished his tenure, he granted most of the resources as state patronage to Malay millionaires and Chinese tycoons (Case, 2010). Then Abdullah Badawi shifted his attention from megaprojects—part of Mahathir's industrial

²² Islam Hadhari is a guiding principle for appreciating and practising the Islamic faith in modern times. It is derived from the Quran.

policies which benefited mostly the Malay and Chinese millionaires—to village and rural-level programs and agricultural schemes (Case, 2005). To demonstrate fairness and competence, Abdullah Badawi tried to maintain the support of non-Malays and regenerate the legitimacy among the Malays. He conducted spot checks and appeared at government sectors (such as immigration and customs department), proposed an independent royal commission to look into matters related to police abuses and suspended several megaprojects. Meanwhile, to curb corrupt practices, citizens themselves began to scrutinise institutional functioning. “Between 2003 and 2005, Malaysia featured a bloom of new voices, as dialogue flourished with open acknowledgement of the challenges the country faced post-Mahathir Mohamad, including corruption and inequitable governance” (Welsh, 2013, p. 236). This later led the ruling coalition to an extraordinary electoral victory in the 2004 general election, with a high share of seats: approximately 91%.

However, this tide soon turned. During his leadership, Abdullah Badawi suffered several challenges against his office. His predecessor Mahathir Mohamad, who still holds a great influence in UMNO, criticised Abdullah Badawi as ineffective and undermined his legacy (Moten, 2009). At the same time, Abdullah Badawi’s administration was made worse by sharp divisions within UMNO and other BN coalition members who were driven by factionalism. This included internal fights within MCA where leaders fought for party presidency and its party leader’s sex scandal, as well as MIC’s internal fight among the top leaders (Mohen, 2009). Abdullah Badawi faced several internal and external challenges from inside and outside of his party.

During Abdullah Badawi’s time, the opposition parties grew more united and active in Malaysian politics. In 2004, former deputy Prime Minister and opposition de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim²³ was released from prison after the appeal court reversed his sodomy conviction. He quickly resumed his political ambitions and succeeded in allying the multiethnic Keadilan party with the other two main opposition parties, PAS, and DAP, into a new coalition called Pakatan Rakyat Malaysia (PRM). The opposition alliance held

²³ Anwar Ibrahim was first charged with sodomy trials in 1998, convicted and later received a nine-year prison sentence. In 2004, this verdict was overturned and he was released from prison. However, in 2008, he was accused of sodomising a male aide, hence acquitted in January 2012. He then served the sentence and was pardoned on 16 May 2018.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anwar_Ibrahim

a “one-to-one electoral contest” against BN under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim who had communicated and reached a consensus with PAS and other leaders in Sabah and Sarawak to prevent direct competition within the coalition (Nadzri, 2018, p. 148). The PH coalition appeared more united and had a political breakthrough in 2008 when BN only won 51.39% of the popular votes and denied for two-thirds majority for the first time since 1974. Consequently, BN lost many popular votes in Peninsula Malaysia particularly urban areas, and only retained their support base in the rural areas where Malay and indigenous are a majority (Nadzri, 2018, p. 147). Although the opposition failed to take over office in GE12, its strong presence in Malaysian politics boded well for multiculturalism and Malaysian democracy.

Abdullah Badawi had maintained Mahathir’s policy in relations with the media. In October 2006, MCA signed a business deal with media tycoon Tiong Hiew King to own the top four Chinese dailies, which are Sin Chew Daily, China Press, Guang Ming Daily, and Nanyang Siang Pau. A year later, Media Prima Berhad, with close links to UMNO, acquired all the private television stations including TV3, NTV7, 8TV and TV9 (Mohd Sani, 2009, p. 42). Abbott (2011a, p. 24), who conducted a study of electoral authoritarianism in Malaysia in 2006 and 2008, found that the two UMNO-owned Malay-language newspapers, Utusan Malaysia, and Berita Harian, showed a strong bias towards the BN coalition and were critical of the opposition. The study also suggested that journalists were encouraged to self-censor by producing reports that sounded descriptive with little context, analysis, or critique. The mainstream media in Malaysia is concentrated in the hands of a few government-linked corporations and operate under the control of the ruling political parties. The ruling government had claimed control of the media for national stability and applied policies to deter any dissention or criticism of the government, in order to strengthen its power. Even though Abdullah Badawi projected a gentle image to the public and the opposition, his administration was still restricted by authoritarian measures and draconian laws.

Apart from the fractured governing coalition, restricted media freedom, and the release of the opposition leader, other issues such as the rising crime rate, inflation, and public corruption were highlighted during Abdullah Badawi’s premiership. These pressing economic situations, especially the rising cost of living in the country, and

growing income disparity, contributed to the BN's poor performance in GE12 (Nadzri, 2018, p. 147). Other challenges included top police officials posted their dissatisfaction against the set up of the complaints commission by Abdullah Badawi through an internal web forum (Kuek, 2006), some government and corporate figures being charged with corruption, and government MPs becoming slow in reporting their assets. He was also facing controversial megaprojects that captured massive attention, including the billion-dollar fraud at the Port Klang Free Trade Zone, and there were allegations that Abdullah's own family members (his son and son-in-law) were involved in deals over government contracts and the privatisation of assets (Gatsiounis, 2007). During Abdullah Badawi's administration, he managed to maintain steady economic growth up to 6% including good export prices for palm oil and crude oil, but these profits did not trickle down to ordinary citizens (Moten, 2011). Even though Abdullah Badawi had acknowledged the challenges the country faced, he seemed to have failed to effectively address them. Hence, a general sense of disappointment of his administration had set in.

In April 2009, Abdullah Badawi stepped down after he lost the two-thirds majority in parliament at GE12 due to claims that he failed to deliver on reform after raising popular expectations. His failure in overcoming the anti-corruption issues had resulted great disappointment in him and his BN coalition (Lee et al., 2010). The failure to deliver reform by ruling leaders and the delay in addressing people's grievances urged civil society to seek other legitimate avenues for complaints. This connects with the reason Malaysians shifted their votes to the opposition parties in the elections and supported electoral reform, including the Bersih movement.

During Abdullah Badawi's premiership, Anwar Ibrahim was released from prison after the appeal court reversed his sodomy conviction in 2004. He quickly resumed his political ambitions and succeeded in allying the multiethnic Keadilan party with the other two main opposition parties—PAS and DAP, into a new coalition called People's Alliance (PRM). Activists had contributed significantly to this opposition coalition by "strategising their collaboration, standing as candidates, informing debates, and expanding media options" (Weiss, 2009, p. 741). Anwar Ibrahim's charisma offered a viable national alternative for the country, and the opposition eventually won five state governments at GE12. Some of the Bersih movement leaders who contested and won at GE12 had then

joined the People Alliance too. In the meantime, Abdullah was forced to step down, handing over his position to Najib Razak. Despite many failures, Abdullah Badawi's leadership has contributed to the main narrative of this thesis by providing a discourse whereby his leadership has created a new equilibrium that is moderate and more friendly to multiculturalism in Malaysian society through the reordering of relations between different races and social classes.

The overwhelming swing in cross-ethnic votes in favour of the opposition parties during the GE12 also reflected Malaysians beginning to engage more actively in the public sphere and share a common political discourse. The citizens then translated their political grievances against the conduct of the then government in several protests in or near Kuala Lumpur (Moten, 2009, p. 176). Among the protestors, a group of Malaysian Bar Council lawyers marched to the Malaysian administrative centre in Putrajaya in September 2007, to protest against judiciary corruption after the video scandal of a high-profile lawyer, V. K. Lingam, who reassured a judge that he had great influence over the appointment of judges (Malaysian Bar, 2007). Two months later, two rallies took place in Kuala Lumpur. First, the Bersih movement that petitioned the King for reforms in the country's electoral system that was regarded as unfair. The success of the first Bersih rally was due to the accumulated dissatisfaction against the rising fuel prices and failure to institute promised reforms by Abdullah Badawi's government (Y.H. Khoo, 2014). Second, the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) organised a rally on 25 November to submit a petition to the Queen of England and urged her to appoint a Queen's Counsel to speak for the welfare of Indians immigrants who were exploited by the British government during the Malaya colonial period and continued to be neglected after Malaysia's independence (Pandi, 2014). All these movements were public demands for reforms. They framed public issues into hegemonic ones, against other domination in the competition, gradually becoming routine, and institutionalised in the Malaysia context. This reflects an extended public sphere where multicultural citizens share common political discourse and engage in participatory democracy. People from multicultural backgrounds who had lost faith in Abdullah's administration had explicitly expressed their disappointment through these open demonstrations and voted for the opposition, which caused the BN coalition losing its two-thirds majority in GE12.

4.6 POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN REGIME CHANGE, 2008–2013

This section discusses the new politics after Abdullah was succeeded by his deputy Najib Razak. It explains how the politics and legitimization in contemporary Malaysia has changed since the GE12 in 2008. To legitimise themselves, Malaysian political parties have to engage more with the people, be more attuned to public issues, and be ethnically neutral in promoting needs-based policies (O’Shannassy, 2013). After Najib Razak took over, he drew millions of fans to his social media platforms and the BN government hired a large number of cybertroopers to enter the cyberspace (Nadzri, 2018, p. 149). The historical account of Najib Razak’s premiership and his political strategies involving cyberspace provides an important background for my study examining the prominent role of social media in Malaysia’s regime change and the Bersih movement’s mobilisation. This is because it explains the impetus of the growing usage of information communication technology among citizens and political parties, and explains why personalised political conversations have become more significant in the country’s political landscape since 2008.

The new Prime Minister Najib Razak projected himself under the 1Malaysia brand that was used to project a polity that was united by diversity. He used the concept of 1Malaysia to articulate a new political reality and tried to re-legitimise the UMNO party and the BN coalition following its electoral setback in 2008 (O’Shannassy, 2013). The concept promotes a new national identity that is more ethnically neutral, and engages the new politics with a different way of legitimization through the notion of “ketuanan rakyat” (“the supremacy of the people”). Likewise, Najib Razak’s government implemented some reforms including anti-corruption, maintaining judicial independence to combat power abuse, abolishing the ISA in April 2012, establishing economic stability through a series of key performance indicators (KPI), six national key results area (NKRA), and the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) (Segawa, 2013). Moreover, Najib Razak initiated populist measures such as cash incentives through BR1M program, book vouchers for students, affordable property loan packages, a pay increase to civil servants, and funds to NGOs linked to 1Malaysia to shore up support for his leadership (Welsh, 2013). However, over the years, these political transformation programmes proved less

effective, and authoritarian measures were still being used by the BN government. This indirectly caused the opposition to secure more parliamentary seats in the GE13 (Nadzri, 2018, p. 150).

Other than populist measures, Najib Razak had led the dominant party UMNO to put an emphasis on “UMNO-Alone” where they believed that it would win at least 80 Malay seats in Peninsula Malaysia and his ally in East Malaysia would contribute at least 40 seats in GE13; hence, they believe they could win by a simple majority of 120 seats (Chin, 2013). Therefore, the contribution by other Barisan Nasional components such as MCA, Gerakan, and MIC were likely to be seen as relatively less significant. This strategy was likely to cause BN’s narrow victory in GE13 when they disregarded the voice of the non-Malay, especially Chinese voters (Nadzri, 2018, p. 151). After that, Najib Razak continued to engage in rebranding UMNO by making it more Islamic and Malay chauvinist, and thus weakened the party’s relationship with its non-Malay partners. As a result, this shift could have caused UMNO to lost its appeal as a more liberal alternative for Malay voters in GE14, being regarded as too radical for non-Malay voters (Welsh, 2018b, p. 100). Najib Razak’s restructured arrangement in the BN coalition apparently affected his electoral support and created an erosion of support for him.

Engagement with voters through social media was another important factor in Najib Razak’s political strategy leading up to GE13. The BN coalition recognised their inadequacy in the cyberspace, and thus sought greater visibility during the GE13. Therefore, Najib Razak instructed all government ministers to use social media accounts such as Facebook and Twitter, and his office started tweeting as @PMOMalaysia from September 2010 (Tapsell, 2013b, p. 44). Najib Razak’s online engagement with Malaysians through several social media platforms managed to reduce the social distance between himself and his audience (Hopkins, 2012). The premier’s active use of social media to naturalise government action, underplay corruptions and social inequalities indirectly painted oppositional voices as disruptive to national security. In addition, Welsh (2013) argues that the BN coalition tried to dominate social media by hiring paid bloggers and funding websites such as TheChoice.com to suppress alternative voices and dominate nearly half of the political content in alternative media. They also set up a special new

media unit in the Department of Special Affairs (Jabatan Hal Ehwal Khas) to get professionals to write positive stories about UMNO and the BN coalition on social media platforms (Chin, 2013). An UMNO cybertrooper team headed by its youth leader Khairy Jamaluddin and another leader Tun Faisal estimated UMNO had about 45 paid full-time, 175 part-time, and 750 volunteers in the UMNO Cybertroopers Club for the GE13 (Tapsell, 2013b, p. 45). Apparently, UMNO and other political parties increasingly used social media in GE13 to sensationalise the news and hence caused greater polarisation in Malaysian society. The main feature of the GE13 cyberwar was the production and manipulation of information by paid bloggers, public-relations experts, and cybertroopers who drowned out the potential for truthful, fair and independent information and analysis (p. 48). The increased manipulation by political parties on online content has precipitated some mainstream media organisations to fight for a more balanced form of journalism. Citizens are encouraged to speak out more boldly when they can freely access a diversity of viewpoints online. Although social media has been used by the government to gain control over information, to a certain extent, it does usher in new ways of mobilisation in the new Malaysian politics that encourages alternative political voices that had always been marginalised or restricted.

The emergence of the Internet opened up the strictly controlled political space in Malaysia and allowed more citizen participation. When the BN coalition won the GE13 with 133 seats, but lost the popular vote, Najib Razak described the result as a “Chinese tsunami” against BN government. However, Tapsell (2018, p. 12) argues that it was an “urban tsunami” because alternative news had circulated more widely in urban where Internet penetration was prevalent than rural areas. The advent of smartphones has also accelerated the growth of ICT in the country, with many citizens accessing alternative political news through their social media accounts than the conventional media (Nadzri, 2018). Mobile technology has also facilitated growing political engagement, especially in urban areas (Welsh, 2013) and provided alternative news that enabled greater participation among Malaysians (Nadzri, 2018, p. 147), especially through Facebook and WhatsApp (Tapsell, 2018, p. 10). The utilisation of social media has allowed for greater subversion of the semi-authoritarian regime and encouraged a more sustainable civil society engagement in electoral politics. The next section will answer the question of how

social media has been used in electoral reform by social movements, Bersih in particular, in the lead-up to the GE14. It links to my argument that the Bersih movement sustains its connectives and communication networks through social media as an organising and mobilising tool.

4.7 THE ROLE OF THE BERSIH MOVEMENT IN DEMOCRATIC BREAKTHROUGH

The Bersih movement started out in 2005 as a coalition of NGOs called the Joint Action Committee for Electoral Reform (JACER), which aimed to push for an electoral reform in Malaysia. JACER formed the Bersih committee on 23 November 2006, involving a group of civil society groups, political party leaders, and NGOs (Bersih.org, n.d.). They wrote on their official Bersih website that they were urged to establish a committee demanding better governance because of escalating public discontent with unpopular government actions. These individual frustrations were turned into collective action and resources that inspired people to join the Bersih rally on November 10, 2007 (Y. H. Khoo, 2017). A year later, some Bersih leaders had left the movement and joined the opposition coalition, the People's Alliance, after the 2008 election. Hence, the Bersih movement relaunched itself as a nonpartisan and apolitical movement in April, 2010. The newly elected central steering committee mainly comprised activists of local NGOs and members of civil society. This coalition made several demands, including cleaning the electoral roll, reforming the postal ballot, implementing the use of indelible ink, setting a minimum 21-day campaign period, allowing free and fair access to the media, strengthening public institutions, and stopping corruption and dirty politics. Based on these demands, the Bersih movement constructed a communicative agenda and actively engaged with individuals in social communications, with social media embedded in social activities, constituting an effective and sustainable social environment until today.

Compared to other social movements in Malaysia, the Bersih movement successfully utilised social media to call for political reform in national dialogue. It is the largest people's movement, having organised five major rallies nationwide, demanding electoral reform and greater democracy for the country (Chan, 2018, p. 112). News relating to the Bersih rallies was also taken into cyberspace and spread through blogging,

YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. For example, #bersih hashtags were popularised by protesters over social media, others included Facebook's likes, Google searches, and Twitter's micro-storytelling (Postill, 2014, p. 92). Netizens created Bersih picBadges and images in their Facebook profiles, "Like" the official Bersih movement page and following the tweet updates via Twitter (J. B. Y. Lim, 2014). During Bersih rally 3.0 on 28 April 2012, the rally organiser claimed to have over 50,000 people clad in yellow Bersih t-shirts marched to the streets of Kuala Lumpur demanding free and fair elections. The movement used yellow intertextually with the colour of the King to reflect a resistant yellow challenging the authority to be cleaned, and the play on colours was evident on social media (J. B. Y. Lim, 2017, p. 210). From its first rally until the present, the Bersih movement continuously and successfully leveraged social media platforms to counter government-controlled mainstream media, distribute alternative information, and mobilise supporters across ethnic, racial, and religious demographics (Welsh, 2011). This shows that social media was an effective mobilising tool that helped sustain the Bersih movement's networks and form connectives among participants during rallies.

The use of force by the government resulted in broad sympathy and support for the Bersih supporters. Pictures that showed protesters helping one another when being confronted by tear gas and water cannon during rallies were shared all over social media and forwarded through personal mobile messaging applications. The Bersih rallies (organised in 2007, 2011 and 2012) improved the cross-ethnic and intergenerational solidarity among protesters when they faced police brutality (G. C. Khoo, 2013). The protesters' digital stories of democratisation and nation-building were amplified and circulated through social media to all Malaysians who were following the rallies online. There were heated debates and conversations on online forums where people engaged themselves in a national dialogue through social media. Malaysians of all races and political preferences who turned up at the rallies reflected a coming together of different political and economic civil society groups (Y. H. Khoo, 2014), and this reinvigorated opposition forces in the country against the centralised authoritarianism of the government.

The electoral reform in Malaysia is a diverse series of concurrent events, trends and routines, not just a single timeline (Sewell, 2005); many factors have collectively

formed stimuli for a change of the government, ranging from the Reformasi movement, the electoral tsunami of 2008 (GE12), the Bersih rallies, and other mini-scale protests initiated by citizens until the scandal of 1MDB. Bersih movement activists seemed able to capture these political happenings in Malaysia and frame them into a narrative that citizens were more likely to pay attention to. When the Bersih movement advocated electoral reform and formed narratives beyond partisan politics, they were able to attract citizens of different political preferences to join their social communications and interactions, contributing to the formation of the Bersih communicative ecology that is multiethnic and politically diverse.

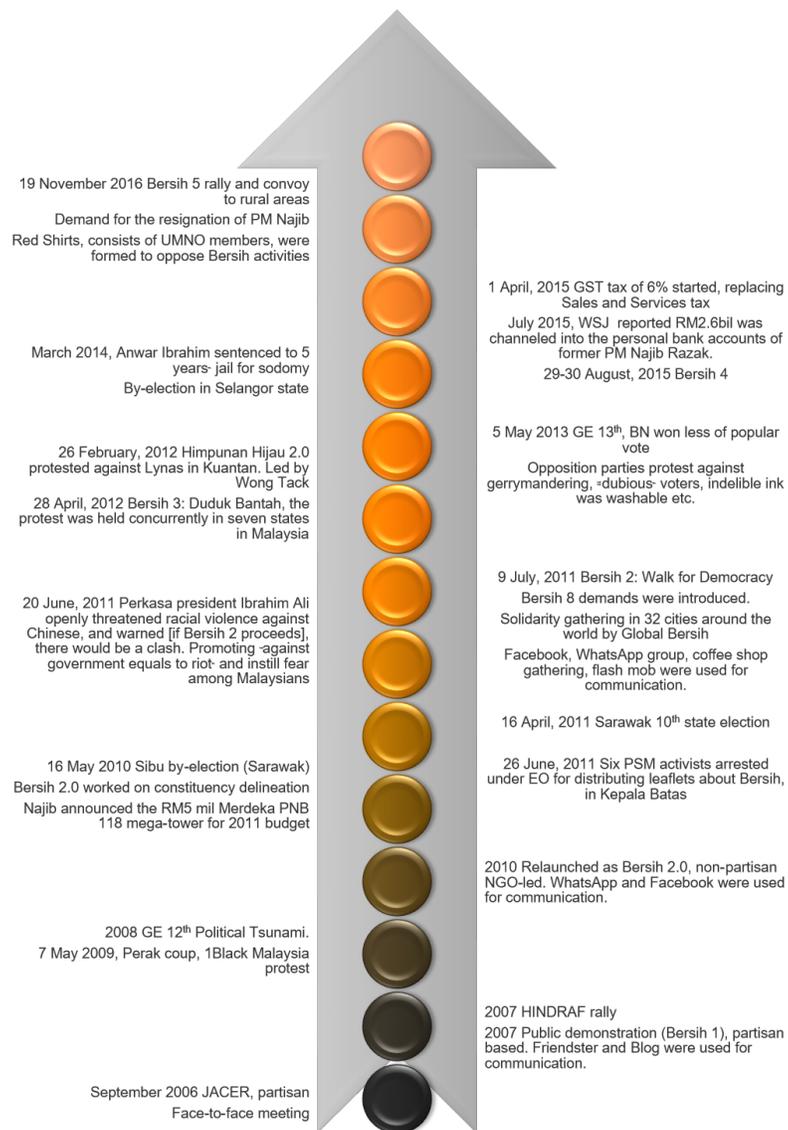


Figure 4.1 A diagram shows the evolution of the Bersih movement from 2006 to 2016, including key actors, events and media strategies of the Bersih rallies.

Moreover, Malaysian political landscape expanded and became global when Malaysian diaspora started to actively engage and respond to the electoral reform of their mother country. Transnational electoral participation was apparent in GE13, when there were demands for overseas voting rights, calls for sponsoring Malaysians to fly back to vote or car pool together, and online fundraising campaigns (Low, 2017, p.153). Diaspora Malaysians financially supported the Bersih movement through Global Bersih group, “MyOverseasVote,” and “Let’s Go Home and Vote” campaigns. Low argues this philanthropy was facilitated through the use of social media networks by activists who initiated campaigns to help other Malaysians. The engagement of diaspora Malaysians in home-country politics showed that much of the digital citizenship had shifted from formal to personalised (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) and private usage models (Papacharissi, 2010). The multiple political events happening in Malaysia and the active participation by Malaysian diaspora made Malaysian politics vibrant and global. Gerbaudo (2012) and Postill (2014) have also connected the global wave of digitally networked protests to new democracy movements in their research, and argue that social media is the key measure of citizen engagement. Woolley and Howard (2018) also argue that social media platforms enable civic discourse and action by using algorithms to direct and amplify the diffusion. The local and global participation of Malaysians in the Bersih movement, aided by social media, has contributed a great political breakthrough, especially in the context of GE14.

The Bersih movement also plays a crucial role in mobilising citizens to walk to the street to fight against highly centralised authoritarianism. While the government strives to gain greater authority, the Bersih movement is heading to a non-centralised power state. After Najib Razak removed the attorney general Gani Patail and Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin in July 2016, the Bersih movement led by Maria Chin Abdullah mobilised citizens to the street to protest. Both rallies, Bersih 4 (August 29–30, 2015) and Bersih 5 (November 19, 2016) protested against 1MdB scandal and called for Najib Razak to step down. The Bersih movement broadened its reform to include economic issues that required a constitutional amendment and institutional change. Some critics disagreed with the Bersih movement’s divergence from electoral reform to pursuing the opposition’s political agenda (Chan, 2018, p. 115). However, in the context

of competitive authoritarianism in Malaysia, it seems sensible for the Bersih movement and civil society to challenge the regime by advocating reform policies and supporting opposition parties. The role of the Bersih movement and civil society in democratic breakthrough was proven to be significant when the opposition parties won with a majority in the GE14 in 2018. Opposition leaders who stood together with the movement in lobbying for electoral reform were elected as members of the parliament, including Bersih's chairperson Maria Chin Abdullah (Petaling Jaya constituency).

4.8 GROWING PERSONALISED POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The GE14 not only opened up a public sphere that encouraged deep civil society engagement, but we saw a proliferation of online videos posted by political parties as well as individual politicians. This marked a new political communication trend that indicated personalisation or individualisation of politics in the new media age (P. P. Y. Leong, 2019, p. 119). These personalised messages were in different styles and circulated rapidly via Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube. Actually, the subtle messaging trend started to get popular in Malaysia since 2017, for instance former Transport Minister Liow Tiong Lai appeared in a six-minute video titled "Citizens," in conjunction with National Day celebrations. Another example is the #NamaSayaNajib ("My name is Najib") video series that featured a young boy who was called Najib Razak. The character symbolises the former Prime Minister Najib Razak, who had made mistakes but deserved to be forgiven due to good intentions. In the video, he was wrongly accused for stealing a watch but his true intention was to safekeep it. Another example is the #BiarBenar ("Let it be true") video series that told a story of two characters—"Fakta dan Auta" ("Fact and Fallacy") that represented a character dressed in a blue-shirt, representing the BN coalition's official colour and another in a yellow T-shirt with "clean" written on it, which could be referring to the Bersih movement, due to its signature colour and name. These subtle and subliminal messages surfaced on YouTube with no direct reference to any political parties during the campaign period for GE14 (Barnes, 2018). The personalised trend of political communication during GE14 reflects the efforts of politicians to use social media to produce digital content that citizens can personally feel a connection with. They

understand the psychology of individuals as the centre of their own social networks, hence optimising social media to engage with their voters. This connects to what Bennett and Segerberg (2011) said earlier: individuals engage in causes that they can personally assign meanings to and thus the greater control they have over their actions, the stronger their personal expressions and self-fulfilments are. The rise of personalised politics has become a cultural trend not only in Malaysia but globally. Politicians are reaching out to individual voters through personalised communication and stories that are uploaded to social media platforms.

Social media content tends to focus more on individual politicians than their political parties, and thus increases the personalisation in the political area. Enli and Skogerbø (2013, p. 758) argue that social media is compatible with current political communication that has become increasingly focused on the personalities and personal traits of politicians. The “mediatisation” of politics that characterises Western societies seems to also affect Malaysian politics, and we can see many politicians have gradually share more personal and private sides of their public images. The intertwine between the political and the private, the public and the personal, not only happens among politicians, but activists and social movements. My thesis uses the concept of personalisation to shed light on how social media impacts and possibly changes both content and structures of political communication in a social movement. More details are elaborated in Chapter 6.

4.9 THE BREAKDOWN OF BARISAN NASIONAL AND RISE OF PAKATAN HARAPAN, 2013–2018

The 14th Malaysian general election (GE14) was held on 9 May 2018 after the then Prime Minister Najib Razak dissolved parliament on 7 April 2018. Despite the great effort invested in personalised politics on social media during the GE14 campaign, the BN coalition was not able to sway the voters. I suggest this could be due to prolonged and unresolved socio-political and economic issues that were not in favour of the voters, as well as competing personalised digital content by the opposition leaders, social movement activists, and voters themselves. The opposition Pakatan Harapan coalition had won an unprecedented victory with a simple majority of 121 parliamentary seats, 113 by PH and eight seats by its ally, Parti Warisan Sabah (PWS) (spr.gov.my). The PH coalition

managed to take control of the government under the leadership of Mahathir Mohamad. While this defeat spelt the end of Najib Razak's political career, it represented a stunning return to power for Mahathir Mohamad, after more than a decade's retirement (CNN, 2018). The result of GE14 ended the BN regime's uninterrupted rule since Malaysia's independence in 1957. There are many factors that contributed to the defeat of the opposition, including the citizens' dissatisfactions about corruption (for instance, the 1MDB scandal), the rise of cost living and negative issues surrounding Najib's administration that drives public support away from BN (The Edge, 2018).

In addition, the PH coalition had a stronger and more credible presence in GE14 with the support of Mahathir Mohamad, the Malaysia United Indigenous Party (Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, PPBM)²⁴ and PWS (Nadzri, 2018, p. 158). Under the leadership of Mahathir Mohamad, formerly the prime minister for 22 years under the BN coalition before switching to lead the opposition in GE14, PH has galvanised urban middle class in the west coast states (Saravanamuttu, 2019) and secured some Malay votes in rural areas. The fragmentation of the Malay vote and continued support of non-Malay voters for political reform also contributed to the electoral victory by the PH coalition. All these factors are interconnected with each other, and eventually led to the fall of the BN coalition and rise of the PH government.

For GE14, the leadership of Mahathir provided some trust and security among the Malay electorate, especially in the rural areas in Peninsula (The Malaysian Insight, 2018). However, in Sabah and Sarawak, political sentiment varies. Although the general mood for GE14 was against BN and Najib Razak's 1MDB scandal, it was local factors that decided most of the seats in Sabah and Sarawak (Chin, 2018, p. 174). Under the 1963 Malaysia agreement, most of the autonomies owned by Sabah and Sarawak, except for its powers over immigration, were taken over by the federal government and this marginalisation resulted in the underdevelopment of both states compared to those in Peninsula (Chin, 2018, p. 175). Unlike Peninsula, both states are more pluralistic and Islam is not recognised as the official religion in the state. In the GE14, Sarawak BN won

²⁴ Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM, also known Malaysian United Indigenous Party) is founded by Mahathir Mohamad and currently led by eighth Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin. It was formed on 8 September 2016 and still active until present.

19 out of 31 parliamentary seats, losing all the Chinese-majority constituencies and six Dayak-majority seats to the opposition, probably due to unhappiness with the selection of candidates and internal sabotage (p. 189). Sabah BN won 10 out of 25 seats, and the opposition won 14 seats (Malaysian Election Commission website, n.d.). The fall of the UMNO-led BN was due to the rise of the PWS led by politicians Shafie Apdal and Darrell Leiking, who formed an alliance with the PH coalition. PWS's success was probably due to their strong sense of state nationalism (Chin, 2018, p. 188). The GE14 shows that Sabah and Sarawak have simultaneously pursued more state autonomy to meet the demands of their local people.

The fall of the BN coalition could be due to elites severed ties among one another (Nadzri, 2018, p. 158). The elite contestations were at the root of political reform in Malaysia from Reformasi to GE14 (Saravanamuttu, 2019, p. 61). The sacking of prominent political leaders had caused political change in the country. For instance, after former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was sacked, his supporters initiated the Reformasi movement and after UMNO deputy leader Muhyiddin Yassin, Vice-President Shafie Apdal, and Kedah Chief Minister Mukhriz Mahathir were sacked, they formed a new political party, PPBM. The political turmoil and elite tussles within the UMNO saw many prominent leaders and their supporters leave the party to form a new one. Another example was the inter- and intra-party tussles within the opposition parties that were later suppressed for a larger goal when Mahathir formed an alliance with his former nemesis Anwar to topple the BN coalition in the GE14. The PH parties stayed united to contest under the PKR Banner in the GE14 and allocated PBBM 52 seats, followed by PKR (51), DAP (35) and Parti Amanah Negara (27) (The Star, 2018).²⁵ The political system in Malaysia changed from a single-dominant party to a multi-party coalition after the fall of the BN coalition. Saravanamuttu (2019, p. 43) argues that the GE14 is an elite contestation within and across Malaysian political parties and it opens up a public sphere with sustained and deep civil society engagement in electoral politics.

²⁵ Benjamin, N. (7 April, 2018). Pakatan will contest under PKR banner. Retrieved from The Star website: <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/04/07/pakatan-will-contest-under-pkr-banner-four-opposition-parties-unite-under-common-logo-for-polls/>

Civil society contributed to the democratic breakthrough in Malaysia (Chan, 2018, p. 112). The change of the ruling government in the country has started a new chapter for the Bersih movement. After the elections, the Bersih movement announced its new chairperson to be Thomas Fann, the founder and chairman of non-government organisation Engage. Thomas succeeded previous leader Maria Chin Abdullah, who was elected as the member of parliament for Petaling Jaya constituency for the 2018–2020 term (bersih.org). The newly elected Bersih steering committee continued to lead its movement in serving their role as electoral watchdog in all Malaysian elections. They regularly appeared in the mass media and social media to remind the Election Commission to stand firm on the code of conduct for political parties during the by-elections held between 2018 and 2019. They urged the Election Commission to monitor and restrict ministers of new ruling government from campaigning during elections (*The Star*, 2019). With the newly formed PH government, the new Malaysia was then heading towards a two-party system with the previous dominant political party UMNO leading the opposition. This political change is expected to allow more freedom of speech among the citizens and promote pluralism, tolerance, and broad-mindedness in this democratic society, but unfortunately it is not sustained for more than two years.

4.10 THE “BACKDOOR” GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL TURMOIL, 2019 TO THE PRESENT

Malaysians witnessed the beginnings of political turmoil again as the PH government led by Mahathir Muhammad collapsed following the latter’s resignation on February 24, 2020. In response to that, former Home Affairs Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who claimed to have the majority 222 seats in parliament, pulled his party out of the PH coalition and formed a new government with opposition parties, including the UMNO, which lost power in the 2018 general elections. The gambit was revealed publicly in a gathering of members of parliament (MPs) and political advisers at the five-star Sheraton Hotel on 23 February 2020. A photograph was circulated online on Facebook, showing Mahathir at a meeting with leaders of six Malay-based political parties (Free Malaysia Today, 2020). The leaders were: PPBM President Muhyiddin Yassin, PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang, UMNO President Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, Warisan President Shafie Apdal, Gabungan Parti

Sarawak Chairman Abang Johari Openg, PKR’s then Deputy President Mohamed Azmin Ali, and GPS Chief Whip Fadillah Yusof. The outcome of the meeting was the formation of the National Alliance (Perikatan Nasional, PN) and the resignation of Mahathir as prime minister the next day. The meeting was widely reported by local media as the Sheraton Move (Aw & Kamarulzaman, 2020) and described as a backdoor coup to form a new government with the former ruling party UMNO (Boyle, 2020). The split group comprised 11 MPs from the anti-Anwar faction of the PKR and 26 MPs from PPBM.

A few days later, a group of pro-democracy activists held a short-notice night protest in the iconic Independence Square in Kuala Lumpur on 25 February against the political turmoil. A poster titled “Turun ke jalan: Demokrasi mati” (“Democracy is dead: Let’s take to the streets!”), as indicated in Figure 4.1, went viral on social media and over 100 people attended the event, including representatives of NGOs, social activists, student leaders, and the public (Solhi, 2020). Bersih movement chairperson Thomas Fann also posted on the group’s Facebook page, urging citizens who were unhappy with the betrayal of the people’s mandate to join the protest. The event was organised to protest against the dinner hosted at the Sheraton Hotel that inadvertently paved the way for PN to take over Putrajaya from PH.



Figure 4.2 A poster titled “Democracy is dead, Let’s go to the streets” circulated online, urging people to protest against the political turmoil. (Source: Sin Chew Daily)

A week after Mahathir's resignation, the King appointed Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) President Muhyiddin Yassin as the country's eighth Prime Minister following the Article 40(2)(a) and Article 43(2)(a) of the Federal Constitution (Channel News Asia, 2020). The new alliance PN that was founded on 23 February 2020, claimed to hold a 113 seat majority in the parliament and officially took over the government from PH. Since then, the term "backdoor government" was spread over social media and mainstream media to describe this newly formed government, based on speculations that they did not have the majority in parliament as they claimed. In addition, they were not directly elected by the people through general elections. This political turmoil reflects the deepening of political polarisation and is likely to foster instability in the country, which once again requires Malaysians to march to the street to make their voices heard. Once again, this explains the significance of my study in exploring how citizens engage in public spaces, use social media to exercise their political autonomy and form their opinions online about the ruling political regime as well as how racial politics plague the use of media in Malaysia.

4.11 CONCLUSION

This chapter provided a detailed historical account of the political developments in post-independence Malaysia, evolving from single-party dominant rule to a subtle two-party system after GE14 in 2018. Each general election was shaped by political developments alongside with other factors such as social media utilisation and the growing political resistance among civil society and opposition parties. All these factors led to the democratic breakthrough during GE14; the Bersih movement is not the only entity that could claim responsibility for the fall of the BN government. Nevertheless, the Bersih movement has served as a major force in bringing people together to collectively demand clean and fair elections.

The socio-political background in Malaysia has provided a backdrop to help understand the multiethnic and multicultural environment of the country, and to contextualise the Bersih movement and its social media use for online mobilisation. The reason I highlighted the role of the Bersih in this chapter is to make clearer of its contributions to the political democratic breakthrough in Malaysia. Furthermore, to

understand the Bersih movement and its significance, it is necessary for us to understand how the movement uses social media to facilitate online activism and expand the space of political participation through fitting into the online networks and communicative ecologies. This leads us to the next chapter that provides a detailed mapping of the technological, discursive, and social layers of the Bersih movement. Chapter 5 analyses how the Bersih movement sustains its connectives and communication networks through social media. It uses the notion of ecology (Foth & Hearn, 2007) as a foundation to explain the interdependencies of citizens, place, and technology in the context of social movement.

5 COMMUNICATIVE ECOLOGY IN THE BERSIH MOVEMENT

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Relying on and advancing the communicative ecology perspectives outlined in the literature review, I use Foth and Hearn's (2007) technological, discursive, and social layers to model the interactions in the Bersih movement's communicative ecology. This study analyses how the Bersih movement builds its complex communicative ecology that involves different levels of social interactions and media use by encapsulating many issues into a single narrative. It demonstrates how central everyday conversations are to the Bersih movement's mobilisation strategies and narrative framing. Chapter 5 uses Foth and Hearn's (2007) notion of ecology as a foundation to critically examine and empirically assess how each layer is significant in mobilisation and interrelated to one another.

The previous chapter provided background information on the political landscape in Malaysia from the Reformasi movement until GE14. The explanation surrounding the political changes and power struggles among the dominant political parties is important to Chapter 5 because it provides context on how these incidents precipitated irregularities in the country's general election system. This background provides an understanding of how these challenges could have led to Malaysian civil society calling for electoral reform, that eventually formed the Bersih movement. Chapter 5 summarises my thesis findings and demonstrates the close connection between social media and the Bersih movement by arguing that Bersih activists effectively use social media to disseminate the movement's electoral reform narratives to mobilise citizens to participate in street protests. It also tries to answer a specific research question, "How do Bersih activists use social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp to communicate narratives of the Bersih movement to the supporters?". This links back to the objective of this chapter which is to explore how the Bersih movement communicate their narratives via social media platforms to influence the communicative ecology of their participants. The social media platforms are used to communicate Bersih stories that sound personal, relevant, and interesting through participants' everyday political conversations.

The following chapters build on the argument made in Chapter 5 and expand the definition of communicative ecology. Chapter 6 adds an element of personalisation that emphasises intimate techno-social sharing that is constant and seems mundane in citizens' everyday life, while Chapter 7 explores the effect of the Bersih community through examining a single social media platform. All these discussions contribute to demonstrate that personalised conversations are vital to the Bersih movement's local and global mobilisations.

5.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To find antecedents that influence an individuals' continuous participation, this thesis adopts a communicative ecology model derived from the media and communication studies. This model emphasises the social media platforms that are embedded in social communications and interactions, constituting a social environment. It focuses on the dynamic interrelationships that link technology, content, and social interaction (Seol et al., 2016, p. 742). Based on the literature review in Chapter 2, this communicative ecology model was initially proposed by Altheide and later developed in other studies. Other communicative scholars like Tacchi et al. (2003, p. 17) define communicative ecologies as "processes that involve a mix of media, organised in specific ways, through which people connect with their social networks." Foth and Hearn further broaden the conceptual boundary of communicative ecology to include "the context in which the communication process occurs." (2007, p. 756). By using Foth and Hearn's three layers, this section analyses the communicative ecology of the Bersih movement. First, the technological layer comprises media and technology devices, which connect people and allow them to interact (for example, the Internet and mobile phones), second, the discursive layer comprises content that involves conversational themes or ideas, and third, the social layer comprises people communicating to one another. This thesis used these layers to research the techno-mediated social communication of the Bersih movement, through examining how movement activists use social media to mobilise participants, what motivates individuals to participate and how they interact with one another within a communicative ecology.

In the contemporary media landscape, communicating through social media has become an individual's everyday practice and stands for an important role in their communicative ecology. This chapter examines this particular instance of a communicative ecology through Foth and Hearn's (2007) three layers. Figure 5.1 illustrates the communicative ecology of the Bersih movement and shows that the three layers are independent but interrelated to one another. First, the technological layer comprises social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, which the Bersih movement uses to create its movement pages and private groups. Second, the discursive layer comprises the movement's own content based on their movement demands, relating to public protest, workshops, training, events, and press releases. Third, the social layer comprises social interaction activities, involving participants of the movement. The participants usually interact with one another by asking questions, or writing comments in response to interesting posts that others have uploaded. For instance, participants share information about their personal experiences with public protests, police, and share news about the movement. I use Figure 5.1 to show the interrelations between the layers, and suggest that communicating through social media mediates the social situations by altering the social processes, relationships, and activities.

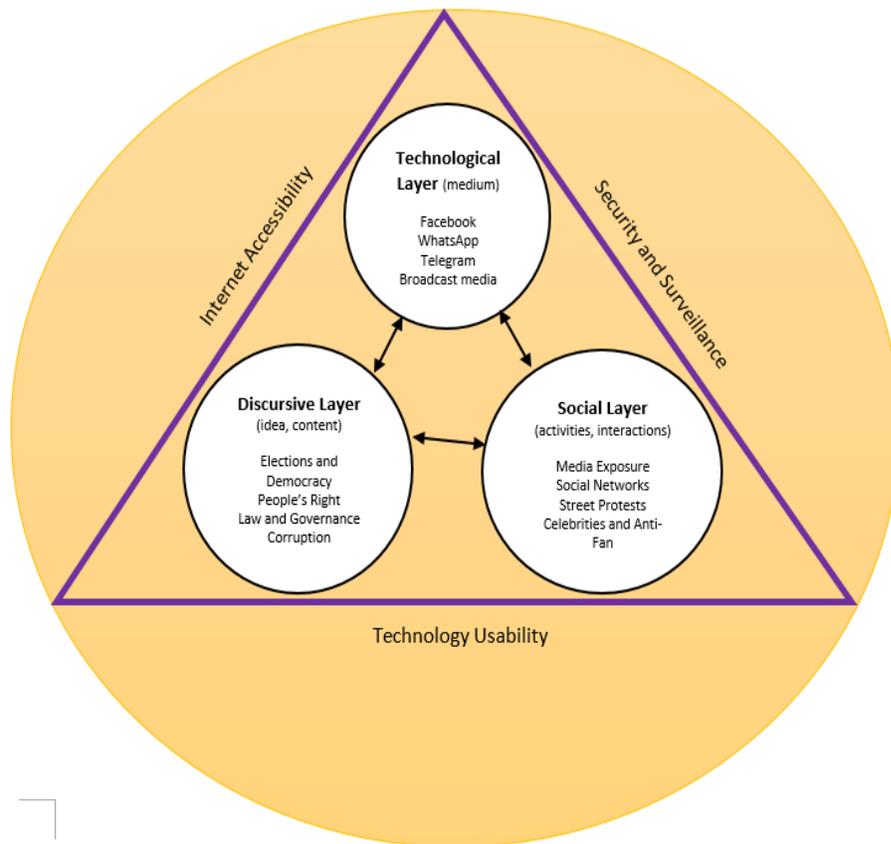


Figure 5.1 The communicative ecology model shows the interdependent and mutually shaping relations between media applications, people, and communicative content within a communicative ecology

By using the three-layer concept mentioned above, this chapter analyses how the Bersih movement's social activities are joined with communicative technology, and from there I offer a rationale for conceptualising how the Bersih movement's mobilising communication can influence citizens' communicative ecologies. This chapter focuses on online and offline communication within Bersih community and aims to propose new conceptualisation of network by examining the roles of social networks of Bersih participants in order to better inform the design of new technology that helps facilitate communication within the country. This includes an examination of how Internet access influences Malaysians' social participation, and the abilities of social media, and why some are prioritised over another. Finally, this study aims to suggest a mobilising approach for social movements that wish to sustain their communicative ecologies.

5.3 DATA ANALYSIS

By using the communicative ecology model, I have analysed the interactions between the Bersih movement and its participants through technological, discursive, and social layers. The case study that I present here comprises statements recorded from individuals within the movement as well as secondary data that I retrieved from websites and social media platforms. I employed several methods, including interviews, participant observation, and content analysis. First, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Bersih steering committee members, activists and volunteers to determine how and to what extent they use social media to mobilise and inform a course of action. Second, I observed the interactions, and conversations between activists and volunteers in events and social media groups within the context of movement. Third, I carried out content analysis on Bersih related social media platforms and online websites to understand the social conditions and processes involved in the construction of online communication through themes, patterns, and meanings.

5.3.1 Mapping the Technological Layer

The online participation of Bersih movement participants is mediated by many factors, one of them is their personal reliance upon social media technology. I will use the technological layer to illustrate the development of participants' social media use over time and connect this to how the Bersih movement frames narratives that the participants are more likely to use for their everyday online social interactions.

The technological layer provides the foundation for “mediated communication to occur in addition to conventional face-to-face interaction . . . each mediated communication operates a separate personal community network, and switches rapidly among multiple sub-networks” (Foth and Hearn, 2007, p.757). Different devices and applications facilitate different communication models, including one-to-one, many-to-many, either broadcast, or peer-to-peer. Each social media platform has its own uniqueness, some might better in producing desired outcomes. Therefore, it is important to examine citizens' accessibility to the Internet and how each media platform works within its communicative ecology to understand how the Bersih movement can deliver its

message effectively to its supporters and mobilise them. This layer provides tangible information on what communication platforms are available to the Bersih movement.

5.3.1.1 Technological Layer: Accessibility Encourages Usability

Before a discussion about how social media mediates the social activities of the Bersih movement, we need to understand the Internet accessibility of Malaysians to appreciate why social media is essential in their everyday social activities. S. Leong (2014) argues that the Internet allows citizens to communicate information that would probably be politically filtered, to wider audience and this might have nurtured great opportunities for the Bersih movement. Based on the Industry Performance Report (2018) that was published by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) on August 21, 2019, broadband subscriptions in Malaysia increased and reached 39.45 million (+4.2%) and mobile broadband contributed 36.79 million (+4.3%) in 2018. The percentage of Internet users in 2016 was only 24.5²⁶ million (76.9%) and increased to 28.7²⁷million (87.4%) in 2018. The report stated the increase was due to wider access to 3G and 4G LTE coverage in the country, improved network quality, and increased competition between telco operators in the broadband market (p. 7). In addition, the Smart²⁸ Community initiative, which began in 2015, was implemented in different states to enhance the living standards of local communities in both urban and rural areas (MCMC Annual Report 2017). Overall, the increase in Internet access among Malaysians shows that individuals are spending more time online and regularly engaging in Internet-mediated communication. Among the online activities are text communication (96.5%) and visiting social networking platforms (85.6%), mainly through applications such as WhatsApp and Facebook (p.54). The high percentage of Internet access among Malaysians reveals that the role of the Internet and social media as a source of information

²⁶ The survey used Computer Assisted Telephone Interview system at MCMC CATI Centre in Cyberjaya.

Fieldwork for this survey on 14 November 2016 and ended on 10 February 2017. The survey reached a sample of 2,402 Internet users and 1,067 non-users.

<https://www.mcmc.gov.my/en/resources/publications/annual-reports#>

²⁷ The sample population was drawn from users of mobile-cellular and household fixed-telephone subscriptions. The fieldwork, between 26 April and 10 August, 2018, reached 4,160 Internet users.

²⁸ MCMC implemented the smart community project in Kemaman (Terengganu) in early 2015 and two years later in districts such as Lundu (Sarawak), Kota Belud (Sabah), Putrajaya in 2016 and Langkawi (Kedah). <https://www.mcmc.gov.my/skmmgovmy/media/General/pdf/AR-2017-Eng.pdf>

and communication is becoming more significant. This indirectly justifies the importance of integrating new technology into the communicative ecologies of social movements to improve mobilisation.

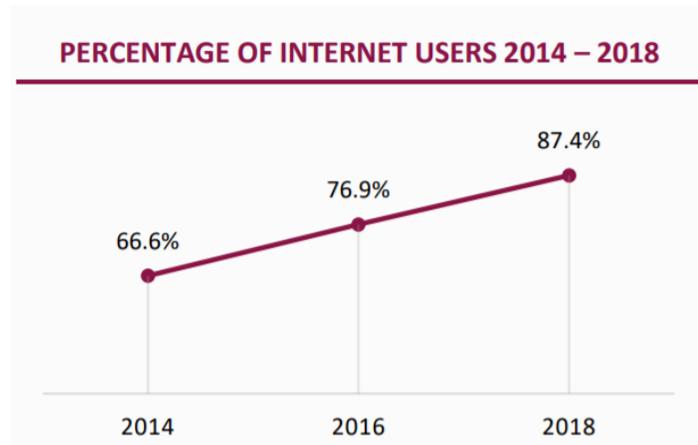


Figure 5.2 Percentage of Internet Users 2014–2018 (Source: MCMC)

With regard to communicative ecology, Altheide (1994) argues the expanded role of technology in everyday life has altered the temporal and spatial order of individuals' social activities. The Internet and social media become vehicles of expression and participation that changed the participatory landscape in Malaysia (Liw, 2012). Based on the MCMC's Industry Performance Report (2018), most Internet users in Malaysia, both urban and rural, prefer to access the Internet from home (88.6%), when they are out in public (68.1%) and in the workplace (56.4%). Since the majority of the Malaysian population has access to the Internet, they can easily obtain information relevant to the Bersih movement and communicate their narratives by joining the movement's online groups and forums, which in turn shapes their understanding of the content they consume. Physical places such as the home, workplace, and public hangout places become spaces that people occupy to engage in everyday conversations. They basically move seamlessly between offline and online communications to access information related to political and public affairs. This links back to the dimensions mentioned by Foth and Hearn (2007) that conceptualises a "place" in which networked social interactions occur that combine online and physical interactions, people, organisation, and content-oriented clusters. This place or context is where the technologies are embedded.

Further, the MCMC Internet User survey 2018²⁹ reports that among telecommunication devices, smartphone is users' favourite means to access the Internet (93.1%). Figure 5.3 shows several reasons for Internet use, including communication by text (96.5%) while others visit social networking platforms (85.6%) and to get information (85.5%). Among Internet users, the majority (61.8%) have shared content online and their content is news (63.9%) and political related issues (32.1%). Even though these statistical data do not really reveal much about digital activism in Malaysia, they reveal the type of content people search for online and the sources that they refer to. I contend that like-minded people who search for similar content eventually meet online and interact in the same social network and form clusters within the communicative ecologies where the technologies are embedded. This will be explored further with the case study of the Bersih movement.

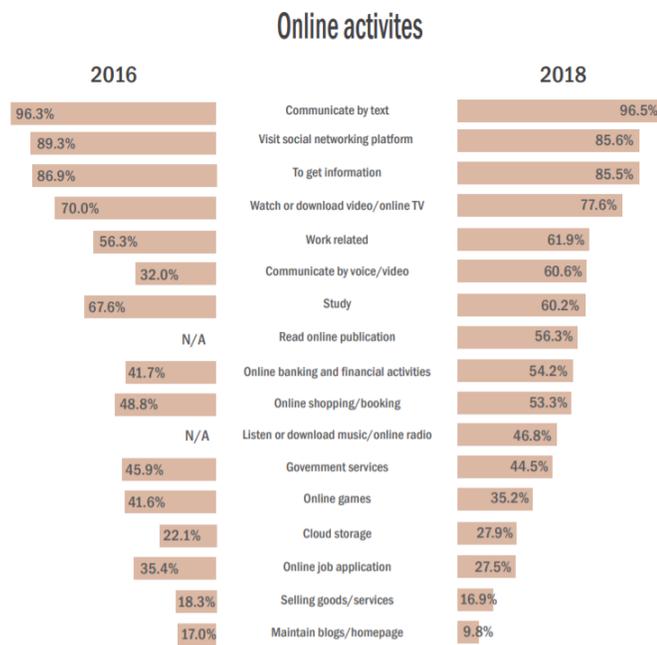


Figure 5.3 Percentage of online activities by Internet users in 2018, compared with 2016 data in parentheses (Source: MCMC)

²⁹ Malaysian communications and Multimedia Commission. (2019). *Internet Users Survey 2018*. [https://www.skmm.gov.my/skmmgovmy/media/General/pdf/Internet-Users-Survey-2018-\(Infographic\).pdf](https://www.skmm.gov.my/skmmgovmy/media/General/pdf/Internet-Users-Survey-2018-(Infographic).pdf)

5.3.1.2 *Technological Layer: Multiple Platforms Cater for Diverse Communication Needs*

Research into the Internet and democracy covers many different contexts, including technology that allows users to instantly express views, join debates and access information (Hargittai, Gallo & Kane, 2008), allow self-expression at relatively low cost (Chadwick, 2006; Gleason, 2013), fast dissemination across national borders (Norris, 2001), less censorship (Della Porta & Mosca, 2005), as well as more efficient coordination and organisation (Earl & Kimport, 2011). In addition, Cooper (2002) argues that the level of Internet connectivity is parallel to the degree of democratic activities, so people who have access to computers and the Internet are better trained, better informed, and able to participate well in democracy than those who are not. The optimism here is that the higher the degree of infrastructure and communication facilities, the greater the participation in democracy. The MCMC reports that I mentioned earlier did reflect that Internet accessibility and content-sharing behaviour among Malaysians are on the rise, but my study has no intention of taking a technologically deterministic approach. Rather, I argue that the level of activism and political engagement should be determined by the interplay between technology and society. It cannot be determined by simply looking at the level of connectivity, number of users, or technological infrastructure readiness alone. It is better to take an ecology approach to study the digital community by looking at how the technology embedded in communicative ecologies mediates and alters people's social interactions. I will use the semi-structured interview data that I collected to analyse how Bersih participants (activists and volunteers) experienced the online environment and how they share their values about electoral reform and gain support. In drawing the notion of communicative ecology by Foth and Hearn (2007), this chapter moves beyond the context of a single media platform or geographical place to explore a Bersih community that is located in an environment that constitutes places, technologies, and flows of people. This section discusses how the network sociability of Bersih communities occurred in the media ecology.

The communicative ecology of Bersih participants, including activists and social volunteers, is a complex system of networked devices. Based on the report of Internet users survey in Malaysia by MCMC (2018), I contend that most of the Bersih participants, especially those who live in urban areas, have mobile phones, desktop or laptop computers

connected to the Internet via broadband at home or workplace or mobile data plan. This shows that they can access the Internet in different locations, even when they are out in public, as long as there is coverage. In this study, I focus more on the multiple forms of communication and social networking applications that they use, instead of the type of devices, to examine the daily practices that make up Bersih participants' social life. The social life here is conceptualised as the social interactions that are related to the Bersih movement.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, participants were chosen based on their participation in online Bersih activism through a referral system. The questions that I asked were mostly related to their Internet use in everyday life that was related to the Bersih movement, as well as how far increased use of social media by social activists facilitated the movement's online mobilisation. There is evidence of a huge population turning up physically for Bersih rallies, suggesting that the popularity of the Bersih movement has increased with online mobilisation through social media. Hence, I used this as an indicator to establish whether or not the use of social media has changed the communicative ecologies of participants. Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram were chosen as technological layers for this study and they are analysed based on the communicative ecology of Foth and Hearn (2007).

In this section, I use qualitative data from my semi-structured interviews with Bersih activists in different states of Malaysia to provide an empirical grounding for the theoretical concept of networked individualism. My data reveals a majority of the Bersih activists and volunteers recognise technology helps Bersih activists in mobilising people to join their networks and stay connected with their electoral activities. The communication and social networking applications that are regularly used for mobilisation previously included email and blogs, and now also includes Facebook and WhatsApp. One Bersih activist (Male 2, Penang, personal communication, July 14, 2017) spoke of the use of technology by the movement since its first rally that was organised on 10 November 2007 and the emergence of other communication platforms over the years:

...we initially spread through blogs under the influence of two hundred prominent bloggers and opinion leaders. They created content relating to electoral reform and

attracted many readers. A year later, we started using Facebook to mobilise people on a wider scale by reporting movement activities in a timely manner to mobilise local and international supporters. We use platform that is accessible and popular among the people, be it email, blog, or social media.

Until 2020, the Bersih social media platforms, especially Facebook have recorded about two hundred thousand followers online. The use of technology for communication has always played a vital role in the movement's mobilisation. This shows that accessibility and social usability of technology has a positive effect on online mobilisation and engagement in Malaysia.

Talking about engaging with technology in social interactions, people who are working with the Bersih movement often communicated about its cause through social media platforms. The Facebook administrator of the Bersih 2.0 Facebook page (Female 1, Kuala Lumpur, personal communication, July 17, 2017) stated that Facebook is a powerful platform for communicating Bersih movement's demands and information to the people because she could upload curated content such as meaningful articles, and enhance their searchability with relevant hashtags.

“Facebook structure integrates many features, including news feed, friend list, likes, reactions, timeline, comments, notifications, messages, groups, live streaming and supports a diverse range of content that are helpful for stories and videos. If we post with hashtags, our followers can easily search and find our updates.”

The hashtags are conversational markers that directs the flow of information and “networked publics are textually rendered through the use of hashtags that define topics or directions for information sharing” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 34). A news feed that contain hashtags are more likely to appear on the followers' timeline. With the given structure and algorithm by Facebook, Bersih followers who regularly log into their accounts to access Bersih news feeds and page, are able to view the most popular post at the top of their news feed. In addition, Facebook allows their users to personally edit their

“Follow” settings to decide posts they wanted to view, either as “See First,” “Default” (see in usual order), “Off,” or completely “Unfollow.” The highly integrated design and personalised algorithm of Facebook makes it a powerful tool for mobilisation. Although technology eases the movement’s online communication, it is still the Bersih followers’ personal preferences and the movement’s moderating strategies that determine the visibility of Bersih’s content and thus influence their communicative ecologies.

The changing ecology of social media affects the way people meet their personal communication needs. Users today incorporate “multiple platforms into their communicative practices to connect to people and networks they desire to influence” (Zhao et al., 2016, p. 89). To effectively mobilise and engage people online, the Bersih movement needs to understand and fulfil the diverse needs of their target audience. The Bersih movement official Facebook page administrator said they always have the social contexts and effects of their movement disclosures in mind when posting online. By imagining their audience as concerned citizens who were interested in the latest political events, they would update the Facebook page with content that was trendy and relevant to the movement's demands in a timely manner. For example, in 2018, they regularly updated content about the GE14 and 1Mdb scandal because they believed their audience would want to know the latest news on major electoral events in the country. In addition, they changed their Facebook profile picture to suit the latest political situation in the country, such as a Malaysian flag and updating posts with hashtags such as #KeluarMengundi (“Come out to vote”), and #KalahkanPencuri (“Beat the Thief”), that corresponded with GE14. The use of hashtags also enhanced the visibility of their content on Facebook. This increased updates on Facebook on a daily basis, allowing Bersih-related content to dominate the followers’ news feeds and to prompt them to participate in conversations, hence meeting their communication needs for information.

Other than Facebook, WhatsApp is another popular mobile messaging application used in social movements. Owned by Facebook Inc., WhatsApp messenger is a free of charge cross-platform messaging and voiceover IP service. Bersih activist (Male 1, Johor, personal communication, September 24, 2017) spoke of his use of WhatsApp mobile for messaging and calling in coordinating movement activities:

“When I travel, I use WhatsApp to keep in touch with local activists. I send messages, videos and images, and make calls at zero cost. Usually I just text, but if it’s urgent I will call and meet the person face-to-face to discuss the details.”

Every platform has their distinct features and can be used in rather different ways. For instance, WhatsApp is widely used for the diffusion of information between Bersih movement activists and volunteers, while Facebook is for network publicity and to generate wider awareness among the public. This shows that different platforms have their own way to impact the flow of information between individuals, and their social relations, and thus alter the power relations between them.

Telegram is another popular instant messenger among civic activism and movements. This cloud-based messenger is popular for its self-destructing messages and heavy encryption. Bersih activist (Male 1, Johor, personal communication, September 24, 2017) spoke of his preference over Telegram for communication among core groups in the committee because it provided heavy encryption and allowed users to connect through Wi-Fi, rather than the centralised hub or the Internet.

“I encouraged people who attend Bersih rallies to install Telegram so that they could access updates on the rally schedule and on-site traffic in crowded spaces. It is more secure for communication and sharing information too.”

There were fears among Bersih participants who were cautious of potential government spies who might infiltrate their online groups, and exploit the technological ability of WhatsApp to screenshot their chat content and forward those private messages to the authorities. This safety concern is reassured by the ability of Telegram to provide heavy encryption for their messages. The sense of security and privacy provided by technology have allowed participants to freely interact and express their views. Recent research on young Malaysian-Chinese activists and citizens suggests that the fear of surveillance and monitoring by the government and online platform operators always

remains despite technology looking safe for political chat and activism (Johns, 2020).³⁰ This shows that the choice of communication platform is related to its interaction form within the communicative ecology and the issue of state surveillance and monitoring remains relevant when we evaluate the level of privacy and security for political conversations of each social media platform.

The above comparison between Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram is not to prove which platform is better because this kind of comparison may not be very meaningful since each has its own distinct features. It is just to provide a review that social media platforms are used by activists and organizational networks for mobilisation and coordinating actions, and hence playing a central role in civic as well as political engagement. It must also be acknowledged that these platforms are not used in isolation with each other, but complement one another.

On the other hand, the access to social media is higher in urban areas, but limited in some rural areas in Malaysia because of underdeveloped infrastructure and roads. Bersih volunteer (Male 1, Sabah, personal communication, October 4, 2017) said he produced CDs for mass distribution in rural areas to spread information about rural issues or struggles. He also collaborated with the Radio Free Sarawak organisation to highlight rural issues and brought local spokespersons to be interviewed by the London-based short-wave radio station. He spoke of his experience in using media to engage local people:

“The mainstream broadcast media such as radio is more reachable in rural areas such as indigenous longhouses in Sabah and Sarawak. I had a project that we distribute radio sets to rural long houses to help local village folks to receive daily evening broadcasts.”

His interview data suggested that when geography is brought into the Bersih communicative ecology, social media may not be feasible in areas that have low Internet

³⁰ A research, conducted between the year of 2016 and 2018, on Malaysian-Chinese activists and citizens aged 18 to 24, reveals that participants started shifting away from public-facing social media (Twitter, Facebook) toward the use of encrypted group chat on WhatsApp and Telegram (Johns, 2020).

accessibility and this is why broadcast media comes into the picture. Bersih activists operate within a highly differentiated media ecology in which old and new media, actors and issues interact in complex ways. Therefore, the Bersih movement should adopt a hybrid media approach to reach out to populations across states, especially rural areas in Sabah and Sarawak. This connects with Tacchi et al.'s (2003) articulation of the communicative ecology, where multiple forms of media are mixed and organised in certain ways that allow people to interact with others within their social networks. A multiple-platform approach is necessary to meet people's diverse communication needs.

The diversity of communication needs determines individuals' decisions around their social media use. From my interview data, Bersih activists revealed media platforms were chosen based on the communication model they enabled. No media platforms are the same, each activist needs to understand the specific affordances of media platform and map it wisely with their individual activities and movement collective activities. While mainstream media such as television and radio broadcasting facilitates one-to-many communication models, social media corresponds to many-to-many communication models. My interview data suggests that Bersih activists categorised the modes of communication they use based on audience and content. For instance, they set up a website to provide information relating to the Bersih movement, including media statements, news articles, reports, and archives of video and pictures. Researchers and students could then access their website for information gathering. As for communication and mobilisation, Bersih activists preferred Facebook and WhatsApp; They valued public-facing Facebook because they can share major events (such as rallies, workshops) and it is friendly for stories and videos, while WhatsApp and Telegram were preferred for communicating personal and critical issues because of the heavy encryption that prevents potential state surveillance and anonymous hacking. For rural areas, Bersih activists tend to use broadcast media to collaborate with local communities. Apparently, multiple platforms should be optimised for diverse communication needs. Each technology shapes individuals' social activities by moulding them into certain communication formats that guide their understanding about the Bersih movement.

5.3.1.3 *Technological Layer Conclusion*

In conclusion, the technological layer shows that political participation of individuals is not solely determined by Internet accessibility and usability alone. The Bersih movement's mobilisation and political engagement cannot be determined by simply looking at the level of connectivity, number of users, or technological infrastructure readiness only. In other words, a communicative ecology change cannot be determined by the technology itself, but the interplay between technology and society. Therefore, to provide a comprehensive view of Bersih's communicative ecologies, I need to analyse the technological layer (multiple platforms) together with the discursive (content) and social (interaction forms) layers. This combination provides a structure, logic, and competence for individuals' social actions.

When social media was integrated into the Bersih movement's activities, it provided opportunities for the movement to develop an entirely different social interaction and perspective. This can be seen to connect with Altheide's (1994, p. 669) articulation of communicative ecology where technology and activity are synthesised through the everyday life experiences of human actors. The next section talks about the discursive layer, particularly how Bersih narratives and content are shaped by the grievances faced by participants. This political context then changes the way they socialise and interact.

5.3.2 Mapping the Discursive Layer

This section analyses the discursive layer of the Bersih communicative ecology, which relates to content. "Content" refers to ideas or themes that constitute the conversations and narratives of the ecology (Foth & Hearn, 2007). It can be loosely regarded as the ideology of the movement that affects the actions and vice versa. Altheide (1994, p. 668) argues that content can be produced in various formats, depending on the selection, organisation, and presentation of experience and information. Social media content of the Bersih movement can be used to assess its cause and ideologies. My study analyses how the Bersih movement shapes their narratives around themes such as elections and democracy, people's rights, law and governance, and corruption. I also look at the online responses of participants by evaluating their attitude to the themes. The findings suggest

that Bersih activists have effectively used those themes to instil a sense of social inclusion among their supporters through the messages they read online. The themes have shaped the supporters' personalised conversations too.

5.3.2.1 Discursive Layer: Election and Democracy

The content that the Bersih movement posts online can be used to assess its causes and ideologies. Since the Bersih movement was formed on 23 November 2006, it has always kept its demands relevant to the political landscape in Malaysia. These can be summarised into eight key demands: (1) clean the electoral roll, (2) reform postal ballot, (3) use indelible ink, (4) minimum 21-day campaign period, (5) free and fair access to media, (6) strengthen public institutions, (7) stop corruption, and (8) stop dirty politics. The eight demands correlate well with the movement's main discourse of clean and fair elections. The slogan on the official website clearly says, "Only when elections are clean and fair, can citizens be real masters of their own destiny and expect holders of public office to act accountability and effectively" (Bersih official website, 2019).

The Bersih movement always affirms on their website that they support clean and fair elections and lobby for citizens' political rights and civic engagement. Based on these core ideologies, the activists frame the narratives and initiate topics of conversations among participants during their online and physical social interactions. However, my interviewees told me that many people had doubts about the Bersih movement's agenda as it was often portrayed as being associated with the opposition by mainstream media. They often received criticism and verbal attacks in mainstream newspapers from some pro-BN politicians who doubted the movement's objectives. This attitude from the government had led Bersih activists to conclude that it would be better for them to establish themselves as unaffiliated to any political party. Therefore, on the Bersih movement's official website (Figure 5.4), they clearly mentioned that the movement was relaunched as a coalition of like-minded civil society organisations unaffiliated to any political party. They also portrayed themselves as a bridge, aiming to effectively monitor both sides of the political divide in their hope to link the gap between civil society organisations and political parties. Their demands and aims speak clearly to their core

values as being independent of any political party, and this contributes to their political discourse and communicative practices.

Launch of BERSIH 2.0

The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (better known by its Bahasa Malaysia name "BERSIH") issued its first joint communiqué on 23 November 2006. At its formation, BERSIH comprised civil society organisations and political parties with the objective of campaigning for clean and fair elections in Malaysia. BERSIH's journey thus far has been both monumental and memorable. The public demonstration of November 2007, which saw thousands of ordinary Malaysians take to the streets in support of clean and fair elections, was a critical juncture in our nation's electoral journey. Almost 3 ½ years later, the aims of BERSIH remain relevant. The time came for BERSIH to continue its crusade for clean and fair elections independent of any political party. BERSIH was thus re-launched as BERSIH 2.0, a coalition of like-minded civil society organisations unaffiliated to any political party. Our aim is to effectively monitor both sides of the political divide.

Figure 5.4 Description of the launch of Bersih as a coalition of like-minded civil society organisations unaffiliated to any political party (Source: Bersih's official website)

Likewise, the content posted on the Bersih movement's social media page is consistent with their official website. Their official Facebook page, as indicated in Figure 5.5, clearly states the year they were founded, their mission, and contact details. Based on my observations, Bersih activists clearly indicated their movement was led by a non-government organisation, guided by an elected steering committee with representatives from different states in Malaysia. Once again, the "About" sections on their website and social media pages presented their ideologies and electoral discourse as neutral and non-partisan. The consistency in presenting themselves as neutral and not affiliated with any political parties shows that the Bersih movement was determined to tell Malaysians that they were independent, and thus reliable. Maintaining a stable social discursive structure could have provided a sense of trust among citizens and engaged them in conversations within the movement's communicative ecologies.



Figure 5.5 Bersih 2.0 official Facebook page (2018) portrays the coalition as independent, non-partisan, and apolitical

Despite many attacks and sabotage by other parties, the Bersih movement has been assertive in its core values as independent, non-partisan, and apolitical. During an interview, Bersih activist (Male 1, Kuala Lumpur, personal communication, July 17, 2017) clarified that the Bersih movement is not a vehicle of the opposition parties. He said that the movement does not prohibit individuals of different political preferences or members of the opposition parties from joining their activities as long as they support the movement's agenda. The ability to embrace people's differences and mobilise them to support clean and fair elections and democracy has been the strength of the Bersih movement.

5.3.2.2 Discursive Layer: People's Rights

In most of their press statements and online posts, the Bersih movement asserts the right of people to speak for themselves, to be a real master of their own destiny. Scholar Welsh (2011) argues that mass protests are not new in the Malaysian political landscape but the Bersih movement is able to reinvigorate opposition forces and renew calls for political reform in the national dialogue. She explains that the Bersih movement has two

distinguishing features that make it important: (1) its success in leveraging social media platforms to counter government-controlled mainstream media, distribute alternative information, and mobilise their supporters, and (2) its ability to gain support from people of multiple ethnicity, race and religion backgrounds. The Bersih movement believes a good government should be made of its individual parts—citizens from all walks of life that are politically literate and able to access and utilise information with the existing technology. This core idea frames Bersih as a people-oriented movement in Malaysia that lobbies for electoral reform for citizens of diverse backgrounds.

The concept of clean and fair elections is central to the Bersih movement's mobilisation. The movement constantly strives for citizens' rights to vote and demand electoral change. Bersih activist (Female 1, Sabah, personal communication, September 26, 2017) told me that the Bersih movement had been promoting awareness about citizen's rights to vote and their rights to freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and freedom of association, which were guaranteed under Article 10 of the Malaysian Constitution. She believed that it was important for the movement to inform the people that the Malaysian constitution has granted every citizen the legal right to freely express themselves. She explained many people are afraid to step out of their comfort zone because they believe that it is "haram" ("illegal") for them to go on the street to protest and they constantly asked about whether an official permit was granted by the authority to the movement organiser. She elaborated that people were fearful to express or voice their views because they feel that such action was illegal. Therefore, the Bersih movement aimed to dismantle this fear and instil an awareness of citizen's legal rights to demand freedom of speech, assembly and association, and furthermore to demand clean and fair elections in their own country.

Talking about people's voices and representatives, the Bersih movement has consistently put pressure on the previous BN government and Election Commission to ensure democratic elections. Long-standing concerns that were regularly expressed in their press statements included postal voting, the failure to use indelible ink to impede fraud during voting, unequal access to government-controlled broadcast and print media, gerrymandering, irregularities with the registered voters' roll, and the impartiality of the Electoral Commission. Bersih activist (Male 1, Kuala Lumpur, personal communication,

July 17, 2017) explained that no matter who won the election, what matters to him was how the match was being played; it was not only about power but the representation of the voters.

“We found some gerrymandering and mal-proportion in electoral constituencies in Peninsula Malaysia that have disparities in population size. Imagine, if a Member of Parliament has 140,000 voters in the constituency, how are you going to serve this huge population? Some places only have about 20,000 voters. There is a huge difference! That’s why we need to pressure the Election Commission to keep the electoral system fair across the board.”

Bersih movement’s emphasis on people’s voices and representatives in their discursive layer mobilise people and engage them in discussing how to exercise their rights as citizens, support electoral reform, and stand up against electoral irregularities. This eventually formed the conditions of sustainability for the movement’s communicative ecology.

Despite the claim of representing general public’s rights and voices, Bersih movement and its leadership is actually dominated by educated middle-class elites who mostly reside in urban areas. Bersih activist (Male 2, Penang, personal communication, July 14, 2017) said electoral reform required high intellectual leaders or activists who understand the complexities of Malaysia constituencies, politics and electoral system, and were brave enough to challenge the authorities and policy makers. He spoke of his experience engaging rural folks:

“I don’t expect rural folks to lead the electoral reform, but I hope they can follow and help to spread the word among their people. If Bersih can relate its cause to rural folks’ everyday lives, link it to local issues and make it relatable to them, I believe we can garner their support”

When the Bersih movement was reported by the government-controlled mainstream media under a negative light, he realised that it was necessary for the

movement to create new online public realities that could be represented by the movement's own new media through street protests, car convoy, social media, and other smaller-scale flash mobs and demonstrations. This new form of engagement should involve both urban and rural folks to support the same cause. He believed that there was a strong urge for transformation within Malaysian political culture, which nurtured public spheres that were more spontaneous and diverse. When the Bersih movement frames people's rights as the movement's discursive layer, it encourages citizens to take initiatives to engage in electoral reform. Citizens, including rural folks, are mobilised to voice their personal political views and have a say in electoral reform.

5.3.2.3 *Discursive Layer: Law and Governance*

Other than individual rights, the Bersih movement mobilises citizens to collectively demand good governance that acts according to the law in their discursive layer. While the Bersih movement was lobbying for clean and clear elections in 2012, the then BN government interfered with the space and democracy in the country by implementing the *Peaceful Assembly Act 2012* (Globalbersih.org, 2020).³¹ The Act was effective from 23 April 2012, which was five days before Bersih rally 3.0, a sit-down protest at Merdeka Square in Kuala Lumpur. Technically, this law enhanced political freedom and democracy for Malaysians; it compliants with Article 10 of the Federal Constitution, which guarantees citizens' freedom of speech, assembly, and association as mentioned in the earlier part of this section. However, this act forbids gatherings within 50 metres of prohibited places including, "hospitals, airports, public transport terminals, ports, places of worship, kindergarten and schools" to protect national interests (The Malaysian Bar, 2011). Furthermore, the act restricts foreigners and youths under 15 years old to participate in public assemblies and organisers of such assemblies should be above 21 years old. This restriction indirectly served as a catalyst for citizens to seek alternatives in engaging in politics, hence they went online, or supported the protest simultaneously in

³¹ The Peaceful Assembly Act 2012 regulates public protests in Malaysia. It was drafted four months after the Bersih rally 2. The government claimed that the Act will allow citizens to organise and participate in assemblies peacefully and without arms under restrictions deemed as necessary in the interest of public order and security. However, the opposition, the Bar Council and civil society have strongly criticised the Act, saying that it can be used as a tool to crackdown on the right to protest and freedom of expression.

different states. The Bersih movement's official website reported a total of over 250,000 people from about 85 cities worldwide who participated in the Bersih 3.0 rally on 28 April 2012. The massive turn up and support by multiethnic Malaysians, despite the legal restrictions, showed an escalated demand for better governance and expanded public sphere. This complements what Welsh (2011) mentioned earlier about the decline of authorities led by elite dominance and shifting power to the grassroots comprising civil society, which reflects the prominence of the Bersih movement in the Malaysian political landscape.

Moreover, Malaysians' frustrations over poor public governance drive them to seek for a proper channel to express their political grievances. Bersih activist (Male 2, Kuala Lumpur, personal communication, September 22, 2017) stated that the Bersih movement lobbied to clean up the governing system, not just the electoral system. He spoke of the importance of good governance to the country:

“A clean and fair government should be a government by law, not a government using law to achieve their own purposes, but a government that follows the law and acts according to the law. When the government ignores people's demands, and sent armed forces who used tear gas canisters and grenades against protesters in the rally, it lost its legitimacy. I believe if a government is running properly, everything would fall into place.”

To ensure good governance, the Bersih movement has trained citizens to be electoral observers. They launched the “Pemantau” (“Observer”) program on 30 October 2017, together with NGOs such as SUARAM and Pusat Komunikasi Masyarakat (KOMAS). Based on my online research, this campaign encouraged citizens to become electoral observers and report any incidents of electoral fraud or misconduct to Pemantau online via WhatsApp or through a telephone hotline. Based on the Pemantau Report of GE14 (2018, p. 12), the observer framework is based upon domestic laws and international obligations and principles whereas in Malaysia, the laws governing elections are in the Federal Constitution (Part VIII of the Constitution and the Thirteenth schedule), the *Election Offences Act 1954*, the *Elections Act 1954*, and the *Election Commission Act*

1957. In addition, the Bersih movement also makes reference to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) to ensure effective enforcement of the principles of free and fair elections. During GE14, several incidents were reported by Pemantau, including 46 incidents of bribery and vote buying, 196 cases of treating and gifts given out to influence voters, 105 incidents on the use of government machinery for campaign purposes, excessive spending by candidates from PH and BN during their campaign, 20 cases of biased behaviour by election workers on polling day and 274 complaints for improper conduct during polling day (Pemantau, 2018, p. 5). These complaints and incidents were compiled by electoral observers from all states and Pemantau presented evidence that the GE14 was neither free nor fair. While reform within the system and institutions is limited, this evidence is useful to bring mass public awareness to issues around electoral fraud. This Pemantau campaign shows the Bersih movement has been rigorously presenting solid evidence in their discursive layer, to allow the voices of citizens to be heard through ballot boxes. This mobilises the citizens to carry out their obligations as voters and cast votes in every general election.

5.3.2.4 Discursive Layer: Corruption

Based on the Pemantau report, irregularities in Malaysian elections were related to bribery and corruption, pointing to the importance of electoral reform. The report states that the Bersih movement lobbied for clean and fair elections because they believe it guarantees a democratic process for elections and this helps to combat corruption among political leaders. Therefore, Bersih activists always frame the movement's discourses and narratives as clean and anti-corruption. Based on the Bersih movement's website, several official press statements were released by the Bersih steering committee calling for supporters to stand up to corruption. Figure 5.6 shows a press statement detailing that even though the practices of bribery, and unauthorised spending was rampant and common in the country, they were still wrong. The committee urged for regulating party financing and governing political parties' income and expenditure. The poster pointed the finger at the former Prime Minister Najib Razak, who had received RM2.6 billion of 1MDB funds for his 13th general elections campaigns. The committee also lobbied for a caretaker government that was able to conduct itself appropriately.

MAKE YOUR VOTE COUNT!—Zero political corruption

16 MAY 2017



Bribery, treating and unauthorised spending are so common in any election in living memory, one would think there is nothing wrong with them. But these are actually among the few things clearly spelt out as offences in the law – i.e. the Election Offences Act: trying to bribe voters or accepting bribes (an offence under [...])

Figure 5.6 A Bersih poster that criticises the political financing for general elections 13 (Source: Bersih official website)

The widespread of corruption and 1Mdb scandal had prompted the Bersih movement to demand the then prime minister to resign. Bersih activist (Male 1, Kuala Lumpur, personal communication, July 17, 2017) said they demanded answers from the authorities pertaining to the allegations of former Premier Datuk Seri Najib Razak Tun Razak for receiving RM2.6 billion in his savings account, which the latter claimed as a donation to fund elections. He gradually raised his voice when he spoke of the scandal:

“People who were involved in investigating the 1Mdb scandal including Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission officers, were either removed or forced to step down. Nobody knows what is going on. So, what do you do? Do you still wait? No, you move! Many criticised Bersih as partisan, but we have no choice because all our concerns have fallen on deaf ears.”

In response to the issue of corruption, the Bersih movement organised its fifth rally on 19 November 2016 which focussed on economy issues and called for the resignation of the then prime minister. This action reflected the versatility of the Bersih movement in addressing issues in timely manner and their ability in incorporating relevant issues into their narrative of electoral reform.

After Bersih rally 5, another press statement (Figure 5.7) was released by the Bersih steering committee on 1 December 2016 to thank supporters who turned up for the

rally and the night vigils for #BebasMaria #MansuhSOSMA. The committee applauded the supporters for “bravely standing up to a corrupt government despite endless intimidation and misinformation” (Bersih 2.0, September 2016). This press statement shows that the concept of anti-corruption is central to the Bersih movement’s mobilisation. When the movement used the issue of corruption in their discursive layer, it generated a positive response from the supporters.

PRESS STATEMENT (1 DECEMBER 2016): BERSIH 2.0 expresses utmost gratitude to supporters for bravely and peacefully standing up to corruption and urges Malaysians to continue the struggle

1 DECEMBER 2016



[VERSI BM] Friends, thank you all for your overwhelming support and commitment, turning out in large numbers for the BERSIH 5 rally and then continuing to attend the #BebasMaria #MansuhSOSMA nightly vigils. You have again showed that the BERSIH is a peaceful movement and BERSIH 2.0 applauds every single supporter for bravely standing up to [...]

Figure 5.7 A thank you note from the Bersih steering committee members to their supporters who turned up for the Bersih 5 rally and night vigils for #BebasMaria #MansuhSOSMA

Over the years, the Bersih movement has been actively demanding reforms for political spending and financing. They have urged the government to review the current *Election Offences Act 1954*, which regulates campaign spending by political candidates. The movement’s steering committee released a press statement on 21 January 2020 on their official website by quoting BN Secretary-General Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor’s testimony in the High Court over UMNO receiving political donations for their election campaigns. They lobbied the authorities to set a limit for public and private funding for political parties during elections. This consistent effort in fighting political corruption and demanding financial reforms through regulations reflected the determination of the Bersih movement to promote a clean and fair electoral system in the country. This demand has influenced the communicative ecologies of their supporters and inspired them to exercise their rights as voters in supporting zero-corruption in Malaysia.

5.3.2.5 *Discursive Layer: Conclusion*

The discursive layer of the Bersih movement's communicative ecology lies in the technological layer, and includes the movement's content. The content posted by movement activists can be categorised into four general themes: (1) election and democracy, (2) civil rights, (3) law, and (4) governance and corruption. These themes correspond to the movement's eight demands and core beliefs, which are for clean and fair elections for Malaysians. The Bersih movement gathers people together to advocate for common issues and to create a Malaysia beyond religion, ethnicity, or personal interests. Even though this discursive layer does not elaborate much on the use of social media, it is undeniable that technology is vital in the movement's struggle. The next section will discuss the social layer of the movement's communicative ecology. Through the Bersih movement's rallies and published media content, participants can interact with one another to build a mutual understanding within the Bersih communicative ecology. In addition, these Bersih rallies and online communities provide a physical and virtual space for participants to take control of their social circles and seek a collective identity.

5.3.3 Mapping the Discursive Layer

The social layer refers to people and social modes of organising those people in a movement, which might include informal social networks and more formal community associations (Foth and Hearn, 2007). It consists of activities that enable participants to socially interact. This layer also explains the social roles played by people and the types of social networks they form within a movement. My study uses a log of online posts and comments from the Bersih movement's multiple social media platforms and interview data with the movement's activists and volunteers to analyse social interactions within the Bersih movement's communicative ecology. The social layer tends to explore the impact of participants' initial exposure to the Bersih movement and their roles in the movement on an engagement level. This layer also examines the influence of Bersih rallies and responses from external parties on the participant's social relations. Citizens' interactions within the movement is a form of engagement that increases the overall value of the movement from the perspective of the participants. For example, when Bersih activists interact with other social media users on the movement's Facebook page by sharing their

experiences with the movement, this is likely to encourage high engagement among them. Participants are mobilised to seek opinions from one another and thus enhance the bonding between them. The social layer explains how people interact with one another and are organised in the Bersih movement's communicative ecology.

5.3.3.1 Social Layer: Media Exposure Stimulates Interest

Social media not only plays a role in mobilising the public, it also serves as a foundation for mediated communication among Bersih activists themselves. An interview with some activists and participants of the movement shows that their initial awareness and exposure to this movement was through mainstream media and online media. The interviewees were from different social backgrounds, basically a combination of professionals, academics, businesspeople, NGOs, students, and retirees. They were living in different states such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Johor, Sabah, and Sarawak. My interview outcomes reflect their personal use of the medium, and communal bonding with like-minded others has gradually nurtured their public-spirited commitments, transforming them from concerned citizens who are aware of the electoral reform movement, into activists who are actively involved in lobbying for the cause. Bersih activist (Female 1, Sabah, personal communication, September 26, 2017) recalled her first experience with the Bersih movement as a social volunteer who helped to administer the movement's Facebook page in Sabah:

“In the beginning for me, during Bersih 4 where I was just helping to update the social media which is the Sabah Facebook page. That was just a minor role for me. I did not get involved actively anymore after Bersih 4, but my connection with the Bersih team never stops and we still continue to keep in touch as non-governmental individuals.”

Bersih activist (Female 1, Sabah) told me that she first got involved with the movement when she was in her twenties. Her responsibility was to disseminate information relating to the movement and other electoral reforms through the Sabah Bersih movement's social media platform. Even though her role was minor, her initial

exposure to the movement through personal social networks and social media had a positive effect on her future participation in the movement.

After a few years, Bersih activist (Female 1, Sabah) said she decided to join the Bersih movement permanently because she felt that she wanted to contribute more to the community that she lived in. Since then, she had been actively using Facebook to engage with Sabah communities by posting information that was relevant to local issues and she used Sabah dialects as captions or headings to attract the attention of Sabah residents. Sometimes she used hashtags in local dialect to shape the tone and flow of information because she believed local tags displayed denser social connectivity between users. She explained that the Sabah Facebook page had drawn many locals to discuss socio-political issues in Sabah, especially indigenous' rights and their customary lands, as well as the movement's demand for clean and fair elections. These issues became the topics of their everyday online conversations, which eventually shaped the social interactions within the Sabah Bersih communicative ecologies. The sense of coming together for the same cause—clean, and fair elections—informally became a social bonding between herself and other supporters who originated from different regions in Sabah.

Another Bersih activist had his first exposure to activism back in the late 1990s when he was still a teenager. Bersih activist (Male 1, Kuala Lumpur, personal communication, July 17, 2017) said he became aware of political injustices after he read about the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in the mainstream news, and some critical reviews in the alternative media. He spoke of himself being terrified by the fact that such a powerful man would be politically mistreated and thus was inspired to find out the cause of such injustice and ways to put an end to it:

“During my young days, I still remember the Reformasi movement. I was 12 years old at that time . . . During the political crisis in Malaysia, I was very young, I will say that I don't know anything, but you know one thing Anwar has been sacked as a deputy prime minister . . . I was reading back then The Star . . . and alternative magazine.”

Back then, Bersih activist (Male 1, Kuala Lumpur) was joined by his friends, and together they went to support protests against Anwar's injustices, without realising that they had indirectly participated in the Reformasi movement. His initial exposure to activism was through print media and he formed a habit of using media to access and disseminate information after he grew up. After he joined the Bersih movement, he continued using social media to mobilise people to participate in the movement.

Compared to the senior activist, a young Bersih volunteer from Sarawak had his first exposure to the Bersih movement after he moved to Kuala Lumpur to pursue a degree in media course. Bersih volunteer (Male 1, Miri, personal communication, May 17, 2018) said he heard about electoral irregularities through his lecturers and peers. He and his friends were prompted to start a physical conversation when they came across any news on government misdeeds or political abuses. They would sit down and complain about the lack of transparency and lamented the decline of democracy in the country. He spoke of his past experience as a cyber-activist who contributed to the awareness of electoral reform:

“My friends and I were very active online, especially Facebook. When we saw biased comments on social media, we would join the debate and try our best to explain the truth to others.”

These young Bersih volunteers carefully crafted their personal comments and used them as a tool for lobbying their arguments and negotiating status, so that others acknowledged their presence in the Facebook forum. Once their comments were assessed to be credible and reliable, either by the Facebook administrator or other participants, they believed they were able to communicate a solid social standing in this online community about the socio-political situation in the country. This shows that there were actual conversations among the participants themselves, either dialogic (between Facebook administrator and participants) or triadic in nature (between participants themselves). If online conversation counts as a starting point that motivates citizens to take physical action, sustained through collective groups and social networks over time, then it is

important for the Bersih movement to address this and utilise Facebook to frame narratives that can mobilise their participants.

Based on the interviews above, the Bersih participants all admitted that their initial exposure to the mainstream media and social media had greatly influenced their later perceptions about media use as well as their engagement in Bersih activism. They agreed that social media played a significant role in disseminating movement information and creating awareness among citizens. In fact, they told me that different forms of communication applications, either mainstream media or social media, worked at different levels to aid people's conventional face-to-face interactions. Each medium operated separately in its own communicative ecology, and integrated together among the multiple social and information networks (Foth and Hearn, 2007). In the Malaysian context, the control imposed by the state on the mainstream media restricted the activists' access to information, and thus, they turned to the Internet and social media. The activists' initial exposure to the media when they were younger encouraged them to adopt mediated communication in their current mobilisation. Through this early media exposure, they were aware of the political situation in the country. Hence, they participated actively in the Bersih rallies and supported the cause. This shows that the social layer is related to the technological layer whereby increased access to the Internet by Bersih activists enables them to disseminate their messages and interact with others online.

5.3.3.2 Social Layer: Social Network Encourages Self-Development

Based on the interview data, a majority of my interviewees' initial exposure to the Bersih movement, other than media, was through their personal networks. Most of them had volunteered for an NGO or attended civil activities prior to joining the Bersih movement because of their family members or friends. A few had taken their own initiatives to participate in activism due to regular exposure to the media. My study suggests that there was an obvious self-development among the interviewees, whereby they started as mere social volunteers then developed into activists through constant media exposure and encouragement by members of their social networks. In the Bersih movement, participants usually distinguished themselves between the social roles of activists and volunteers. It was possible for volunteers to become activists if they actively engaged in

the movement's activities. Some activists who had been vocal and proactive in electoral reform were promoted as regional representatives and appointed as members of the Bersih steering committee.

The social networks within the Bersih movement provide an environment conducive to personal development. Bersih activist (Female 1, Johor, personal communication, September 24, 2017) said when she was in her early twenties, she was concerned about her country's politics and regularly read news on social media. She spoke of her first encounter with the Bersih movement and how she grew into an activist several years later:

“I received a leaflet about an English political forum, which was rare because usually forums in Johor Bahru is conducted in Mandarin. So, I joined. I met an activist from *Engage* and he invited me to join their organisation. Slowly from there, I started to get to know people and became active in Bersih.”

As a committee of Bersih endorsed NGO named *Engage*, she had proactively interacted with people within and outside of Johor, and formed social networks with them. She collaborated with people from different NGOs and civil society on various causes, including the Bersih movement's activities on the constituency delineation project, KOMAS for Freedom Film Festival, PACA trainings, and conducting political education workshops in several places titled Parliamentary Democracy—Who wants to be YB? She always held a positive attitude towards these social acquaintances when she first started as a social volunteer in the Bersih movement. Gradually, she became compatible with them and eventually shared access to their social networks. From a brief encounter in an informal social network, she then came to participate in a more formal social network with other volunteers and activists within the Bersih movement. Her influence within the movement grew when she managed to broaden her new social networks and integrate them with her existing personal networks in her mobilisation. This personal growth and identity change from volunteer to activist is also one of the advantages of being involved actively in the Bersih movement.

Besides, based on the background of the Bersih movement published on its official website, and the interview data that I collected, the movement started from a group of people who probably knew one another and formed a joint communique after an electoral reform workshop in September, 2006 (Bersih, n. d.). These members were initially organised through their personal social networks. Later on, they met new friends through movement activities and eventually formed a broader social network. My study suggests that when the social networks are multiplied and their messages are amplified through multiple media platforms, a joint action committee eventually grew into a coalition and expanded into a nationwide movement. Based on the interview data, the Bersih movement organised its members through broader issues by framing their demands as a national affair, beyond ethnicity, race, religion, and geography. The locations for organising group meetings had shifted from personal to physical public spaces, and from private to public networks online. These collective community building efforts basically operated on the basis of common location, interest, and mutual friends.

During my visit to the Bersih secretariat offices in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Sabah, I was told by the Bersih secretariat staff that their offices were used for activities and informally as a gathering spot for their volunteers and activists who dropped by to rest or socialise. People met one another at some occasions and interacted, hence forming informal social networks. Likewise, the participants also met at more formal occasions such as Bersih rallies, electoral reform workshops, voter registration activities, and online groups such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups. Among the active movement participants, many were existing members of Bersih-endorsed NGOs. According to the Bersih movement's official website on 20 March 2018, there were 92 NGOs that collectively endorsed the Bersih movement's goals and mission. Based on my interview data, these organisations and communities had expressed their endorsement for the Bersih movement and participated actively in their rallies to demand clean and fair elections. Meanwhile, they also worked on their own agendas and issues such as gender issues, human rights, indigenous customary lands issues, rural development, and voter education. Each Bersih-endorsed organisation and community had their own cause and target community. Some focused on a single cause and their existing social networks, while others preferred to engage with other members and collaborated in interstate activities. My study suggests

that despite differences, the Bersih movement managed to sustain all these social networks and mobilise them in their rallies because it embraced multi-issues advocacy and emphasised broader goals. The movement's demand for clean and fair elections seemed to encapsulate all issues in one common goal, which was institutional reform.

My findings show that in a networked community like the Bersih movement, participants are allowed to collaborate with others on multiple issues and they are not required to collectively agree on a single cause only to be successful. Participants feel empowered in believing that they can make a difference in their social world (Drury & Reicher, 2005). Every individual and organisation could select the cause and activities they wanted to support and participate in, and from there they formed social networks and stayed connected with one another. My study concluded that the Bersih movement has been successful and popular in Malaysian society due to its flexibility and versatility in organising electoral activities and mobilising people. Many Malaysians of different demographics have used the Bersih branding to organise activities that are in line with the movement's demand for clean and fair elections via social media within Malaysia and abroad. When these social media networks multiplied, the influence of the Bersih movement on their supporters' communicative ecologies increased as well.

5.3.3.3 Social Layer: Street Protest Cultivates Collective Identity

My study uses Foth and Hearn's (2007) concept of the social layer to explore how a social movement initiative can connect to people's social networks through mapping their media use and social activities. Based on my interview data, among all the electoral activities organised by the Bersih movement, it is the mass rallies that were the most prominent. In addition, the expectation that the Bersih rallies would be successful has shaped people's perception of their own political efficacy (Y.H. Khoo, Selvanathan & Lickel, 2021) and given them greater confidence after participating in collective action (Profitt, 2001). Bersih activist (Male 2, Penang, personal communication, July 14, 2017) spoke of the significance of mass rallies in getting people of diverse background together:

“Bersih had its first rally in 2007 but it was dominated by Malays and initiated by PAS. After we relaunched ourselves as non-partisan, we can see more support from people of different ethnicities. I remembered in Bersih 2.0 rally, the participants were dispersed by police who were heavily deployed throughout Kuala Lumpur. When the police threw tear gas and water cannons at us and physically assaulted some of our protestors, everyone started helping one another. We don’t know each other but at that moment, we came together as one. This experience was indeed a transformation for all because we started to see the Bersih movement as a Malaysian affair.”

Participating in collective action through street rallies had made protesters who did not know each other feel a sense of togetherness and compelled to take up the identity of Malaysians who love their country and fight for change. The Bersih rallies built a sense of belonging among supporters who were mobilised to collectively fight against police brutality. This connects to the first theme that I mentioned in the discursive layer where the Bersih movement used the concept of civil rights to influence the communicative ecology of supporters and the social interactions between them.

Moreover, Bersih activist (Male 2, Penang, personal communication, July 14, 2017) described the Bersih 2.0 rally (2011) as the turning point in changing citizen’s perception of street protests; it marked a new chapter in Malaysian protest history. He told me that in Malaysian history, independence was delivered by elite dominant groups whereas ordinary citizens did not have a chance to participate in the process unless they joined leftist or communist groups. To fill this gap, he believed that Bersih rallies had provided a common ground for citizens to speak out, and these protest experiences had made them bolder and mobilised them to organise other mini-scale protests in their hometowns.

However, another social activist (Male 1, Sabah, personal communication, October 4, 2017) told me that it was idealistic to believe that people would be united through those rallies. He spoke of the Bersih movement as too urban-centric, and not representative of the majority.

“Bersih should work on eliminating the biases of Peninsula Malaysians and be more sensitive to the differences of Sabah and Sarawak, in terms of history, ethnic profile, and local civil societies, so that a truly free and fair nation would emerge in the future.”

In response to the gap between urban and rural communities, Bersih activist (Male 2, Kuala Lumpur, personal communication, September 22, 2017) stated that many rural folks were not aware of the political conditions in the country and they were not articulate enough. Hence, it was difficult for them to reach any kind of conclusion about the issues happening around them. He explained urban folks had access to different media and stories from different sources, and thus they were able to understand the background and context of electoral reform easier. From my interview data, a majority of activists acknowledged the differences between Peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak—rural, and urban—but they still agreed that the Bersih rallies have indeed provided a good platform for citizens to voice their grievances. The Bersih movement has encouraged regional coordinators to organise local protests in line with the main ones in Kuala Lumpur and they are allowed to add local issues into their demands. This links back to the point that I mentioned earlier, where the flexibility and versatility of the Bersih movement has made them one of the most popular movements in the country.

Other than Bersih rallies, Bersih activist (Male 2, Penang, personal communication, July 14, 2017) said the Bersih movement also mobilised citizens to form ad-hoc communities to create awareness about political issues that happened in their hometowns or neighbourhoods. He gave me some examples of local protests that were organised alongside Bersih rallies, for instance “Anti-Lynas” in Pahang, “1Black Malaysia” in Perak and “Anti-Mega tower” in Kuala Lumpur. Residents protested against the Lynas rare earth refinery plant in Kuantan in 2012 over the fear that it would produce radioactive waste harmful to the local residents and the environment (The New York Times, 18 June 2012). For the 1Black Malaysia campaign, the Bersih movement urged Malaysians to wear black on 7 May 2009, to protest against the ongoing Perak coup or constitutional crisis by the BN government (The Nutgraph, 5 May 2009). The anti-mega tower protest was against the government's plan to build a 100-storey Warisan Merdeka

tower that was proposed by the Prime Minister in the 2011 budget at a cost of RM5 billion (The Malaysian Insider, 29 October 2010). There were other protests that were initiated by individuals and organisations, some with political connections, while others were just concerned citizens or residents of the area.

These protests were all physically organised and promoted through social media. For instance, the committees created events and forums on Facebook, exchanged messages through WhatsApp groups, organised discussions at coffee houses and eateries, initiated flash mobs in the streets, protested in front of buildings and set up film screenings at friend's houses. Bersih activist (Male 2, Penang, personal communication, July 14, 2017) spoke of how extended face-to-face interactions had mushroomed over the years and were all initiated by citizens themselves, through their personal social networks based on a common location, interest, and mutual friends.

“Sometimes the citizens just gathered at a regular hangout place to discuss issues happening in their neighbourhood. The meet-ups were casual and regular.”

The perspectives on the importance of citizens staying united either physically or online to fight for their collective rights are also supported by much scholarly research. Scholar J. B. Y. Lim (2017, p. 217) argues that the citizens' Facebook activities reflect their deep sense of disappointment and dissatisfaction with Malaysia's leadership and the political dilemma; they seem to reach a consensus that in order for a change, they have to unite, strive for their voices to be heard and show solidarity via individual and collective actions. From the interviews, my study concludes that Bersih rallies and citizen-initiated activities might not have had a significant impact on Malaysian politics, but they did broaden the public sphere and increase political awareness and engagement in society. Some of the small protest groups dissipated over time when they failed to connect and network with each other, but the Bersih movement is sustainable because it is a network of organised yet informal social entities that are formed based on common purposes and solidarities in the pursuit of electoral reform.

5.3.3.4 *Social Layer: Celebrities and Anti-Bersih Fans Increase Publicity*

Most of the time, we expect mobilisation to come from social movements; this could be due to the type of communication applications used, or the messages that are framed. However, Bersih activist (Male 2, Penang, personal communication, July 14, 2017) pointed out that the biggest mobiliser sometimes did not come from the movement itself, but the BN government and their cronies. He explained that ever since the Bersih movement started to draw public attention and support, there had been several instances of harassment and threats from the government. However, this harassment had indirectly given the movement a lot of media coverage and support from citizens. For example, far-right Malaysian politician and former Perkasa president Ibrahim Ali and the notorious Red Shirt leader Jamal Yunos, who constantly made racist statements against the Chinese communities—“Cina gila babi” (“crazy Chinese pigs”)—had driven many Chinese citizens to join Bersih rallies to protest against extremism.

“These extreme and racist political remarks by the BN coalition had caused an uproar among the people and they start to resort to a more independent platform to voice out their dissatisfactions.”

When the Bersih movement was able to respond critically against extremely racist and authoritarian political speeches, they gained people’s trust and support. Hence, the movement became legitimised. From the interview data, my study concludes that the concept of legitimacy is vital in bringing Malaysians together and mobilising them to support a common cause. The extreme and racist remarks made by the BN politicians that challenged the legitimacy of the Bersih rallies had indirectly garnered more support for the Bersih movement. This is important to the social layer because it encourages more engagement between Bersih supporters.

When angry citizens march in the street to protest against extremism and racism, the endorsement by celebrities and artists who support the Bersih movement motivates them to continue their fight for clean and fair elections. Many Malaysian artists have indirectly contributed to the Bersih movement’s communicative ecology by producing art works relating to themes that are relevant to Bersih’s ideologies. For instance, Malaysian

artists such as Chinese rapper NameWee who is popular for his rap song “Negarakuku” (“My country”) has used social media as a new forum to express his dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in his homeland. Also, in September 2010, he posted a video titled “Cakap Lagi La Cina Balik Cina” (“Say it again Chinese go back China”) (Figure 5.8) that contains racial remarks in response to the racist statements made by the BN politicians and their supporters. His song has drawn many people to his YouTube channel and has been shared millions of times online. Since then, NameWee has continuously uploaded original songs to his YouTube channel and Facebook page in support of the Bersih rallies. Other than NameWee, popular Malaysian filmmaker Pete Teo has tweeted about the peaceful Bersih rally 4 organised by the Bersih movement and praised it as a beautiful Malaysia when the non-Muslims and Muslims peacefully gathered for the same cause (Pete Teo, 2015). These celebrities have taken up hashtags and used their own social media accounts to draw attention to the Bersih movement. Celebrity advocacy for the Bersih movement has captured the public’s attention and allowed a more active interaction in the public sphere.



Figure 5.8 A rap song titled “Say again la Chinese go back China” is uploaded on Facebook to criticise the racist remarks by Malay politicians



Figure 5.9 Filmmaker Pete Teo tweeted that the peaceful Bersih mass rally is truly Malaysian on August 30, 2015

Based on social media posts and stories reported by the mainstream and alternative news media, racist comments made by anti-Bersih supporters and the ruling political coalitions have angered many Malaysians and urged them to fight for institutional reform. As a result, when the Bersih movement called for everyone to join the street protests, many jumped on the bandwagon to protest against social injustices and demanded more political freedom and equality for all races. Some have extended this to social media platforms by generating content in support of the Bersih rallies. The social layer can be mapped for geographical communities where Malaysians share the same space with others, including friends and families, social activists, artists and celebrities, as well as anti-Bersih politicians and interaction within the Bersih movement's communicative ecology. These voices are often competing with one another within the public sphere.

5.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter highlighted the advantage that the Bersih movement has gained by having access to the Internet and social media. Technology is more than a medium but a social setting where different layers (technological, discursive, and social) collide into one another and the process of personalisation and persuasion happens in a faster and wider

scale. The communicative ecology framework that I adopted from Foth and Hearn (2007) suggests that communicative ecologies comprise mediated and unmediated forms of communication that are organised in specific ways, through which people connect with other members in their social networks. Communicative ecologies incorporate socio-political and personal practices, communication processes, and everyday activities that embed information. This model embraces the three dimensions of the Bersih movement, including “online and offline,” “global and local,” and “collective and networked.” My study has found that movement participants, including activists and volunteers, frequently traverse between online and offline communication.

In the Malaysian context, Bersih movement participants maintained close communication with their local communities and more prominent interactions through WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and face-to-face activities, compared to global and geographically dispersed communication. Depending on the communication context and purpose, participants often switched between their networked and collective (group) interactions. When they were in a collective group, participants interacted collectively and discussed issues ranging from street protests, petitions for election irregularities, voting, and electoral lobbying activities. On the other hand, when they were in networked interactions, they sought to raise awareness about clean and fair elections among Malaysians, and voluntarily initiate contact with people who support electoral reform. Among movement participants, the activists were more interested in making new friends and establishing new social networks, whereas the social volunteers seemed more comfortable with their established social networks (such as friends and families). There was the potential for social volunteers to become activists when they started expanding their social networks and participating in the movement more actively. Hence, the hybridity of communicative ecology shows both network and collective qualities that allow much more fluid and informal connections between movement participants. I argue that these personalised social networks are more likely to form civic engagement and social capital, from closed groups to community at large. The future challenge for Bersih activists is developing a greater understanding as well as communication applications that address the complexity of this communicative ecology, within the context of a Malaysian civil society that is reasonably diverse and vibrant. This detailed mapping of the

technological, discursive, and social layers of the Bersih movement contributes to the existing literature by recognising that individual citizens' personal experiences and self-fulfilment are becoming more central in the Bersih movement.

The three layers that I discussed above are frequently colliding and influencing one another. For example, during the Bersih 2.0 rally, there was a mix of multiple types of media used by participants to disseminate information. For instance, mobile phones enabled rally participants to record and document the events, communicate and connect with individuals and groups who support the same cause—clean and fair elections—and to pass the electoral reform story to other Malaysians. The diffusion of information during the Bersih 2.0 rally on 9 July 2011 took place in a hybrid network of media users, including ordinary citizens, social activists, journalists, broadcasters and social media users. This network not only reflects the logic of media convergence (Jenkins, 2004), where old and new media collide in the technological process, but a cultural process in the contemporary society where the line between production and consumption stages, and the roles between producers and consumers are blurred. Text, images, and videos of the Bersih 2.0 rally were posted and shared several times on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, and forwarded many times to WhatsApp and other messaging groups. The social networks seemed to have grown larger and denser from one rally to another since 2011. This explains how each layer collides and influences one another, as part of the Bersih communicative ecology, activists and volunteers used mobile phones and social media platforms (technological layer) to frame a collective response based on local and national history and culture, through creating a common narrative of clean and fair elections (discursive and social layers).

The overall importance of social media to the Bersih movement is obvious but difficult to quantify. My interviewees all recognised the importance of the technology in their activism but not fully convinced that technology alone could stimulate significant political and societal transformation, not to mention changing the most fundamental narratives of Malaysian politics. Some argued that clicking on a website or “Like” a Facebook page could give a false sense of efficacy of technology's impact on the movement. However, nearly all of them stated that technology helped Malaysians to communicate with one another and share stories to keep the movement's conversations

active. It was the stories and people's voices that kept the movement sustainable. This connects back to the discursive layer that frames the narratives of the Bersih movement and the social layer that explains about activities that engage the interactions among participants. However, for rural areas where access to technology is still limited, access to the information and stories was prevented. Therefore, Bersih activists had to identify this gap and bridge it so that their movement could be more independent, rather than relying on the political parties' mechanism and partisan networks in rural areas. To sum up, this chapter provides a detailed mapping of the technological, discursive, and social layers of the Bersih movement and contributes to the existing literature by utilising a holistic perspective that recognises the interrelationships between diverse communication platforms. The multiple social media platforms and face-to-face interactions during street protests have given rise to a communicative ecology of Bersih participants. This chapter developed an understanding of the offline and online appearances, and contextualised the hybridity of this communicative ecology in the Bersih movement by showing both collective and network qualities.

6 PERSONALISATION OF THE BERSIH MOVEMENT'S COMMUNICATIVE ECOLOGY

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter analysed the Bersih movement's communicative ecology by looking through the lens of Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model. This chapter continues to build on the existing argument by expanding the definition of communicative ecology through personalised communication. The growing demand for personalised communication and relations with causes and organisations makes social media increasingly central to the Bersih movement's mobilisation. My study argues that the Bersih movement's communications can best be understood by bringing together the communicative ecology and Lichterman's (1996) idea of personalism to put the media use of movement participants into the context of the surrounding human relations. I use Lichterman's personalism to conceptualise the practise of personalisation and commitment within Bersih movement is on individual basis. Individuals express their personal feelings to get self-fulfillment, and this enhances their public commitment. This chapter explores personalised communication in the Bersih communicative ecology and the next chapter delves deeper into a particular social media platform to analyse the personal and political topics that individuals share, the type of communicative modes (such as posting, sharing, replying, commenting, liking, and using hashtags) that are prominent, and with whom they interact and share content with. Both chapters tend to answer the sub-research question "How effective is Bersih participant' personalised communication and affect for increasing their engagement with political conversation?". By personalising their communication, they see online media as their own media which they have full control to discuss and make public of their fight. They are able to personalise their activism, which in this case, is to get clean and fair elections for themselves and other Malaysians. These individualised orientations lead them to engaging with politics as a personal expression, fulfillment and grievances.

The growing individualisation in modern societies has encouraged widespread emphasis on self-fulfilment. There is a fear that this emphasis may lead people to become increasingly selfish and destroy the existing traditional community ties that are necessary

for good citizenship. My study uses Lichterman's concept of personalism to challenge this common assumption and argue that self-fulfilment does not necessarily detract from public-spirited politics. Lichterman (1960, p. 56) conceptualises personalism as building an organisation based on a great deal of personalised initiatives, not selfish means, and participants with personalised commitments can regroup relatively easily. This chapter uses personalism to add a more personalised lens to Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model. I try to map the technological, discursive, and social layers with Lichterman's (1960) personalism and put individuals' social media use and interactions within a culture where they respect one another's personal fulfilment and hence become united. Lichterman's personalism theory sees individuals as autonomous and active in social change and their everyday lives. This demonstrates why individuals' personalised communicative ecologies are important and how central their everyday conversations are in the Bersih movement's mobilisation strategies.

I have organised the findings in this chapter by placing them into an integrated private public sphere (see Figure 6.1) where Bersih activists and volunteers are able to claim politics and personalise participation. If compared to the conventional public sphere as defined by Habermas (1996) where there is a disconnection between institutionalised, formal politics and the everyday citizens, my findings show Bersih activists and volunteers feel that it is more rewarding for them to be able to freely express their political views without succumb to the mainstream and elitist political traditions in Malaysia. Although critics doubt that loose multi-networks are able to generate strong commitment, coherence and persistence of action that is required to produce political change (Tilly, 2004), Bersih activists feel that this loose individual affiliation provides more flexibility and room for the movement to grow locally and globally. Each individual who gets involved in the movement is able to take charge of their personal coordination in their social groups, neighbourhood or community. The high turnout of the Bersih rallies over the decade proved that loose individual affiliation is able to mobilise people and form a unified act of personal commitment among Bersih participants who come from different states and countries.

6.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The increasing individualisation of Malaysian society in recent decades is likely to result in the personalisation of political issues. This shift in society encourages individuals to “bring their personal narratives to the fore in the mobilisation process and thus requires social movements to be more flexible in their mobilisation strategies” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, p. 771). Individuals who are autonomous tend to demand more freedom in framing their everyday narratives and socialising with others. Foth and Hearn (2007, p. 750) argue that “individuals take control of their personal portfolio of sociability”; their behaviours during social interactions are driven by their own personal needs and preferences. From passive consumers they become active content producers who create personal and political content. To mobilise these highly autonomous individuals, social movements need to embrace more flexible policies that allow individuals to freely express their personal views and commit their own free will. As I mentioned earlier in Chapter 5, the Bersih movement is one of the most popular social movements in Malaysia because of its flexibility and versatility in multi-platform mobilisation. It encourages individuals and organisations from different states to participate in electoral reform by expressing their views online and organising local activities. Therefore, this chapter will further expand this point by using Lichterman’s (1960) theories of personalism and personalisation. An understanding of personalisation builds on the foundation of my analysis of Bersih participants’ personalising narratives within their communicative ecologies and makes their everyday conversations central to the movement’s mobilisation process.

Personalised everyday practices eventually form personalised public commitment to society among individuals. By using a theory of culture that highlights everyday practices to conceptualise personalised communication and public commitment, Lichterman (1996, p. 279) argues that individuals who participate in a protest probably share a common enthusiasm for personal self-expression towards the issue, and this might enhance public commitment rather than just temper it with private needs. He argues that an individual discovers their personal self by reflecting on their own biographies and developing preferences that establish their own individualities (p. 277). Lichterman’s theory of personalism suggests that individuals attain fulfilment from their personal

commitment and communication, and that this fulfilment is a cultural accomplishment that happens in a group or community setting. The approach to culture as everyday practice enables individuals to identify personalised public commitment by examining the cultural relations between selves and communities (p. 276). This chapter uses personalism theory to analyse why individuals' personalised communication and commitment influences the Bersih movement's communicative ecologies and how central their everyday practices are to the movement's mobilisation strategies.

The next section builds on the previous chapter's argument by expanding the definition of communicative ecology through personalised relations. My study analyses how the Bersih movement makes room for the personalised commitments of participants structuring themselves as a movement and how they relate to that structure. My interview data shows that the Bersih movement is formed by participants at will and that they have organised several mass rallies and activities, and maintained a steering committee that comprises regional representatives from different states in Malaysia. The steering committee based in Kuala Lumpur is responsible for setting direction in the movement and coordinating with other endorsed individuals and organisations. They work with local organisations and social volunteers who allow them to facilitate local protests for clean and fair elections. They also work with global partners, such as Global Bersih, which coordinates protests in cities where overseas Malaysians reside. The democratic structure and consensus decision-making processes within the Bersih movement have produced different kinds of group bonds. These bonds have influenced the communicative ecologies and commitments of participants.

6.3 PERSONALISED COMMUNICATION IN BERSIH: THE THREE LAYERS

My study examines a personalised politics that involve autonomous action and moderate degree of coordination within the Bersih movement. By using the concept of personalisation and Lichterman's (1996) personalism theory, I analyse how the Bersih movement personalises its communication strategy to mobilise others to fight for their voices to be heard. This chapter applies personalisation to the movement's participants by delving into the private and political aspects of their social experiences that are related to the Bersih movement. Even though the concept of personalisation has existed for four

decades, the notion of personalisation as a practical activity in media industries and social movements is relatively new since the spread of social media and mobile technologies in the 2000s. I aim to explore this area by examining Bersih participants' personalised communications practices, how these manifest, and what this tells us about personalised mobilisation in the age of social media. While Foth and Hearn (2007, p. 750) argue that individuals' social relationships are driven by their own personal needs and preferences, Lichterman (1996) links these personal expressions to individuals' self-fulfilment and public commitment. Both revisit and shift the definition of community, from a traditional sense of collective group behaviour to a more personalised communal experience.

This research focuses primarily on the Bersih movement in the multiethnic and multicultural Malaysian context, which may differ from other forms of online activism in Europe or the United States. I conducted several semi-structured interviews with Bersih participants and asked them about their involvement in the Bersih movement and their experiences with the movement's development processes. In addition, a critical review of existing movement literature, social media platform content analysis, participant observation, field notes, and email interviews were used to provide rich data that was collected between 2017 and 2020. "Participants" here refers to two groups of people: activists and volunteers. Activists are elected members of the Bersih steering committee, and full-time staff who work for central and regional Bersih secretariats. Prominent political leaders, academic researchers and professionals who contributed their expertise and resources to the movement leadership are also referred to as activists in this thesis. Volunteers refer to members of the 93 Bersih movement endorsed NGOs and individuals who support and regularly engage in various forms of communication with the movement, both online, and offline.³² Chapter 5 uses Foth and Hearn's (2007) three layers of communicative ecologies to analyse how the Bersih movement builds their complex communicative ecology that involves different levels of social interactions and demonstrates how central everyday conversations are to the Bersih movement's

³² Initially, Bersih official website listed 93 endorsing NGOs, but after an update on 10 October 2019, it was reduced to 56. This is probably due to some groups being formed on an ad-hoc basis and the members having gone inactive after the general elections in 2013 and 2018.

mobilisation strategies. This chapter explores personalisation practices among participants within the Bersih communicative ecologies.

Based on my four years of observation and analysis, I summarise that the Bersih movement is framed on the idea that it is a legitimate platform for individuals to advance their personal and political interests, beyond racial, geographical, or political backgrounds. The movement often promotes the idea that helping an individual's self is best achieved through collective action by emphasising how fair and clean elections can influence a citizen's personal life. Self-interest and personal experience are embedded in society and community, within personalised communicative ecologies. Individuals situate themselves in a social context and articulate their political grievances about the country. They frame their personal narratives as citizens or voters, and together with others, collectively support the Bersih movement. For instance, when thousands of Malaysians were mobilised to join the Bersih 2.0 rally in 2011, a general perception was that the Bersih movement had successfully gained widespread public acceptance or legitimacy. In addition, the movement received the Asia Democracy and Human Rights award in 2017 and was widely recognised for lobbying for the use of indelible ink during elections, as well as empowering overseas voters (Aliran, 17 December 2017). My interview data found that citizens went to street protests because they personally felt that the government was not treating them fairly, and thus they had a right (such as freedom of speech) to express dissatisfaction through public sit-ins, mass demonstrations, strikes, and other protest actions. This connects back to Lichterman's (1996) personalism theory that individuals who participate in a protest probably share a common enthusiasm for personal self-expressions towards an issue, and this might enhance public commitment rather than just temper it with private needs.

6.3.1 Personalised Social Layer

Personalism is highly participatory because individuals play an active role in social change, both in activism, and everyday life (Lichterman, 1996). People make meanings in specific social settings in relation to each other (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003). Before we discuss how the Bersih movement personalises their participants' communication, let us take a look at their personal selves and experiences. Prior to their participation in the Bersih movement, my interviewees were ordinary citizens from different social

backgrounds: a combination of academics, professionals, businesspeople, activists, and students. They were living in different states such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Johor, Sabah, and Sarawak. They were exposed to the electoral reform movement through different forms of media, and their own personal experience and networks.

In their everyday life, my interviewees revealed that they conversed about politics in locations such as home, work, places of worship, out in commercial spaces, or on social media. They moved around in their conversations with people, from public to private, talking about education, economy, politics, crime, religion, personal matters. Their personal use of digital media and communal bonding with like-minded others gradually nurtured their public-spirited commitments, transforming them from concerned citizens who were aware of political injustices to volunteer in the electoral reform movement, to activists who were actively involved in lobbying for the cause.

6.3.1.1 Personalised Social Layer: Interest Enhances Public Commitment

I asked interviewees: “How did your political conversation about the movement arise, and what motivated it?” Some of them explained their early exposure to politics was through family, religion, traditional media, political leaders, and peers, as well as personal curiosity and concern for the country that they live in. Bersih activist (Male 1, Johor, personal communication, September 24, 2017) told me that his religion had taught him to love others the way God has loved him, and to uphold justice among injustices. For many years, he had been active in NGO, but he always drew a distinct line between religion and social activism. He tried to keep a low profile and did not want his Christian friends to see him as politically active or anti-BN government when he first started activism a decade ago. Hence, he organised electoral activities outside of church. He recounted his experience struggling to reconcile the political frame of Bersih movement with his personal religious identity:

“[At first] I volunteer to help people to register for voters . . . then I get to know more about phantom voters been used during election to try to cheat and to the work of Bersih we became more aware of some of these fraudulent methods, so

when Bersih 2.0 rally was organised in KL in 2011, I went up with a few friends to join the protest . . . I didn't do it as a Christian, but I did it as Malaysian.”

Like many others, Bersih activist (Male 1, Johor) respected his identity as a Bersih steering committee member who demanded clean and fair elections, but retained his personal identity as a Christian who kept his political preferences separate to his religion. Even though he did not claim receiving a calling from God to fight for this cause, he admitted that religious beliefs had inspired the social conscience in him and made him responsible and concerned for the problems and injustices in the society. The religious capital that he acquired directed him to engage in giving and volunteering in the Bersih movement. This meant Bersih activist (Male 1, Johor) was a role model among his social networks. Gradually, his friends learned about his involvement in the Bersih movement, and started to join to show support. They shared a common passion for personal self-expression towards political injustices and this enhanced their public commitment. Hence, this Bersih activist's personal commitment in caring about social justice mobilised his personal ties to join the movement. It has also bridged his perception of the movement's cause as both a personal (individual) and societal (collective) issue.

Other than religion, another Bersih activist joined the Bersih movement because of an invitation by a like-minded friend. Bersih activist (Male 2, Penang, personal communication, July 14, 2017) said the movement started as a body called Joint Action Committee by a group of friends comprised of activists and members affiliated to opposition parties PKR, PAS, and DAP:

“I was invited to join as the committee because they need my [personal] experience and expertise as a researcher to reorganise Bersih, from a partisan-based to a NGO and civil society-oriented movement”

The establishment of the Bersih movement started with a group of academics, politicians, and activists who gathered to discuss their political views and how they could contribute to make a change in the electoral system through street protests and social media. These early pioneers knew one another through mutual friends or the organisations

they were affiliated with. None of them had control over the mainstream media, nor acquired any political power to make changes to the institution. However, they participated in online discussions and met face-to-face to discuss electoral reform. These regular interactions eventually led to a coalition of clean and fair elections and later turned into a movement. My study suggests that personal communication between like-minded activists can develop into public commitment with the help of alternative distribution networks and spaces, such as personal social networks and social media groups. The “friend-to-friend social networks” established on social media contributed to online solidarity and likely helped create a sense of civic responsibility among citizens who felt empowered to support and contribute to the political reform discourses by disseminating information online through their personal (and public) social media platforms (J. B. Y. Lim, 2017, p. 223).

There are others who are influenced by their family members who are politically active. Bersih activist (Male 1, Kuala Lumpur, personal communication, July 17, 2017) who grew up in a typical pro-BN government family, told me that despite objections from his family, he insisted on supporting the Reformasi movement when he was a teenager. He spoke of his refusal to follow in his parents’ footsteps to support the then ruling government because he felt that what had been done to Anwar Ibrahim was unfair:

“Despite coming from a family who is very active in BN—my mum was the woman wing chief and my dad was the secretary . . . I do join the activities, go and listen [to] this kind of things. I believe members of a family are allowed to support different political parties, we should be given the freedom to exchange perspectives without any interference from other family members.

Due to his enduring persistence, he managed to sustain his personal identity as the son of pro-BN parents as well as an activist identity as a supporter of the Reformasi movement. Both roles and relationships are equally important to him, and interwoven with the work he performed, but did not impede his activism.

Based on the interview data, my study found that the Bersih movement seemed to frame their pursuit of electoral reform as a way to cultivate personal satisfaction and

empowerment. The traditional sense of community as a collective behaviour had shifted to a more personalised communal experience. This connects back to Foth and Hearn's (2007, p. 750) argument about individuals' social relationships being driven by their own personal needs and preferences as well as Lichterman's (1996) emphasis on self-fulfilment and public commitment. Both revisit and shift the traditional sense of community from a collective group behaviour to a more personalised communal experience. My interviewees all agreed that the Bersih movement was a good platform for them to fight against political injustices and put their personal experiences to good use. It had constructed a culture of personalised public commitment that framed the pursuit of electoral reform as a way to cultivate the activists' personal satisfaction and empowerment. As Lichterman (1996) argues, the concept of personalism is highly participatory because individuals play an active role in social change, both in activism and everyday life. Individuals' personal selves and experiences do link their everyday practices to their political actions. This personalised social layer links back to my earlier argument that the Bersih movement's communications can best be understood by bringing together the communicative ecology and Lichterman's personalism into the context of human relations. Citizens who participated in the Bersih movement shared a common enthusiasm for their expressions towards electoral reform and this further enhanced their public commitment beyond private needs. The next section takes this as a departure point to further explore the personalised self and commitment in the public and private spaces of the Bersih movement's communicative ecology.

6.3.1.2 Personalised Social Layer: Integrated Private and Public Spaces

The previous section examined how Bersih activists' personal experiences and family background influenced their political expressions while this section explores the spaces where these political expressions take place, with attention to the social layer to demonstrate that personalised communication is central in the Bersih movement's mobilisation. Based on Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model, I use its emphasis on place-based networks, both global and local, to analyse my case study. I argue that the Bersih movement's communicative ecology contains social networks of citizens who reside in Malaysia that follow its social media. It is not an ecology based

around a range of socially linked portfolios that represent a non-place-based networked community. My argument builds on the model's discussion about the blurring of the boundary between online and offline life, suggesting that the emergence of social media does not make communities disappear, but has reinvented an integrated new space that is both public and private.

In contemporary society, individuals often cross between private and public spaces, and engage in mediated communication in places where they regularly hang out. Personalised conversations in familiar spaces are more than just mere talk, they are likely to multiply, which may lead to better thinking and greater action (Wyatt et al., 2006). From the interview data, I found that Bersih participants' everyday political conversations took place most frequently in their own house or familiar places where most media are consumed. Basically, the communicative ecology of a Bersih participant consists of home, school, office, public areas, and sometimes religious places. They converse about the content they read from the mainstream media and social media in their everyday social interactions. I mapped these interactions into the three layers of communicative ecology with an emphasis on the integrated public and private spaces in Figure 6.1. The diagram illustrates that these two spaces have gradually integrated due to people engaging in mediated communications through mobile devices and the Internet on a daily basis. People are moving around while communicating about socio-political issues with others, and eventually form mediated conversations within these two spaces.

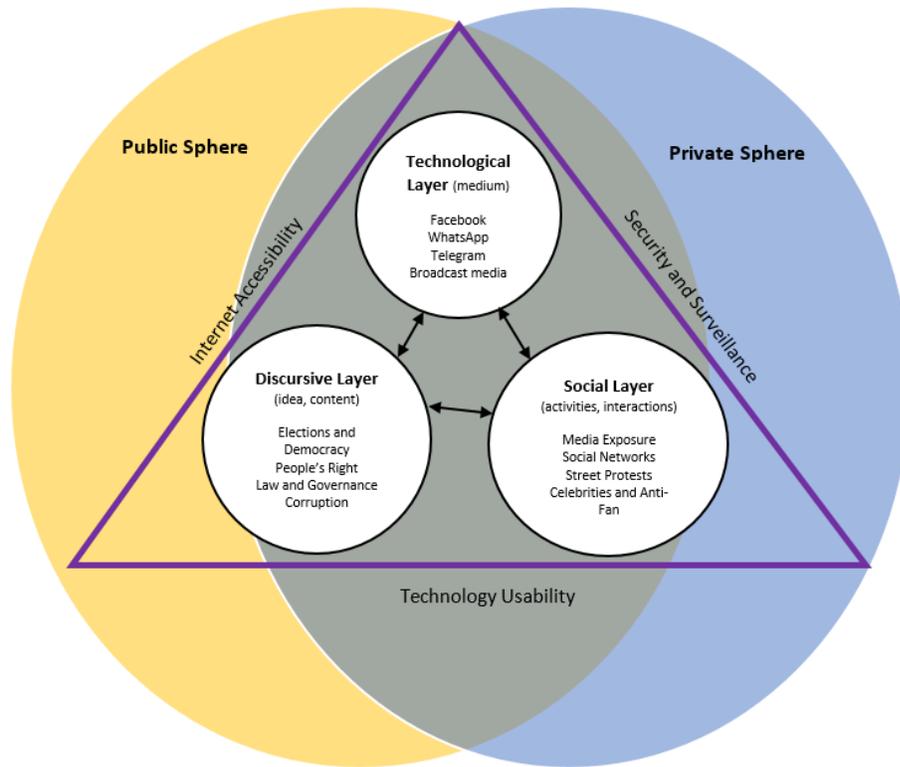


Figure 6.1 The Bersih movement's communicative ecology takes place in the integrated public and private spheres

In this digital culture, it is getting harder to draw a distinct line between public and private spaces, when most of our interactions are mediated through mobile phones and laptops. Referring to Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action, a political conversation or communication that takes place in the public sphere is usually proper, rational, and reaches a consensual action. In this public sphere, citizens exchange ideas, debate, shape the conditions that structure their everyday lives, and translate their privately suffered grievances into public concerns and collective action. However, with new media devices and communicators always on the move, it is challenging to decide what is considered intimate talk and public speech. Critical theorists like Habermas (1994), Arendt (1958, 1998) and Fraser (1992) do not associate personal hang-out places as part of the public sphere because they do not contribute to changing state policy or power, but they agree that the public sphere is open to popular participation regardless of social status or identity (Breese, 2011, p. 137). Habermas (1989) says everyday political talk may look

trivial, but it forms the basis of rational public deliberation. However, other scholars like Ikegami (2000) and Putnam (2000) argue that these personal interactions are important forms of shared public life (Breese, 2011, p. 137). There is a potential for small groups to become political because they can mobilise individuals to define problems collectively and react to common issues (Fine & Harrington, 2004). Therefore, personalised conversations that are made in public spaces such as streets, shopping malls, and markets through social media applications or public performances (such as voting for election polls) conducted in the privacy of the home by individuals, all contributed to the public sphere. Over time, these individuals and their personalised conversations will form a communicative ecology that responds to public issues in a personally mediated fashion.

Furthermore, the Internet and social media have given individuals the power to monitor their continuous mediated conversations as part of their daily activities. The personal can become political with the help of alternative distribution networks and spaces that help to develop counterclaims and critical narratives against predominant mainstream claims and social values (Fraser, 1992). Mapping these ideas of public sphere with my case study of the Bersih movement, I argue that Bersih participants who talk about politics and interact with like-minded people are part of this integrated private public life. For instance, my interviewees could talk about election campaigns with their friends in a private WhatsApp group, comment publicly in an online political forum, have political conversations with co-workers over lunch at a local restaurant, and watch television news at home with their families. They moved around in their conversations with others, from the public to private, and their communicative ecology comprises their home, office, and other familiar hang-out places such as cafés or eateries with friends. Basically, they generated personalised mediated conversations within their niched social groups on an everyday basis. Once again, this links back to my earlier argument that everyday personalised conversations between Bersih participants and their social networks are central in the Bersih movement's mobilisation. To understand Bersih participants' mediated conversations and media use, it is important to understand the way social media is designed for individualised use, and has control of users' personal expressions. This leads to an analysis of the technological layer of the communicative ecology model.

6.3.2 Personalised Technological Layer

The way social media is designed for individualised use has control of users' personal expressions and probably opened up new possibilities for better commitment and mobilisation within the Bersih movement. This section uses the technological layer in Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model to analyse the way social media shapes Bersih participants' social activities by moulding them into certain communication formats that guide their understandings about the movement's communication. In communicative ecology, the technological layer refers to information technology that operates according to a logic involving operating principles, and each is unique in preserving and transmitting information. Each technology brings different dimensions to activities and often reshapes them (Altheide, 1994, p. 668). This layer provides some tangible information on what communication platforms are available to the Bersih movement. Building on the discussion in Chapter 5, I expand the technological layer through personalisation and argue that the growing demand for personalised technology and individualised media use in contemporary society has improved individuals' relations with causes and organisations, and thus makes social media increasingly central in the Bersih movement's mobilisation. Up to December 2019, there was about 270,000 people following the official Bersih movement's Facebook page online, checking on movement updates, and engaging in online conversations. Followers expressed their political expectations, concerns, and frustrations about the Malaysian socio-political situation and electoral misconduct on this platform. Social media seemed to enrich democratic participation by connecting millions of people around the country at hyper speed. Malaysians use media as a form of civic participation in their public life as well as in more personal settings such as at home with families. This layer critically examines how the Bersih movement succeeds communicatively by personalising their social media use and making everyday political conversations central in their online mobilisation.

6.3.2.1 Personalised Technological Layer: Individualised Use of a Public Platform

The emergence of social media that encourages personalised participation has placed average citizens at the centre of a conversation and invited them to project their personal interpretations on existing socio-political issues (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011). The

architecture of the Internet and social media that connects many-to-many, enables personalised conversations among citizens. For example, Facebook allows individuals to create groups as a way to grow a community who are interested in the Bersih movement. This allows Bersih activists to organise Watch Parties to stream video online for their Facebook followers or make it live for the public to view and comment on. Figure 6.2 shows that the Bersih steering committee held a press conference and streamed it live to respond to the political turmoil and “back door” government under the leadership of the eighth Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin in Malaysia. By May 2020, the video had received 28,000 views and 60 shares as well as 162 emoticons such as “Like,” “Haha,” and “Love.” The responses reflected personal self-expressions of the public who shared a common enthusiasm for the political issue, and a sense of commitment that something must be done in response to the “backdoor” government. This connects back to Lichterman’s (1996) theory of personalism, whereby personalising conversations help to enhance self-fulfilment and public commitment.

Individuals who watched the video live were watching in real time together with many others, and they interacted through personal comments even though they were not physically present at the press conference. For those who missed it, they could easily search or access the video archive in the Bersih Facebook page and join the comments online. This feature allowed Bersih Facebook page followers and the public to support and develop closer relationships with one another during the political turmoil. My observation suggests that the interactive design of Facebook allows Bersih participants to talk to each other and exchange personal views that in turn provide moral support and create political awareness among themselves. Those who frequently access the Bersih news feed and notifications on a daily basis are more likely to appear to be more enthusiastic and committed in the group.

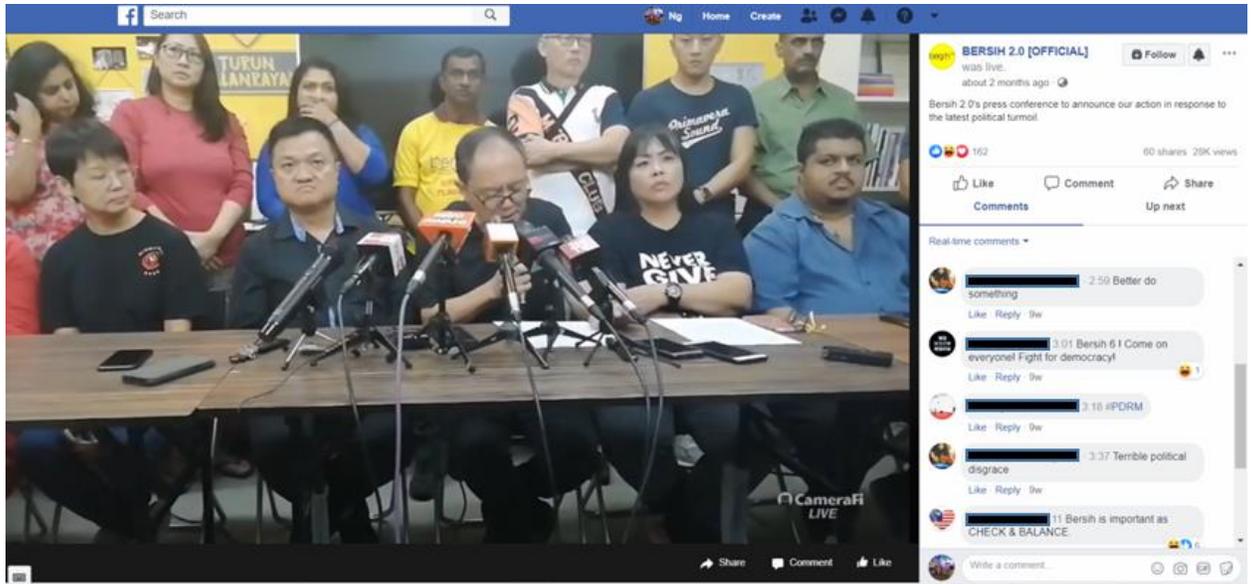


Figure 6.2 The Bersih steering committee held a press conference to respond to the political turmoil in Malaysia on 28 February 2020

Another example of this occurred when the motion of constituency re-delineation was passed in parliament on 28 March 2018, with 129 votes in favour and 80 against, and citizens shared their views on Facebook about the potential impact of redrawing electoral boundaries on the voters and GE14. The administrator of Bersih’s Facebook page urged citizens to check their polling status and verify whether they had been reassigned to a new area under the new re-delineation policy by using a check link on the Malaysiakini.com website (refer to Figure 6.3). The advice was posted online soon after the motion was passed in the parliament. This post urged Bersih’s Facebook community to perform their role as voters by checking their constituency status online. I observed that the administrator was always aware of political events in Malaysia and posted content relating to electoral reform on their Facebook page on a daily basis. They had optimised some popular features of Facebook and customised the account settings to curate personalised messages targeted at the Bersih community.

For every item of content that the administrator posted online, Facebook sent push notifications and emails to update Bersih’s Facebook followers about the new comments, tags, and activity. However, the followers still enjoyed nuanced controls over their social media use and could turn off this notification if they were not interested in the updates.

Sanfilippo and Strandburg (2019, p. 10) argue that movements can moderate and control the social media content flow if they customise their settings to admonish individuals who shared friends' stories and persistent metadata that revealed deleted posts. To some extent, the rules-in-use of Facebook have creatively supported appropriate information flows and governed information sources to balance online communities' objectives and privacy.

Moreover, I observed that the Bersih Facebook post on the passing of constituency re-delineation had solicited a quick response from followers as many shared their search results that said, "Your constituency has been moved to a different constituency," or "Your constituency has not been moved," under the post's comment bar. A discussion over constituency status might sound trivial because it would not bring any solid-state policy change, but this instant and interactive communication did provide citizens a space to express themselves and access a wider range of voices due to the low barrier of entry. This space sounds like what Breese (2011) mentioned earlier; a public sphere that is open to popular participation regardless of social status or identity, that forms the basis of rational public deliberation despite looking trivial (Habermas, 1989). Although many scholars argue that Facebook may not be a suitable platform for rigorous conversations and in-depth deliberations, it does allow for quick deliberation on simple issues (Lim, 2017, p. 223).

Other than updating their status, some followers also exchanged affective content and motivational words among each other. For instance, one wrote, "We still can win! We have to work harder! Still have time!" Nearly all suggested fighting against the re-delineation and continuing to fight for clean and fair elections. The re-delineation post received 129 responses in the form of emoticons, such as "Like," "Angry," and "Sad," and 193 followers shared it to their Facebook timeline. These spontaneous responses and interactions temporarily bridged diverse and multiethnic publics in interconnected conversations within the Bersih movement's communicative ecology.

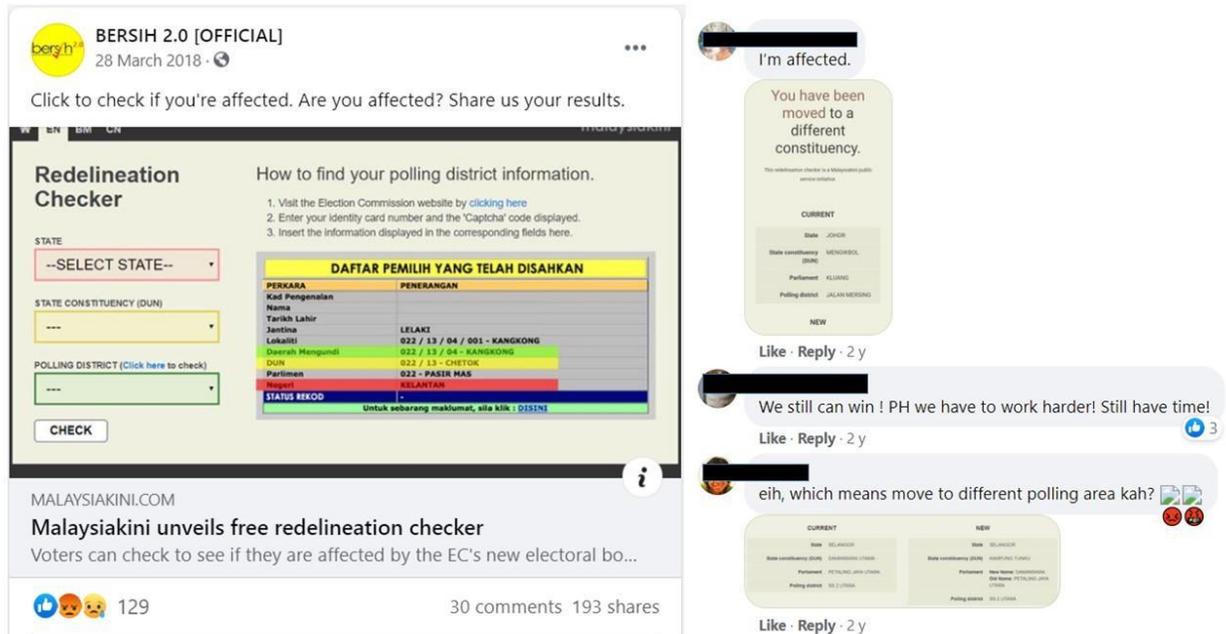


Figure 6.3 The Bersih official Facebook page urged participants to check the status of their constituency after the re-delineation motion was passed in parliament on 28 March 2018

The next day, the Bersih Facebook administrator used hashtags *#Redelineation*, *#KeluarMengundi* (“Come out to vote”) and *#KalahkanPencuri* (“Defeat the thief”) to mobilise citizens to fight for their voters’ rights. They also uploaded a poster in Malay (see Figure 6.4), urging citizens to collectively support Bersih activist Maria Chin Abdullah and a group of 107 voters against the unfair re-delineation of electoral boundaries. Led by former Bersih chairman Maria Chin, the group lodged a police report at the Petaling Jaya district police headquarters against re-delineation fraud and demanded Election Commission’s officers be investigated for allegedly fabricating evidence and practising forgery. In support of this protest, I observed Bersih participants discussing protest sites against re-delineation and locations for gathering on Facebook. The features on Facebook allowed them to share Google maps, directions, and other information about the locations. In addition, many updates and alerts were shared on other media platforms, including Twitter, WhatsApp, online forums, YouTube, SMS, online news portals, and mainstream media, about the passing of the re-delineation bill by parliament (Welsh, 2018; Chan, 2018). Other than the re-delineation issue, even during Bersih rallies multiple

online platforms were used to organise, share and disseminate information and personalised expressions such as “Ubah” (“Change”), “Ini Kali lah!” (“This is it!”) and “Reformasi” (“Reformation”) at rallies (J. B. Y. Lim, 2017, p. 210). Citizens also changed their profile pictures to show support for different causes, each with a solid colour, including yellow (Bersih), black (Black505), orange (Save Felda), and green (Anti-Lynas).

Activists also rely upon multiple online platforms to mobilise citizens and amplify their own messages (Poell, 2014). My study suggests that through these multi-platform interactions, Bersih participants come to understand what their own interests were, what others wanted, and what fits the common good. They were working on their personal choices and political views about electoral reform with the hope that they could bring change to the institutions. Social media seems to allow democracy to devolve down to the personal level and facilitate individualised media use in everyday life, including posts, comments, and emoticons that are contributed online.



Figure 6.4 Bersih steering committee called participants to join protest against the unfair re-delineation

Social media is designed to be user friendly and encourages sociability among citizens who are active online. For example, when Bersih participants visit its Facebook page, Facebook automatically shows them “People Also Like,” “Pages liked by this Page,” and “Related Pages” sections. This customisation is made available to appeal to individual participants and to suggest content that they might be interested in, or that their Facebook friends have visited. This helps to direct Bersih participants to organisations or movements that share a similar cause as the Bersih movement and indirectly exposes them to other relevant social networks. For instance, a Facebook group called “Suara Anak Malaysia” (“The Voice of Malaysians”) and “1M Malaysians Reject 100-storey Mega Tower,” which protested against the construction of an estimated RM5 billion 100-storey Warisan Merdeka tower near to a historical site in Kuala Lumpur, appeared under “Related Pages” when I searched for “Bersih movement”.

One of my interviewees (personal communication, July 14, 2017) told me that the protest against the mega tower had garnered a huge group of supporters and the group managed to move offline by organising cake parties to protest in the same neighbourhood.³³ The anti-mega tower Facebook campaign was reported by Malaysiakini.com (30 Oct, 2010) to have drawn more than 200,000 supporters in two weeks. Social media has allowed its users to inform and connect with others, and therefore it serves as a good tool for instant mobilisation. This connects back to the personalism theory and personalised communicative ecology that emphasises personal expressions and choices made by participants. This activity might sound trivial because it does not change the state policy in the short term, but it has successfully mobilised ordinary citizens to work on their personal choices and creativity, within their capacities, in responding to the broader political issues in the country. However, social media platforms such as Facebook are more public than privacy-focused, which puts users at risk of state surveillance. The police were aware of these local protests and had attended the anti-mega

³³ The aim of cake-eating was to get around the law requiring public gatherings to obtain a police permit and to make the police look outlandish for arresting a group of friends eating cake together. One such gathering at McDonald was successfully organised with the presence of some police seated next to the participants (Open Society Foundations, 2013).
<https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/c4d5d093-1375-439e-b593-7aad4333dac1/mapping-digital-media-malaysia-20130617.pdf>

project cake-cutting activity, trying to disperse the small crowd. Despite the benefit of instant mobilisation, the rising potential for surveillance by the state remained.

When citizens enthusiastically embrace social media for activism, they gradually come to realise its limitations and pitfalls. Despite all the advantages brought by social media platforms, especially Facebook, in the case of the Bersih movement, there are still fears and concerns exacerbated by worries about the way social networking site's data collection and sharing policies work. Some Bersih activists and volunteers are sceptical about whether Facebook would prioritise their movement's interest over their own corporate interests, and submit to the Malaysian government's pressure to edit content whenever they want. A Bersih movement central secretariat media staff member (personal communication, July 17, 2017) told me that they adopted content moderation by keeping one official Facebook account and encouraging their regional counterparts to set that as their main reference point. They were afraid that by having too many accounts it would confuse participants and probably skew the visible demographics of the movement in each account. They admitted that they did not impose strict rules about participants disclosing personal information or sensitive comments, but they did feel responsible to ensure a more constructive discussion that was not prone to personal threats or emotionally disturbing content.

To ensure good privacy practices online, Sanfilippo and Strandburg (2019, p. 15) argue that social movements should facilitate informed community design and platform use, allowing individuals or communities to move beyond governance-by-default settings, especially when they are adopting multiple platforms. One Bersih volunteer interviewee (Male 2, Miri, May 29, 2018) expressed his worries about online privacy and safety, and was particularly sceptical about meeting strangers online because they might have ulterior motives. He told me that people should adopt hybrid media use and stay critical in their reading by accessing multiple sources so that they would not be easily manipulated by online fake news. He said he was active in the Bersih movement but only used social media to access information, not for engagement or personal expressions because it was simply too time consuming. However, he admitted that social media, Facebook in particular, had played a vital role in changing Malaysian politics, especially in GE14. Based on the interview data, I can conclude that Bersih participants were aware that it was

important to extend some content control, including carefully constructing their online messages, and monitoring hate speech or fake information to achieve their goals and maintain a good civil space for political discourse. Raising awareness on these platform features and algorithms helped to balance expectations and sustain a long-term involvement in movement mobilisation.

6.3.2.2 Personalised Technological Layer: Individualised Use of a Privacy-Focused Platform

Other than Facebook, WhatsApp is another preferred instant messenger platform that is frequently used by Bersih participants. WhatsApp seems to provide activists and everyday citizens with an avenue to freely express their political views, and end-to-end encryption acts as a shield against unnecessary interference and state surveillance. Based on my interview data, participants used WhatsApp because it was user friendly and allowed them to exchange messages in multiple forms, such as texts, images, videos, voice messages, and files. The content on WhatsApp was end-to-end encrypted, therefore they felt it was more secure and personal.

I tried to persuade Bersih activists to admit me into their WhatsApp groups as an observer but they only approved me after recommendations by some senior members that I knew personally. My interviewees introduced me to the group administrators and the group participants were well-informed of my role as a researcher and my research project. I was grateful that they allowed me to observe their group conversations, which were supposed to be personal and private. These two groups were “Bersih 5 Johor” from Johor (Peninsula) and “Bersih 4 Sarawak Group 2” from Sarawak (East Malaysia). These two groups authorised me after they were convinced that I could tactfully manage the information shared within in-group conversations, especially in relation to sensitive political issues, and use the data solely for research purposes. This process required a referral who was an experienced activist to introduce me to them. My observation started in July, 2017 and ended a year later in June, 2018 after GE14. Participants of these WhatsApp groups included the Bersih steering committee, social activists and volunteers from different Bersih-endorsed NGOs, and individual citizens who gathered together for a common cause, which was to fight for clean and fair elections in Malaysia. Among these

two groups, the Johor WhatsApp group was relatively more active than the Sarawak group and my analysis relied a lot on its data.

Similar to Facebook, WhatsApp provides many features that help Bersih participants to manage their private conversations. Its conversation threads are arranged in chronological order, so sometimes it takes a while for users to track back to their previous records. To make the search more convenient and less time consuming, Bersih participants can “Star” a message and easily retrieve it under the “Starred Message” folder. If participants are uncomfortable with the chatty group conversation, they may opt to “Mute” the conversation for a period from eight hours to a year (WhatsApp.com). They can also export the conversation thread to email and save it for archive. Bersih activist (Male 1, Johor, personal communication, September 24, 2017) told me that he created a broadcast list to update his contacts about the movement and news relating to the causes that they were fighting and endorsing together. This one-to-many communication allowed him to send personal messages to a big group of recipients individually at just one click (refer Figure 6.5). These customising features allowed Bersih activists to build a personal rapport and reciprocal relationship with other movement participants.

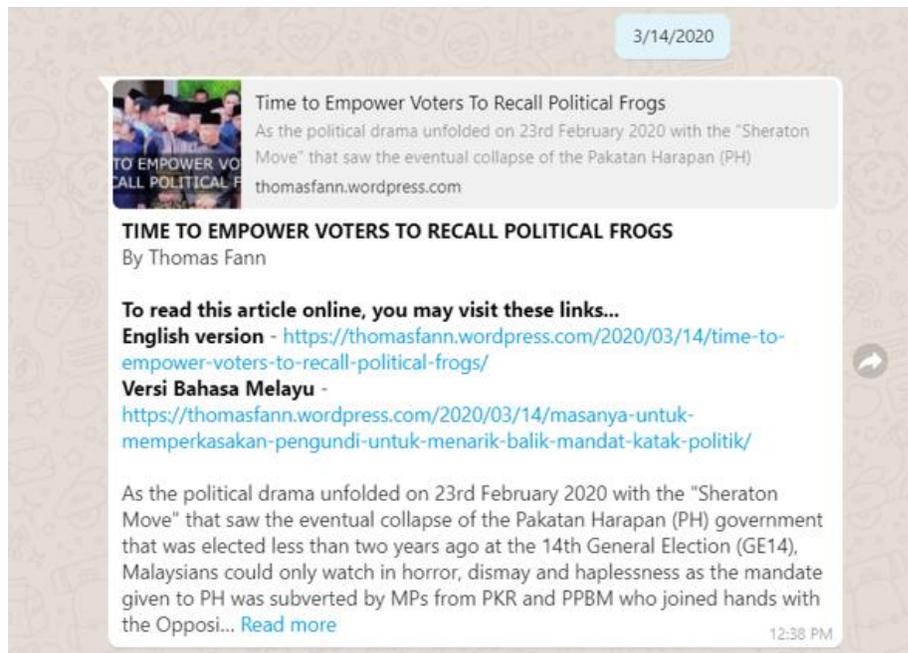


Figure 6.5 A Bersih activist broadcast message via WhatsApp to his friend list to notify them the update on his personal blog about electoral reform

Despite all the advantages and conveniences brought by WhatsApp, my one-year observation showed that the personalised conversations within the groups were almost purely expressive and had positively enhanced the relations among participants by improving the bonding between them. However, the conversations did not necessarily aim at any action other than talk itself. Sometimes, the interactions occurred not among participants who made a point to specifically talk about politics, but emerged instead from the social processes of Bersih participants chatting with one another. Participants seemed to chat casually, more for personal expression and gratification, and less for building a connective to achieve a collective common goal for the movement. The participants did respond to current affairs happening in the country but most of the replies were personal expressions. Some even went on a tangent by forwarding content that had nothing relating to politics or the movement's cause. Figure 6.6 shows how Johor group WhatsApp administrator had to interfere and correct participants who engaged in small talk, to ensure that the group was always engaged in political conversations that were in line with the Bersih movement's electoral cause. My observation suggests that every participant had different interests and motivations engaging in the group conversation; some were there for small talk about trendy issues, while a few were more serious and interested in in-depth conversations.

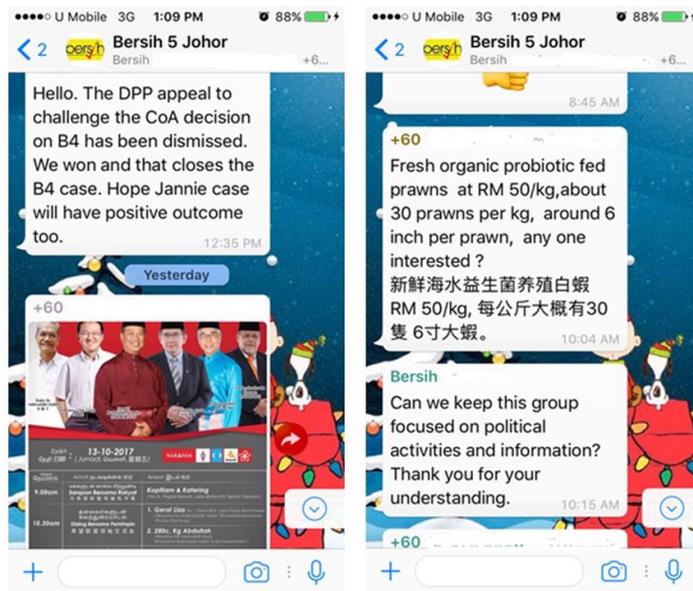


Figure 6.6 The administrator of Bersih 5 Johor's WhatsApp group reminded participants that their conversation is restricted only for political activities and information (early October, 2017)

On the other hand, the conversations in Bersih 4 Sarawak Group 2 had obviously become stagnant after the Bersih 4 rally (2015). Neither the administrators nor participants posted any recent information about the movement or amended the group's name to keep it up to date. I observed that their conversations eventually turned into superficial small talk when they forwarded some images or web links that they received in the group. Some of the content contained merely greetings that were irrelevant to the Bersih movement's cause. The conversation was not akin to political deliberation, and did not sound like it contributed to the Malaysian political discourse. It sounded like a political conversation that offered an opportunity to merely pass time while waiting for someone, or over coffee during break, rather than being motivated by an effort to gain information or a debate that would lead to a shared decision on a difficult political issue. My observations found no sign of the creation of a public sphere within the group that offered group participants an important degree of information and communication independent from the mass media.

In comparison, the Bersih 5 Johor group did more by keeping their WhatsApp conversation active every day and restricting the content exclusively to topics relating to electoral reform and human rights in Malaysia. The restrictions set by the group administrator, who was also the movement leader, helped participants find an entrance into the group's political conversation when they were otherwise not making a point to talk about. Their conversations grew more political and ideological, with heated debates over who would win the election and the irregularities of the Election Commission, when it was near the 14th Malaysian General Election on 9 May 2018. As for the Sarawak group, the discussions remained subtle and light, with no deeper discussions of the event.

Overall, the conversations in Bersih 5 Johor WhatsApp group were smooth as participants shared and posted the latest news about the activities in their neighbourhood as well as official updates from the Bersih steering committee in Kuala Lumpur. The conversations consisted of an exchange of information in various forms such as images, written-text, videos, and URL links. Compared to the Sarawak group, I observed that the Johor WhatsApp group participants seemed to have much stronger motivation for political conversations, rather than just mundane conversations, and their responses to messages were usually fast. Sometimes, disagreements would be directly expressed in interactions through debates or arguments, but they did not prevent the participants from expressing

their views when the next topic was prompted. My observation suggests that their expressions and interactions within WhatsApp reflected that their personal satisfaction was high and thus enhanced their commitments in the group. This resulted in higher social media use among participants on a daily basis. The communicative content seemed to be another strong factor, other than technology, that could stimulate the interests of participants and mobilise them to respond. This connects back to the discursive layer, where the content that participants consume has an impact on their social interaction as people tend to talk more about topics that they are interested in.

WhatsApp is definitely an important platform to look at since the majority of Internet users in Malaysia use smartphones and are aged 20–29 (47%), and 30–39 (25%) (MCMC, 2018). However, there are some limitations in my research and analysis. The WhatsApp groups that I observed were regionally based, and therefore not representative of Malaysia's national WhatsApp or social media discourse. The conversations were mostly in English and a little bit in Chinese; never in Malay or Tamil. The group participants basically knew one another, even though not everyone, and were supportive of the Bersih movement. Even though not everyone engaged actively, participants did switch on and off throughout the day as the comments were indicated as sent (double tick) and read (blue tick). I used only two samples of how WhatsApp discourse played out before and during GE14, though limited, to give some sense of how this digital public sphere operates.

6.3.3 Personalised Discursive Layer

Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model operates on technological, social, and discursive layers. The personalised social layer examines the Bersih participants' personal experiences, their understanding of social impact and mediated sociability within the social media environment. This section analyses the discursive layer of the Bersih communicative ecology, which is the content, loosely known as the ideology of the movement that affects the actions and vice versa. Content can be in various formats, depending on the selection, organisation, and presentation of experience and information (Altheide, 1994, p. 668). The content here refers to ideas or themes that constitute the conversations and narratives of the ecology (Foth and Hearn, 2007, p. 756) which have been personalised by individuals' narratives that are brought to the fore in the mobilisation

process (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011). Building on the communicative ecology in Chapter 5, this section analyses how participants' personal narratives and themes are integrated into the movement's discursive layer. I argue that personalisation makes Bersih movement's collective action framing more flexible and thus enhances better public commitment among movement participants. This adds to the findings in the previous chapter that the movement's content creates a sense of social inclusion among supporters through the messages they read and contribute to online.

6.3.3.1 Personalised Discursive Layer: Simplified Narrative Appeals More

As mentioned in the technological layer, Bersih participants were not only connected through technology, but also by the content they consumed and shared collectively. Participants could freely generate personalised content and distribute it among their social networks. However, since social media is designed for individualised use, individuals are usually fragmented and dispersed in these highly connected social networks where content is overly abundant, attention spans are short, and conversations are parsed into diminutive sentences (M. Lim, 2013, p. 644). Therefore, it is always a challenge for the Bersih movement to frame narratives that can reflect the movement's discourse and fit into their supporters' understandings. I contend that by understanding the nature and limitations of social media activism, the Bersih movement can frame narratives that are able to transform fun self-expression into meaningful civic engagement and political participation.

Personalised conversations that humanise Bersih figures are central in the movement's communicative ecologies. Participants interact and socialise within the Bersih movement's communicative ecologies through the Internet—social media in particular—that is designed to direct users to engage in quick conversations and encourage multitasking. The Internet and social media features nurture short interactions, meaning that simplified narratives are more likely to go viral than complex ones (M. Lim, 2013, 651). Circulating images online represents a threat to structural power and their virality depend on them being understood by people and suited to their socio-cultural environment (Braun & Nzeza, 2020, p. 110). For example, Figure 6.7 shows an image of an elderly woman standing soaked with a battalion of uniformed officers and FRU trucks

behind her (The Rocket, 14 August 2011). This image is more likely to stand out in the information-abundant environment of social media than a seemingly generic image of crowds holding banners and placards. The story of Auntie Annie, the icon of democracy, can easily be told and retold in casual online chat by exchanging just a few quick lines, whereas a sensitive and complex story of the 1Mdb scandal or corruption cannot be discussed in the same manner. Other examples include a video of street poet Uncle Lawrence Saw, and an elderly Chinese guy nicknamed Uncle Bersih, who played violin to lead the rally Bersih 3.0 crowd singing in Mandarin to the tune of “Solidarity Forever,” and later the national anthem “Negaraku” (G. C. Khoo, 2013; J. B. Y. Lim, 2017, p. 213). These examples speak to my earlier suggestion that a simple story can go viral more easily than complex ones. The Bersih movement uses accumulated personal information to frame a narrative that humanises political issues and post them online to appeal to the public. While the Bersih movement is creative in framing its narratives that embrace the principles of popular culture, which are light and interesting, they also face challenges in conveying complex political issues to their supporters. This personalised discursive layer explores how Bersih narratives are told by movement participants, expressed in their personal ways that eventually develops into solidarity among Malaysians who support clean and fair elections.



Figure 6.7 The face that launched a thousand protests: Auntie Annie standing soaked with a battalion of uniformed officers and FRU trucks behind her (Source: The Rocket)

Visuals are central to everyday life and ubiquitous in social media practices. They have a more powerful effect than words (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017) and are able to build quasi-relationships between the image and its viewers. Among all the photographs taken during the Bersih 2.0 rally, the photograph of a retired English teacher in her 60s stood out. Auntie Annie (Annie Ooi Siew Lan), also known as the Lady of Liberty, who marched against injustice during Bersih 2.0 rally, rose to fame following this iconic photograph of her. G. C. Khoo (2013, p. 119) argues that different lines of solidarities were forged at the Carnival of Hope as the younger generation discovered heroes and role models in their elderly citizens, including Auntie Annie, street poet Uncle Lawrence Saw, and 78-year-old poet laureate Samad Said aka Pak Samad. A simple visual narrative of these heroes who risked their lives in the hopes of changing their beloved country, that sounds emotional and everyday, proved to have stronger appeal to the audience's sympathies and attention, than any official news stories.

Among these elderly citizens, Auntie Annie had been described as an important icon for the Bersih movement and her courage had been widely applauded and even discussed online by many during the Bersih rally 2.0 in 2011 (G. C. Khoo, 2013, p. 119). I observed that a Facebook profile was even created for her under "Aunty Bersih—The lady of liberty" and was linked to the Bersih movement's official Facebook page under Related Pages. The visuals of an ordinary elderly woman who could be anyone next door, has appeared as both ordinary and extraordinary through the facilitation and amplifications of the mass media, especially social media. Her vulnerability is in fact her source of charisma and her presence at the street protest, especially her age and physical shape has become a strong voice for change. Visual narratives about patriotic Malaysians who risked their lives to demand electoral reform that went viral online have captured many people's attention and stimulated conversations online. A simple narrative with powerful visuals about a dedicated Bersih supporter has moved to the centre of public attention via mass media and successfully organised solidarity among many others who wish for a reform through networks and online communities.

In this contemporary society, personal narratives and visuals of ordinary citizens tend to gain more significance due to the existing trend of mass media towards personalisation. The example of Lawrence Saw, a Chinese man in his fifties or sixties,

rhyiming in Malay, led a crowd to sing “Suara Rakyat” (“The People’s Voice,” sung to the tune of “Oh My Darling, Clementine”) at the Bersih 3.0 rally and many others have given us a sense of potential human togetherness in the public realm, actualising through the performance of deeds and sharing of words (G. C. Khoo, 2013, p. 120). There were many others who have also contributed their personal views about Bersih rallies or shared their experiences through personal social media accounts or written to news editors. Based on my online observations, a reader named Dharm Navaratnam wrote a letter titled “Day Two of Bersih 4—Oh what a feeling” to the editor of Malaysiakini.com news portal, talking about his personal experience participating in the Bersih 4 rally and pleading with authorities to “Listen just a little” to what the people want, and be the servants of the “rakyat” (“people”) (Malaysiakini, 31 August 2015). The article was published on Malaysia's Independence Day, a day after Bersih rally 4. Such personalised narratives detailing individuals' personal experiences reflect the attempts of Malaysians who tried to use media to express themselves and mobilise public opinion. Personalised narratives that take place within the Bersih movement’s communicative ecologies as well as the broader media ecosystem have led to a sense of solidarity among people who support electoral reform.

Other than quick and catchy narratives, the Bersih movement has also taken advantage of online searching by creating #hashtags and keywords in the circulation of their content which leads to personalised results tailored to their target audience’s needs. Hashtag is a type of metadata tag used on social networks, and when a hashtag becomes popular, it can turn into a trend that attracts individuals to discussion. Scholars argue that the #bersihstories hashtag enabled digital stories to be quickly shared and easily curated, brokering connections that bridged multiple ethnicities and classes, shaping new trans-ethnic solidarities (G. C. Khoo, 2013; Postill, 2014; Weiss, 2012). Other hashtags found on Bersih’s Facebook page include #TolakPolitikKatak (“Reject Political Frog”), #PertahanMandatRakyat (“Defend the People’s Mandate”) in response to the political turmoil in February 2020, and many more. People who follow and regenerate hashtags make the conversations popular and this eventually develops into digital solidarity among social media users. This new form of solidarity is crucial in the Malaysian context because many existing social movements tend to be formed through ethnicities and thus fail to

challenge a political system that is ethnicity-centric. When the Bersih movement is able to direct people's attention to important political issues online, it is likely for the movement to facilitate and amplify a culture that helps establish a conversational space for individuals to express their opinions, exercise their citizens' rights, and collaborate with others. However, we shall never forget that long-entrenched ideologies, political practices and dominant discourses like Malay primacy cannot be dispelled and removed overnight, even when the Bersih rallies were widely celebrated.

6.3.3.2 Personalised Discursive Layer: Tension Between Individual and Collective Framings

It is important for the Bersih movement to frame a collective identity that everyone follows, as this will strengthen its mobilisation. However, when democracy is devolved down to the individuals' private level and communication within a movement becomes personalised, new challenges arise. When a movement personalises its communication, sometimes it has to compromise on its articulated goals because the potentially incoherent voices may fail to travel well in the mass media. However, it is still debatable whether personalising communication helps to strengthen or compromise participants' engagement and the movement's collective framing. Robnett (2015) argues that individuals may not be able to frame narratives that are in line with the organisations' discourses. For example, Bersih rally 3.0 (2012) called for a sit-in protest while some of its supporters might have preferred more aggressive means. Or, Bersih Rally 5 (2016) demanded institutional equality and transparency, but some individuals aimed to bring down the then premier Najib Razak due to his 1MDB scandal. While individuals may extend their personal understandings to fit the movement's frame, they also may extend the frame to fit their understanding.

The Bersih movement has eight demands in total, and clearly not every participant completely agrees on all these demands. Based on my interviews, some participants embraced the Bersih movement's institutional reform collective action frame while others perceived the demands as too urban-centric, keeping rural folks in a marginalised position. For mass rallies, some Bersih participants urged participants to march peacefully, while others preferred a more aggressive approach that involved shouting and engaging in physical conflict with the police. Some tended to simplify the act of transforming a corrupt

institution to bringing down a corrupted leader. To accommodate different or conflicting framings, many Bersih participants resolved the problems by avoiding situations that directly placed them in conflict with the movement's identity, which was moderate, peaceful assembly, and non-partisan. My interviewees told me that they had been communicating the movement's identity and amplifying it through social media to sustain their participants. The use of social media was vital in disseminating the movement's collective framings to individuals and further influenced their personal framings. Again, this reflected an important aspect of the Bersih movement's discursive layer to ensure that individuals' personalised framings were in line with the movement's collective framing.

It is vital for the Bersih movement to establish an identity that separated the movement from the political parties. Bersih activist (Male 2, Penang, personal communication, July 14, 2017) spoke of the appropriateness of activists and individuals of civil society to lead the Bersih movement:

“Many of our opposition party members had been elected as member of parliaments or state assemblymen in GE12. It was awkward to have them leading the institutional and electoral reform because they were part of the ruling government. Therefore, we must rebrand ourselves as politically neutral and non-partisan.”

When a movement's collective identity is commonly accepted and goes well with participants' personal framings, it definitely helps to strengthen the movement's mobilisation in the long run. This connects back to my earlier argument that personalisation helps to enhance participants' engagement if their self-fulfilment and public commitment are compatible.

A relaunched coalition that was unaffiliated to political parties is essential for the Bersih movement to garner support from people of multiethnic groups. Bersih activist (Male 1, Penang, personal communication, July 14, 2017) argued that the popularity of the Bersih movement has expanded since its first rally, from Malay dominated to diverse ethnicity. This shows that Malaysians were united in voicing their personal views and narratives beyond ethnicity-centrism, to go against dominant mainstream claims that were

pro-BN government. The Bersih movement's discursive layer contains the characteristics of multiethnicity, non-partisanship and independence, and this collective framing is commonly accepted and goes well with participants' personal framings. It has also strengthened and sustained the movement's mobilisation over a decade.

However, there are criticisms against the Bersih movement for not being able to create solid institutional change. Despite these criticisms, Bersih activist (Male 2, Penang, personal communication, July 14, 2017) told me that the movement had successfully shaped a nation that was willing to challenge the dominance of the former BN government by breaking down the fear of public rallies. The perception of the Bersih rally among Malaysians had changed, from stereotyping the event as a riot, to seeing it as a legitimate way to challenge an authoritarian government. This coherent narrative is disseminated by the movement and individuals who support the Bersih movement. The shift of perception about legitimacy reduced the tension between the collective and individual framings within the Bersih movement. This contributes to the discursive layer that the Bersih movement is a legitimate platform for citizens to channel their political grievances.

My study argues that the concept of personalisation encourages Bersih participants to bring their narratives to the fore and make the movement more flexible in defining its cause. The Bersih movement's coordinating mechanism was constantly changing and adapting to local issues and community needs. This flexibility allowed participants to frame their personal narratives and self-mobilise. Bersih activist (Male 2, Penang) spoke of Malaysians being more emboldened after experiencing some peaceful Bersih rallies because they realised that street protest was a legitimate way to challenge the ruling coalition and it paved the way for electoral reform, and hence they started to initiate on their own:

“The gain in Lynas was this protest, was a Mother's day was leaderless . . . it came back using Facebook. You do not have anyone come up and tell you who they are, they just come up with statement saying, “We mothers, going to celebrate Mother's day at beach.” You just tied an anti-Lynas cause to a celebration. So, 800 to 1,000 people on the beach. . . . What Bersih 2.0 rally [is significant] are we have all these people who actually get bolder, so, now, most of these people in

Kuantan . . . use Mother's Day to call people on the street. Because the story with the mega tower thing . . . [which] started completely as an online thing. In one week, they gather one hundred thousand, it appears even in Al Jazeera . . . so this is actually very different from Bersih, where you actually have Ambiga as icon and later Maria, these two did not.

When the population who turned up for Bersih rallies increased, this showed that the movement was gaining more support and legitimacy in their petition for electoral reform. For instance, in the Bersih 5 rally (2016), we saw Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad himself lead the crowd to unseat the former premier Najib Razak over alleged mismanagement of the country's finances. The Bersih 5 rally not only attracted opposition parties, but members of the former BN coalition who were against the 1MDB scandal, as well as students and concerned citizens residing overseas. From the interview data, my study suggests that when individuals started using their personal capacity to probe into the institutions and procedures by which the government gains and exercises their power, they gradually saw the Bersih movement as a primary and reliable platform which they could use to collectively evaluate the ruling government across multiple dimensions. I argue that the Bersih movement's personalised narrative has significantly increased political awareness among its participants and successfully made an impact on their participation through both online and physical mobilisation. Their rallies managed to gather people of diverse ethnic and geographical backgrounds to frame their personal narratives in protesting against poor governance and irregularities in the electoral system. It has become the most popular movement in Malaysia because it has successfully kept individual and collective framings under tension. Rather, both framings have collaborated and contributed simultaneously to the wide media ecosystem that encourages expressions and collaboration among citizens. However, it is too simplistic for me to draw a conclusion that the movement has brought a solid institutional change because the complexity of the political landscape in Malaysia makes it difficult to gauge the significance of the movement's impact on the country's political landscape.

Since it was relaunched in 2010, the Bersih movement has enjoyed, and continues to enjoy, broad-based support as a movement that is independent, non-partisan, and

apolitical. However, some interviewees told me that the level of its legitimacy appeared to be rather shallow. I observed that some experienced movement activists displayed a lack of enthusiasm for the movement and a consistent sense of disappointment about the electoral system in Malaysia. Some left the movement or gradually withdrew from the core leadership after a few years. They pointed out that the Bersih movement had done a good job in engaging people to debate and protest on the street, increased their awareness of electoral reform, but did not have significant impact on solid institutional change. Others believed the change of state power after GE14 was likely due to internal conflicts within UMNO, escalated economic dissatisfaction among the people, and the political involvement by prominent leader Mahathir Mohammad. Even though the Bersih movement gained a reputation by popular votes, it was not powerful enough to make a solid change in society. My findings conclude that for a movement that believes it enjoys the trust of the people and lobbies for their best interests, whether or not they have the mandate to make changes on governance or policies appears rather puzzling before GE14. The Bersih movement seems to have been bound with the people in a relationship based on mutual grievances rather than on the common good. Such a relationship can be stable but requires constant attention to socio-economic issues. If problems are left unaddressed, it could weaken or undermine the legitimacy of the movement in the long term.

6.4 CONCLUSION

Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model operates on technological, social, and discursive layers. The personalised social layer suggests the Bersih movement participants used social media for mediated sociability while the technological layer articulates the type of media they used to sustain their social networks within Bersih movement's communicative ecologies. The discursive layer on the other hand ventures into simplified narratives that the movement framed as well as those personally contributed by its participants. My interviews with the Bersih movement participants who resided in Malaysia were drawn on this model because I wished to focus on a communicative ecology that was place-based rather than just a range of socially linked portfolios on social media. This model highlighted the overlapping of online and offline

lives, as well as public and personal spheres, and suggested a reinvention of communities in this movement.

The concept of personalisation is an important dimension that the Bersih movement uses to frame their movement narratives, articulate their ideas, and encourage social interactions. The movement's participants or individuals who supported the movement's cause could post their personal comments or express their views freely on social media and collaborate with others to organise small-scale demonstrations in their own neighbourhood. For instance, joining the Bersih movement's Facebook and WhatsApp groups did not require the participant to be completely open with their family, friends, neighbours, and work colleagues about their political preferences. They could enter and exit the online community without repercussions to relationships and reputations offline. The openness of the Bersih movement's communicative ecologies was necessary for recruitment, but it also left them vulnerable to surveillance. The personalised content that was shared in a public setting or within a private online group could expose their identities to the authorities. This might lead to unnecessary police intervention and unfavourable consequences as mentioned in Chapters 3 and 5. Despite the potential risks, personalising messages did help the Bersih movement to some extent by strengthening their participant engagement and getting their message into the public dialogue.

Nonetheless, there is criticism that personalising messages that help to generate many clicks and likes might have failed to achieve critical mobilisation. Conversations and information that dominates social media reflects the interests, choices, and preferences of its users who are mostly urban middle class. Critics say that among those who protested physically, many still sat behind their computer screens clicking and slacking. However, my thesis argues that if legitimacy is rooted in the shared beliefs of citizens, then Bersih rallies are indeed a rightful platform for many to reclaim their civil rights against the abuse of power by the government. Whoever participated in the movement, either physically occupying a space or morally supporting by circulating news online, has collectively made their personal evaluations of the government and based their arguments on shared political values. This also encourages a democratic relationship between citizens and has taken Malaysia one step closer to mature democracy.

Welsh (2011) describes the Bersih movement as the most renowned Malaysian protest movement based on two distinguishing features. First, its success in leveraging social media platforms to distribute information, counter government-controlled media, and to mobilise and organise its supporters. Second, the support that it garnered comes from a diverse ethnic, racial, and religious demographic. Despite repeated government guarantees to ensure democratic elections, a wide range of NGOs, civil communities, and opposition politicians have expressed concerns over issues such as gerrymandering, unequal access to government-controlled broadcast and print media, postal voting, the failure to use indelible ink to impede fraud during voting, irregularities with the registered voters' roll, and the impartiality of the Electoral Commission (EC). These concerns hastened the establishment of the Bersih movement and its mass rallies that took place before the general elections on 8 March 2008, 5 May 2013, and 9 May 2018. Over the years, the Bersih movement has become increasingly vocal in demanding the constitutional rights for citizens and the opposition coalition PH is galvanising a modern, globalised, and progressive Malaysia. However, this sense of democracy and human rights is not extended to undocumented workers, refugees or stateless people, with some having diminished right of redress due to a lack of recognition by the society (G. C. Khoo, 2014, p. 792). The solidarity between citizens and non-citizens is worth exploring by social movements across multiculturalism studies, migration studies, and citizenship studies in other research studies.

The case of the Bersih movement discussed above has shown that social media activism can translate into populist political activism. My findings show Bersih participants seemed to be reasonably aware of the Bersih movement and positively support its demands. Even though many may not have remembered all its demands, they seemed to interpret that it was making a change or reform in the country. To sustain its legitimacy, the Bersih movement personalised its narratives that encouraged political talk among participants, through which they discussed and made decisions, constructed a collective identity, achieved mutual understanding, and formed considered opinions. The use of social media, simplified personal narrative (democratic symbols such as the icon of Auntie Annie) and street protests allowed the Bersih movement to engage their participants in day-to-day communication within their communicative ecologies. They

have also taken advantage of online searches by creating #hashtags and key words in the circulation of their content that leads to personalised results tailored to their target audience's needs. The Bersih movement's narratives stood out in the digital space because their messages were simplified, quick and catchy, strumming our emotional heartstrings. In addition, their versatility in engaging different forms of media, including media outlets, to produce deeper narratives about electoral reform contributes in strengthening the engagement with their supporters or participants. Despite criticisms that the movement is not able to perform solid institutional change, my analysis shows that the Bersih movement managed to create a space where its participants could freely express their views and collaborate. The Bersih movement is considered successful in the digital mediascape because their messages are quick and catchy. They also engage with media outlets to produce deeper stories about the need for electoral reform and improve public governance. This definitely helped in strengthening the engagement with their supporters or participants.

This chapter contributes a personalised lens in mapping the technological, discursive, and social layers of the Bersih movement. It found individual citizens' personal experiences and personal satisfaction were becoming central in the Bersih movement. It also demonstrates that social media acts as an organising tool that helps to form groups relatively easy and encourages individuals' personal expressions. The next chapter will continue to build on this discussion about why personalised conversations are central in the Bersih movement's mobilisation and how it changes the communicative ecologies of the movement's participants. It will situate citizens' social media use in a particular ecology, within a particular social media platform such as Facebook, by arguing that personal affect or emotion that influences individuals' social media use is not technology derived. Rather, it is stimulated in users themselves by the environment where they interact socially with one another. This discussion will be further supported by the communicative ecology model of Foth and Hearn (2007).

7 COMMUNICATIVE ECOLOGY: BERSIH FACEBOOK COMMUNITIES

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter continues the discussion about how personalised media use among Bersih participants maintains a high level of engagement, the movement's agenda focus, and their social network strength. Relying on the communicative ecology model outlined in the previous chapters, I analyse how individuals use social media to bring their personal narratives to the fore in mobilisation in a particular online space—Facebook—that lies within the Bersih movement's communicative ecology. Chapter 5 uses Foth and Hearn's (2007) technological, discursive, and social layers to analyse the Bersih movement's multiple-platform communicative ecology and argues that these layers are interrelated. Chapter 6 then builds on this argument and expands the definition of communicative ecology by adding the element of personalisation that emphasises communication within the integrated public and private spaces and uses personalism theory to conceptualise individual's self-fulfilment in their public commitment. It argues that the movement is versatile in using multiple platforms to frame simple and engaging narratives that are able to encourage people to freely express themselves and collaborate with one another. Chapter 7 continues to discuss about the communicative ecology of the Bersih movement, from within to outside of Malaysia, locally to globally. It connects to my research objective by examining the interaction between local and global supporters of the Bersih movement in different communicative ecologies.

I will compare the content of two Facebook pages—Bersih 2.0 (Malaysia) and Global Bersih (Switzerland)—by using the communicative ecology model to evaluate how the Bersih movement uses Facebook to mobilise citizens through personalised conversations and how citizens express their affect. The engagement of diaspora Malaysian in home-country politics is worth exploring here because it reflects that much digital citizenship has shifted from formal models to the use of personalised (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) and privatised (Papacharissi, 2010) models. This local and global activism, by using social media platforms and networks, has contributed a great political breakthrough in Malaysia, especially in GE14.

A single-platform comparison provides a more nuanced view of the Bersih movement's communicative ecologies among local and diaspora Malaysians. This comparison is supported by the "local and global" dimension suggested by Foth and Hearn (2007), which explores how locally and globally dispersed communications maintain their position within the same ecology. In this chapter, I use Facebook as the technological layer, its online posts and participants' affect as the discursive layer, and the interactions between participants as the social layer. By building on the discussion about personalised communication in the previous chapter, it is worth further exploring the relationship between individuals' social media use and their personal expressions, and affect within the three-layer communicative ecologies. In this chapter, I analyse how the Bersih movement uses Bersih 2.0 and Global Bersih Facebook pages for mobilisation within and outside of Malaysia as well as how central individuals' everyday practices and expressions are to the movement's online mobilisation. Both Bersih 2.0 and Global Bersih use multiple platforms to engage their supporters, but I only chose Facebook for my analysis because it is vital in the Bersih movement and as a public-facing social platform, Facebook conversations are more searchable and traceable.

7.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

By referring to Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model, this chapter aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how networked social interactions take place in a specific medium such as Facebook. The communicative ecology model divides the Bersih movement's communicative ecology into three layers, which are technological, discursive, and social. The technological layer looks at IT devices and media, the discursive layer involves content and ideas, while the social layer comprises people who communicate. Foth and Hearn (2007, p. 749) argue that communicative ecology integrates three dimensions: "online and offline," "global and local," and "collective and networked." With the new media technologies, they suggest individuals are not constrained to satisfy social communication needs with people in their immediate surroundings, even though social relationships do benefit from physical proximity. With this more holistic model, I want to explore how mediated communication occurs within the Bersih movement among

local Malaysians and those residing overseas, in addition to conventional face-to-face interaction.

For the technological layer, this chapter focuses on a single platform, instead of multiple, because it aims to explore how two geographically different groups of Bersih participants use Facebook to support the movement. In addition, it explores the potential moderating effect of culture on the diffusion of online content within the same platform. In terms of the discursive layer, I contend that the affect or emotion that influences participants' social media use is not technology derived, but stimulated in them by the environment where the social interactions are situated. Based on this assumption, I wish to examine how local and diaspora Malaysians use Facebook to express their views and emotions in response to electoral reform in Malaysia and to defend their own fundamental human rights.

Lichterman's (1960) concept of personalism talks about individuals' self-fulfilment and public commitment while Papacharissi's (2010) concept of affect discusses individuals' personalised emotions and affect. I believe the way individuals feel are reflected through their online expressions, self-fulfilment, and eventually personal commitment. Therefore, I examined the emotions and affect of Bersih participants through their online expressions and posts in these two Facebook pages. Papacharissi's (2010) concept of affect or emotion can be applied in the discursive layer to analyse how Bersih's Facebook page affords and governs its reactions such as hashtags and emoticons in mobilising people to support the Bersih movement. These reactions provide an understanding of the type of communication activities participants engage in online, the available social networks, and how they use these networks to build a sense of unity and solidarity within Facebook.

For the social layer, Bersih participants distinguished themselves between the social roles of "local Malaysians" and "diaspora Malaysians" who reside overseas. I analysed how individuals' Facebook use elicits affect through their online interactions based on their replies and comments to the online posts. My study uses the concept of affect to regulate the relationship between the discursive and social layers in the Bersih movement's communicative ecologies. Wakefield and Wakefield (2016) argue that digital content is likely to diffuse more broadly and deeply within a network when affect is

involved because it increases the frequency and duration of users' interactions as well as fostering new associations around the activity. A case study on hashtags shows individuals use textual gestures to demonstrate their affect in social media through highlighting emotional responses, humour and sentiments like solidarity, outrage and hope (Papacharissi, 2015). Other than hashtags, emojis are another popular visual mediator that allow affective information to depict a user's mood and intention (Miltner & Highfield, 2017). The use of affect in online mobilisation helps to build the idea of change into politics through the everyday online activities of the Bersih movement. This can attract and retain people's support and persuade them to perform their rights by engaging online.

In short, this chapter examines how Bersih participants are increasingly connecting to other like-minded individuals by using Facebook as a social networking and communication mechanism. It focuses on whether the communication is characterised by a dialogic (between Bersih official Facebook page administrator and participants) or triologic nature (between participants themselves), or both. What I intend to bring to the fore is whether participants are merely responding or commenting on the administrators' updates, or whether there are actual conversations between them. This is important because it demonstrates my argument that the use of social media to mobilise and influence individuals' communicative ecologies and personalised conversations are vital to Bersih movement's mobilisation.

7.3 DATA SAMPLING AND METHODS

Based on my interview data, staff of the Bersih regional secretariat in Penang and Sabah told me that the Bersih steering committee and central secretariat in Kuala Lumpur played the main coordinating role in the Bersih movement. Each state had their own Facebook page but they always encouraged their regional representatives to ensure their communication was in line with the official page managed by the Bersih steering committee and central secretariat. By 2019, the Bersih movement was endorsed by about 93 NGOs and community groups that supported the movement's cause for clean and fair

elections³⁴. Some organisations were very active on Facebook, such as Global Bersih, Mamas Bersih, Johor Yellow Flame, and Bersih groups of various cities such as Bersih Sydney, and Bersih New Zealand. In this chapter, I compare the communicative ecologies of Bersih 2.0 with Global Bersih. I chose Global Bersih because it represented the voice of diaspora Malaysians, had organised five solidarity rallies worldwide and supported the same eight demands of Bersih 2.0 in Malaysia. It was an NGO established under the Swiss Civil Code that aims to support Malaysian civil society's efforts and has a steering committee that plays a crucial role in planning the yearly activities and campaigns in response to electoral reform and governance in Malaysia (Globalbersih.org, 2020). Global Bersih actively uses Facebook as a mobilising tool and had 25,044 followers by July 2020. Both Bersih 2.0 and Global Bersih represent archetypes of two forms of social media networks.

This chapter explores the diffusion of social media content within the communicative ecology framework and briefly examines the moderating effect of culture on the diffusion. It not only examines how Facebook administrators shape the online communicative content, but also considers responses by participants and interactions among themselves. Several empirical studies confirm that there is a positive correlation between the frequency of social media use and physical participation (Valenzuela, 2013). Therefore, examining these two Facebook pages help us to understand the political engagement of Bersih participants and how engaging social media is as a mobilising tool. Among social media platforms, Facebook is highly effective in reaching and engaging individuals and groups because it provides space for good quality political discussions (Kushin and Kitchener, 2009). Papa (2017) argues that Facebook has double roles: reinforcing civic talk and debate through activists' digital storytelling, including shared feelings, and supporting alternative politics inspired by participatory engagement. This explains why my study chose Facebook to analyse the communicative ecologies of the Bersih movement for its local and global mobilisations.

³⁴ Initially, Bersih 2.0's official website listed 93 endorsing NGOs, but after an update on 10 October 2019, it was reduced to 56. This is probably due to some groups being formed on an ad-hoc basis and the members having gone inactive after the general elections in 2013 and 2018.

The method that I use for analysis is, first, exploring the use of Facebook by Bersih activists and platform administrators for their seemingly diametrically opposed points of view on social issues such as general elections (pro-BN/pro-opposition), Bersih rallies (support/resist), Election Commission (independent/ government-controlled), anti-corruption/corrupted practices, and respecting/ignoring human rights. These social issues are selected based on the themes developed from the discursive layer of the Bersih movement in Chapter 5 and through repeated readings of Facebook content. This diametrical method helped to construct my initial coding frame. It tested whether participants who agreed with the diametrically opposed content were prone to respond on Facebook and whether the content they posted online reflected diametrically opposed points of view. Second, I employed content analysis to qualitatively assess how the movement participants use social media content (including texts, emoticons, images, digital photos, videos) for different reasons. This method allowed me to make inferences about the link between content and reason, to make sense of the communicators' intentions. Once the intentions were clear, it would be easier to understand how participants used their autonomy to make contact and exchanges on the Facebook page and between their social networks. From there, they could critically debate the political issues by using Facebook as an online public sphere.

To obtain a systematic and consistent approach in the content analysis, I started my qualitative analysis with the construction of a coding frame. I set a few groups of themes and divided the comments or data that I collected into categories. The coding frame contained elements that were significant to the description and interpretation of the Facebook posts, which are related to my research question, "How does the Bersih movement's communicative ecology, with a focus on social media, mobilise individuals?" The coding frame is built based on the role of social media in linking participants' personalised conversations to their political action in a networked ecology, and hence mobilise them to participate in public street protests. In this study, the coding frame is based on the reasons behind participating in the online communicative ecology. The signs and words found are coded into a few categories such as information, mobilisation, deliberation, self-organisation, and expression of solidarity. Each category was differentiated by the characteristics of their message content. After that, they were mapped

to the political issues that engaged users in online conversations, such as general elections, Bersih rallies, Election Commission's practices, corruption, and human rights. Comments that were made relevant to the issues were selected and grouped into five reasons based on their characteristics, including information, mobilisation, deliberation, self-organisation, and expression of solidarity. I will elaborate more on these reasons in the discussion later on. The reasons for social media use varied according to issues, and users' engagement in each conversation reflects their potential political participation offline. By knowing the reasons for social media use, this chapter attempts to highlight the strategies used by movement participants in framing narratives about Bersih movement and electoral reform movement in general, participants' affect and motivations, and their online interactions within Bersih movement's communicative ecology.

7.4 TECHNOLOGICAL LAYER: BERSIH 2.0 AND GLOBAL BERSIH'S FACEBOOK PAGES

Facebook was chosen as the technological layer in this chapter because it has a high population of users in Malaysia and is an active mobilising tool for the Bersih movement (Welsh, 2013; Nadzri, 2018; Tapsell, 2018, p. 10). For individuals, Facebook is particularly useful for its ability to adapt to personal communication styles and routines. It allows a more controlled and managed self-presentation performance, which can be executed from the comfort of one's private surroundings (Papacharissi, 2010). For social movements, Clark (2016, p. 237) argues that even communication among social circles of little influence within Facebook can impact the development of a movement. Social media platforms are integrated into people's everyday lives and allow them to produce personal and dominant narratives. For instance, the Facebook status update "What's on your mind?" often prompts users to write about their everyday doings and a personal narrative of themselves (Langellier & Peterson, 2006). This platform allows users to self-narrate their experiences of the moment and their stories are later generated as trending conversations on Facebook, especially through hashtags. These hashtags are conversational markers that help in setting direction of information flows and networked publics are textually rendered through the use of hashtags that define topics or directions for information sharing (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 34). These hashtags, stories, and social

media platforms are integrated in our everyday lives and we are using them to connect with friends and families, express opinions, and support causes.

Moreover, Facebook is an integrated platform that offers a rich user experience with multiple functions. It provides many types of information, including digital image, video, discussion groups and pages, friend lists, a search engine, and news feeds that engage its users in everyday communication. Facebook messages are disseminated through updating statuses that appear on its timeline, where an organisation and its friends can publicly post and exchange their statuses. This shows that Facebook's timeline serves as a dialogic platform for organisations to involve their fans and build a devoted community (Waters & Lo, 2012, p. 300). It also serves as an ideal platform for movements and organisations to engage their supporters, disclose information about themselves, and promote movement news and accomplishments. My interview data shows nearly all Bersih activists and volunteers are actively using Facebook for information dissemination and communication because it caters to their various types of interactions, affiliations, and interests. Some might not be actively talking or sharing, but listening passively.

Facebook also provides a space for alternative information that requires little or no coordination or planning, but simple activity via messages and social media. This platform helps to shape political discourse when the mainstream media loses credibility in a semi-authoritarian country like Malaysia. It serves as a central place to see images of opposition leaders that citizens support as well as read fervent criticism of ruling leaders that they dislike during the electoral campaign for GE14 (Tapsell, 2018, p. 26). As mentioned in Chapter 6, Facebook provides a networked environment that comprises integrated public and private spaces that allow citizens to conduct their civic and social activities. Citizens are able to attain self-fulfilment and remain autonomous through their everyday presentations online. Johnson et al. (2011) argue that when individuals' public and private boundaries are blurred, it is likely for those who are less active in politics to start to explore political activities, starting from civic involvement online which they find more fulfilling and relevant to their everyday lives. My interview data also revealed that Bersih activists used Facebook to express their alternative views and engage with like-minded others. Their initial exposure to the Bersih movement was through the Internet

and social media. This shows that Facebook provides a space for alternative political discourses even though it does not directly stimulate institutional change.

Even though Facebook has well-established algorithmic architecture that afford Bersih activists to develop connectives with their supporters, the activists are always prepared to mitigate the risks of being disadvantaged by fake news and state surveillance. The global incidents of Snowden leaks (2013) and Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal (2018) revealed that the Internet and online platforms are not entirely private and safe. Social media users circulate content they create as part of their identity and participation in social networks and communities because they believe it has an impact on their networks (Lupton, 2015). However, by sharing, users are exposing themselves, making them more visible to others. This chapter addresses this dilemma and explains reasons and affect that users experienced that influence the way they create content and participate in Facebook.

Finally, to assess the Bersih movement's online presence, my study uses Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model to compare Bersih 2.0 and Global Bersih's Facebook pages. I examined how local and diaspora Malaysians used this platform to interact and respond to political issues in Malaysia. This chapter aims to provide a nuanced understanding of Facebook use by Bersih participants who live in a rather restricted and authoritarian country like Malaysia, versus those who reside in a relatively free Western country in general (includes USA, Europe, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand). I contend that diaspora Malaysians are still very much affected by their Malaysian culture even when they reside overseas, but their expectations and sentiments could be different.

7.5 DISCURSIVE LAYER: PARTICIPANT EXPRESSIONS AND COLLECTIVELY PRODUCED NEWS FEED

The discursive layer uses Facebook content to assess Bersih 2.0 and Global Bersih's online presence in social media networks. It examines how well these Facebook administrators use Facebook pages to disseminate information and engage their supporters online as well as how citizens express their affect or emotions, respond to messages (such as text, images, and emoticons), and interact with others that they met

online. I analyse Bersih 2.0 and Global Bersih's Facebook pages and the contexts they provide for topics such as general elections, Bersih rallies, Election Commission, corruption, and human rights. My theoretical framework helped me to think about the discursive layer, which included collectively produced news feeds by Bersih Facebook users as an important alternative to mainstream media in Malaysia where information is more restricted and controlled by the state. This collectively produced content does not guarantee change, but might produce momentum in a social movement over time. I contend that the online content and offline activity operate in tandem, so it really makes no sense to separate them. Therefore, I put social media and everyday social activities together into the same context. This builds on my previous argument in Chapter 6 on personalised conversations being central in the Bersih movement's mobilisation by further delving into how connective and a sense of community are developed through the affordances and algorithmic architecture of a particular social media platform.

Affect is an emotion that we subjectively experience and connect to before a movement or event. In this individualised society, people tend to structure their own lives and express personal interest in issues. The concept of affective publics supports a connective that allows people to show interest without having to enter into complex negotiation of personal versus collective politics (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 314). Other than the official Facebook page that represents movement, individual Bersih activists are active on Facebook too. They use Facebook for their personal storytelling and expressions about political events in Malaysia. Some even provide real personal profiles, including pictures, and names. This is particularly common among those who probably need a public identity for their leadership in the movement. Figure 7.1 shows Bersih steering committee chairperson (2018–2020) Thomas Fann, who uses his real name for his personal Facebook account and reveals some of his personal details, including hometown, marital status, and education. His profile picture shows him in a white shirt that portrays a clean image, and the background picture reflects his solidarity with other activists in the electoral reform movement. He is always active in updating content relating to the Bersih movement, his personal work schedule and whereabouts, and interacting with his followers on Facebook through bonding messages. In the interview, Fann (personal communication, September 24, 2017) told me that Facebook was a good tool in allowing collaboration and sharing of

information to promote electoral reform. People tended to be wordier on Facebook and that gave more substance to their responses. His posts on Facebook were not only a part of the everyday context of him presenting his networked self, but also his socially informed personal reactions to socio-political news and current events. As an individual, his online presentations have reflected him as a passionate citizen who has strong affect for the political events in the country and this connects him to other like-minded citizens who follow his Facebook page.

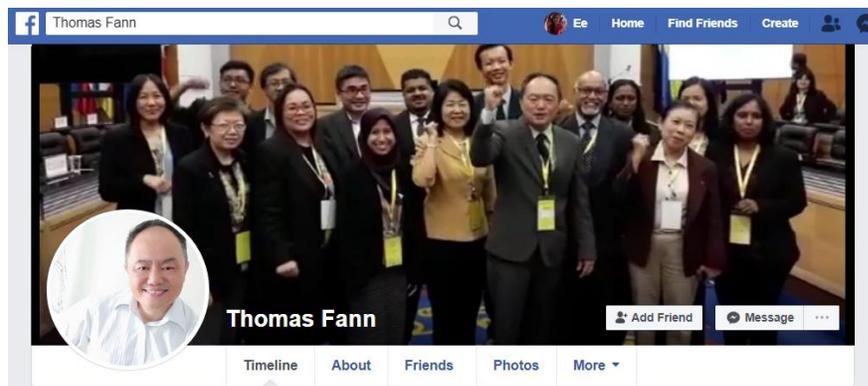


Figure 7.1 Bersih steering committee chairperson (2018–2020) Thomas Fann’s Facebook profile

Another example is former Bersih chairperson Maria Chin Abdullah, who resigned from the Bersih steering committee to contest in the 2018 general election, who changed her profile to a politician, as Member of Parliament for Petaling Jaya. She has been using her real name as her Facebook username since her leadership in the Bersih steering committee. The act of personalising her profile on Facebook has probably attracted more people to get to know about her and the cause that she is fighting as a Malaysian activist and member of parliament. Maria Chin has been very vocal on her personal Facebook page, where she regularly expresses her personal dislike, anger, and affective statements which later turn into her political statements. For example, she wrote, “Slowly but surely” (3 February 2020) when she posted a news article about Malaysia rising nine spots to 43rd in the democracy index. In some of her Facebook posts, she used all capital letters to set a serious and determined tone, and openly complemented good government policies and governance. Her posts always sounded determined and likely to persuade her followers to perform their duties as Malaysians by simply clicking “Like,” or sharing posts that they agree on. Her personal position on current political events

connected her with her Facebook friends and followers without forcing them into forming a collective narrative.

The connective abilities of social media invite forms of expression and connection that help liberate the individual and collective imaginations (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 310). Stories of the Bersih movement have been generated and re-generated through digital layers of expression and bind networked publics after the first event that called them into being. For example, Bersih 2.0 Facebook posted the movement's new buntings designed with multiple rally scenes as background, and asked "Which one [rally] were you in?" (30 October, 2017). The post received 37 comments that replied they were in most of the rallies and 832 emoticons, including "Likes," "Love," and "Haha." Supporters cherished the movement's sustained fight over a decade through posting comments and emoticons. On the movement's 10-year anniversary, they posted "10 November 2017: Blessed Anniversary Bersih! This day we celebrate every Malaysian who has stood with us at every rally" (9 November 2017). This anniversary post prompted supporters to remember when they first joined the movement and to realise they still shared the same collective idea of clean and fair elections. The Facebook post ended with a call for supporters to sign up as 14th general election observers and continued to bind them together with another event in this ongoing electoral reform. The affect of togetherness and connectives energised supporters to remember what they had been through over the past decade and motivated them to continue their fight.

Global Bersih Facebook reflected a more global and international sentiment of the Bersih rallies. It posted solidarity rallies that were organised in several countries, such as "Global rallies, Indonesian version!" (May 15, 2017), and "Romania's own Bersih rally" (February 7, 2017). The Romania post had received 114 emoticons in support but drew some criticism: "Here, we just come and do some silly funny jokes then bersurai ["disperse"] around 5–6pm," "Lol bersih is a joke," "Seconded. All bark, no bite. They cannot even be bothered to change their tactics. And the rest of us still suffer for it." The supporters sounded more critical and were disappointed over the short rally. They seemed to have a higher expectation for the rally and this was probably due to the higher civic awareness and democracy level in the European city they resided in. Another example is when Global Bersih Facebook shared an event in Taiwan titled "Bersih Taiwan is having

a protest rally on the postal voting system—those in Taiwan do join” (May 8, 2018), the response was low, and the caption merely suggested supporters to take part. The affect and expressions on Global Bersih Facebook seemed lacking compared to Bersih 2.0. Even though it targeted diaspora Malaysians, the supporters did not appear excited or supportive of solidarity rallies organised in other countries. Their viewpoints about rallies were assembled collaboratively by Global Bersih Facebook and presented as a global imagination, even though they did not seem to share a collective imagination. This links back to Papacharissi’s argument that affective publics support connective yet not necessarily collective action via networked platforms.

The narratives of the Bersih movement are woven collaboratively through #bersih stories. Hashtags play a significant role as a bridge between disparate information flows in the Malaysian cyberspace, with Facebook serving as an everyday space for individuals to produce and circulate stories. Hashtag activism is an act of supporting a cause with the use of hashtags as the primary channel to raise awareness of an issue and encourage debate via social media (Tomblason & Wolf, 2017). It is also a form of participatory culture that enables individuals to form groups around particular topics and events. For example, Bersih 2.0 Facebook used hashtags such as #Bersih5, #KitaLawan (“We fight”) in support of Bersih leader Maria Chin, who was detained without trial for 10 days under SOSMA before Bersih 5 rally (2016) to show solidarity. The conversationalist nature of these narratives encouraged Bersih supporters to collaboratively co-create a story about the event. Sometimes they also challenged the issues through online expressions. These narratives often sustained a pace that was emotive and intense. For instance, when the Bersih movement lobbied against re-delineation issues, Bersih 2.0 Facebook posted, “When injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty. When SPR cheats, the masses must rise,” “Withdraw the re-delineation report! #Kalahkan Pencuri” (28 March 2018), and “The government has changed, but the reform must continue to make Malaysia a truly democratic country” (July 8, 2018). Facebook administrators often develop hashtags and narratives around its events to encourage its supporters to stay together through bonding words such as “we,” “Malaysians,” and “reform.” Based on the hashtags created, Bersih 2.0 Facebook appeared more active in framing their narratives and its news streams are more affective in nature. Hence, their supporters’ responses were more encouraging and

the connectives (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) among them appeared stronger. The narratives generated by them were broadcast to the rest of the world via Facebook through a number of tags and these affective stories helped to sustain the feeling of engagement.

Compared to Bersih 2.0, Global Bersih had fewer updates on its Facebook and the use of hashtags was relatively less. They tended to set a more serious and formal tone by providing their supporters solid information and rational feedback. They usually framed their online posts with an extract from the news articles that they forwarded and the captions they used were less catchy and emotive. For example, they forwarded an article taken from New Naratif site with a quote that said, “Malaysia’s ongoing re-delineation exercise is unconstitutional and will create a parliament that is extremely unrepresentative of Malaysia’s people, no matter who wins” (March 19, 2018). This re-delineation post attracted three comments from their supporters, demanding actions to protest the violation of law. Global Bersih Facebook administrator’s timely response to these demands by forwarding press statements issued by the Bersih movement (Malaysia) in collaboration with its endorsed NGOs and news stories published in newspaper Malay Mail. They used published news stories and information to create awareness and educate their supporters about political events in Malaysia and actions taken by the Bersih movement. Both Bersih 2.0 and Global Bersih used Facebook to facilitate the feelings of engagement among their supporters by activating latent ties formed through their Bersih events. Global Bersih tended to frame their narratives with more substance but less intensity while Bersih 2.0 was more affective and connective through hashtags.

Locality appeared to be another important factor that shaped the tone of narrative flows on Facebook. Yardi and Boyd (2010, p. 200) argue local hashtags may display denser social connectivity between posting users. Users always referred to related issues (such as who to vote for) that mobilised the movement, and participated in local events in addition to the online conversation (Xiong et al., 2018). Narratives framed by social movements are disseminated and amplified by social media through these tags. Eventually these narratives would discursively hail like-minded individuals to form affective publics. Both Bersih 2.0 and Global Bersih frame their narratives in a mixture of English and Malay language. In response to GE14, Bersih 2.0 Facebook uploaded a midnight post to urge Malaysians to remain calm and collected while waiting for the official announcement

of the election result (9 May 2018), as indicated in Figure 7.2. They used hashtags in Malay such as “#SatukanTenaga” (“Stay United”) and “#KalahkanPencuri” (“Defeat Thief”) to frame their stories and urged Malaysians to stay united to fight against corrupt leaders. This post received 1,700 emoticons, 29 comments and 2,600 people shared it. Other popular hashtags during GE14 included #MalaysiaBaru, #GE14, #SPRtipu (“Election Commission lies”), and #UndiRabu (“Vote on Wednesday”). Based on my online observation, these conversations around GE14 helped like-minded individuals to strengthen their movement identities. The local networks appeared denser and individuals who were geographically local or based in Malaysia were more responsive to the information posted on Facebook. Those residing overseas tended to be more responsive to events organised by the central committee in Malaysia than solidarity rallies in other countries.



Figure 7.2 Bersih 2.0 Facebook post reminds Malaysians to stay calm and wait for the GE14 results

The Global Bersih Facebook page was more prone to use hashtags in Malay when they share information from the Bersih 2.0 (Malaysia) website and its official Facebook

page. For instance, hashtags such as #pengundibaru (“new voter”), #malaysiabarur (“new Malaysia”), #pemantau (“observer”), #JomPantau (“let’s observe/monitor”) (31 December, 2017) and #PRU (“General Elections”), #Undilah (“Vote”), #SatukanTenagaLawanPenipuan (“Be United to Fight against Deception”), #KeluarMengundi (“Come Out Vote”), and #PengundiBijak (“Smart Voter”) (24 January, 2018) were used before GE14, urging citizens to protect their rights as voters. The use of Malay language seems to better reflect the locality of the issue, and strengthen the group identity as Malaysian as a whole. Based on my observations online, Global Bersih consistently aligned their use of hashtags with Bersih 2.0 (Malaysia) and emphasised more about issues relating to general elections and rallies in Malaysia because they wanted to produce a sense of community between diaspora Malaysians and those who resided in the country. For other issues or content shared on their Facebook page, they often used longer captions in English and keep the mixture of language minimal. The similarity in the usage of hashtags and local language (Malay for Malaysia in this case) reflects how social media presence is consistent across Bersih movements. The sense of unity and social connectivity between supporters is likely to be improved through the central message of #bersih stories that embraces all supporters and allow them to be counted as part of the one movement.

The discursive layer shows that the Bersih movement’s social media presence remained consistent across countries. From the use of hashtags to the content shared online, the movement committees seemed to set similar central goals and ideologies that focused on electoral reform and institutional change in Malaysia. The sentiment and affect shared by diaspora Malaysians seemed more relevant to the political events in their home country. They were still very much affected by their identity as Malaysians despite residing in other countries. This shows that culture only partially moderates the diffusion of the discursive layer within the Bersih’s communicative ecology framework. Their geography, network, and communication varied, but the language and stories remained similar. This links back to the concept of affect that argues technology networks the supporters, but stories connect them. These stories are eventually spread through everyday personalised conversations among people, both online and offline.

People used Facebook for a variety of reasons, ranging from self-gratification, social integration, and other socio-political matters. These posts were either presented as personal, or contributing to greater conversations. The interesting part of this Chapter 7 is that Facebook is dual-faceted, both personal and collective at the same time, sustaining the sociality form of a networked individual. The next section of this chapter presents a content analysis that was conducted to examine the performative practices constructed within Facebook, with emphasis on the social layer. It explores how Bersih supporters use Facebook to respond to the socio-political conditions in Malaysia and interact among themselves.

7.6 SOCIAL LAYER: MOTIVATIONS TO POST AND ENGAGE ONLINE

The social layer analyses how the diffusion of social media content increases participant engagement with a movement's Facebook page. It explores reasons that motivate people to participate in Facebook conversations and how the Bersih movement maps those reasons with their narrative framing and shapes conversations that people would pay attention to. Norris (2001) argues that motivation refers to an individual's access to the Internet and their ability to use it, including confidence, interest, and knowledge of online communication, as well as an open-mindedness towards democratic processes. Another research study (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017) found offline participation was connected to self-fulfilment while online participation relates more to following peers and earning rewards. This echoes my findings in Chapters 5 and 6 which stated that social media provides a space for activists and volunteers to interact with wider communities and obtain self-fulfilment for public commitment. As all of my interviewees had knowledge and experience using social media, they were already familiar with accessing and creating online content, thus their main concern was to provide truthful information about electoral reform as a basis for the public to make political decisions.

Furthermore, Couldry (2009, pp. 580–581) argues that an interactive platform requires someone listening or recognising what others have to say to the process of interaction. This listening is an embedded part of networked engagement and thus emphasis is placed on posting, commenting, and speaking up (Crawford, 2009, p. 528). This online practice usually contains a certain level of emotional intensity or affect that

guides a Facebook follower or movement supporter to negotiate the level of investment they should invest in an online text. The affective practice can also inspire an action, such as leaving a written comment or emoticon, and sharing. This connects back to the communicative ecology model that argues media is an environment or ecology that defines our roles, frames what we see or think, and makes us feel and act as we do (Postman, 1970). The affective practice affects the way people engage in the networked media environment that is hybrid and interrelated. Examining the reasons or motivations for people engaging in social media helps us understand their affective level and how they respond to the interaction online. Therefore, I wish to explore the social layer of the Bersih movement's communicative ecology by examining the reasons that motivate Bersih supporters to use Facebook to engage with others online.

In this section, I continue to use Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model to analyse the social layer of Bersih 2.0 and Global Bersih's Facebook pages. People feel powerful to be able to raise issues and feedback. Facebook makes the diversity of their actions possible through features, including liking, sharing and posting. By diversifying the types of actions that people can take, from follower to leader, social media allows many to become involved. Based on my observations of these two Facebook pages between 2017 and 2019, I have identified five reasons that motivated people to join the Bersih movement's online communicative ecology in general. They are: information, mobilisation, deliberation, self-organisation, and expression of solidarity. I will elaborate each reason in reference to the two Facebook pages and examine whether culture was a moderating factor in the diffusion of the social layer within the Bersih movement's communicative ecology framework. The online posts that I retrieved from both Facebook pages are based on themes such as elections and democracy, people's rights, law and governance, and corruption, as analysed in the discursive layer of Chapter 5 in this thesis.

First, Bersih participants used Facebook to access information relating to the Bersih movement. This was a common practice among those who were already interested in politics, as well as those who started to get curious when they saw their friends following the news feeds. I conducted a check on Bersih 2.0 and Global Bersih's Facebook page during GE14 and found that the viewership of the content shared and uploaded was high. Several references such as press releases or promotion for campaigns

were uploaded by the central committee of Bersih 2.0 to their Facebook and this content was also shared by the endorsed Global Bersih to their own Facebook. Other than Bersih-related information, both Facebook administrators uploaded content from external sources such as news websites (such as Malaysiakini.com, Malaysia Today, CNN, and Bloomberg) on electoral reform and human rights issues. My online observation shows that administrators updated the political information on a daily basis and these frequent posts on Facebook resulted in higher participant engagement. This finding could be explained by the fact that movement supporters who “Follow” the Facebook pages like to be informed of the latest information about the movement and general elections. When they saw new content on the movement’s Facebook timeline or their own news feed, they interacted with it by clicking on “Like,” posting comments and sharing it on their own timeline. Their engagement directed more traffic to the movement’s Facebook page because the shared content was visible to all their Facebook friends.

For example, Bersih 2.0 Facebook streamed a live press conference on “Observation report of Seri Setia and Balakong by-election” on 4 October 2018, five months after the 14th Malaysian general elections were held, as indicated in Figure 7.3. Candidate Wong Siew Ki from Pakatan Harapan had beat her MCA opponent Tan Chee Teong by 18,533 votes in the Balakong by-election on 9 September, 2018. The physical press conference that took place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, was live-streamed to communicate the Bersih movement’s position and concern regarding the political offences documented during this by-election. Supporters around the world who wished to know more about the report were invited to “Watch this video with their friends” through Facebook’s Watch Parties. They watched this press conference together in real time and interacted with other citizens and voters to discuss the by-election results. This combination of old media (physical press conference) and new media (Facebook Watch Party) communicated a converged and integrated message about the Bersih movement to supporters and gathered them around the same topic. The engagement level increased from the perspective of the supporters when they watched and participated in the live-streamed press conference. This shows that Bersih 2.0 successfully optimised Facebook features in their relationship cultivation efforts.



Figure 7.3 Bersih press conference on “Observation Report of Seri Setia and Balakong by-election” was live-streamed on their official Facebook page on 4 October, 2018, five months after the 14th Malaysian general elections

To cater to the information-seeking behaviour among their supporters, Global Bersih always posted external news links about its causes and forwarded press releases and rally summaries from the Bersih 2.0 to its Facebook page. This information helped in detailing its successes to supporters who expected advanced movement profiles. During the GE14 campaign, Global Bersih had been updating news on postal votes and provided detailed information on how to prevent phantom voters, as well as posting some precautionary steps that should be taken on Facebook (7 May 2018). Based on my online observation, diaspora Malaysians who resided in Westernised and developed countries such as the USA, and Europe were more explicit and direct in their communication; therefore Facebook served as a good platform for them to exchange information. Global Bersih posted a demonstration organised in the United Kingdom to speak out for

Malaysians who had not received their postal votes (8 May 2018). It used words such as “corruption,” “very angry,” and “stolen” to explicitly express their dissatisfaction with the Election Commission. Pictures that showed protesters in Bersih t-shirts, holding placards that said, “Where is my ballot paper?” were posted online too. This post received 891 emoticons, 74 comments and 1,400 shares. Malaysians who resided in different countries also poured in their support and shared similar experiences about delayed postal ballot papers in their countries. Even though they hardly knew each other, the communication between them was not difficult as they could freely and explicitly make their dissatisfaction manifest through words. This could be due to them living in Westernised countries where freedom of self-expression is the norm.

Second, Bersih participants used Facebook for social networking with like-minded others. Bersih 2.0 Facebook often portrayed their prominent leaders as ordinary individuals who did not possess any superpowers, but were just brave and courageous. They publicised their achievements in the form of stories to appeal to the public. For example, Figure 7.4 shows Bersih former chairperson Maria Chin Abdullah receiving a testament from the Kofi Annan Foundation, congratulating her for winning a parliamentary seat in the 2018 election and complimenting her exemplary commitment in promoting peaceful and democratic change in the country (31 May 2018). This official statement from the Kofi Annan Foundation (Annan was the 7th Secretary-General of the United Nations) showed that Maria Chin and the Bersih movement were internationally recognised as significant and their demands were in line with the foundation’s mission of mobilising political will to overcome threats to peace, development, and human rights. The communication about personnel relating to the Bersih movement on Facebook helped to shape participants’ perception of the Bersih movement as legal, righteous, and independent. Also, the iconic figure of Maria Chin made the impression that a patriotic Malaysian was obliged to join the movement for a fairer and more peaceful Malaysia. This post received several likes and emoticons from supporters, showing that they were proud of the achievement and likely agreed on a consensus that the Bersih movement was legitimate and gave their support. The personalisation of personnel instilled excitement and pride among Bersih supporters about their leaders who received international

recognition. The emotion or affect that they personally experienced online was likely to mobilise them and encourage a certain form of commitment to the movement.



The Honourable Maria Chin Abdullah, MP

Geneva, 31 May 2018

Dear Maria,

I wanted to congratulate you on your election victory and, more broadly, on your personal role in preparing the ground for this historic transition in Malaysia.

Your bold and spirited defence of democracy in the face of increasing authoritarian drift, of which your own arrest was symptomatic, highlighted the strength of your character. Malaysia can count itself fortunate to have MPs of your calibre to serve the root and branch reform process it is about to undertake.

Nor have I forgotten Bersih and the Foundation's cooperation in Malaysian democratic reform. I hope that our engagement played a useful role in the process that led to this result.

I also want to stress that this Malaysian election has sent a signal of hope across the world, to the many other countries where politics have been hijacked by entrenched corrupt ruling parties, that peaceful, democratic change is possible. Thank you.

Please accept my warm regards and best wishes.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "K Annan". Below the signature, the name "Kofi Annan" is printed in a small, black, sans-serif font.

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Figure 7.4 The Kofi Annan Foundation issued a testament on 31 May 2018, to congratulate Bersih former Chairperson Marin Chin Abdullah for her victory in the Malaysian general election as a Member of Parliament

On the other hand, the Global Bersih Facebook page seldom promoted their movement leaders, but they did post news that they collaborated with Bersih 2.0, the Kofi Annan Foundation, and others to organise a two-day roundtable discussion on “Advancing electoral reform in Malaysia” in parliament (November 24, 2018). A video that depicted Bersih representatives in the parliament was posted after the discussion with a caption indicating the foundation would prepare a summary report based on the discussion (December 2, 2018). It received 633 views and 13 Likes. This showed that diaspora Malaysians were probably more curious about how the movement brought solid institutional change and development in the country rather than one individual’s international recognition.

Third, Bersih participants used Facebook for political deliberation. While traditional mainstream media provides news and analysis of political affairs, enabling information, and facilitating debates and deliberation between different views, social media levels the playing field by making all users equal and less hierarchical. This condition makes rational debate possible. Habermas (1996) argues that informal deliberation takes place outside of the institution, then forms public opinions affecting institutional deliberation. This deliberative democracy develops in voluntary groups, including the Bersih movement, keeping a critical watch upon the institutions. On the Bersih 2.0 Facebook page, there were comments and questions that instigated and contributed to discussion on the politics at the heart of the Bersih movement. For instance, Figure 7.5 shows the Bersih steering committee and secretariat releasing a press statement titled “Lim Guan Eng’s case shows institutional reform should no longer be delayed”³⁵ and urging the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission as well as the Attorney General’s Chambers to look into this alleged corruption case (5 September 2018). This statement had garnered criticism from the public and triggered a heated debate on whether the Bersih movement’s questioning about acquittal fairness was necessary. Some had argued online that the graft case was less severe compared to the 1MDB scandal and claimed that Lim Guan Eng was “framed by the BN,” and the case was “lies and not facts.” One participant had looked at this case in a broader context and called for “a distinct separation of powers between MACC and AGC with respective charge.” This debate shows that Bersih’s Facebook page created a virtual public sphere that encouraged participants to freely express their opinions in their private space, probably at home, or outside, whenever an issue was posted online. This space allows participants to express their anger and disappointment about the judgement, both personally and publicly. They probably read the news on the mainstream newspaper or television, and used this space to communicate with like-minded others within this Bersih social network.

³⁵ Former Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng, who is now a Finance Minister, was acquitted of corruption charges over the purchase of a bungalow allegedly below the market value on 3 September 2018. This acquittal has ignited a firestorm of criticism from civil society and Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission. Retrieved from <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/09/03/guan-eng-grateful-for-being-acquitted-of-graft-charges/>

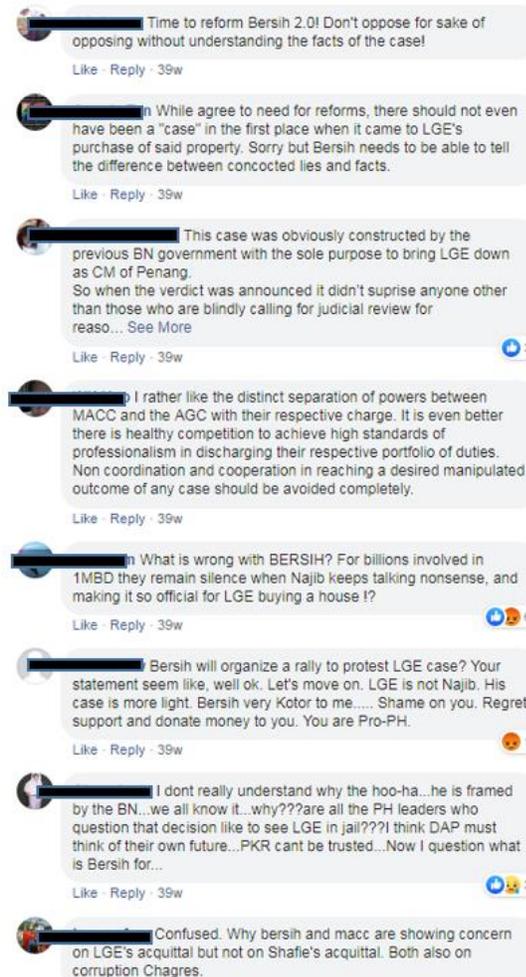


Figure 7.5 Responses to Bersih’s press statement titled “Lim Guan Eng’s Case Shows Institutional Reform Should No Longer Be Delayed”

Participants not only used the Bersih Facebook page to debate local and national issues, but also international issues. Figure 7.6 shows the Bersih movement released a press statement on their Facebook page to call for the release of pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong and condemn police violence, as well as the deterioration of civic space (Bersih 2.0, 1 September 2019). This post received 152 emoticons, including “Like,” “Angry,” and “Love,” as well as a total of 253 comments and 44 shares. The movement’s open support for this international issue received numerous criticisms online. Some participants responded with statements such as: “Bersih 2.0 why you want to involve in Hong Kong affairs? You want us to support terrorism? No way,” “Bersih please mind your own business,” “Bersih what happens for your guys, they rally is not peaceful but

you support them?” “Bersih, you are quick to come out with statements about HK police brutality. How about violence by the rioters? Are you advocately their action? Are you saying that it is OK if protest will be happened Malaysia in future,” “Bersih, already run out of ideas to fight for? myb should reconsider its relevance since BN now not in power?” Instead of text, some participants used angry-faced emojis to express their rage against the movement’s decision to support Hong Kong’s activism while others resented the police brutality used by the authorities in Hong Kong. The meanings attached to these emojis varied as this was part of their discursive power and flexibility. The various features on Facebook have also allowed participants to reason together about political issues by freely expressing themselves in either text or emoticons. The deliberative democracy that develops in this media environment allows citizens to keep a critical watch upon the institutions and worldwide political happenings.



Figure 7.6 Responses to Bersih’s calls for release of pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong

On the Global Bersih Facebook page, they only posted content relating to Lim Guan Eng and his role as finance minister. The comments were limited and most people applauded the appointment of a non-Malay for such a significant position in the newly formed cabinet in 2018. Whereas for international issues such as pro-democracy activism in Hong Kong, there were no relevant posts that showed support for it. Rather, the Global Bersih Facebook page posted comments to support their Bersih solidarity rallies in Hong Kong. My online observation showed that diaspora Malaysians were more affected by posts that were driven by events that happened in Malaysia, such as general elections and Bersih rallies, than political issues happening in other countries. Despite residing in different countries, their Facebook use was culturally relevant and their affect was stronger when the issues were related to Malaysia.

Fourth, Bersih participants used Facebook to self-organise. Participants used the Bersih 2.0 Facebook page to comment on their preparations to attend rallies and raise enquiries about the logistics of the events. For about two weeks before the Bersih rally in Malaysia, viral posts (consisting of tips, infographics, and educational videos) were widely disseminated to educate rally goers on what to pack, what to do when tear-gassed, how to use salt, and important phone numbers if they were arrested (J. B. Y. Lim, 2017, p. 211). This online interaction helped participants self-organise for Bersih rallies and develop solidarity online. Followers of the Bersih 2.0 Facebook page received notifications when an event was created by the administrator. For example, Figure 7.8 shows an event page that was created for Bersih rally 3—“Duduk Bantah” (“Sit and Protest”) on the Bersih 2.0 Facebook page. The event was held on 28 April 2012, and 4,500 people had confirmed they would be going while 995 had shown interest. The page had calculated 331 posts in the discussion relating to the rally. Most of the posts were expressions of solidarity with participants organising among themselves for the rally. One participant posted an update online about the road block: “Kelana Jaya LRT station still open as at 9am :). . . See u all soon!” (Male, 28 April), while another expressed interest in going together: “Anyone from setapak/wangsamaju area wanna go together in a group?!? Have 3 persons here =) Let Us be a Group if u are from this area~thx~~” (Male, 27 April). Participants were busy discussing the upcoming rally, organising among themselves, and

sharing information relating to potential roadblocks, meeting-up points in Kuala Lumpur and sharing maps.

In addition, there were words of encouragement such as: “To support u guys at SG” (Male, 26 April), “Osaka punye what time? i’ll be there” (Female, 22 April), “I duduk di tempat kerja saya, wish good luck guys!” (Female, 22 April) and “Sorry, I’m not at Msia on that period. . . But my soul will attend” (Female, 23 April). The ongoing discussions on Facebook among participants who resided in different countries had reached a consensus at that point, which was to join and support the Bersih 3.0 rally. This decision was made by citizens who wished to function civically and had influenced many, including locals, and diaspora Malaysians, to participate in the rally, either physically, or to give moral support online. The participants had exchanged information that was useful in helping them to determine whether they should join and support the rally. This connects to the concept of an affective public which is built on the idea of networked publics who share opinions, facts, sentiments, drama, and performance (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 126). Bersih participants form networks with people who support the same activity and they get excited about the event because of their passion for it. This affect is not merely technology derived, but stimulated in them by the Facebook environment that leads them to self-organise and forms unity among races at the rally.

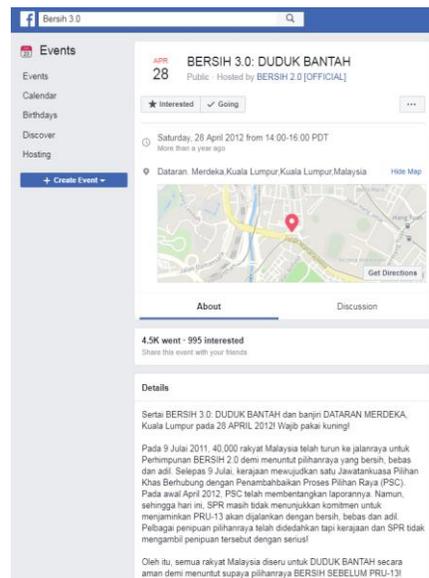


Figure 7.7 Facebook event page for Bersih rally 3 “Duduk Bantah” shows 4,500 people went while 995 showed interest

The Global Bersih Facebook page also played an important role in engaging diaspora Malaysians to join Bersih rallies globally. The platform allows the participants to overcome their sense of isolation and inefficacy by connecting them with like-minded others. The platform and the network of Bersih coordinators mobilise various Bersih groups in different cities around the world and synergise their efforts. For instance, they created an event titled “Bersih 3.0 links to all global locations” (April 28, 2012) and provided Facebook links of solidarity rallies in different countries including Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, Austria, Australia, USA, Canada, New Zealand, Taiwan, Ireland, Switzerland, Sweden, Germany, China, France, Thailand, Korea, Finland, Russia, Jordan, Bangladesh, Netherlands, Indonesia, South Africa, India, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Nepal, Egypt, Italy, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. Through these links, Bersih participants could connect themselves with the local coordinators and self-organise with other participants. Global Bersih Facebook administrators also urged cities that organised their own Bersih gatherings in solidarity with the Bersih 4 rally to register with them and take photos of themselves dressed in yellow during the rally (28 August 2015). The colour code and “Bersih” branding was used to form solidarity among supporters. The Global Bersih Facebook page served as a one-stop centre that provided globally shared information that helped diaspora Malaysians to self-organise and contribute to the networked social movement. My online observation shows that people used the Global Bersih Facebook page mostly for functional purposes, and less on expressing their affect. Therefore, the user-generated content was structured and organised around specific topics and locations. This information helped to direct participants to the Facebook pages of specific cities or countries and self-organise with other local participants.

Fifth, Bersih participants used Facebook to form solidarity online and support one another. Individual participants participated independently in Facebook, gradually becoming more connected through the affordances of the digital platform. For instance, participants who were trained as PACAs for general elections often faced confusion and challenges due to electoral irregularities. To assist in their enquiries, Bersih 2.0 Facebook administrators posted some legal information relating to the Malaysian electoral system and the Election Commission’s practices on their Facebook page. On polling day May 9 2018, they posted an extract from the Malaysian election law book to remind the PACAs

that they must obtain a signed copy of Form 14³⁶ from the Election Commission during polling day, as indicated in Figure 7.8. The explanations made on the Facebook page helped to clarify doubts about the conduct of elections among participants. This shows how Bersih activists used the abilities and algorithms of Facebook to engage their supporters and develop a sense of community among citizens who believe that only when the elections are clean and fair, they can be the real masters of their own destiny. This common belief forms a strong solidarity among the movement participants who are trained to be part of the electoral monitoring process and generates many positive affective responses from them.

³⁶ According to the Election (Conduct of Elections) Regulations, 1981, "...it shall be mandatory for the presiding officer to issue Form 14...to all candidates their election agents or counting agents duly signed by the presiding officer and all candidates, their election agents or counting agents present. www.parlimen.gov.my

BERSIH 2.0 [OFFICIAL]
May 9, 2018 · 🌐

PERINGATAN KEPADA AGEN PENGIRAAN UNDI

Wakil calon yang akan memantau proses pengiraan undi MESTI menuntut salinan Borang 14 yang mengandungi tandatangan semua pihak yg berkenaan. Jika tidak, ini adalah satu kesalahan di bawah Seksyen 25(12) (b) Peraturan Pilihan Raya (Penjalanan Pilihan Raya).

#PACA

A reminder to the voting calculation agent

Representative of the candidate who will monitor the voting calculation process must claim a copy of form 14 that contains the signature of all parties that are applicable. If not, this is an offence under section 25 (12) (b) election rules (election carrying).

#PACA
🌟 Rate this translation

**COE 25(12)(b)(ii)
KTM hendaklah
menyerah Borang 14 kpd
setiap Ejen Calon.**

18 Undang-Undang Malaysia FCU (A) 366195

(9) Sebelum memulakan sebarang kertas undi, ketua tempat mengundi hendaklah menunjukkan kepada setiap calon, ejen pilihan raya atau ejen mengira, jika hadir, dan menumbangkan pendapat mereka mengira.

(10) Keputusan ketua tempat mengundi, sama ada atau tidak mana mana kertas undi hendaklah diundi, adalah muktamad.

(11) (Dipotong oleh P.U. (A) 87/2004).

(12) Tertakik kepada subperaturan (13), ketua tempat mengundi hendaklah, dengan segera setelah selesai pengiraan undi—

(a) menyerahkan kepada tiap-tiap calon atau ejen pilihan raya atau ejen mengira yang hadir bilangan undi yang diberikan bagi setiap calon;

(b) menyediakan bilangan salinan yang mencukupi prasyarat perundangan dalam Borang 14 dalam Jajual Pilihan Raya yang hendaklah dipertahankan oleh ketua tempat mengundi itu dan ditandatangani oleh setiap calon atau ejen pilihan raya atau ejen mengira yang hadir dan yang berkecuali untuk memandatkan penyata perundangan itu, seperti yang berikut:

(i) satu salinan, bagi pegawai pengurus, hendaklah diserahkan ke dalam suatu sampul khas yang dibekalkan bagi maksud itu, dibekalkan dengan penakat keselamatan yang hendaklah ditandatangani oleh ketua tempat mengundi itu; dan

(ii) satu salinan hendaklah diserahkan kepada setiap calon atau ejen pilihan raya atau ejen mengira yang hadir;

(c) memberitahu pegawai pengurus, dengan apa cara yang ada padanya, keputusan pengiraan undi di tempat mengundi.

(13) Jika perbezaan antara bilangan undian oleh pemilih bagi calon yang terbanyak dengan bilangan undi, kedua terbanyak ialah empat peratus atau kurang daripada jumlah bilangan undian oleh pemilih, maka atau penentuan mana-mana satu calon atau

107 3 Comments 116 Shares

Figure 7.8 An extract taken from the Malaysian election law book set as a reminder for PACA that they must obtain a signed copy of Form 14 from the Election Commission during polling day

Moreover, to express solidarity, participants always used Facebook to show their support and praise for events or actions relating to the Bersih movement. A quick check on the Bersih 2.0 Facebook page shows participants describing the Bersih movement as doing the “right thing” by adhering to the electoral law, fighting justice “for the people and a better Malaysia,” and encouraging one another to give their support to the movement. To further enhance this solidarity, the Bersih 2.0 Facebook posted about a new electoral reform and party system training workshop and urged everyone to participate (15 October 2018), as indicated in Figure 7.9. These one-day workshops were conducted free nationwide after GE14, including in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Johor Bahru, Ipoh, Kuantan, and Kota Kinabalu. Participants were encouraged to discuss across party lines the new electoral system that should be adopted. This conversation bridged diverse groups, members from different political parties, to come together to make consensus on the most

ideal system that they should practise in Malaysia. This showed how an online platform was used to enhance the offline social interaction and allow movement supporters to freely interact among themselves. It also spoke to the discursive layer of the Bersih movement's communicative ecology that even with the newly elected government, the Bersih movement had to continue monitoring a clean and fair electoral system.



Figure 7.9 Bersih Facebook page calls for members to register for their nationwide one-day electoral systems workshop

7.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter compared the content of two Facebook pages to give a more nuanced view of the Bersih movement's communicative ecologies among local and diaspora Malaysians. The comparison showed that the Bersih 2.0 Facebook page was more engaging in their online communication; they seemed more active in framing their online narratives and generating news streams in a more affective nature. The regular updates, relatable tags, and affective stories helped to sustain the feeling of engagement among their participants. Therefore, their participants' online responses were more encouraging and the connectives between them appeared stronger through the affective comments and emoticons. This suggests that when affect is involved, there is greater frequency and duration of participants interacting with one another, and the content that they created is likely to diffuse more broadly and deeply within the Bersih movement's social network, with the help of hashtags.

On the other hand, the Global Bersih Facebook page showed less affect and expressions among diaspora Malaysians. They did not appear particularly excited or supportive of the Bersih solidarity rallies organised in other countries online. Facebook merely assembled their viewpoints about clean and fair elections collaboratively and presented them as a global imagination. They appeared more responsive to events organised in Malaysia and their sentiments were more relevant to the political events in their home country. Despite residing in other countries, diaspora Malaysians were still affected by their identity as Malaysians. This was obvious when the online response to general elections in Malaysia was much higher than other posts. Individuals who shared the same cultural values, despite being geographically dispersed, were likely to share a strong sense of connectivity among themselves via networked platforms, not necessarily collective action. In contrast, it was also likely that Facebook's algorithm made some posts more visible than others, unless participants had actively looked through the history of the page, and hence there would be a chance for search results to be skewed.

Based on Foth and Hearn's (2007) three layers, I have analysed the technological, discursive, and social layers of these two Facebook pages. My analysis suggests the Bersih 2.0 Facebook page took a stronger stand in the same ecology due to its locality. Bersih participants satisfied their social communication needs with conventional face-to-face

interaction through Bersih rallies, as well as mediated communication that occurred on the Bersih movement's Facebook page. The local #bersih stories on Facebook embraced all participants and counted them as part of the movement, whereas for diaspora Malaysians, content posted on the Global Bersih Facebook page tended to be functional, documenting information that they needed to know about electoral reform and the Bersih movement rather than motivational or affective content. Therefore, their globally dispersed communication was less engaging than the local communication within Malaysia. This relates back to the discursive layer of the two Bersih Facebook pages that suggests while social media serves to network participants, it is stories that connect people.

The social layer of this chapter examines the reasons Bersih participants use Facebook, what motivates them to converse online, the interactions between them, and how two Bersih groups utilised these to shape participants' perceptions about the movement. These reasons could be culturally driven; local Malaysians with collectivistic values are positively related to affective expressions, whereas diaspora Malaysians who reside in developed countries with individualistic values are prone to use Facebook for documenting information. Culture seems to have a potential moderating role in social engagement via networked platforms.

Foth and Hearn (2007) point out social interaction that takes place in a specific medium operates in specific ways. Facebook holds a complex networked structure that allows Bersih activists and their supporters to converse in all one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many levels, making it easy for them to diffuse information in multiple overlapping networks and mobilise diverse publics. Therefore, it is important to put the communication in context, and figure out how each communicative ecology moves between the connective groups and networked communities. This chapter has addressed the research question: "How does the Bersih movement's communicative ecology, with a focus on social media, mobilise individuals?" by examining a single platform and providing a nuanced view of the Bersih movement's communicative ecologies among local Malaysians as well as those residing overseas. The examination on the three layers suggests that social media affords users the ability to self-narrate their experiences of the moment and get their stories generated as trending conversations through features such as hashtags. The innovative abilities and algorithmic architecture of social media has

challenged traditional social boundaries and transformed the relationships between individuals.

In conclusion, the Bersih movement started with a group of activists, but when it grew bigger over time, technology played an important role in keeping the communication intact. The use of social media allowed the movement to gain momentum and scale rapidly. However, as the movement grew, the constraints of social media reveal the need for a new form of collective action that would allow Bersih to sustain and be more consistent in their activities. The rapid formation of Bersih groups or communities in different cities around the world that develop under the trademark of Bersih becomes a concern. Whether Bersih movement's flexible terms of online communication has strengthened or undermined their engagement becomes a question. My study findings show one of the clearest signals of engagement strength is by participating in the mass rallies, so Bersih's engagement can be measured by the size of turnout in their rallies. Another measurement could be by the diversity of turnout through the photos, videos and comments posted by participants on various Bersih endorsed Facebook pages or other social media platforms which clearly show a broader range of people locally and globally.

In addition, the new media technologies, social media in particular, created an ecology that allowed participants to interact in different ways, to the extent that they could self-organise among like-minded people without the involvement of a formal organisation or leader. Everyone was autonomous and able to take the lead in this personal sphere. The Bersih movement was able to grow rapidly from local to global because it allowed participants to expand their social networks while the participants' personal networks contributed to the sustainability of the movement. The physical rallies and online content created have energised these disorganised and loosely connected Malaysians through feelings of belonging and solidarity. This chapter did not aim to discuss impact, but merely the connective, and bonding between citizens that encouraged them to collaborate in the space provided. Their personal stories and affect were in fact strong means to illustrate the citizens' political grievances, hence Facebook appeared to be a good channel of expression and mobilisation.

8 CONCLUSION

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The evolution of opposition politics and social movements in Malaysia since the Reformasi movement until the change of governing power in GE14 yielded important insights about the political landscape in Malaysia and its democratic development generally. UMNO, the leading member of the BN coalition, which has dominated the country's politics for more than 60 years since independence in 1957, was replaced by the opposition who won a majority in 2018. A complex understanding of the significant input of the Internet into the social movement, social media in particular, has both empirical and theoretical value. It places technology, social movement, and citizens in context. I have used the notion of ecology (Foth & Hearn, 2007) as a foundation to explain the interdependencies of citizens, place, and technology in the context of a social movement. Therefore, this study contributes to understanding the communicative ecology that links these actors together and assists in mobilising them in progressing towards a new political paradigm. The progress involved both cultural and electoral factors. The former involved a change in the political culture in Malaysia, in terms of political norms and behaviour, which made reform more sustainable and legitimate. The norms have gone beyond class or religion, and ventured into issue advocacy, which have had an impact on electoral systems, government structures, and later, policies.

The political background and breakthrough were explained in chronological order in Chapter 4 to highlight the role of the Bersih movement in responding to the political events in Malaysia. From Reformasi (1998) to the Bersih movement (2007 until present), we have come to learn how civil society, NGOs, and political parties have developed and interacted over time. These interactions, which actively involve the Internet—social media in particular—influenced the sort of coalition that may emerge to support a reform effort. In this thesis, I discussed the formulation of the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, otherwise known as “Bersih” that was attended by political party leaders, civil society groups, and NGOs. The argument that I have made in this thesis was about how the richly contextual human interactions that surround social media use among Bersih movement participants affected the way they engaged in everyday personalised

conversations in the overlapping private and public spheres, and linking those conversations to their political actions and participation. I argued that the Bersih movement used personalised everyday conversations, through social media, to influence citizens' communicative ecologies to mobilise them to participate in political activism. Social media provides a space for activists and volunteers to interact with the wider community and obtain self-fulfilment for their public commitments.

My study examined how social media contributed to the development of democracy in Malaysia by bringing together Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model, Habermas's (1996) theory of the public sphere, Papacharissi's (2010) work on private sphere and affect, and Lichterman's (1996) idea of personalism, to analyse the communicative ecologies of the Bersih movement. The perspective that I presented in this thesis reveals a certain political pattern in Malaysia and the use of social media. It suggests that citizens will continue to shift to engage themselves in the private and public spaces, through social media, to support a more personalised politics that allow them to freely express their political opinions, affect, and form connectives with like-minded people. Even when the government tried to repress this political dissension, social media provided a way for liberalisation and potential political breakthrough in the long run.

Semi-structured interviews with the leaders and active participants of the Bersih movement allowed new ideas about democracy in Malaysia to be discussed during face-to-face interviews, with interviewees given a set of open-ended questions. Both interviewer and interviewee were able to explore the issue of electoral reform and social media in detail and delve deeply into personal, and sometimes sensitive issues, such as police interference and state surveillance. Furthermore, content analysis of the Bersih 2.0 and Global Bersih Facebook pages was undertaken to determine the rationale and approaches local and global Bersih activists and participants took in using social media platforms to mobilise one another, by linking their personalised conversations with their offline political participation. The analysis of this study suggests that social media can become a platform to facilitate online activism through the formation of a networked self and social networks that encourage multiple social interactions and diverse voices.

Habermas (1996) argues that ordinary citizens are autonomous; they can participate in political discussions and debate, create alliances, and organise solidarity through networks. These conversations and debates would move from the periphery to the centre of public life through the mass media to generate more critical debate among a wider public. He recognises the possibility of people exerting their influence upon the mass media and establishing alternative, discursively-connected public spheres. The media provides new sites for these conversations and create new ways for public interest groups and political parties to form more fluid forms of political engagement (Chadwick, 2006). My PhD study thus adds to these scholarly works by providing empirical evidence of how, when, and why social media can become a significant platform at a particular moment within a relatively authoritarian society where the state controls the mainstream media. It examines the Bersih movement and how it uses personalised conversations mediated through social media to make an impact on the general elections and political landscape of Malaysia between 2017 and 2020. It also highlights the particular circumstances under which social media can flourish and advance democratic practices in Malaysia.

8.2 THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This thesis is positioned within the literature and scholarly debate on the role of social media and its impact on electoral politics and political life in contemporary societies. It is difficult to measure the effect or success of social media use in a social movement, thus this study puts social media into context to examine the extent to which the Bersih movement's communicative ecology could influence citizens' communicative practices and mobilise political participation. I will summarise my empirical findings and theoretical contributions, and make clearer how personalised conversations, through social media, are central to the Bersih movement's mobilisation.

8.3 THE BERSIH MOVEMENT'S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO MOBILISE INDIVIDUALS

Social media has been heralded as having the potential to provide democratic spaces for free debate and discussions among citizens on public interest issues. It also provides a

platform for social interactions with personal social networks that comprise like-minded people. My study contributes to the existing scholarship of social media by applying personalisation, with an emphasis on self-fulfilment in public commitment (Lichterman's personalism), to social media use in Bersih participants' everyday conversations, which is central to the movement's mobilisation.

8.4 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This study argues that to best understand a social movement's communication, it is important to bring together Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology, Habermas's (1996) notion of the public sphere, Papacharissi's (2010) private sphere and affect concept, as well as Lichterman's (1996) personalism concept, and put social media use among movement participants into the context of the surrounding human relations. My findings suggest that individual citizens use social media to link their personalised conversations to their political actions in a networked ecology. Hence, they were mobilised to participate in Bersih rallies and protests. Their everyday personalised conversations have mediated their news consumption and political actions.

Based on Habermas's (2008) notion of the public sphere, the Internet is widely regarded as a platform that provides spaces for open and free debates on public interest issues. This is particularly helpful to the subject of deliberative democracy. The semi-structured interviews that I conducted with movement participants helped to provide an understanding of whether social media was able to expand and improve the quality of deliberation in the public sphere. My interviewees revealed that they have been actively managing social media information to influence public opinion through collective groups and social networks, to mobilise the people to achieve electoral reform. However, my later observation showed that Habermas overestimated the civic engagement and rational accord for a democratic public sphere as these mediated conversations have grown over time to respond to public issues in a more personally mediated fashion. Bersih participants made judgements based on the information they received from their social networks and eventually struck up conversations offline and online, which eventually formed their communicative ecologies. Their political conversations gradually shifted from deliberate to more personal and individualised.

In this post-modern era where mainstream narratives are often challenged by individual's affect and personalised expressions, the Habermasian public sphere that sounds rational and formal has been challenged by social media and communicators who are always on the move, to decide what is considered personal or public. My interview with Bersih activists concluded that their initial exposure to the movement was through online content, especially blogs and social media platforms. The online conversations among mutual friends and between political leaders fostered their interests in politics. Later, they gradually developed personal satisfaction through participating actively in electoral reform activities such as rallies, voter education, PACA training and lobbying against election re-delineation. Movement participants were groomed into activists.

My findings show those who grew up with civic or religious traditions felt obliged to commit themselves to the public good while those who focused on their personal needs as Malaysian citizens were equally keen to demand for institutional and electoral changes. This was because they were well aware that their personal needs were affected by the communities they lived in, the state, and its governance, therefore they chose to collectively commit to a common good that benefitted everyone in the long run. Their interactions with one another heavily relied on social media that provided portability and convenience, and their lives in the private and public spheres were intertwined. This connects to Lichterman's (1996) personalism theory that suggests that even though the growing culture of individualisation pushes people to focus on their personal needs, this personal satisfaction is not selfish, but helps with their commitment to the public good. It is through the everyday political practices, offline, and online, that people are able to conceptualise this personalised form of public commitment.

Based on Lichterman's (1996) personalism theory, I have conceptualised public commitment at the individual level, arguing that the individual level of public commitment is a more accurate predictor for individuals' everyday practices and conversations. In Chapter 6, I contributed to an understanding of the interplay between individuals' personalised conversations and social media use. My findings indicated that the ability to communicate personalised messages on public issues is important to social movements who strive to position themselves distinctively in the digital world. This helps social movements to understand how citizens collectively respond to public issues in their

private spaces and thus can mobilise around them. My analysis shows the Bersih movement's success in mobilisation has to do with their messages being personal, instant, and relevant. They were able to respond to political issues in Malaysia and get their messages across a distracted, noisy terrain to their target audience. The Bersih movement's successful communicative mobilisations parallel the simplicity and power of the people, their messages always asking for "Clean and Fair Elections," for a "Better Malaysia," and "from the People and for the People." Their messages tell the story of poor governance that needs reform, which is in line with the people's grievances and the socio-political issues in the country.

Focusing on a simple narrative that gathers people together allows the movement to attract widespread attention. The story is always made based on issues that people find relevant, including elections, poor governance, corruption, and human rights. The personalisation of the protest actions and stories is central to crowd-enabled and organisationally enabled social movements, both of which are driven by connectives (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). Meanwhile, the mainstream media also produced narratives about the need for government accountability and electoral reform, especially during general elections. When the state-controlled mainstream media was restricting opposing views in Malaysia, social media opened up to the citizens and hence mobilised them to engage in political involvements. Therefore, for a social movement to effectively facilitate mobilisation, the Bersih movement had to acquire the ability to communicate personalised messages on public issues that sparked meaningful interactions between people.

Another aspect of social media use in a social movement is its ability to bring about multi-platform hybrid communication within individuals' communicative ecologies. Since its first rally until now, the Bersih movement's social networks have grown larger and denser. This study uses Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology as the main theoretical framework to analyse social media use among Bersih participants, including activists, and volunteers. Foth and Hearn (2007) argue that technology is more than a medium, but a social setting that involves both mediated and unmediated forms of communications. In Chapter 5, my interviewees told me that they used their mobile phones and social media platforms (technological layer) to engage citizens (social layer)

by creating a common narrative of clean and fair elections (discursive layer). First, the technological layer showed how each medium operated differently in their own communicative ecology, and then integrated together among the multiple social and information networks. Popular social media companies, especially Facebook, design their algorithms that affects which content people do and do not see. Facebook used to prioritise paid content, but after the data scandal with Cambridge Analytica, they reviewed their policies and changed their algorithms to prioritise posts that spark conversations and meaningful interactions between people (Facebook newsroom, 2018).³⁷ This allowed well-crafted messages by individuals and organisations to actually reach people.

Moreover, the Facebook-owned messaging app WhatsApp allows users to share personalised photos and videos, connect through video calls, and keep their friends updated with their status. People can freely connect with one another in their own special way because WhatsApp applies end-to-end encryption to protect chats, calls, and file-sharing against any unwelcome acts of privacy breaching by a third party. My interviewees revealed that they used Facebook and WhatsApp as their main communication platforms because of their popularity and user-friendly features that accommodated several personalised functions. WhatsApp was used to help coordinate the Bersih movement's collective discussions and activities while Facebook was used for network publicity and to generate awareness among the public. My findings show that movement participants conveniently traversed between online and offline communications, from one social media application to another, to keep in touch with their peers and local communities. For example, they shared electoral reform content they read from online news websites on their Facebook timeline, forwarded posts from other people's Facebook pages to their WhatsApp group, and conversed about the content they read online among friends at coffee houses. The communicators were always on the move, exchanging information using different platforms, crossing from public to private spaces

³⁷ On January 11, 2018, head of News Feed Adam Mosseri wrote on *Facebook newsroom* that Facebook is built to bring people closer together and build relationships. They connect people to meaningful posts from their friends and family in News Feed, and prioritise posts that spark conversations and meaningful interactions between people. Page posts that generate conversation between people will show higher in News Feed (Newsroom, 2018). <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/01/news-feed-fyi-bringing-people-closer-together/>

and vice versa on a daily basis. Bersih participants practised multiple media use and belonged to multiple social networks online. This hybridity of communicative ecologies encourages a fluid and informal connection between people. Despite technological abilities, the fact that social media algorithms tend to make some information more visible than others, the prevalence of fake news and state surveillance have constantly challenged the way Bersih participants use social media.

Furthermore, Bersih participants used social media to keep in close contact with one another. They were drawn to use social media collectively and usually participate because their friends are there. Facebook's "People you may know" feature connects people to their friends based on location, phone contacts, mutual friends, and networks that the users are part of. Based on my interview data, the online communities that the movement formed through WhatsApp and Facebook were frequently valued by participants as spaces to interact. The appeal was not solely technological, but the presence of like-minded people. This linked to Chapter 5's social layer, which explained the social roles played by participants and the types of social networks they form within the Bersih movement. The social layer talks about people and social modes of organising those people in a movement—which might include informal social networks and more formal community associations (Foth & Hearn, 2007). Generally, there are two social roles played by Bersih participants: activist and volunteer. These two groups could interact freely among themselves using different mediums, moving from one community to another within the networked Bersih community.

During the interactions, the content and ideas discussed formed the conversations and narratives of the movement's ecology. Foth and Hearn's (2007) discursive layer explains how the Bersih movement shaped their political discourses and communicative practices. My findings show the Bersih movement has effectively used social media to communicate messages relating to electoral reform—from the eight demands that support clean and fair elections, to its core value as an independent, non-partisan, and apolitical movement. The Bersih movement committee has been consistent in speaking as a civil organisation unaffiliated to any political party. They framed their demands as a national affair that binds all citizens together, and have been consistent and assertive in pressuring the government to ensure good democratic governance. The Bersih movement's framing

has successfully appealed to diaspora Malaysians who practised philanthropy by funding the movement. Their ability to leverage social media to communicate their causes had successfully mobilised global support and crystallise the online sphere into a political force for electoral change in Malaysia.

Social media also allows people to freely express their emotions and socialise without many restrictions. When social media was integrated into the rhythms of the Bersih participants' everyday life, it formed an environment within which they could easily communicate. These communicative ecologies allowed participants to be autonomous, and organise among themselves without the involvement of an authoritative centralised leader. In Chapter 7, I revealed how the Bersih movement retained the support of Malaysians, despite being geographically dispersed, through everyday personalised conversations online. I compared two Bersih Facebook pages and analysed the affect and expressions of supporters in response to political events in Malaysia, including general elections, corruption, human rights, and poor governance. This chapter built on the previous discussions of personalised communications and reconfirmed that individuals' everyday practices and individualised expressions were central to the Bersih movement's online mobilisation.

Social media platforms provided users with the experience of events and invited affective gestures that provided a basis for individuals to connect and tune in to events in the making (Papacharissi, 2018, p. 62). My observation of both Facebook pages between 2017 and 2019 revealed that movement participants provided substance to Facebook and the way the platform was designed shaped their content. Participants used "Like," hashtags, and emoticons to express the emotions that they subjectively experienced on Facebook. The affect that they share online forms a connective between them by allowing them to show interest on the issues without having to enter into a complex negotiation of personal-versus-collective politics (Papacharissi, 2016). Diaspora Malaysians had different sentiments and affects than those who lived in Malaysia, but Facebook allowed their viewpoints about the Bersih movement to be assembled together and presented as a global imagination. The active engagement of diaspora Malaysians in home-country politics revealed that digital citizenship had shifted from formal to personalised (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) and privatised models (Papacharissi, 2010). The Bersih movement

created affective publics that supported their movement connectively, locally and globally, without engaging in collective action via networked platforms. Personalised conversations within the Bersih movement's Facebook space encouraged like-minded others to gather to exchange views and work together to lobby for political change.

Through social media, Bersih participants were able to organise among themselves easily. With a common collective goal, anyone can lead, and keep the movement going forward. The Bersih movement began from a small group of like-minded people, but when it became bigger, they used technology to keep communication intact. My findings show that participants used the Bersih Facebook page for several reasons, including information, mobilisation, deliberation, self-organisation, and expression of solidarity. They not only interacted within the Bersih 2.0 official Facebook page, but also interacted with other Bersih-endorsed NGO Facebook pages such as Global Bersih, as well as other social media platforms. Diaspora Malaysians were more responsive to political issues that happened in their home country and their cultural values seemed to have a potentially moderating effect on their expressions and reasons to engage in online conversations. By engaging on social media platforms, Bersih participants were able to expand their social networks over time, and gradually contribute to the sustainability of the movement's networks in the long run.

8.5 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This thesis makes several contributions to the field of social movement studies. First, it contributes to the broader literature of social movement by emphasizing the need to go beyond connective actions and delve into individuals' self-fulfillment and public commitment. My analysis indicates that understanding the paradox of being personally fulfilled enhances public commitment is important in studying the contemporary social movement. My findings highlight the need to transition from personal to collective fulfilment among supporters. It emphasises the role of social media is crucial to moving movement towards a more personalised collective action that is critical for maintaining its momentum, sustainability and effectiveness.

Second, this study offers a theoretical framework for studying social media-enabled social movements by pulling four theories together. Many studies concentrate on

one, but this study took an approach by integrating multiple theories to provide a broader understanding of how social movement start and grow. My study revisits the definition of Habermas's (1996) notion of the public sphere by taking into consideration Papacharassi's (2010) work on the private sphere and Lichterman's (1995) theory of personalism. Habermas (1996) defines the public sphere as a space for citizen participation in public affairs, through which individuals express their public opinion in a rational manner. Habermas argues that mass media fails to provide space for the public sphere due to commercialisation, hence compromising rational and democratic public discourse. Like Habermas, I argue that mainstream media content has occupied our public sphere at a compromised rate due to state control, and thus social media plays an important role in informing the public. My study tends not to look at the public sphere as the opposite of private space, but both spaces as integrated and forming a hybrid space through digital media. Along that line of thinking, my study refers to Papacharassi's (2010) work on the private sphere and re-examines the role of private space in digital media. This allows an exploration of how private space can sustain alternative communication, through which autonomous individuals may connect back to public and hybrid spaces. Likewise, Lichterman's (1996) personalism theory argues that the culture of personalised politics is one where individuals tend to respect the personal fulfilment of others and hence unite people of different backgrounds. He defines personalism as a highly participatory form of politics that features individuals as autonomous and active agents of social change not only in social activism but their everyday life. Both research studies have enriched my understanding of the democratic potential of social media and enabled me to revisit the definition of Habermas's public sphere to suit the contemporary context.

Third, the increasing individualisation in modern societies has required a more personalised lens of Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology model. I applied personalisation from this model and used the three layers to analyse the Bersih movement's communicative ecology. This model looks into the context in which communication occurs and how each medium organises the social interactions in its own unique way. It also explores how technology is integrated into communities (Tacchi, 2006), and is used by social movements in their activism. A detailed mapping of the technological, discursive, and social layers of the Bersih movement contributes to the

existing literature by recognising that individual citizen's personal experiences and self-fulfilments are becoming central in the Bersih movement, as well as other contemporary social movements in US or Europe. In addition, my study takes advantage of this communicative ecology model to suggest an extension to the existing research about the role of social media in online activism. It is important to explore the multi-faceted complexity of each social media platform rather than generalise, because users access those features to serve different personal purposes. By providing a more nuanced view, this study adds a corrective to the technological determinists and resists easy causal formulations that technology is the primary source for social change. It also contextualises the Bersih movement in a hybrid space, where both public and private spheres are seen as integrated and complementing one another.

8.6 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This thesis contributes to the wider theoretical debate on the significance of social media in shaping the path towards democracy in a less democratic, authoritarian society like Malaysia. By focusing on how people use social media to organise interactions and converse about them on a daily basis, this study demonstrated how a particular medium helps to enhance certain aspects of democratic practices. People who participated in the Bersih movement demonstrated they were able to present themselves as an alternative form of media network when they started publishing content that was not covered by the mainstream media. Their content took many forms, ranging from written texts, images, photographs, illustrations, and emoticons. In addition, this thesis provides nuanced views on the personalisation of individuals' social media use in facilitating activism. It also has some limitations. The Bersih movement is one of the most significant national movements in Malaysia, but my research was limited to certain locations—the major cities where I could access the movement's secretariat offices and meet up with some organisation leaders. As for the selection of samples, I tended to interview more prominent members of the movement whom I believed were able to provide me with more personalised and yet rational comments and experiences, but that consideration probably rules out the views from the periphery of the movement's social circles, and the general public. I tried to make up for this bias and balance it with public comments that I retrieved from the Bersih

Facebook page. I chose the Bersih 2.0 and Global Bersih Facebook pages for deeper analysis, hoping they could provide a local and global perspective of participants. However, a single-platform analysis may seem insufficient to explain the broad communicative ecologies of a movement that emphasises multi-platforms. Despite an inability to present a broad view, my research opted for a nuanced view of how the Bersih movement used personalised conversations through social media to mobilise citizens. Hopefully, future studies may benefit from this narrow-but-nuanced research.

I have obtained much data during my fieldwork, but to focus on a particular area that answers my research question directly, I selected only the most relevant. Data relating to personalised social media use on a daily basis and activism in the integrated private public sphere were selected. Furthermore, my thesis focuses on a specific context, Malaysia, and this ruled out a discussion of other prominent social movements that were highly engaged with social media, such as the Egypt Uprisings, and Wall Street Occupy. These case studies are important in the social movement studies, especially if I wished to discuss the importance of social media in social movements generally and internationally, but I decided to opt for something more local, narrow, and in-depth by looking at the multi-facets of a particular social media platform and its personalised use, in the case of Bersih movement. To some, this could be a limitation, while on the other hand, it could also be seen as a strength because relatively speaking there is a dearth of scholarly work on the Bersih movement in the Malaysian context compared to the Arab Spring and Occupy movements. Seeing the continuous political turmoil and instability in Malaysia until present, I believe my research on the Bersih movement remains relevant and significant to the democratic breakthrough in Malaysia.

My thesis employs the communicative ecology theory to conceptualise the relationship between social movements and social media. However, social movements comprise many social movement organisations and individuals. Therefore, it is important to place them within communities and societies that include actors such as the state, and lawmakers. I have briefly discussed other actors in Chapter 5 in reference to the technological, discursive, and social layers, but did not venture further. This limitation would be an area which I wish to strengthen in the future research and it requires a new data collection, meeting up with the authorities and setting new interview questions. For

the time being, my thesis focuses on how personalised conversations through social media can promote democratic practices and enrich individuals' political conversations by facilitating free expression, providing alternative views, and pressuring the ruling government to commit to fairer and cleaner policies in an election. My thesis suggests that social media is likely to achieve a particular goal at a specific moment and it will remain important in future elections.

9 REFERENCE LIST

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10 APPENDIX – LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

(Bersih activists/ volunteers)

Thomas Fann – Bersih chairperson

Maisara Amira – Bersih Secretariat staff (Kuala Lumpur)

Mandeep Singh – Bersih Secretariat manager

Dr. Wong Chin Huat – Bersih activist, political analyst and researcher

Ong Lai Mun – former Bersih Vice-chair/Regional chairperson (Johor)

Beverly Joeman – Bersih Vice-chair/Regional chairperson (Sabah)

Ashraf Sharafi – Bersih Secretariat staff (Sabah)

Ong Jing Cheng – Bersih activist, State councillor (Penang)

Lee Chung Lun – Bersih Secretariat staff (Penang)

Dr. Toh Kin Woon – Bersih activist, Senior Research Fellow at the Penang Institute

Ann Teo Chiang Joo – Bersih Vice-chair/Regional chairperson

S.V. Singam – Bersih activist, chairperson of Tindak Malaysia

Chua Boon Leng – Bersih activist, member of political party

Ong Boon Keong – former Bersih activist, now social activist who works on rural issues

Chai Yee Loon – Media graduate, Bersih volunteer

Mukmin Nantang – former student activist, Bersih activist

Members of Johor Yellow Flame group

11 APPENDIX – AUTHOR/ORGANISATION’S PERMISSION

Ngu Ik Ying

From: Thomas Fann <chairperson@bersih.org>
Sent: Sunday, December 27, 2020 7:34 PM
To: Ngu Ik Ying
Subject: Re: Bersih case study - permission to use content for PhD thesis

Dear Ik Ying,

I approve you using all the data available on our website for your PhD.

Thomas Fann
Chairperson, BERSIH 2.0

On Wed, 23 Dec 2020, 9:00 am Ngu Ik Ying, <nguiy@curtin.edu.my> wrote:

Hi Thomas

Hope this email finds you well. I am Ik Ying, a PhD student at Curtin University in Perth Australia. I had interviewed you in 2017 in Johor, Malaysia.

I wish to seek for your kind approval/permission to use **information** (such as online posts, comments, pictures, press statements) from your personal Facebook page and the organisation’s online presence (such as Bersih’s official website, Bersih 2.0 Facebook page, Bersih WhatsApp group and broadcast list) in my **PhD thesis** as well as academic manuscripts (derived from my PhD thesis) for future publications.

Thank you in advance and please stay safe during COVID.

Hope to hear from you soon.

Regards,

Ik Ying, Ngu