THE VARYING TREATMENT OF SELECTED HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES VIA INTERNET MEDIA IN SARAWAK, EAST MALAYSIA

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examines efforts by indigenous rights activists to exert pressure on the Malaysian government by way of new media technologies and transnational human rights networks. Comparative content analysis of newspaper and online coverage shows that, despite the many formal restrictions on political demonstration and dissent in physical public spaces, the internet provides Malaysians with an important arena for political dissent. Additionally, the study finds that new technologies have further facilitated collaboration between local activists and overseas rights networks as first examined by Keck and Sikkink (1998). The study traces how transnational activism resulted in political pressure on the Malaysian government via boycotts, letter writing campaigns and financial support resulting, in some cases, in the desired boomerang effect.

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INTRODUCTION

What is considered dissent to some may be considered an expression of one's rightful freedom of expression to another. From a Western, or democratic, perspective, dissent may simply be called opposition; however, when governments limit citizens' individual freedoms and do not provide authorized paths for inquiry, opposition or protest, the term "dissent" takes on a broader meaning that encompasses a wide range of activities. In the contemporary world where information and communications technologies are virtually limitless, and when traditional conduits for government opposition are often limited, current new media technologies offer new venues for political discussion and criticism. With an increasing number of individuals having ready access to camera phones and computers, it is becoming difficult, if not impossible, for those in power to control, curb or change absolutely everything that gets published. This, of course, is in sharp contrast to the way things used to be. Previously, when authorities considered information to be sensitive, they might simply have prevented it from being printed altogether or alternatively, had it confiscated after printing, thus preventing circulation. However, the emergence of technological tools such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are difficult for authorities to restrict and have opened up new means for ordinary people to have a voice. Non-governmental organizations (NGO) and transnational activist groups have begun to make ready use of these new technologies. An example is the website www.witness.org, which is a database of human rights abuses that are caught on camera. By communicating with transnational NGOs, local activists now have new way of communicating their opposition to their governments across national borders and then back again to their local government officials. Though governments still hold some power to prevent certain web content from being accessed by their citizenry, there are a number of means available to circumvent these obstacles. An example currently exists in China where,

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despite the existence of a firewall, there are still some points of access available for participation in political protest and discussion.

Whereas these new technologies are global, it is generally the poor and marginalized who do not have access to the internet, with its array of news forums, blogs, and social networking groups. This can be due to poverty, inadequate education, or illiteracy, or also government intervention, which attempts to control the access as well as the content of narratives to be found there.

The state of the media in Malaysia is a fairly typical case of disconnect between the imposed spin and framing of state-controlled media and the alternative online writings created by individuals and independent groups in the form of blogs, reports, and general postings. Currently, the international organization for freedom of the press, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), ranks Malaysia in their Press Freedom Index 131st out of 175 (Reporters, 2009).[1] Malaysia's ranking has fallen from 94th to its current position in four years, partially as a result of recent crackdowns on some dissident bloggers and the banning of politically sensitive foreign literature (Reporters, 2009). This is similar to the rankings of Malaysia's neighbouring NIC countries, as Thailand ranks slightly better at 130, and Singapore is slightly behind at 133.

Though Malaysia's rank has dropped somewhat, it still stands above many other countries because of the freedom of speech found on the internet. It is true that some bloggers, such as Raya Petra (Walker, 2008) and Nat Tan (Gharbia, 2007), have been arrested for dissident writing, but they represent only a very small percentage of online

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[1] Ranking at the top of the 2009 report are Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Norway, and Sweden. Canada ranks 19th, while Eritrea and North Korea hold the bottom two rankings.

writers. In Malaysia, the internet is still an outlet for protest, the mobilization of like-minded individuals, and for open criticism about the state and federal governments. In fact, research for this study shows that blogs like the Sarawak-based *Hornbill Unleashed* contain extremely dissident and somewhat threatening user-generated comments that, to date, have not been removed or regulated, nor have the authors or commentators been arrested or forced to stop. The Malaysian government has the ability to reprimand only those who reside within the country's borders, so sites created by foreign-based Malaysian and non-Malaysian authors can safely publish anti-government material; also, Malaysian citizens are safe in reading it, as it currently remains accessible to them.

Still, controversy exists concerning media freedom in Malaysia in that the state-run media supports and promotes a particular agenda, while the country's censorship laws prevent alternative perspectives from becoming widely available via the mainstream press. In this paper, differences regarding media coverage of one issue, the Penan logging blockages, will be examined as it was addressed in both state-controlled and alternative online media outlets. The primary questions asked are: To what extent does the information provided in Malaysian blogs and online newspapers converge with or diverge from that which is provided by the Malaysian government and international human rights groups? And, is the Malaysian people's access to internet communication technologies contributing to positive change in Malaysian human rights cases, though transnational activism?

BACKGROUND

A Historical Perspective – Malaysia

In order to better position the issue presented by the media addressed in this paper, it is necessary to provide a historical overview of Malaysia. Of particular note are those actions which have endeavoured to restrict dissent and which have shaped the current environment in terms of human rights, freedom of the media, and the containment of discontent in government policies.

Bordering Thailand, Indonesia, and Brunei, The Federation of Malaysia consists of 11 states on the Malay Peninsula, and two, Sabah and Sarawak, on the island of Borneo. In addition there are three federal territories: the City of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, and the island of Labuan. The country, which achieved independence from Great Britain in 1957 with the accession of Sabah and Sarawak into the federation in 1963, has, according to the 2004 census, an ethnically diverse population consisting of 50.4% Malay people, 23.7% Chinese, 11% indigenous, 7.1% Indian, and 7.8% other (CIA, 2009). The Malay people are considered the "Bumiputra", meaning "sons of the soil," claiming an ancestry that goes back thousands of years and enjoying preference under the laws of the country's government. The Chinese comprise a large portion of the business world, and the Indian population, introduced by the British to work in the tin mines and rubber plantations, comprise the smallest ethnic group and are often found at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale. Although most sources acknowledge these three main ethnic groups as comprising Malaysia's population, the country is also home to a number of indigenous peoples. These consist of the Orang Asli on the peninsula, approximately 30 groups in Sabah and another 28 in Sarawak, including the Penan. This unique ethnic diversity plays an important role in the

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story of Malaysia's development and also currently. It has created opportunities to challenge accepted societal rules, and some Malaysians are now accepting that challenge by offering their personal stories to the world through new media.

Great Britain ruled Malaysia for nearly a century, during which time they established a strong commercial enterprise and an infrastructure "to mobilize the resources of the country" (Andaya, 1982, p. 205). The resources, namely tin, rubber, tea, coffee, and pepper, made up the bulk of the business; however, in order to carry out their operations the British put in place a system of law and order to encourage and protect their economic interests. At the time of independence, the British "left behind important residues in the economy, society, and politics" (Case, 2002, p. 101). This colonial inheritance played an important role in economic development and in particular, has greatly affected the development of freedoms and human rights in Malaysia. According to Case, "colonial policies and the identities they created helped to shape Malaysian society profoundly" (p. 102).

The first and subsequent governments in Malaysia have been dedicated to carrying on the economic legacy with regard to trade in resources, while endeavouring to reduce poverty, improve education for all citizens and most aggressively, pursue ethnic equality in order to deal with the top priority--establishing unity within this diverse country. During Dr. Mahathir's term as the country's fourth Prime Minister (1981-2003), the government exercised strong control over the country and, in order to move toward modernization and development by 2020[2], a number of constraints were placed on freedom of the press, and on academic and individual rights. Even before that, many government acts were put in place that have affected society. They may appear to have been established to maintain ethnic

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[2] The goal to achieve 'developed' status by 2020 is known as Vision 2020.

harmony and national security, but they also served as a means of maintaining the country's status quo. Many of them served to limit free speech, as detailed below.

The Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) of 1984 requires all newspapers, books and foreign publications to have a publishing license granted by the Internal Security Ministry. The Ministry also holds the power to revoke licenses at any time. Foreign publishers pay large deposits at the onset of their publishing, which they lose if their representatives do not show up to court to answer for publishing material that is "prejudicial to public order and national security" (SUARAM, 2008, p. 61).

The Sedition Act of 1948 was implemented by the British Colonial government and continues to remain active within the Federation of Malaysia. It is intended to prevent citizens from raising popular contempt and discontent for the central authority. The all-encompassing Sedition Act deems unlawful "any act, speech, words, publication or other thing" that might excite disaffection towards any ruler, government, administrator of justice, state ruler or king. The Act can be used against anyone who incites revolt, promotes feelings of discontent between races or classes, or anybody who questions "any matter, right, status, position, privilege, sovereignty, or prerogative established" in the Constitution that deals with provisions of citizenship, national language, the ruling chiefs of Negri Sembilan, or special rights for the Malay people and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak (61). Offenders of the Sedition Act can be fined up to RM5,000 and imprisoned for up to three years, with a second offense resulting in a sentence of up to five years.

The Sedition Act works in conjunction with The Constitution Act of 1971, which deems it unlawful for anyone, including members of parliament, "to question issues of

citizenship, national language, ethnic Malay rights, and matters pertaining to the rulers"
(SUARAM, 2008, p. 61).

The Official Secrets Act (OSA) of 1972 is in place to protect the secrecy of
documents deemed classified by the government. Any classified document cannot be used or
questioned in court. The SUARAM Human Rights Report of 2007 states that the inability for
citizens to use these documents in a courtroom "makes it almost impossible to challenge a
charge for any non-authorized possession or use of a document – even though it may not be a
'secret' or security risk, and its exposure is in the public interest" (p. 62). The maximum
penalty for a violation of this Act is seven years imprisonment.

Other acts that restrict freedom of speech, freedom of association and freedom of
assembly are the Trade Unions Act of 1959, the Societies Act of 1966, the Universities and
University Colleges Act of 1971, and the Police Act of 1967. These controls, which govern
so many aspects of life in Malaysia, were implemented during periods of unrest and in the
name of national security, resulting in power becoming centralized in the "hands of the
executive, especially since the 1980s" (Weiss, 2006, p. 5).

With Malaysia's move to achieve the Vision 2020 goals came the establishment of
the Multimedia Super Corridor – Malaysia's Silicon Valley – which endeavoured to attract
international companies to set up business there as a place dedicated to new technology. As a
result of this, the government worked hard to curb the freedom of the internet and
consequently, the use of blogs, social networking, etc. became a major vehicle for
expression. In other words, the prime minister could not very easily invite the technology
world to set up shop when that very business itself was being controlled (Weiss, 2006).
Consequently, the uncensored press, by way of online news groups, exists across Malaysia

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and is more likely to be critical of the government. Despite this, during Mahathir's term the offices of Malaysiakini.com, one of Malaysia's major online dissident newspapers, were raided and computers were confiscated.[3]

Since Mahathir stepped down in 2003 the country has continued along its path to developed status. However, the party has encountered some setbacks, particularly in the results of the 2008 election, which failed to return the traditional and expected two-thirds majority. The climate changed somewhat under Prime Minister Badawi, and the Reformasi movement, started by the former deputy prime minister who was ousted and jailed by Mahathir, played a major role in the final result. As well, the Indian people of Malaysia staged protests in Kuala Lumpur prior to the 2008 election, an action that appeared to indicate a change in attitude and certainly informed the country, and the world, of Malaysian issues regarding freedom and human rights. At that time, they demanded that attention be given to their role in the country and that their standard of living, which lags behind that of the Malays and Chinese, be improved. The 2009 protests against the Internal Security Act (ISA), as well as the critical commentary available through blogs and the private online press, are not unrelated to the relaxation of some of the rules and enforcement that had marked Mahathir's time in power.

Racial and ethnic divisions continue in Malaysia and existing laws can stymie both press and individual freedoms (Weiss, 2003; Case, 2002; Manan, 1999). Social networking and blogs, have to date not been blocked; amid current indications that a firewall is under

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[3] In September 2009, Malaysiakini.com was ordered by the government to remove photos of the "Cow head" incident where some young Muslims who objected to the proposed site of a new Hindu temple in Shah Alam marched to another temple and deposited a cow's head on the steps. These actions were widely criticized, even by the prime minister, who requested that those responsible be arrested and tried for sedition. Malaysiakini.com refused to remove the photos.

consideration and in the face of international criticism, the claim has been denied by the government of Malaysia (Cheah, 2009, August 21).

The Dispute: Penan History and Background

People have inhabited the island of Borneo and depended on its forest resources for centuries. As an early nation it existed under the royal family of Brunei but most of the island was left ungoverned. The northeastern area of Borneo, which is today the Malaysian state of Sabah, was closely tied to the Southern Philippines. Colonialism ultimately divided the country in to three the nation-states that remain: Malaysian Sarawak and Sabah, Indonesian Kalimantan, and Brunei.

Within Sarawak, close to the border of Kalimantan, two major indigenous groups exist. These consist of typically settled subsistence agriculturalists and either active or settled nomadic hunter-gatherers like the Penan. The people in these communities are very much dependent on resources from the forest, as it is the primary source of their livelihood. Within the Penan, there are also two culturally distinct groups. They speak mutually intelligible sub-dialects of the same language, and "consider themselves to be of only very distant ancestry" (Brosius, 1997, p. 471). Many of the differences between them stem from the subsistence technologies that they use, and their patterns of settlement and social organization. Western Penan typically stay settled in a camp for longer periods of time but hunt and forage over a much larger area than the Eastern Penan. For example, the Western Penan of Geng Belaga "occupy areas of some 1,500 square kilometers," whereas the Eastern Penan "rarely forage over areas larger than 400 square kilometers" (Brosius, 1997, p. 492). The two groups of Penan rarely intermarry and do not interact with each other on a regular basis. Almost without exception, the group that has resisted logging through the use of blockades has been the Eastern Penan. Brosius writes that the Western Penan have not only passively allowed

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logging to go on, but many are "willing participants in the activities of logging companies" (p. 471). Most often the Western Penan receive compensation packages from the logging companies, which usually include a monthly allowance, and gifts on major holidays.

According to Brosius (1997), logging impacts the lives of the Penan in many ways as even the urban Penan are still regular visitors to the forest, and they are dependent on its resources for their daily living, income and cultural practices. The most common complaint of the Penan people is that sporadic timber extraction has uprooted much of the jungle's sago palms, which is their traditional staple food. Logging has destroyed many fruit bearing trees, as well as those from which the Penan extract blowdart poison, which they use for hunting. Other complaints by the Penan people are that the sound of industrial activity scares off game, while the number of those remaining has been depleted because the fallen trees cannot provide forage for them. As well, the loggers often hunt with shotguns. River siltation has killed much of the fish that people depend on, and the lack of clean water makes it difficult for people to process sago flour. The destruction of rattan, from which many goods and crafts are made, makes it increasingly difficult for the Penan to participate in a cash economy. In addition to the loss of items needed for their subsistence, the Penan are deeply affected by the obliteration of their gravesites, which are almost always located on the same mountain ridges where logging roads are constructed.

As a result of this systematic destruction, "both Eastern and Western Penan feel that they are looked down upon, ignored, and treated unjustly" (Brosius, 1997, p. 474) by those involved in logging. They hold both the logging companies and the government of Sarawak responsible, whom they often see as a single entity. By observing some of the cases that have come to Miri's High Court, one gets a perspective on the difficulties they have encountered

in their efforts to deal with the logging issue. For example, suit 22-46-98 from April 15th

1998 is a case of four Penan headmen claiming native customary land rights over their four

settlements, and suing the companies that have exploited that land. The defendants are the

Government of Sarawak, Samling Plywood, Syarikat Samling Timber, a logging contractor,

and the licensee of the logging concession. All the defendants filed their defence and two

filed counter-claims seeking "RM1 million in special damages" (SUARAM, 2008, p. 219).

Before the trial was set to begin, three other groups made claims for the same native

customary rights (NCR) land: members of the Kenyah indigenous community, Samling

Plywood, and the Sarawak Government. Later, a Kenyah of Long Tungan "exposed

Samling's ploy in enticing the Kenyah communities to delay and derail the trial" (p. 219).

The cases have dragged on for more than 10 years and appear to remain unresolved after the

mysterious death of one plaintiff, the Long Kerong headsman, in the aftermath of earlier

threats from loggers and surveyors. According to the post-mortem report by the Sarawak

Criminal Investigation Department (CID), the headman died of natural causes, though the

post-mortem was considered incomplete because not all of his bones were found

(SUARAM).

The lack of progress experienced by the Penan through trials and attempts at dialogue

with the logging companies and the government were instrumental in the building of road

blockades in the early 1980s. The first wave of blockades resulted in the arrests of many

Penan, but there were no laws in place at that time to allow the government to prosecute them

for such actions. In 1988, the passing of a new "Forest Ordinance" resulted in the arrest and

incarceration of many Penan, but according to Brosius (1997), "to date, most trials have

proven inconclusive" (p. 476). In November 2003, the laws surrounding blockades were

significantly tightened when a new ordinance was passed by the State Legislative Assembly "that makes it not only illegal to blockade logging roads but presumes that all those apprehended near such blockades are guilty" (Brosius, 1997, p. 476).

The Penan have very few resources for engaging in dialogue with the government or with logging companies. The lack of better options forces them to set up road blocks in attempting to protect the land that they depend on, but these blockades are short-lived as they are dismantled by security forces. Though coverage of the protests and blockades often gets little or superficial attention in the local media, the internet has provided people with an option for publishing further content. Through the internet and international media, the Penan's plight has received a great deal of publicity, so much so that celebrities like Al Gore and Prince Charles have become advocates for the cause. Among the most well known is the Swiss activist Bruno Manser, who is often credited with bringing the Penan struggles into the international spotlight. Manser lived in the rainforest with the nomadic Penan from 1984 to 1990, and in 1992 he set up the Bruno Manser Fonds, a transnational NGO aimed at advocating for the Penan in their efforts to protect their rainforest and culture. Because of his activist practices, Manser was not viewed favourably by the Malaysian government, and he was ultimately banned from the country. On his illegal return to Sarawak in 2000, he disappeared and is presumed dead. His death remains a matter of controversy and many groups, including the Swiss government, remain unsatisfied with investigations by Malaysian authorities (Bruno Manser Fonds, 2009).

The surge of international publicity that came from Manser's work, his mysterious death and the work of other transnational advocacy groups has been instrumental in bringing the Penan issue to the forefront. As well, according to Brosius (1999), "the [international]

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circulation of images of Penan facing down at blockades resulted in a dramatic upsurge in interest in the issue of logging in Sarawak among Northern environmental and indigenous rights activists" (p. 346). However, Malaysia's strict media protection laws were capable of preventing the distribution of information about the Penan only on local soil so other measures had to be employed in order to protect the government's reputation and disseminate their point of view. Thus, the Malaysian government launched its own media campaign which vigorously denounced the work of foreign environmental NGOs in Sarawak, portraying them as "eco-colonialists" and making compelling arguments about the Western world's consumption of Sarawak's forest resources. Allied with the Malaysian government are the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO) and the International Hardwood Products Association (IHPA). This highly organized and aggressive counter-campaign "profoundly influenced how Northern environmental NGOs approach issues affecting the South and remains a significant case in contemporary activist history as it provided a blueprint for other nations to use in response to the criticisms of the developed world's environmental NGOs" (Brosius, 1999, p.346).

News and the Information Age

The proliferation of information technologies such as computers, telecommunications, audio and video broadcasting, and the internet has had a major effect on the global community. Today these technologies have become integral to all aspects of society, both locally and globally. The dispersal of information through the news was traditionally a one-way process carrying with it a particular bent as determined by the institutions producing it. Therefore, the provider of the news was limited by the form (Matheson, 2004). These limitations, whether imposed by the medium or by those who

controlled it, determined what was traditionally made available to the audience and what was generally perceived as truthful and appropriate. New technologies, which include online newsgroups, digitalized newspapers, and in particular, weblogs[4] have now entered this forum. These allow anyone with access to a computer to provide local and personal information to a worldwide audience with limited restrictions.

Research shows that there is little difference between the online and printed versions of most newspapers (Matheson, 2004; Kung, Picard, & Towse, 2008). In fact, the digital version is usually a "repurposing" (Kung, 2008, p. 79) of content and offers little difference in terms of focus or information. However, the weblog (commonly referred to as a "blog") provides a great potential for innovation in that it allows for immediate input, accommodates a multitude of readers and offers an uncensored forum in which viewpoints that may be different from those of professional journalists can be promoted and debated. The blog provides a "shift from a mass medium to a more intimate one where [one] can hear and respond to audiences on a personal level" (Matheson, 2004, p.453). These information technologies provide a ready avenue for people to tell different stories, promote local issues and most importantly, move them to an international level to garner new interest and support and even engage external actors to promote the cause (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). There is no cost involved in creating a blog, as companies such as internet giant Google provide free, pre-designed blogging space to the public. The result is that everyone, even those with no knowledge of website construction, has the capacity to publish whatever they wish, from personal journal entries to political opinions. All internet surfers have the capacity to post responses to the blog posts of others whether in agreement, opposition or for the purpose of

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[4] Weblog is the long form of blog.

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pointing out inaccuracies in data. The latter may result in the posting of links to other websites.

The story of the Penan's plight surrounding the logging encroachment onto their traditional lands and the resultant deforestation has received widespread attention and support from outside of Sarawak and Malaysia. Much of the global support came from NGOs focused on the environment and on the indigenous peoples; the movement from local to global was made easier by the availability of new forms of communication that allow domestic claimants access to international institutions (Tarrow, 2005). Indeed, the value of internet-based communication tools like blogs is greater in Malaysia than in neighbouring countries because of the government's current tolerance for online dissent. The Malaysian online press and a significant number of bloggers in the country provide transnational advocacy groups with information and testimonials about what is happening "on the ground" in the country.

The international community and institutions focused on the Penan are able to tell the stories of the people, thereby bringing the local forest-dwellers into the bigger picture, where international NGOs can attempt to bring their problems back to the Malaysian authorities. What Keck and Sikkink (1998) refer to as the "boomerang" effect can then bounce the issue from the local to the transnational and ultimately back to the state – the body with the power to make changes. They describe a transnational activist network as a communication network or alliance between domestic advocacy groups in a given country and actors in other parts of the world who have different degrees of influence upon their governments and other agencies because there are different, lesser or even no limits on their freedom of speech. Transnational advocacy networks commonly emerge in places where "channels between domestic groups

and their governments are blocked, or hampered or where such channels are ineffective for resolving a conflict" (p. 12). Blockages in such communications can often be attributed to the censorship of any kind of press, internet content regulation, restrictions on peaceful demonstrations, and a lack of other outlets for people to make requests to their government.

Countries with low rankings on the MSI (Media Sustainability Index) or RSF (Press Freedom Index) are therefore the ones that most commonly fit into the transnational activist paradigm, also known as the "boomerang" pattern. As mentioned above, this pattern may be described as follows: Activists in state A are unable to communicate with or make demands on their government, so by using communication tools such as the internet, fax machines and telephones, with or without the aid of NGOs, they distribute information about their causes to activists in other parts of the world (State B). Activists and NGOs in state B receive the information and then exert pressure on the government of state A, either directly from NGO to government, or though an intergovernmental organization like the United Nations. The pressure from activists on the outside can stimulate the government of state A to initiate a discussion of the issues of concern with the local activists. Outside states sometimes have more power to engage with state A because of their influence on the country's trade, their international image, and so on. The degree of influence that transnational activism exerts varies from scenario to scenario but one can be sure that "for the less powerful third world actors, networks provide access, leverage, and information (and often money) they could not expect to have on their own" (p. 13).

However, it must be noted that some limitations arise from the information gathering process in transnational activism. These activist groups use statistical data to give legitimacy to their causes but they also, and more increasingly, use testimonials from people on the

ground. Much of the information gathered about a particular struggle in a country has to come from people who have views that fall in line with the views of the organization. Keck and Sikkink write that "Transnational actors may identify what kinds of testimony would be valuable, then ask an NGO in the area to seek out people who could tell those stories" and that "Local people, in other words, sometimes lose control over their stories in a transnational campaign" (p. 19). This issue in gathering information on the ground gives the opposition a compelling argument about the legitimacy of the activists' claims, as well as a framework for creating their own media campaigns because they can use the same methods of information-seeking to support their counter-arguments.

As new technologies allow for greater information flows between northern and southern nations, governments are less able to hold a monopoly on truth as they did in the past. Information passes through national borders, creating interest in other nations, but the question of why information from certain sources on the ground gets chosen over others opens up debate over the integrity of certain transnational campaigns. These points of contention can greatly benefit those who oppose the activists especially through their implementation of the previously mentioned counter tactics campaigns. Whereas opposing governments might have, in the past, blocked information flow, this new tool can serve to effectively discredit the work of the activists. It is also possible that in its re-telling for the bigger stage some aspect of the original story can get lost and the strategies and claims of the local scene may become somewhat altered (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). However, regardless of which version is ultimately published the process does serve to open the channels between those affected and those with the power to create change.

Reports regarding the Penan issue from the Malaysian government-controlled press and website information provided by international activists is now also supplemented by personal blogs written by citizens of Malaysia and, in particular, those of Sarawak. This allows for the telling of individual stories and for commentary by readers who thus contribute to the ongoing narrative. According to Matheson (2004), "Weblogs are more likely to reflect the sense-making practices of groups who struggle to be heard in a monoglot media" (p. 462). The blogs written by the people that are dealt with here are a significant part of the arena in which the story of the Penans is currently being played out against powerful state actors. They provide a local and personal connection that contrasts sharply with the official narrative. The fact that any reader can express an opinion, post it and have it read by a wide audience gives an immediacy to the freedom accorded by the web.

As indicated, one of the most effective tools that those in power can use to counter the rise of citizens' dissent is the publication of counter arguments and/or propaganda using online and offline publication tools. This can be accomplished by reframing stories of world events or by simply rewriting an event with a certain bias that might sway public opinion. New tools are being implemented by governments, and especially by corporations, who seek to sway public opinion. For example, there is the net pop-culture term known as "astroturfing," which companies and corporations often refer to as "stealth-marketing". It works like this. When a writer creates a blog article, readers are encouraged to write their own comments or opinions at the end of the article. These comments are considered to be a natural representation of people's opinions, so some refer to them as "grassroots" opinions. Astroturfing occurs when, for example, a company hires a team to post comments and opinions which favour their products on customer satisfaction or product review blogs.

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Governments are also known to use astroturfing on websites containing opinions that challenge their own viewpoint.

Many countries, such as China, use firewalls to block content deemed sensitive by the ruling government. However, if an individual is intent on finding information, it can be found using a proxy server, a device that cloaks the computer's address and searches for content through something akin to a virtual 'back door.' Though firewalls are the strongest tool that less democratic governments can use to limit access to information, education or political discussion online, most countries use a fairly mundane method for tracking down cyber-dissidents: they simply search for keywords entered in search engines such as Google in order to identify dissident bloggers. This method is used, for example, by the government of Thailand in order to track down anti-monarchial content online. Even in these circumstances activists and "culture-jammers"[5] can simply use code words that make the identifying words unsearchable by converting them into small image files instead of hypertext documents or standard web pages (Liberty Institute, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

This study consists of an analysis of a series of online information sources written by individuals and groups who are primarily providing facts and editorial opinions on political matters in Malaysia. The articles were chosen based on whether or not they contain dissident material in reference to the Penan struggles. They were written over a period of time ranging from October 2006 to November 2009. The primary issue is that of the roadblocks staged

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[5] Culture jamming is a reaction by activists to social conformity, mainstream cultural institutions, and corporate advertising through satirical art and design in public spaces and the media.

periodically since the 1980s by the Penan people of Borneo in order to prevent further

deforestation of East Malaysia's rainforests through logging. Penan actions have garnered a

great deal of international attention and are promoted as a prime example of the struggle for

the preservation of indigenous cultures and the natural environment (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

However, the Malaysian government views the traditional Penan as being left behind in

Malaysia's rapid development process and is working to integrate them into modern

Malaysian society. Both traditional and activist groups (NGOs) and the Malaysian

government have launched influential media campaigns opposing each another's positions on

the issue. The NGOs criticize the government for carrying out logging without obtaining

consent from indigenous communities, while the government makes compelling arguments

about the Western consumption of these forest products. Consequently, sources researched

for this study consist of government-supported online publications, privately owned online

publications, reports from both local and transnational groups, and most central for this

study, commentary found on blogs.[6]

All the online formation sources will be treated similarly, as publishing tools that are

used as conduits for the expression of opinions, concrete facts, as well as unreferenced

material and agendas of any kind. The focus of the research is the differences of opinion

between the publishers and speakers/interviewees, the framing of the events, the amount of

coverage given to the issues, the amount of objectivity, the degree to which writers express

emotional responses to the events and the degree to which they express opinions that oppose

the government position. As well, evidence of the use of blogging as a means of creating

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[6] Because blogs are tools that allow virtually anyone to publish information at no or minimal cost, many blogs are journals and contain reviews of personal experiences. However, for the purposes of this study only blog entries pertaining to topics relevant to the goals of this paper will be considered. Therefore, blog entries that pertain to particular political topics will be the focus, though the entire blog itself often contains non-political entries as well.

Keck and Sikkink's boomerang effect will be addressed. As indicated, the Penan plight has

sparked what some might call a "media war" between the parties, as both transnational

activist groups and the Malaysian government promote their agendas via the media. The

situation may be interpreted as one of noble environmentalists and human rights activists vs.

a corrupt, exploitative government or alternatively, as a government rapidly developing with

little Western support vs. eco-colonialists who consume the very forest products that they

criticize the government for extracting.

The degree to which opinions expressed on blogs converge and diverge with the

views of the Malaysian Federal Government and those of international human rights groups

will be used to judge the degree of political dissidence expressed by authors using either

publishing platform. The degree of dissidence expressed in the comments and in the readers'

feedback, a forum exclusive to blogs, is also considered because many internet publications

tend to regulate their comments in order to limit trolling and keep feedback relevant.[7] Each

blog owner has his/her individual level of tolerance for trolls and astroturfers[8] but they are

addressed in this paper in order to determine how many are critical of the views of the

blogger, the government, and international human rights groups. The blogs were chosen

based on whether or not they contain posts about the roadblocks on logging roads by the

Penan people of Sarawak.

The destruction, cultivation, use, and ownership of East Malaysia's rainforests have

long been contentious issues among the Malaysian government, the Malaysian people and

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[7] Irrelevant commentators are called "trolls" in Internet pop culture, which comes from the fishing practice of trolling – scraping the seabed for whatever one can get. Blog or Internet forum trolls are considered to be people who post irrelevant and extremely controversial comments for the sole purpose of invoking (or trolling for) strong emotional responses on matters that may be unrelated, or only loosely related, to the original blog post
[8] Astroturfers are often small teams of individuals who maintain multiple Internet identities and online profiles, such as email and social networking accounts like *Facebook*, and who then use them in order to flood or spam the natural spheres of opinion in their organization's favour.

the international community. This is often framed by transnational activist groups as an environmental and a human rights issue; it has therefore garnered widespread popularity with donors and activists, making it arguably Malaysia's most internationally criticized and controversial development issue.

The treatment and analysis of the issues considered in this paper, and their coverage by the various online media, have been framed and informed by questions similar to those asked by other new media studies, such as *Cybersociety 2.0* (Jones 1998). To understand the power of each information source, one must look at statistics about the websites' popularity. With quality information about the site's readership, popularity, base location and the design tools used in its creation, one can ascertain a better comprehension of its standing and value within the 'blogosphere.' Questions must be posed that apply to the entire website, as well as to the individual posts that pertain to each of the cases analyzed in this paper; however, it must be noted that tools for website analysis such as Alexa.com seem to generate clearer and more detailed results for whole sites.

The following questions help the reader understand the intended purpose of each blog. Many of these are drawn from works by new media communications scholars who focus on web community and culture (Hill and Hughes, 1998; Coleman and Blumer, 2009; and McCaughey and Ayers, 2003): Of the total posts on the site, how many are explicitly political? How many are personal attacks against members of the government? How many readers' comments are personal attacks against the blog's owner or author? Is the site solely an alternative source for news? Does the site contain the tools to recruit users as members or authors to the site? Is the space on the sidebar(s) or other extra space used for commercial advertising, non-profit advertising or other uses? Does the site make good use of multimedia

tools such as images, sound and video to reach a wider audience that may include those with disabilities and/or those with reading difficulties? What kinds of links are in the author's blogroll?[9] Are there outlets for building transnational alliances such as mailing lists, fundraising opportunities, or downloadable media (posters, videos, e-books etc.)?

Though the above technical questions aid in understanding the quality of the publications, the content itself is of primary importance because it shows that dissent exists whether or not it is accessed by readers. The essential question to this study is how does the information about the Penan situation compare in terms of the way it is presented in the different online media sources and does citizen access to this new media technology assist in creating change?

This paper is organized in a manner that helps support the theme that the news provided by the three types of information sources varies in agenda, framing and willingness to be openly critical of the government in a politically sensitive environment. The news source analysis consists only of publications that contain coverage of the Penan roadblocks. It begins with a look at Malaysia's first private online press, Malaysiakini.com, a publication whose candidness has been a contentious issue in Malaysia since its inception. This is followed by excerpts from selected articles from three different government-backed online newspapers. Next, the perspectives of three activist groups – Human Rights Watch, Bruno Manser Fonds, and Aliran are presented, and finally, coverage of this issue in Malaysia's blogosphere is presented by examining the postings and user feedback on several blogs.

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[9] A 'blogroll' is a list of recommended hyperlinks to other related blogs and websites.

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Treatment in the Online Media

The struggle of Sarawak's Penan population to reclaim ownership of their tribal lands is a popular topic in international media. A Google search using the term "Penan" results in a wide range of articles and websites, mostly written from a Western perspective and mostly in support of the Penan cause.[10] The following discussion will focus on this issue as covered in the private press, the government press, by environmental and human rights activist groups and by blog writers. This provides an opportunity for a perspective on multiple sides of the debate and an assessment of the editorial tone of the different internet media sources.

The Private Press Perspective
Malaysiakini.com

Malaysiakini.com is Malaysia's pioneering private online press and was the first to benefit from the Vision 2020/MSC Restriction-Free internet "loophole" established by former Prime Minister Mahathir (see Historical perspective). On 31 July 2009, it published an online article entitled "Penan Mount Two Anti-logging Blockades."[11]

In this article two transnational activist groups concerned with roadblocks, famine and other plights of the Penan are quoted. First, the director of Survival International (SI), a group centred on indigenous rights, is quoted as saying, "The logging and palm oil companies are robbing the Penan not just of their forests but of their food and water" (Malaysiakini.com 2009, July 31).

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[10] In Eric Hanson's account of his journey across Borneo in the 1980s he reported that a number of Sarawak aboriginal groups had been adversely affected by unrestricted logging on their tribal lands.
[11] Present research indicates that many bloggers were simply copying and pasting this article into their own blogs rather than expressing their own views, perhaps because *Malaysiakini* has a paid subscription service and most blogs do not.

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The second activist, Jok Jau Evong, a field officer with Friends of the Earth Sarawak (FoE), is attributed with the following quote: "The Penans put up a blockade as a last resort after talks with the logging company failed […] When I visited the two Penan areas, I felt very sad. There is a lack of food, especially for the children […] The Penan people are among Malaysia's poorest and number just 12,000 out of the two million people in Sarawak, and only 400 Penan are still living a fully nomadic lifestyle" (Malaysiakini.com, 2009, July 31). The figure given for the number of Penans living in a traditional setting varies depending on the source. However, the traditional Penan lifestyle that depends on the forest for essentials has been seriously impeded by logging; it has resulted in a scarcity of fruit and wildlife, while transportation to medical services and schools, and access to supplies is a major concern. On the other hand, there are Penan spokespeople, particularly from the western region, who have adapted to the changes brought on by the logging companies. Perhaps this immersion of the western Penans gives more urgency to the objectives of those from eastern areas who wish to maintain their traditional ways (Bending, 2006; Keck & Sikkink, 1988; Brosius, 1999; Brosius, 1997).

Malaysiakini.com's stand on the Penan issue is stated in a fairly descriptive manner. Though their content would appear to ally them with groups that support the Penan cause, they refrain from the type of preaching that is evident in some other publications and they refrain from setting out possible solutions or making open attacks. The focus here seems to be a careful presentation of well-chosen facts and interviews to endorse their viewpoint.

The Government-Controlled Press Perspective
www.thestar.com.my (*The Star Online*)

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The Star, Malaysia's largest newspaper, began publication in 1971 and launched the online version in 1995. Part of the official press, the *Star Online* carries the same stories and editorial focus as the print version.

A July 23rd, 2009 article in *The Star*, entitled "Penans Stage Timber Blockade in Interior Ulu Baram," provides a clearer view of the situation on the ground for the protesters. It states that "the police had gone to the protest sites following reports lodged by the timber companies." At the regional government level, "Baram District Officer Joseph Balayong said that he had not been briefed on the latest protest," and that "the police have not referred the matter to my office. The rightful authority to deal with these cases will be the police. However, the district office will monitor the situation and step in and help if needed" (Then, 2009, July 23).

Another piece from *The Star Online*, also written by Stephen Then and entitled "Standoff Between Penans and Loggers in Borneo Eases," is worth noting because it indicates that some Penan protesters had their demands met. Bear in mind that this being part of the government-controlled media, the online publication quotes Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) for descriptions of the situation: "The disputing parties did not want to aggravate tension in disputes where the usually peaceful Penans had picked up spears and parangs (machetes) to prevent loggers from entering what they claim were their ancestral lands" (Then, 2009, July 24). But the matter was resolved peacefully through compromise on the part of the logging companies resulting in the "Penan protestors [laying] down their arms after timber workers at the sites agreed not to proceed with their logging operations in the disputed territories" (Then, 2009, July 24).

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Coverage of the events in this article appears to portray the Penan people as being primitive because of their weaponry, as well as perhaps lazy and uncivilized because they are "sitting around" instead of working diligently towards the same kinds of goals for modernization as the rest of Malaysia supposedly is. The police are portrayed as heroes who prevented violence by disarming the angry indigenous people, while the article failed to outline for the reader the circumstances that led the Penan to set up roadblocks in the first place.

As indicated, this article comes from the government-controlled press and therefore represents the official line. This medium reaches more readers than the unofficial blogs that present the Penans' viewpoint and the consistently anti-government commentary contributed by people who participate in online discussions. The approved press, as can be seen from the previous quotes and those that follow, appears to downplay the blockages and the potential for increasing conflict. One gets the impression that the appropriate government authorities have things "under control."

www.Bernama.com

Bernama is the official press agency of the Government of Malaysia. It operates via a 1967 Act of parliament, and has been online since 1997.

As might be expected, an article posted on Bernama.com represents the official government viewpoint, which clearly differs from the perspective one gets on the Penan issue from blogs and environmentalist and human rights groups. On January 21, 2007, a road blockade between Long Lellang and Long Benalih was set up by a very vocal minority of Penan people in the region. The blockade, according to Bernama, was instigated by NGOs aligned with the Bruno Manser Foundation, and in setting up these blockages the claim is

made that they have caused "the settlement to face food and medical supply shortages." The blockade also "disrupted diesel delivery to run the generators for a school and rural clinic." The headsman of the community are said to have "forced Penan settlers to support their move." Most significantly, the unnamed community leader is quoted saying "We are suffering…our children are suffering because these NGOs are supporting these small group [sic] [to set up the blockade]" (Bernama, 2007, January 21).

<u>www.NST.com.my</u> *(New Straits Times)*

New Straits Times, one of the major newspapers in Malaysia, has been in publication since 1965, and similar to *The Star,* is currently a government-run newspaper. The online version, <u>www.NST.com.my</u> is the 148th most visited website in the country, with 61% of visitors coming from Malaysia and the rest mostly from the USA and the UK (Alexa). On 25 July, 2009 *New Straits Times* ran an article entitled "Getting Up Close with Penans," which is based primarily on interviews with a Penan headman, Belulak Seng, and the managing director of the German Association for the Protection of Forests and Woodlands (GAPFW), Christoph Rullman, both of whom give perspectives that are atypical of transnational environmental or human/indigenous rights groups (NST Online, 2009, July 25).

The article begins by subtlety countering stereotypes of primitive forest people by informing the reader that Belulak Seng "stays connected to the outside world through his mobile phone." We are told that he and his tribespeople once "roamed around the national park to forage" but nowadays they "cultivate vegetables, keep animals and sell Penan handicrafts to tourists visiting their village" (NST Online, 2009, July 25).

According to the article, times have changed for the headman and his people, and he is quoted as saying that "we have a more routine lifestyle and stable income" and that "We

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can stay in touch with our children studying at boarding school" (NST Online, 2009, July 25). The article then goes to say that "the way of life led by Belulak and his community stands in stark contrast to the gloomy picture painted by some non-governmental organizations which gives [sic] the impression the Penans face an uncertain future"(NST Online, 2009, July 25). It continues: "like many local indigenous communities, Belulak and his 300 villagers were also wary of logging activities. But now their priority is on clean water, electricity, clinics and identification documents such as birth certificates" (NST Online, 2009, July 25).

The Penan, who are estimated in this article to number only around 1,000, are benefiting from development and logging, and the "negative perception [that logging is driving them out of the forest] was capitalized on by the Switzerland-based NGO…founded by Bruno Manser [Bruno Manser Foundation]" (NST Online, 2009, July 25). In addition to the Penan headman's wishes for development and essentially more logging, the article assures us that "representatives from emerging timber markets and the United Kingdom, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Italy and Greece were satisfied with the explanation that they had received during dialogue with the Penan villagers."

Finally, Christoph Rullman of the German Association for the Protection of Forests and Woodlands (GAPFW), apparently only thinking the worst after reading reviews from organizations like the World Wide Fund for Nature and Greenpeace, "was very surprised to see the seemingly endless green canopy of forest on the 30-minute flight from Miri to Mulu." He was also very much "impressed with the government's efforts to put Penan children in

school and integrate the semi nomadic people with the rest of society."[12] The words which conclude this *NST* article are a quote from Bernama.com: "You can't lock them somewhere in the forest" (NST Online, 2009, July 25).

The last of the online articles included here under traditional media sources (*NST*) is an October 22, 2006 posting denouncing the international activists' Eurocentric understanding of the Penan's struggles, which proposes that they are too detached from the situation on the ground to have a clear picture of what is needed. The piece is entitled "News Focus: Do They Know What We Want?" and it assures readers that nearly all Penan have given up their nomadic lifestyles and are now more interested in development, modernization and "securing a brighter future for their children especially through the pursuit of education." Indeed, the author, Firdaus Abdullah, believes that Western notions of Penan needs are not relevant, as he writes that "various quarters, including environmentalists from places they [the Penan] have never heard of, claim to champion their interests and yet, no one truly knows what they want." Abdullah goes on to quote a few different individuals to show the reader what he (or the agenda of his paper) sees as what they want (Abdullah, 2006, October 22, 2006). The following, from the same *NST* article, is by Seluma Jalong, a 32-year-old mother of three:

Why should we remain backward when the whole world is moving ahead? There are people who want us to remain nomadic and maintain the primitive way of life […] We love the forests more than so-called activists but we also need to chart our children's future […] There is so much to be done in terms of awareness and convincing the community of the fruits of development (Abdullah, 2006, October 22).

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[12] Interestingly, a further Google search conducted on Mr. Rullman and the GAPFW for this study yielded no results.

By interviewing "the enlightened Penans who are rallying others in the community to embrace the benefits of development", *NST* found that what Penan people want are roads and transportation to the outside world, so that they can get "essential items like fuel, sugar and cooking oil" at lower prices, as well as cement, which is said to cost nearly RM200 per bag. In support of development, the head of an unknown village said, "They claim it will ruin the environment, but how are we to live by just looking at the trees and having nothing to eat?" (Abdullah, 2006, October 22).

Another community spokesperson, Dennis Bujang, told *NST* that the Penan people want development and education for their children, but "we cannot simply sit and watch when loggers want to rape this forest. It has been done in other areas." He told reporters that in the past, "local people had been swindled into allowing for the construction of logging roads because they were convinced that they are necessary for the transportation of necessities." Dennis goes on to speak poorly of logging companies and adds that "loggers often operated without any supervision by authorities," thus apparently removing some blame from the government (Abdullah, 2006, October 22). Bujang adds that today, with governing bodies present such as the Sarawak Forestry Corporation, Sustainable Forest Management and the International Tropical Timber Organization, "The days when loggers could roam freely are long gone. For instance, they can only cut trees of a certain measurement, they cannot pollute rivers or log in water catchment areas" (Abdullah, 2006, October 22).

Finally, the last of the *NST* interviewees, simply listed as "Miri Resident Ose Murang" blames the Penan hostility towards development on foreign NGOs. He says that "The people who are instigating them are staying in mansions and bungalows in New York,

Switzerland and Paris but they want our people to remain on trees." And he continues by stating that "Ulu Baram is the last remaining area of Sarawak which has yet to experience any development, and it is our duty to do that" (Abdullah, 2006, October 22). The article concludes with a more objective tone than that reflected in the body of the piece: "While the arguments go back and forth, the Penan are caught between the need for development and what they see as their duty to protect the environment and their heritage…Unless someone is willing to listen their voices and look for solutions, the Penan will remain victims" (Abdullah, 2006, October 22).

The Environmental & Human Rights Activist Groups' Perspective

Getting all sides of the issue requires one to view the perspectives of a few human rights and environmentalist groups, as the struggles of the Penan are quite popular with transnational activists. It should be noted that in this case, human rights and environmentalism go hand in hand, as a number of Penan people are dependent on their natural environment for their livelihoods and everyday survival. Restrictions on peaceful protest or dissidence in Malaysia make it very hard for the Penan to choose their own destinies, which according to some international and local NGOs, is centred around environmental protection and "bottom up" or "grassroots" development initiatives.

Aliran

Aliran, a Malaysian based human rights website claiming to be the country's first, posted an article entitled "Why the Penan Set Up Blockades," which ends with the assurance that "We deliver the truth right to your doorstep every month for only RM30 a year" (Kiew, 2007, July 31). The piece begins by telling us that its intention is to make "clarifications" on blockade situations to avoid any "misunderstandings on the part of other parties." Three main reasons are given: "Firstly, the reason the Penan villages are forced to voice their protest in

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this way is that the issuance of logging licenses in Sarawak is done in a non-transparent way and has neglected to consider the customary rights of indigenous peoples. […] Secondly, other attempts to influence the local government have been made but the people have found little success." The author writes that "numerous Penan villagers have been writing to the authorities for years to appeal for the encroachment issues to be resolved and for assistance to improve our standard of living to be delivered" (Kiew, 2007, July 31).

The third problem is that the logging companies do not often consult the local people, but instead work over their heads with governments and investors, not paying attention to the fact that because of continued logging not only "forest and river resources are damaged," but also "farms are also destroyed." Rice plantations and fruit trees are commonly a main source of a Penan community's income. The author, Ajang Kiew (chairperson of the Sarawak Penan Association), describes the manipulation of the Penan peoples' understanding of their land rights, a claim that is evident in many readings: "In many cases, we would either be forced to 'consent' to agreements which were unfair and unclear and lacking in the ability to provide any guarantee for us or to receive 'compensation' of meagre value" (Kiew, 2007, July 31).

The document concludes with suggestions and an appeal to the government to make changes that will "avoid such blockades from being erected." They ask for logging licenses to be issued in a way that respects indigenous customary rights, through consultations with them. They also ask for more government assistance to improve their standard of living, such as "housing improvement projects, agriculture assistance – including reforestation of encroached areas to increase our sources of food and income – as well as assistance in birth and identity card registration, the construction of more schools and the rendering of health care services" (Kiew, 2007, July 31).

Human Rights Watch

   In 2008, Human Rights Watch posted onto their web portal an article entitled

"Malaysia: An Unholy Alliance of Politics and Logging." Their information on the struggle

comes from the National Resource Defence Council (NRDC)[13], which has informed them

that "timber companies and government officials [have been] acting together to dispossess

indigenous communities for their own gain, [and have] endangered the survival of

indigenous communities in Malaysia's once-vast Borneo rainforest" (Human Rights Watch,

2008, p. 44). They go on to say that Malaysia's indigenous people do have rights to claim

their native customary land but it is usually too expensive for most indigenous communities

to assert these claims. *HRW* describes the Penan as "a hunter gatherer society" and they,

along with "most other indigenous communities in the area" are dependent on the natural

landscape for their survival and customs: "[S]tate officials took over millions of hectares of

[this] land and divided most of it into logging concessions" (p. 45). The local people saw

next to none of the benefits from the sale of their forests as "Most of the profit from logging

went to state officials, which gave them a direct financial incentive to redistribute indigenous

land" (p. 45).

   Road blockades were set up by local people to stop bulldozers from entering their

territories and from cutting down the little that remains of the forest. Then, "the timber

companies responded by dispatching vigilantes to terrorize the protesters with menacing

behavior and threats" (Human Rights Watch, 2008, p. 45). In cases where vigilantes did not

work, officials sent security forces to charge protest participants with obstructing logging

activities, which usually ends in confining them in miserable conditions of detention.

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[13] The NRDC, with headquarters in New York, is an American environmental action organization –
http://www.nrdc.org

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Bruno Manser Fonds

The Bruno Manser Fonds (BMF) is the NGO founded by Bruno Manser, the previously noted outspoken Penan rights and environmental activist who championed the Penan cause and created international awareness of Borneo's indigenous issues (Bruno Manser Fonds, 2009). The Manser Fonds published a report outlining the issues surrounding the roadblocks. It provides a similar perspective as that previously seen and describes steps leading up to the blockades. The story is related of the headman, Panai Irang, who became fed up with the forest destruction and walked five hours to the loggers' camp to negotiate with the manager. Interhill, the logging company, did not engage in dialogue with the headman and only said "That does not interest us. We have a valid license from the government and will continue our work as long as we find timber in the forest that can be used" (Straumann, 2006, p.1). Apparently, this tribe tried to solve the matter with words, but when that failed to work they were forced to set up a roadblock and confiscate the chainsaws of those who tried to cut trees that were in close proximity to their water catchments. The Malaysian police and Federal Reserve Unit arrived on the scene to end the protests. Bruno Manser Fonds describes the Federal Reserve Tactical Unit as "a special unit trained to suppress demonstrations with force." The police eventually withdrew from the protest so Interhill used their own intimidation tactics, going so far as to bring in "a sorcerer who was supposed to frighten villagers by using 'magical powers'" (Straumann, 2006, p. 2).

Since BMF got involved in this cause, the Penan "appeal [has been] met with an enormous echo," and "Friendly organizations in the USA, Japan, South Korea, Great Britain and Germany took up the cause and asked their members to write letters of protest and emails to [the government of] Sarawak." The document ends by stressing that the battle is not over,

as residents of villages neighbouring the blockades have asked to put an end to protests and build more roads (Straumann, 2006, p. 2).

Publications authored by environmental and human rights activist groups make no pretense of hidden agendas. Their coverage of the Penan issue is openly pro-social development, and economic growth is given little attention. The commentary found in these pieces is openly self-righteous and impassioned reporting is commonplace, as is the use of emotive terminology ('vigilantes,' 'terrorize,' 'menacing,' 'threats,' 'suppress demonstration with force').

The Blogger's Perspective
www.thebrokenshield.blogspot.com

The Broken Shield has been active since December 2007 and has had 235,477 visitors since January 2008. The majority of visitors to this site arrive from other blogs like *Malaysia Today*, though some come from search engines. The site runs on a Blogger.com platform, which is a free online blog tool from Google. The sidebar and blogroll on this site are used primarily to promote websites with similar political views and agendas.

This popular Sarawak-based pro-indigenous blog, and on 19 August 2009, published a piece entitled "Legal Tools to Grab Dayak Land," which describes the problems that the author and his colleagues found with NCR land claim policies in East-Malaysia (Joseph, 2009, August 19). He begins by clarifying the tools or acts that the Malaysian Federal Government uses to organize, claim and distribute its land: the Land Code, Land Custody and Development Authority Ordinance, Sarawak Land Development Board, The Forest Rules and the Agropolis Ordinance. He takes aim at the Land Code and the LCDA as the main perpetrators on the government's side in the exploitation of native land, and quotes Paul

Raja, a lawyer who advocates for indigenous land claims, who jokingly says that LCDA stands for "Let's Chase Dayaks Away." Raja is later quoted in a more serious tone saying, "The LCDA is used to designate certain areas as 'development areas.' Most of the time, these areas will affect the native lands. But the native lands are always erroneously and deceptively termed as 'state land'" (Joseph, 2009, August 19).

The article stresses that while the indigenous people of Sarawak are "sleeping soundly in their longhouses," transactions are being made between the government and companies, but the local people only become aware of these transactions years down the road when timber extraction companies arrive.

Another problem he identifies with the land claim situation is that the Dayak or indigenous representatives in the district or local governments fail to admit these problems because it would expose them as "total failures." The traditional state-controlled media plays a major role in how land claims are played out by casting the native defenders as anti-government, anti-development and anti-social (Joseph, 2009, August 19).

In this article the offending parties portrayed are not just the Malaysian government, the police or the logging companies, but also as the Dayak leaders who taint their people's perceptions of the situation: "Whenever the plights of the natives are highlighted, the so-called Dayak leaders, instead of lending support to the plight of the rural poor, are the first to condemn the whistle blowers" (Joseph, 2009, August 19).

www.dayakbaru.com

Dayakbaru's owner/author, Dr. John Brian Anthony, also a Dayak native, focuses on the issue of famine in the Dayak/Penan communities as a result of deforestation and neglect. He writes that, "Starvation should be more rampant now in certain areas because the State

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Government do not practice 'sustainability.' The government continues to log and award land for plantation and dams not caring for the livelihood of people staying in the area" (Anthony, 2009, August 1). He counters the position of another academic, Dr. George Chan, who is hopeful about the Penans' survival and has stated that, "With no government assistance or no assistance they will always survive because they have few basic needs." Anthony also attacks the Malaysian BN government in saying that "The BN government simply do not care for us because 'poverty' is our [Dayak] way of life" (Anthony, 2009, August 1). However, his negative view of the government does not go without criticism of the indigenous community leaders, as he writes that they "might be getting involved in politics too much without realizing that they forgot their duties to help the poor under their responsibility" (Anthony, 2009, August 1).

He ends the article with several barbs directed at the government: "The government would also not find effective solution for eradicating poverty because the business interest has taken most of the 'reichest' [sic] of Sarawak without sharing it with the people. […] Shame on the BN government – with so much money and many Sarawak citizen is [sic] so poor." And finally he writes, "If this BN government refused to listen to us Dayakbaru – then we should refuse to listen to them too. If that is [the] BN rule, then we will abide by their rule" (Anthony, 2009, August 1).

http://khookaypeng.blogspot.com

Of the dissident blog writings found online, "Penan's Plight Reflects Failure in Bumiputra Policy," which was posted on September 12th, 2009, stands out. The blogsite hosting the article is called Straight Talk, with postings related primarily to Malaysian politics. 84.8 percent of its readers come from within Malaysia and the majority of readers

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are over 35 years old. Much of the restriction on media law seen in Malaysia is said to be used in the interest of protecting "racial harmony" in the country; therefore, publications that challenge the government's handling of multicultural issues in Malaysian society would be viewed as extremely dissident. The author Khoo Kay Peng writes that "socio-economic development and infrastructure development cannot be focused merely around the Klang valley (Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur, and surrounding municipalities). The overly centralised model has failed in its purpose and objective to help develop Malaysia more evenly." He then goes on to criticize the country's pro-Malay actions by saying, "As usual, this case has put Malaysia in a bad light and it reflects another failure of the Barisan government ability to rule fairly" (Peng, Khoo Kay, 2009, September 12).

User Comments

The following comments were selected randomly from those posted on the weblogs in reaction to the Penan logging blockade and the aftermath. What is worth noting here is the nature of the writing in terms of its open criticism of the government and its policies. One could anticipate that the authorities might close the site and perhaps even move to arrest the writers. However, the fact that negative and grass-roots commentary of this nature is allowed to go on would suggest that the Penan-based blogs are not seen as a threat, or alternatively, that the criticism from transactional activists is perceived as a greater threat.

www.brokenshield.blogspot.com

> *"The current State Government has been repeatedly elected by big*
> *majority by voters made of the Dayaks who cannot differentiate between*
> *government and politics, government and political parties, between real*
> *beneficial projects that can alleviate the suffering, and ameliorate the*

poverty in the masses of the people, on a basis of long term and the hand-out or development in a flash during election times" Anonymous (Brokenshield, 2009, August 19).

"To all the swkn [sic] *especially the young voters...together we vote beend[sic] out next state election. Change we must" Jumpover (Brokenshield, 2009, August 19).*

"Enough of this land grap1[sic]*!everyone knows about this, especially those who read blogs but what about those in the jungle and those who are not educated. They are the ones who are facing the land seizure. Why are they not been well informed" Anonymous (Brokenshield, 2009, August 19).*

"I personally think some dayaks must set up a group of people who can go down to this poor rural folks and pass on these information to them so they know the real truth of what happen to their brothers who face the same fate as them" Banting (Brokenshield, 2009, August 19).

www.dayakbaru.com

"Is there any fair distribution of wealth? It is obvious that the wealth from this country is totally accumulated by a selected few. This is really unfair. SDGA, any proposal towards the alleviation of poverty among our people? Is Collection of donation drive in the pipeline? It just so sad" Cikgu Iban (Dayakbaru, 2009, August 1).

"Some false benevolent acts in the next few days will see politicians using helicopters going there. That is not benevolence but pricks of guilty

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conscience because they are the ones that destroyed the forest where the

Penans live" Empelesik Sungai (Dayakbaru, 2009, August 1).

http://khookaypeng.blogspot.com

"Failure of bumiputra policy? Come off it lah. There's no such thing as

bumiputra policy, only Malay policy. Every benefit and affirmative action

policies only benefit the malays" Anonymous (Straight Talk, 2009,

September 12).

The above blog entries have clearly provided the writers with an opportunity to exercise dissidence and openly criticize the government without apparent consequence. They have also allayed fears of reprisal by allowing the responders anonymity. Some comments made by both writers and responders are, as is often the case with environmental and human rights groups, highly emotionally charged and poignant, and some are certainly not objective, nor necessarily fact-driven. The commentary differs from that of previous publications in that it has not been altered or taken out of context by either transnational activist groups or the Malaysian government in order to endorse a particular stand. It is, as they say, what it is. Also, unlike the previous publications, it appears to be more a method of protest than an actual means of news coverage. In any case, the writers have demonstrated a freedom of expression here not seen in other venues notable in the emotional call to get rid of the BN government in the next election, and in the charge that Bumiputra policy benefits only the Malay population in Malaysia.

TRANSNATIONAL LINKAGES

In examining the above weblogs, whether written by local activists or transnational activist groups, the question exists as to whether or not they have been successful in bringing about change. Accordingly, from this perspective of these groups, desirable change would involve bringing pressure to bear on the Malaysian government or corporations to recognize the land rights of the Penan people and their right to develop that land at their own pace. Individuals, local activists, transnational activist groups and NGOs all use blogs as platforms to publish and distribute material about the Penan struggles.

Many of the blogs found while researching for this study contained republications of news articles from other sources, which gives the articles exposure to a much wider audience. As noted, in many cases users had posted comments on the blogs expressing views that would generally be deemed dissident. Many blogs contained links to transnational human rights organizations, allowing readers to examine the Penan issue in more depth; a number of them were set up with the means to donate money to both domestic and transnational NGOs. Some local bloggers have gained the attention of international NGOs like Human Rights Watch, which has published reports of human rights abuses in places where blogs are used as sources of information because of the difficulty in gathering such information from government agencies or people on the ground. Reports on issues involving human rights abuses and blogs can be found on the HRW website and cover regions such as Cuba, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia and India.

Linkages from local activist blogs to transnational advocacy groups are important to this study because in order for change to occur, relevant information about the Penan struggles must be shared among multiple parties at varying levels. The following blogs relate

to the Penan struggles; they contain dissident material as well as evidence for Keck and

Sikkink's boomerang pattern, which can ultimately aid in the creation of change. Some of

these blogs also contain tools for readers to take action in helping the Penan through

donations, letter writing campaigns and online petitions.

Friends of the Penan is an anonymous blog devoted to the Penan plight. The site

contains links to organizations that have taken up the Penan cause, including Bruno Manser

Fonds, rengah.c2o.org, rimba.com, Survival International and The Borneo Project. The site

also has its own Facebook group to expand its audience. Many of the links on the site contain

articles written by NGOs about human rights and environmental struggles but they also

provide users with tools and templates for writing letters to their members of parliament,

various embassies and larger transnational advocacy groups.

Susan Loone's Blog is a human rights publication focused on issues that affect

Malaysians. The biographical section of the blog informs us that Susan Loone is a Malaysian

citizen living in Thailand who works as a freelance human rights writer and for an NGO. Her

blogsite contains three sections called "free speech zones" on which users may post anything

that they wish for other users to view. In her article "Policeman vs Penan Girl: Who is Worth

More?" she criticizes the Malaysian government's lack of effort in handing cases of Penan

girls and women raped by loggers. She points towards transnational organizations as those

most likely to solve the problem as domestic inquiry has produced few positive results. She

writes that "due to the lack of confidence in the Sarawak police among the local community,

suggestions have been put forth in the past by numerous groups, including a coalition of

NGOs and the Malaysian Bar Council that Bukit Aman (the Royal Malaysian Police

Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur) should lead this investigation" (Loone, 2009).

Malaysia Update is a news blog devoted to Malaysian social political news. It contains mostly posts from other news websites, allowing more readers access to the articles and providing a forum for commentary. The November 15th, 2009 article "Sarawak Police Get Thumbs Down Over Penan Girls Rape Cases" discusses the usual criticisms of the government's responses to helping the Penan seek justice for the crimes committed against Penan people. The article goes on to discuss the efforts of Jok, a Catholic priest turned social activist, in aiding the Penan with this particular struggle. As president of the Sarawak Indigenous Rights Association, Jok is quoted saying that "his organization would meet soon to discuss the latest steps to be taken by its members with regards to the police failure in handling the Penan cases," and that "He will also contact his counterparts in other human-rights organizations in the state and country to discuss the matter." This suggests that he will use his contacts with transnational advocacy groups to aid his organization in producing the results that they were unable to achieve through dialogue with the Malaysian government (Malaysia Update, 2009).

The Global Sociology Blog is an American-based independent blog about human rights and international politics. The author, though partially anonymous, claims to be a lecturer at an American Midwestern university. The blog is connected to transnational advocacy groups through the author's contributions to them. She claims to be a partner of conscience with Amnesty International, a sponsor of children though Children International, a microfinance lender through Kiva.org and an advocate for Survival International, an international NGO devoted to protecting indigenous peoples. In the August 5th, 2009 article "Shoving Indigenous People Out of the Way (again)," she informs readers that the Penan are only one of many indigenous groups in the world that face threats from deforestation and

agribusiness. She makes a compelling point about the mismatched priorities of transnational groups that advocate to end the destruction of Sarawak's rainforests by writing that "The threat to endangered wildlife attracted more NGOs (as is often the case) such as Greenpeace, in that case" (SocProf, 2009).

The above examples reflect the channels of communication that exist between activist bloggers at a local level and transnational organizations. Local activists who have given up hope that the government of Malaysia will initiate social change with regard to the Penan issue direct their concerns towards transnational organizations as a means of initiating that change. Some of the writers are ordinary individuals, some are not identified, while others are amateur journalists. In some cases, the dialogue between the local and the transnational is encouraged, supported and maintained by the links or means of contact provided. The following are examples of the boomerang effect.

SUARAM is a Malaysian based human rights NGO which that works in Southeast Asian countries and receives most of its funding from private donors. Their projects involve police accountability, the right to a fair trial, the documentation and monitoring of human rights abuses, public outreach, the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers, and international solidarity. They are aligned with local activist groups as well as regional and international organizations. Partners listed on the website include the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID), Alternative ASEAN for Burma (ALTSEAN), the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT), Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and SAPA (Solidarity for Asian People's Advocacy), a group working in conjunction with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations).

Posted on *SUARAM's* blog is a media release from the Indigenous Peoples Network of Malaysia calling for action on aiding the Penan through transnational campaigns. The article was released on September 17th, 2009 and is entitled "Sarawak State Government Not Listening to Indigenous Peoples." It quotes the executive director of the Borneo Resources Institute as saying "Rubbishing state leader claims that local NGOs had instigated the incident." He then goes on to say that his NGO and international NGOs had "responded to the communities because no one else wanted to listen" (Rubis, 2009). The article indicates that *SUARAM* is collaborating with smaller domestic NGOs, including the Borneo Resources Institute (BRIMAS), the Sarawak Conservation Network (SCANE), the Network of Indigenous Peoples and Nongovernmental Organizations on Forest Issues (JOANGOHUTAN) as well as the Sarawak Native Women's Association (WADESA). JOAS (The Indigenous Peoples Network of Malaysia) President Adrian Lasimbang has called on the EU to pressure Malaysia's government to end the exploitation of the Penan people and their land through the following plea:

> In solidarity with JOANGOHUTAN, we support the call to the EU to suspend
> FLEG (Forest Law Enforcement and Governance) negotiations with Malaysia in
> view of the flagrant disregard of the government for free, prior informed consent
> and consultation with communities affected by logging and by development
> projects. We additionally call for the Malaysian government to review its policies
> to ensure that international law, especially those concerning human rights and the
> rights of indigenous peoples, is mainstreamed (Rubis, 2009).

The world's largest human rights NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have often used blogs as sources of information on human rights abuses in

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countries where freedom of speech is limited. This can be confirmed by their interests in protecting the rights of bloggers in various countries, as well as in their referrals to blogs in various human rights reports available on their web. One of HRW's articles is "Malaysia: Don't Censor or Harass Independent Websites," which was written in response to the government's investigation of Malaysiakini.com for posting imagery of a protest that was deemed offensive by the Communication and Multimedia Commission. Amnesty International also obtains information from blogs and advocates for the protection of blog authors in Malaysia. Its website features a full report titled "Malaysia: Arrest of Blogger Highlights Continued Repression." Amongst the myriad articles on Amnesty's website, many are written by bloggers for Amnesty.

Survival International is a UK-based Indigenous Human Rights NGO with supporters in 82 countries. It is a registered charity in Britain, with 501(c)(3) status in the US and the equivalent in France, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain. Many of the independent blogs about the Penan plight examined for this study reference SI as the source of their information. Their publications are posted in blog form, allowing readers to comment. Many of the commentators on the site are themselves bloggers who link their websites together and offer information about human rights cases on the ground. Each article on the website has a link to assist in finding out more information via SI's official blog, where users can contribute to the content of the articles and where discussions can take place.

Copies of SI's November 2nd 2009 report entitled "Blow to Malaysian Palm Oil Industry as UK Bans Advert" can be found on a large number of Sarawak-based, Malaysia-based and overseas-based blogs. As well, other articles about Malaysia's palm oil industry are circulating on the websites of bloggers, the sites of other NGOs and news sites. This

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article states that "The UK's Advertising Standards Authority banned the magazine advert, placed by the Malaysian Palm Oil Council" (Survival International, 2009, November 2). The advert claimed that Malaysian palm oil was "sustainable" and contributed to "the alleviation of poverty, especially amongst rural populations." The article rejects this, stating that "oil palm plantations and logging are destroying the forests the Penan hunt and gather in, and polluting the rivers they fish in. Without their forests they have difficulty finding enough food" (Survival International, 2009).

The international pressure exerted on Malaysia by the UK government through the banning of this advertisement can be attributed in part to the work of activists who gather and use information about what is happening to the Penan and the rainforests in Sarawak and who use a variety of communication tools, one of which is blogging. On *Malaysia Today,* Malaysia's most popular blog, one author posted an article from *The Star* that criticizes the United Kingdom's actions, claiming that "It is not fair to link a business issue with a native rights issue because they can be dealt with separately." The most popular user comment on the article come from a writer who identifies herself as "Dreamlady." She writes: "UUMNO regime, how do you feel to be snubbed by British government over the oil palm advertisement and the reason for doing so!!! [It] Serve[s] you right for robbing the rural folks of their lands!!!" (Then, S, 2009, November 6). Two readers of the article disagreed with "Dreamlady," but a total of 64 users registered support of her comments.

The UK's banning of palm oil advertising is an example of the effect that activism can exert on human right issues. Clearly, the boomerang pattern described by Keck and Sikkink (1998) is highly dependent on communication between local activists and foreign parties. As seen in the some of the above examples, web tools such as blogs have become

integral to raising awareness, sharing information, facilitating discussion, networking and fundraising, usually via links provided on a particular site. This is not to say that the boomerang effect is solely a product of the information age; in fact, it has been occurring with respect to the Penan case since the 1990s, even before the internet went mainstream. Keck and Sikkink claim that "efforts of the NGO networks and activists were remarkably successful" and quote an October 1995 issue of *Business Times* which states that "Malaysia's timber exports to Europe have fallen by half since 1992 due to pressures from environmental groups on local and municipal governments in Europe to boycott or ban tropical timber products" (p. 160). While acknowledging that the blogophere is not the sole vehicle for delivering on the ground information to transnational organizations in their efforts to promote human rights, it certainly fulfills an important role in places like Malaysia where laws restrict open political discussion and dissent via traditional media.

CONCLUSION

All news media publications, whether blogs, print and online newspapers, or reports from international NGOs, communicate some form of agenda. News that might appear at first glance to be objective because it relays several perspectives on a particular issue will still usually focus more attention on one viewpoint over another, often by concluding with an interview or item that supports the agenda. As readers become increasingly aware that the news does not necessarily provide an objective perspective and is often framed by the interests of a particular group, many are accessing new forms of online media, such as blogs, in search of alternative perspectives.

This study indicates that government-run media in Malaysia promotes an agenda that strives for and supports economic growth as the most important aspect of the country's development. If growth is the priority, then restrictions on certain freedoms, such as the freedom of speech can be considered legitimate and necessary in order to speed up the economic process. It would seem that democratic change achieved through dissidence and protest could potentially change government and economic policies too quickly so that long-term development planning, such as Mahathir's Vision 2020, might prove more difficult to achieve. The view that governments of developing states are better off limiting certain freedoms is not an uncommon theme seen in development practice, as some believe that an ever-changing democracy can compromise long term government planning.

One might say that modernization is occurring at the cost of environmental and cultural loss, albeit with the ultimate interests of Malaysians in mind; however, in such a multicultural and multiethnic society, finding peoples with the same interests is far from easy. The government press appears to reflect the attitude of many modern/urban Malaysians who may have difficulty reconciling why the Penan would choose to continue to live in the rainforest, essentially as hunter gatherers, when they can enjoy the advantages of development by living in a modern city and can now have the added benefit of enjoying Bumiputra status. The government essentially argues that economic growth is good for all citizens because as the size of the pie grows, each slice for each portion of the population grows too. However, the size of the slices (the distribution of wealth) creates an arena for political discussion among the Malaysian people and, especially among the more impoverished indigenous people, has consistently made it a matter of controversy in the blogosphere.

Based on the transcripts viewed, it would appear that the government-run press promotes their agenda in most cases by highlighting the comments of interviewees whose opinions coincide with their pro-growth and pro-modernization model while allowing a *few* comments from those who oppose this view, perhaps in an attempt to appear objective. The comments from transnational organizations that were examined in this paper differed in that there was no attempt to appear objective, nor was there any effort to avoid looking self-righteous or ethnocentric. The agendas of transnational organizations are clearly stated and in many cases they are marked by emotional responses to burning issues and suggestions for needed change.

The agendas of the selected human rights groups, whether transnational or not, are quite different from the views of the government as social, rather than economic, development is their priority. These groups are most concerned with preserving the cultural traditions of people who are not well represented within Malaysian society, as well as with preservation of the environment. Human rights groups obviously believe in freedom of speech and freedom of expression above all else. They subscribe to the belief that development is not necessarily about economic growth as much as it is about enhancing people's everyday freedoms, thus giving them the choice to modernize at their own pace. Publications authored by human rights groups are quite different from those found in traditional news sources for a variety of reasons. For example, they are not published as often as articles in the traditional news media, and as a result they are more concentrated. The inclusion of the views of human rights groups is significant to this study because such groups play a strong role in persuading governments and people to make changes in policies and paradigms that they may be otherwise accustomed to accepting.

Many Malaysians use blogs as an alternative information source. The greatest advantage that they have over publications from NGOs or the traditional press is that though the author promotes a particular point of view, readers have the ability to post comments about what they have read, which can lead to discussion and debate on the website. Some of the comments associated with a particular blog post may be of little use, but others may contain references or helpful perspectives that can be followed up on by other readers. In some of the blogs examined, people who responded with comments asked the author to re-post certain articles by government newspapers so that they might engage in a discussion about them, an option not usually available on newspaper websites. In researching Malaysian blogsites, it was found that many bloggers copied and pasted articles from newspapers, especially ones with subscription fees, such as *Malaysiakini.com,* thus providing opportunities for more people to access them. One such example of this practice is an article found on Mustafa K Anuar's blog, a popular Malaysian site. It is a response to a comment made by a current minister in the Prime Minister's Office claiming that Malaysians should be wary of blogs because many contain mere allegations, so he suggests that citizens should balance their perspective by also reading government papers (Anuar, 2009, July 15). The post has 25 comments ranging from the humourous to those that are in agreement with the Prime Minister. The culture of blogging, then, has much to do with cross-referencing information to find a middle ground between various attempts by authors to provide readers with the "truth."

One of the common themes in blog writing is reinforcement of the idea that blogs are a better source of media than any other. For example, an article about land claims may contain criticism of the mainstream press as seen with Joseph's criticism of the state-

controlled media (Joseph, 2009, August 19). This capacity for Malaysians to criticize their government online appears to be making blogging increasingly popular within the country. These criticisms can precipitate the first steps in creating changes that will impact some of the of human rights issues in Malaysia. As seen with the Penan situation, local bloggers have an opportunity to communicate directly with transnational activist organizations and to "get their message out." Transnational organizations can, in turn, utilize information found on local blogsites or in user comments on their own blogsites to identify, monitor and bring pressure to governments and corporations regarding human rights issues.

This new information age, then, provides support and exposure for the Penan and similar groups by opening access and connections when traditional channels of communication may be blocked or unavailable. As more people gain access to internet technology, more stories will acquire the potential to be told, and the narratives that closely reflect the real voices of people will have a better chance of being heard. Moreover, as more information is made available and people are better able to understand and use it, they are more likely to "perceive themselves as agents for a social [and] just … society" (Pestana & Swartz, 2008, p. 92).

As seen in this study, those with access to computers and the internet are provided the option of an alternative perspective and they can also exercise greater freedom of expression in Malaysian society. Though Malaysia is a relatively wealthy country, according to a 2002 estimate, 5.1% of the population live below the poverty line (CIA, 2009). This estimate does not take into account the country's high number of migrant workers or unregistered indigenous people. Seventy percent of Malaysians are urban dwellers, 62.8% are internet users (Internet World Stats, "Asia"), and the country has a literacy rate of 88.7% (CIA,

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2009). However, groups like the Penan, who live far from any city centre, are least likely to enjoy these new Malaysian benefits. This has created certain difficulties as much of the debate among blog authors, commentators, human rights publications and newspapers centres around differences in perspective about what the Penan want and need. One group presses the need for growth, modernization, education and development, whereas another sets forth the agenda that the neo-liberal model of development is damaging to traditional ways of life that must be preserved. Yet, the perspective of the people central to this debate may be limited by their own lack of access to the technology needed to enter the discussion.

The Honourable Lloyd Axworthy has commented that the internet can be used as a tool to serve human rights if its availability spans "both urban and rural communities, developing and industrialized countries [and] women and men" (Axworthy, 2002, p.19). Unfortunately, marginalized and voiceless groups who do not have the needed tools or education at their disposal to access modern technology will remain unable to realize the internet's potential to create change. Access to telecommunications and information technology, including blogging, is often hailed as a panacea for positive change with regards to social development and human rights, but this means very little in a world where, according to Lebert, "more people use the Internet in London [UK] than in all of Africa" (2003, p. 224). This lends support to his further observation that "ICTs do not operate independently of complex and independent socio-political, economic, or historical contexts, nor does virtual space operate independently of relationships of power" (p. 224).

McCaughey (2003) notes that though the use of internet media is a step in a positive direction, "technology can deliver the information, [but] it cannot determine the quality of the information, nor can it determine what impact that information will have" (p. 8).

Information and commentary from the Penan people that reaches activists in other countries can have a very positive effect in bringing pressure to bear on the Malaysian government. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that much of the information posted on blogs will be read by only a small number of individuals. Yet, evidence shows that information that does manage to cross borders and land on the desks of transnational NGOs can result in action such as in the banning of the Malaysian palm oil advertisement in the United Kingdom. Evidence of the boomerang effect working through less direct means can also be seen in the donation of funds to NGOs by bloggers and readers. As human rights groups and transnational activist groups continue to pay more attention to blogs, they will have access to expanded amounts information and more accounts of what is happening on the ground. Increased access to and utilization of media publications such as blogs gives activist groups a better awareness of the needs and wants of marginalized groups such as the Penan so that, hopefully, campaigns can be executed that are in their best interest.

Regardless of which perspective a Malaysian citizen holds on the development of the country, he/she will be able to find information in the blogosphere. The news found there is not necessarily more accurate nor more objective than that found in government newspapers, and neither medium should be seen as holding a monopoly on truth. Perhaps the most important advantage of blogs for Malaysian citizens is that access to alternative information sources and user commentary allows them to partake more freely in discussions around news and politics than might otherwise occur. When transnational organizations also become part of these discussions, the result can be creation of change that benefits local people. Ultimately, this relatively new kind of public forum will assist people in drawing their own

conclusions and in taking action regarding the issues of both democracy and development in

Malaysia.

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