Feeling the chill: Bersih 2.0, state surveillance and 'networked affect' on Malaysian social media 2012–2018

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Introduction

In 2007, Malaysian protest movement, *Bersih*, mobilised 40,000 citizens to take to the streets of Kuala Lumpur, demanding clean and fair elections. In a country that, to that date, had the longest serving ruling party in any democratic country in the world (Barisan Nasional, or BN)[1] it was alleged that electoral irregularities and political corruption were hampering genuine, representative democracy.

The *Bersih* street protest—organised by opposition party leaders and NGOs—was supported by the actions of bloggers and citizen journalists online who were credited with having a major influence on Bersih's rise. The support of bloggers for the movement was believed to be a factor in the 2008 election result, a political 'tsunami' where the ruling coalition failed to obtain a two-thirds majority for the first time since 1973 (Mohd-Sani 2016, Postill 2014, Weiss 2013). From 2011 to 2015 *Bersih* staged three further rallies where supporter numbers swelled to the hundreds of thousands, with organisers using Twitter hashtags (#bersih, #bersihstories) and Facebook to coordinate grassroots campaigns for more accountable democracy.

This connects with scholarship on digital activism and networked social movements (NSMs; see Castells, 2015; Donovan, 2018), highlighting the affordances of digital technologies and social media platforms for *connecting* citizens and *mobilising* protest publics. Some of this scholarship, which has investigated case studies from the Arab Spring (Lim, 2012; Tufecki and Wilson, 2012) to Occupy (Donovan 2018), Indignados (Siapera, 2016; Gerbaudo, 2016) and the Umbrella movement (Lee and Chan, 2018), link the success of social movements to their capacity to 'shape repertoires of contention, frame the issues, propagate unifying symbols, and transform online activism to offline protest' via social media (Lim, 2012, p. 231). Amongst arguments qualifying and in some cases contesting these claims, the role of emotion and affect is often highlighted (Castells, 2015; Jasper 1998). However, there remains a neglect of non-representational theories of affect and their importance to understanding digital and social media technologies and the human entanglements with digital technologies that hasten or arrest social movements. In this article, we draw upon non-representational theories of affect (Hillis, Paasonen & Petit, 2015; Dean, 2010; Papacharissi, 2015a, 2015b; Kuntsman, 2016) to highlight how the logic and drives of networks, platforms, algorithms, interfaces, the meanings users inscribe into these technologies and their bodily capacities to react to and be 'moved by' these engagements, drive NSMs forward.

Nonetheless, participation in NSMs has also invited skepticism from theorists who argue that participation can occur with only a casual interest in the event—what Gladwell refers to as 'slacktivism'— which makes sustaining the initial mobilization challenging (Tufecki, 2017). There has also been a return in the scholarship to Morozov's claims that rather than democratizing media and empowering everyday citizens, social media more easily lend themselves to manipulation and repression by authoritarian states, corporate platforms and socially divisive actors (Morozov, 2011). Much of this literature concentrates on government laws to interdict speech, or blocking and filtering technologies to disrupt digital infrastructure, interrupting vital flows of communication between organisers and protesters (Howard & Hussein, 2013, Khazraee & Losey, 2016, Tufecki, 2017). There is also a growing focus on more subtle techniques adopted by states to manipulate 'affective publics' (Papacharissi, 2015a, 2015b), that is through trolls and

misinformation campaigns (Freedom House, 2017; Wooley & Howard, 2017; Bradshaw & Howard, 2017), impacting on capacities for 'informed citizenship' and the functioning of democracy.

The Malaysian state response to *Bersih* provides a powerful example of these techniques, as the findings presented here show. The article draws from data collected in two ongoing projects: The *Malaysian Digital Citizenship Project* (Johns) and research into cybertroopers on Malaysian social media (Cheong). The case study analysis provides insight into the former Malaysian government's use of affective techniques to manipulate and control social media discourses and publics, including a strengthening of Malaysia's sedition laws and the *Communication and Multimedia Act* to censor political speech online, producing 'chilling effects'. Analysis of the 'cybertrooping' phenomenon on Malaysian Twitter, particularly attempting to suppress the *Bersih* movement, provides insight into the use of paid actors to manipulate political discussion on social media, generating uncertainty and confusion.

The contribution the article makes to scholarship is twofold. Firstly, it advances understanding of the relationship between affective publics, NSMs and authoritarian state power via a case study not often represented in research (the Malaysian internet and the *Bersih* social movement). Secondly, it draws upon *non-representational theories of affect* to identify the way states 'modulate' the mood of citizens via interventions designed to freeze, chill, and depress participation in social movements, often beyond cognitive awareness (Dean, 2010; 2015, Massumi, 2005, 2010; Penney, 2010). Nonetheless, as the election defeat of BN in May 2018 shows, power is fluid and changeable in the *hybrid media system* (Chadwick 2013). Whilst social media is now more often than not identified with the amplification and spread of far-right politics and authoritarianism, alternatives continue to emerge. This article examines the 'freezing' techniques employed by the Malaysian state from 2012 to 2018, up until the election defeat, whilst also offering some insight into the repertoires of action activists used to redirect communications to keep the *Bersih* movement and its spirit for reform alive in the same period.

Affective social movements, state interference and the freezing of public participation

Mobilisation, connection and stuckness

In theories of the public sphere, when private individuals enter the 'public' realm and deliberate over issues this is said to produce 'the public' as a collective voice, capable of holding state authority to account (Habermas, 1989). Recently, however, public sphere theories have become a counterpoint to thinking about what forms of power matter in an era of deepening globalisation and digital connectivity, with digital technologies, social media platforms and their human and non-human interactions shaping new communication worlds and politics that are more fragmented, personalised, transnational, 'connective' and affective (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Papacharissi 2015a, 2015b).

Theorists of NSMs have argued that this empowers social movements who have capitalised on social media's network effects, connecting citizens to political decision-making in a context of growing mistrust of parliamentary democracy (Vromen, 2017). In this vein, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) claim that the logic of 'collective action', which typified social movements in the 60s and 70s, and which focused resources on collective identity formation, issues framing and co-ordination, has been replaced by 'connective action' driven by 'personalised content shared across networks' (see also Papacharissi, 2015a; Lee & Chan, 2016). Notwithstanding valid criticisms arguing for the continued significance of collective identity to social movements (Gerbaudo & Trere, 2015), Bennett, Segerberg and Walker (2014, p. 234) have identified that loose networks of participants who interact with NSMs through content *production*, *curation* (bringing visibility to important content via the retweet (RT), @mention functions and favoriting functions), and *dynamic integration* enable organisers to co-ordinate protest activities through a lighter touch (see also Tufecki & Wilson, 2012; Postill, 2014; Lee and Chan, 2018).

Nonetheless, in some cases the role of organisers is more instrumental, 'gaming' platform algorithms; that is, utilising keywords in hashtags to maximise visibility and virality of messages (Donovan, 2018; Postill, 2014; Bruns, Highfield & Burgess, 2013). Relating this to *Bersih*, it has been argued that marketing campaigns focused on shaping 'new discourses of identity and belonging' were enabled through the #bersih and #bersihstories hashtag (Khoo, 2013; Postill, 2014), strengthening social ties between networked citizens and helping to mobilise crowds in the hundreds and thousands at street rallies. Success was also counted by the diversity of publics mobilized. Scholars have described how the #bersihstories hashtag enabled digital stories to be uploaded, shared and curated via the hashtag, brokering connections that bridged ethnic, class and racial fractures, shaping new "transethnic solidarities" (Postill, 2014; Khoo, 2013; Weiss, 2014). This is important in the Malaysian context, given that social movements had previously tended to be formed through ethnic or religious organisations, thus failing to challenge a political system where racial and religious polemics (i.e. playing ethnic groups off against one another) was seen to maintain the ruling party's political power (Weiss & Hassan 2002).

Postill also draws on the affective dimensions of participation, arguing that the explosion of digital activism that occurred in Malaysia in the late '90s was triggered by two developments: i) the decision of the state to invest heavily in broadband and digital technologies to drive foreign investment, which opened up the internet to a generation of bloggers, activists and citizen journalists; and ii) indignation at high levels of political corruption in the country, which hampered democracy. The latter indicates that, beyond digital and social media's *connective* and *mobilising* aspects, *affect* and *emotion* were central to *Bersih*, bringing it in line with the global wave of protests analysed by Castells (2015). Viewing emotion and affect as a driver of social movement participation is consistent with sociological approaches identifying emotions (often of indignation, fuelled by a sense of social depravation or injustice) as factors that enable individuals to overcome fear or apathy to participate in protest (Melucci, 1996; Jasper, 1998). Some scholars also highlight how emotions such as anger act as *accelerators* or *amplifiers* of protest (Van Stekelenberg & Klandermanns, 2013, p.892). Nonetheless, there is less regard for non-subjective, pre-personal and non-representational understandings of affect in this literature, despite its suitability for analysing human-machinic agencies that are increasingly shaping social and political arrangements of power in a digital era.

This is well captured in *Networked Affect*, where Hillis, Paasonen and Petit (2015) examine how digital networks and social media enable new modes of participation, and new public formations, underpinned by desire for intensity, instantaneity of connection, emotionality of expression and provocation 'rather than a desire for negotiation' (Paasonen, 2015, p. 33; Papacharissi, 2015a, 2015b; Johns and McCosker, 2013). In the introduction of the collection, the editors frame their definition of affect around theories rooted within phenomenological traditions, that is referring to bodily capacities to 'affect and be affected' in encounters with other bodies, machines and force relations (Deleuze, 1992; Massumi, 2002), resulting 'in increases or decreases of our potential to act' (Hillis et al., 2015, p. 6; see also Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). In its relationship to NSMs, affect is often thought of as a pre-personal 'intensity' and 'drive' that is amplified and channelled through interactions with digital and social media in a manner that has the capacity to 'stir social action' (Hillis et al., 2015, p. 3).

Taking account of these more-than-human forms of agency, Papacharissi (2015a, 2015b) refers to the swarms of participants engaging in topics trending on Twitter, using hashtags, retweets, @mention functions and like buttons to boost the messages of NSMs, as *affective publics*, assembled around/by platforms that 'invite affective attunement, support affective investment, and propagate affectively charged expression' (Papacharissi 2015a, p.2). With reference to hashtags used in the Occupy and Arab Spring movements, this allowed individuals to 'feel their way' into the movement, with the 'phatic', affective 'refrain' of content tweeted and then retweeted, building a sense of momentum and inevitability.

Papacharissi (2015a, p.12) found 'repetition reinforced the affective pace of the movement online, producing and reproducing the collaborative chant of a revolution, well before one could process whether what was going on was actually a revolution'. This suggests that rational calculations are often secondary to pre-emotional, bodily reactions that arise from being wired into a socially mediated event. But Papacharissi also advises that this participation can have ambivalent political effects:

> At times of collaborative mobilization, affect can sustain a feeling of community that can reflexively drive a movement forward, or entrap it in a state of engaged passivity (Papacharissi, 2010, p.12).

Jodi Dean's *Affective Networks* (2010) captures the latter trend by observing that politically engaged publics on social media are held in the thrall of its circulatory drives and 'feedback loops'. This is because social media platforms are a part of a 'circuit of communicative capitalism' designed to keep users stuck in a perpetual 'loop' of clicking, liking and sharing, thus contributing to the profits of the platform operators, without ever achieving concrete change. Dean uses the term 'stuckness' to describe this stasis, arguing that affective participation is most closely connected to anxiety, insofar as the compulsive forms of democratic participation social media encourages, the multiple connections that 'stir' and mobilise political action are doomed to forever 'miss' their object (political change), instead circling back to feed the 'communicative circuits of capitalism' (Dean, 2010, p.21).

In a related way, Lauren Berlant (2010) describes the kinds of political depression that can be produced via participation that generates attachment to an object of hope that has 'compromised conditions of possibility' in her work *Cruel Optimism* (2010, p.97). Whether it is security and patriotism, as promised by states manufacturing anxiety in the 'war on terror' (see below), or investment in social change movements and hope that participation will contribute to new ways of doing politics, these participatory practices are captured within circuits of 'communicative capitalism', state surveillance and control (Dean, 2010).

State surveillance, manipulation and freezing of participation in NSMs

Dean adds that it is not just corporations who profit from this circulation of affect, but that states are also capable exploiters of affective social media. She particularly identifies how platform algorithms and functions provide the technical means for states to manipulate affective flows of communication through the use of 'paid commentators and political bots' that multiply messages favourable to states (see Dean, 2010; Freedom of the Net, 2017). In analysing the influence of these 'message force multipliers' Dean argues that 'repetition itself has an affective impact' (Dean, 2010, p.26). It persuades and can produce a feeling of authority without need for rational argument and deliberation. By this logic, the more fake Twitter accounts pumping out a negative message about an opposition figure, regardless of the content, will have an effect. This logic has gained terrible clarity in recent times with the use of 'cybertroopers' or, in the case of *Cambridge Analytica*, the use of big data to hack publics and circulate misinformation or biased information, thus manipulating voting publics and election outcomes.

This reinforces counter-views to arguments that digital and social media empower pro-democracy activists who are able to channel affective and intensive media flows to contest the political status quo. Rather these accounts show that the same affordances are also available to authoritarian states and socially divisive political actors to support conservative political agendas. In this vein, scholars have argued that platform-enabled practices of racism (Matamoros Fernandez, 2017; Ahmed, 2004), gender-based discrimination and homophobia (Paasonen, 2015; Sundén & Paasonen, 2018), as expressed in flaming and trolling practices for example (Kuntsman, 2009; McCosker & Johns 2013; Bulut & Yörük, 2017; Paasonen, 2015) or the circulation of racist memes (Johns, 2017) also connect and mobilise publics, although often in harmful ways, and with violent political effects. Ahmed understands that these harms are generated

through affective economies (Ahmed, 2004) where emotions accumulate through the circulation of texts and images, while Kuntsman highlights how these feelings are 'intensified (or muffled) and transformed through digital circulation and repetition' (2012, p.1).

This link between affect, repetition and *movement*, is examined from a different angle by theorists examining state strategies to quieten political activists and social movements, i.e. via Denial of Service (DoS) attacks, or tapping into the data mining operations of platforms to engage in covert surveillance of targeted populations (Tufecki, 2017; Postill, 2014; Howard et al, 2011; Morozov, 2011). This is closely connected to the concept of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2015; Dencik & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017), which examines the increasing interdependencies of platforms (and their data mining operations) and state-based projects of surveillance and control. These relationships have been examined through case studies examining: the Snowden leaks, revealing the capacity of the NSA to access metadata and private communications of citizens via telecommunications providers (Hintz, Dencik & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017); and the use of digital technologies to intervene in activist communications in Iran (Khazraee & Losey, 2016; Howard, 2010, 2013) and Egypt (Tufecki & Wilson 2013; Tufecki, 2017) by shutting down mobile networks or using deep packet inspection systems to slow information flows (Howard & Hussein 2013). These states were also said to be involved in paying informants to spread misinformation or biased information on activist websites and social media (Howard, 2013, p.2). These entanglements have been associated with 'greatly enhanced possibilities [for states and private companies] to understand, predict and control citizen activities' (Hintz, Dencik & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017, p.732) with negative consequences for civil liberties and democracy, with mass surveillance being understood to produce 'chilling effects' on political speech (Penney, 2017).

Pre-empting these new political realities, Massumi (2005, 2010) and Anderson (2010, p.162), in the early 2000s, examined George W Bush's use of mainstream media to 'modulate' the circulation and distribution of affects to manufacture fear in support of the 'war on terror'. Anderson argued that states 'work in conjunction with the force of affect, intensifying, multiplying, and saturating the material-affective processes through which bodies come into and out of formation' (2010, p.162), while Massumi applied the logic to Bush's affective attunement of the public mood, i.e. using media to manufacture threat and fear to subdue political unrest and justify pre-emptive war (2010). Dean also examined Bush's information wars and the force of *repetition* on shaping public feelings and moods, i.e. by use of military 'talking heads' deployed on mainstream news networks parroting administration messages (2010, p.25). This is a point also reflected in reports that the vast number of tweets flowing through Twitter publics aren't sent by humans at all but 'automated zombies' deployed to influence and manipulate publics through repetition rather than the 'force of the better argument' (24).

In this article, we draw upon theories which highlight the affective force of repetition in social media participation, to examine how the intensity of repetition mobilised mass participation in Bersih, but also contributed to 'stuckness', uncertainty, fear and depression/apathy. We deploy these concepts to show how bodies and speech can be frozen by governmental techniques, drawing upon the force of repetition via the use of paid trolls or 'cybertroopers' and the force of laws to silence political speech on social media, both of which, we argue, trigger responses which slow and chill bodies, speech and participation of individual protesters, but also the collective body of social movements[2].

Methodology

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[2] The way we put this concept to work is different to the 'tactical freeze' that Tufecki (2017, p.77) describes, where she highlights how leaders of movements become 'frozen' by the tactical successes of the initial mobilisation, and don't know what to do beyond this to sustain collective efforts toward political change.

Cybertroopers Project

The research of Cheong is organised around the analysis of various data sets, including news articles, emails and data mined from social media. This paper focuses on the analysis of Twitter data mined on April 28, 2012, the day of the Bersih 3 rally, and provides insight into manipulation of information on the Internet in Malaysia through the use of 'cybertroopers'.

Sample: Using The Archivist Desktop (www.tweetarchivist.com), tweets using the #bersih hashtag – which was used by *Bersih*– were collected between 9.28am and 8.18pm Malaysian time, before the rally began at 2pm and several hours after it ended at 4pm. As with many other Twitter studies, the data set is not fully representative of all relevant tweets sent on that day because 1) other hashtags were also used (for example, #bersih2, #bersih3, #bersihreport, #bersihstories) or tweets about the rally were sent without a hashtag and 2) Twitter API rules and the unknown algorithms of analytics tools make it impossible to know exactly which tweets were collected, what was excluded and how many there were in total. However, the nature of the analysis conducted here – in this specific case, looking for patterns involving duplicate tweets – mean that the limitations listed above do not significantly affect the results of the study.

Analysis: The object of the analysis was to identify patterns of tweets where the content was similar or the same, but where the messages were sent from multiple user accounts. To identify these tweets, the data was cleaned and duplicate tweets – identified through Twitter IDs which are unique to each tweet – were removed using Microsoft Excel. This left 54,790 tweets in the data sample for analysis. The removal of duplicate tweets was essential to ensure that any other further duplicates found in the data sample – specifically, with the content of the tweets – could be analysed for instances of 'cybertrooping', the common term for trolls engaged by political parties and other political organisations to intervene in Twitter or other social media debates to spread messages favourable to the government, or to discredit the opposition. This analysis is designed to identify likely patterns that show the existence of organized efforts to manipulate social media publics, including tweets that duplicate, to be disseminated by multiple persons. These tweets – or multiple messages – were found through a search for 'Duplicate Values' through Excel's Conditional Formatting feature. A thematic analysis of the tweets was then conducted to identify patterns in the messages, which will be discussed in the case study section of this paper.

Malaysian Digital Citizenship Project

The Malaysian Digital Citizenship project (Johns) provides qualitative insights into the 'cybertrooping' phenomenon whilst also revealing how the force of laws (Multimedia and Communication Act, Sedition Act) produced 'chilling effects' on political speech and action on social media, leading, in some cases, to withdrawal from participating in *Bersih* online campaigns and street protests in 2016.

Participants and sample: Malaysian Chinese youth (aged 18–24) residing in Kuala Lumpur were chosen as a participant group owing to media and scholarly accounts that Malaysia's two sizeable ethnic minority communities (Chinese and Indian Malaysian) experience themselves as second-class citizens as a result of Malaysia's citizenship laws and redistributive policies. These laws, although aiming to equalise economic and social opportunities between members of the dominant Malay group and other ethnicities, enshrine discriminatory citizenship laws and practices that distribute political rights unevenly. Moreover, scholars have noted the large participation of Malaysian Chinese youth in *Bersih* street rallies and in their social media campaigns (Lim, 2016; Khoo, 2016).

Research Phase One: The first phase of data collection took place from June 2016 to November 2016, in Kuala Lumpur. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 young people over a 4-week period. These interviews included use of digital ethnography 'scroll back' (See Robards, 2013), 'walk through' and 'video tour' (Pink et al, 2016) methods, where young people scrolled through their social media profiles to

'show' the researcher which platforms and apps they use for different social, political and leisure activities; the composition of their social networks on these platforms; what forms of civic and political participation they engaged in; and what platform affordances and functions enabled these types of engagement. During this time Johns made contact with two Melbourne-based Malaysian students through word of mouth. Both were involved in the organising committee for the *Bersih* 5 rally in Melbourne, staged as part of *Global Bersih's* transnational activities. They were invited to participate in the study to broaden the field site.

Research Phase Two: Toward the close of 2017, following the Malaysian General Election, follow up interviews (using scroll-back and walk through method) were arranged and conducted with five of the participants from phase one of the research (interviews were conducted in June 2018). In addition, ethnographic interviews were also conducted with eight new participants. This brought the total number of youth participants in the study to 29. The second phase of research used the same questions as the first phase, but modified slightly to address participation in the May 2018 election, where BN was unexpectedly swept from power with a large youth voter turnout.

Bersih: Online and in the streets (2008–2016)

Bersih originally started out as a Joint Action Committee for Electoral Reform, made up of opposition political parties, civil society groups and non-governmental organisations, in 2005. Following its official launch a year later, Bersih – which means *clean* in the Malay language – organised its first rally on Nov 10, 2007, mobilising thousands of Malaysians to take to the streets calling for electoral reform.

In 2008, the organisation dropped its partisan connections to opposition parties and figures, and changed its name to Bersih 2.0[3] – The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections. However, its demands worked to the advantage of the opposition (Welsh, 2011) and it continued to get strong support from the political parties over the years. Bersih's demands included the cleaning up of the electoral roll, reforming the postal ballot process, use of indelible ink during elections, a minimum of 21 days campaign period and more,[4] thus it was reformist rather than radical in its political goals. Nonetheless, for the Bersih 4 rally in 2015, it added a call for the resignation of then-Prime Minister Najib Razak, amid accusations of excessive corruption.

Besides strong support from the opposition parties, Bersih also benefited from the emergence of new media technologies for both organisation and mobilisation (Pepinsky, 2013). In fact, the choice of name for its relaunch – Bersih 2.0 – came from growing recognition of the importance of web 2.0 affordances, particularly blogging culture, to the broadening of the movement's support base. The reliance on such technologies was a matter of political survival and a fight for relevance in a country where the use of the sedition act (then targeting legacy media) and other laws making political and contentious speech a criminal act, drove activists and ordinary citizens to either avoid political speech, or to use alternative means of communicating among themselves.

With Malaysia's mainstream media outlets being controlled by the BN government, Bersih relied on blogs, online news sites and platforms like Twitter and Facebook to mobilise supporters. Scholars have noted that Bersih's "embeddedness in social media" (Welsh, 2011) allowed for a fostering of sense of community, often across ethnic, religious and partisan differences, making up what Lim (2017, p.221) calls "a nation that is a crisscrossing of multiple solidarities online". The movement has long moved beyond the geographical borders of Malaysia, and over the years, have seen the emergence of a "parallel movement"

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[3]While the Coalition is officially known as Bersih 2.0, the movement is generally known to the public as just Bersih (Lee, 2014). In this article, we refer to the movement simply as Bersih, except when referring specifically to the organisation.
[4]http://www.bersih.org/

known as Global Bersih with rallies having been held in 85 cities across 35 different countries, organised via Facebook and Google Groups (Lee, 2014, p.905).

In response to the success of Bersih's online strategy, the government and authorities began to employ their own affective, although less visible, social media strategies. BN's official line was that the Bersih rallies were a threat to peace (Pepinsky, 2013), and this was consistent with the anti-Bersih messages produced by cybertroopers sympathetic to BN in discussions on social media platforms (discussed later in this article). The Royal Malaysian Police adopted the use of social media platforms in retaliation to staged rallies; in 2011, they released selected videos online and encouraged citizens to inform on rally participants amid accusations of police brutality (Postill, 2014). At the Bersih 3.0 Duduk Bantah (sit-in) rally in 2012, the police released videos on Twitter showing alleged protestors engaging in unlawful activities. In addition, Bersih has claimed that its website came under DoS attacks in the days ahead of both its 2011 and 2012 rallies – a tactic that other websites critical of the government such as news portals *Malaysiakini* and *The Sarawak* Report had experienced.

The use of these techniques was also accompanied by increasingly sophisticated methods used by government and non-government actors to manipulate social media publics, in some cases through deliberate disinformation campaigns. In the Malaysian context, this has been said to have been enabled by 'cybertroopers', and more recently through social profiling and individualised targeting of political messages. Claims, for example, that BN employed Cambridge Analytica in their 2013 election campaign to win the key battleground seat of Kedah caused alarm among human rights organisations who argued that it enabled political organisations to sabotage democracy through manipulation of election outcomes.

As the case study analysis will show, both the mobilisation of public support for Bersih and the counter-strategies used by the state to quell participation in the movement demonstrate that strategic interventions into the circulation of affect on social media are crucial to understanding how social and political arrangements of power are shaped in a digital era, with significant outcomes for how democracy is enabled, performed and frozen.

Findings

Malaysian social media and cybertroopers: the force of repetition and the production of uncertainty and fear

In 2017, Freedom House highlighted online manipulation of information as a major trend globally, contributing to the decline of internet freedom (Kelly, Truong, Shahbaz, Earp, & White, 2017). The report found that elections in at least 17 countries were affected by manipulation and disinformation strategies (Kelly et al., 2017). More recently, a report from the Computational Propaganda Project, Bradshaw & Howard (2017, p.4) referred to "cyber troops" – "government, military or political-party teams committed to manipulating public opinion over social media" – which they found to exist in at least 28 countries worldwide. In particular, these investigations extended upon reports that emerged in the wake of the 2016 US Presidential election, where Russian 'troll farms' were found to be 'spamming' political debate on social media with pro-Trump and anti-Clinton messaging.

Due to the covert nature of cybertrooping, little is known about how it is practiced in Malaysia and the ways in which cybertroopers are mobilised. Nonetheless their existence is well documented (Tapsell, 2013; Tan, 2012). Former Prime Minister Najib Razak, himself acknowledged their existence in a blog post in 2016.[5] Ironically, BN, the party that Najib led until the recent election, has long been reported to have engaged cybertroopers. Months before he wrote the blog post, Najib called for the creation of 'a new

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[5] Najib, 2016, 'Netizens for the Greater Good'.

group of soldiers, which are the keyboard warriors' (Hamid, 2015). Members of his own party, including Tun Faisal Ismail Aziz, who headed UMNO Youth's[6] New Media Unit, has explicitly referred to the online team as 'cybertroopers' (Tapsell, 2013).

It should come as no surprise that social media has increased the occurrence and influence of cybertroopers, and that they have become active in social media discussion of politically significant events like the *Bersih* rallies. For example, in an analysis of 54,790 tweets collected from Malaysian Twitter during the Bersih 3 rally (by Cheong), a total of 36 users responsible for sending 1,117 multiple messages were identified as being engaged in cybertrooping-like practices in action.

A thematic analysis of the tweets showed two kinds of messages being sent by the accounts identified. The first were hundreds of messages that, if seen in isolation, come across as genuine deliberative engagement by citizens who opposed the protest. However, when analysed using a big data analytic approach, this pattern of tweeted messages supports conjecture that the repetitive dissemination of similar scripted messages is part of cybertrooping technique.

As examples, the following tweets, presented verbatim with typos and grammatical errors, were sent by between two and three Twitter accounts found within the dataset. Each of the tweets can also be found on Twitter to have been posted by other accounts not found within the dataset.

> *#bersih likes to intimidate PM n govt..how will they manage Msia then when thats is what they do? reject #bersih now!*

> *#bersih rally is affecting taxi drivers livelyhood! pity they cant make end meets this saturday.maybe sue or claim from #dearambiga*

> *Can we held #dearambiga; Pak Samad and the rest of the committe liable for any loss to others peace loving citizens during #bersih?*

The second type of message, of which there were at least 175, were sent from 22 accounts in the data set. These tweets were found to be generated by two to four different accounts. However, unlike the three tweets mentioned above, these follow a particular messaging pattern in terms of how the tweets are structured. As the sample below shows, the tweets tend to start with "joining #bersih means" followed by a reason – usually negative in nature – why people shouldn't join the rally:

> *joining #bersih means u accept #dearambiga as ur god! an anwar as ur apostle! .. dont join it!*

> *joining #bersih means u r a sinful person because god forbid people to break the law.. dont join it!*

> *joining #bersih means u r exposed to negative subversive within the rally that might affect u n ur family.. dont join it!*

To understand and connect this strategy to the politics of affect as it operates through social media, the way in which messages are repeated by cybertroopers is not dissimilar to the 'message force multipliers' Dean (2010) refers to in *Affective Networks.* In reference to George Bush's media campaign during the Iraq war, Dean highlighted how military analysts were used as 'message force multipliers' to reinforce government messaging on broadcast news media (e.g. Fox news). To work, this strategy relies on the knowledge that 'repetition exerts a force, a compulsion.' It is the mere act of the message being repeated and circulated that grants it authority and legitimacy, beyond the credibility of the source or the content itself. Using the metaphor of information 'war', Dean likens these message force multipliers to the role of

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[6] UMNO Youth is the youth wing of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the largest political party in Malaysia. Together with the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Association, UMNO form the major parties of BN.

army troops being deployed into conflict zones, 'it implies adding lots of forces, putting more people on the ground or in the air, just as one would send more troops into a situation' (Dean, 2010, p.25)

States are able to use cybertroopers as message force multipliers on various platforms, such as Twitter, to disrupt deliberative political discussion, and inflame and polarise debate by using repeated, provocative or offensive speech and images (Bulut & Yörük, 2017), all of which has the potential to arrest the momentum of social movements like *Bersih*. Contextualising the tweets presented here within Dean's understanding of message force multipliers allows us to posit that the content of the tweet, or the argument, is not necessarily what is key to its effectiveness, but instead, it is the force of repetition that reinforces a message or sows seeds of uncertainty in the minds of supporters.

This was supported in responses from some participants in the *Malaysia Digital Citizenship Project*, who mentioned how the use of repeated messages or what some participants referred to as 'spam' in the context of Bersih events led to information overload and confusion being sowed on platforms like Twitter, contributing to their feeling that it was safer not to participate in political chat or action, or support political actors, on the platform:

> *I remember last time I did re-tweet something then there was just a load of spam commenting on the thing (Steven, KL)*

> *Kylie: We don't comment on Twitter... anything can happen, it's quite dangerous.*
> *Interviewer: What do you mean dangerous? What could happen?*
> *Arlene: Might get trolled by others, people comment. So we talk about politics offline. It's safer that way. (Interview with two female students, KL)*

Dean's assertion that there are two ways in which 'message force multipliers' exist is also seen in the examples of cybertrooping we have noted, that is, 'the force multiplication of messages' (the duplicate tweets) and 'multiplication of message forces' (the number of cybertroopers). The latter point is worth noting because one of the ways in which cybertroopers have been reported to operate is through the creation of sock puppet accounts, that is, online accounts created to deceive; in 2016, a Facebook account sending messages supporting Prime Minister Najib was accused of using a profile picture of someone who had passed away (Buang, 2016). Sock puppet accounts on social media do not just provide a mask for users to hide their identities, their existence also speaks to the current discourse on the use of bots and computational propaganda in the manipulation of online sentiment worldwide (Woolley & Howard, 2017), also commented upon by Dean (2010).

Nonetheless, participants also spoke of the content of the tweets sent by cybertroopers as being emotionally 'triggering' for them, leading them to withdraw from participating in political debate. The earlier example illustrates this through tweets referring to *Bersih* as "subversive" or "sinful" which are likely to produce worried or fearful reactions among supporters. They talk about the livelihoods of small business owners, the destruction of Malaysia's future and dishonour to one's family as direct outcomes of participating in *Bersih* rallies and social media campaigns. The following tweets are example of how the emotive content in tweets could cause fear among participants, invoking terms such as "arrest", "traitor" to cause alarm:

> DBKL n PDRM (*City Hall and Royal Malaysian Police*) will have joint operation on #bersih 3.0! tangkap aje n buang negeri pengkhianat2 negara ni! (*just arrest and send these traitors to exile[7]*)

> joining #bersih means u r absolute law breakers since u tend to defy court order!

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[7] Text in bracket are context and translation by authors.

Playing to the cultural complexities of Malaysian politics, the cybertroopers also used other terms which pathologise and racialise participants in *Bersih* rallies. The following example involves the use of the Malay word "biadap", an extreme form of rudeness or disrespect:

> #bersih ni biadap kat PM la..YDPAgong la... now mahkamah pun dia nak biadap jugak..nak teruskan kat dataran..ini kerja gila

> (*#bersih has been disrespectful to the Prime Minister, the King and now the courts as well. They want to continue marching to Dataran Merdeka. This is crazy.*)

Moral propriety is particularly invoked where religion is concerned. The following two examples show how notions of sin aligned with Islamic laws, in a country where over 60% of citizens are Muslims, is used to characterise Bersih and its participants as being traitorous, while the second tweet is designed to instil fear of potential arrest:

> Tok Guru Nik Aziz should come out with fatwa banning PAS members joining #bersih since it was lead by sinful #dearambiga!

> joining #bersih means u r a sinful person because god forbid people to break the law.. dont join it!

The repetition of the term 'sin' here could also be seen as an encoded signifier that 'dog whistles' to the Malay majority, while silencing Malaysia's ethnic minority communities that are consistently singled out and labelled by BN and Islamic parties as sinners and therefore potentially untrustworthy and traitorous, agreeing with research on the racially divisive and violent political effects of racist trolling (Kuntsman, 2009):

> *If you're a Malaysian Chinese and you're a minority in Malaysia, and you say things that are against the current status quo, it does endanger you because you just get sidelined into this one big grey group that is called racist, that is questioning the status quo, that is ungrateful, and you are promptly told to go back to your own country. Never mind that we were born here (Timothy[8], KL)*

The force of law: the sedition act, Communications and Multimedia act and chilling effects

Building on the data which shows cybertroopers employed as an 'affective technique' of state manipulation during *Bersih* 3, interviews and ethnographic observation from the *Malaysian Digital Citizenship Project* provide further insight into a shift in political feelings and capacities to act among project participants. This is highlighted by *Bersih*'s online and offline public mobilisations slowing in the lead up to *Bersih* 5 (2016) as a sense of hopelessness at the failure of the movement to effect change set in. At the same time the capabilities of the state to mobilise their own crowds and use affective prompts to suppress opposition voices was growing. In addition to cybertroopers, project participants identified the expansion of state surveillance and punishment of online dissent, via the *Communications and Multimedia Act* and sedition laws, as having produced 'chilling effects' on political speech dampening and slowing individuals' capacities to continue support for *Bersih*.

Sedition laws prompting a chilling effect on political communication

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[8] Pseudonyms used to protect anonymity

To put claims that sedition laws and the *Communications and Multimedia Act* were successful in suppressing voices of online dissent into context, *Bersih* emerged in an era where there was no censoring of online speech or content. The reason for this discrepancy between online and print media, which was censored tightly, can be traced to the launching of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) in 1996 by then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed (Formerly of UMNO, now leader of PH and the current Prime Minister of Malaysia). The initiative was designed to attract multinational IT companies to base themselves in Malaysia. To secure this investment, the government drafted a bill of guarantees, including a provision that the government would 'never censor the internet' (Mohd Sani & Wahid, 2016). After the 'tsunami' election of 2008, however, and with the introduction of social media as a platform that empowered and connected opposition voices and activists (Postill, 2014), many of these freedoms became curbed.

Sedition laws (preventing offensive speech) and article 263 of the *Communications and Multimedia Act* (preventing unlawful use of the network) in particular have been instrumentalised to target and arrest digital activists and news organisations critical of government since 2008 (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Human rights groups argue that the arrests have produced 'chilling effects' on free speech. Participants interviewed confirmed this, describing a general climate of fear, mistrust and anxiety around what speech may fall under the sedition laws or *Communications and Multimedia Act*, leading to feelings that participating in politics on more publicly visible social media may lead to arrest and even jail time:

> *'On Twitter, there is an increasing trend to use the multimedia communications act to censor political content on social media (…) the act says if you're posting and what you've said has offended somebody (…) So that's really so broad and it's the basis of a criminal offense. (Charlie, Bersih campaign organizer, KL)*

> *The sedition act is omnipresent. It's always in the background waiting for you to make some sort of statement that you can get hauled away for' (Julian, Melbourne)*

Participants cited three high-profile cases that directly impacted on their decision, in some cases, not to post political content on social media. In the first, a teenager living in Johor state was arrested and sentenced to one year in prison under Communication and Multimedia laws for posting a 'derogatory' comment about Johor royalty on a Facebook group called 'TRW Troll Story' (Southeast Asia Globe, June 9, 2016). Julian, a Melbourne based *Bersih* organiser that I spoke to, highlighted how this case raised concerns about what could be said in online chatrooms and Facebook groups that were 'public':

> *I mean just recently someone was arrested for making seditious comments about the Prince of Johor; that is proof of there being a sort of invisible wall when you want to say the things that you do. That's going to be a hindrance for absolutely anyone to speak out your mind (Julian, KL).*

Julian admitted that this event led him to disengage from posting contentious political' content to Facebook 'walls', public forums or Twitter, and to instead became a 'paranoid' user of Telegram (a messenger app using end-to-end encryption). The threat of arrest for engaging in politics on social media led many participants, especially activists who felt their communications were too visible on Twitter and Facxebook, to 'go dark' and use messenger apps employing end-to-end encryption (WhatsApp, Telegram, and Messenger) to engage in political debate.

Platform switching

The prevalence of WhatsApp or Telegram use to engage in political debate but also to organise 'grassroots' activism and political actions was made possible not only be the affordance of end-to-end encryption,

which enabled members to evade state surveillance, but also by the group chat function of these apps, which extended affordances of networking, connecting and experimenting with and testing political views between networks of up to 250 participants. Nonetheless, Julian also disclosed that he did not feel entirely safe engaging in political chat on WhatsApp due to fears that group members could inform on him, a fear shared by another activist Hai Yang:

> 'WhatsApp is quite secure. Just a lot of time we're quite… we're quite caution about who are the members in the chat. Because even though no matter how secure the app is, people can simply do livestream and give it to the police or give it to the administrative of the school' (Hai Yang, KL).

These fears around political WhatsApp groups being monitored by government informers was confirmed in 2016, with the arrest of a man for posting a photo to a WhatsApp group that 'insulted' the Prime Minister (Yee Xiang Yun, 2016, 2 July). The man was charged under Section 263 of the *Communications and Multimedia Act*. Three participants mentioned these arrests as contributing toward their unwillingness to post, comment or even share material online to show support for *Bersih.*

Kathy (KL) a young employee in an auditing firm, was advised by her employer not to post any politically contentious views on social media as a condition of her employment. She worried about this clamping down on free speech, but also felt it was too risky to go against these expectations owing to the high personal cost:

> With all this sedition act coming in and them trying to scare us by saying if you start spreading stuff we could prosecute you and things like – it becomes even more like … I could just end up in jail… I want a change, but how much can I do?

Non-participation in Bersih 5

In light of these conversations a number of activists and other interview participants conveyed fears that *Bersih 5* would have the lowest turn-out since its debut in 2007, a fear that seemed to suggest that public confidence in *Bersih* as the main voice of the opposition in Malaysia had weakened and that state control would remain unchallenged:

> 'towards this rally, I would say, for those who are concerned about politics, concerned about the social, they will join. But they are still considered as the minority because in current situation, Malaysians are quite hopeless with that's happening. They know that probably the nation, our leaders are committing some corruption. But they fear that when they stand up, there's basically nothing they can do…I think maybe very few of them will come out' (Hai Yang, KL).

In Skype calls and face-to-face discussions other participants supported Hai Yang, expressing feelings of cynicism and disinvestment in *Bersih*; owing to the failure of the movement to bring about change:

> 'I do feel passionately about Malaysian politics but I think everyone or at least most of the people I interact with have all reached a state of disappointed but unsurprised. Personally I feel more cynical. I try not to get very emotionally involved anymore. I do what I can when I can but yeah…' (Anita, KL)

Conclusion

By thinking through questions of how the young people in the study participated in *Bersih*'s networked publics, or retreated after key moments or events, and the impacts on the movement overall, this article has examined how networked affect works to mobilise and sustain social movements online, whilst also being employed strategically by states and socially divisive actors to arrest participation in a movement.

In particular, drawing on non-representational theories of affect, the human-machinic agency of 'repetition' located in tweets circulating through the affordance of the RT, which was seen to *mobilise and connect* 'affective publics' to drive a movement forward (Papacharissi, 2010a, 2015a) were also recognised as an affect that had been exploited and manipulated by states to slow the momentum of social movements over a longer duration, through the repeated messages of paid trolls that manufactured fear and uncertainty. In reference to the affective outcomes of this slowing and stalling of a movement, Dean's examination of how participants can get stuck in endless 'feedback loops' of liking and retweeting content showed how repetition can also be linked to feelings of 'stuckness' if these movements don't bring about change quickly. As Berlant describes this can further lead to states of political depression and withdrawal, freezing and slowing communication flows and political engagement essential for the success of social movements.

In analysing the political consequences of the state's manipulation of affect and affective publics on social media, through use of cybertroopers, surveillance and laws that make political dissent punishable, we indicate that stasis and containment as effects of socially mediated biopolitical and affective techniques of state power should be given a higher status in politically engaged research on NSMs. In particular, digital technologies and the wars of affect waged between states and social change movements within and across communities connected via social media, as the findings show, highlight how states are able to contain the bodily capacities of individuals and publics through techniques that 'chill' speech, freeze bodies, and slow flows of communication and sociality online.

Nonetheless, the findings also show how forms of strategic retreat from engaging in politics on 'public facing' social media (SNSs such as Twitter or Facebook) did not necessarily lead to disengagement, but produced creative solutions as citizens and activists used WhatsApp and other encrypted messenger services to evade 'surveillance capitalism', allowing new openings for democracy to re-emerge. This concurs with Berlant who warns against misaligning feelings of stalled hope or political depression with 'affectlessness, apathy, coolness, cynicism, and so on' (Berlant, 2010, p.97):

> Modes of what might be called detachment… are really not detached at all but constitute ongoing relations of sociality.

In this vein, Hai Yang and his friends 'going dark' describes a passion to heat up communications frozen or shut down on visible social media, to use alternative apps to create new flows of political speech, activity and sociality underneath the freeze.

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