

Impacts of Using Online Alternative Media towards Participatory: A Political Perspective

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Abstract

The online media revolutionary technology contains the potential for users to avoid refinement and resist attempts by the state to be in charge of its uses. The potential of massive use of online media increases in information, points of connectivity and the spatial scope of communication, which adds to the difficulty in facing many government or regulatory body that wants to monitor and control its contents. This study explores the political implications of using online alternative media towards participatory democracy in Malaysia. The method employed for the collection of data is through phenomenological study where the data collecting by doing semi-structured interview. The findings of the study suggest that participation in online media is no longer limited to the audience's active engagement in the interpretation of texts. In this context, understanding the Internet should be in terms of the relationship between different actors. This study suggests to other researchers who are interested in doing the same area of this study to conduct a hyperlink study; to explore other websites or other resources to enable to see the whole macro picture about the implications of online media towards participatory democracy.

Keywords: Online Alternative media; Participatory democracy; Dissident voice.

1. Introduction

Malaysia is perceived as democratic in many ways, even though in the political realm there are some elements that do not apply to the call for idealistic, totally free and unrestrained democracy. Democracy varies in its degree of practices. As Rahmat [1] points out, in practice, democracy among different nations varies because the level of freedom they attain, their national aspirations and also their social, political and historical backgrounds vary. This is more noticeable when comparison is made between the nations of the developing Third World and those of the Developed West. The variation becomes more intricate when democracy is misunderstood as merely a political system or political process. Other fundamental aspects of democracy are public participation, civil and political liberties, justice and equality, which were often missing, even though democratic institutions were in place.

2. Background of The Study

However, the online alternative media seems to be pervasive in Malaysia, whereby participatory democracy is still questionable amongst its people. In general, Malaysians do not practice participatory democracy much and thus, their action towards the achievement of being actively involved in participatory democracy is still in progress. Consequently, the Internet provides online alternative media as a new public space in order to give more space for the public to voice their opinions and critiques.

In between, the term 'public journalism' is coined. It means journalism has a purpose to improve the quality of lives by fostering participation and debates [2]. The online media revolutionary technology contains the potential for users to avoid refinement and resist attempts by the state to be in charge of its uses. The potential of massive use of online media increases in information, points of connectivity and the spatial scope of communication, which adds to the difficulty in facing many government or regulatory body that wants to monitor and control its contents [3]. Thus, online alternative news caters to the function of online conversation.

3. Statement of The Problem

The alternative media has become a new platform for the public to voice out reserved views which are not popular and sometimes deviant from the common majority thoughts and insights. This kind of new media provides an unlimited space for the voices that focus on definite happiness of the community; either for the contrary or the subversive [4]. However, as far as Malaysia is concerned, this is not a significant issue because the online alternative media serves as a portal for online news which seemingly operates with full responsibility and is bound by acts and regulations. Even though the online alternative media is bound by many acts of law and regulations, the control on them is loose and

this might widen the political division between the government and the governed. Nothing in this Act shall be construed as following censorship (Communication and Multimedia Act, 1998). This is quite a contrast to Kim [5] and Rahmat [1], who claim that online media or the Internet (including online alternative media) has provided more problems for the government.

In Malaysia, this is a sign that the government has enabled new voices to be heard and engendered new practices-networking and the formation of new vibrant cyber-communities, but they are under control. At the same time, the spirit of participatory democracy can be seen here.

4. Review of Past Research

Communication studies which emphasize on the effects of political communication specifically towards attitude and behavior mostly are alternatives to the empirical approach which consider its impact on the democratic process itself. In these circumstances, mass media play an important role to achieve the democratic plan. Media is not only transmitting the messages of political organizations to the public, but it is also transforming them to the various processes of news-making and interpretation. In regards to the above, the media make a statement about politics in their own right, in the form of commentaries, editorials and interview questions. According to Grabowicz, Jose, Ramasco, Moro, Pujol, and Eguluz [6] the simplest associations of the online network allow valuable information on where higher quality exchanges take place.

The use of the Internet is a sound political strategy for disseminating information, given the Malaysian government censorship of traditional print and broadcast media. The results show that opposition candidates benefit significantly more from having a blog than non-opposition candidates, as blogging provides opportunities denied to them by the Malaysia state-controlled media. Bloggers are more than seven times as likely to win an election compared to non-bloggers, controlling for incumbency, party membership, and race. This analysis also makes an exploratory effort to identify social mechanisms that can explain the effect of blogs. In addition to being an alternative source of information, blogs' potential for building interpersonal relationships and their role as mobilization tools are discussed using qualitative examples.

The mass media compete with other sources of gratification, but gratifications can be obtained from a medium's content, in regards to this study it refers to the online conversation content of online alternative media (Malaysiakini, Malaysia Today, and the Malaysian Insider); from familiarity with a genre within the medium (for example looking at online alternative media), from general exposure to the medium (for example Malaysian Internet users are accessing to the Internet), and from the social context in which it is used (for example surfing Internet with another group of Internet users).

5. Methodology

U> theorists argue that people's needs influence how they use and respond to a medium. According to Zillmann [2, 7], the influence of mood on media choice which encourages the choice of exciting content and stress encourages a choice of relaxing content. The same TV programme may gratify different needs for different individuals. Different needs are associated with individual personalities, stages of maturation, backgrounds and social roles. Developmental factors seem to be related to some motives for purposeful viewing [8].

Similarly, the same online alternative media content might be gratified to diverse desire and create tendency for exposure by individuals or group. For instance, some individuals prefer to gain a lot of information about political news but another person would like to know about contemporary issues. Individuals who have voiced out their opinions through online alternative media would consider as building contribution towards participatory democracy.

Media are considered to be one of the factors contributing to how needs get met, and audience members know how to gratify those needs [9]. By exposing themselves through the online media, the Internet users tend to fulfill their needs and desires in order to participate in democratizing nation issues.

5.1 Participants

Table 1: Demographics of the participants

Participant (by pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Education
Participant 1	47	Male	Malay	Master holder
Participant 2	28	Female	Malay	Master holder
Participant 3	53	Male	Malay	PhD holder
Participant 4	26	Female	Malay	Master holder
Participant 5	37	Male	Malay	Master holder
Participant 6	50	Male	Chinese	PhD holder
Participant 7	26	Female	Malay	Master holder
Participant 8	24	Female	Malay	Bachelor degree

During the interview session, each participant was asked a set of predetermined questions. However, as the semi-structured interview procedure suggests, based on the exigencies of the situation and perspectives that surfaced from the participants' answers, some extended questions on particular issues were also asked [13]. It is determined that the interview is best set in a dyad mode, meaning a single participant in a single face-to-face interview. Under certain strategies, issues to be discussed and enquired are predetermined before the interview.

The participants for this study are general public. Some criteria of the public have been highlighted in order to assure the reliability and consistency of the data provided by them. Eight criteria of the public include; (1) willingness to participate in interview session; (2) accessibility to online media/news portal; (3) availability to interview; (4) ability to transmit information freely and accurately; (5) regardless of political ideology; (6) regardless of academic qualification; (7) regardless of gender; and (8) regardless of ethnicity. The researcher used convenience sampling to guide the idea which has significance for the emerging theory.

5. 2 Data collection techniques

The increasing expectations associated with networking development on a global scale presented by these interviews provide precious information. Interviewing becomes equal with qualitative research and is also an accepted method for data collection, irrespective of methodology [14, 15].

The major questions of the semi-structured interviews were predetermined prior to the interviews. Some extended questions, however, were asked extemporarily when it was seen relevant or when the participants lead the interview to other important issues. Besides the data generated from the semi-structured interviews, literatures of earlier researchers on Malaysia political phenomena were also consulted in order to relate concepts and theoretical relationships.

The real data collection process began as soon as the researcher as comprehended and scrutinized the results of data analysis from the pilot study. The process of data collection for the second informant commenced on the 8th August 2012, which began at 10 am at the lecturer’s office in University Perguruan Sultan Irish (UPSI). Before starting

the interview session, the same process as the pilot study was repeated on the participant, this includes filling-in consent letter, briefing the participants, and then, initiating the discussion. This interview was also audibly recorded.

Based on the researcher’s experience in conducting pilot study interview, the researcher was more cautious when submitting follow-up questions to avoid the participants from straying away from the real research questions. When facilitating the interview, the researcher experienced a similar problem, which was to get the participants to be comfortable.

However, this problem did not last because in less than five minutes, the participant did not only begin to actively participate in the discussion, but more interestingly, they began to share their experiences without being asked by the researcher. They showed deep interest in the discussion topic, and the researcher’s observation showed that they were interested with the questions posed regarding their experiences in accessing online alternative media. The process of asking root questions and follow-up questions were carried out in the same way as the discussion during the pilot study interview.

6. Data Analysis and Interpretation

There are five themes created for political implications of using the online alternative media towards participatory democracy, as shown in below:

Table 2: Themes of political implications

THEMES
1) Appreciate semi-democracy in Malaysia
2) Government start to think and take action
3) People need changed in administration because offrustration
4) Be rational to accept political view
5) Believe politics is essential for national transformation

6.1 Appreciate Semi-Democracy in Malaysia

As a responsible citizen of Malaysia, the researchers urge to appreciate of semi-democracy practicing in Malaysia. The term ‘participatory democracy’ is realized when the public gets ready to be involved in the process of democracy. 75% of the participants regretted as they thought that the public should use online media in a proper way and not to insult other people, especially the leaders. It is against the norm and culture in Malaysia. Participant two (P2) said:

“... so when we talk about democracy we are free actually in the sense that maybe we are free to provide the ides, and then we are free todiscuss, but still we have our own

limitation, otherwise we don’t want to be like Indonesia, they really enjoy the free press, they can say anything about the leaders, they can say things can blame other people, we don’t want to have that kind...”

In addition, participant three (P3) admits that recently, with the existence of online alternative media, people have grabbed opportunities to voice out their thoughts easily.

But the whole process got to go through Parliament, return back again. So the process repeated like previously, but now Malaysian have opportunity to participate in a way that can voice out if they feel dislike at any policy. If in the past, it is difficult to do that.

(P3/line1325-1330)

Err... if you say democracy it allows everybody the opportunity to voice out the opinion and thought and what have you, the media. The alternative media or what we call the digital media allows that, they give the opportunity to say something.

(P3/line1520-1524)

In contrast, participant nine (P8) declared that democracy in Malaysia is only about being free to vote and select the government in the election process. For him, there is no clear statement related to democracy to the media.

Well.I think...democracy according that everyone have is voting, what is clear that Malaysia is democracy country because Malaysia free to vote and we are given opportunity to choose our government and we can select the government not the free media, I can't find any clear statement, claws talking about democracy is has fine

media.. .and your question about democracy in Malaysia is only on voting.

(P8/line2658-2664)

On the other hand, participant 7 (P7) stressed about the term 'guided democracy' which is practised in Malaysia. He stated that it is similar to authoritarian system.

I would say yes of course it providing space for democracy but be careful with the democracy. The terminology as well. Our Prime minister says that our country is practicing guided democracy. So of course the American will say that they liberal. The other side says we are not real democracy; we are practicing some kind of authoritarian. Actually how the term definition should be back to society, that we should go to discourse and system itself.

(P7/line3162-3168)

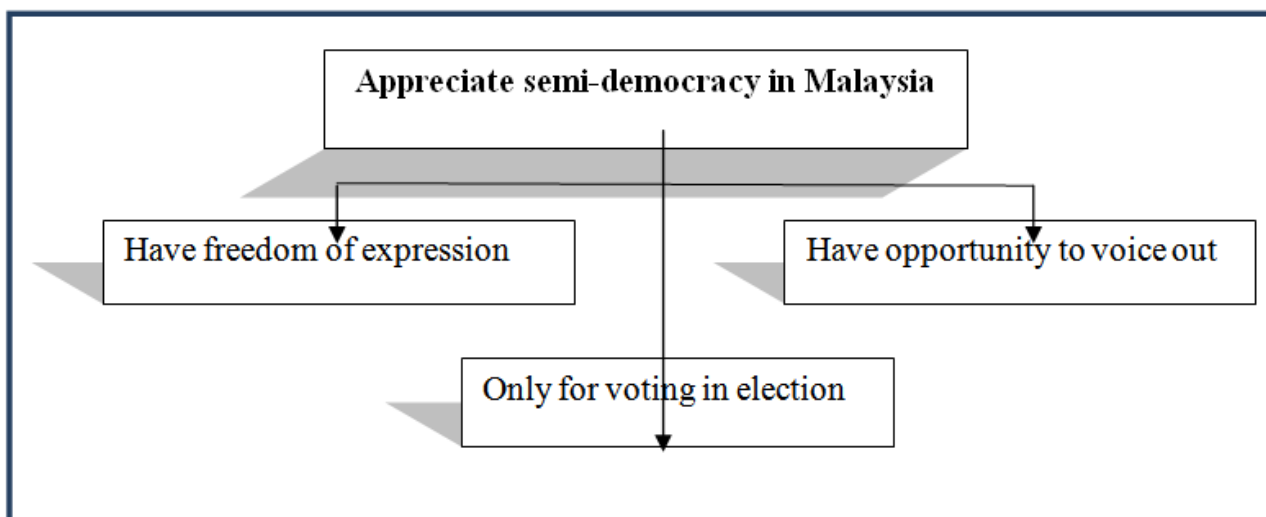


Figure 1: Appreciate semi-democracy in Malaysia

Based on Figure 1, the implication of using online alternative media towards participatory democracy is appreciated by the public who practices semi-democracy in Malaysia. They realize the freedom of expression in Malaysia gives a chance for Malaysians to participate in the democracy process, even though, a participant stated that the democracy concept practiced through voting for the selection of the government, otherwise, not practiced in the media.

6.2 Government Starts to Think and Take Action

For political implication, the participants looked at this phenomenon of online alternative media as they started to see that the government has started to think and take action. In regards to the above, a government officer should be more sensitive in serving the community.

The implication we can say that, maybe the government have to think, it is not. What to say yeah. It may irresponsible for this people who are loyal to them

before might change the direction to choose the other party. That might be the implication of the online news, because they know thing, sometimes maybe they know the truth, maybe they know base on their experience, they get many information so this might happen

(P2/line659-666)

So what how does it effect the policy making. It effect because the government become sensitized, the government begin to take action, now the government said maybe not maybe they wanted to abolish ISA. So that one of the punish, and they said they want to amend AUKU. So that is the effect.

(P3/line1317-1322)

The government, media and the society have to give consensus by upholding a win-win situation. Furthermore, the active online users will provide new and powerful ideas for the national building in relation to support participatory democracy. I can see that alternative media actually help government to improve.

(P9/line2639-2640)

We can see about the civic engagement or the public involvement in this respect. I look at it, I am also give comment. Our Prime Minister is not just only begin with this web, onemalaysia.com, and later on expand into what it call the facebook, twitter, just to cater for Chinese one ajibco. Just to cater for the Chinese.

(P6/line3052-3057)

6.3 People Need Changes in Administration because of Frustration

Some participants believed that the public felt disappointed of the ruling leaders who preferred changing the administration for their own sake. Perhaps, this occurs when the public realized the 'hidden story' of the other side, which was not published in the mainstream mass media. The participants claimed that people raised their voices in a group, hoping for changes to bring down corruption, biasness, cronyism, and etc.

The implication, I'm talking about the reality. Ok err when we look at previous election, because we have bloggers, because we have a lot of online news, people want changes in the administration.

(P2/line645-648)

Frustration is want things lah because I still remember when I visited Dr Airs blog, it is very interesting he said that those people who actually turn to the side is not because they love the pembangkang, but because they really frustrated to the government, maybe they thinks they need very long to get, but they are many issues so..sometimes they also from their members actually, because like for example BN members definitely they know more, sometimes they don't like the leaders, or maybe the leaders they only serves certain people, so this kind of frustration, might change their vote..I think that's one of the implication lahh.

(P2/line672-682)

7. Findings

The participants realized the political issues are considered significant in online conversation. For example, besides highlighting major issues in the election campaigns, the online alternative media was singled out as one of the main contributing factors that swing young voters to the opposition. This study concurrently supports the previous study, which analyzed variables that were related to media credibility, including the online alternative media. The issues rose during the election campaign, such as increasing the price of consumer products, unemployment, crime rates, increasing incidents of corruption, and equal treatment of citizens regardless of race. Multiple regression analyses indicated that credibility of source of information such as the Internet and friends, together with major issues raised in the campaign, contributed positively towards satisfaction with election results that favors the opposition coalition[16].

Therefore, synthesizing and communication information are depended solely on the individuals. In open-

access media communication, the impacts of individuals' perception may be able to influence others instantly while reaching to borderless communities[17]. The obstacle to participation is awareness and technophobia. The public awareness to online alternative media and awareness of what benefits from online alternative media have improved. This is the most challenging. Is the community aware of the potential of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)?

Technophobia is another obstacle that prevents the community from getting involved in the activities of online alternative media, either as users of the services or in other aspects of online alternative media. Continuous efforts to familiarize key people in the community with the process are an important tactic. Young people, who tend to learn and value technology quickly, can be used as a path to getting parents involved. Training programmers for community health workers do not only get them to get involved, but also may lead them to influence their clients to use the telecentre services. Similar approaches can be made with teachers and extension agents.

Through the media platforms, the public frequently exposes the plight of children and young people caught up in circumstances beyond their control, or abused or exploited by adults. Through online alternative media, media influence policy and encourage the government and civil society organizations to effect changes that will improve the quality of people's lives and ensure the best for children and young people.

As such in public sphere, contestation and competition are permitted [18]. It means people can debate or converse certain issues from their point of view. The public sphere in this regard is the structured setting where cultural and ideological contest or negotiation among a variety of publics takes place[19]. A functioning democratic public sphere meanwhile requires a sharp separation of civil society and the state

8. Conclusions

The public does not only respond to one another, but they also respond to the main subject of the issue. They prefer to compliment, insult and blame other party in order to express their feelings. They use negative language in their opinion regarding a particular issue. Reflective of current social norms, findings shows that incivility leads to more negative perceptions of online conversation. That is, conversant in the uncivil conditions were perceived as aggressive and intimidating (more dominant) as well as unreliable (less credible). Emotions in turn are known to be important in affecting interaction partners in offline communication in many ways. Could emotions in the Internet exchanges affect others and systematically influence quantitative and qualitative aspects of the trajectory of e-communities [20].

Results of past research indicate that conversant in the uncivil condition were perceived as more dominant and less credible reinforce the notion that incivility does have negative consequences, at least as far as one's reputation goes in the context of political conversation [21]. Moreover, where conversation is exchanged mainly through written text, the occurrence of civility could act as a stronger cue for interpersonal evaluations. The inconsistency between

perceptions of conversation and perceptions of participants' findings with regards to manipulations of civility could be due to participants' self perceptions. Perceptions of the informativeness and persuasiveness of the conversations were based on how participants rated the conversations as providing more information (high in informativeness) or having the ability to change their viewpoints (high in persuasiveness) [22].

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