

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH SHARING EXPERIENCE VIA THE ONLINE ALTERNATIVE MEDIA TOWARDS PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explore about the community engagement through sharing experience via the online media towards participatory democracy. Since the enactment of the Communication and Multimedia Act 1999, online alternative media such as Malaysiakini and Malaysia Today have played a pivotal role in many political events including the post-Mahathir-Anwar political crisis, the 2008 financial crisis, election campaign, Anwar's sodomy case, and Dr. Hasan Ali's disclosure of PAS weaknesses. Online alternative media assist in spearheading some other relevant issues that reflect the undercurrent of discontentment or otherwise the participation of peoples' voices towards democracy. Dissident voices become aloud without fear to voice out their opinions and dissatisfaction on political issues via online alternative media. Indirectly, it forms a force for a shift of democratic paradigm. This study will employ the qualitative research method by means of qualitative content analysis as data analysis techniques. Some examples of the democratic phenomenon were analysed to gain a sense of its general essence.

Keywords: Community engagement, online alternative media, experience, participatory democracy.

Introduction

Community engagement through sharing experience means people's knowledge and skills that is gained through time spent doing a job or activity. Public get involved in online based activity by joining online discussions via access to online alternative media. The public needs a high level of engagement with daily news that invites public discussions and debates. Hence, the utilisation of online alternative media has the potential to contribute toward democratic participation. In addition, online media represents a revolutionary change in space-time relations. In seeming to extinguish space with time, cyber-technology allows communication through online media to appear instantaneously upon demands at multiple points in an ever-shifting network of connectivity (Barth, 2015). Meanwhile, the term "public journalism" has been coined. It means journalism has a purpose to improve the quality of lives by fostering participation and debates (Herman, Schaap & Bardoel, 2014). The revolutionary online media technology contains the potential for users to avoid refinement and resist attempts by the state to be in charge of its uses. The potentially massive use of online media increases in information, points of connectivity, and the spatial scope of communication, which adds to the difficulty in faced by many governments or regulatory bodies that want to monitor and control all content (Herman & Walraze, 2015). Thus, online alternative news caters to the function of involving community engagement. Online alternative media play an important role within democratic societies (Howard & Hussain, 2011). Therefore, new media technology is rapidly developed in the media industry and the practices of mass communications. As new media technology removes many of the barriers encountered in conventional media, the citizens are exposed to more information. Some people believe that the online alternative media is coordinated concurrently with entertainment in a convergent aesthetics. The Internet users have been motivated by either intrinsic or extrinsic functionality, which looks at the Internet as a source of "infotainment" (Abdelhamid, Hassanein & Takahara, 2015).

Thus, online alternative media are important channels for those who prefer to express their opinions more freely compared to the use of mainstream media. Some scholars also develop a deeper understanding of Internet news by distinguishing the different types of online news and also clarifying the relationship between traditional media and the Internet (Eisingerich, Chun, Liu, Jia & Bell, 2015; Nguyen & Western, 2006).

Previously, the format of media is centralised as a one-way information flow but it has changed rapidly and allowed for more active audience participation. Simultaneously, public participation has been encouraged by media programming and structures (Lee & Kwak, 2012). The function of media is enhanced as time goes by that consists of watchdog, forums for public debates, advocacy tool, and it also acts as a mobilisation medium.

After the 2008 general election, an opinion survey shortly detected that only 9% of respondents found that the Internet was the core resource of news. Simultaneously, a minority of respondents claimed that it is synonym with truthfulness, fairness, objectivity, and breadth of opinions covered (Weiss, 2012). In this regard, the Malaysian public are willing to restrict involvement in politics, as those groups are perceived to threaten social order, lack qualification to participate, or hold "deviant views".

This paper will elaborate more about community engagement by sharing their opinions and comments via online alternative media. It is a basic concept of participatory democracy with is not being implemented in Malaysia currently, but participation needs to be urging from the entire community to assure that country will be success in the mission and vision.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT BY SHARING EXPERIENCE THROUGH PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

In this study's context, public experience means people's knowledge and skills that is gained through time spent doing a job or activity. They get involved in online based activity by joining online discussions via access to online alternative media. Through online channels, individual's voices are diluted due to the linkages that provide opportunities for other voices to be heard. However, individuals are free to sustain a certain degree of anonymity. This means that one can engage in discussion without exposing personal characteristics such as gender, race, age, and, etc.

Online community participation includes everyone (Zhang, Hahn & De, 2013). It encourages online conversation and creates an environment where people can become acquainted, relationships can grow, and people become interested and motivated to support each other. Building these skills and talents can be done early in a human being's life, even before specific needs are identified.

The concept of participation also involves that of "community." If the goal is to facilitate participation, people must not forget that a local community is not a unified group of people, but rather a grouping of individuals and groups with their own characteristics and their own interests. It often happens that decisions taken in the name of the community in fact reflect the interests of one group or another. At this point, communication becomes an appearance for manipulation. It is important then to identify clearly the different community groups that are affected by ordinary online alternative media, who are willing and able to deal with it, and to ensure that each group can express its own viewpoint.

The objective of this study is to explore public experience in conjunction to community engagement regarding the utilisation of online alternative media for participatory democracy in Malaysia. The characteristics of some online alternative media, such as *Malaysiakini* and *Malaysia Today* which are interactive in nature, have given space and platform to readers and the general public to express their ideas, dissatisfaction, or comments about the government or the ruling party. However, there is an assumption here that online alternative media could possibly produce as much harm to democratisation as good, because repressive governments are becoming better at using these tools to suppress dissent.

Meanwhile, research conducted by Boyle and Schmierbach (2009) showed that online alternative media treat protest activities critically; suggesting that mainstream media is used to discourage alternative participation. When Malaysians began comparing information from mainstream media with online alternative media, "many Malaysians, for the first time felt they had been misled and began to lose faith in the official media" (Rahim, 2001, p.7). As a result, the public attempts to play its role in the democratic landscape by exposing themselves to online alternative media. Even though formal participation by the public related to the national agenda setting that depends on their respective representative to the Parliament and State Legislative Council, specifically those who had been voted during the election, they also could participate in giving ideas and comments through online alternative media.

The Internet users consumption of mediated meaningful content (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Kalmus & Runnel, 2015). It is knowledgeable by their comprehension and familiarity of a wider world. Drawing upon the cultural framework or horizons of understanding within which the Internet users interpret experience, communities of viewers produce their readings of visual texts mischievously.

Some researchers found that Internet users going online as ludic, as a purposeful and pleasurable experience which is essentially playful. They believe that venturing into cyberspace through the process of media consumption needs to be conceptually and socially located (Dickinson, Murcott, Eldridge, & Leader 2001; Zolkepli & Kamarulzaman, 2015).

However, through disagreement of experiencing online as ludic, other empirical and theoretical research on the monopolisation of popular debate around everyday Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT) using games discourses (Mawindi, 2014) is honoured. Consumption of online media embodies a varied roller-coaster of reactions, often anticipated but nevertheless, interesting (Barker & Brooks, 1998; Takahashi, 2015).

As stated in the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 (The Commissioner of Law Revision Malaysia, 2006; Mohd Safar, 2002), this suggested that the government has enabled new voices to be heard and engendered new practices—networking and the formation of new vibrant cyber-communities, but still it is under control. At the same time, the spirit of participatory democracy can be seen here and there.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the notions of participatory democracy were discussed (Habermas, 1989; Habermas, 2004; Vitale, 2006). The root of participatory democracy model found by Carole Pateman and C. B. Macpherson (Vitale, 2006). As Pateman highlighted, participatory democracy is participation in the making of decisions.

The participatory concept of democracy assumes that people's participation is the most important quality of a democracy. The power of the people is exercised when they participate (Hanberger, 2001; Mico' & Casero- Ripolles, 2014). According to Habermas (1996), participatory democracy encourages more active participation from the public for the purpose of decision-making process.

There is no way to have democracy without the participation of citizens. Several previous studies indicated the Malaysian political system as a fettered democracy or so-called “semi-democracy” (Abdul Rashid, 2009). Therefore, for this study context, the public is the significant actor in the struggle for participatory democracy and meanwhile, the Internet users are the empowered actors in the participatory democratic processes of online alternative media.

Democracy is a system in which the people govern themselves, form a government by consent, are ruled by the majority, have a government with equal rights for all, and maintain the sovereignty of the people, just to name a few. This system positively or negatively, makes the basic determination of important matters of public policy (Mohd Izani, 2007; Gerston, 2014). As a result, democracy is enhanced to the extent that communicative reason is strengthened. Simultaneously, democratic institutions play an important role as an instrument of mediation. In relation to this, politics have become meaningful in the dimension of common view and public issues will be better understood. Democracy is the instrument that can ensure the establishment of a free process of mutual understanding toward achieving a consensus.

Moreover, it is democracy that is seen to be the privilege of online alternative media, which is another form of mass communication (Karvonen, 2004). Online alternative media can be regarded as any-to-any connectivity, irrespective of geographical location or cultural difference. The most important quality of democracy is people’s participation (Hanberger, 2001), which is the assumption of the participatory democracy concept.

In line with the above discussion, the major threats to democracy are of apathy and non-participation. Participation assists in the building of a community and identity to encourage a desire to participate further and also to develop responsibility (Mohd Izani, 2007).

Although democracy creates a relationship between the citizens and the state through elections, the representatives mediate this association. It refers to the civil society which is dominated by highly professionalised Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). These NGOs have initiated a different style of politics that includes campaigns instead of social movements and delivery of social goods instead of political mobilisation (Chandhoke, 2009).

The function of democracy is to grant public participation in decisions that would affect all levels of society. Direct democracy translates this general principle into practice, where all citizens are given a choice in the decision-making process (Tan & Zawawi, 2008). The problem with this concept of participatory democracy via the Internet is that there are several boundaries of participation which are simply disregarded by those advocates of new media.

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. Although Malaysia is one of the countries that practice democracy, it is still predictable that it is a so-called semi-democracy. Some scholars prefer to name the democracy practised in Malaysia as forced democracy (*demokrasi paksaan*) (Mauzy, 1993), static democracy (*demokrasi statik*) (Jesudason, 1995), two-fold democracy (*demokrasi dua lipat*) (Khoo Boo Teik, 1995), false democracy (*demokrasi palsu*) (Case, 1993), and limited democracy (*demokrasi terhad*), showing that the democracy in Malaysia is immature compared to the absolute form of true democracy (Mujibu & Badrul, 2012).

Literature reviews provide some information regarding the themes of participatory democracy. From the previous researches, the list of the themes include: (1) Individual and collective participation is accepted and recognised by the policy and decision-makers; (2) Existence and formation of consensus; (3) Formulate ideas to policy and decision-making process; (4) Continuous and significant public participation; (5) Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation; (6) Build community and identity; and (7) Develop social responsibility.

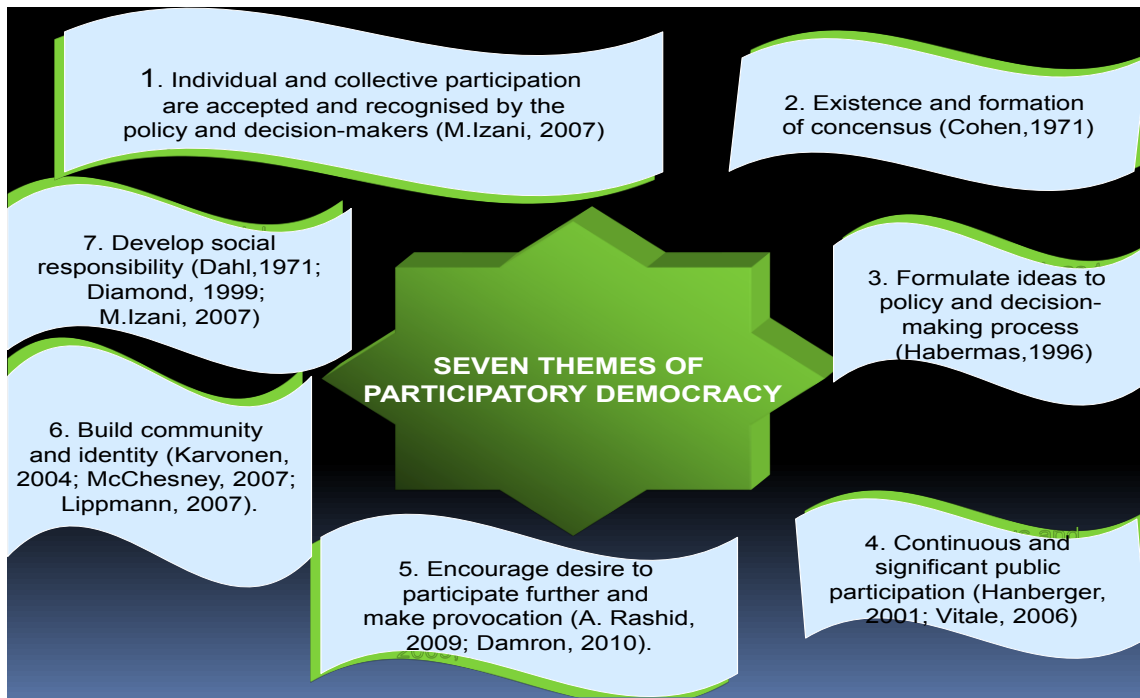


Figure 1: Themes of participatory democracy

Furthermore, according to Samsuddin (2009), trustworthiness of the Internet credibility was just from 42% to 53% only. It is considered as very low achievement compared to the level of trustworthiness of other media such as television and mainstream newspaper. Analysis also showed that Malaysians less believed the radio as one of the important resource for election news. On the whole, the finding highlighted that Malaysians believe in their interpersonal communication more, which comes from their members in the society.

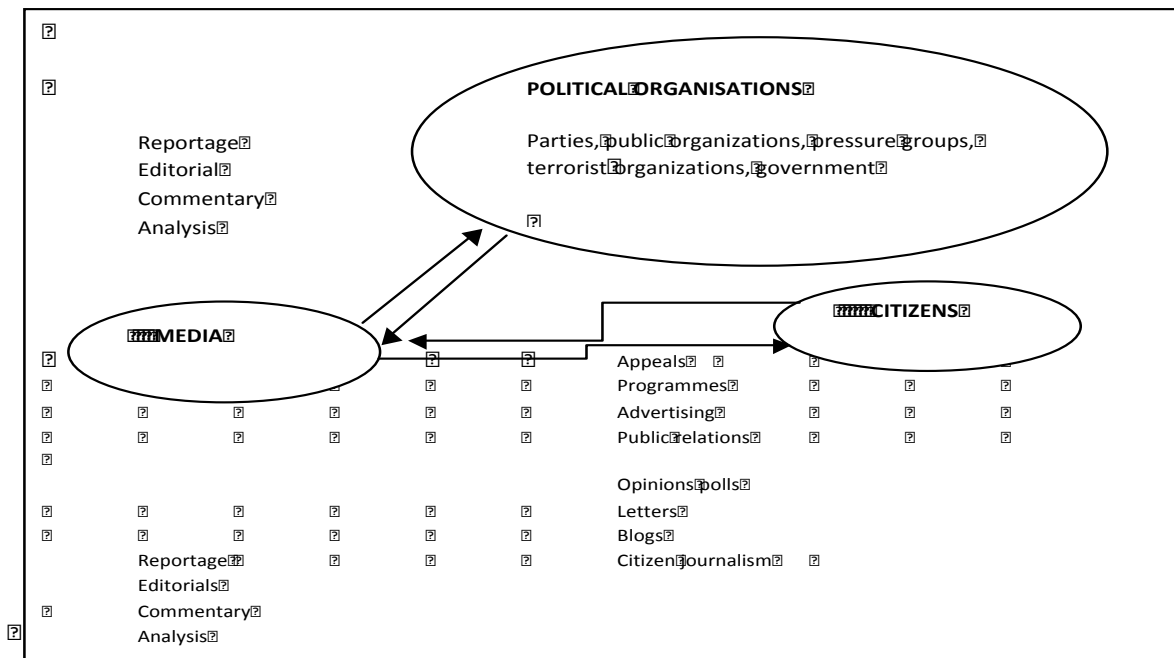


Figure 2: Relationship between Media, Political Organization and Citizens (McNair, 2007).

Basically based on Figure 2, there are three main elements of political communication, such as political organisations, media, and citizens. All these three elements support each other in terms of their reports, editorials, commentaries, and analysis. The

media plays an important role and has a place between the political organisations and the citizens, which functions as a medium of communication.

The Internet has built new opportunities in the new media and political involvement when it participated in and contributed to the new freedom of the press (Zajc, 2015). Freedom of speech in Malaysia is considered as a threat to the country (Watson & Hill, 2003; Chamil, 2010; Mariah & Amelia, 2007). Therefore, the media in Malaysia are advised to limit its' freedom of speech. Meanwhile, a revision of the Normative Theory should be done in order to suit within the Malaysian environment and to develop a new mass media theory.

Through online channels, individual's voices are diluted due to the linkages that provide opportunities for other voices to be heard. However, individuals are free to sustain a certain degree of anonymity. This means that one can engage in discussion without exposing personal characteristics such as gender, race, age, and, etc.

Media richness may influence people perception toward the content of information. Its effectiveness results in bargaining time, outcome satisfaction, and the desire for future negotiation interaction. Thus, the communication media for managing strategic communication should be chosen with care (Omar, Abidin, Mahmud, Fuziah, Rahman, Mohd, 2010).

The general election result in 2008 had opened the eyes of the public. They became more vocal about some particular issues through the Internet, letters to the editor, as well as through street assemblies and NGO activities (Eng, 2008). For example, in May 2008, the public poll conducted by the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) with the *Merdeka* Centre for Opinion Research, 80 per cent of the respondents (from a sample of 1,203) linked media ownership to the government and said they would like to see more independent and critical media. This reflects an increasingly vocal demand from the public for openness in information and critical expression (Eng, 2008).

Amnesty International Malaysia (AIM) is of the view that both Sedition Act and Section 27 of Police Act are arbitrary laws that undermine the freedom of opinion, expression, and assembly in Malaysia. AIM is concerned of the continued use of Section 27 of Police Act to criminalise freedom of assembly as witnessed during the arbitrary arrests of Hindraf Candle Light Vigil on 2 September 2009 and the latest being the charge against the cow-head protesters. AIM believes that all parties must be allowed to hold public speeches and assemblies for their campaign or cause as these rights are fundamental rights guaranteed in our Federal Constitution and Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (Shan, 2009).

These rights are entitled to all regardless of political opinion they hold. Both the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Conduct and Management of the Royal Malaysia Police and National Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) have called for amendments to this section as it is open for abuse and clearly undermines human rights (Shan, 2009). Everyone in Malaysia recognises the undeniable impact social media has had on national politics, and because of this, the entire Internet is now perceived as a political zone (Salman & Saad, 2015). In many countries, the Internet is considered as a zone of entertainment and in some countries it is specifically not a political zone (Crampton, 2009).

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

For this study context, "qualitative content analysis is defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of the text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). We used to do conventional approach to qualitative content analysis in my study. This approach is generally used with a study design whose aim is to describe a phenomenon, in this case how the community engage during online conversation.

The mini case study focused on 12 selected issues in the two news portals (*Malaysiakini* and *Malaysia Today*). In this study, we reviewed articles or points of view and comments which were posted by the Internet users in online alternative media. In relation to the above, the texts in this study referred to the online conversations in regard to participatory democracy. As for qualitative content analysis, purposive sampling is for those who are involved in online conversation from the selected sections found in the two news portals.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The exposure of individuals and groups into the usage of online alternative media brings a lot of information luxury with their positive and negative experiences. The general public tend to participate informally with the effort to sustain the concept of participatory democracy in practice. First and foremost, all the participants are willing to share their experiences while accessing the online alternative media, particularly two news portals such as *Malaysiakini* and *Malaysia Today*. Why we choose these two online media? The justification for selecting these two online alternative news media are, among others: (1) they provide information from basically three levels of participants, which are pro-government, opposition, and neutral; (2) they include a variety of information regarding the research issues; and (3) they are ranked 100 most popular websites among the Asian countries, which have a large number of loyal followers (The Star, May 2009). *Malaysiakini* acts as the most important online alternative source of news about Malaysia (Mohd. Yusof, 2003).

"Existence and formation of consensus" is one of the participatory democracy themes which have been highlighted base on literature review. Even though for over a decade, a group of people including academics, policy-makers, and other social commentators have been debating the relationship between the application of Information and Communication Technology

(ICT) and democracy; obviously, there is still a wide gap between the utilisation of online alternative media and participatory democracy in Malaysia although there is a significance of ICT. According to Wan Abdul Rahman (2008) and Von (2015), democracy in Malaysia is more towards consensus.

Besides, consensus can be determined when the participants realise, adapt, and adopt the existence of online alternative media as a medium of interaction platform. The public admit that they gain information about online alternative media from people in their surrounding, such as office colleagues, teachers, and family members. The general public perceive the importance of this new media.

The formation of consensus among the members of the society to participate actively in online alternative media, indirectly, supports the assumption of uses and gratification theory (U>). According to U>, the public is an active group, those who are able to voice out their satisfaction and dissatisfaction through the maximum usage of selective media. Active public refers to the people who are aware of a problem and will organise to do something about it. In this study, the general public is considered as Malaysians, who prefer to be part of online conversation towards participatory democracy.

Phenomenology has pursued the view that perception is an interpretative activity, which takes place over time (Wilson & Peterson, 2013). The public anticipate efficiency and ease of access to information. In this regard, the online alternative media has increased the scale and speed of information provision. In addition, it gives Malaysians an opportunity to be more organised over their information diet.

The role of mass media in Malaysia is created not only to disseminate information and as educators as envisaged in the government policy, but it also acts as a guide to walk hand in hand with the government's aspiration and policy to be able to sustain and survive in the media industries (Ahmad, Chang, Mustaffa, Faridah, Wan Mahmud & Dafrizal, 2012). However, there are some netizens who did not give their full attention to the online conversation pertaining to their busy commitment, but they could also highlight and identify the particular issues discussed through online alternative media accordingly. For example, they know the contemporary issues discussed such as about political news, general election, corruption, and human rights. As a result, their focus and desire to know the gist of the issues highlighted in online conversation would open the participants' mind to be involved informally in the online alternative media.

Citizen's preferences in representative democracy measurement could be harnessed by new technology. The online alternative media would make it easier for Malaysians to give feedback and also build up political participation (access to information, deliberation, debate, and voting) and so-called involve in participatory democracy. These types of people who have experiences in accessing online alternative media are among those who are socially disadvantaged, obliged to stay at home, and otherwise have little voice (Roza, Tambini, & Bryan, 1998).

Based on this study, we think that the type of online users is those who have little voice within a minority group of people. Based on the spiral of silence theory, people who assume their opinions are different from others would avoid sharing and forwarding their ideas to the whole society. In this circumstance, once they meet the group (minority group), the 'silent view' would be raised. The dominant views are considered as the opinions or thoughts that are accepted and approved by others. However, the minority views are considered as dissident voices and they would select another medium of communication, which can give them space to voice out their ideas with selective media channel. Simply, the online media act as one of the venues in which people can express the otherwise inexpressible and have access to information denied to them in the mainstream media (Tedjabayu, 2006).

The selective exposure (according to Selective Exposure Theory) to certain interesting online alternative media such as these two top ranking online alternative media, namely *Malaysiakini* and *Malaysia Today* depends on public's belief and trustworthiness to the online alternative media as they provide various advantages. The participants perceived that the advantages of the online alternative media include: (i) provide various types of information; (ii) give immediate and up-to-date news; (iii) share news which are not provided in the mainstream media; and (iv) provide space for online public sphere.

On the other hand, the participants believed that participation in online alternative media could assist the Internet users to transmit their dissatisfaction because of frustration with the current political issues, protest against people's action, and when they feel dissatisfied with certain issues, especially related to current political issues. Ideally, these problems appeal to support the earlier idea of this study stated in the problem statement. The principal claims for the online alternative media is strengthening democracy, whereby the online alternative media will facilitate political participatory action. There is an argument from the participants which says that the online alternative media make some political activities easier and cheaper. However if everybody speaks, who will be listened to? Thus, any effectiveness of early users will soon be matched by their rivals and simply leads to an expensive and mutually political arms race of investment in customisation techniques and new media marketing technologies. Another principle is the online alternative media provide more information, which is good for democracy. The online media can be regarded as a political public sphere (McNair, Flew, Harrington & Swift, 2017; Rasmussen, 2014). Access to information is indeed helpful, which is why the Internet undermines totalitarianism. However, it undermines pretty much everything else, including political parties and stability. Democracy requires stability and stability requires a bit of apathy. The most stable democracies are characterised by a certain slowness of change (Bad, 2005; Dutt & Mobarak, 2016; Von, 2015). In this regard, it requires the attitude to accept the reality.

Hence, the findings for this study would be highlighted the main reason why the general public tend to participate through online conversation. Probably, it is because they think that online alternative media provide some space to voice out their dissident

voices, share ideas, opinions and thoughts; which are being seen less in the public domain in the mainstream mass media. The theme of participatory democracy, “continuous and significant public participation”, shows the level of public’s consistency in their participation by voicing out new ideas for the national development. The public also wish that they could assist the decision-making process in the democracy system.

Unfortunately, some participants of this study assume that the term “democracy” should twist to “democracy” because of the failure of implementation of the system. According to Tan and Zawawi (2008), democracy is about accepting finality through the ballot box and due process of law. He stated that:

It is really shocking to see how so many Malaysians actually believed in unverified rumours by even sharing them on social media. Many were also thinking irrationally in their arguments over the social media. A small number of them were sadly converted to vigilantes by taking the law into their hands.

Therefore, these phenomena should be changed to positive. All Malaysians should be kept reminded as to not to distribute rumours for the sake of the harmony in the society. Similarly, the media in Malaysia should also contribute to the loyalty of the people and thus annoying the rebellious of society. Rebellious communication refers to the media that operate in a positive way for political ends in situation of oppression. There are two purposes, namely (i) to express opposition vertically from subordinate quarters directly at the power structure and its behaviour; and (ii) to build support, solidarity, and networking laterally against policies (Downing, 2000).

This study has successfully found that the exposure of individuals and groups into the usage of online alternative media brings a lot of information luxury with their positive and negative experiences. The general public tend to participate informally with the effort to sustain the concept of participatory democracy in practice. First and foremost, all the participants were willing to share their experiences while accessing the online alternative media, particularly three news portals such as *Malaysiakini*, *Malaysia Today*, and *the Malaysian Insider*.

Online alternative media is a powerful tool to facilitate the process of participatory democracy, when it accompanies local development dynamics. It is about encouraging community participation with national development initiatives and policies through a strategic utilisation of various communication strategies. By community participation, we mean facilitating the active involvement of different community groups, together with the other stakeholders involved, and the many development and research agents working with the community and decision-makers.

The general public must play an active part in the process of participatory democracy. Regarding communication, participating through online alternative media implies that the emphasis should be put on facilitating participation. From this study, we learn that participatory democracy is not merely a question of social or political goods, but it involves the notions of freedom of expression, political openness, social stability, access to education, etc.

Involving via online alternative media is central to the task of defining and achieving participatory democracy. However, in spite of this evolution in understanding of participatory democracy, the public have to face a lot of constraints. However, the ruling leader led the entire process. So what is "participation" is all about? We may say that a good indicator of participation is when people take responsibility carrying out their opinions and thoughts. This means that people are not only taking part in the different activities, but also in the decision-making process and the planning of the development initiative.

Participation also goes hand in hand with responsibility. It is useful here to distinguish the roles and responsibilities of the general public involved and to work out contribution to the process. Promoting participation also depends on making room for democracy and recognising the right to express divergent opinions. Without democracy and respect for fundamental human rights, and without the freedom of expression, the ability to use communication to foster social change is severely limited. Democracy implies recognising other peoples’ rights to exist, to have their own points of view, and to express themselves freely, as long as they do so peacefully, without provocative disgust towards other people. When this culture does not exist, participatory democracy cannot be of much help.

Thus, this study access the community engagement through online media is become important for expressing netizen’s believe and opinions.

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