



Research in Brief

Social media creating digital environmental publics: Case of Lynas Malaysia



Kiranjit Kaur*

Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Internationally, strategic use of digital media has successfully united activists with voters on a number of social issues. One such issue is the case of Lynas, an Australian rare earth mining company, wanting to set up a refinery in Malaysia prompting Malaysian NGOs to share, collaborate and communicate online with various stakeholders, international NGOs and the public to ensure a slowdown on the operations of Lynas in Malaysia. This paper examines how anti-Lynas public sentiment was successfully created through social media for an activist campaign.

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1. Introduction

Digital publics are created and united on issues by activists through the mobilization of people to participate in social movements, which aim to bring about social changes, as well as influence public opinion and government policies. Increasingly, exchange of information and opinions occurs in cyberspace, facilitated by issue experts promoting the desired interaction for greater civic participation.

1.1. Social media in Malaysia

A previous study by the author showed that other than the large and multinational organizations, a number of Malaysian corporations view information on social media as flippant and non-substantive in content (Chelluri & Kaur, 2012). Scepticism exists because of not knowing the trustworthiness of who is at the other end of the social media communication chain, whether on twitter, Facebook, or YouTube. In issues management, in contrast to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), corporate use of the social media is more reactive – to respond to questions rather than as part of their communication strategy as it is not seen to contribute to the bottom line of financial performance or shareholder value. Nevertheless, social media is seen as a great leveller and a democratic force that has opened up a new realm for wider public participation on social issues, especially in countries where traditional media is controlled by the ruling establishment. Among Asians, Malaysians are recognized to be heavy users of Facebook, twitter, and other social media. Broadband penetration rate among

* Tel.: +60 123813145.

E-mail address: kkludher@gmail.com

the 29.82 million population is at 67.2 per 100 households. According to comScore,¹ social networks account for one-third of the time spent online by Malaysians, with Facebook scoring highest at 46.6 per cent.

1.2. Activism

Tkalac and Pavicic (2003) found that NGOs use public relations as a primary tool to mobilize public opinion in their favour towards a cause or an issue, as opposed to the not-for-profit sector, which is oriented towards building a better community by resolving social problems. The Internet has provided NGOs the added advantage of easily built coalitions to empower communities to coerce for a united cause. NGOs garner expert scientific help to demystify issues and make them comprehensible for public discussion. While the level of activism in Malaysia generally remains low, there are sporadic outbursts of activist movements as in the case of the anti-Lynas movement. Activist groups have rapidly adopted the use of blogs, Facebook and twitter as both their communication strategy and communication tool.

1.3. Controversy surrounding Lynas (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd

Lynas Corporation Ltd. is an Australian rare earths mining company that has two major operations: a mining and concentration plant at Mount Weld, Western Australia, and a refining facility, Lynas Advanced Materials Plant (LAMP) at the Gebeng industrial park in Kuantan, Malaysia. LAMP commenced operations in 2012 amidst strong local opposition, and expanded to become a national and international issue. On 8 March 2011, the *New York Times*² first broke the story on the construction of the 700 million Ringgit Malaysia (230 million USD) world's largest rare earths processing plant in Gebeng, Kuantan, Malaysia, raising public awareness of the LAMP project. The news raised fear among the Kuantan residents about the risks of radioactive exposure, especially with the past experiences of the Bukit Merah incident in Malaysia as well as the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster after the Japanese earthquake. In addition, there was a lack of information on how Lynas would provide a safe permanent waste plan for its toxic and radioactive waste, which would not risk either human health or the environment in Malaysia (Stoplynas, 22 June 2014). This paper, thus, examines the impact of digital media on the strategic social interactions with digital publics by activists, and the creation of public sentiment on the environmental issue surrounding Lynas.

2. Methodology

Information on the controversy and protest surrounding the Lynas LAMP facility in Malaysia was gathered through a qualitative analysis of newsworthy and online local and international newspaper reports, NGO blogs (particularly of *Save Malaysia Stop Lynas* and *Himpunan Hijau*), the Lynas corporation official website, state public documents and technical reports on Lynas, as well as interviews with three key activists representing NGOs actively involved in the issue, the corporate communications officer of Lynas Malaysia, and three Malaysian journalists on the Lynas beat.

3. Discussion

This paper argues and supports the notion that digital media has affected lives of humans around the world in a multitude of ways as well as changed social interactions and the rules that shape them. Although environmental concerns are sometimes overlooked in favour of economic growth, this case illustrates the role of media, especially digital media, in shaping public opinion through socio-political-economic framing of environmental issues. The construction of concerns of a potential leak of radioactive waste posing a dangerous environmental threat to the country was done through cyber protests against Lynas. LAMP, fraught with controversy, generated strong opposition from local residents who consistently protested against the plant with support from Malaysian opposition politicians, online media, and political NGOs.

3.1. Activist intervention

As there were grave doubts that Lynas was in a position to genuinely guarantee the safety of its temporary and permanent disposal of its toxic and radioactive waste, a number of anti-Lynas environmental, consumer, and human rights groups formed a "loose" *Stop Lynas* coalition to organize online and grassroots public protests, besides submitting appeals and affidavits by technical experts to the government. While early protest against Lynas appeared to be politically driven, the issue was taken up by environmentalists and other activists to be propelled further by two key movements: the environmental NGO, *Himpunan Hijau* (Green Assembly) led by Wong Tack; and *Save Malaysia Stop Lynas* (SMSL) founded by Tan Bun Teet.

¹ comScore is a leading internet technology company that measures what the people do as they navigate the digital world.

² Bradsher, K. Taking a risk for rare earths, *New York Times*, March 8, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/09/business/energy-environment/09rare.html>.

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