

NARCISSISM AND THE NEW CULTURE OF CITIZENSHIP: THE EXPERIENCES OF THREE MALAYSIAN BLOGGERS

Shafizan Mohamed

As citizens, the bloggers have refocused their political attention outside the parliamentary system; they are in the process of redefining just what constitutes the political, often within the contexts of civil society where according to Beck (1999) the boundaries between politics, cultural values, identity processes and local self reliance measures become fluid. Politics is not only an instrumental activity for achieving specific goals, but is also an expressive activity, a way of asserting values, ideals and belonging. In Malaysia specifically, a country where politics is racially and culturally divided, partisan politics are often seen as a way of supporting and resisting the status quo. In an environment where freedom of speech and expression is often contested, citizens are restricted to having their voices heard only at the election polls. For many ordinary citizens, political participation is mostly restricted to being law abiding citizens who discuss issues only with close acquaintances.

Blogging brings in new cultures of citizenship that will have a significant effect on how citizenship and politics are experienced by these bloggers specifically; and by Malaysians in general. Following Dahlgren (2003, 2005 and 2006) and Couldry (2006) who argued that democratic engagement should be framed less by the political lens and be understood more through a cultural approach by identifying new cultures of citizenship that can link politics to the everyday citizen, blogging to be a practice that links private action to national politics. Couldry (2006: 323) asked, 'What would a culture of citizenship look like? Is it perhaps the absence of such a 'culture' that underlies the often-feared decline of politics? Or, more positively, what new cultures of citizenship might be emerging, and where or how can we best look for them empirically?' Responding to his queries, that emerging new cultures of citizenship can be found in how blogging is experienced by Malaysian bloggers.

NARCISSISTIC POLITICS

According to Papacharissi (2010) personalization is an operative feature of online media like blogs. She defines personalization as the ability to organize information based on a subjective order of importance ranked by the self. Inspired by the work of Lasch (1979), Papacharissi (2010) related the personalization of blogging to Lasch's (1979) concept of narcissism. Lasch's (1979) definition of narcissism relates to behaviors structured around the self in post-war, late-capitalist America, where he locates the production of a personality consistent with clinical definitions of 'pathological narcissism'. Lasch's (1979) take on narcissism is not akin to the everyday understanding of narcissism as hedonistic, rather he views narcissism as a very weak sense of self that is in constant need for external validation. On the other hand, Papacharissi (2010) situates her use of narcissism within a postmodern culture that emphasizes self-expression values that is civically motivated.

In relation to blogging, Papacharissi (2010: 145) takes a step further by contextualizing narcissism as a pre-occupation with the self that is self directed, but not selfishly motivated. She employs narcissism 'to understand the introspection and self-absorption that takes place in blogs and similar spaces, and to place these tendencies in historical context'. Narcissistically motivated political views shared on blogs are personally inclined but at the same time meant to contribute to the greater public. While a quantitative analysis of blogs finds them to be largely self-referential (Papacharissi, 2010) and motivated by personal fulfilment (Kaye, 2005), contextual research studies and case studies have found blogs to be liberating (Elsadda, 2010; Somolu, 2007) and democratizing (Tan and Zawawi, 2008; Smeltzer, 2008).

The analysis of the blogging experience agrees with Papacharissi's (2007, 2010) narcissistic take on bloggers. The bloggers often write about issues that interest and benefit them personally. Blogging allows them to dictate and moderate issues that they care for. They do this with a conscious effort to gather support. For many, blogging about politics is hardly deliberate. They usually write about issues that affect their life and become political only after realizing they have audiences