Biotechnology, the Environment, and Alternative Media in Malaysia

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Abstract: The Malaysian government has embarked on an ambitious path to make biotechnology a key driver of the country’s economic future. This burgeoning sector is being developed by a state with a problematic environmental track record, which does not bode well for the future. As mainstream Malaysian media are heavily controlled through a range of restrictive laws and hegemonic pressures to self-censor, critical coverage of biotechnology and its implicit ties to the environment is, not surprisingly, sparse. The focus of this article, however, is the relative scarcity of critical discussions about these issues in the country’s vital alternative media. This article offers a number of suggestions for this shortfall, including government restrictions on available information, the complexity of relevant issues, a lack of recognition of the industry’s importance, and the tenuous relationship between environmental NGOs and alternative media practitioners and organizations.

Keywords: Malaysia; Alternative media; Biotechnology; Environment

Résumé : Le gouvernement malaisien a entamé le projet ambitieux de faire de la biotechnologie un moteur-clé de l’avenir économique du pays. Cependant, l’état qui développe ce secteur a à ce jour obtenu des résultats problématiques en matière environnementale, ce qui n’est pas de bon augure pour l’avenir. Comme un éventail de lois restrictives et de pressions hégémoniques effectue un contrôle assez lourd des médias malaisiens prédominants, une couverture réellement critique de la biotechnologie et de ses liens implicites à l’environnement se fait rare, ce qui n’est pas trop surprenant. L’objectif de cet article, cependant, est le manque relatif d’examens critiques provenant des médias alternatifs vitaux du pays. Cet article propose certaines explications pour ce manque, y compris : des restrictions gouvernementales sur l’information disponible, la complexité des questions pertinentes, une reconnaissance insuffisante de l’importance de l’industrie, et un rapport tenu entre les ONG environnementaux et les médias alternatifs.

Mots clés : Malaisie; Médias alternatifs; Biotechnologie; Environnement

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Biotechnology is set to be one of the key drivers of Malaysia’s economic future. As Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi proclaims: “Malaysia possesses the richest biodiversity on the planet. It is a gift, a competitive advantage that is God-given and we must find ways to harvest it to the best of our abilities” (2003, emphasis added). To do so, Badawi announced in 2005 that his government would commit financial and political resources to jumpstart this new sector. Though biotechnology endeavours may produce positive scientific and economic benefits, the government’s problematic environmental track record should be of particular cause for concern—and thus discussion and debate—in the media. Despite attempts of some critical mainstream journalists, coverage of sensitive environmental issues—especially the potential socio-cultural and environmental ramifications of the government’s new biotechnology strategy—is extremely limited. Given political and economic constraints placed on mainstream Malaysian media, this dearth in critical reporting about biotechnology and the environment should not be surprising.

The focus of this article, however, is the relative scarcity of coverage in Malaysia’s alternative media, which include “politically contentious” (George 2005; 2006) professional online newspapers, non-governmental organization (NGO) websites, and journalistic blogs. The primary objective of these alternative forms of communication is to challenge “the consensus that powerful interests try to shape and sustain through the mainstream media” (George, 2005; 2006, p. 3). The discussion below offers possible explanations for why these media have said little about Malaysia’s new thrust toward biotechnology and its implicit ties to the environment.

**Biotechnology in the Malaysian environment**

In 2005, the Malaysian government introduced three new mechanisms to facilitate growth in the domestic biotechnology industry: the National Biotechnology Policy, the Malaysian Biotechnology Corporation, and BioNexus.¹ The National Biotechnology Policy was introduced to provide the regulatory and financial framework for the industry. The sections of the policy available to the public provide a cursory overview of the government’s broad objectives, which range from increasing the “value creation” of Malaysia’s agricultural sector and the commercialization of nutraceuticals and pharmaceuticals derived from bio-products, to leveraging the strength of manufacturing by improving “opportunities in bio-processing and bio-manufacturing” (Badawi, 2005). The policy also outlines tax incentives for local and foreign biotechnology companies and promises access to sufficient venture capital, a cooperative legal and regulatory framework, and a sufficiently skilled workforce.

Through this policy, the government also established the Malaysian Biotechnology Corporation (MBC) to administer government policies, advance the commercialization of biotechnology initiatives, and assist interested companies and investors (MBC, 2006). Together, the National Biotechnology Policy and the MBC are expected to guide the country’s biotechnology industry toward creating 200,000 new jobs in agriculture, healthcare, industrial biotechnology, and bioinformatics. The industry is also supposed to contribute five percent of the national GDP by 2020, the year Malaysia is slated to become a self-sufficient developed country (Malaysia, 2006, pp. 157-169). To achieve these goals, the
government also introduced a “nexus of centres of excellence from existing institutions around the country, to be known as BioNexus Malaysia” (Badawi, 2005). Originally, a biotechnology hub was to be built within the country’s Multimedia Super Corridor—a geographically defined area dedicated to high-tech entrepreneurship. The BioNexus strategy is a departure from these kinds of earlier infrastructure-heavy projects in that it draws upon expertise from the country’s various universities and research organizations. Badawi and his administration have placed significant political weight behind this three-part biotechnology strategy, promising that the industry will leverage Malaysia’s unique and abundant flora and fauna to positively benefit all Malaysians. That said, the sector is being developed within the historical context of a problematic environmental track record. Under former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, widespread logging and the introduction of commercial agriculture (particularly palm oil plantations) prompted a significant decline in the country’s forests, threatening flora, fauna, and the lives and livelihoods of local peoples (Article 19 & CIJ 2007; FAO, 2001; McMorrow & Talip, 2001; Nicholas, 2003; SAM, 2005; Vincent & Rozali, 2005).

Mahathir also conceived and initiated construction of the colossal Bakun Dam project to supply electricity to the state of Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia. Located along the Balui river, the Bakun Hydroelectric Project is expected to devastate the surrounding environment (close to 70,000 hectares will be destroyed in a tremendously diverse ecosystem) (Choy 2005), and force the inequitable resettlement of approximately 10,000 citizens whose lives and livelihoods have been intimately intertwined with the Bakun region for centuries (Allison, 2000; Choy, 2005; Thien, 2006). Despite the “irreversible environmental destruction” (Choy, 2005, p. 957) and socio-economic ramifications of the dam, the government approved and began planning the project prior to submitting a thorough environmental impact assessment (which could have also recognized potential alternatives to what will be the largest dam in Southeast Asia) (Choy, 2004; 2005). Although Mahathir and his administration initiated the project, Prime Minister Badawi’s government will finish it—the Bakun Dam is expected to be completed in 2008 (Thien, 2006).

The Badawi administration also initiated plans to construct the largest incinerator in Asia. Slated to be built in the state of Selangor, the 1,500-tonne Broga Incinerator site was located adjacent to the Sungai Lalang forest reserve and on a river basin. In addition to the 229 animal species (some of which are “protected” or “totally protected” under Malaysia’s Protection of Wildlife Act) that inhabit the surrounding region, approximately 5,000 citizens live within five kilometers of the proposed project site (CAP, 2005, p. 4). Many of these individuals expressed serious concerns about the cancer-causing dioxins they suspected would be emitted by the incinerator and mounted an inspiring campaign that halted construction; however, the government announced in early 2007 that it would be looking to other sites in Malaysia to build new incinerators (Netto, 2007).

The lack of public consultation and transparency in the development of both the Bakun and Broga projects (especially the difficulty in accessing comprehensive and accurate environmental impact assessments) has elicited fierce criticism from local and international civil society organizations. These examples also demonstrate the government’s past and current disregard for the environment and
its citizens—particularly those with little political capital—in favour of economic
growth and large-scale technological ‘fixes’ (Article 19 & CIJ, 2007; Choy, 2005;
Greenaction, 2006; SAM, 2005; Smeltzer, 2008; Vincent & Rozali, 2005). As
Hezri and Hasan contend in their historical overview of Malaysia’s environmen-
tal policy landscape, although the situation has, arguably, improved over the past
few years, environmental issues in Malaysia continue to be “marginal to the over-

The government has also delayed establishing biotechnology-oriented laws
that would help protect citizens and the environment. Little movement has been
made to introduce an Access and Benefit-sharing law that would ensure equitable
remuneration from biotechnology activities in the country (e.g., fair compensa-
tion for use of indigenous knowledge or access to their land). Additionally, ten
years elapsed before a draft Biosafety law to monitor the trans-boundary move-
ment of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) was passed by Parliament (in
2007). These postponements can, in large part, be attributed to government con-
cerns that safety regulations will deter international companies and investors, sig-
nalling the pre-eminence of economic interests over environmental and human
rights concerns (Smeltzer, 2008).

For all of the reasons outlined above, it is difficult to overstate the importance
of critically examining Malaysia’s biotechnology industry. Examples of questions
that need to be asked include: Can and will the Malaysian government adequately
control the movement of GMOs and, if not, what impact will this have on
Malaysia’s environment and biodiversity? How will expanded and lengthened
intellectual property rights affect Malaysia’s agricultural sector and the rights of
farmers and indigenous peoples (i.e., will Malaysians have control over their own
biodiversity)? Will legally binding ethical guidelines be put in place for genetic
engineering? What companies are currently operating in the country and in what
kinds of research are they engaged (e.g., bio-chemical weapons)? What kind of
public funding is being directed toward the industry and how will it create
200,000 new jobs? Despite the implicit tie between biotechnology initiatives and
environmental concerns, it is rather surprising that few alternative media or envi-
ronmental organizations have addressed issues related to biotechnology in a sus-
tained manner. As argued below, these and other members of Malaysia’s civil
society must ask these kinds of tough questions.

Mainstream media coverage of environmental
and biotechnology issues
Not surprisingly, mainstream Malaysian media are reticent to allow their journal-
ists to critically report on the government’s biotechnology strategy from an envi-
ronmental point of view (nor, for that matter, from human rights, ethical or
critical economic perspectives). Instead, the media engage in pro-government
reporting that has helped frame biotechnology as an obvious next step for
Malaysia’s overall progress and development. By reporting almost exclusively on
the industry’s potential positive benefits, the media avoid addressing the kinds of
critical questions noted above.

To curb unwelcome critiques of the status quo, media are impelled to practice
self-censorship through the inherent threat and enforcement of a wide range of
restrictive laws. These laws include: Printing Presses and Publications Act, Sedition Act, Defamation Act, Official Secrets Act, Communications and Multimedia Act, and the Internal Security Act. Media are thus in constant danger of losing their licenses or being sued if they publish or broadcast materials the government may consider critical of the status quo. Since any type of challenge to the government’s programs and policies is treated as inimical to Malaysia’s economic stability and progress, journalists, editors, and media owners, “[f]eeling that potential controversies are not worth the risk... tend to avoid troublesome topics, even when the resulting coverage is likely to be within bounds of acceptability” (McDaniel, 2002, p. 175). Moreover, the Malaysian media landscape has become increasingly concentrated; a handful of politically supportive elite wield significant control over the country’s media content (Anuar, 2002; 2005; Gomez, 2003; McDaniel, 2002; McElhinney, 2005; Nain, 2002; Siong, 2004).

Even within Malaysia’s restrictive media environment, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, top-selling (primarily English language) local newspapers supported limited environmental beats and encouraged a relatively healthy competition between local media outlets. By the mid-1990s, however, environmental journalism waned as commercial pressures escalated, editors changed (often at the behest of the government), and reporters left the business. Today, environmental reporting tends toward non-inflammatory ‘objective’ reporting of isolated stories of what are now fairly benign issues, such as air quality and recycling. Though clearly important, such coverage is usually cursory and decontextualized. Without a ‘big picture’ context and links to broader environmental and human rights issues and movements, the full value and importance of these issues tend to be overlooked or marginalized. Critical environmental commentary is especially unlikely to appear in the many newspapers owned by Sarawak-based timber companies Rimbunan Hijau Group and KTS Group, which have been censured by national and international NGOs for their environmentally destructive logging activities.

When mainstream media do cover specifically biotechnology-related issues, reporting is primarily positive in nature, eschewing critical discussions of the potential negative impacts of biotechnology activities on the environment and on Malaysian citizens. Alternatively, coverage leans toward the critically pragmatic, focusing on steps that need to be taken for the industry to be an economic success. For instance, an article in The Sun newspaper (which tended to offer more critical coverage of environmental and biotechnology issues than its competitors) praised the “goodies” Prime Minister Badawi was offering to attract biotechnology companies, including “research grants, fund [sic] for skills training and tax incentives” (Manirajan 2005).

The control mechanisms described above do not mean political and economic control of Malaysia’s media is absolute, nor do they mean the media have completely ignored environmental reporting. First, as discussed below, critical online newspapers, NGO websites, and blogs work to circumvent government restrictions and the media monopoly. Second, mainstream media personnel are not a monolithic group that uniformly shies away from critical analysis and investigative reporting. Through interviews with key environmental journalists in the mainstream media, it is clear that although these individuals are well aware of what
they are/are not allowed to report, most strive to provide critical in-depth coverage of a wide range of environmental issues. Though not all are conversant in the government’s biotechnology strategy, these journalists have expressed interest in expanding their knowledge in this area. The popularity of television personality Karam Singh Walia—a Malay-language environmental reporter for TV3’s (Malaysia’s first private television station) news program, Buletin Utama—has also helped raise the profile of environmental reporting and eco-friendly living. His work has also opened a modicum of space for citizens to critique environmental practices of both private and public sectors. As a Barisan Nasional Member of Parliament, frustrated by the inaction of local authorities to solve an air pollution problem in his constituency, stated: “If the Government doesn’t care, we will bring Karam Singh to air the problem over TV3. This is what I am going to do. Any ministry cannot solve problems, I will bring TV3” (Malaysia Today, 2005).

With the introduction of a few new initiatives dedicated to improving environmental and science journalism in mainstream Malaysian media, there is room for some additional optimism. The Asian Institute for Development Communication (AIDCOM) has tried to encourage local media organizations to (re)introduce and expand the number of journalists specifically dedicated to environmental issues. The nascent Malaysian Centre for Environment Communicators (MACEC) (created out of the defunct Malaysian Forum of Environmental Journalists) is planning to engage in similar activities (Arbee, Chair, MACEC, personal communication, May 16, 2006; Khairul Bashar, Executive Director, Asian Institute for Development Communication, personal communication, February 14, 2006). As well, the Enhancement of Environmental Journalism in Malaysia program—funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark and administered by select faculty in the Universiti Sains Malaysia’s (USM) School of Communication—aimed to advance environmental journalism programs within the Malaysian university system (to date, only USM offers undergraduate and graduate programs in Malaysia that focus specifically on “Science and Environmental Journalism”). The program, which concluded in 2006, promoted the value of environmental reporting to local editorial managers and nurtured an educational relationship between local and Danish journalists. Participants also organized workshops for journalists new to, or interested in, the field and produced a handbook of relevant environmental information, laws, and a list of local contact people (DANIDA, 2004; Mohammed Zin Nordin, Dean, School of Communication, USM, personal communication, May 12, 2006). While these initiatives are certainly a positive step toward raising the profile of environmental reporting, it is not clear whether they have actually encouraged critical in-depth journalism, especially as they have not been directed toward altering the overall political and economic apparatus governing the media in Malaysia.

**Alternative media coverage of environmental and biotechnology issues**

Malaysia’s alternative media landscape is also, in large part, limited by government control mechanisms. Politically contentious television journalism in Malaysia is non-existent and, depending on selected content, only RadiqRadio (a
limited community radio station operated by the Centre for Independent Journalism), offers mildly contentious domestic programming. Moreover, the Printing Presses and Publications Act severely limits the circulation of alternative newspapers, opposition party papers, and other forms of print material (as it requires all publishers to obtain an annual operating license). As part of its Bill of Guarantees to attract investors to the country’s Multimedia Super Corridor, however, the government announced it would not censor the Internet. A wide range of critical online media journalism subsequently emerged; the Reformasi movement of the late 1990s clearly playing a pivotal role in the initial surge. Though the audience share of these media remains relatively limited—especially when compared to that of print or television—Internet use is growing and is increasingly being used by citizens to exchange information and engage in critical debate (George, 2005; 2006; Tang, 2006). More recently, the emergence of critical blogs has provided a valuable extension to electronically-mediated critical newspapers, magazines, and NGO websites (e.g., Aliran, Free Media, Malaysiakini, Malaysia Today, Merdeka Review, and Rengah Sarawak). These different types of media mutually support and often reference each other. For example, readership of Jeff Ooi’s politically contentious Screenshots soared after Malaysiakini linked to his blog on its main website (Jeff Ooi, personal communication, February 14, 2006).

Although they are not, as discussed below, free from government controls, these online alternative media have more latitude for critical discussion and debate then do their mainstream counterparts. They have played a particularly important democratizing role in allowing citizens to circumvent the Printing Presses and Publications Act and laws restricting freedom of assembly (Abbott, 2001; George, 2005; 2006; Ling, 2003; Tang, 2006; Uimonen, 2003), as well as in addressing limitations related to geographical proximity and other physical constraints (Tang, 2006). As an example, Peter Tan, who is paralyzed from the chest down from a spinal cord injury, uses his blog (The Digital Awakening) to document and raise awareness about inaccessible transportation and buildings, as well as to mobilize action to improve residential and commercial evacuation procedures for people with disabilities (www.petertan.com/blog).

It, therefore, seems rather surprising that these media have offered relatively little coverage of environmental issues more generally, or, more specifically, of potential environmental impacts of the growing biotechnology industry. The Bakun Dam and Broga Incinerator are excellent examples of environmental projects that have been well-documented and critically discussed in a wide range of alternative media. Without doubt, this coverage has played a central role in raising awareness about these initiatives within and beyond Malaysian borders. Why then is the same coverage not being given to the environmental implications of the government’s biotechnology strategy? Possible explanations for this gap in coverage to date are briefly discussed below.

Dearth of information
Alternative media have found it difficult to obtain the information necessary to provide a thorough and critical analysis of the government’s plans for the country’s biotechnology sector. Publicly available information pertaining to the National Biotechnology Policy, for example, is extremely limited and what does
exist tends to be vague. Understandably, mainstream and alternative media organizations—as well as academics and NGO volunteers and employees—have indicated that they cannot accurately write about biotechnology if they are unable to obtain adequate and relevant information. This shortage of information can, in part, be attributed to the legacy of Prime Minister Mahathir’s regime and the power of the Official Secrets Act (OSA). Established in 1972 (but with roots in British colonialism), the OSA essentially prohibits the release or publication of all “official secrets” “without prior authorizations from the government” (Faruqui & Ramanathan, 1998, p. 46). It is, however, also illegal for journalists to publish purported secret materials even if the information was provided to them by someone in the government. Of particular concern, it is not always clear what the government deems to be secret, and challenges to such claims cannot be questioned in court. When combined with a 1986 amendment to the Act threatening a one-to-five-year jail term for disobeying the law (Safar, Sarji, & Gunaratne, 2000, p. 326), this lack of clear guidelines regarding government information encourages journalists to err on the side of caution in their reporting and to be wary when pursuing investigative journalism.

As public officials are also subject to the OSA, a sense of fear tends to permeate much of the public service, which is reticent to offer information—especially to alternative media that the government has not officially sanctioned. In their report, “A Haze of Secrecy: Access to Environmental Information in Malaysia,” the Centre for Independent Journalism and Article 19 (a British human rights organization) document this difficulty in accessing environmental material. They contend that although a “shift in attitude” under the Badawi administration has allowed public servants to be “less concerned about the repercussions of divulging information,” there has not been any “institutional and legislative reforms” to guarantee employee protection (Article 19 & CIJ, 2007, p. 40). Consequently, “researchers and NGOs often rely on an informal network of contacts within the government to help supplement official channels of information” (Article 19 & CIJ, 2007, p. 53). That this kind of network takes significant time and patience to develop and maintain makes it difficult for newer or less well-connected NGOs and alternative media practitioners to gain access to valuable information.

**Complexity of issues & staying in bounds**

For the uninitiated, issues related to biotechnology and the environment can be complex and difficult to understand. Conveying the material in a manner that is coherent, contextualized, and interesting can prove even more challenging. There are also very few people within alternative media who are conversant in relevant existing and potential laws (e.g., Biosafety, Access and Benefit-sharing) and international agreements (e.g., the US-Malaysia Free Trade Agreement, the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety), or know all of the responsible parties within a government undergoing constant change and expansion under the Badawi administration. While the 18 alternative media practitioners interviewed for this research—representing critical online newspapers, non-environmental NGO websites, and blogs—were somewhat to very knowledgeable about specific environmental issues (e.g., the Bakun Dam, Broga Incinerator, water privatization, air...
pollution), their understanding of environmental policy, potential environmental implications of Malaysia’s biotechnology industry, or the need for biosafety laws was fairly limited. As these individuals are already tackling myriad other issues of concern, however, it is rather unreasonable to expect that they would have the time and resources to also delve into complex subtleties related to these policies and practices.

Critical bloggers, for instance, expend significant amounts of time keeping abreast of political activities and tracking stories that are/are not reported in both mainstream and alternative media. They also dedicate time and energy to monitoring reader comments for content the government may deem objectionable. Unless these bloggers already possess relevant expertise, it is difficult for them to research and then provide in-depth commentary about Malaysia’s expanding biotechnology sector and related policy framework.

Although, at the time of writing, there were no local blogs dedicated specifically to Malaysian environmental or biotechnology issues, some of the leading politically contentious bloggers have posted material written by other well-informed individuals and NGOs. Jeff Ooi’s Screenshots (www.jeffooi.com), Raja Petra Kamarudin’s Malaysia-Today blog (www.malaysia-today.net/Blog-e), Parliamentary Opposition Leader Lim Kit Siang’s blog (in English: blog.limkitsiang.com/; in Chinese: www.limkitsiang.com/cblog/), and the blog of human rights organization Aliran (www.aliran.com/content/blogcategory/) are good examples of alternative media drawing upon the expertise of fellow compatriots to raise awareness about specific issues relevant to biotechnology and the environment. For instance, they have reported on the environmental and human rights implications of the US-Malaysia Free Trade Agreement (FTA), including the impact of expanded intellectual property rights on the agricultural sector and the availability of affordable medicines. They have also offered limited commentary about the absence of specific information in the National Biotechnology Policy and the lack of critical biotechnology coverage in mainstream media. These are important first steps in raising awareness about these issues; however, coverage in the Malaysian blogosphere and other forms of alternative media still remains sparse. Notwithstanding a dearth of available information, this scarcity is rather surprising considering the government’s troublesome environmental history and its emphasis on developing biotechnology as the country’s new engine of economic growth.

Some alternative media practitioners may be reluctant to overtly criticize Malaysia’s biotechnology strategy or to discuss aspects of it the government would consider politically sensitive—e.g., issues that would jeopardize the industry’s economic viability. Despite the government’s pledge to not censor the Internet, electronic communication is subject to many of the country’s other media-related laws. The Malaysia Content Code is very clear on the matter: “In general, if something is illegal ‘off-line’, it will also be illegal ‘on-line’. In this matter, the relevant existing laws apply” (CMCF, 2004). Essentially, politically contentious media do not operate within a vacuum—as George (2006, p. 3) states, these media in Malaysia have “enough political space to practice their craft openly on the internet (unlike in, say, China), but not the constitutional protection from political censorship or politically motivated reprisal. . . ” (George, 2006, p. 3).
Recent comments by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi about online media have given alternative media practitioners and advocates particular cause for concern. He warned them not to “abuse the freedom earned under the media” lest they face possible detainment by the authorities for further questioning (McIntyre, 2006). In reaction to Badawi’s comments, one leading critical blogger wrote: “When the PM is the one issuing the warning, then we must conclude that something is really wrong” (Attan, 2006).

In December 2006, government officials also suggested that bloggers might be required to register with the local authorities, which may deter some would-be contributors to the online community. Badawi then told Parliament that these authorities should discourage all media from covering taboo issues (“Reporters,” 2007). A month later, two popular politically contentious bloggers—Jeff Ooi (Screenshots) and Ahiruddin Attan (Rocky’s Bru)—were sued for defamation by the New Straits Times Press. Press freedom advocates within and beyond Malaysian borders denounced the move, describing it as an unfair tactic by a large, government-supported media organization to silence individual bloggers. Subsequently, approximately 50 local bloggers banded together (April 2007) to form the National Alliance of Bloggers (led by Ooi and Attan), hoping to gain strength in numbers. Their dedication to freedom of speech and the right to communicate, especially in the face of possible legal and financial repercussions, is inspiring. Although these alternative media practitioners have openly critiqued the government on a wide range of politically sensitive issues, democratic expectations of alternative media as a whole must be tempered by the reality of the government’s control mechanisms. Warnings from Badawi and other government officials particularly dissuade new individuals from engaging in media activities, especially if the content openly criticizes the Prime Minister’s ‘pet’ biotechnology project.

Talking to each other: Alternative media and environmental NGOs

In her many writings about Malaysian civil society, Meredith L. Weiss contends that most NGOs in the country are constrained by government control mechanisms, a lack of access to sustainable funding, internal conflicts, and “difficulties in rousing an often disengaged mass public” (Weiss, 2003a, p. 17; see also Weiss 2003b, 2005; Weiss & Hassan, 2003). Nevertheless, Malaysian NGOs have played a central role in “fostering a democratically inclined and socially aware citizenry” (Weiss, 2003a, p. 17). The Malaysian environmental movement is one of the most well-known of the domestic civil society movements and arguably one of the most effective at stimulating public interest, initiating sustainability programs, and influencing environmental policy.

Developed and funded by the Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA) program, a loose coalition of 19 Malaysian Environmental NGOs—MENGO—was established in 2001 to provide a common platform and stronger voice for this movement, to help strengthen the efficacy of individual member organizations, and to “facilitate a more effective interaction” with the federal government on environmental programs and policies (MENGO, 2005).

Members of the MENGO coalition represent a wide range of interests. Some organizations focus their attention on such activities as implementing recycling
and environmental educational programs, raising awareness of endangered flora and fauna, or fundraising for environmental protection. Others concentrate their efforts on government activities and policies, either working primarily in collaboration with various government entities (e.g., World Wide Fund for Nature) or in more of a critical capacity in an attempt to influence their future directions (e.g., Sahabat Alam Malaysia). Several MNGO members have “green” mandates to protect Malaysia’s natural resources and promote environmental sustainability, while others focus on “‘brown’ (pollution, environmental degradation) or ‘blue’ (marine) issues and initiatives” (Ramakrishna, 2003, p. 119).

Notwithstanding these differences, MNGO affiliates have come together at various junctures to support issues of shared concern, drawing on a common voice to elicit change and reform. As an example of their cooperation, MNGO has actively protested plans by the Selangor state government to privatize local rivers, arguing that, as a human right, water should not be commodified (Netto, 2006; Ramakrishna, 2006). Led by the Third World Network (TWN), Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM, also known as Friends of the Earth Malaysia), and the Consumers’ Association of Penang (CAP), many members have also come together to raise awareness of potential negative ramifications of the impending US-Malaysia FTA on the environment, the local economy, and citizens’ rights (see www.ftamalaysia.org). This kind of collaborative work is a positive indication of increasing cooperation within the domestic community on an issue of common concern.

These NGOs have not, however, come together over the issue of biotechnology, despite the potential impact of the industry on the local environment. Other than TWN, SAM, and CAP (which are interlinked beyond their affiliation with MNGO), no other organizations are engaged in actively researching, writing, and raising awareness about biotechnology issues (the Pesticide Action Network has, however, been active on this issue in the past). Additionally, TWN is particularly effective at influencing policy at an international level and works partially within the national level political system to effectuate change; therefore, they do not focus their efforts on more grassroots activities. If and when MNGO does unite over the biotechnology issue, other organizations could step into this complementary role.

Any critical discussions of the government’s biotechnology strategy will, however, be impacted by the restrictive media laws noted above. Additionally, NGOs must seek approval from the Ministry of Home Affairs to circulate newsletters or other forms of print media, and the Malaysian Police Act requires organizations to obtain police permits 14 days prior to any public meeting consisting of more than five individuals, thus limiting the organizations’ opportunities for on the ground political events/initiatives (Ramakrishna, 2003, p. 120; Weiss, 2003b, p. 149). For these reasons, NGOs must make use of online media; yet, little communication exists between most of these NGOs and what would seem to be their natural allies in the online alternative media world. The majority of MNGO member representatives interviewed for this research indicated that, quite understandably, they tend to focus their time and energy on securing mainstream media coverage in order to access a larger audience. Alternative media sources, however, would
offer avenues for more critical discussions of what the mainstream media may view as politically sensitive issues. Many alternative media and MENGO representatives expressed an interest in fostering a closer, mutually beneficial relationship—a positive indication for the future. As a first step, however, additional members of each group need to become more aware of the importance of the country’s growing biotechnology industry in order to develop collaborative strategies for communicating their concerns to fellow citizens.

In sum, organizations with a stronger propensity to research and understand issues related to biotechnology issues may not have the necessary experience to effectively critique the government’s strategy and/or may be reticent to openly challenge local authorities (with obvious exceptions, including TWN, SAM, CAP). In addition to potential personal liabilities, public criticism may jeopardize their status as an NGO (under the Societies Act) and may further restrict their access to government-held information. On the other side of the equation, most alternative media practitioners willing to openly critique the government do not, as noted above, possess the necessary biotechnology expertise. Together, these two groups can further pool their resources and work together to raise awareness, rouse public interest, and push for greater government transparency.

Alternative directions
Politically contentious alternative media have played a central role in promoting freedom of speech in Malaysia, facilitating critical perspectives, discussion and debate otherwise unavailable through their mainstream counterparts. Despite government warnings of reprisals, the increased prevalence of online media offers some promising new avenues for democratic communication. The country’s burgeoning and increasingly important biotechnology industry has thus far, however, only received limited coverage. Given government filters, this shortfall results directly from a lack of available information. Additionally, many media practitioners interviewed expressed concern that writing about biotechnology requires significant research and an understanding of broad themes and specific issues. Moreover, many may not realize the importance of biotechnology, especially when there are so many other pressing issues to discuss and debate—from human rights to cronyism, press freedom to upcoming elections. As alternative media have the responsibility to fill gaps left by a heavily-controlled mainstream media, biotechnology can easily fall by the wayside. This presents an opening for environmental NGOs to lend their expertise. Though they face similar challenges in accessing government-controlled information, these NGOs can work with alternative media to provide the public with well-informed critiques of the future of biotechnology.

To date, there is limited critical academic literature about Malaysia’s biotechnology industry or about domestic environmental journalism. This research has tried to fill in the gap for both academic and political purposes—to support the work of dedicated members of Malaysia’s environmental and alternative media movements and to link them to each other. Future research should provide in-depth content analyses of a range of alternative media to track how coverage changes over time, particularly as the biotechnology industry begins to play an increasingly prominent role in the local economy and the US-Malaysia FTA takes effect. On a
more ambitious scale, ethnographic and survey research investigating citizens’ perceptions of biotechnology and the environment—and their sources of information—would benefit alternative media and interested NGOs alike.

**Note**

1. Much of this and subsequent information about Malaysia’s biotechnology industry is based on anonymous semi-structured and structured interviews conducted in February and May 2006 with representatives from the following federal and state-level government entities: investPenang, Malaysian Biotechnology Corporation, Malaysian Biotechnology Information Centre, Malaysian Technology Development Corporation, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, and the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation. During the same time period and in the same locations, six journalists from four mainstream newspapers, as well as representatives from the following environmental-oriented organizations were interviewed through unstructured and semi-structured interviews: Asian Institute for Development Communication, Consumers’ Association of Penang, Environmental Investigation Agency, Enhancement of Environmental Journalism Malaysia, Environmental Management and Research Association of Malaysia, Global Environmental Centre, Malaysian Centre for Environment Communicators, Malaysian Nature Society, MENG0 Support Unit, Pesticide Action Network, Sahabat Alam Malaysia, Third World Network, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Malaysia.

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