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THE 'FAKE NEWS' LABEL AND POLITICISATION OF MALAYSIA'S ELECTIONS

Gulizar Haciyakupoglu

Abstract

This article analyses the information garboil caused by the politicisation of disinformation and the term 'fake news', and interruptions in the flow of information during the 14th General Elections in Malaysia. It pays particular attention to the distortion of the information environment by politicians and political parties, the control of the media (traditional and new), and the mobilisation of cyber troops and bots by political agents. The Anti-Fake News Act is central to the discussion as a law passed before and submitted for repeal after the elections. The article also looks into the subsidiary debate on foreign intervention and the supporting measures, such as cyber attacks and legal actions, that interrupted the information flow. An examination of these activities suggests a need for reform in the conduct of politicians and political parties, and of the media, as well as a closer look at other measures employed to disturb the information sphere. An evaluation of the problem and the introduction of a new approach are very timely, given the political changes the country is currently experiencing.

Keywords— *Malaysia, Anti-Fake News Act, fake news, disinformation, elections, cyber troops, strategic communications*

About the Author

Dr Gulizar Haciyakupoglu is a Research Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for National Security, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Her research interests include disinformation campaigns, information operations, online trust, and activism.

Glossary of Political Actors and Coalition Parties Mentioned in the Article

Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim (Left) and Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad (Right). Photo: EPA

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak (Left) and Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad (Right). Photo: AFP

Political figures mentioned in the article

Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad. Current Prime Minister of Malaysia, previously in power for 22 years (1981–2003). He was succeeded by Tun Dato' Seri Haji Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi (2003–2009). While Mahathir had been a leading figure in UMNO, he fell out with UMNO before GE14 and ran for his current position under the flag of the Malaysian United Indigenous Party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, (PPBM), which is a member of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition.

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. Former Prime Minister of Malaysia, who was also the president of UMNO and former chairman of the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. He is currently under investigation for the 1MDB case.

Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim. President of the People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat – PKR). Anwar was the Deputy Prime Minister under Mahathir until he was dismissed 'amid investigation for alleged corruption and sodomy' in 1998.[i1] Anwar was charged and jailed for five years, freed in 2004, and later charged again for another sodomy allegation,[ii2] and freed after GE14. He is currently a member of the parliament for Port Dickson.

Lim Guan Eng. Current Finance Minister and the Secretary-General of the Democratic Action Party (DAP).

Mohd Rafizi Ramli. Vice-President of the People's Justice Party (PKR).

Datuk Zaid Ibrahim. Former Law Minister from UMNO who joined DAP in 2017.

Datuk Seri Dr. Ahmad Zahid Hamidi. New president of UMNO and BN and former Deputy Prime Minister.

GE14 Coalition Parties Mentioned in the Article
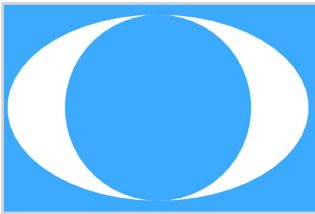
PAKATAN HARAPAN (PH)
Alliance of Hope

* The coalition in power

Lead Figures:
Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad (PPBM)
Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim (PKR)

Parties in the Alliance:
Democratic Action Party, Parti Tindakan Demokratik (DAP); People's Justice Party, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR); Malaysian United Indigenous Party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, (PPBM); National Trust Party, Parti Amanah Negara, (Amanah).

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i The Straits Times, 'Anwar Ibrahim's sodomy cases: What you need to know', 28 October 2014.
ii The Straits Times, 'Anwar Ibrahim's sodomy cases'.
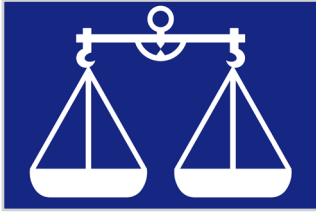
**BARISAN NASIONAL (BN)
National Front**
* Ruled the country from
independence to GE14

Lead Figures:
Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak (UMNO)
Datuk Seri Dr. Ahmad Zahid Hamidi
(UMNO)

Parties in the Alliance during the GE14:
United Malays National Organisation,
Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu
(UMNO); Malaysian Chinese Association,
Persatuan Cina Malaysia (MCA); Malaysian
Indian Congress, Kongres India Malaysia
(MIC); United Traditional Bumiputera
Party, Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu
(PBB); United Sabah Party (PBS); People's
Progressive Party, MyPPP (under Kayveas
faction); Malaysian People's Movement
Party; Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Ger-
akan); Sarawak People's Party, Parti Rakyat
Sarawak (PRS); Progressive Democratic
Party (PDP); Sarawak United People's
Party (SUPP); United Pasokmomogun Ka-
dazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO);
United Sabah People's Party (PBRS);
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)
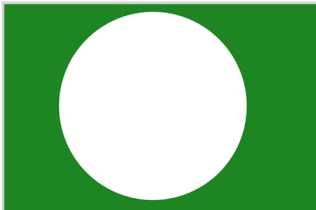
**Gagasan Sejahtera (Gagasan)
Movement of Harmony**

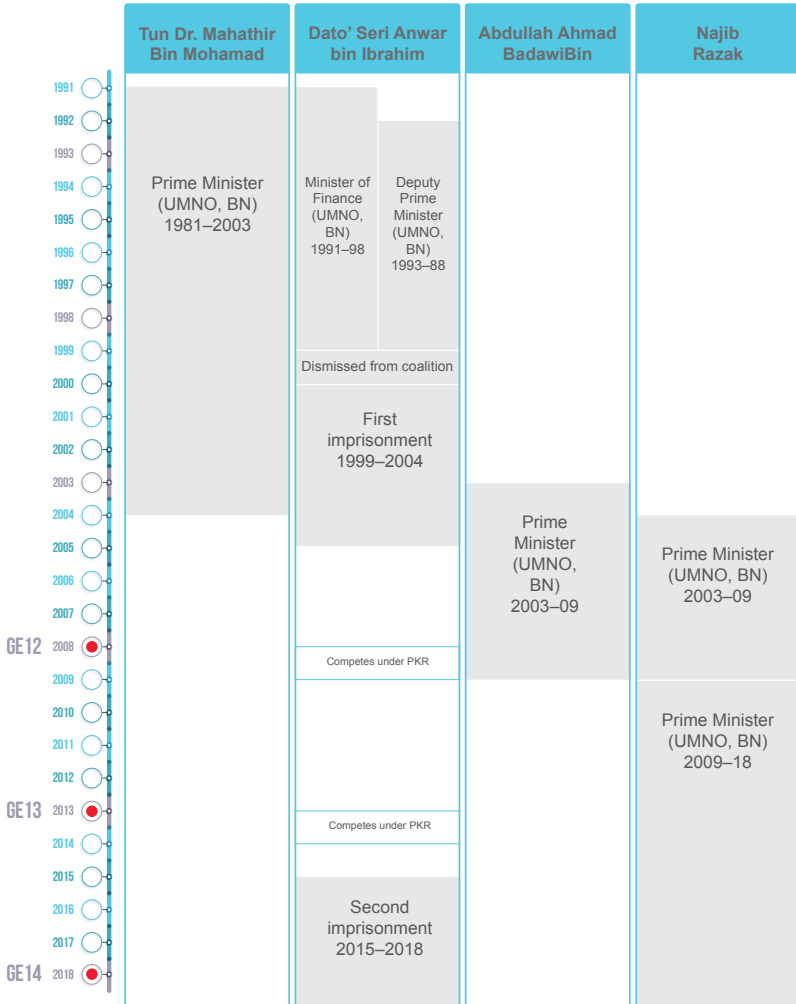**Lead Figures:**
Abdul Hadi Awang (PAS)

Parties in the Alliance during the GE14:
Malaysian Islamic Party, Parti Islam
Se-Malaysia PAS; Malaysia National Alli-
ance Party, Parti Ikatan Bangsa Malaysia
(IKATAN); Pan-Malaysian Islamic Front
(BERJASA)

Timeline of events discussed in the article

	Tun Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad	Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim		Abdullah Ahmad BadawiBin	Najib Razak
1991		Minister of Finance (UMNO, BN) 1991–98	Deputy Prime Minister (UMNO, BN) 1993–88		
1992	Prime Minister (UMNO, BN) 1981–2003				
1993					
1994					
1995					
1996					
1997					
1998					
1999		Dismissed from coalition			
2000		First imprisonment 1999–2004			
2001					
2002					
2003				Prime Minister (UMNO, BN) 2003–09	Prime Minister (UMNO, BN) 2003–09
2004					
2005					
2006					
2007					
GE12 2008		Competes under PKR			
2009					Prime Minister (UMNO, BN) 2009–18
2010					
2011					
2012					
GE13 2013		Competes under PKR			
2014					
2015		Second imprisonment 2015–2018			
2016					
2017					
GE14 2018					

Introduction

In March 2018, Jailani Johari, Deputy Minister of Communications and Multimedia at the time, urged the foreign press to stop circulating 'fake news' aiming to damage Prime Minister Najib Razak's image before the 14th General Elections (GE14) by entangling him in allegations against 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB).[1] 1MDB, a government-owned investment fund, became embroiled in a scandal when claims emerged that millions of misappropriated USD dollar deposits had gone into Najib Razak's personal account.[2] The post-election interrogation into the 1MDB case revealed that some of the accusations that had been dismissed as 'fake news' by Johari and other officials might have been accurate. This is just one example of the use of the 'fake news' label as a political tool in the run-up to the election.

GE14 will go down in Malaysian history as an election full of surprises. The information sphere was highly politicised throughout the tight race between prominent political figures. Among other developments, GE14 (a) ended the rule of the Barisan Nasional coalition, which had been in power since independence; (b) then incumbent Prime Minister Najib Razak faced off against Tun Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad, who had served as Prime Minister for 22 years; and (c) Mahathir joined forces with Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim, his 'one-time deputy' who later became his rival, in an effort to topple Najib.[3] Amidst the complex dynamics of this election, reaching audiences with desired information and shaping the information space to one's advantage was an important concern for the political figures and parties.

This article analyses the deterioration of the information space during GE14. In the run-up to the elections, politicians and parties sporadically used disinformation to dispel criticism, discredit the opposition, and manipulate information flow and public opinion. In examining these attempts, I pay special attention to cases linked with Malaysia's front-running political camps—the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition and the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH). I examine their use of the 'fake news' label and other disinformation methods to achieve a discursive edge.

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1 *The Straits Times,* 'Malaysia's deputy minister warns foreign media about spreading "fake news" about 1MDB', 11 March 2018.
2 *Guardian*, 'Malaysian taskforce investigates allegations $700m paid to PM Najib', 6 July 2015; see also Channel News Asia, '1MDB scandal: A timeline', 22 May 2018; see also *The Straits Times*, '1MDB: Malaysia's extraordinary financial scandal', 3 July 2018.
3 Liz Lee and Rozanna Latiff, 'Mahathir, 92, sworn in as Malaysia's seventh prime minister', Reuters, 10 May 2018.

The attempts of politicians and political parties were aided by control of the media (traditional and new) and the mobilisation of cyber troops and bots, often by political agents. The information sphere was further muddled by occasional interruptions in the flow of information, mainly by way of cyber attacks and legal restrictions, the most noteworthy being the Anti-Fake News Act[4], a legal action instituted by the ruling party in the midst of the campaigning period. The bill to repeal the act was submitted soon after the victory of the opposition coalition. Foreign intervention on the other hand, an issue that has been high on the agendas of various countries, especially since the 2016 American elections, emerged as a subsidiary concern during the elections. Leading political figures accused rival party members of inviting foreign influence, but these debates were more about discrediting rivals than about investigating foreign influence.

The practices mentioned above raise questions about the expanding boundaries of 'ethical' political communication, especially in times of critical decision-making. The drivers and measures discussed in this article promoted particular truths at the expense of others and interrupted the 'healthy' consumption and exchange of information necessary for democratic elections. This is especially alarming considering the population's unease about disinformation practices. According to a recent survey, a significant part of the Malaysian population is concerned about the adverse effects of disinformation, and more than half the population has difficulty identifying 'good journalism'.[5] This, together with the conditions discussed in the article, show the need for reform in the conduct of politicians and political parties, and of the media.

This article is based on an examination of relevant English news articles published during the campaigning period and in the immediate aftermath of the elections,[6] and on a review of scholarly literature on the issue. The analysis provided here is timely, given the changes the country is going through after the

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4 The act was submitted for repeal by PH. During the review process of this article, repeal of the act was stalled by the BN..
5 According to the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, 63% of respondents fail to 'distinguish between rumours and good journalism', and 73% are uneasy about the adverse effects of disinformation in Malaysia (Zin, March 7, 2018). These insights expose the population's vulnerability to the politicisation of the term 'fake news' and to disinformation that is manufactured for political gains. Mazuin Zin, 'Malaysia: The Changing Face of Trust', *Edelman*, 7 March 2018.
6 Interviews and surveys could have provided greater insight into the issue. However, given the short period between the announcement of the election date, the enforcement of the Anti-Fake News Act, and the elections, and the time required to receive Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I could not conduct such interviews or surveys. Hence, the article is founded on the available scholarly literature. It draws from news articles produced within the given timeline and aspires to identify the clashes on the ground, which can be further explored by empirical studies in the future.

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end of BN's 60-year rule.[7] While the focus of this article is on the 14th General Elections, historical accounts and references to past events are occasionally mentioned to provide context and substantiate arguments. Here it should be noted that I do not delve into the reception dimension of the issue,[8] nor do I attempt to measure the impact of disinformation on voters' choices and on election results.[9]

In the following section I define the terms 'fake news' and 'disinformation', and describe the intricate network of relations in Malaysia's political environment. In the main body of the paper, 'Key Disinformation Drivers During GE14', I discuss each driver in turn. The nature of the problem of disinformation is multi-faceted and pervasive. There is a need for reform in the conduct of politicians and political parties, and of the media. In the concluding section I propose the adoption of a multi-pronged approach to counter the problem, and conclude with some practical recommendations for the future.

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7 BBC, 'Malaysia election: Opposition scores historic victory', 10 May 2018.
8 Questions regarding audiences' reception of and reaction to disinformation disseminated during GE14, including the influence of cognitive biases in information consumption behaviours, and audiences' investment of trust in different media, information, and sources, do not fall within the scope of this article. Akin to this, media, messages and sources used to target different audience groups, and disinformation as well as political communication targeted at different language circles and ethnic communities are not discussed in this article.
9 It is troublesome to assess the impact of disinformation, the 'fake news' label, and the Anti-Fake News Act on audiences' perceptions and decisions, and to calculate the reach of disinformation, for a number of reasons. These include the diversity of factors that contributed to the surprise election results (e.g. concerns about corruption and the economy), the multiplicity of agents involved in producing and circulating disinformation, manipulation of online likes, followers, and conversations, and the possible gap between concerns on the ground and issues raised online. It is worth clarifying the problem of measurement. Multiple agents were involved in disinformation production and circulation and they used diverse mediums, thus the problem grows in a complex ecosystem. To name a few: (a) a variety of interacting factors contributed to the surprise in the election results, including concerns about the situation of the economy and corruption cases; (b) online conversations are not always 'indicative of ground sentiment' (Leong, 2015, p. 55); (c) social media are not always a good indicator of the popularity of a party or a candidate, as the number of followers and likes are easily manipulated and conversations can be swayed by trolls. This list can be expanded. With regards to the influence of the Anti-Fake News Act on the election results, the law was only one of the major topics and concerns during the campaigning period, and the short-lived act did not lead to significant material changes. (a) Although one Danish citizen was sentenced under the act, the cases against opposition were not concluded. (b) Neither the law nor the sentencing of the Danish citizen deterred the circulation of fake news. For instance, a false viral message claiming Johor's Crown Prince would pay for people's groceries at a supermarket (*The Straits Times*, 12 April 2018), and supposedly 'fake' viral messages on voting-related problems in GE14 (*The Straits Times*, 9 May 2018) went into circulation after the enforcement of the law. (c) The law did not necessarily silence the opposition. Indeed, its enactment sparked new criticism. And (d) the law was not adequate to obfuscate the concerns (e.g. the economy) that potentially contributed to the loss of BN. For citations see: Pauline P. Y. Leong, 'Political Communication in Malaysia: A Study on the Use of New Media in Politics', *Journal of e Democracy and Open Government*, 7(1), (2015): 55; *The Straits Times*, 'Fake news of Johor Crown Prince appearing at Pontian supermarket causes pandemonium', 12 April 2018;
The Straits Times, 'Malaysia election: Najib slams viral messages about voting issues as fake news', 9 May 2018.

Fake News, Disinformation, and Malaysia's Political Environment

'Fake news' is an ambiguous term that has been exploited by politicians and other authorities as a political tool to defame an opponent, discredit an argument, or deflect criticism. Donald Trump popularised the term 'fake news' as a mechanism to circumvent undesired media coverage or criticism,[10] and various politicians, *including some in Malaysia*, have hopped on the bandwagon.[11] The term 'fake news' is used to refer to episodic 'falsehood and confusion'.[12] 'Disinformation', on the other hand, designates the deliberate dissemination of a 'wide range' of falsehoods (e.g. inaccurate information, rumours, politically biased information), at times for political or monetary gain.[13] It refers to 'systematic disruptions of authoritative information flow due to strategic deceptions that may appear very credible to those consuming them'.[14] This article explores a broad range of politically motivated disinformation and related material (e.g. half-truths, propaganda, decontextualised information, partisan information).

In Malaysia, the meaning of 'fake news' is shaped by the dynamics of the political environment, while disinformation remains an under-defined problem. The term 'fake news' was given both a political definition and mission amidst the politicking of BN and its opposition in the GE14 campaign. The opposition equated fake news with 'regime propaganda',[15] while the ruling coalition defined it as a 'weapon of the opposition',[16] and occasionally leveraged the term to deflect 'questions and critiques' of news outlets such as '*Malaysiakini*, the London-based *Sarawak Report*, and even international news agencies'.[17] Amidst the contested significations, the ruling party's Anti-Fake News Act defined the term as 'any news, information, data and reports, which is or are wholly or partly false, whether in the form of features, visuals, or audio recordings, or in any other form capable of suggesting words or ideas'.[18]

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10 Gabbatt, Adam, 'How Trump's 'fake news' gave authoritarian leaders a new weapon', *Guardian*, 25 January 2018.
11 Andy Yee, 'Post-Truth Politics and Fake News in Asia', *Global Asia*, 12(2), (2017): 71. *Emphasis added*.
12 W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, 'The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions', *European Journal of Communication,* 33:2, (2018): 124.
13 Bennet and Livingston, 'The Disinformation Order', p. 124. See also Joshua A. Tucker, Andrew Guess, Pablo Barbera, Cristian Vaccari, Alexandra Siegel, Sergey Sanovich, Denis Stukal, and Brendan Nyhan, 'Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature', *William & Flora Hewlett Foundation*, (2018): 2.
14 Bennet and Livingston, 'The Disinformation Order', p. 124.
15 *The Straits Times*, 'Barisan Nasional launches portal to combat "fake news"', 5 January 2018.
16 Ibid.
17 Zaharom Nain, 'Digital News Report 2017: Malaysia', In *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* 2017, Nic Newman, Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, David A. L. Levy and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (eds), (2017): 121.
18 Laws of Malaysia, Act 803 Anti-Face News Act 2018, Part I, p. 5.

This partisan approach to the term 'fake news' comes against the backdrop of a political system governed for sixty years by the BN coalition (dominated by the United Malays National Organisation or UMNO party), yet ardently challenged by the opposition, especially in the 2008 and 2013 elections. In 2008, BN 'lost its two-thirds majority control of parliament'[19] to the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition of three parties—the People's Justice Party (PKR), united around Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim (Anwar from here onwards);[20] the 'largely ethnic-Chinese' Democratic Action Party (DAP); and the Pan-Islamic Malaysian Party (PAS).[21] The opposition's success in the 2008 election was partially attributed to its mastering of the Internet.[22] Although BN elevated its online campaigning efforts in the 2013 elections,[23] it lost seats in parliament due to myriad voter concerns including 'corruption', 'racial-based policies', 'cronyism', and 'religious extremism'.[24] Later, BN claimed it was hit by 'fake news' in the 2013 elections.[25]

GE14 was a particularly important election, as BN was competing against the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition formed by parties with different voter bases, namely PKR, DAP, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM or Beratsu—the Malaysian United Indigenous Party), and Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah). More critical, Najib, the BN candidate, was running against two prominent political rivals—Tun Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad (Mahathir from here onwards)[26] and Anwar, who joined forces under PH against Najib. Mahathir holds the title of longest-serving Prime Minister, with 22 years of leadership under the UMNO (and BN) flag. He was elected Prime Minister of Malaysia for the second time in GE14, while leading the Pakatan Harapan coalition. Anwar was the Deputy Prime Minister during Mahathir's first term in office (UMNO, BN),[27] until he

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19 James Gomez, 'Social Media Impact on Malaysia's 13ᵗʰ General Elections', *Asia Pacific Media Educator* 24, № 1 (2014): 96.
20 I refer to the former Prime Ministers and others in this article by name for convenience and because it is common journalistic style, no disrespect is intended.
21 Bridget Welsh, 'Malaysia's Elections: A Step Backward', *Journal of Democracy* 24, № 4 (2013): 138.
22 Fischer, 'We Shift the Channel', p. 61; Welsh, 'Malaysia's Elections: A Step Backward', p. 43.
23 Ibid., p. 143.
24 Gomez, 'Social Media Impact,' p. 101.
25 Anisah Shukry, 'Malaysia Gears Up for Elections as Najib Targets "Fake News"', *Bloomberg*, 5 January 2018.
26 Tun Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad is referred to as Mahathir for the rest of the article, due to the length of the name. There are many news and academic articles that refer to him as Mahathir (only). I refrain from using his PM title, as it could confuse the reader in terms of the timeline of events.
27 Anwar was expelled from UMNO with allegations of sodomy during Mahathir's tenure and was later imprisoned. According to 'human rights groups and his supporters' the corruption and sodomy allegations that put him behind bars were 'trumped-up at the behest of Mr. Mahathir' (Austin Ramzy, 'Now Free, Malaysia's Anwar Ibrahim Attacks System That Jailed Him Twice', *New York Times*, 15 May 2018). Anwar's deportation and arrest sparked the Reformasi movement that comprised protests in support of Anwar. The movement drew spotlight for the online activism it generated. Anwar was imprisoned for a second time during Najib's tenure and the Pakatan Harapan coalition argued that his imprisonment under Najib was 'politically motivated' (Trinna Leong, 'Malaysia's jailed political leader Anwar Ibrahim to be released on May 15', *The Straits Times*, 12 May 2018).

was dismissed 'amid investigation for alleged corruption and sodomy' in 1998.[28] Anwar was later charged with corruption,[29] 'sodomising his family's former driver, and abusing his power to cover up his actions';[30] he was sent to prison as a result. After being freed in 2004, Anwar was entangled in another allegation of sodomy in 2008, 'sentenced to five years' in prison in 2014,[31] and imprisoned for a second time in 2015.[32] Some argued that both arrests were politically motivated. Anwar had been Mahathir's stern opponent until the two made peace to run together in GE14 with the ultimate goal of toppling Najib. The election victory was Anwar's ticket to freedom, as he was still in prison when running for office. Winning the election was crucial for both coalitions, and so both were politicising information on candidates and other major issues to their best advantage.

The amount of disinformation in circulation increased as the election date drew near. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission claimed that the 'fake news' identified by their fact-checking site *sebenarnya.my* 'increased by almost 100 per cent'.[33] Within this context, the Anti-Fake News Act, which BN introduced about one month before GE14, stimulated discussions on informational advantage in the elections. Both parties used the topic to promote their positions during the campaign.

With this background in mind, the following section will delve into the prominent disinformation drivers during GE14.

Key Disinformation Drivers During GE14

There are multiple agents with intersecting motivations that help distort the information sphere and manufacture disinformation. Alexandra Siegel lists 'trolls, bots, fake-news websites, conspiracy theorists, politicians, highly partisan media outlets, the mainstream media, and foreign governments' as 'disinformation producers'.[34] In the context of Malaysia, this list can be extended to include influential opinion and religious leaders. For the purposes of this article, I focus on politicians and their parties, take a closer look at the battle over control of the media (traditional and new), and consider the bots and cyber troops, some

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28 *The Straits Times*, 'Anwar Ibrahim's sodomy cases: What you need to know', 28 October 2014.
29 Channel News Asia, 'No need for me to explain further on sodomy cases: Anwar Ibrahim', 18 October 2018.
30 *Guardian*, 'Anwar Ibrahim sodomy case is credible, judge rules', 16 May 2011.
31 *The Straits Times*, 'Anwar Ibrahim's sodomy cases'.
32 Channel News Asia, 'No need for me to explain further on sodomy cases: Anwar Ibrahim', 18 October 2018.
33 Beatrice Nita Jay and Mohd Nasaruddin Parzi, 'Fake news surging in GE14', *New Straits Times*, 4 May 2018.
34 Alexandra Siegel, 'Producers of Disinformation', in Tucker et. al., '*Social Media, Political Polarization'*, p. 22.

of which are allegedly tied to political actors and agents of foreign influence. In addition to these interacting drivers, I will also discuss supportive measures, including legal actions and cyber attacks. I shy away from using the term 'disinformation producers' in the context of Malaysia, as the actors identified above do not always produce the disinformation they use. Sometimes they leverage the term 'fake news' to sway opinion and dispel criticism, or disseminate disinformation produced by other sources.[35]

Malaysian politicians, their parties, and the Anti-Fake News Act

In the run-up to GE14, disinformation emerged as a strategy to conceal the truth and promote a political agenda,[36] and the term 'fake news' was exploited to dispel criticism. The scandal around 1MDB and the Anti-Fake News Act were also central to the debates on 'fake news' and disinformation.

A telling incident occurred during a speech delivered by ruling coalition leader Najib at the launch of the portal *Rakyat.com*. BN created the portal to provide 'accurate' GE14-related information amidst rising disinformation. Ironically, in his speech Najib accused the opposition of pushing 'fake news' (about 1MDB) while promoting a platform created to publish his coalition's interpretation of the truth. [37]

The 'fake news' label was also used to help create 'alternative truths' regarding the 1MDB case, and to discredit allegations against the fund. While Najib dismissed some of the accusations against 1MDB as fake news,[38] Johari[39] asserted that any information on 1MDB that had not been 'verified by the Government' would be 'deemed as fake news'.[40] His statement signalled the BN government's intention to control what is fake and what is accurate, and thus, what one can and cannot publicise on issues of importance.

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35 These drivers potentially refer to different (in some cases overlapping) audience groups, and they might have had a disparate impact on information consumers with diverse profiles. Their activities, alone or in conjunction with other agents, have served as a means for political parties or figures to achieve their ambitions. Regardless of their use in isolation or inclusion into an orchestrated effort that combines other agents, cumulatively they polluted the information environment before the elections. For instance, politicians had the option to leverage the term fake news to discredit criticism while they also benefited from cyber troops' attempts to deflect it. In addition to these drivers, legal regulations and cyber attacks helped disrupt information flow and sway the course of political interaction.
36 Yee, 'Post-Truth Politics'.
37 Ibid.
38 *Al Jazeera*, 'How Asian leaders are riding "fake news" mantra', 22 January 2018.
39 Datuk Jailani Johari was the Deputy Communications and Multimedia Minister of BN (Please see the Introduction).
40 Datuk Jailani Johari as cited in Sivanandam, Hemananthani, 'Unverified info on 1 MDB is fake news, says deputy minister', *The Star Online*, 21 March 2018.

Fake news had clearly become a hot button issue. Barisan Nasional claimed to have been victimised by fake news in the previous elections. Just before GE14, in April of 2018, it introduced an Anti-Fake News Act 'to curb false news that threatens public order and national security'.[41] The act was passed with comparatively little debate, although it later became the target of intense criticism, including complaints that it was couched in much too general language and failed to define 'fake news' in any meaningful way.[42] Muhyiddin Yassin, PPBM president, who had been ousted from UMNO in 2016, accused BN of leveraging of the 'fake news' label 'as an excuse'.[43] Yassin called for Najib's resignation soon after the 1MDB saga began to unfold.[44] Both DAP Parliamentary Leader Lim Kit Siang, and former law minister Datuk Zaid Ibrahim, who joined DAP in 2017,[45] claimed that a major objective of the Anti-Fake News Act was to defend Najib against the corruption allegations tied to 1MDB.[46] The 1MDB case potentially swayed the votes of some concerned Malaysians in support of the opposition, despite the ruling party's efforts to sweep the allegations under the carpet. More importantly, the post-election discoveries of misconduct raised questions about the damage caused by dismissing the claims of corruption, and exposed BN's attempts to control the flow of information regarding the issue.

In addition to its alleged role in side-lining diatribes against 1MDB, the Anti-Fake News Act granted BN greater control over the information sphere before the election. Steven Gan, editor-in-chief of the *Malaysiakini* news portal, and Zaid Ibrahim suggested that the bill was enacted to bolster BN in the elections.[47] The law was used against opposition figures Mahathir Mohamad and Mohd Rafizi Ramli (People's Justice Party Vice-President)[48] days before the election. Mahathir was placed under investigation for claiming that his 'plane was sabotaged',[49] and Ramli was singled out for his comments on 'social media about the filing of nomination papers for the election at a district in Negeri Sembilan state'.[50] If we take into account over 50% of Malaysians' scepticism in deciding which

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41 *The Star Online*, 'Azalina: Media providers consulted over fake news laws', 14 March 2018.
42 Gulizar Haciyakupoğlu, 'Malaysia's Elections and the Anti-Fake News Act', *The Diplomat*, 26 April 2018.
43 Mohamad Fadli, 'Muhyiddin: Why no action on 1MDB "fake news' since 2016?', *Free Malaysia Today*, 12 March 2018.
44 *The Straits Times*, 'Malaysia's Umno expels Muhyiddin and Mukhriz Mahathir, suspends Shafie Abdal', 24 June 2016.
45 Trinna Leong, 'Former Malaysian law minister Zaid Ibrahim joins DAP', *The Straits Times*, 8 February 2017.
46 Zaid Ibrahim in Lourdes, 'Malaysia's anti-fake news law'; see also Siang, 'The Anti-Fake News Bill'.
47 Lourdes, 'Malaysia's anti-fake news law.'.
48 Jo Timbuong, 'Terengganu and Kelantan (updated)', *The Star*, 5 October 2018.
49 Emily Chow and Praveen Menon, 'Go ahead, charge me over fake news, says Malaysia's Mahathir of plane sabotage claim', *Reuters*, 4 May 2018.
50 *Reuters*, 'Malaysian opposition leader investigated under fake news law', 5 May 2018.

'politicians to trust',[51] it is likely that the effect of the two cases on different audiences was inconsistent. On the one hand, the investigations against Mahathir and Ramli may have discredited these candidates in the eyes of some voters. On the other hand, Najib's politicisation of the term 'fake news' might have damaged BN's image. Some voters might have interpreted the investigations as just another election trick, especially when certain parties were already criticising some of BN's tactics, such as gerrymandering, as an election fix. Some voters, undecided, sceptical, or already sympathetic to PH, Anwar, or Mahathir, might have shifted their allegiance.[52]

The impact of this law on the election results is hard to gauge, given the influence of multiple drivers of disinformation production and amplification, the brief lifespan of the Act, and the variety of interacting factors that may have contributed to the surprising election results, including concerns about the economy and political corruption. Besides, the short-lived law did not lead to any significant material changes, as can be seen in four failures of the law to achieve results: (a) Although one Danish citizen was sentenced under the Act, the cases against the opposition were not concluded. (b) Neither the law nor the sentencing of the Danish citizen deterred the circulation of fake news—several fake messages went viral after the law was enacted, including the claim that Johor's Crown Prince would pay for people's groceries at a supermarket,[53] the claim that 'voters must wear government office attire' at the polls,[54] and other voting-related problems in GE14.[55] (c) The law did not necessarily silence the opposition, but rather sparked new criticism. And (d) the law was not effective enough to obfuscate concerns that potentially contributed to BN's defeat.

Disinformation tactics were also used to confuse voters to the disadvantage of BN's ruling coalition. One such incident was a 'story about Bangladeshis with blue caps seen entering the country to become phantom voters' that went viral.[56] It built on similar stories from the 2013 elections, one of them being Mahathir's allegation on a previous occasion of 'the existence of [...] phantom voters in the country's electoral roll'.[57] According to the newspapers, Mahathir claimed that

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51 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer Malaysia Launch, Slide Share, (2018): 17. According to the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, 58% of the respondents 'd[id] not know which politicians to trust'.
52 These suppositions are hard to substantiate due to lack of empirical studies and more important, the difficulty of assessing impact on this front.
53 The Straits Times, 'Fake news of Johor Crown Prince'.
54 The Star Online, 'EC confirms no dress code on polling day', 30 April 2018.
55 The Straits Times, 'Malaysia election: Najib slams viral messages about voting issues as fake news', 9 May 2018.
56 Beatrice Nita Jay and Mohd Nasaruddin Parzi, 'Fake news surging in GE14', New Straits Times, 4 May 2018.
57 The Straits Times, 'Mahathir alleges evidence of "phantom voters' in Malaysia's electoral rolls', 15 January 2018.

900 people with the same birth date and name, Fatimah Ismail, were 'listed in the electoral roll'; he also pointed to registry entries with no proper address indicated.[58] In this context, the disinformation about phantom Bangladeshi voters arguably built on a suspicion that had been planted earlier. Whether this incident and other disinformation tactics targeted at BN obliquely benefited the opposition remains a question.

The debate around the Anti-Fake News Act, on the other hand, quickly emerged as a promising campaign discourse for opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan. PH leveraged the debate to create the image of the Barisan Nasional as a coalition intolerant of dissent and willing to curtail freedom of speech. Reinforcing the negative image of his opponents, Mahathir claimed that the Act was part of the ruling coalition's 'political agenda',[59] and called on BN not to 'use this law to cover up the truth'.[60] Similarly, Lim Guan Eng, current Finance Minister and the Secretary-General of the Democratic Action Party, argued that BN aspired to define 'what is true or false' and 'fake or not' with the Anti-Fake News Act.[61]

The opposition based some future promises on its criticism of the law and arguments about the 'fake news' saga. They promised to repeal the Anti-Fake News Act, presenting their coalition as keen to restore tolerance of dissent and variety of information. PH also defined its position on freedom of expression and of the press with its criticism of the Anti-Fake News Act and other laws curtailing these freedoms. For instance, Mahathir expressed the need to repeal several other laws that he 'deemed oppressive to people', including some of the laws pursued during his governance, such as the Sedition Act of 1948 and the Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1971.[62]

After the elections, the parliament, led by the victorious PH, announced that it would abolish the Anti-Fake News Act.[63] PH kept its promise and submitted a bill to repeal the vaguely defined act, which could easily be exploited to curtail

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58 Ibid.
59 Tarrence Tan, 'Dr M: Even AGC officers are confused about Anti Fake News Bill', *The Star Online*, 27 March 2018.
60 *Free Malaysia Today*, 'Don't use fake news to cover up truth, says Dr M', 6 February 2018.
61 Lim Huey Teng, 'Guan Eng: Anti-fake news bill to cover up 1 MDB scandal?', *Malaysiakini*, 22 March 2018.
62 Terrance Tan, 'Dr M: Pakatan to repeal controversial laws, including fake news act', *The Star Online*, 3 April 2018.
63 Hemananthani Sivanandam, Martin Carvalho, Rahimy Rahim, and Loshana K. Shagar, 'Parliament passes bill to repeal Anti-Fake News law', *The Star Online*, 16 August 2018; The new government's decision to repeal the law was announced during the review period of this article. See Hemananthani Sivanandam, Martin Carvalho, Rahimy Rahim and Loshana K. Shagar, 'Bill to repeal controversial Anti-Fake News Act tabled in the Parliament', *The Star Online*, 8 August, 2018.

freedom of speech for political gain. However, PH has not disclosed its agenda on combating disinformation, which will continue to be a problem if no further action is taken. We have yet to see how tolerant PH will be towards dissent now that they are in control, especially considering Mahathir's past policies (see the section on traditional media).

As a man who was allegedly suppressed as a dissident by Mahathir and Najib, Anwar may aspire to institute a fair playing field for the opposition. However, several questions create uncertainty on this front: How will Mahathir's past relationship with the opposition and his policies on the media influence his future steps? How will Mahathir and Anwar (and Lim) negotiate their different ambitions? In his first days as a free man, Anwar called on PH supporters and other Malaysians to act as watchdogs over the conduct of elected ministers.[64] Whether citizens will follow his advice and hold politicians accountable for their actions and their words remains to be seen.

Malaysia's media environment and the Internet

BN's stranglehold on some of the traditional media sources in Malaysia through ownership and legislation inculcated an unhealthy, partisan-leaning media culture in the country.[65] While some traditional media tend to support BN in controversial issues, independent websites and other online sources have come to be venues for questions and criticism.[66] Hence, the traditional media are not entirely immune to opposition rhetoric, and the Internet has not been completely safe from 'established political forces'.[67] Although the Internet remains relatively free as a platform for voicing dissent,[68] a number of attempts have been made to circumvent the promise of no online censorship, a promise delivered as a

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64 Razak Ahmad, Martin Carvalho, Hemananthani Sivanandam, Vincent Tan, M. Kumar, and Tarrence Tan, 'Anwar to rally crowd: Monitor Pakatan's elected representatives', *The Star Online*, 17 May 2018.
65 The traditional media and the Internet accommodate various forms of disinformation, and both may be exploited to cause information interruption. The traditional media and the Internet are not necessarily independent spaces in the production and circulation of disinformation. Information is not imprisoned in online or offline locations; it travels from one medium to another. Thus, the Internet, social media in particular, and the mass media are not isolated pockets, and the issue of reforming the media to eliminate dissemination of deliberate falsehoods must be evaluated and tackled with attention to both online and offline information spaces. Here, I should also stress that that disinformation manufacturing and circulation are not the only mechanisms for swaying and constructing public opinion. Various means of control over information (e.g. hacking, blocking, banning) available to the public may obstruct people's access to accurate information, hamper information verification process and obliquely cause misinformation.
66 Cherian George, 'Media in Malaysia: Zone of Contention', *Democratization,* 14:5, (2007): 901.
67 George, 'Media in Malaysia', p. 893.
68 Liu Yangyue, 'Controlling Cyberspace in Malaysia: Motivations and Constraints', *Asian Survey*, 54(4), (2014): 802.

part of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) policy from the mid-90s.[69] The Anti-Fake News Act is only one of a number of legal actions that provoked criticism for their potential to challenge the liberty of deliberations. Additionally, attempts have been made to censor dissent from all quarters and partisan content has found its way online. These circumstances contribute to curtailing the variety of information available to the public on the Internet.

The dynamics of the Malaysian media environment exhibit a vulnerability to the penetration of disinformation. I will first discuss the partisan condition of the traditional media and then elaborate on the Internet with a particular focus on legal actions and cyber attacks.

The traditional media

Newspaper circulation has been decreasing in recent years.[70] The prominent drivers of this fall include the media's pro-Najib propaganda, despite his enmeshment in the 1MDB scandal, and the public increasingly turning to digital sources for their news.[71] While the impact of the traditional media's predominantly pro-BN stance on the rising consumption of news from digital spaces is a question, biased coverage by the press has long been a concern in Malaysia. The media ownership that favours BN, and the correspondingly partisan content of BN-lenient sources, have become a standard component of the Malaysian media environment.[72] In addition, the content covered in the traditional media has been sporadically managed by legislation. I will first discuss the structure of media ownership and then expand on some of the legal enforcements over content and publication.

BN and the establishments under its influence own a significant portion of the mainstream media.[73] Media Prima, which operates four TV stations and three newspapers (*Harian Metro*, *Berita Harian*, *New Straits Times*) under its umbrella,[74]

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69 The MSC was introduced as part of the National Development Policy in the mid-90s with the intention to draw mainly 'IT-related tycoons' into Malaysia. MSC was followed by a 'Bill of Guarantees' which promised no-censorship on the Internet. See Yangyue, 'Controlling Cyberspace', p. 804; and Nain, 'Digital News Report 2017: Malaysia', p. 121.
70 Zaharom Nain, 'Digital News Report 2018: Malaysia', in *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018*, Newsman', N., Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., Levy, D. A. L. and Nielsen, R. K. (eds.), (2018): 13.
71 Nain, 'Digital News Report 2018: Malaysia', p. 131.
72 Kean Wong, 'Malaysia in the Grip of the Government', in *Losing Control: Freedom of the Press in Asia,* L. Williams and R. Rich (eds.), (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2013): 124.
73 Nain, 'Digital News Report 2017: Malaysia', p. 121.
74 Ibid.

is 'indirectly' controlled by BN.[75] UMNO (also under the influence of BN) holds up to 50% of shares in Utusan Melayu (Malaysia) Bhd. (UTUS.KL), which runs *Utusan Malaysia*, *Mingguan Malaysia*, *Kosmo!*, and *Kosmo! Ahad*.[76] The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), another member of the BN coalition, owns the 'best-selling' English newspaper, *The Star*.[77]

Legal restrictions have complemented this ownership dominance to bias the traditional media. Contested laws targeting the press (e.g. the Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1971) have long been in force, and existed during Mahathir's previous term as Prime Minister. During his tenure, licensing laws were passed,[78] the operations of three papers were suspended due to fears of racial tension,[79] and regulations such as the Internal Security Act (now repealed) and the Official Secrets Act were allegedly used to suppress dissent and political opposition.[80] Indeed, Mahathir was given a place on the Committee to Protect Journalists' 'list of the 10 Worst Enemies of the Press' more than once.[81] Moreover, Lim Guan Eng, current Minister of Finance, faced a conviction during Mahathir's term in government. He lost his seat in the Parliament upon being found guilty of circulating false information.[82] Lim's conviction came after he produced a pamphlet questioning the 'handling of a rape case involving a senior government leader and a young girl from his constituency'.[83] Conditions did not improve under Najib Razak. In 2015 and 2016, over 150 people, including a number of journalists, were detained under the Sedition Act of 1948.[84]

This firm control over traditional media has created an atmosphere in which much of the mainstream press was politically slanted towards the government's political agenda. The 1MDB saga is a case in point. Partisan media sources mostly remained silent about the allegations of 1MDB-related corruption.[85] Additionally, the opposition struggled to receive equal representation in the mainstream media, and this partisanship resulted in the promotion of particular

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75 Gomez as cited in Anand, Ram, 'Universiti Malaya academic says previous Umno assets now controlled by Putrajaya', *Malay Mail*, 21 July 2016.
76 *The Star Online*, 'Boardroom changes at Utusan and Media Prima', 16 May 2018; Nurul Izzah Anwar, 'Who controls the media? BN hypocrisy exposed', *Malaysiakini*, 17 November 216.
77 Wong, 'Malaysia in the Grip,' p. 126; Nain, 'Digital News Report 2017: Malaysia', p. 121
78 Wong, 'Malaysia in the Grip,' p. 118–20.
79 Crossette, 'Malaysia Shuts Down 3 Papers'.
80 Wong, 'Malaysia in the Grip,' p. 120–21.
81 Chong Yen Long, 'Mahathir in top ten enemies of press', *Malaysiakini*, 20 April 2001.
82 Wong, 'Malaysia in the Grip,' p. 119.
83 Ibid.
84 Nain, 'Digital News Report 2017: Malaysia', p. 121.
85 Tom Westbrook and John Geddie, 'Telling truth to power still no easy task for Malaysia's revved up media', *Reuters,* 25 May 2018.

truths at the expense of others. However, the capacity of such politically-motivated content to reach and sway the minds of Malaysians remains a question.

Moving forward, how the media controlled by BN will reform itself remains uncertain. The media also suffered from government control during Mahathir's previous term in office. However, he may be less stern towards the media this time around as the opposition's victory has shown that BN's restrictions on publicly available information did not guarantee them election success. Besides, amidst the low-level of trust in 'overall' news (30%) and social media (21%),[86] and the high level of concern about the effects of disinformation (73%),[87] it is clear that the Malaysian public is in dire need of a clean information environment and trustworthy media. The most optimistic scenario would be renewed media freedom on the part of the government, which would also refrain from abusing its power to control the media for political gain, and the media itself heeding criticism and embracing better journalistic practices.

The Internet

Against the backdrop of a highly-controlled traditional media space, the Internet, and social media in particular, emerged as a space for dissent and alternative views partly with the help of the MSC and the synergy created by the Reformasi movement. The Mahathir-led government introduced MSC as part of its National Development Policy in the mid-90s with the ambition of attracting businesses to Malaysia.[88] MSC was coupled with a bill of guarantees, which, among other pledges, promised no Internet censorship.[89] Alternative views thrived in cyberspace, and the Internet became a breeding ground for the opposition.[90] The Reformasi movement, a social movement kindled by Anwar's dismissal from UMNO and subsequent 'arrest and detention',[91] was a milestone. The movement demanded the eradication of 'corruption, cronyism and nepotism'[92] from government. Anwar's supporters congregated online to voice their opinions and online dissent flourished.[93]

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86 Nain, 'Digital News Report 2018: Malaysia', p. 132.
87 Mazuin Zin, 'Malaysia: The Changing Face of Trust', *Edelman*, 7 March 2018.
88 Yangyue, 'Controlling Cyberspace', p. 804–05. See Also Nain, 'Digital News Report 2017: Malaysia', 121.
89 Ibid.
90 Yangyue; George, 'Media in Malaysia', p. 900.
91 Elvin Ong, 'Commentary: Beware the deep ironies of the Malaysian opposition coalition', *Channel News Asia*, 18 April 2018.
92 Ong, 'Commentary: Beware'; BBC News, 'World: Asia-Pacific Japan concerned over Anwar Arrest', 19 October 1998.
93 Yangyue, 'Controlling Cyberspace', p. 805–08.

The Internet has remained a relatively open space for alternative views, and has been regarded as an influential platform for electoral politics in Malaysia.[94] In the 2008 elections, the opposition's masterful use of online communication played an important role in the loss of BN's two-thirds parliamentary majority.[95] Recognising the growing importance of the Internet in electioneering, BN refocused its efforts there. While Pakatan Rakyat was experienced in online electioneering, BN elevated its online influence for the 2013 elections by capitalising on its 'deep-pocket resources' and reached broader crowds via online ads on Google and Facebook.[96] At the same time, BN claimed it was a 'victim of fake news' in the 2013 elections.[97] By GE14, BN had revamped its online presence and had aquired the capacity to 'overpower' the 'opposition on social media'.[98]

The rising importance of the Internet for electioneering and of social media for receiving news might have motivated BN to increase its control over online content before GE14.[99] During GE14, legal procedures (e.g. the Anti-Fake News Act) were occasionally used to control online content. I will discuss this next.

Regulations imposed on online content and communications

The regulations that kept the traditional media under control, and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission's (MCMC) capacity to block websites, allowed for the sporadic interruption of online information flows. BN introduced the Anti-Fake News Act into an array of laws that permitted the control of information in cyberspace, claiming that existing regulations were not suited to respond to the developments brought about by technological changes.[100]

The Malaysian Bar argued against the Anti-Fake News Act and asserted that the country had laws addressing 'false' information and news,[101] including the Printing Press and Publications Act of 1984 and the Communications and Mul-

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94 Yangyue; Johan Fischer, 'We Shift the Channel when Mahathir Appears: The Political Internet and Censorship in Malaysia', *Akademika: Journal of Southeast Asia Social Sciences and Humanities*, 75(1), (2009): 43-63.
95 Yangyue, p. 801.
96, Pauline P. Y. Leong, 'Political Communication in Malaysia: A Study on the Use of New Media in Politics', Journal of e Democracy and Open Government, 7(1), (2015): 54.
97 Anisah Shukry, 'Malaysia Gears Up for Elections as Najib Targets "Fake News"', *Bloomberg*, 5 January 2018.
98 Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, 'Battle Royale on Social Media in the 2018 General Election in Malaysia', *Asian Politics and Policy*, Vol. 10, Issue 3 (2018): 557.
99 Mazuin Zin, 'Malaysia: The Changing Face of Trust', *Edelman*, 7 March 2018; Nain, 'Digital News Report 2018: Malaysia', 131–32.
100 Nazurah Ngah, 'FAQs: What you need to know about the Anti-Fake News Bill 2018', *New Straits Times*, 26 March 2018.
101 George Varughese, 'Press Release | Withdraw the Anti-Fake News Bill 2018', *Malaysian Bar*, 27 March 2018.

timedia Act of 1998.[102] These laws, as well as the blocking of sites, were occasionally used to regulate online content. For instance, the MCMC investigated at approximately '1,500 fake accounts on social media' between January and June 2017,[103] and blocked 1,375 websites in 2016 and 2017 for allegedly circulating 'false content'.[104] The MCMC also evaluated 167 cases of 'Internet and social media abuse', some of which concerned the dissemination of 'false content and information' via platforms including WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter.[105]

The continued blocking of opposition websites and other sites critical of BN showed further disregard for the policy of no online censorship, and claims of 'false' information were occasionally used to justify the bans. For instance, the *Medium* and *Asia Sentinel* were blocked for publishing an article from the *Sarawak Report* on 'the graft charges against Najib'.[106] *The Malaysian Insider*, which ceased operations in 2016, was banned for sharing an "unverified" report about the corruption probe involving the prime minister.[107] BN also occasionally dismissed criticism on various topics from the *Sarawak Report*, *Malaysiakini*, and other international news agencies as 'fake news'.[108] Once revelations regarding the 1MDB report emerged after the elections, MCMC revoked its ban on the *Sarawak Report* and the *Medium*.[109] This was a heartening development; however, the new government's approach to freedom of speech and freedom of the press will be tested when new criticism challenges their power.

Restricting the flow of information on the Internet brought about the risk of the promotion of one particular version of the 'truth' at the expense of other perspectives. The regulation of online content might also have deterred some from voicing their criticism in the online spaces. Correspondingly, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018 revealed that 57% of respondents held reservations about sharing their political views in cyberspace due to the risk of coming into conflict with authorities.[110] The report pointed to the growth of

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102 Section 8A of the PPPA penalises the dissemination of false news, and Section 223(1) of the Communications and Multimedia Act forbids 'false communication'. See Varughese, 'Press Release'.
103 *The Star Online*, 'MCMC moves to curb fake news', 10 July 2017.
104 *Freedom House*, Freedom on the Net 2017 Country Reports: Malaysia, 2017.
105 Ibid.; Most of these cases did not reach the stage of a 'trial'. However, one person was imprisoned for his Facebook post, which was interpreted as an 'insult' to the Sultan of Johor. See the Freedom House report.
106 Mong Palatino, 'Malaysia Broadens Media Crackdown As Political Scandal Worsens', *The Diplomat*, 2 March 2016.
107 Ibid.
108 Nain, 'Digital News Report 2017: Malaysia', p. 121.
109 *The Star Online*, 'MCMC confirms lifting ban', 19 May 2018.
110 Nick Newman, 'Section 1: Executive Summary and Key Findings', in Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018, Newman, Nick, Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, David A. L. Levy, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (eds.), (2018): 13.

messaging applications such as WhatsApp as a 'safe' venue for communication in Malaysia and in other countries with controlling regimes.[111]

In Malaysia 54% of respondents receive news from WhatsApp.[112] While the popularity of encrypted messaging platforms continues to grow, the disinformation shared in these venues has come under the spotlight. For instance, WhatsApp has been exploited for the circulation of fictitious information such as the viral message claiming that Johor's Crown Prince would pay for shoppers' groceries.[113] In the same way that people may invest greater trust in information received via 'interpersonal exchange' from their 'social networks' (e.g. friends and family),[114] disinformation transferred by means of WhatsApp and other messaging platforms may be misjudged as accurate and internalised without much scrutiny if shared by one's close social network. As WhatsApp is also used for group chatting with clusters of people beyond one's inner circle, members of the cluster may transfer disinformation shared in such groups to the other group chats. Trust in social media is quite low in Malaysia (21%),[115] and many Malaysians (63%)[116] find it difficult to differentiate rumours from quality journalism. This indicates the population's vulnerability to misleading information.

Legal measures were only one of the supporting weapons in the battle for information supremacy. Cyber attacks complemented the efforts to manipulate information flow and public opinion as well.

Cyber attacks

Cyber attacks interrupt information exchange and curtail the breadth of information available to the public. Thus, they jeopardise the healthy information consumption and exchange necessary for verifying information and for conducting democratic elections. Furthermore, cyber attacks are often hard to attribute to a perpetrator, and their orchestrators may hire proxies to carry out the attacks on their behalf.

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111 Ibid., 'Section 1: Executive Summary and Key Findings', p. 13.
112 Ibid., Kalogeropoulos, 'The Rise of Messaging Apps for News', p. 53.
113 *The Straits Times*, 'Fake news of Johor Crown Prince'.
114 Miriam J. Metzger, Andrew J. Flanagin, and Ryan B. Medders, 'Social and Heuristic Approaches to Credibility Evaluation Online', *Journal of Communication*, 60, (2010): 425.
115 Nain, 'Digital News Report 2018: Malaysia,' p. 132.
116 Mazuin Zin, 'Malaysia: The Changing Face of Trust', *Edelman*, 7 March 2018.

During GE14 some candidates from both BN and its opposition—including the People's Justice Party, and Democratic Action Party—claimed their phones had been hacked.[117] They raised complaints about receiving 'spam' calls.[118] Some candidates also experienced problems with their emails and social media accounts.[119] In addition to cyber attacks, there were cyber manipulation efforts. MCMC allegedly 'instructed at least 11 internet service providers to block *Malaysiakini*'s three election result websites on polling night'.[120] The cyber intrusions during GE14 interrupted information exchange, but the attacks carried out during GE13 also contained acts that aimed at misinforming the followers of some sites and accounts.

In the course of the 2013 elections, Human Rights Watch called on BN and its opposition to stop the 'intimidation and violence' that posed a danger to the elections. Cyber attacks committed in the run-up to the 2013 elections included a DDOS attack on *Malaysiakini* and 'London-based radio web portals—*Radio Free Malaysia*, *Radio Free Sarawak*, and *Sarawak Report*'.[121] Also, months before the election, Rafizi Ramli's (Parti Keadilan Rakyat) Facebook page was hacked, and his status was updated with a fake apology to the Defence Minister.[122] Ramli blamed pro-UMNO bloggers affiliated with the New Media Unit (Unit Media Baru) for the attack, and asserted that various PKR members had their social media sites or blogs hacked before.[123]

Bots

Bots, 'automated accounts that post based on algorithms',[124] plague some of the online platforms (e.g. Twitter) used by Malaysians. Bots are used to gain political influence in various ways including artificially inflating numbers of followers or social media 'likes',[125] manipulating political discussions,[126] and influencing public opinion by artificial means.[127] Bradshaw and Howard's recent study on

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117 Jonathan Loh, 'GE14 candidates' mobile phones and online platforms hit by apparent mass hacking attack on olling day', *Business Insider Singapore*, 9 May 2018.
118 Ibid.
119 Ibid.
120 The claim was based on MCMC's Network Media Management Department's emails. See *Malaysiakini*, 'MCMC ordered at least 11 ISPs to block M'kini GE14 sites', 19 May 2018.
121 *Human Rights Watch*, 'Malaysia: Violence, Cyber Attacks Threaten Elections: Party Workers, Activists, and Online News Portals Targeted', 1 May 2013.
122 *Malaysian Digest*, 'Rafizi on FB Hacking: Reporting to MCMC Would be "Pointless"', 29 January 2013.
123 Ibid.
124 Tucker et. al., 'Social Media, Political Polarization', p. 4.
125 Woolley (2017) as cited in Siegel, 'Producers of Disinformation', p. 24.
126 Forelle et al. (2015) as cited in Siegel, 'Producers of Disinformation', p. 24.
127 Wolley (2016) and Kollanyi et al. (2016) as cited in Siegel, 'Producers of Disinformation', p. 24.

'organized media manipulation',[128] identified bots as a type of fake account prevalent in Malaysia.[129] Their list of agents that may engage in social media manipulation in Malaysia include (a) government agencies, (b) politicians and parties, (c) private contractors, and (d) civil society organizations.[130] The examples cited below and elsewhere in this article confirm Bradshaw and Howard's finding that social media manipulation strategies in Malaysia involve 'pro-government or party messages' and 'attacks on the opposition'.[131] Some election-specific bot activities have also been observed in Malaysia.

According to a 2018 study by the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFR), in the run-up to GE14 two hashtag campaigns, *#SayNOtoPH* and *#KalahkanPakatan* [Defeat Pakatan], were run by Twitter bots.[132] The bots had Cyrillic names, and according to DFR this indicates that the bots were generated by 'Russian-speaking bot herders'.[133] DFR suggested BN or its supporters' potential involvement in the bot activity, as the images used by bots corresponded to those employed in BN's campaigns.[134] The study argued the messages shared by the bots did not incite 'real user participation' and this helped preserve the hashtags within a network of bots.[135] Also, on Election Day, party members from both BN and the opposition were hacked by bot-initiated spam calls.[136] Bots were also active during GE13. Twitter allegedly accommodated bot-postings of mainly pro-BN content over the course of the GE13 campaign.[137]

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128 Bradshaw and Howard's study provides an inventory of cyber troops' computational propaganda efforts in the countries they surveyed. They define computational propaganda as 'the use of automation, algorithms and big-data analytics to manipulate public life'. See Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, 'Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation', (2018): 4, *Computational Propaganda Research Project.*
129 Ibid., p. 14; The next section on cyber troops demonstrates that bots are used in addition to people hired or volunteering to run (whether they use fake or genuine identity is not disclosed) social media accounts to manipulate information on social media. The difference may stem from Bradshaw and Howard's focus on the activities that fit their definition of computational propaganda. Also, the researchers state that the automated accounts are more visible on Twitter. The accounts delivered on cyber troops in this article are mostly drawn from newspaper articles.
130 Bradshaw and Howard, 'Challenging Truth', p. 9–10.
131 Ibid., p. 14.
132 Donara Barojan, '#BotSpot: Bots Target Malaysian Elections', Digital Forensic Research Lab. *Medium*, 21 April 2018.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
135 Ibid.
136 *The Straits Times*, 'Malaysia election: Politicians claim phones were hacked; probe shows spam calls from unknown bot attacks', 9 May 2018.
137 Faizal Kasmani, Rosidayu Sabran, and Noor Adzrah Ramle, 'Who is Tweeting on #PRU13?', *Asian Social Science*, 10(18), (2014): 150, 155.

While the reach of bot activity and its capacity to sway public opinion are contested, bots cultivate information disorder and have emerged as drivers polluting the information sphere for the benefit of some—possibly covert—actors.

Cyber troops and big data

Cyber troops[138] are now commonly employed to assist political parties in countering the new kinds of political risk brought by the Internet. They use a variety of tactics to sway public opinion and respond to the challenges posed by their opposition.[139] In Malaysia cyber troops have been mobilised to manipulate public opinion, promote a particular political agenda, and defame adversaries and their policies.[140] The operations of cyber troops also assist parties in deflecting criticism, defaming and discrediting the opposition, and creating a public perception aligned with their particular political agenda. A coordinated manipulation effort may combine human efforts and bots.[141] The organisational structure of cyber troop operations allows political parties and figures to claim a distance between the party and the acts of cyber troops and degrade any criticism of direct involvement to mere allegation.

Cyber troops are no longer a new phenomenon. A UMNO cyber troop branch was launched within their New Media Unit already in 2004,[142] and BN has allegedly ramped up its investment in cyber troops since the 2008 elections.[143] While there are accounts of a number of different political parties employing cyber troops, information on the cyber troops used by BN's UMNO is more extensive. I will first discuss BN's cyber troops and then talk about those run by the opposition.

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138 Cyber troops are 'government, military or political party teams' seeking to sway 'public opinion over social media' (Bradshaw and Howard, 2017, p. 3). Trolls, on the other hand, are online personas who deliberately share negative content, seek to disturb the harmony and incite reactions (Siegel, 2018, p. 22). Cyber troops may resort to trolling to counter political opposition (Bradshaw and Howard, 2017, p. 9). Just as people may engage in trolling independently for personal 'entertainment' or to disclose media's 'hypocrisy and sensationalism'(Siegel, 2018, p. 22), cyber troops or hired, individual trolls may operate as teams working for the government, politicians and parties, or as private contractors, volunteers and paid citizens (Siegel, 2018, p. 22–23; Bradshaw and Howard, 2017, p. 2). The focus of this section will be on government, politician and party affiliated, hired or volunteer cyber troops.
139 Yangyue, 'Controlling Cyberspace', p. 818.
140 Freedom House Malaysia Report.
141 Bradshaw and Howard, 'Challenging Truth', p. 11–12.
142 Julian Hopkins, 'Cybertroopers and tea parties: government use of the Internet in Malaysia', *Asian Journal of Communication* 24(1), (2014): 12; see also Ross Tapsell, 'Negotiating Media "Balance" in Malaysia's 2013 General Election', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs,* 32(2), (2013): 44.
143 Peter Guest, '"Queen of Dragons": The inside story of Malaysia's election fixer', *Wired*, 9 May 2018.

UMNO is open about its use of cyber troops.[144] However, the exact number of UMNO cyber troops, which also serve BN, and the way they are organised is not very clear.[145] Cyber troops are responsible for scanning online conversations of the opposition to locate 'offences';[146] they also deflect criticism and promote BN's messages and agenda,[147] sometimes at the expense of accuracy. Descriptions of cyber troop operations suggest that the party provides them with guidelines to follow,[148] although it does not micromanage the content they circulate,[149] and gives them liberty to choose their own 'tactics'.[150] This lack of direct control over content grants BN (and UMNO) the ability to deny association with the activities of their cyber troops when necessary.[151] Some commentators depict cyber troops as groups engaged in political communication within ethical boundaries, but such units are created to sway public opinion for the benefit of a particular group and are sometimes allegedly involved in the creation and circulation of disinformation.

Before GE14, UMNO Youth Vice-Chief at the time, Senator Khairul Azwan Harun claimed that the party's cyber troops were spreading the 'truth' and 'right' messages and sometimes engaging in 'rebuttal' in an 'ethical' way.[152] However, ex-cyber troop leader Syarul Ema Rena Abu Samah, who oversaw 80 people in her unit,[153] claims otherwise. According to her, BN cyber troops engage in countering criticism, managing fake social media accounts, spreading falsehoods to discredit dissent, and diverting attention from vital information that may damage BN's image.[154] For instance, one day before the 2014 Teluk Intan by-elections, she caused a fabricated video—scripted and plotted by her—to go viral

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144 Boo Su-Lyn, 'BN reveals art of targeting voters', *The Malay Mail*, 11 April 2017.
145 The UMNO-dominated BN held ten conventions in different states in 2012 to increase the headcount of its cyber troops to 10,000 before the 2013 elections, according to *Free Malaysia Today*. A BN-supporting media consultant, who was 'asked to handle' the new media unit in 2013, argued that the group comprised Facebook and Twitter users and bloggers, and that the division 'trained more than 2,000 people, 20% of whom [were] active online' (Leong, p. 54). On the other hand, a pro-UMNO blogger, *Budak Sri Kinta*, asserted that the UMNO's IT Bureau convened approximately 3,5000 cyber troopers in Kuala Lumpur in late 2017 (Ibrahim). He also claimed that UMNO IT Bureau Chair Ahmad Maslan had around nine people responsible for 'monitor[ing] online activity in all states' (Ibrahim). He said most of the cyber troop members were working voluntarily, although there were some full-time employees (Ibrahim). See *Free Malaysia Today*, 'Now Ahmad plots a new army of cyber troopers', 31 January 2016; Leong, 'Political Communication', p. 54; Diyana Ibrahim, 'Up close and personal with Umno cyber troopers', *Malaysian Insight*, 18 November 2017.
146 Guest, "Queen of Dragons".
147 Yangyue, 'Controlling Cyberspace', p. 818; Guest, 'Queen of Dragons'; Ibrahim, 'Up close and personal'.
148 Syarul Ema as cited in Guest.
149 Hopkins, 'Cybertroopers and tea parties', p. 13; Syarul Ema as cited in Guest.
150 Ibid.
151 Hopkins, 'Cybertroopers and tea parties', p. 12.
152 Su-Lyn, 'BN reveals art of targeting voters'.
153 Guest, 'Queen of Dragons'.
154 Ibid.

on WhatsApp with the aim of swinging the Indian minority vote.[155] The video showed an Indian member of BN claiming that DAP activists had 'assault[ed]' him, and calling on people to vote for BN to ensure that 'the DAP loses'.[156] In addition to UMNO, the Parti Rakyat Sarawak revealed using cyber troops[157] and stated its intention to increase their number to assist the party in spreading its messages to voters.[158]

Other parties are also said to employ cyber troops to spread fabricated information and to 'sway voters'.[159] Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Ahmad Zahid Hamidi (current president of UMNO) claimed that the opposition's cyber troops are receiving 'foreign training'.[160] Similarly, Gerekan Vice President Datuk Dominic Lau claimed that the DAP cyber troops, also known as the Red Bean Army, received help from Taiwanese political consultants when campaigning for the 2013 elections.[161] The Red Bean Army was also accused of circulating 'lies' in cyberspace.[162] DAP rejected the allegations, while its National HQ Media and Communications manager Medaline Chang defined the group as active pro-opposition netizens who did not have any monetary attachment to DAP.[163] PR, like BN, supposedly employed cyber troops to carry out operations that aimed at alleviating the 'impact and influence' of the opposing party's message by 'discredit[ing]' and 'derail[ing]' their messages.[164] PAS, on the other hand, intends to establish a 'mujahid cyber group', which will shield the party against 'outside attack', communicate the party's messages to PAS's followers, and safeguard PAS's 'policy and integrity' with their real identities, without resorting to 'fake accounts or fake names'.[165] One operation thought to be carried out by the opposition's cyber forces entailed an influx of messages to ex-PM Najib's Facebook page asking him to 'step down'.[166]

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155 Syarul Ema as cited in Guest.
156 Ibid.
157 Su-Lyn, 'BN reveals art of targeting voters'.
158 Ibid.
159 Ruben Sario, 'Opposition cyber troopers getting foreign training, says DPM', *The Star Online*, 16 December 2017.
160 Sario, 'Opposition cyber troopers'.
161 Su-Lyn, 'BN reveals art of targeting voters'.
162 Tapsell, 'Negotiating Media', p. 46.
163 Ibid.
164 Leong, 'Political Communication', p. 59–60.
165 Embun Majid, 'Pas to monilise "mujahid cyber" in run-up to GE14', *New Straits Times*, 1 May 2017.
166 Freedom House.

The Malaysian people may have some level of awareness of cyber troop activities from news articles or online encounters, but the means of manipulating information online are diverse. For instance, social media manipulation can be elevated by the 'use of fake accounts and followers, which misrepresent the actual impact and influence of politicians'.[167] In the run-up to GE14, UMNO's Youth Deputy chief accused PH of buying social media viewers.[168] Their continued cyber operations and the use of social media manipulation tactics demonstrate parties' persistence in spreading their 'truths'. As audiences grow accustomed to these activities, cyber troops will likely find more innovative ways to inject their messages. Various parties in Malaysia are exploring big data analytics to better understand and target their audiences and improve their cyber operations. The online information activities of cyber troopers and others can be optimised using big data analytics. Those who can leverage this power can use it to make decisions informed by extensive, complex data sets that can be analysed to extract correlations, preferences, and other desired information.

In a newspaper interview, UMNO, the Malaysian Indian Congress, the Malaysian Chinese Association, and Parti Gerakan Rakyat—all members of the BN coalition—declared their use of big data analytics to aid voter outreach and their campaigning efforts.[169] Other parties are also engaged in such efforts. PAS has been working with 'companies, groups, and local universities since 2013' to 'profile prospective voters through […] WhatsApp and Facebook' and reach out to urban and rural populations.[170] PKR and Amanah, on the other hand, receive the support of Invoke, a big data analytics firm established by Rafizi Ramli.[171] Invoke aims to discern information about voters' 'political leaning[s]', their approach to political issues, and their potential to switch affiliation to other parties, from the 'millions' of pieces of voter data[172] it has at hand.[173] These and other data-driven efforts cannot merely be discounted as harmful; among other positive uses, they may allow politicians to identify demands and fault lines that can assist with educated decision-making. However, there are a number of standards that should be upheld including the protection of data privacy, clarity regarding

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167 Leong, 'Political Communication', p. 60.
168 *The Star Online*, 'BN: Probe Pakatan for data tampering', 8 May 2018.
169 Su-Lyn, 'BN reveals art of targeting voters'.
170 Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, 'Battle Royale on Social Media in the 2018 General Election in Malaysia', *Asian Politics and Policy*, Vol. 10, Issue 3 (2018): 559.
171 Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, 'Battle Royale on Social Media in the 2018 General Election in Malaysia', *Asian Politics and Policy*, Vol. 10, Issue 3 (2018): 558–59.
172 Ibid., Invoke has accumulated 'basic' data which includes information such as voters' 'age, race, gender, residential postal code, and religion'.
173 Ibid.

sources, assurance that data has been provided with informed consent,[174] adherance to the contract with users, and transparency regarding access to the data and its potential uses. Big data should not be exploited to sway votes, manipulate people, or conduct smear and disinformation campaigns. In addition to homegrown efforts such as Invoke, Malaysia has also been linked with Cambridge Analytica, which will be discussed next.

Foreign intervention

The intervention of foreign states in elections has been disturbing to many governments, especially after the 2016 American elections.[175] While this concern had found its way to Malaysia, domestic issues outweighed its importance. Allegations of foreign interference and blame for allying with foreign powers were used more to deflect attention from substantial issues and to discredit rival parties than to begin an actual inquiry into potential interference.[176] Debates about foreign intervention revolved around the Cambridge Analytica scandal, accusations against the international press for spreading fake news, comments regarding Chinese investments, meetings with foreign officials, and campaign assistance from the Chinese ambassador.

The Cambridge Analytica saga unfolded during the heated campaigning period for GE14. Cambridge Analytica declared on its website that it had been engaged with BN since 2008, supposedly for a 'targeted messaging campaign highlighting [its] school improvements' in the state of Kedah.[177] Nevertheless, the company's alleged involvement in GE13 was scrutinised,[178] partly because of BN's success in taking Kedah from PAS,[179] at the time a part of the Pakatan Rakyat

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174 Some consent forms are not reader friendly and people may sign the long consent forms to receive access to a service without taking the time to read them line-by-line. It is important to provide clear and concise consent forms and perhaps underline important points that readers may overlook. Seeking further consent for particular processes may make the use of data more transparent.

175 One may also argue that the surreptitious nature of foreign interference endeavors might have allowed them to go unnoticed and some domestic actors might have covertly sought their assistance or obliquely benefited them with their actions. However, these issues are hard to investigate given the lack of open sources.

176 Erin Cook argued that 'both the ruling party and the opposition in Malaysia have at various points used "foreign interference" to "boost their own position at the expense of their opponent, to distract from substantive challenges that they have and sow confusion around clear concerns" '. See Erin Cook, 'The "Foreign Interference" Blame Game in Malaysia's Upcoming Election', *The Diplomat*, 23 March 2018.

177 Cambridge Analytica as cited in Trinna Leong, 'Malaysian Politicians point fingers as Cambridge Analytica linked to 2013 polls', *The Straits Times*, 20 March 2018.

178 Cook, 'The "Foreign Interference" Blame'; Leong, 'Malaysian Politicians'.

179 Saifulbahri Ismail, 'Kedah set to be battleground state in Malaysian general election', Channel News Asia, 17 April 2018.

coalition.[180] BN promptly deflected the accusations by asserting that it did not 'employ' Cambridge Analytica.[181] It argued that the country representative of Cambridge Analytica's parent company SCL Group 'confirmed Cambridge Analytica provided advice on the 2013 election personally to Mr Mukhriz', who is a 'former BN leader turned opposition politician' and the son of Mahathir Mohamad.[182] Mukhriz denied accusations[183] and said: 'any claim otherwise is a misrepresentation of the facts, intended to divert attention away from the possible use of illegal campaign tactics as admitted by Cambridge Analytica for BN'.[184] Mutual accusations over Cambridge Analytica worsened confusion rather than trigger a comprehensive investigation, and added to the electioneering contestations. In addition to the allegations about Cambridge Analytica, PH stated that it 'received pro bono training from an American political advertising agency, the Strategy Group Company'.[185] According to Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, the training was 'organized by the International Republican Institute'. It is indirectly linked to the Open Society Foundation, offering 'funding to opposition friendly entities' including the news outlets *Malaysiakini* and the *Sarawak Report*, and the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, also known as Bersih.[186]

The foreign press is also occasionally accused of spreading 'fake news' and attempting to influence domestic politics. Johari condemned the foreign press for disseminating 'fake news' about 1MDB,[187] and the *Economist* was accused of 'attempting to overthrow' Najib and BN for its report on 1MDB and gerrymandering.[188] Arguably, BN pointed the finger at the foreign press to deflect criticism and distract attention from the main issue,[189] in this case 1MDB. The 1MDB investigation also sparked a clash between Switzerland and the BN government. When Swiss authorities declared that 'billions of dollars had been

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180 Pakatan Rakyat coalition had Parti Keadilan Rakyat, Democratic Action Party, and Parti Islam Se Malaysia as its members until it dissolved in 2015. Joceline Tan, 'Is the divorce between Pakatan and Pas for real?: The Star columnist', *The Straits Times*, 30 August 2017, and Asrul Hadi Abdullah Sani, 'Break up of Malaysia's opposition bloc Pakatan Rakyat: What happened and What's next?', *The Straits Times*, 18 June 2015.
181 Leong, 'Malaysian Politicians'.
182 Ibid.
183 Ibid.
184 Sumisha Naidu, 'Malaysian government denies hiring Cambridge Analytica', *Channel News Asia*, 20 March 2018.
185 Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, 'Battle Royale on Social Media in the 2018 General Election in Malaysia', *Asian Politics and Policy*, Vol. 10, Issue 3 (2018): 558.
186 Ibid.
187 *The Straits Times*, 'Malaysia's deputy minister warns foreign media about spreading "fake news" about 1MDB', 11 March 2018.
188 Cook, 'The "Foreign Interference" Blame'.
189 Cook (2018) argued that the 'blame game' was pursued by both parties to 'boost their own position at the expense of their opponent, to distract from substantive challenges that they have and sow confusion around clear concerns'. Meanwhile the fake news label as blame directed at foreign interference allowed BN as well as PH to sway conversations and opinions.

stolen from Malaysian state-owned companies', the BN government blamed Switzerland for 'circulating misinformation'.[190] Salleh Said Keruak, Minister of Communications at the time, claimed that statements from Switzerland were 'made without a full and comprehensive appreciation of all the facts'.[191]

In addition to the foreign press, politicians and parties were in the spotlight following their engagement with international actors. Anifah Aman, the Foreign Minister at the time, criticised Mahathir for meeting with EU ambassadors to seek their 'help to ensure' fair elections arguing that the 'issues raised at the meeting affected the country's dignity and sovereignty'.[192] During his time in office, Mahathir was concerned about Western interference and had reportedly prevented some opposition leaders from 'meeting foreign envoys'.[193] In the run-up to GE14, Mahathir pointed to China's widening economic influence in Malaysia and 'joint-projects with other countries.'[194] In addition to allegations of influence by way of investment and projects, a report from the Hoover Institution stated the 'Chinese ambassador to Malaysia openly campaigned for the president of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) in his constituency' during GE14, but even so the 'MCA president lost his seat'.[195]

Although there were some incidents with foreign governments and the international press during the GE14 campaigning period, debates regarding foreign interference were limited in comparison with the heated discussions about domestic political issues; at times the issue of foreign interference was pressed into service as a talking point for domestic political debates.

Conclusion

The current environment in Malaysia is conducive to an increase in disinformation and to interruptions in the flow of information. GE14 exposed the activities of politicians and parties, the partisan-leaning media (with spillover onto the Internet), and cyber troops and bots, that disturbed the information sphere. Allegations of foreign interference also emerged as episodic discussions in the

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190 Oliver Holmes, 'Malaysia accuses Switzerland of "misinformation" over stolen 1MDB', *Guardian*, 2 February 2016.
191 Salleh Said Keruak as cited in Holmes, 'Malaysia accuses Switzerland'.
192 *Reuters*, 'Malaysia criticizes opposition party meeting with EU ambassadors', 28 January 2018.
193 Ibid.
194 Kenneth Cheng, 'It's election time in Malaysia, and the spectre of a foreign bogeyman emerges', *Today*, 05 May 2018.
195 Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, 'Chinese Influence and American interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance', Hoover Institution Press, (2018): 177–78.

course of GE14. However, the activities of the domestic drivers were more pal-pable. In addition to these drivers, legal measures and cyber attacks interrupted information flow during GE14. Taken together, the drivers of disinformation and interruption to information flow led to the deterioration of the information space during the election period. The situation surrounding GE14 raised ques-tions about the politicisation of disinformation and the boundaries of political communication.

Malaysia may begin a path of transformation under the PH coalition, which halted the 60-year rule of the BN coalition. Submitting a bill to repeal the An-ti-Fake News Act was one of the first acts of the new government. While this is a positive move, PH's direction on the fight against disinformation remains unclear. In a new period conducive to change, PH may study the fault-lines that can be exploited by local or foreign actors engaged in disinformation campaigns, examine the drivers of disinformation campaigns further, and adopt tailored counter-measures. Given the multi-faceted and pervasive nature of the prob-lem, it is necessary to involve different groups of stakeholders and to embrace a multi-pronged approach to institute a healthy information regime. In the course of dismantling the disinformation-friendly framework, Pakatan Harapan must negotiate the various objectives of its prominent party members and will need to prioritise the benefit of Malaysian society.

In light of the drivers discussed in this article, evaluating the communication practices of politicians and political parties and setting guidelines for their con-duct is an essential component of the solution process. This not only requires the self-assessment and cooperation of politicians and political parties but also calls for citizens' active scrutiny of acts, comments, and truths of politicians and parties. Indeed, Anwar has already invited citizens to invigilate ministers' behaviour. For this to occur, the environment must be sufficiently open to crit-icism and alternative voices for citizens and non-governmental organisations confidently and freely to flag misconduct and disinformation. Freedom of speech must be maintained as a fundamental value, and people must have access to accurate information. This necessitates a reform in media and journalistic practices, and a review of curtailments to freedom of speech in cyberspace.

It is necessary to install non-partisan and ethical reporting practices, and to cre-ate an online environment free from politically motivated interventions. The traditional media sources that had been lenient toward BN's murky dealings are now in limbo. At this point, it is of paramount importance to institute free

media and to refrain from allowing a PH-supporting media block to be created. Also, as it promised when electioneering, PH may look into the Malaysian laws curtailing freedom of the press (beyond the already abolished Anti-Fake News Act), and create a more favourable legal framework.

It is also essential to address the information pollution stemming from cyber troop/bot activities, and targeted manipulation by way of data analytics. According to Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard's report 'Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation', coordinated social media manipulation efforts jumped from 28 in 2017 to 48 in 2018.[196] The activities of cyber troops and bots are central to current manipulation attempts. The blame for disinformation and manipulation campaigns can too easily be evaded by outsourcing such campaigns to cyber troops, making it hard to raise barriers to the employment of these measures. The global surge in such deleterious means may lead to the normalisation of their employment for political gain. At this point, it is important to improve our understanding of cyber operations, to consider how outsourced operations can be tied to the orchestrators expeditiously, and to discuss the boundaries to their use for ethically acceptable political communication.

This article focused on some of the key disinformation drivers and measures that distorted the flow of information to influence the information environment in the run-up to Malaysia's 14th General Elections. Factors from which the present article has prescinded remain to be explored. Prominent influencers, such as religious and opinion leaders, and civil society movements such as Bersih, may be studied for their role in solving the problem of disinformation. Future research may also explore the question of how disinformation is received and understood by diverse audience groups in Malaysia. Empirical research may delve deeper into some of the queries raised in this article.

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196 Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, 'Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation', (2018): 3, *Computational Propaganda Research Project*.

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