

Popular Culture
Edited by Anthony Y.H. Fung

**Media and Communication in
the Internet Age**
Edited by Greg Dalziel

**Gender and Sexualities in
Asian Cinema**
Constructing gay, lesbi and waria
images on screen
Edited by Nururtagh

Temporary Chinese Print
Constructing middle-class taste
Edited by Grace

**Visuals, Aesthetics and Affect
in Digital Media**
Constructing mosaic image
Edited by Grace

**Democracy, Media and Law in
Malaysia and Singapore**
A space for speech
*Edited by Andrew T. Kenyon,
Tim Marjoribanks and Amanda
Whiting*

Democracy, Media and Law in Malaysia and Singapore

A space for speech

Edited by
**Andrew T. Kenyon, Tim Marjoribanks
and Amanda Whiting**

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2014
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa
business*

© 2014 selection and editorial material, Andrew T. Kenyon, Tim
Marjoribanks and Amanda Whiting; individual chapters, the contributors

The right of Andrew T. Kenyon, Tim Marjoribanks and Amanda Whiting
to be identified as authors of the editorial material, and of the individual
authors as authors of their contributions, has been asserted by them in
accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents
Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or
utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now
known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in
any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing
from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or
registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation
without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Democracy, media and law in Malaysia and Singapore: a space for speech /
edited by Andrew T. Kenyon, Tim Marjoribanks and Amanda Whiting.

pages cm. – (Media, culture and social change in Asia; 36)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Government and the press–Malaysia. 2. Government and the press–
Singapore. 3. Journalism–Political aspects–Malaysia. 4. Journalism–
Political aspects–Singapore. 5. Mass media–Law and legislation–
Malaysia. 6. Mass media–Law and legislation–Singapore. I. Kenyon,
Andrew T., editor of compilation. II. Marjoribanks, Tim, editor of
compilation. III. Whiting, Amanda, editor of compilation.
IV. Lee, Terence, 1972- Media governmentality in Singapore.

PN4748.M35D46 2014

323.44'509595–dc23

2013025802

ISBN: 978-0-415-70409-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-76233-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Cenveo Publisher Services

Printed and bound in the United States of America by Publishers Graphics,
LLC on sustainably sourced paper.

3 *Malaysiakini's* citizen journalists

Navigating local and national identities online

Janet Steele

As a Malay, I take citizenship for granted, but the Chinese and Indians do not.
(Shufiyan Shukor, *Malaysiakini* video editor (interview, 27 May 2010))

Introduction

In November 2008, the online news portal *Malaysiakini* began an experimental programme in which professional journalists work with ordinary Malaysians, training them to make video reports on local issues and to become 'citizen journalists'. By May 2010, the project, which is funded by a grant from the US Department of State, had trained approximately 220 citizen journalists or 'CJs', who had produced over 900 videos.¹ Many of these videos appeared on *Malaysiakini's* website, and all could be viewed for free on a sister site called CJ.MY. This chapter argues that the term 'citizen journalism' as it is commonly used in the United States is based on a notion of citizenship that is quite different from that which exists in Malaysia. It examines questions such as: Who in Malaysia is interested in becoming a citizen journalist, and why? How do the citizen journalists conceptualize the notion of citizenship, and how does *Malaysiakini* see it? And how do these understandings of citizenship intersect with the more universal norms and ideology of journalism?

In an environment in which ethnic and religious identities are highly politicized, *Malaysiakini* strives to acknowledge local and community differences while promoting a nation that is truly multiracial. This multiracialism was recently put to the test in a dispute over the demolition of Kampung Buah Pala, a Tamil village in the State of Penang. The demolition had national dimensions in that it pitted the newly elected Democratic Action Party (DAP) government of Penang against not only the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN, National Front), but also against Hindraf, the banned Hindu Rights Action Front. In the case of Kampung Buah Pala, the Penang-based citizen journalists offered local perspectives that were left uncovered by the national media and sometimes at odds with stories by *Malaysiakini's* own reporter in Penang. In covering the dispute, *Malaysiakini* was forced to navigate a set of conflicting narratives that were often linked to ethnicity and communalism. At the same time, interactions

with the citizen journalists in Penang forced editors based on the national capital, Kuala Lumpur (KL), to think more explicitly about their own professional norms and practices, especially the role of journalistic objectivity. This chapter will explore these different models of journalism, and draw preliminary conclusions about citizen journalism and the discourse of 'citizenship' in Malaysia.

Malaysiakini, citizen journalism and the idea of citizenship

Malaysiakini was launched in November 1999, less than one year after the arrest of former deputy prime minister and leading opposition figure Anwar Ibrahim.² The news portal was the creation of Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran, two young journalists who started in print journalism at the KL newspaper *The Sun*. Believing that political control had corrupted the values of good journalism in the mainstream media, their plan was to bring independent news, investigative reporting and in-depth analysis to the internet.³

In a country where all publications are licensed, and journalists must work under the restrictions of an Internal Security Act, a Sedition Act and an Official Secrets Act, Malaysian journalists are highly constrained by the law (Brown 2005). Yet in Malaysia there is an unlikely loophole for online news organizations and bloggers. In a 1997 speech in California, where he was courting overseas investment for high-tech industries, former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad pledged a no-censorship policy for the internet (Uimonen 2002). Although on-line journalists and bloggers are subject to harsh defamation laws regulating content, they need not fear losing a licence to publish, because they are not officially recognized as journalists (Tong 2004).

Although the term 'citizen journalism' first became popular in the early 2000s, it has antecedents in the 'public journalism' movement of the 1990s (Gillmor 2004; Rosen 1997). Usually referring to a kind of participatory journalism in which 'the people formerly known as the audience' write and or produce their own news, citizen journalism is generally associated with the ideology of liberal pluralism. In the United States, the word 'citizen' draws upon a Western understanding of civic engagement which, according to sociologist Michael Schudson, dates back to the late nineteenth century. This ideal of the 'informed citizen' grew out of the ideology of the Progressive Era, in which a good citizen was expected to 'exercise citizenship by virtue of informed competence' (Schudson 1998: 173).

In Malaysia, by contrast, discourse around the term 'citizen' has little to do with 'informed competence' and everything to do with ethnicity. As Hefner writes, 'with European help', the divide between Malays and non-Malays came to take on an oppositional quality:

... in assigning different ethnic groups to specialised positions in everything from agriculture to the opium trade, the Europeans crystallised the most essential of supra-ethnic categories: the distinction between indigenous Malayo-Indonesian 'children of the soil' (Malay, *bumiputera*, Indonesia,

Journalists and national identities

but the Chinese and Indians do not.
Ideo editor (interview, 27 May 2010)

Malaysiakini began an experimental work with ordinary Malaysians, issues and to become 'citizen journalism' funded by a grant from the US by 220 citizen journalists or 'CJs', many of these videos appeared online for free on a sister site called 'citizen journalism' as it is commonly understood. It raises different questions such as: Who is the journalist, and why? How do the concepts of citizenship, and how do the understandings of citizenship intersect with journalism?

Diverse identities are highly political and community differences are racial. This multiracialism was a result of Kampung Buah Pala, a settlement that had national dimensions. The opposition party (DAP) government of the Barisan Nasional (BN, National Front) and the Human Rights Action Front. In the early 2000s, citizen journalists offered local news through traditional media and sometimes at the same time in Penang. In covering the set of conflicting narratives that emerged. At the same time, interactions

pribumi) and 'non-indigenous' or immigrant Asians (Indians and, especially Chinese).

(Hefner 2001, 19)

In a country in which Chinese and Indian Malaysians are often called 'immigrants', and *bumiputera* or 'sons of the soil' is an official legal category, just who is a citizen? Again, Hefner explains (2001, 29):

it was to be an asymmetrically differentiated citizenship, which accorded basic citizen rights to Chinese and Indians in exchange for special legal, political, and economic rights for Malays. ... Chinese and Indians who met certain residency requirements were given citizenship rights in exchange for accepting Malay dominance in politics and culture.

Although *Malaysiakini*'s citizen journalism training didn't directly address these issues, the make-up of the people who joined the programme suggests that it is Chinese-Malaysians and Indian-Malaysians who are the most interested in becoming 'citizen journalists', with 79 per cent of the participants being non-Malay.⁴

The citizen journalism project was funded by the US Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, and implemented by *Malaysiakini* and the US-based International Center for Journalists. The first CJ training in Penang was conducted in March–April 2009, and twenty people enrolled. To become 'citizen journalists', participants had to complete four weekends of intensive training in the basics of journalism, camera work, story-telling and video-editing techniques. Penang was one of the two initial sites chosen for the programme because of its importance as a manufacturing centre. Although many of the participants in the programme became adept at producing videos for *Malaysiakini*'s website, the two standouts in the first Penang intake were Beng Hock [Jimmy] Leow and Chan Lilian. Forty-four years old and of Chinese descent, Jimmy is a sales manager for a multinational corporation. Lilian, also 44, is a housewife and well-known blogger.

The training for the first Penang intake ended in May 2009. Jimmy Leow and Chan Lilian frequently worked together after completing the programme, and produced dozens of videos focusing on a wide range of topics ranging from homelessness in Penang to the problems of trash-choked streams, water pollution along Penang's celebrated Gurney Drive, and abandoned state construction projects.⁵ Jimmy explained (interview, 20 December 2009) that as the controversy over Kampung Buah Pala heated up and the CJs were looking for topics for videos, they were naturally drawn to the case.

I think we talked about it in our class, what is happening around Penang, and this Kampung Buah Pala was highlighted by one of the CJs, so hey, why not. Let's go do it! Let's have a look at it.⁶

For these two upper-middle class Chinese Penangites, it was a stretch even to go to Kampung Buah Pala. In the beginning, they didn't know where the village

was, al
view I

I v
th:
sta

wi
at
ar
th
I t

Mal
Buah
Veera
his go
Decen
up by
from 1
goal c
Penan
Kamp
who v
with s
ers of
ingly
journa

Kamp

Kamp
mean
them
more
labou
callec
that g
had s
100-y
natio
was c
sheds
quiet
shady

was, although it was only a 10-minute drive from the Penang Bridge. In the interview I conducted with him on 20 December 2009, Jimmy recalled:

I was telling Lilian, do you know how to go there? No. There was one time that we went, I was there first, and she was parking her car at the petrol station and I get the villagers to meet her outside. It was like that!

Because we are new, we tried to look at the situation, is it dangerous? Are we going to get caught? We were a little bit afraid. Because they are talking about rural residents fighting for their rights to stay at that place. Emotions are high. So we evaluated somehow. Lilian's video told us it's all right to go there, it's all right to ask people questions. So that's how it started, I guess. I think Lilian was the one who said look, let's do it.

Malaysiakini was the first national news organization to report on the Kampung Buah Bala dispute. Much of the impetus for reporting the story came from Athi Veerangan, *Malaysiakini*'s reporter in Penang, who later said that it had been his goal all along to make Kampung Buah Pala a national story (interview, 19 December 2009).⁷ Although the Kampung Buah Pala story was eventually picked up by Malaysia's mainstream news organizations, their interests were different from those of *Malaysiakini*. As Athi said (interview, 19 December 2009), the goal of the mainstream media was to 'pick on' the new Pakatan government in Penang. Moreover, *Malaysiakini* faced a unique challenge in reporting on the Kampung Buah Pala dispute, in that its readers had widely divergent views of who was to blame. As editor Steven Gan explained, *Malaysiakini* was popular with supporters of both Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng and the DAP, and supporters of Hindraf. The differences between the two constituencies became increasingly sharp as the controversy heated up, and the participation of the citizen journalists in some ways served to exacerbate them.

Kampung Buah Pala

Kampung Buah Pala was a small village in Bukit Gelugor, Penang. The name means Nutmeg Village, and its 300 or so residents were mostly Tamil.⁸ Many of them could trace their families' occupation of the land back five generations or more to a time when their ancestors had been brought to Penang as indentured labourers to work on the Brown family plantation.⁹ The land was sometimes called 'High Chaparral' because of its elevation, and also because of the cows that grazed there. Old-timers remembered the milk from Kampung Buah Pala that had stocked the local hospital during a shortage of infant formula, and the 100-year-old freshwater wells that had saved George Town during the 1990 national water shortage (*The Sun* 2 July 2009). By the time Kampung Buah Pala was demolished in September 2009, the village consisted of 24 houses, some sheds, and about 90 head of cattle. Although the village was little more than a few quiet streets situated a few minutes from the bustle of George Town, it was a shady, tranquil oasis in the rapidly developing world of modern Penang.

For over five generations, Tamil families had lived in Kampung Buah Pala, and many believed that the land was theirs.¹⁰ In 1954, two years before Helen Margaret Brown, the last of the Brown family, returned to England, she left the land in trust to the Straits Settlement government for the benefit of the workers. After independence, the land passed first to the new federal government of Malaya, and then to the state government, which began to charge the villagers an annual rental fee called TOL, or Temporary Occupant Licence.

Paying a TOL was an indication that the villagers were tenants, but apparently not all of them understood this. In 2005, the state government (at that time in the hands of Gerakan, one of several parties in the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional) stopped collecting the TOL, and agreed to sell the land to a cooperative (Koporasi) consisting of 3600 state civil servants. In October of that same year the Koporasi entered into a joint venture with Nusmetro Ventures (P) Sdn Bhd, which planned to develop four blocks of high-rise condominiums that were – with unintended irony – called ‘The Oasis’.¹¹ The agreed-upon price was a bargain, if not an outright steal, at MYR 6.42 million, or MYR 20 per square foot. (It is generally agreed that in 2005, the prevailing price of land in the area was MYR 50 per square foot.) Later, at the recommendation of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Abdul Rashid Abdullah, the price was reduced by another fifty per cent to MYR 3.21 million, or MYR 10 per square foot.

In 2007, the villagers took the state government, the Koperasi and the developer Nusmetro to court. The villagers argued that because the Koperasi had only paid part of the premium – and had not yet been issued the title – they still had the rights to the land. Although the High Court ruled in favour of the villagers, the case was overturned by the Federal Court on 11 May 2009.¹²

On 14 March 2008 the Koperasi paid the remaining portion of the premium (MYR 2.24 million) to the new Pakatan Rakyat government of Penang, which had won the state in the March 2008 election. The transfer of the land was completed on 27 March 2008 by a new government headed by DAP stalwart Lim Guan Eng. In June, individuals from the outlawed Hindu Rights Action Front (Hindraf) got involved in the dispute, and demanded that the state conserve the land as a ‘living human heritage site’ and Penang’s ‘last remaining traditional Indian village’ (*Malaysiakini* 14 September 2009). Once Hindraf got involved, the narratives concerning the village of Buah Pala began to diverge.

Facing a potential public relations disaster, Lim Guan Eng’s government moved quickly to negotiate a compensation package for the villagers with the developer. As the DAP’s website suggested, the package was a generous one, which they argued meant that Pakatan cared more about the fate of the villagers than had the previous Barisan Nasional government (DAP 2009). Ultimately, 24 families accepted the Pakatan government’s offer, and 12 did not.

In August, the developer obtained a court order that allowed it to demolish the houses. The villagers protested, and twice the demolition was stopped. The demolition took place in three separate phases, ending with the destruction of the homes of the families that had refused the government’s compensation package. By 14 September 2009, Kampung Buah Pala was completely gone.

Comp

Althou
were 1
compe
accou
tives a
basis c

A heri

Was K
Althou
and tre
people
or sav
the vil
with it
Athi S
spond
'Penar
quotec
Ng as
India i
joyous

The
United
added
annou
repres
two 'u
East &
UNES
to ove
were 1
2001).
the su
UNES

The
federa
arguec
numbe
strateg
intern
global

Competing narratives

Although the basic facts of the Kampung Buah Pala issue are well known, there were nevertheless a number of disputed points, most of which fit into three competing narratives. These comprise the heritage village narrative, the land grab account, and the story of the greedy villagers. As we will see, each of these narratives also fit into a broader interpretive framework that tended to be chosen on the basis of one's geographic position and ethnic identity.

A heritage village

Was Kampung Buah Pala a heritage village, or just another squatter community? Although the Federal Court's decision stated that the villagers were 'squatters and trespassers' with no legal standing to question the transfer of the land, many people believed that the village's unique history meant that it should be gazetted or saved as a heritage site. According to a petition to save Buah Pala, 'in 1999, the villagers requested the Federal Government to gazette the area in accordance with its policies to preserve traditional villages as symbols of national pride'.¹³ Athi Shankar (previously known as Athi Veerangan), *Malaysiakini's* correspondent in Penang, frequently wrote stories that took this angle.¹⁴ For example 'Penang's traditional Indian village under threat,' published on 6 July 2009, quoted villagers, NGO supporters and Penang Heritage Trusts manager Magdeline Ng as saying that 'a tourist would mistake Kampung Buah Pala for a village in India if one were to witness religious festivities celebrated so passionately and joyously by the villagers'.

The word 'heritage' holds a special meaning in Penang. In July 2008, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) added the cities of Malacca and George Town to its World Heritage list. The announcement cited George Town's 'residential and commercial buildings [that represent] the British era from the end of the 18th century', and called it one of two 'unique architectural and cultural townscape[s] without parallel anywhere in East and Southeast Asia' (UNESCO 2008). The effort to win status as a UNESCO heritage site was long and hard won. Supporters of heritage status had to overcome the interest of developers and the indifference of politicians who were reluctant to recognize the importance of 'non-Malay' history (Holland 2001). Yet despite opposition at the federal level, the Penang Heritage Trust had the support of the local government in its application to add George Town to UNESCO's list.

The conflict between local Chinese elites in Penang and the Malay-dominated federal government in Kuala Lumpur wasn't surprising. Kelly (2003: 60, 76) has argued that Penang has 'a remarkably rich civil society' with a large and diverse number of NGOs. A majority ethnic-Chinese state, Penang has been able to draw strategically on its 'anomalous population', its historical significance as an international trading depot and its current status as a 'significant node' in the global electronics industry. With a history of supporting opposition parties,

Penang's politics have often 'marched to a different beat' and 'created conditions conducive to independent and critical social movements'.

While most agreed that Kampung Buah Pala had a unique history, one thing the dispute made clear was that there were no clear guidelines as to what constituted a heritage village (*Malaysiakini* 29 September 2009). A query to the Penang Heritage Trust resulted in this answer:

Unfortunately no one has made a case for the urban village or heritage village. As they are neither building [n]or monument, they are going to fall through the gap in the Heritage Act. We have to try to address this in the proposed Heritage Enactment, and we should include under a definition for 'places of cultural significance,' something like an ensemble or cluster of buildings which have a strong identity and tradition.¹⁵

On 3 July 2009, the supporters of heritage village status for Kampung Buah Pala won a moral victory when the president of the Penang Heritage Trust was quoted in the *New Straits Times* as saying that 'Kampung Lorong Buah Pala should be treated with the same standard as the heritage status of George Town's inner city which is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site', and that 'many other countries in the world were trying to "recreate" traditional villages to encourage and boost tourism'.

Regardless of what legally constitutes a heritage village, there were strong feelings on both sides as to whether a unique Tamil village would be lost with the demolition of Kampung Buah Pala. When *Malaysiakini* video journalists Indrani Kopal and Maran Perianen visited the village with Penang CJ Jimmy Leow in July 2010, they noticed a few hastily erected bullock carts, a newly-painted shrine, and a fancy sign saying 'High Chaprral [sic] 200 Years Traditional Indian Village'. Aside from that, they saw little to support Hindraf's argument that this was a heritage village, which posed a problem as most of *Malaysiakini*'s stories to date had used that phrase.

On 3 August 2009, *Malaysiakini*.tv uploaded Indrani's documentary, entitled 'Kg Buah Pala ... pawn in a political game.' The video, which noted the absence of a temple in the village, prompted several irate letters from subscribers, as well as objections from *Malaysiakini*'s Penang correspondent Athi Shankar, who said that there had previously been two temples on the Brown estate, but that they had been divided by urbanization and the building of a new road. 'Some people argue there's not even a temple in that area,' he said, 'which suggests there is no Indian village. But [they] did not investigate why there is no temple there. When you look at the history, the whole thing was an estate once, and there were two temples' (Athi Shankar, interview, 19 December 2009).

Vicknesan, one of *Malaysiakini*'s senior editors who grew up in Penang and remembers riding his bike along the path near Kampung Buah Pala, dismisses the notion of a heritage village altogether. 'It's not a heritage village,' he said. 'It's really hard to call Buah Pala a heritage village' (Vicknesan, interview 29 December 2009).¹⁶ Shufiyan Shukor, *Malaysiakini*'s video editor, said much the

same thing. 'Have you talked to the Malays about Kampung Buah Pala?' he asked.

'What is the difference between Kampung Buah Pala and [Malay settlement] Kampung Berembang? Again, these are settlements, they've been there 70 years, sometimes longer, and they have to move for development. And these villagers, they are Malay. They don't call them squatters, they call them settlers. But there's no difference. Most of KL is built that way. So for the Malays, it is different. For the Malays, they say Kampung Buah Pala had a good deal, a very good deal, and they should be happy with that'.

(Shufiyan Shukor, interview 22 December 2009).

Both Vicknesan and Shufiyan believe that what was really going on in Kampung Buah Pala was a land grab.

The land grab

Based on an informal survey of comments from subscribers, it seems that most *Malaysiakini* readers also believed a land grab had taken place – but the question was: who was to blame? Was it the fault of the previous Barisan Nasional state government, led by Gerakan Chief Minister Koh Tsu Koon, whose executive council had negotiated the sale? Or was it the new Pakatan government led by DAP's Lim Guan Eng that was responsible because the final payment and transfer had occurred on its watch? Not only were Penangites divided, but so were journalists at *Malaysiakini*.

One of the most vocal critics of Lim Guan Eng was *Malaysiakini*'s own correspondent in Penang, Athi Shankar. The son of an Indian Tamil immigrant to Malaysia, Athi was born in Penang. He started in journalism working for Chandra Muzaffar and Aliran, the venerable multi-ethnic reform movement based in Penang. Athi credits Chandra with having made him an activist. One of his first jobs in journalism was as the editor of the Malay-language edition of *Aliran Monthly* magazine. Athi has been criticized for what are viewed as attacks on the Pakatan Chief Minister and his support for Hindraf, but in his mind there was no question as to who was responsible for the Kampung Buah Pala problem. In an interview on 19 December 2009 he told me:

Lim Guan Eng failed big time. He presented himself as whiter than white. He said that unlike Gerakan he would protect the people's interest, be a human rights fighter ... and then boom – he did that.

I see Kampung Buah Pala as a land scam. Ordinary people saw it as an Indian issue, where they stole Indian land. See, I was more concerned about why Lim Guan Eng wasn't doing anything to stop this project, when Barisan was the one that sold it out ... but only later I realized that Lim Guan Eng is the man who has actually transferred the land. Lim Guan Eng is the guy!

If Athi was convinced that Lim Guan Eng 'is the guy', *Malaysiakini*'s two most active citizen journalists, Beng Hock [Jimmy] Leow and Chan Lilian,

were equally convinced that it was the previous Barisan Nasional government that was at fault. For Jimmy, it was 'very clear' that the previous government was responsible:

'The records show that it was signed by the previous administration in 2004', he said. So when he said 'I didn't sign a single piece of paper', I somehow believe him. It was all pre-approved before him. So what he did was he had to follow what was done before, to release that to Koperasi.

(Jimmy Leow, interview, 20 December 2009)

Citizen journalist Chan Lilian, who is generally seen as being pro-Lim Guan Eng, said something similar:

No doubt [Lim Guan Eng] is in charge. But do you expect him to become a CM and within two weeks he should know what happened in the offices? And the money went through. And Lim Guan Eng said that until today he has never signed a single document, and no doubt it was his people's fault, but the thing is he really didn't do it. He didn't sign anything that says okay ... they collect the money, but the money goes through the land department.

(Chan Lilian, interview, 21 December 2009)

In Steven Gan's view, the issue wasn't whether or not Lim Guan Eng had signed anything:

If you ask whether he signed, he didn't sign. But he should admit [to the villagers] that okay, he screwed up, his people screwed up, and this is the best I can do for you. Because with the federal court decision, there is no way that you can stop the demolition.

(Steven Gan, interview, 31 December 2009)

The greedy villagers

According to Vicknesan, the editor of *Malaysiakini's* letters and Vox Pop sections, another narrative started to emerge late in the saga of Kampung Buah Pala: that of the greedy villagers. As citizen journalist Jimmy Leow put it, most of the reporters from the mainstream media who were following the story thought that the villagers were being excessive in their demands for compensation. 'And in this', he explained, 'it was probably because the state government was very clever'.

So at one press conference Lim Guan Eng asks the reporters whether they own a house worth 500K. And all the reporters were like no, we don't. So he was also telling them look, this is what we are going to offer, and there are some who do not want to take it. Indirectly he is saying, if you don't like it, you can say then that you are not satisfied with the amount, but at the end of

the day, most of the reporters say that they [would] do it. And that is probably the downfall of the whole situation.

(Jimmy Leow, interview, 20 December 2009)

Jimmy videotaped the press conference, which was held in Butterworth on the other side of the Penang Bridge.¹⁷ In Jimmy's view the choice of venue had been deliberate, so that it would attract less national attention. But there was no ambiguity about the Chief Minister's message: the villagers were being greedy. Chan Lilian agreed. 'In the beginning all of the reporters are very supportive of Kampung Buah Pala', she said. 'And then they realize that they are being taken for a ride by the few rich ones' (Chan Lilian, interview, 21 December 2009).

According to Lilian, many of the villagers had children who no longer lived in the village. Doctors and lawyers, they lived in expensive condominiums, drove new cars, and wore Ferarri jeans. As Jimmy said:

The children who have grown up, who have become doctors and lawyers, what kind of role are they playing? Are they just keeping silent and saying okay parents, why not fight for your house? There will be extra money for us, not that we need it, but okay, go ahead! What kind of rules are they playing? The son of [the chair of the Kampung Buah Pala residents' association] is a doctor. And his grandmother is sitting in the house, waiting for the house to be demolished. You are a professional, and you let your parents deal with developers? Sad. It is for money. So it's not embarrassing to see your parents' name in the newspaper as long as they get money? So to me it's sad.

(Jimmy Leow, interview, 20 December 2009)

Identities: who you are and where you're located

Significantly, each of the three narratives described above also fits into a broader interpretive framework that tended to be chosen on the basis of one's geographic position and ethnic identity. What was being contested in Kampung Buah Pala had both national and local dimensions. In Kuala Lumpur, the issue was competition for the hearts and minds of Indian voters, but in Penang it was the politics of economic development. And in both places, how one viewed the issue was tempered by a sometimes ugly communalism.

Hindraf and the struggle for the hearts and minds of Malaysian Indians

The first story in *Malaysiakini* that mentioned Hindraf appeared on 14 June 2009. It was written by Athi Shankar (at that time Athi Veeranggan), and its headline contained a phrase that would become the mantra of the Hindu Rights Action Front: 'Kg Buah Pala issue can end with a stroke of a pen.' The story, which was prompted by a visit to the village by Hindraf leader Uthayakumar, quoted him as saying that Lim Guan Eng, Penang's Chief Minister, had the power to resolve the

impasse by acquiring the land back from its current owner on the basis of public interest under section 76 of the 1965 National Land Code. The story threw down the gauntlet, stating that Hindraf would hold Lim Guan Eng personally responsible if 'the only Tamil Hindu living cultural site in the state' were to disappear. As Athi explained, Hindraf only got involved when it became clear that Lim Guan Eng 'wasn't doing anything to stop this project'. But it wasn't quite that simple. Hindraf also had a broader agenda, which *Malaysiakini* editor Vicknesan called the struggle for the 'hearts and minds' of Malaysian Indians. 'I think it was very important for Hindraf to appear to be a force', Vicknesan said, 'and to be able to force either BN or Pakatan to do what they want'.

Hindraf's larger political aims were made explicit when Uthayakumar said that the organization would hold Lim Guan Eng 'personally responsible' for the demolition of the village. But they were also obvious in a story that appeared in *Malaysiakini* on 23 September 2009, about a week after the village had been demolished. The article, titled 'Hindraf alleges Pakatan double standard in Tanjung Tokong', quoted an 'exclusive email' from Hindraf's international coordinator in New York that pointed to Anwar Ibrahim's 'double standard' in supporting heritage village status for the majority Malay community of Tanjung Tokong while allowing for the demolition of Kampung Buah Pala. The Hindraf spokesman called upon the Pakatan leader 'to give a categorical assurance that the Indian community matters to the Pakatan Rakyat and not just their votes during election time'.

The results of a by-election in Bagan Pinang one month later suggested that Hindraf was right in warning Pakatan Rakyat not to take the Indian vote for granted. On 11 October Barisan Nasional regained a seat it had lost by 2000 votes in 2008. While analysts agreed that the Pakatan candidate had lost because the coalition had failed to attract the non-Malay vote, the fact that the faction of Hindraf led by Uthayakumar had boycotted the polls almost certainly contributed to BN's victory as well (*Malaysiakini* 21 October 2009).

Local politics in Penang

As the story quoted above suggests, the fallout from Kampung Buah Pala had implications not only for national politics but for local politics as well. In fact, for Pakatan politicians in Penang, the loyalty of a few thousand Indian voters mattered far less than that of the majority Chinese population. Kai Ping, the editor of *Malaysiakini*'s Chinese section, explained that the key to understanding politics in Penang lies in understanding the 'pro-business stand' of the government. In Kai Ping's view, 'business is the number one issue in Penang', and BN partner Gerakan had gone down to defeat in the 2008 election because its leaders 'couldn't manage the relationship with the developers'.

The developers, UMNO and Gerakan have always been a triangular relationship. A lot of UMNO guys are also developers. So they work together with Chinese developers. Kampung Buah Pala is a typical example. The Koperasi

is acti
partne
I b
frien
He w
[And

For Lin
view that
Pakatan g
case set fo
demonstr
As it tu
Septembe
Authority
draw dire
2009).

Issues wi

By now,
Kampung
and fram
ing view:
one persc
a lightnir
The cc
'professi
within M
citizen jc
ences, A
Athi S
for being
'I'm not

I'm
a we
stan
alwa

One c
Guan Er
story the

is actually UMNO-linked, and together with a Chinese developer, that's the partnership. That's the typical Ali-Baba partnership.

I believe that Lim Guan Eng, in his eagerness to promote a business-friendly image, just sent through all the transaction as soon as he took over. He was just trying to clean up the mess, but he accidentally transferred it. [And if he admits it] it looks so embarrassing.

(Yong Kai Ping, interview, 29 December 2009)

For Lim Guan Eng, the immediate public relations concern was to reinforce the view that it was Barisan Nasional that had sold out the villagers, not the new Pakatan government. But more importantly, what kind of precedent would this case set for squatter disputes in the future, especially if Lim Guan Eng wanted to demonstrate a pro-business attitude to the developers who supported him?

As it turns out, what happened at Kampung Buah Pala did set a precedent. In September 2009, villagers at Tanjung Takong appealed to the Urban Development Authority to declare their Malay village a living Malay cultural village, and they draw direct parallels with Kampung Buah Pala (*Malaysiakini* 15 September 2009).

Issues within Malaysiakini

By now, the outlines of *Malaysiakini's* dilemmas in covering the issue of Kampung Buah Pala should be clear. Not only were there competing narratives and frameworks of interpretation used by the players, but there were also differing views within *Malaysiakini* itself. Many of these differing views focused on one person: Athi Shankar, *Malaysiakini's* correspondent in Penang, who became a lightning rod both inside and out of the news organization.

The concerns about Athi focused on two separate issues, both related to his 'professionalism'. Was Athi too close to Hindraf? Many subscribers and people within *Malaysiakini* thought so. The second concern was raised by several of the citizen journalists, who claimed that, in addition to not attending press conferences, Athi was fabricating quotes.

Athi Shankar is the first to acknowledge that there were complaints about him for being 'pro-Hindraf', but to his mind this was because he is of Indian descent. 'I'm not even a Hindraf supporter', Athi said:

I'm not a Hindraf activist either. I know [Hindraf leader] Waythamoorthy in a way that, personally, we go back. So of course I see them, I always take a stand, when I think that that's the truth. So when they speak the truth, it will always look like I am biased.

(Athi Shankar, interview, 19 December 2009)

One of the people who saw Athi as biased was Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng. In July, the Chief Minister called *Malaysiakini* to complain about a story that was posted on 25 July 2009. The story was titled 'Project revoked but

villagers still worry about land', and it was written by Athi Shankar. As Steven Gan explained,

apparently [Lim Guan Eng] was unhappy with the paragraphs following the words 'MIC Youth: Show us the minutes'. Eventually, we decided to add in a few paragraphs under the subhead 'CM: Don't blame us, it's BN's mistake'.
(Steven Gan, interview, 31 December 2009)

Lim Guan Eng has a reputation for being a politician who likes to manage the media. In a celebrated stand-off with the *New Straits Times* earlier in the year, he announced what amounted to a boycott of the newspaper, stating that its 'refusal to give a right of reply has forced [the] Penang state government to act defensively by choosing not to engage with NST' (Chew 2010). Of course the Chief Minister could complain to *Malaysiakini* all he liked, but, as Gan pointed out, he had still failed to answer the question of why 'the Pakatan government accepted payment of MYR 2.2 million as the balance of the premium on 14 March 2008 – six days after taking office – and the land title was issued to the cooperative and the developer on 27 March 2008'.¹⁸

Steven Gan's measured response to the complaints about Athi suggested the news organization's ambivalence with regard to their Penang correspondent. On the one hand, they didn't like the complaints that he was biased in favour of Hindraf; but, on the other hand, nobody knew Penang better than Athi Shankar. As K. Kabilan, who was at that time *Malaysiakini*'s chief editor and Athi's direct boss, said:

His local knowledge is excellent. He knows what is happening in Penang. Politically, non-politically, everything about Penang. He is our guide on the spot. He has received complaints from a few ministers there, too many complaints from the ruling party there. The reason they have been complaining is because he has been doing the right things. So we've got the chief minister complaining about Athi, the deputy chief minister complaining about Athi, the local branch of DAP complaining about Athi, the citizens complaining about Athi, especially from Buah Pala, they think he has been very critical of them, but if you look at his stories, you will know. The stand he has taken is quite clear: when he sees something is wrong, Athi is a person who will really go out and hit you for that.

(K. Kabilan, interview, 18 December 2009)

As noted above, it wasn't only outsiders who questioned the validity of Athi's reports; *Malaysiakini*'s video team also challenged the Penang correspondent's pro-Hindraf bias. This was ironic, given *Malaysiakini.tv*'s history with the Hindu Rights Action Front.

Malaysiakini's video section had begun in 2006 with a grant from the Friedrich Naumann Foundation to provide Tamil-language news coverage (Steele 2009). *Malaysiakini* used some of that grant to hire Indrani Kopal, who became one of the

news organizat
enormous conti
ples occurred v
which tens of
ment. As Steve
the temple des
with Gan, sayi
(K. Kabilan, 2
challenge to H

Role of the CJ

At *Malaysiakini*
view is shared
citizen journa
Lilian's video
According to
age in that wl
and Lilian 'w
villagers' (Jin
when she exp
'The thing is,

So they
we were
who is v

Jimmy an
that while h
interested ir
which is ac
develop an
ment's Chic

As the K
nalism vide
answered tl
been blogg
ministers a
raised new

I have
Minist
media
taken

news organization's video editors. Over the next few years, *Malaysiakini* made enormous contributions to Hindraf's public profile. One of the more notable examples occurred with its video coverage of the Hindraf rally in November 2007, in which tens of thousands of ethnic Indians protested against discriminatory treatment. As Steven Gan said, the Indian issue was 'owned' by *Malaysiakini*, especially the temple destruction (Steven Gan, interview, 24 March 2008). Kabilan agreed with Gan, saying 'we gave maximum coverage to Hindraf; we gave them oxygen' (K. Kabilan, 28 March 2008). The fact of this support made *Malaysiakini.tv*'s challenge to Hindraf's 'heritage village narrative' even more striking.

Role of the CJs

At *Malaysiakini* there is an almost naive faith in the fact that 'videos don't lie'. This view is shared not only by *Malaysiakini*'s video team but also by the organization's citizen journalists. As the Kampung Buah Pala incident heated up, CJ Jimmy and Lilian's videos quickly became essential to *Malaysiakini*'s coverage of the dispute. According to Jimmy, their videos were different from *Malaysiakini*'s regular coverage in that whereas *Malaysiakini* looked at the situation from the 'big picture', he and Lilian 'want[ed] to know individually what these people felt, especially the villagers' (Jimmy Leow, 20 December 2009). Chan Lilian said much the same thing when she explained how her reporting differed from that of the mainstream media. 'The thing is, they have so many reporters they are rotating on and off', she said:

So they don't have a grasp of the issue like what Jimmy and I have because we were following from the very beginning. Every one of them, we know who is who, which one is the son, which one is the father, we know them.
(Chan Lilian, interview, 20 December 2009)

Jimmy and Lilian also developed their own unique styles. Jimmy explained that while he liked to tell the stories of the individual villagers, Lilian was more interested in trying to get 'headlines...because that will bring a lot of attention, which is actually good' (Jimmy Leow, 20 December 2009). Lilian was able to develop an especially good rapport with the Lim Guan Eng, the Pakatan government's Chief Minister. It was this rapport that got her into trouble.

As the Kampung Buah Pala case attracted national attention, and citizen journalism videos appeared on *Malaysiakini*, the Penang CJs found that politicians answered their phone calls and responded to their emails. Chan Lilian, who had been blogging for four years, said that once she became a citizen journalist, the ministers actually started to contact her – and that this situation, while exciting, raised new and sometimes problematic issues. As she explained in an email,

I have built a very good trust from the ruling state government. The Chief Minister now feeds me with news leads like I am an editor of mainstream media. He reads my blog and praised my very frank views. Therefore, I have taken advantage of this rapport to bring issues to his attention. ... I am like

the mediator. He will then instruct the relevant department to act. ... I remind myself to use this special treatment for the good of the poor and the voiceless. My main focus is on the needy people and not about gloating that I know the higher up office.¹⁹

Were the CJs providing sides of the story that Athi was not? Absolutely. Once the Chief Minister made it clear that Athi was no longer welcome at press conferences, *Malaysiakini* was dependent upon the citizen journalists to fill in the gaps. Yet sometimes what they reported was strikingly different from – if not completely contradictory to – what Athi was filing. As *Malaysiakini*'s chief editor Kabilan said,

Our own reporters' reports were totally different from what the CJs were doing, especially when it came from Lim Guan Eng's side, what the Chief Minister was doing and things like that. There was one incident of a protest; we had Athi reporting on the protest, taking a very strong [lead] against the state government for refusing to come down to see these people, and I think it was Lilian who had managed to get the Chief Minister talking about the protestors. Seen together, it was good for *Malaysiakini*, we got both sides. Seen internally, it was an embarrassment. We had a journalist on the ground who had failed to get the government's view. Thank God we had a CJ there. And I think the CJ also took it to a certain extent, I think she also felt too involved with him. So her questions, if you listen to her questions, they were also personal in nature. The sense of professionalism was totally missed in both the cases.

(K. Kabilan, interview, 18 December 2009)

Professionalism

The issue of 'professionalism' came up most frequently in terms of concern about Athi Shankar, *Malaysiakini*'s correspondent in Penang, but it had other dimensions as well. Some of these accusations against Athi came from supporters of Lim Guan Eng, who felt he was too pro-Hindraf, but others came from the citizen journalists, who said that Athi was reporting on events that he had not attended (Jimmy Leow, interview, 20 December 2009). In response, Athi insisted that he did not fabricate stories, but rather that once he was shut out of the government's press conferences he had no choice but to rely on Chia Ming, *Malaysiakini*'s Chinese-language correspondent in Penang. *Malaysiakini*'s senior editors defended this practice, pointing out that they routinely 'processed' statements from government officials and press conferences that *Malaysiakini* journalists had not attended. Steven Gan explained, 'sometimes a journalist will have to deal with a few stories a day, and you may not be able to attend a press conference, but you have another journalist who attends it, and you get it from that person'. In the case of Athi, Steven added, he was 'definitely' getting it from Chia Ming. 'He has to get it from him. There's no way that he's getting it from somebody else' (Steven Gan, interview, 31 December 2009).

Although Steven said this practice was 'normal', the Penang CJs found it to be unprofessional. Part of their training had focused on the basics of good journalism, including the concept of objectivity. Many of the citizen journalists, especially those who had been bloggers, found objectivity to be a difficult concept to put into practice. Veteran *Malaysiakini* editor Vicknesan, who was assigned to be the liaison to the CJs, said: 'the CJs are very partisan and they make no bones about it! For them, journalism, it's okay to be in journalism while being partisan'. Vicknesan conceded however that Athi Shankar's reports from Penang made it more difficult to reinforce the news norm of objectivity. "You tell us not to be partisan," they say, "but then look at him." We are telling them that they are supposed to be objective, but he is not objective at all' (Vicknesan, interview, 29 December 2009).

There were also charges that the citizen journalists themselves were unprofessional. Of course citizen journalists are amateurs by definition, but in the case of Kampung Buah Pala this status made them even more susceptible to charges of bias from the supporters of Hindraf. One letter from a disgruntled subscriber, who complained about a video and accused the CJ who produced it of being a mouthpiece for both Lim Guan Eng and the developer, prompted editor-in-chief Gan to remind the editorial staff 'looks like we are getting hit from both sides of the Kampung Buah Pala divide. This is a reminder that whatever our sympathies, we need to do a professional job – to ask the important questions and to report factually.'²⁰

As I have argued elsewhere, *Malaysiakini*'s understanding of objectivity is a mechanistic one, in which the balance is attained by including multiple points of view (Steele 2009). With competing constituencies among its readers (pro-Pakatan, pro-Hindraf), conflicting reports from its reporters on the ground (Athi, the citizen journalists) and so many competing narratives, Steven Gan resorted to what Vicknesan once referred to as the 'valid point' test. As Steven explained, in a situation in which there were so many competing agendas, it was not *Malaysiakini*'s job to determine who was right.

'There is no doubt that we want to include on all sides', Steven said, 'but that doesn't mean that we don't have an agenda. Our agenda is more transparency, giving a voice to the voiceless, all that'. Steven added that he wasn't bothered that in this case *Malaysiakini* contained such contradictory reports because on this particular issue both sides were so 'adamant'. 'Our agenda is not to make Lim Guan Eng look bad', he said:

Our agenda is number one to provide the villagers the ability to voice their views. And now that they have done that and the government has responded ... we will provide both sides.'

(Steven Gan, interview 31 December 2009)

In the final analysis, *Malaysiakini* utilized a hybrid definition of professionalism that combined international news norms with a pragmatic sense of what would work in the bare-knuckled world of Malaysian politics. Unable to

reconcile the competing accounts of what had actually happened in Kampung Buah Pala, *Malaysiakini* included them all, and left it up to the reader to decide. As CEO Premesh Chandran noted in an email to a subscriber who found fault with one of *Malaysiakini*.tv's videos:

I assure you that *Malaysiakini* remains independent of political influences. If you notice our reports as a whole, some were very critical of the Penang govt's handling of the case, others presented CM Guan Eng's view. Similarly with our videos, as a collection they present various differing views on the issue. In any controversial issue, there are many perspectives, and we leave it up to the reader to make their own conclusions.²¹

Navigating identities

Shortly after being sworn in as Malaysia's sixth prime minister in April 2009, Najib Abul Razak launched a concept that he called 1Malaysia. The prime minister announced that 1Malaysia would 'preserve and enhance [the] unity in diversity which has always been our strength and best hope for the future,'²² a claim that was greeted with derision by the opposition. Calling Najib's concept 'pure spin' and yet another 'empty slogan', supporters of the opposition pointed out that the ruling coalition was an alliance of parties defined by race, and that Najib, as head of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), presided over a party based on Malay domination.

Malaysiakini also practises a kind of unity in diversity, but one that is significantly different from Najib's version. An online newspaper that strives for journalistic professionalism and political independence, *Malaysiakini* promotes a Malaysian Malaysia that is truly multiracial. Yet being multiracial is not so easy, and in the case of Kampung Buah Pala, *Malaysiakini* faced multiple dilemmas. There were complaints that *Malaysiakini*'s Penang correspondent had a pro-Hindraf bias, there were complaints that the citizen journalists were pro-Lim Guan Eng, and there were even complaints about the documentary produced by *Malaysiakini*'s video team. It is difficult not to conclude that many of these complaints were linked both to ethnic loyalties and to local identities, as the 'heritage village' narrative tended to be favoured by Indian supporters of Hindraf; the 'land grab' narrative was supported by backers of Pakatan Rakyat and Lim Guan Eng; and the 'greedy villagers' narrative found favour with both Malays and ethnic Chinese. Class and geographical location were also significant, with middle-class Chinese Malaysians in Penang more likely to support Lim Guan Eng. As Chan Lilian remembered,

[When] Jimmy and I went to the market, and we wanted to ask the Chinese and so on what they think of Kampung Buah Pala issue, they didn't want us to record, but they would tell us 'the Indians they are asking for all this, take already take and go home.' And so they are very angry. And at the same time the Indians are very angry with the police and with the developer,

because the
the police
If it goes

If Lilian's c
tend to focu
Remembering
'it is very diffl
tend to be div
really underst
view, 20 Dec

Despite the
had to try to
younger India
Indian comm
an issue of hi

And I sai
you don'
And to n
our prim
is bad. T
how to t

Conclusion

In thinking a
video editor
surprised hir
of the peopl
time. But ex
this questior
order to feel
things. Jimn

When y
a lot of
No, I'm
is still a
because
a Mala
I am a

because they see the developer as Chinese. The developer ... is Chinese and the police are Malay. So it becomes a racial matter. And I was so concerned. If it goes on like this, somehow, somewhere, something is going to erupt.

(Chan Lilian, interview, 20 December 2009)

If Lilian's comments suggest a kind of hyper-consciousness of race, Jimmy's tend to focus on the difficulty of overcoming one's own ethnic identity. Remembering his initial nervousness about going to Kampung Buah Pala, he said 'it is very difficult for you to peel that [identity] away'. In Penang, communities tend to be divided, he added, and 'it will be difficult for a Chinese or Malay to really understand, to really think [about Indian problems]' (Jimmy Leow, interview, 20 December 2009).

Despite these difficulties, the citizen journalists were acutely aware that they had to try to overcome narrow ethnic perspectives. Jimmy Leow recalled how a younger Indian-Malaysian CJ expressed surprise that he was so interested in the Indian community. 'He was so fascinated to see me being so engrossed in doing an issue of his race', Jimmy said.

And I said that is your job in the future; that is how you should do it, because you don't pick and choose your issues.

And to me that is the real meaning of 1Malaysia. I mean the 1Malaysia that our prime minister is saying is totally, when they are preaching hatred ... it is bad. They really should learn a little bit more from citizen journalists about how to be Malaysian.

(Jimmy Leow, interview, 20 December 2009)

Conclusion: journalism and citizenship

In thinking about the impact of the citizen journalism programme, *Malaysiakini's* video editor Shufiyan Shukor said (interview, 27 May 2010) the thing that had surprised him the most about the programme was how it had transformed many of the people who participated in it, making them feel like 'citizens' for the first time. But exactly what does it mean to be a citizen of Malaysia? When I posed this question to Jimmy Leow and Chan Lilian, their responses suggested that in order to feel like a citizen, one must have both a voice and the power to change things. Jimmy said:

When you ask people like me who are you? I will say I am a Chinese. And a lot of people who do not know Malaysia will say, oh, you are from China? No, I'm a Chinese. So we don't say I'm a Malaysian Chinese. Because there is still a big difference of how they treat Chinese and Malays and Indians; because a citizen of Malaysia somehow is Malay. And for me to say I'm a Malaysian, the government will have to do a lot to convince me that I am a Malaysian.

[But] you know when you have the word citizen journalist, it somehow it makes you ... we don't care whether it is a Malay issue, we don't care whether it is a Chinese issue, and we don't care whether it is an Indian issue. It's an issue. And it is a job for us as a citizen journalist. Even though I don't say out loud that I am a Malaysian, if I use the name citizen journalist when I go and see an issue, everything is fair and square.

(Jimmy Leow, interview, 20 December 2009)

Although Chan Lilian took a more pessimistic view of citizenship for Chinese Malaysians, her words echoed Jimmy's thoughts on the power that comes with being a citizen journalist:

I won't say that I'm a citizen, because here you don't have that sense of belonging, of being a citizen. You can't say that 'oh I'm Malaysian,' I have the right, and this is what the constitution give[s] me, because we don't have that kind. I know that I have my rights, but if I were to really go and use those rights, we could get into trouble with the authorities.

But [being a citizen journalist], it gives us; I won't say that it's a power, but it is really a power. We can exercise our rights, our voice.

(Chan Lilian, interview, 21 December 2009)

As I have argued elsewhere, despite the popular belief that it is the internet that challenges the Barisan Nasional's stranglehold on power, it is the norms and values of independent journalism rather than the technology of new media *per se* that makes *Malaysiakini* so threatening to government authorities (Steele 2009; Kalathil and Boas 2003: 2). The success of the citizen journalism programme suggests that *Malaysiakini*'s ideology of independent journalism has further widened the democratic space for public discourse by giving ordinary people the tools to craft a message and a platform from which to speak. When asked 'did the course change your opinion about the ability of individuals to make a difference?' 95 per cent of the CJs who responded answered affirmatively, and more than a third added superlatives such as 'certainly', 'definitely', or simply 'yes!'²³ A series of interviews provided even more evidence of this sense of empowerment. For example, Dave Jean Kameron, a medical student from Kedah, said that whereas before he had felt like 'a resident with an identity card', he now feels like a citizen. 'We have credibility because we are not paid', he said. 'It makes us feel like we are doing something to make a change' (Dave Jean Kameron, interview, 19 December 2009).²⁴

In Malaysia, where citizenship has traditionally been linked to ethnicity, becoming a CJ has not only empowered individuals to feel connected and engaged, it has also given them a sense of moral obligation to change things. When *Malaysiakini*'s citizen journalism project director and trainer Maran Perianan spoke at a graduation dinner in Penang on 19 December 2009, he made this obligation explicit:

You are part of something HUGE, a huge family which will change this country in a different way. We do this for the love we have for the country.

Ea
pu
yo
ha
ch
ye
wi

As t
ment v
meanit
citizen
obligat
at leas

Notes

- 1 TI
bc
- 2 M
es
- 3 I
jo
to
at
- 4 A
ci
se
ar
M
- 5 D
he
o:
- 6 R
M
2
M
ir
E
jc
d
jc
- 7 A
- 8 F
- 9 E
h
th
c
f
- 10 I
c

Each one of us has different interests. Whatever interest you have, please pursue it. And please, with what you're doing at this moment, your articles, your photographs, your videos, you can change lives, you know? Those who have been journalists, like Shufiyan, myself, we know, being a journalist can change so many things, You can make a big difference in society Twenty years or ten years from now, the country becomes really good like how you wanted, you will never forget that you were part of it.

As this study suggests, international organizations engaged in media development work would benefit from a more nuanced understanding of the different meanings of the word citizenship. For the citizen journalists of Penang, being a citizen means far more than 'informed competence'; citizenship brings with it the obligation to speak up and to try to change your country for the better. In Malaysia, at least, the concept of being a 'citizen' has revolutionary potential.

Notes

- 1 The author served as the 'monitor and evaluator' of the 18-month project, which began in November 2008 and concluded in May 2010.
- 2 *Malaysiakini* has received a significant amount of scholarly attention since it was established a decade ago. See Chin 2003; George 2006; Zaharom 2002; Tong 2004.
- 3 I have argued elsewhere (Steele 2009) that *Malaysiakini* uses the norms of good journalism – covering both sides, providing documentary evidence, and giving voice to the voiceless – to legitimize alternative views of events, thus challenging the authoritarianism of the Barisan Nasional.
- 4 Although *Malaysiakini* made a concerted effort to recruit Malay participants to the citizen journalism programme, placing advertisements in the Malaysian-language section of the website as well as conducting short training in the cities of Johor Bharu and Kota Bharu, of the 157 CJs for whom I had complete information by the end of May 2010, only 33 (21 per cent) were Malay.
- 5 During the 18-month period of the grant, citizen journalists were paid a small honorarium for each video that was published on *Malaysiakini.tv*. The payment was on a sliding scale, with 'tier one' videos of the highest quality earning MYR 150.
- 6 Research for this study was conducted during four separate three-week visits to Malaysia in December 2008–January 2009, July 2009, December 2009–January 2010 and May–June 2010. The visits included extensive informal interaction with *Malaysiakini* personnel and citizen journalists in Penang and KL, as well as formal interviews, focus group meetings, and observation of training sessions held 20–21 December 2008 and 1–6 July 2009 in KL. The author was a member of six citizen journalism Google groups maintained by the project, and regularly monitored forum discussions on the website CJ.MY. She also conducted email surveys of all citizen journalists who completed the programme.
- 7 Athi Shankar resigned from *Malaysiakini* in early 2010.
- 8 For a fascinating history of the Tamil diaspora in Malaysia, see Amrith (2009).
- 9 David Brown was one of the largest landholders in Penang. Born in Scotland in 1778, he went into business with James Scott, the trading partner of Captain Francis Light, the founder of Penang. In 1806, 'David Brown used capital borrowed from Scott and other friends to clear a part of the hillside at Gelugor, about 8 km from George Town, for pepper and nutmeg planting' (Kathirithamby-Wells 2005: 34).
- 10 In this regard, the story of Kampung Buah Pala is remarkably similar to that of the destruction of Kampung Serani, another village in George Town that was occupied

- by a group believed to be the descendants of Portuguese Eurasians who had settled in Penang in the early 1880s. For a thoughtful analysis of their 14-year battle against eviction, see Goh (2002).
- 11 For two excellent chronologies of the land deal, see Anil Netto 6 August 2009 and 27 September 2009.
 - 12 An additional appeal filed by the villagers in June 2009 also failed (*Malaysiakini* 21 August 2009).
 - 13 The petition was created by Coalition to Save Kampung Buah Pala and written by JERIT Penang, <http://www.petitiononline.com/savekbp/petition.html> at 31 January 2010.
 - 14 In July 2009, Athi Veerangan changed his *Malaysiakini* byline to Athi Shankar because he had been using Veerangan at a different news organization.
 - 15 Email to author, 1 February 2010.
 - 16 In October 2010 Vicknesan left *Malaysiakini* to become Malaysia country editor of Yahoo news.
 - 17 The video can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QeEF5RWoktI>.
 - 18 Email from Steven Gan to author, 29 July 2009.
 - 19 Email from Chan Lilian to the author, 2 July 2009. Almost exactly ten months after this interview was recorded, Chan Lilian took a job with the communication office of Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng.
 - 20 Steven Gan to editorial staff, 13 August 2009.
 - 21 Private correspondence dated 7 August 2009.
 - 22 The 1Malaysia campaign has its own website: www.1malaysia.com.
 - 23 A follow-up questionnaire was sent by email to each of the citizens who completed the programme. Sixty-one of the participants responded.
 - 24 Dave is based in Kedah, and his video on a promised Tamil school that never materialized prompted a call to *Malaysiakini* from Barisan Nasional MIC chair Samy Vellu within two hours of its posting. See <http://ej.my/video/18248/tamil-school-still-waiting-for-building-after-20-years.html> at 24 July 2010.

References

Unless otherwise noted, all newspapers and magazines are online editions and URLs are not provided

- Amrith, Sunil S. (2009) 'Tamil Diasporas Across the Bay of Bengal', *American Historical Review* 114(3): 547–572.
- Anil Netto (6 August 2009) 'Kg Buah Pala: More Questions'. <http://anilnetto.com/accountability/kg-buah-pala-the-second-caveat/>
- Anil Netto (27 September 2009) 'Kg Buah Pala: Release Pakatan Exco Minutes Too'. <http://anilnetto.com/accountability/kg-buah-pala-release-pakatan-exco-minutes-too/>
- Brown, Graham (2005) 'The Rough and Rosy Road: Sites of Contestation in Malaysia's Shackled Media Industry', *Pacific Affairs* no. 78 (Spring): 39–56.
- Chew, Jeffrey (2010) 'Press Statement by Jeffrey Chew, Special Investment Officer of the Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng in Penang', 8 January. <http://limguaneng.com/index.php/2010/01/08/new-straits-times-to-be-sued-for-defamation-for-publishing-lies/>
- Chin, James (2003) '*Malaysiakini* and its Impact on Journalism and Politics in Malaysia', in K.C. Ho, Randolph Kluver and Kenneth C.C. Yang (eds) *Asia.com: Asia Encounters the Internet*, London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon.
- DAP (2009) 'Kampung Buah Pala: Frequently Asked Questions', *Democratic Action Party Penang*. <http://dapppg.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/FAQ-about-Kg-Buah-Pala.pdf>

- George, Cherian (2006) *Contentious Journalism and the Internet: Towards Democratic Discourse in Malaysia and Singapore*, Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Gillmor, Dan (2004) *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People*, Beijing: O'Reilly Media.
- Goh Beng-Lan (2002) *Modern Dreams: An Inquiry into Power, Cultural Production, and the Cityscape in Contemporary Urban Penang, Malaysia*, Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications.
- Hefner, Robert (2001) 'Introduction: Multiculturalism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia', in Robert Hefner (ed) *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*, Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press.
- Holland, Lorien (2001) 'Whose Heritage?' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3 May.
- Indrani Kopal (3 August 2009) 'Kg Buah Pala ... Pawn in a Political Game.' <http://www.malaysiakini.tv/video/17518/kg-buah-palapawn-in-a-political-game.html>
- Kalathil, Shanty and Boas, Taylor C. (2003) *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Kathirithamby-Wells, J. (2005) *Nature and Nation: Forests and Development in Peninsular Malaysia*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Kelly, Philip (2003) 'Developing Dissent in Industrializing Localities: Civil Society in Penang and Batam', in Ariel Heryanto and Sumit K. Mandal (eds) *Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia: Comparing Indonesia and Malaysia*, New York and London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Malaysiakini (21 August 2009) 'Federal Court Strikes out Buah Pala Residents' Application'.
- Malaysiakini (14 September 2009) 'High Chaparral: Hindraf Blast State Government'.
- Malaysiakini (15 September 2009) 'Group Wants Ancient Malay Village Preserved'.
- Malaysiakini (29 September 2009) 'Penang Gov't Pondering New Policy to Handle Squatters'.
- Malaysiakini (21 October 2009) 'Shift of Indian Votes: Dire Warning for Pakatan'.
- Rosen, Jay (1997) 'Public Journalism as Democratic Art', in C. Gibbs (ed.) *Public Journalism, Theory and Practice: Lessons for Experience*, Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation.
- Schudson, Michael (1998) *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Steele, Janet (2009) 'Professionalism Online: How Malaysiakini Challenges Authoritarianism', *International Journal of Press/Politics* 14: 91-111.
- The Sun* (2 July 2009) 'Kampung Buah Pala Holds its Breath'.
- Tong Yee Siong (2004) 'Malaysiakini: Treading a Tightrope of Political Pressure and Market Factors', in Steven Gan, James Gomez and Uwe Johannsen (eds) *Asian Cyberactivism: Freedom of Expression and Media Censorship*, Bangkok: Friedrich Naumann Foundation.
- Uimonen, Paula (2002) 'Mediated Management of Meaning: On-line Nation Building in Malaysia', *Global Networks* 3: 299-313.
- UNESCO (2008) 'Eight New Sites, from the Straits of Malacca, to Papua New Guinea and San Marino, Added to UNESCO's World Heritage List', 7 July 2008. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/450>
- Zaharom Nain (2002) 'The Media and Malaysia's Reformasi Movement', in Russell H.K. Heng (ed.) *Media Fortunes, Changing Times: ASEAN States in Transition*, Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies.

Interviews

Athi Shankar, 19 December 2009
Chan Lilian, 20 December 2009; 21 December 2009
Dave Jean Kameron, 19 December 2009
Jimmy Leow, 20 December 2009
K. Kabilan, 28 March 2008; 18 December 2009
Shufiyan Shukor, 22 December 2009; 27 May 2010
Steven Gan, 24 March 2008; 31 December 2009
Vicknesan, 29 December 2009
Yong Kai Ping, 29 December 2009

Laws (Malaysia)

Internal Security Act 1960 (revised 1972) (Act No. 82)
Sedition Act 1948 (revised 1969) (Act No. 15)
Official Secrets Act 1972 (Act No. 88)
National Land Code 1965 (Act No. 56)

Introducti

Media scho
democratiz
is understoc
cratic princ
facilitated l
groups and
ency; accou
media are c
governed b
expediency
of vibrant,
deepening
restrictive
by the ruler

In multi
ruling part
majority p
continue to
ners of dev
his 'partne
2010). Thi
when it is
and the m
argument
general we
cultural gr
tion for th
the Malay
interests, l
to the 'di'
very proc