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Political Communication and Online Public Discourse: Examining Digital Media's Role in Malaysia's Electoral Process

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Abstract

The use of digital media has revolutionized the way electoral communication in Malaysia has been conducted by increasing access to information about the political scene and allowing the citizens to participate and alter the flow of campaign messages. These possibilities are in concert with disproportionate visibility, fractured social discourse and the amplification of false or hostile discourse. This paper discusses these tensions by reviewing the critical narrative and analysing the qualitative documents focusing on the fifteenth general election in 2022 based on the precedent electoral developments. The ideas of the public sphere, hybrid media systems, framing and connective action are used to evaluate academic scholarship, official statistics, and election-monitoring reports. The results show that digital media functions on the basis of the relations between parties, journalists, influencers, platforms and interpersonal networks. It has been shown to be dependent on the quality and inclusivity of those relationships, and not on the number of connectivity or engagement. The article suggests available electoral information, autonomous journalism, open campaign sponsorship, situational moderation and assessed civic education. It concludes that the electoral relevance of digital media is in reorganizing participation and popular oversight, whereas its more immediate impacts on voting need more causal support.

Key words: *Malaysia, political communication, electoral process, digital media, public discourse, GE15*

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1. Introduction

Political communication determines the information by which citizens judge representatives, comprehend the social issues and choose whether to vote or not. Digital media in Malaysia has widened the scope of the actors that can disseminate such information. Political parties communicate to their supporters directly, political journalists report via social media, and citizens rebrand campaign narratives by commenting, recording videos and having one-on-one conversations. This growth has undermined certain historical boundaries to visibility without eradicating disparities in power. The main question, thus, is the impact on the state of electoral choice that digital communication has: who is given a voice, whose statements are brought to the fore, and whether those statements are treated with any seriousness.

The context of media in Malaysia is of significance in exploring this relationship since the media landscape in the country has emerged in the context of challenging political power, linguistic pluralism and evolving electoral politics. Previous studies have reported significant variations in political bias among newspapers and web-based sources, which were attributed to ownership and governmental restrictions (Abbott and Givens, 2015). The historical evidence is why alternative information channels were important, even though it can not be regarded as a description of all contemporary newsrooms as they are. These institutions and social relations created digital media. Its impacts cannot be realized by looking at the technical attributes of a platform in isolation of the political conditions in which individuals utilize it.

The GE15, or fifteenth general election, serves as the main point of focus. It was held in November 2022 and put video campaigning and TikTok into mainstream political discourse. According to Tapell (2023), the trends are the increasing professionalisation of campaigning and the production of creative content and polarising narratives. There was also a change in electoral inclusion: The voting age was reduced to 18 years and automatic voter registration became effective on 15 December 2021 (Bernama, 2021). These reforms increased the eligibility but new voters which were registered were not teens only. Neither did registration confer political knowledge or confidence or practical resources required to participate informedly.

The magnitude of the digital connectivity renders these questions significant not limited to an individual election. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM, 2026), the individual internet use amounts to 98.3 in 2025. Internet penetration in households however varied with urban regions, which have 99.0 percent and rural regions, which have 90.7 percent. These are subsequent contextual signs, rather than a measure of connectivity in GE15. They show the reason why digital communication has become hard to detach itself with public life and also exposes the sustained disparities of access. Whether or not someone has access to the internet is not the sole indicator of the quality of connection, access to language, information literacy or the plurality of political content that a given individual is exposed to.

The article investigates three related questions. What is the impact of digital media on electoral messages production and circulation in Malaysia? What are its opportunities and limits to discussion and citizen involvement? What are the roles of electoral bodies, political parties, the media and the press? It is argued that digital media redistributes communicative opportunities and brings about new dependencies on commercial systems of visibility and networked social authority. It may aid accountability and mobilisation, yet these results demand conditions, which technology cannot deliver on its own. Popularity, persuasion, political learning and electoral success should not be kept analytically separate, however.

The discussion is in the form of literature review, methodology, findings, conclusion and recommendations. It measures electoral communication in terms of campaigning, seeking information, discussing and interpreting results. Previous elections give a historical background as opposed to a controlled comparison, and foreign research gives elucidatory concepts as opposed to anticipations of Malaysian impacts. This method adds a comprehensive description of the quality of communication, involvement and responsibility. The matter of its practical significance is that citizens need to get credible information, to voice dissent safely, and to keep political actors accountable during the electoral process, even when campaigning officially ceases but debates regarding representation and legitimacy persist.

Literature review

Public discourse and the hybrid media system

Public-sphere theory offers a point of reference on which to evaluate electoral communication. Habermas (1962/1989) relates democratic legitimacy to the public discussion where the claims related to the common affairs could be analyzed. In the context of digital media, this shifts the focus to accessibility, giving reasons and questioning authority. Nevertheless, the fact that anyone can contribute to an online forum does not make it democratically inclusive. Involvement also relies on social status, time, and assurance and shield

against fear. An effective evaluation would then be: are individuals able to affect the talk and get a hearing, as opposed to counting the number of accounts or remarks made.

Fraser (1990) is opposed to assumptions that there is a single public sphere that involves people equally. Her talk of competing publics assists in understanding why marginalised groups might require space in which they can express experiences that are not part of mainstream discourse. The linguistic and regional diversity of Malaysia renders this point of view topical. The separate online communities are capable of reinforcing representation through discussing local issues in language known to them. They are also able to feel quite isolated with other communities in case there is a weak translation, cross-group reporting and shared evidence. Plurality is no failure of democracy per se. The question is whether individual dialogues can engage in such a way that they do not eliminate the distinctions but transform antagonism into mutually delegitimizing each other.

A complementary explanation of political influence is provided by the hybrid media system presented by Chadwick (2017). Older and newer media interrelate in the context of political actors modifying content in an institutional and technological environment. A campaign speech may be a brief clip, a television debate and a family conversation in one cycle of communication. This kind of movement makes it hard to claim that one platform has been replaced by another. Weiss (2013) also differentiates the Malaysian news websites roles, blogs and social networks and believes that the new media should not be discussed as a homogeneous entity. These approaches combined imply the analysis of interrelationships between channels and actors instead of the assumption that digital communication exists in a vacuum, beyond the existing political dynamics.

Visibility framing and participation

Agenda-setting scholarship differentiates the significance of an issue and the stand of an individual on the issue. McCombs and Shaw (1972) demonstrate the importance of patterns of media attention in perceptions of issue importance. The framing approach by Entman (1993) further provides that the selection of the aspects of an issue that are to be communicated is what proposes problem definitions, causes, evaluations and responses. These ideas can be applied to the study of the Malaysian election processes, whereby the economic performance, corruption or communal relations are brought to bear and accountability is placed. They do not mean that all the exposed electors assume the same meaning. Audiences are able to oppose a frame, reframe it or get conflicting narratives elsewhere.

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe connective action by personalised sharing, which enables one to participate without the same organisational commitments as that of traditional collective action. Citizens can spread an issue, make a video or arrange help via networks that go beyond party membership. This framework assists in recognizing some of the types of electoral participation that are ignored when only rallies or voting are used as the basis of analysis. However, sharing easiness does not create a lasting interaction. Digital participation can be learning and coordinating, but can also be short expressive actions. The connection between the latter activities and long-term political organisation requires facts and not speculations on the issue of empowerment or sterility.

The studies of participation provide qualified assistance to the democratic potential of digital media. The meta-analysis by Boulianne (2015) reveals that the relationship between social-media use and participation is generally positive, with the questions about the causal direction being raised. Political content might be sought out by people who are interested in politics, so exposure is in part a result of their prior interest. Vaccari and Valeriani (2021) demonstrate why the incidental exposure and online mobilisation are worthy even outside the image of citizens trapped within partisan bubbles. Their work has to do with Western democracies, and cannot be imported into Malaysia in a mechanical way. It rather offers questions regarding who gathers political information without expecting it and whether they discuss, learn or take action.

Papacharissi (2015) describes the process of networked publics building on a sense of sharedness and narration. Emotion can open the door to politics and relate individual experiences to the larger issues. It may also hasten suspicion or animosity where intricate conflicts are offered by emotionally flammable segments. The difference lies not in the rational traditional media and irrational digital media, but political communication has always been a mixture of evidence, identity and feeling. The critical assignment is to discuss what emotion allows and what it does not allow. In electoral discourse, displays of aggravation can reveal unaddressed grievances, and stories that depict other nationals as existential dangers can reduce the room to agree that there can be legitimate disagreement.

Malaysian evidence and unresolved questions

Malaysian scholarship shows that digital electoral communication is not a new phenomenon with Tik Tok. In a study of candidate blogs of the 2008 election, Gong (2011) discovered that there was a relationship between blogging and electoral success, and benefits of opposition candidates. The nature of its observational design should be taken as a caution against the attribution of the victories to blogging. Tapsell (2013) then discussed media balance negotiations in the 2013 election, which exemplifies conflicts between the journalistic practice, political limitations and online competition. These articles define the significance of historical context: platforms have the potential to create opportunities in a lopsided information landscape, and successful actors and institutions evolve to the opportunities instead of being technologically dormant.

The 2018 and 2022 elections demonstrate shifts in distribution as well as the production of campaigns. Tapsell (2018) explains smartphones, Facebook and WhatsApp as significant sources of alternative information in semi-rural environments in the 2018 contest. In his subsequent analysis, he singles out video production, livestreaming and professional campaigning as notable characteristics of GE15 (Tapsell, 2023). Razali and Abdul Hani (2022) express some concerns regarding the aggression in the electoral discourse and the use of Tik Tok by youth. These descriptions can be used to analyze the evolving communication patterns, yet they do not create a consistent pattern of youth response or identify the role of a platform in determining the ultimate vote. Electoral causation and campaign innovation are divergent propositions.

Assumptions regarding habitual platform use are also complicated by recent work. In their analysis of youth political engagement in Selangor, Yahaya et al. (2025) focus on perceived usefulness and social influence as important predictors but did not find an important role in habitual use. The national generalisation is constrained by the geographic and methodological boundaries. In a broader sense, Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023) compile the evidence of association between digital media and positive and negative democratic impacts on the environment in terms of participation. The research gap is not as such whether social media matters or not. It is about the process, institutional circumstances and disparities with which certain uses can contribute to informed participation, animosity or marginalization in Malaysia.

Methodology

The approach of this article is a critical narrative review and qualitative documentation analysis. The design fits well to incorporate conceptual scholarship, electoral research and institutional evidence without introducing a new survey or an experiment. In accordance with Bowen (2009), documents are discussed as local sources, the purpose of which, the limits of authorship and evidence influences the interpretation. The relationship between the electoral process in Malaysia and digital communication practices is the unit of analysis. The main case is GE15, and the historical developments are based on studies of 2008, 2013 and 2018. The recommendations are given in context of later connectivity statistics and policy materials, which are not given retrospectively to the 2022 electorate.

Identification of sources was based on specific web searches and reference tracking, giving more preference to journal publishers, university repositories, official statistical releases and organisations that engage in

election monitoring. Combination of searches consisted of Malaysia, GE15, political communication, social media, Tik Tok, Whats App, youth engagement and popular discourse. Inclusion had to make a definite contribution to the communication of Malaysian elections, a clarifying theoretical framework or a topical methodological or governance principle. The sources that cannot be traced to some provenance or sources that are not backed by factual evidence were not applied as substantive evidence. The bibliography is the end result that is a mix of academic publications and official and institutional content. This selective sampling facilitates the interpretive synthesis, but does not assert comprehensive database coverage or systematic-review exhaustiveness.

These categories include evidence in the analysis as access and participation, circulation and visibility, discourse quality, inequality, and accountability. Braun and Clarke (2006) give a methodological grounding to the thematic organisation of patterns, but this article does not purport to have done any interview coding, or intercoder reliability or social-media dataset that was recently obtained. It contrasts what sources actually prove with the larger sense they allow, on each theme. Communication practices may be documented in a campaign study; associations within a sample of a survey; access may be described using official statistics. None of them automatically show that a given message shifted a vote. Such differences inform the language employed in the findings.

Triangulation contrasts the scholarly interpretations with the election monitoring of the Centre of Independent Journalism and the official contextual evidence. The value of the monitoring material is particularly great as it records its time of collection, the selection criteria and evaluation processes. It is, however, a purposefully filtered corpus and not a representative sample of all Malaysian conversation. The plausible mechanisms are identified based on international evidence of misinformation and participation, and specific consideration of platform-specific differences and political contexts. Normative recommendations are given in the form of suggestions based on the synthesis and not as interventions whose effectiveness has already been proven in Malaysia.

There are a number of limitations in the design. Published sources can focus on visible controversies, more accessible platforms and more connected populations. The aspect of private messaging is hard to monitor, and alterations in the platform make elections less comparable. English-language access can serve to favor certain points of view as well when the underlying studies refer to multilingual communication. There were no main players recruited, there were no personal groups joined and no recognizable posts of users were copied. Ethical care thus relates to proper attribution, contextualizing interpretation and not being overly amplification of hostile content. The results are to be interpreted as a critical evaluation of the current evidence, and an agenda of more vigorous research, not an estimate of the causality of electoral impact.

Findings

Wider participation with unequal opportunities

The evidence reviewed shows that digital media opened up access to electoral discourse. The citizens would be able to report even beyond the fixed broadcasting hours, they would be able to hear what the candidates said, and spread local issues without necessarily ensuring that the newsroom would listen to them. This is significant in the context of historical media organizations limiting the presence of rival voices (Abbott & Givens, 2015). But the direct publication does not guarantee discovery. It is possible to have a page and not to attract the audience and a citizen may serve and not be answered. Electoral inclusion thus is a matter of entry into communication and a matter of distributing attention after it is possible to participate.

Undi18 and automatic registration made more prominent the significance of available civic information, which must not be compared to a single digital youth constituency. Legal status is Eligibility; knowledge, motivation, opportunity and social relationships are all engaged. As the Selangor evidence indicates, the perceived value of political use and peer influence are important items to consider, alongside platform

familiarity (Yahaya et al., 2025). One of the implications is that voter education must cover what the elected institutions are doing, how voting functions and how political claims could be evaluated. The tendency to treat younger citizens as audiences to entertain can run the risk of not taking into account their ability to question policy and organise around substantive concerns.

The access is also not even when the national connectivity becomes generalized. The DOSM (2026) urban-rural household gap warning against the substitution of all electoral information services with digital delivery. Even interrelated households can have access to devices or be limited in data application. Internet indicators also present more questions that cannot be answered by headlines language and disability access. These notes justify maintaining alternative channels, such as communal elucidation, available publicity and broadcast data. What makes sense about the principle is that an election communication system ought to enable the participation of people with varying resources, as opposed to the most digitally confident user becoming the implicit standard.

Campaign messages circulate through interconnected channels

The result is in favor of a mixed explanation of electoral communication. Even when a message is delivered to citizens via a smartphone, newsrooms, party organisations and interpersonal networks are still important. The content of political clips could be provided by a journalist investigation, and the response of the population to the political clips could be news. This circulation alters the place of editorial control but not eliminates it. With the assistance of Chadwick (2017), the reasons behind the competition between actors moving messages between settings with varying forms of authority can be explained. The assessment of communication in Malaysia, in other words, involves considering the flow of claims and alteration of their context, and not attributing all power to the ultimate site of their presentation.

Video campaigning was particularly evident in GE15, however, its interpretation finding relates to how attention is organised and not a technologically determined outcome. Ooi (2022) records the conflicting party strategies to Tik Tok and use of influence by influencers to communicate campaign messages. In short videos, a personal tone of voice, character and symbolic relationships can be used to support a political statement by a speaker. They are also able to condense credentials and take out the context of an original statement. These characteristics bring about possibilities of both explanation and distortion. Their democratic implications rely on what is communicated and the circulation of the same and whether audiences can find evidence outside the clip.

Individual messaging provides another communication environment. The description of WhatsApp during the 2018 election by Tapsell (2018) emphasizes the importance of the use of interpersonal circulation and the use of platforms oriented towards people. When the relationship is unknown, a message relayed by a person acquainted with you might still receive attention. The same association, however, can facilitate questions, correction and discussion which are not there in anonymous communications. The private groups cannot thus be portrayed as a homogenous group of misinformation channels. The critical analytical difference has to do with provenance and verification: trust in the sender is not the same as evidence of the assertion, but trusted relationships may be used to circulate and fix.

There is an additional tension of professional campaign production. Political communication can be enhanced through skillful editing, translation and explanatory graphics, but money and organisational capacity are other factors that influence the repetition of messages. According to Tapsell (2023), such a feature of GE15 is professionalisation. What this means is that low publication costs do not necessarily result in the same communicative power. The political influence can be more and more reliant on the access to creative labour, distribution systems and information concerning audiences. Evaluation of fairness, in turn, involves the consideration of both sponsorship and coordination and the formal freedom to create a social-media account.

Public discourse combines scrutiny with polarisation

Online mass discourse has the ability to reveal inconsistencies in political assertions and to expand the agenda beyond the campaign agendas. Citizens will be able to contrast promises, challenge state spending and bring up constituency issues. The agenda-setting and framing agendas can be used to differentiate between the two processes bringing an issue into view and defining what the issue is (Entman, 1993; McCombs and Shaw, 1972). A conflict of living expenses, say, can be used to invite a comparison of policies or be reworded as an instance that a whole community is not trustworthy. The case demonstrates an analytical possibility as opposed to a coded observation. It is important because the various forms of public reasoning which each frame promotes are different.

Between 20 October and 26 November 2022, the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ, 2023) monitored the selected material on social-media beyond the polling day, between 20 October and 26 November 2022. Its report reviewed 99,563 filtered messages, and reported high race- and religion-related narratives. These statistics are about the corpus of monitoring, not about the percentage of all Malaysians who have experienced or approved such material. Moderate intercoder agreement has also been noted in the report, and it is applicable in interpreting severity classifications. The most effective input it provides is that there are recurring narrative patterns and monitoring difficulties; it is not able to determine the electoral impact of all of the messages it identifies or the opinions of the broader population.

The post voting period is a focus since the uncertainty surrounding political results may perpetuate high levels of communication. The long-term observation of CIJ shows why it is possible to overlook crucial discourse by halting the analysis on election day (CIJ, 2023). Voters require valid differences amid unofficial statements, confirmed outcomes and declarations regarding the government formation. Incomplete information should be properly communicated by revealing the uncertainty and informing the next procedural course of action. This is a procedural consequence of the time series, and does not imply that all controversial statements are intentional lying. Explanation promptly can lessen the room within which rumour flourishes without subjecting common requests to elucidation to the label of illegitimate suspicion.

There is no harm in ethnoreligious discussion per se. The citizens have justifiable grounds to argue over the representation, religious liberty and unfair treatment. The difference in question lies in the difference between talking about those problems and depicting groups as worthy of exclusion or violence. Razali and Abdul Hani (2022) raise the issue of normalisation of hostile rhetoric in electoral communication, which is inappropriate, but the analysis fails to support such a generalisation of radicalisation to all young voters. The viewpoint by Fraser (1990) supports the importance of maintaining marginalised voices in combating intimidation. Democratic public sphere should not deny the right to scrutinize hard claims, that membership in a community is not the basis to deny political legitimacy.

Misinformation and engagement require careful interpretation

Misinformation poses an issue to electoral judgement but its mechanisms need accurate language. Misinformation may spread by accident, whereas disinformation is a conscious effort to deceive; an action cannot be assumed to be intentional based on an incorrect statement. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) discuss the topic of false election news in the United States and demonstrate the significance of taking exposure and belief apart. Vosoughi et al. (2018) report that true and false stories spread differently on Twitter. These sources define the rationale to examine the quality of information but none of them gives an approximation in Malaysia. They are used in this context conceptually: circulation, credibility and behavioural consequences have to be considered separately.

The same warning is applied to engagement metrics. Opinions can involve exposure to the same content more than once, non-viewers and those viewing critically; remarks can convey hostility to the material being

viewed. A persuasive account can consequently produce masses without the creation of convincing or involvement. On the other hand, a minor internal conversation can influence the practical decisions with minimal societal imprint. The issues expressed by Boulianne (2015) regarding causal direction are still pertinent: both platform use and participation can be explained by previous political interest. A justifiable electoral evaluation must contain information regarding audiences and shifts throughout time, preferably connected to plausible comparison plans, instead of transforming likes or the number of followers into assumed votes.

The issue of fragmentation is also more complicated than a universal diagnosis of an echo-chamber. Mixed social networks, mainstream reporting and incidental exposure are ways in which people are exposed to various views (Vaccari and Valeriani, 2021). Facing conflict does not necessarily ensure respectful interaction or change of belief. It may stimulate learning, evasion or aggression based on the situation. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023) demonstrate that democratic impacts differ in terms of outcomes and settings. In the case of Malaysia, studies ought to differentiate between ideological differences and affective hostility and between factual misunderstanding. These states of affairs demand various reactions; a mere exposure to contradicting material might not be a solution to all three.

Accountability extends beyond individual users

Discourse is mediated through platforms by ranking, moderation, design of interfaces and access to data. Gillespie (2018) describes the need to have content moderation as a component of their operation, whereas Gorwa (2019) places their power in interpersonal relationships involving governments, users and advertisers. In the case of electoral communication, it implies that the responsibility cannot be placed on the citizens who share material. Companies make decisions which influence discoverability, complaint management and reinstatement of content that has been mistakenly restricted. They should be responsible with explanations of consequential decisions and evidence on recurring failures. Neutrality in a policy document cannot be formal, but must have a significant difference in application across languages or not provide meaningful remedies to the affected users.

The context also includes the regulatory path that Malaysia pursues. In July 2024 the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC, 2024) declared a licensing system of large social-media and messaging platforms, to be enforced since January 2025. The development since GE15 shows a growing regulatory interest; it is not a fact regarding the regulation of the campaign in 2022 or a full story of the law thereafter. The question of election is whether the checks and balances uphold the participation and combat the harms that can be demonstrated. The freedom of expression, transparency, and stakeholder participation is a relevant benchmark by UNESCO (2023), as it reflects the centre of platform governance.

A further accountability mechanism is provided by independent monitoring but needs resources and safeguards. The National Democratic Institute (n.d.) explains the operational and wellbeing issues associated with the Malaysian monitoring activity of the CIJ, such as processing large volumes of offensive content and the delay in locating the urgent cases. These hurdles qualify anticipations that the civil society will be able to offset all failures of platforms. Proper monitoring requires personnel training, well-defined ways and channels of reporting escalating time sensitive threats. It must also be free of campaign interests. Public reporting must clarify what was reported, how material was chosen and where uncertainty still exists and the findings must be used to inform criticism and not be another unquestioned source of political power.

Another implication is that of national visibility and local representation. A national issue with a large following can easily take the center stage at the expense of constituency services, local development and records of the candidates. This imbalance can be addressed through digital communication where local journalists and the groups of people associated to the communities relate the questions that are raised by the people to the responsibilities that can be identified. It has the ability to solidify the imbalance by covering only personalities with a national audience already. The measure of democratic quality that is involved is

then the ability of citizens to get usable information on the available options. This further extends the hybrid-media interpretation to the aspect of accountability between elections, whereby the response of the representatives can be contrasted with the promises that circulated in campaigns.

Conclusion and recommendations

The digital media has transformed the electoral process in Malaysia by increasing participation and recalibrating the flow of political power. Evidence examined in this paper favors a significant impact in access, mobilisation, campaign production and public scrutiny. It also discloses an unequal visibility, emotionally colored communication and struggles to regulate harmful content. These consequences are simultaneous as platforms are run by social relations, resources and institutions. The main finding of the article is that the democratic value of digital media hinges on the quality and accountability of communication. Its existence or popularity can never prove that voters are more informed, that discussion was inclusive or that a specific platform led to an electoral outcome.

The electoral institutions are expected to deliver a regular public information service in anticipation of, during and post elections. Registration, voting processes, checking of results and the duties of elected units should be explained in plain language. It should be accessible in different languages and different accessible formats and complemented by offline access. Corrections ought to mark the particular claim, include supporting evidence and have a definite date of publication. Unresolved questions should also be recognized by the institutions in a timely manner. These practices bolster a sense of trust by providing verifiable information as opposed to calling upon citizens to accept authority without providing explanation. Assessment should address understanding and effective accessibility, even of those citizens who have connectivity or access constraints.

Sponsorship, commissioned influencer activity and responsibility of campaign pages should be disclosed by political parties and candidates. Clear records would assist in differentiating independent citizen expression and coordinated paid communication whilst maintaining legitimate volunteer engagement. Campaign organisations must have corrections available and act on gaffes in materials they publish that are serious. These are suggested standards of accountability, and not descriptions of universal compliance. They are aimed at attributing persuasion to be contestable. The same election promise not to be intimidated must be coupled by effective mechanisms to receive complaints; empty promises of civility are not very protective when malicious content is disseminated by loosely-knit supporters.

Resources of Malaysian language should be mobilized through platforms, usable appeals should be made and meaningful information about the enforcement of election made available. Government requests, company policy decisions and user reports should be characterized by transparency. The privacy-protective access required by the researchers must be adequate to examine patterns of distribution and unequal moderation, without getting unlimited access to personal discussions. The principles proposed by UNESCO (2023) provide control over expression, but consequential interventions are subject to review. The measures must be evaluated in terms of both mistakes and omissions: discouraging the correct reporting can also weaken the electoral integrity just as much as the inability to respond to the credible threats. Safety therefore requires independent scrutiny and timely remedies as opposed to hindrances to it.

Civic education ought to encompass institutional teaching with practical information judging. Citizens should have a chance to follow a claim to its origin, find the context that is lost and discriminate between evidence and popularity. Guess et al. (2020) present experimental data that a media-literacy intervention enhanced discernment among the studied populations in the United States and India, but the results do not necessarily apply in Malaysia. Piloting and testing of locally adapted programmes across languages and learning environments should thus be done. They should seek to make informed judgement and not blind

distrust. Being conversant with a machine is no education on how to decipher campaign promises or comprehend electoral duties.

Independent journalism is crucial in the digital setting. News organisations ought to associate brief formats with a deeper evidence, clarify doubt and not repeat inflammatory statements simply because they will gain attention. When funding and editorial accountabilities are open, collaboration between journalists and researchers as well as community organisations can expand the scope of trusted explanations. The resources and staff wellbeing maintenance is also required to be stable to allow monitoring efforts as the Malaysian experience reported by the National Democratic Institute (n.d.) shows. Such arrangements ought to enhance the independent checks in political camps. They rely on their validity through regular practices and willingness to be corrected when their own interpretations are found wanting.

Further studies ought to track individuals and information over time, platforms and electoral stages. Ethically based longitudinal surveys, experiments, interviews and transparent content studies might help understand the relations between exposure and knowledge, hostility, turnout and vote choice. Rural communities, Sabah and Sarawak, different language groups and non-higher education citizens should be sampled. The amount of campaign expenditure and the circumstances in which corrections travel efficiently should also be explored. These priorities are based on the constraints of the existing evidence. Such a more democratic communication space will demand longer-term institutional labour, where citizens have a say, can scrutinise assertions and question decisions on a non-election campaign basis.

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