

Building a Malaysian Community Online: An Analysis of *That Effing Show* and Online Responses to It¹

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Abstract

Upon achieving independence in 1957, Malaysia became a sovereign political entity. Now, fifty-seven years later, there is still uncertainty as to whether the state has developed into a nation. I question the extent to which all Malaysians are allowed to *be* part of a larger, national community within the politically-constructed framework of the state. For politically-expedient reasons, citizens are constructed as being fundamentally different from each other, and these differences have had a deep and damaging effect on their perceptions of their place, and the place of others, within the social framework. This has been compounded by the lack of space for open discussion of these issues. I wish to argue in this paper that the growth of the Internet and the burgeoning of social media have created a space within which a broader and more inclusive sense of community can be considered, examined and argued about, thus perhaps being allowed to grow and develop further. In order to examine this subject, I will be analysing a popular Malaysian web show called *That Effing Show*, which comments on Malaysian politics and society. What makes *That Effing Show* worth taking a closer look at, is the fact that it is disseminated via the internet, and is easily accessible on YouTube. The medium allows for immediate and visible responses from viewers. It is, therefore, a far more dialogical medium than traditional print media. This paper will analyse both the content of the shows and the responses generated in the comments section.

Keywords

Malaysia, community, online, satire, YouTube, *That Effing Show*

Introduction: Community in Malaysia

Upon achieving independence in 1957, Malaysia became a sovereign political entity. Now, fifty-seven years later, there is still uncertainty as to whether the state has developed into a nation. A nation, as Ernst Renan suggests,

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must exert a spiritual, emotional hold over the individual: “A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future” (19). What Renan’s words suggest is that a nation must form a community – without doubt an imagined community, as Benedict Anderson (1991) suggests, but also undeniably an entity in which the individual feels a sense of belonging as well as a sense of ownership and responsibility. Does this sense of belonging exist in Malaysia? Two former Prime Ministers have suggested that it does not. As A.B. Shamsul notes, former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad admits that there is still no “united Malaysian nation” (25-26). Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, then Deputy Prime Minister, in 2000 asserted that it would one day be possible to “define a *Bangsa Malaysia* or Malaysian Nation in the years to come” (qtd. in Cheah 70) – implying that it was not possible at that point.

I question the extent to which all Malaysians are allowed to *be* part of a larger, national community within the politically-constructed framework of the state. For politically-expedient reasons, citizens are constructed as being fundamentally different from each other, and these differences have had a deep and damaging effect on their perceptions of their place, and the place of others, within the social framework. As David Mearns puts it, “The national political structure is built on a set of contrasted categories which seek to emphasize differences” (81). Charles Hirschmann has traced the way in which Malaysia’s racial categorisation of all citizens as either Malay, Chinese, Indian or “Other” developed through census-taking activities (“The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia”). Since Independence, these categories have been maintained in order to serve specific political aims: Malays have been constructed as *Bumiputera*, which literally means “son of the soil,” a term which implies their indigeneity and ownership of the land. As *Bumiputera*, they are recipients of privileges in terms of education (through quotas at public universities, and the setting up of tertiary institutions open only to Malays), property ownership (discounts on new developments), and investment opportunities (investment schemes with guaranteed returns, open only to Malays). In order to administer these privileges, it is necessary to be able to specify who is Malay, and who is not. Farish Noor suggests that this kind of categorisation has had an insidious effect on Malaysian ideas of national identity:

What strikes me as very sad, so many people (not just Muslims), still hold onto this idea of identity being something pure and uncontaminated....

People are looking for homelands. The Indian community feels marginalised, isolated, and thinks of India as its home land. Chinese,

with the demise of the baba culture, go for mainstream Chinese culture. Likewise for the Malays here, they feel they have to invent a home land, which is this mythical, pure, Malay, Muslim class which never existed. (“Malaysians” 14)

As B.L. Goh points out, “The essence of Malay-ness is central to the foundation of the Malaysian nation-state” (186). Thus for non-Malays, there is a certain level of exclusion from full participation within the nation. This is primarily evident in the way in which non-Malays are frequently referred to as *pendatang*, meaning “immigrants,” highlighting their non-belonging within the Malay-ness of Malaysia. There have, for example, been instances of teachers and school heads referring to their non-Malay pupils in this way. A school principal in Kedah, for example, allegedly scolded non-Muslim students “for ‘not respecting’ their Muslim friends and that they ‘should return to their country of origin if they did not show such respect’” (<http://blog.limkitsiang.com/2010/08/21/another-racist-school-head-in-kedah/>). As recently as November 2015, the director of the National Civics Bureau declared that there was “nothing wrong with the term ‘*pendatang*’ to describe the Chinese and Indians in Malaysia as it is a historical fact” (Mayuri Mei Lin).

But exclusion from participation in the political process is even more far-reaching. Essentially, ordinary Malaysians of all races have been blocked from taking an active part in the socio-political processes which help to frame and build the imagined community that is the nation. The government has long taken the paternalistic attitude of knowing what is best for the people, and given the government’s control of the print media, there have been few outlets for the people to take an oppositional stance or even to learn something different from what the government tells them. This is visible in the way controversial or unfavourable stories are spiked in the print media, sometimes through the efforts of the editors, and sometimes through more punitive government action. Dorothy Teoh documents the following example from 2007:

The Deputy Prime Minister, Najib Razak, made a statement on July 17 after opening the Malaysian Institute of Islamic Understanding’s international conference on the “Role of Islamic Studies in a Globalised World” that Malaysia is NOT a secular state.

“Islam is the official religion and Malaysia is an Islamic state; an Islamic state that respects the rights of the non-Muslims and we protect them.... I want to correct you (the reporter); we have never been a secular state,” he said.

The statement drew protests from several quarters, including MCA (the Chinese-based party in the ruling National Front coalition),

lawyers, and civil society groups. Most pointed to the fact that Article 3(1) in the Federal Constitution gives Islam a special position in the country but does not render Malaysia an Islamic state.

The Sun ran Najib's statement on the front page on July 18 and points from his speech and reactions on Page 2. That day, the paper's group editor in chief received a call from the Ministry of Internal Security expressing unhappiness with the article. On July 19, the other 2 leading English dailies in the country, The Star and the New Straits Times, carried reactions to the statement from the Bar Council and others. That same day, the Internal Security Ministry confirmed that it had issued a directive banning mainstream media from further reporting on the Islamic state issue as Islam was a "sensitive issue" and allowing such discussions would cause "tension." However, newspapers could still report on statements by the Prime Minister and his deputy on Malaysia being an Islamic state!

More recently, the Inspector General of Police weighed in on this issue, saying:

all social web users, such as Facebook and blog writers, must be careful in issuing statements, particularly those that touched on racial sensitivity.

'We will take action under the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 if needed. We have freedom of speech but (it) has its limits,' he told reporters after attending the community-to-the-police appreciation night here last night. ("Avoid Making Statements")

I wish to argue in this paper that the growth of the Internet and the burgeoning of social media have created a space within which a broader and more inclusive sense of community can be examined and argued about, thus perhaps being allowed to grow and develop further. In a country in which identities are predicated on primordial notions of race, and where race has come to equal difference and separation, the online world allows the growth of a community which can (ideally) transcend race, or which, more realistically, can allow race to be lived and spoken about in ways not encouraged by official discourse. Communities may spring up which are founded on common political beliefs, or a rejection or re-embracing of racial or religious identities. The very act of talking and arguing about subjects deemed too sensitive, or beyond the competence of ordinary people, also allows them to participate in forming, dismantling and reforming communities, rather than having them formed for them by the state. I wish, therefore, to engage with the ways in which different communities might arise, which may potentially encourage a re-thinking of the narrow and exclusive ways in which community is often structured in Malaysia.

In order to examine this subject, I will be analysing a popular Malaysian web show called *That Effing Show*, which produced 100 short sketches (on average around six minutes long) which comment on Malaysian politics and society. In the past, many writers have commented on these subjects – Farish Noor, Karim Raslan and Kee Thuan Chye, for example. What makes *That Effing Show* different and worth taking a closer look at, is the fact that it is disseminated via the internet, and is easily accessible on YouTube. It can, therefore, reach out to those who are (as is the case with many Malaysians) simply not that interested in reading. Even more importantly, the medium allows for immediate and visible responses from viewers. It is, therefore, a far more dialogical medium than the traditional print media.

The shows are comedic and satirical, and have caused some offense among some of the more right-wing elements of society.³ However, as can be seen from the comments posted in response to their video, many people are encouraged by the fact that these issues are aired in such a public forum. On the other hand, there are also quite vitriolic responses to the shows, especially when they touch on religious issues. It could be argued that in this case, too, a kind of community is formed. Certainly, in either case, there is a somewhat greater sense of participating in or at least talking with other people about the development of a larger idea of community. We must, however, also bear in mind that the internet allows commenters a high level of anonymity, as well as opportunities to take on different personas. Comments and responses cannot, therefore, be treated as entirely trustworthy or true. What I will be able to look at is trends in responses, and what these trends suggest.

The Internet and Online Community

Much has been written about the power of the internet in creating a space of open expression beyond the reach of the censoring blade of authoritarian regimes. Rebecca MacKinnon notes that access to the Internet or other forms of digital communication means that “the average person... has a much greater sense of freedom – and may feel that he has the ability to speak and be heard – in ways that were not possible under classic authoritarianism” (33). However, as she goes on to point out, “in the networked authoritarian state, there is no guarantee of individual rights and freedoms” (33). This is not to say that the stranglehold is absolute, but many

³ Malay-rights group Perkasa (Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia) lodged a police report against *That Effing Show* over an episode which dealt with the controversy about Christians in Peninsular Malaysia not being allowed to use the word ‘Allah’ in their Malay-language services, etc. The response of the producers of the show was to create an episode mocking Perkasa.

commentators do show that the Internet is strongly controlled. Larry Diamond, for example, points out that any tool which can be used *against* oppressive authorities, can also be used *by* them, saying that “Democrats and autocrats now compete to master these technologies” (70). MacKinnon also points out that the authorities can mobilise technology for their own ends, but adds that this “networked authoritarianism” still allows for more freedom of expression than might previously have been possible: “In the networked authoritarian state, the single ruling party remains in control while a wide range of conversations about the country’s problems nonetheless occurs on websites and social-networking services” (33). It is within this “range of conversations” that I see new communities potentially forming.

Communities are often viewed in terms of being tightly-knit, cohesive units, bound by something their members hold in common. But belonging within a community might be imposed rather than inherent or voluntary. In Malaysia, for example, where traditional identity markers such as race, ethnicity, language, religion and sexual orientation are defined and bureaucratically imposed, one’s community is all but chosen for one.⁴ One is embedded within particular racial/ethnic/linguistic or other communities, whatever one might feel about the appropriateness of that community. But online, there is a greater element of freedom of choice. Bell says that the internet allows for “disembeddedness” – the quality of being “no longer rooted in place” (95):

since we are *disembedded*, we can choose who we want to be (within certain structural limitations, of course!). And this disembeddedness and reflexivity enables us to question and transform the taken-for-granted, leading to *detraditionalization* (Heelas et. al. 1996) – a chance to make over the social fabric anew and... *imagine* new forms of community. (96; italics in the original)

This imagining of new forms of community should, ideally, be active rather than passive or purely of the imagination. If we look at the internet as a

⁴ I have already noted how race has been discursively constructed through census taking as well as through government policy and the dependence on race-based political parties. The government also controls gender identities by outlawing homosexuality. Currently, the status of transgender individuals is being argued in the courts:

In overturning a landmark ruling, Malaysia’s highest court has undermined the rights of transgender people in the country, Human Rights Watch said today. On October 8, 2015, the Federal Court reversed a lower court ruling that a state’s prohibition on “cross-dressing” was unconstitutional. On wholly procedural grounds, the Federal Court upheld Sharia laws prohibiting “a male person posing as a woman” (Human Rights Watch, “Malaysia: Court Ruling Sets Back Transgender Rights”).

space where opinions can be expressed, shared and commented on, then we begin to enter the realm of participatory communitarianism, which is “marked by sentiments of political agency and efficacy, ‘namely the sense that we have a say in the economic, political and civic arrangements which define our lives together, and that what one does makes a difference’” (Graham 102). In a society in which spaces for public expression are tightly policed, the internet can perhaps lead the individual towards more of a sense of being able to have a say in economics, politics, etc. – in other words, towards a sense of being an integral part of that society or community.

Of course, not all are so sanguine about the positive effects of reflexivity and disembeddedness; Smith and Kollock summarise the arguments for and against:

Something is missing, they argue, that makes these online groups pale substitutes for more traditional face-to-face communities. Others respond that not only are online communities real communities, but also that they have the potential to support face-to-face communities and help hold local communities together. (“Communities” 16)

Wellman and Gulia also point out these opposing trends encapsulated within the world of online communication, noting that “even as the Net might accelerate the trend to moving community interaction out of public spaces, it may also integrate society and foster social trust” (188). Laura Gurak furthers the argument about the possible negative effects of the Internet and digital communication on the formation of communities, suggesting that offline habits of exclusion can continue online:

Although delivery and *etbos* in cyberspace suggest great promise for online social action, these rhetorical dynamics also require us to view cyberspace with a critical eye. These features may at the same time encourage the spread of inaccurate information and promote an insider status that leaves out dissenting voices. (255; italics in the original)

There is, then, no consensus as to the validity and efficacy of the Internet in creating community. David Bell quotes Kevin Robins, who suggests that “virtual culture is a culture of retreat from the world” (105). But the recent increase of cyber-activism and its proven effectiveness in places like Egypt and Tunisia, and in Malaysia (where it has led to far greater political awareness than in the past), suggests that the Internet is being used as a way of actively confronting and negotiating with a world that has proven unsatisfactory, rather than retreating from it. There are, then, communities bound not by physical proximity or ethnic similarity, but by political and

social awareness, and a desire to take some kind of action. Bell suggests that a good term for this kind of community is the German word *bund*, which means “an elective grouping, bonded by affective and emotional solidarity, sharing a strong sense of belonging” (107).

It is the sense of community as *bund* which I wish to trace in selected examples of online communication in Malaysia. I need here to differentiate between the communities to which we are told we belong, within the social framework, and the online communities which the Internet has opened up to us. In examining *That Effing Show*, I will look at how the writers challenge state-mandated ideas of belonging and community, thus allowing viewers to think differently about these ideas. I will also look at how alternative communities “bounded by affective and emotional solidarity” (Bell 107) are formed within the responses of the viewers to the episodes. In watching and then responding to these videos through the comments, they are actively interpreting them based on their own experiences and perceptions, thus articulating their understanding of their society. At the same time, the space afforded by the comments section allows for the development of a shared practice of discussion and debate not available in the offline world.

However we must be aware that despite the apparent openness of Internet use and access in Malaysia, society is still hedged about with control mechanisms. “No internet censorship” does not equate to absolute freedom, and newspostals have been punished in other ways, for example through the Official Secrets Act or the Sedition Act, as well as through civil action such as lawsuits. For example, *Malaysiakini* journalist Susan Loone was arrested in September 2014 for writing an article based on an interview with Penang state exco member Phee Boon Poh, about his treatment by police while in detention. Both Loone and Phee were investigated under the Sedition Act. The question raised by many was how a journalist could be arrested simply for reporting the words of another person. Clearly, this was punitive action being taken against the newportal, rather than against the journalist herself (Bhatt). In another example, Prime Minister Najib threatened to sue *Malaysiakini* over readers’ comments which had been compiled into articles entitled “Yoursay” (“Najib Threatens to Sue”). Unable to curtail the activities of the journalists, perhaps, the next step is to punish public response to the articles, and thus hopefully reduce their popularity.⁵

⁵ An interesting aspect of the “Yoursay” articles is that they represent, in a kind of compressed and easily-accessible form, the voices of disparate individuals separated in time and space, but often united in their opinions – a visible representation of an otherwise invisible community. Indeed, I would suggest that it is only through the compilation of the comments that a sense of unity or commonality is made possible.

***That Effing Show* and Community**

Despite these controls, *That Effing Show* has successfully tackled a large number of issues touching on such “sensitive” matters as race, religion and politics. In this, it is protected to some extent by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Content Code. Under “Specific Online Guidelines” (part 5 of the Code), section 5.1, the code defines false content:

(ii) False Content.

Content that is not truthful and likely to mislead is prohibited except in any of the following circumstances:

(a) Satire and parody;

(b) Where it is clear to an ordinary user that the content is fiction; and

(c) Where it is preceded by a statement that the content found on the web site is not factual. (43)

Thus, where newsportals such as *Malaysiakini* are vulnerable because they report hard news, *That Effing Show* can purport to be purveying satire, or can claim that their content is fiction.

The tone taken by this show is highly satirical. I read this satirical tone as an attempt to forge links with others who are “like-minded” – Malaysians who are able to laugh at the comedy provided by the programme, but who at the same time understand its hard-hitting critique. The show strikes this note from the opening credits of each episode, which runs a *caveat* as follows (this caveat takes advantage of point number (iii) quoted earlier from the Content Code):

Caution: This programme is intended for *immature* audiences only. This programme is NOT intended for *educational purposes*, merely to *stimulate FUN*.

If you are easily offended, *mudah tersinggung* or *terkeliru*, probably best to *close the window right now*. (Italics in the original)

The first two lines seem to trivialise the show, suggesting that it is just about having fun. However, the final sentence acts as a clue to its more serious purpose. Clearly, it is going to tackle issues which might be deemed “offensive” – but only by those who are “mudah tersinggung or terkeliru.” The phrase “mudah tersinggung” translates as “easily offended,” while “terkeliru” means “confused.”

Most Malaysians will understand the import behind these words. As noted above, we are frequently told not to discuss particular topics (mainly those related to race and religion) because open discussion will “cause confusion,” or will touch on “sensitivities.” The implication is that to touch on sensitive topics is to confuse, offend and possibly inflame some quarters of the population. But to insist that these topics cannot be touched, renders

them taboo in the public imagination; they are thus turned into topics which are feared for their inflammatory power, rather than discussed, understood and possibly defused. However, the advent of the Internet has meant that people who want to talk about these things, now have the space in which to do so.

It is clear that the producers of the show are speaking to those who *want* to discuss topics which the authorities might deem controversial and therefore “confusing.” This show is meant for those who are clear-headed enough not to get confused. This in itself can be seen as an attempt to create a community of the like-minded. On the one hand, it is open to those who want to discuss things openly (it is inclusive); on the other hand, it draws boundaries – if you do not like this kind of thing, do not watch – and thus becomes exclusive in tone. But because it is freely available on the internet, there can be no rigid enforcement of such boundaries, and the space therefore becomes open to all kinds of comments and discussions. As Hopkins points out, “a blog can also be described as a *dialogical medium* – that is, it is produced not only by the blogger, but also by multidirectional overlapping voices” (84-85). This is an important point when talking about the need to create dialogue and discussion. While the blogger, or the person posting an article or video, is putting forward one opinion, the fact that other internet users will then be able to comment on the work or to share it, means that multiple dialogues are created – between the blogger/poster and commenter, and between different commentators. This is vastly different from the hegemonic voice presented in the mainstream media. The movement of information sideways, rather than just top-down, is participatory. Thus ordinary individuals take part in these discussions, and multiple communities form, break apart and reform on these sites, as can be seen in *That Effing Show* #61 (“Problematic PSAs”), and in the online responses to the video.

Local terrestrial TV channel 8TV put out a series of PSAs during the fasting month in 2011, aimed at guiding non-Muslim Malaysians on how to behave appropriately. The PSAs featured a wildly exaggerated Chinese woman behaving in a crass and ignorant way, exclaiming loudly over the food available at the Ramadan bazaar, offering food to a Muslim woman *before* the breaking of fast, traipsing around in a tight, sleeveless t-shirt and so on, to the (exaggerated) horror of the Muslim patrons of the bazaar. These shots were followed by examples of “correct” behaviour, with the same Chinese girl pointing decorously to the food she wants, but pointing with her thumb, as is common among the Malays; another shot shows her dressed modestly in the Malay *baju Kedah*. These PSAs received a lot of flak from the public for their crudely exaggerated portrayal of the Chinese girl, as well as because of their implication that non-Muslims are actually that

insensitive and need to be told how to behave, or that Muslims need to be protected from any kind of temptation in case they succumb. Perhaps less noted, but equally significant, is that the “correct” behaviour models were all predicated on Malay cultural norms and habits.⁶

That Effing Show’s way of undermining the line of thought behind these ads was to play with stereotypes in its own exaggerated way. Co-host Uma tells host Ezra that he is offended by the ads but not, as Ezra expects, because of the “racial stereotyping” and the “patronising nature” of the ads. Rather, he is upset that once again, the Indians have been marginalised – none appear in the PSAs. He declares that “we are just as cliché-worthy as the Chinese, we are full of stereotypes!” He then presents his own PSAs featuring an Indian man and some common stereotypes about Indians – that they talk a lot, that they are overly macho, that they are irresponsible alcoholics. This is followed by the “how to behave properly” segment, in which we now see the Indian man wearing a *songkok* which implies that he has converted to Islam, and that this is the best way to behave. This assumption is borne out by a slide which exhorts people to “Correct yourself! Circumcise!” The clip not only laughs at the stereotypes; it also, with that final segment implying conversion as the best solution, makes a pointed comment about how narrow the official borders are for what is considered acceptable behaviour. Why, in all cases, must “correct behaviour” be contextualised within a very specific racial/cultural/religious sphere?

The episodes provide viewers with material to discuss and even to argue about. It is in the comments from these viewers that we see how battle lines as well as lines of allegiance are formed between individuals and among groups. Smaller communities governed by shared ideology, or by strong opposition to particular ideas, seem to spring up within the borders of the “comments” section on YouTube. Thus the show itself talks about and presents community in different ways; but it is in the comments that we see other communities forming and re-forming.

A sense of community might be engendered, for example, among those who object to the cultural narrowness mentioned above, or feel marginalised by it. Out of 53 comments, only one was critical: “ezra, go correct ur dad first. Virus.” The response is clearly not to the contents of the video, but to Zaid Ibrahim’s politics.⁷ Other than that, the comments refer

⁶ It should be noted that these PSAs were pulled off the air after the online outcry against them (Surin). It was also reported that “local regulator Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) will take action against TV station 8TV over its controversial Ramadan advertisements” (Lee).

⁷ Zaid Ibrahim is the father of the show’s co-creator Ezra Zaid. Formerly a member of UMNO (United Malays National Organisation – the main component party in the current ruling

to how funny viewers found the episode, as well as to specific lines within the episode. One relatively long comment asks:

Why must everything revolve around one religion when that country is supposed to be multi cultural and show each other equal respect and understanding? I find it weird that “racial” groups doesn’t get along too good, because they don’t really want to! It’s hilarious! (Based on my S’wak life, don’t take me seriously!).

This comment is interesting in that it presents two rather different attitudes towards community. First, it speaks of the kind of mutual respect and understanding that are commonly taken to underlie a sense of community. But the commenter then goes on to state that, based on the life that he or she lives in Sarawak (East Malaysia), he/she finds Peninsular Malaysian race relations difficult to grasp. Here, the commenter seems to be creating a divided idea of community – the suggestion is that in Sarawak, there is a broader, more inclusive and accepting idea of community. This implies further that he or she is treating Sarawak as a separate community which does not partake of Peninsular Malaysia’s divisive politics. Therefore, while on some level the commenter seems to be building community, on another level, he or she is also creating boundaries and divisions.

As *That Effing Show* became more well-known and garnered more views, it also began to attract attention from those who were not quite so like-minded in wanting to open up spaces of discussion. One of their videos (#99) which went viral cheekily referenced PM Najib’s *kangkung* gaffe in which he declared that the government is always blamed when prices go up, but never praised when prices come down. The example he chose was the very humble vegetable *kangkung* (water convolvulus), which can often be found freely growing near water, and is extremely cheap. The team from *That Effing Show* used this as a base from which to discuss race relations in the country: a Malay man declares he will fight for the right of the native vegetable, the *kangkung*, against such foreign interlopers as the avocado and broccoli; a Chinese man laments that all the vegetables used to come together in mixed-vegetable dishes, but that no longer happens because the “head chef” does not know how to bring the vegetables together; two Indian men are up in arms that the cucumber is sidelined, always a garnish, never part of the main meal.

The video is clearly about Malaysia’s racial divides. The three spokespeople belong to the (fictional) entities PerKaSa (Persatuan

coalition) and a Minister, he left UMNO to join Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), a leading opposition party. However, he also left PKR after accusing certain members of fraud.

Kangkung SatuMalaysia, or OneMalaysia Kangkung Association), MCA (Malaysian Choi-sam Association, *choi-sam* being another type of leafy vegetable) and MIC (Machas Institute of Cucumber – “*macha*” is an Indian word similar to “bro” or “dude”). The names of these groups very obviously refer to existing social and political groups. The current ruling coalition (BN, which stands for *Barisan Nasional*, meaning National Front) consists of a number parties, but the main component parties are UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress). The show’s writers here link Malaysia’s racial divides directly to the way in which politics is structured.

But interestingly, the third comment to appear on the screen (by commenter Izz Adam) makes a wild logical leap and links it to religion: “Please make the another Video about ur Minister jalanan reject in Japan. and Please don’t play with JAIS.” The first part of the comment refers to a January 2014 incident in which opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was barred from entering Japan because of his former criminal conviction. The second part tells the producers of the show not to “play” with *Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor* (JAIS – the Selangor Islamic Religion Department). This appears to be a strange comment, given that the video does not speak about religion at all.

What the commenter appears to be doing is building a sense of community via an “us” against “them” logic of binaries, as shown by one of his subsequent comments: “actually i Don’t care if u guys want make joke about kangkung or everything. Cuma jangan main Dengan isu Agama mostly Islam. In previous Video pun Sama About Allah. Dalam Sosial bolehlah berani. sedar sikit cinai indiani bukan Bumiputera” (roughly translated as: “Just don’t play around with the issue of religion, especially Islam”). In the previous video as well it was about Allah. You can be brave on social (networks). Show some awareness, these Chinese and Indians are not Bumiputera.” He marks religion as an issue which cannot be joked about – but by particularly singling out Islam, he subtly suggests that joking about other religions is not as offensive; and he emphasises his opinion that the Chinese and Indians in Malaysia must be constantly mindful that they are not Bumiputera, i.e. that they do not really belong to or own the land. By yoking together the ideas of Islam and Bumiputera-hood in his response to this video, and by putting the Chinese and Indians “in their place” within the social framework, the commenter constructs an idea of Malaysian society which emphasises division and separation. His is a narrow and exclusive idea of community: in a response to commenter +nana penang, he says “previous tu semua pendatang yg comment” (“the previous comments were all made by immigrants”) – again, a way of putting non-Malays in their perceived place as non-natives. While this commenter is a single individual,

his response seems to mirror a sentiment that is, as noted earlier, becoming increasingly common.

Responses to Izz Adam's comments were scathing, with many making the assumption that he must be a supporter of BN or UMNO (he denies this in one of the comments but his reference to Anwar Ibrahim as "*your* minister" certainly suggests that he is not on the side of the opposition). Given that the responses were united in their disapprobation for his words and the attitude they betray, it is possible to see some level of community among the commenters.

But these are not "ideal" communities, but rather communities brought together by perceptions of threat, or by a mutual disapproval of or dislike for another group. In this case, the majority of the comments revolve around race and religion. But it is not possible, just from reading the comments, to identify all the commenters by race or religion. Going by the usernames of many of the commenters, it is difficult to establish race. Even where race seems obvious, there are hidden complexities. Commenter Izz Adam speaks very firmly on the Malay/Muslim side, but he self-identifies as not being a pure Malay ("im nott Full Melayu btw"). By making that statement he seems (and even in referring to the commenter as "he" I am making assumptions) to be removing himself from the race debate by declaring multiple or layered loyalties. But his later use of the word "pendatang" suggests the opposite because it affirms that "they" do not belong – thus implying that he *does* belong. On the other side of the debate, the commenters in favour of the *That Effing Show* video clips seem to represent a broader range of society. But again, this is speculation based on some clues within the usernames, as well as from language-use choices.

Many commenters with Muslim names chose to chide Izz Adam for his intolerance. Commenter Fauzul Hakim, for example, asks Izz Adam "so how old are you 12??" Another commenter, Zakaria Mohd Yacob, says "some thing wrong with you dude 1 side thinking why don't you try listening the other side point of view." Commenter Zaed Harisah says of Izz Adam's comment, "inilah perangai bn konon2 mempertahankan hak islam" ("this is the kind of behaviour you get with BN, supposedly defending the rights of Islam"). As I have said, I am making an assumption that the Muslim names indicate a Muslim identity. Going with that assumption, however, it is clear that these individuals have deliberately chosen to step back from the community of race and religion and, instead, embrace a more inclusive and tolerant sense of community.

It is also possible that Izz Adam is just trolling the other viewers of the episode. His rather confusing response (that he is not an UMNO supporter, that he is not fully Malay, but he is scathing about opposition politicians and supporters, and about non-Malays) may indicate that he is

just “pushing buttons” rather than speaking from a well-thought out and strongly held position. However, the responses to his comments are important, as they do almost unanimously suggest a community united *against* his stance.

Conclusion

It is difficult to speak with any clarity or certainty about ways in which communities are built through websites, or online shows like *That Effing Show*. However, the very fact that these videos are produced and consumed, and sometimes made to go viral, is in itself significant. In a country where the mainstream media are under tight political control, it is clear from the comments on these videos that people are excited by the ability to hear these issues discussed, and to be able to talk about them. As noted earlier, while the points have been brought up before in other media, the internet allows space for responses, discussions and argument. One commenter for the Kangkung video says: “Baguslah! Malaysian creativity truly leveraging the diversity of the Malaysian society, unlike the UMNO-BN’s approach to diversity: divide and rule!” Another declares that “The Effing Show is our Malaysian version of The Daily Show, brilliant!” One commenter expresses worry that “Ezra is treading a fine line as the general public is not mature enough to discuss about it” (this is a common trope used by the government to avoid open discussion of sensitive matters). But another commenter responds that treading a fine line “is what satirists and art in general are meant to do.”

The existence of these videos and the ability of individuals to comment on them creates a participatory culture which was not previously available. The site serves as a virtual community of practice which is therefore not rooted in a specific place or time, but is significant because it allows for the reexamination and reinterpretation of ideas of nation, citizenship and belonging. There is every possibility that this can then feed into social reality offline.

It is worth asking, however, whether action emerges from these conversations. Does the existence of this apparently more open space for discussion merely serve to placate citizens, to give them the impression that they have an open space for discussion, while it is in reality very tightly controlled? Tan Meng Yoe touches on these questions when looking at the role of the Internet in breaking down boundaries, suggesting that it is possible to build as well as destroy boundaries online. Tan addresses the issue of whether online action necessarily has an effect in the offline world:

The Internet can potentially actively build boundaries as well as break them – if one argues that powerful binaries encapsulate gender, race

and others, are deconstructed online [sic], I would propose two questions. First, are these binaries deconstructed in practice? Second, if there is an active deconstruction of familiar boundaries, are there new boundaries and binaries that are being set up? (80)

I would suggest that any transformation or deconstruction that does take place is at this stage likely to be small and local, rather than at the larger level of national transformation. An important issue is who exactly these videos are speaking to. From the comments, the audience seems to be divided between those who enjoy the alternative and oppositional viewpoints presented in the clips, and those who object to them, especially when race and religion are debated. These two groups can perhaps be seen as representing two communities already visible in the offline world, whose viewpoints are emphasised by their responses to the videos. Where, one wonders, are the voices of those who are not ideologically aligned with either “side?” An important part that these videos can play is to speak to those who are undecided, and perhaps persuade them to decide one way or the other, to make them part of a community.

Any sense of community being created through these videos is tenuous at best. To a large extent, responses indicate that people already have fairly fixed ways of looking at the issues brought up in the clips, and so they bring their pre-existing prejudices and ideological stances to their viewing of and responses to the episodes. Community building through these comments, then, reflects broad ideological communities already existing in the offline world. What is important, however, is that *That Effing Show* as well as other online sources provide a node within which these offline communities, consisting in the offline world of isolated individuals disconnected from each other, can connect across time and distance. It is this, perhaps, which can potentially feed into the exploration of new ideas of community and identity within society.

Race-based politics as practiced in Malaysia have had a debilitating effect on the development of broader notions of community. Racially-based policies and the insistence that each race needed its own racial party to look after it was meant to assure the people that they were being looked after, regardless of race. But in effect, it has led to the entrenched belief that each race has to look after itself, because no one else is going to. Fundamentally, this has also led to a worsening of interracial ties, which further undermines the strength of the community at a national level.⁸

⁸ The further fragmentation of the nation is suggested by the rise of narrowly-focused special-rights groups such as Hindraf (Hindu Rights Action Force), Perkasa (Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia) and Isma (Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia). Hindraf claims to be a voice for the

It is, therefore, important to engage with the question of what it means to be a Malaysian. In a country still mired in racial politics, how is a Malaysian national identity meant to emerge? Most Malaysians, when asked what makes them Malaysian, will refer to food, or to linguistic quirks like the use of the particle “lah,” or the ability to create multi-lingual sentences that are perfectly comprehensible to most other Malaysians. But there is generally no reference to shared ideas and ideologies or common values. This again goes back to policies of racialisation: Malaysians, constantly reminded that they are Indian or Chinese or Malay or Other, tend to cling to their racial markers of identity, and to identify themselves racially when among other Malaysians.

I do not suggest that the Internet will solve these problems. They are deep and almost intractable. Indeed, in recent years there has been a worrying return to racial identification and race baiting. What I suggest is that Malaysia needs a space in which issues of politics, society, race, religion, culture, language and identity can be debated and explored, so that eventually, some common understanding can hopefully emerge. The internet has a wide reach; with internet penetration of around 70%, it is a tool which can speak to Malaysians across the usual borders of race, language, location and age. It is within this space that the most scope exists for the exploration of a Malaysian community which transcends barriers of race, language and religion.

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voiceless, and seeks to protect marginalised Malaysian Indians. Perkasa claims to fight for the rights of Malays and Pribumi (indigenous peoples). Isma fights for Islam and Muslim rights.

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