

## **The Utilisation of Online Alternative Media Towards Participatory Democracy: A Malaysian Case**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the utilisation of online alternative media towards participatory democracy. Since the enactment of the Communication and Multimedia Act 1999, online alternative media such as Malaysiakini, Malaysia Today, and the Malaysian Insider 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. This study has explored the role of online alternative media and answered the enquiry of how Malaysians have utilised it for participatory democracy. The specific objective of this study to comprehend how public corresponds to online alternative media towards participatory democracy. This study employed qualitative content analysis as data analysis technique. The findings imply that participatory democratic stance via the alternative media is less significant.*

**Keywords:** utilisation, online alternative media, participatory democracy, dissident voice.

## **Background**

Online media is a special kind of medium, differing from earlier forms in the variety of its applications and impact. As well as being a realm of social integration, it has important steering functions in both material production and administrative practices which should not be neglected in examining its role as a medium. The existence of online alternative media, concurrently, opens up more space for the public voice. It is an arena of citizen activity (Sassi, 2001).

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.

Moreover, online alternative media has high contribution toward the development of a new form of participatory democracy. It considers the quantity of political discussion in cyberspace which represents a yearning for participatory democracy (Habermas, 1989, 2004; Kellner, 1998). This means that if more Internet users got involved and participated in certain political forums, there will be higher tendency for participatory democracy. Participatory democracy should involve the active participation of citizens and entails the observations and control over the aspects of state power by the people. The utilisation of online alternative media also considers the reflection of the people's desire to intervene in a political event or to participate in the decision-making process.

The potential for online alternative media to act as an agent for political change has been widely discussed for the last decade (Kang & Dyson, 2007) and it has created a phenomenon by cyber-dissidents. Alternative media plays a positive role in helping the underprivileged members of society to have access to social participation and cultural

identity, so as to achieve equality among members of a multicultural society.

## **Problem Statement**

Since the early 1990s, online alternative media flourished in Malaysia to a peak in 1998, after the arrest and prosecution of former Deputy Prime Minister at that time, Anwar Ibrahim (Usha Dewi, 2009). In this circumstance, mainstream mass media focused on positive news and uncritical views for the benefit of the political elite. Consequently, news against the stance of the political elite had got less coverage from mainstream mass media (Anuar, 2000).

With the increasing utilisation of online alternative media by Malaysian public, it may thus be applicable to formally inculcate the notion of participatory democracy. 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). Meanwhile according to Habermas (1996), participatory democracy encourages more active participation from the public for the purpose of the decision-making process.

In contrast, research conducted by Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) argued that an understanding of online alternative media simply as participatory media is insufficient. They suggested the notion of online alternative media as critical media. However for the purpose of the study, the researcher stood firm with the first assumption, which is online alternative media functions as participatory media in the democratic landscape.

It had been recorded that online alternative media:

... has created a surge in space for news and political discourse that overrides geography and increases opportunities for online media. The emergence and development of the Reformation (*Reformasi*) movement from 1998 onwards became crucially linked with online media (Usha Dewi, 2009, p.35).

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.

In addition, this is quite similar to Kim (2001) and Rahmat (2008), who claimed that online media has created more problems for the government. This argument was supported by Muhd Azizuddin (2004), saying that press freedom in Malaysia has been restricted and controlled by the government because it leads to political instability and inter-ethnic unrest that would also undermine economic development. However, does the utilisation of online alternative media really become a problem to the country or vice versa? This question needs to be answered by exploring public experience and how they correspond toward their participation in the national agenda.

On the whole, even though Malaysia does not yet practice participatory democracy their action toward the achievement of being actively involved in participatory democracy is still an on-going process (Welsh, 1996). Consequently, the online alternative media provides a new public space in order to give more room for the public to voice out their opinions and critiques.

The basic problem of this study is that some public members feel disappointed since their opinions, needs, and consumptions were not well covered and reported through the mainstream media. Therefore, the public take this opportunity to explore the new medium that provides

them space to express their dissatisfaction and opinions. Concurrently, the new media such as the online alternative media provide platform for people to have conversation through their channels. Furthermore, news portals have become popular nowadays and many people are computer literate. Therefore, the present study had sought to answer the following questions:- How does the public correspond to online alternative media for participatory democracy in Malaysia?

## **Online Alternative Media**

Alternative media are newspapers that cover news which are not reported by the mainstream media, believing that a free exchange of information is necessary to organise for social change (Asheville Global Report, 2010). On the other hand, alternative media is meant to be an alternative to the mainstream media. From this point of view, a small environmental broadsheet is an alternative medium, even if it uses traditional newspaper publication technology. In this study context, online alternative media refers to the form of digital media which provide an alternative source for news. It is also an independent media that is free from censorship or affiliation with major news corporations (Naren Chitty & Sripan Rattikalchalakorn, 2007). George (2006, p.4-5) defined alternative media as those that “democratise access to the media, inviting voices and viewpoints that are underrepresented in the mainstream for want of status, skill, or capital”. Within that category, contentious media are those that directly and explicitly challenge the authority of elites in setting the national agenda and in forging consensus. These websites are engaged in more than just a struggle against government domination. They also embody competing normative notions of journalism and its role in democracy. Since online alternative media is accessible to a large segment of the population, it serves as a new medium of information (Usha Dewi, 2009).

According to Ahmad, *et al.* (2012, p.1):

News in mass media is constructed because there is demand for current and accurate information and the mass media does not stand in a vacuum. Indeed, the media stands in the midst

of social reality, full of enthusiasm, self-interest, conflict and multi-faceted facts. Audiences now receive information from channels that are reachable and they are comfortable with this medium and this is in line with the new media.

With reference to Wilson et al. (2003), it is useful to conduct studies on youthful Internet audiences' responses to an increasing availability of information and news resources. There are only a few studies conducted (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012; Gil de Zuniga & Valenzuela, 2012; Chen & Smith, 2010; Pickerill, 2003; Pickerill, 2004; Gibson, 2001) to study about utilisation and implication of online media, thus, this study would be beneficial to the community to know the experience of the public's response to online alternative media.

## **Participatory Democracy**

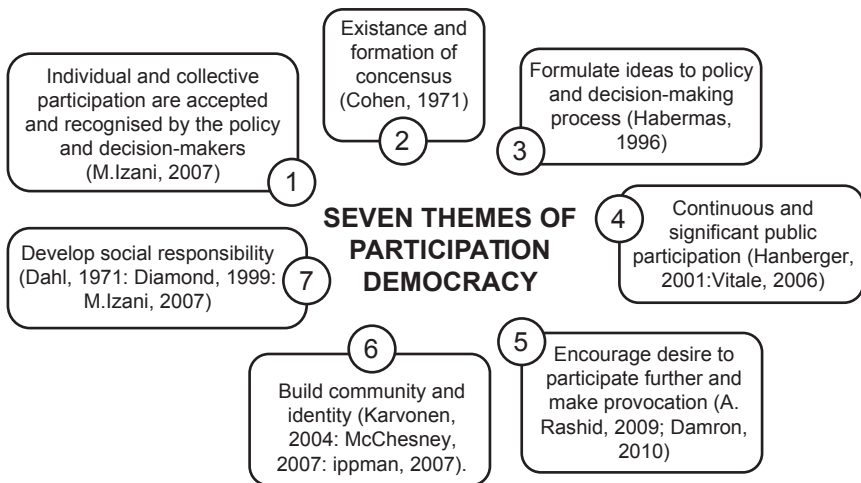
In the late 1960s and 1970s, the notions of participatory democracy were discussed (Habermas, 1989; Habermas, 2004; Vitale, 2006). The root of participatory democracy model found by Carole Pateman and C. B. Macpherson (Vitale, 2006; Zittel & Fuchs, 2007). As Pateman (Zittel & Fuchs, 2007) highlighted, 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). 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 (Cohen, 1971). This system positively or negatively, makes the basic determination of important matters of public policy (Mohd Izani, 2007). 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. The ideas regarding participatory democracy presented by the various authors can be illustrated by the following figure:

Figure 1: Themes of participatory democracy



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*) (Crouch, 1996), showing that the democracy in Malaysia is immature compared to the absolute form of true democracy (Mujibu & Badrul, 2012).

## **Public Correspondence to Online Alternative Media for Participatory Democracy**

The online media offers an alternative, non-traditional venue for people to participate in a greater public sphere. It is a new sphere of communication to engage discourse (Schifino, 2006). In a network society, this gives the opportunity to particular members of society to build up their relationships through utilisation of online alternative media.

Castells (2001) described the term network society to be “portrayed as the new social structure and there are many other references to micro-networks, sub-networks, and inter-metropolitan network”. However, Smart (2000, p.24) criticised the definition of network society concept introduced by Castells, where:

the concept itself is by no means new and if ‘network’ simply signifies the existence of complex interconnections, or circuits, between social, economic and political phenomena, then it represents far from novel condition.

In other words, online alternative media enhances the level of interactivity and transforms identities, and it is related to the term network society (Bunt, 2000; Castells, 2008). Network society is very much a capitalist society or so-called finance capital. There is an essential acknowledgement where capital is realised, invested, and accumulated mainly in the sphere of circulation (Castells, 2008). Websites such as Facebook and MySpace are prime examples of



a network society. All these Web services provide means for people around the world to communicate without personal contact.

Some media researchers pointed to the possibility that Internet decentralised communications can enhance the public sphere. Meanwhile, the social sphere is constituted by rational-critical discourse that enables the formation of public opinion through which official decision-making can be held democratically performed (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004).

Historically, public debate over the future of media and communication has been effectively eliminated by powerful and giant corporate media, which metaphorically “floss their teeth with politicians’ underpants” (Lippman, 2007). A comprehensive public conversation showed the qualifications of participants in the discussion process, including their interests and preferences, which have been represented in the policy-making process (Dahl, 1971; Diamond, 1999). In other words, democracy functions best when all citizens are free to speak, discuss, debate, and dissent (Damron, 2010).

The evolution of social ideals over time such as equality and freedom has taken place in many developed nations that created democratic political systems which require the majority of individuals within that society to communicate how they believe that society should operate politically and culturally. Due to this need, the public sphere has evolved and become a process of significance.

## **Methodology**

This study utilised the qualitative content analysis method. The samples are based on articles from the news section in *Malaysiakini*, archives section (*Malaysia Today*), and Malaysia section (*The Malaysian Insider*). These articles were then put under 12 categories namely, politics, education, development, economy, religion, social, foreign affairs, internal affairs, civil cases, human rights, law, and general issues.

Analyses from the 12 categories were then matched with the seven themes of participatory democracy discussed earlier to answer the research question:

*How do the public correspond to online alternative media for participatory democracy in Malaysia?*

All seven themes of participatory democracy are (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.

#### *Unit of analysis for qualitative content analysis*

In this study context, the unit analysis for this study is the public corresponding to online alternative media. It refers to words, sentences, sequence of sentences or a complete dialogue related to feelings, attitudes, and reactions in online conversation within three selected online alternative media, Malaysiakini, MalaysiaToday, and the Malaysian Insider.

## **Analysis and Discussions**

Our research question asked how do online public correspond to online alternative media for participatory democracy in Malaysia.

*Table 1: Main Issues Discusses in News Portals*

<b>Main Issue</b>	<b>www.malaysiakini.com (‘News’ section)</b>	<b>www.malaysia-today.net (‘Achieves’ section)</b>	<b>www.themalaysianinsider.com (‘Malaysia’ section)</b>
Politics	36	240	219
Education	2	16	7
Development	10	7	51

Economy	9	55	40
Religion	16	28	28
Social	2	4	21
Foreign affair	8	0	12
Internal affair	17	75	35
Civil case	7	27	15
Human right	4	9	3
Law	7	7	20
General issue	20	84	38
<b>Total</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>552</b>	<b>489</b>

*Diversity of Malaysiakini, Malaysia Today and the Malaysian Insider readers*

The actual identities of the readers who give their personal comments were not known generally. Who are the readers of the particular online alternative media; Malaysiakini, Malaysia Today, and the Malaysian Insider? They put their names as their identification such as ‘motherchell’, ‘NSTPravda’, ‘Dreamlady’, ‘onenight4’, ‘alacarte’, ‘capricorn’, ‘ibabonma’, and ‘beezee-beezee’. However, a few readers still use their actual names, which obviously show their identity and gender, for example ‘Iman’, ‘albert zacharias’, ‘Ahmad Sobri’, ‘Aruna’, and ‘syd’.

Obviously, they often write emotional statements and attempt to cultivate negative thoughts about somebody or parties. However, all the subscribers would have to obey to the terms and conditions by the administrator of the respective news portal.

Below are the 12 issues which have been pointed out in the three news portals (Malaysiakini, the Malaysian Insider, and Malaysia Today). All comments from the readers of the issues in their conversation were analysed based on the seven themes of participatory democracy. This part answers the specific research question; ‘How do the public correspond to online alternative media for participatory democracy in Malaysia?’

## Politics

Contribution towards participatory democracy in politics is as follows:

**Table 2: Themes of Participatory Democracy and Readers' Comments in the Political Issues**

Themes	Comments
Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation. Build community and identity.	<i>Malays, Chinese and Indians, all the men of this nation - RISE UP show the politicians that the world is changing (a mother, TMI, 19/6, topic: 'Bersih is 'not about me', says Ambiga').</i>
Existence and formation of consensus.	<i>Datuk Ambiga, I salute you as a fellow Malaysian. Your cool response is a far contrast from the irrational burning of your effigy by some pea brain people. We need leaders like you who will stand for a clean and fair election irrespective of which political divide (a mother, TMI, 19/6, topic: 'Bersih is 'not about me', says Ambiga').</i>
Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<i>"MR PM, please, ENOUGH is ENOUGH. You don't have to be smart to see what Utusan is trying to do. BAN Utusan Immediately. If you can't do it - then we have to wait for the NEXT GE". (C4 to use or not to use, MK, 8/5)</i>
Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<i>On another note, if my memory serves me right, wasn't Nik Aziz Nik Mat investigated for "vote buying" because he gave money to the mosques months ago? (Ben Hor, MK, 29/5, topic: Transport money for voting also a 'norm'?).</i>
Existence and formation of consensus.	<i>BN reply: We don't pay, they won't vote (Kuek Ser Kuang Seng, MK, 29/5, topic : Transport money for voting also a 'norm'?).</i> <i>Compared to most politicians, Joseph is, at least, honest to admit bribing the voters. Any wager, MACC and EC will be as meek as the lamb on Joseph's open admission (Mirror thyself, 29/5, MK).</i>
Continuous and significant public participation	<i>Good afternoon to you Keturunan Malaysia. There are now 58 comments here &amp; counting. ONLY ONE comment from isa@1 brain-damage supports the corrupt practice of BN. Duly noted, is the absence of AkuMelayu, Carl, Arbeena and their various alter-egos in the form of ANON_riff-raff. The pattern is pretty clear really (Jiminy Qrikert, MK, 29/5, topic: Transport money for voting also a 'norm'?)</i>

In the political issues, there are four themes of participatory democracy: existence and formation of consensus; continuous and significant public participation; encourage desire to participate further and make provocation; and build community and identity.

### Education

Contribution towards participatory democracy in education is as follows:

**Table 3: Themes of Participatory Democracy and Readers' Comments in the Educational Issues**

Themes	Comments
Formulate ideas to policy and decision making process.	<i>The solution is to convert all the English language classes in schools where there is no English teacher, into BM classes. This way, the children will get more exposure in BM. No need to worry about English because as Perkosa has informed us there is no need for English. Everyone happy (nagappan, MT, 2/1, topic: Transfer for English teacher).</i>
Existence and formation of consensus.	<i>I do agree with educationist. That's the virtue of meritocracy; those who deserve it and are qualified to pursue their PhD's are not held back by any perverted Malaysian-Notion of a level playing field!(Obadiyah, MT, 16/1, topic: A cacophonous comedy).</i>
Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<i>It's just that the natives, and all Malaysians, need to be reminded how great Islam was in the 12th century, never mind that today Muslim nations are dummies to the Christians, rebuffed by the Hindus and ignored by the Chinese. That is not important. The past is important (temenggong, 2/1, MT).</i>
Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<i>How to brainwash people using Maths and Science?. So Umno's history is the best way. Moreover, in history, no thinking is required, just memorize and regurgitate what the BTN propagandist what them until that's all. First instill the parrot mentality then the parrots can be lead about like lambs (Malaysiaiputra, 2/1, MT).</i>

In the educational issues, there are two themes of participatory democracy: existence and formation of consensus; and formulate ideas to policy and decision-making process.

## Development

Contribution towards participatory democracy in development is as below:

**Table 4: Themes of Participatory Democracy and Readers' Comments in the Developmental Issues**

Themes	Comments
Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<i>This is how Pakatan government and their representatives have to work - starved of funds legitimately due to them because they are in the opposition, while the actual funds due to their constituency are given to BN reps who were not elected by the public and with no accountability as to how it was spent.</i>  <i>Isn't it time to replace the government in Putrajaya so that all citizens in Malaysia will receive a fair deal from the government? The ball is in the rackets court (Disgusted, 1/5, TMI).</i>
Formulate ideas to policy and decision making process.	<i>RM300 million building is going to be so heavy, it will bring Penang into the earthquake zone. (batsman, MT, 16/1, topic: Lim: RM300m Penang convention centre good value).</i>
Formulate ideas to policy and decision making process.	<i>They should protest before construction, not after completion. (syd, MT, 2/1, topic: hundreds stage protest against developer).</i>
Individual and collective participation are accepted and recognize by the policy and decision makers. Formulate ideas to policy and decision making process.	<i>Whilst most BN MPs will laugh the matter off when they are approached for funds to build amenities like this, MP Dr D Jeyakumar has shown the way.</i>  <i>If PM Najib Razak really meant 'People First, Performance Now', the job could have been done with a phone call to JKR (Public Works Department), but as usual politics comes first. Perhaps what Umno has forgotten is that as they pursue wealth via capitalism, the people have been forgotten. Though the Orang Asli may be swayed by money and gifts, this selfless act by Dr Kumar will see more of them voting for him from the interiors of Sungai Siput ((P Dev Anand Pillai, 1/5, TMI).</i>

In the developmental issues, there are three themes of participatory democracy: individual and collective participation are accepted and recognised by the policy and decision-makers; formulate ideas to policy and decision-making process; and encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.

## Economy

Contribution towards participatory democracy in economy is as follows;

**Table 5: Themes of Participatory Democracy and Readers' Comments in the Economic Issues**

Themes	Comments
Formulate ideas to policy and decision making process.	<i>It is better if the government could provide a market for selling subsidised equipment and controlling things especially routine equipment in all districts. The purpose is to avoid middle-person to take advantage for increasing the goods price (sioponthan, MT, 2/1, topic: 2011 will be celebrate with the increasing of goods price).</i>
Formulate ideas to policy and decision making process.	<i>Hope the government could control the price after this because the increasing of price would make Malaysian citizen suffer. (bulletpain, MT, 2/1, topic : 2011 will be celebrate with the increasing of goods price).</i>
Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<i>Unfortunately the rural folks will not understand the problem, together with the large group of government servants; UMNO/BN vote bank is guaranteed. Now we can only wait for the moment when the government cannot longer sustain itself, and by then the public will see the actual problem. This year alone, it is reported that the BN government will issue RM70 billion bond, a staggering 1/3 of the national budget. Can this bond attract enough buyers? How long can this amount sustain the wasteful spending of UMNO/BN government? (by2020, MT, 30/1, topic: Rakyat living in borrowed cash).  <i>I agreed with many within the PM has gone overboard. And this proved how competence our elected reps are. All they concerned for being money, power and glory. So whenever they claimed to look out for the peoples' interests are all bullshit. There are hidden agendas in all their projects, programs, etc., the main agenda is to profit from all without any regards for people like you and me. The economic implication for such holiday is costly to the investors, employers and employees (Vic, 3/1, MT).</i></i>
Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<i>Read 1My Qur'an swearing pink pouting lips: What's wrong with declaring a holiday with our great wealth. This is as to 1moi world cup as we are likely to get, without paying too much money for it like the Monsoon Cup (remember?)... and the holiday is also a good rehearsal for the unemployed-to-be when we go bankrupt. Al-UMNOdollarlah, \$emua-nya OK! 😞😞 (NSTPravda, 2/1, MT).</i>

In the economic issues, there are two themes of participatory democracy: formulate ideas to policy and decision-making process; and encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.

## Religion

Contribution towards participatory democracy in religion is as below:

*Table 6: Themes of Participatory Democracy and Readers' Comments in the Religious Issues*

Themes	Comments
Develop social responsibility.	<i>To ALL the Muslims in Malaysia and the world over... my name is Michael Jiuvin Sibinil and I hail from Sabah (previously North Borneo). I am a bona-fide "Born Again" Christian and a re-baptized Fundamental Pentecostal, Baptist layperson of a professional background (engineering). I have commented extensively on the "Allah" issue in many internet portals and even emailed articles on the issue at hand. Needless to dwell in depths for now...., my message is for Islam (Clara Chooi, TMI, 13/3, topic: Hishammuddin tosses bible hot potato at AG).</i>
Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<i>Can the Ministry and people involved to stop playing wayang kulit and Taichi, and get back to the root of the problem and solve it in a professional manner? How can a cabinet decision make in 1986 be used as a reason or excuse? And who is making the call now, can we identify them and ask them to explain it well? Please stop acting in the manner where the basic rights of citizens are being taken away? Who gives you this right in the first place? Are we not all equal in the eyes of our Constitution? (Jerry Choong, TMI, 13/3, topic: Hishammuddin tosses bible hot potato at AG).</i>
Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<i>PKR and DAP have said its piece on this matter. Of the day, PR wants to govern Malaysia But I am more interested to hear what PR as an alliance has got to say on this including PAS. At the end as an alliance right? So what say you PR? Please issue a collective statement on this rather than give your piece meal statements (jjj, TMI, 13/3, topic: Hishammuddin tosses bible hot potato at AG).</i>



Existence and formation of consensus.	<i>I don't understand why the Semenanjung hate Christian so much.. what have we done that makes them anti Christian.. we are just peace loving community that's all.... just release the bible and get a good sleep (karajapung, 13/3,TMI).</i>
Existence and formation of consensus	<i>"Religion is no a sensitive issue..... But human makes it sensible. First human are separated by country, then by color, then by races then by Religion. Why? We are all human living in one world. Religion is something good to practice it teach you the best value on how to be a good person, but why there is some individual making religion and sensitive issue and used it to control certain people? Can we leave religion out on politics?"(Thundercat, MK, 8/5).</i>

In the religious issues, there are two themes of participatory democracy: encourage desire to participate further and make provocation; and develop social responsibility.

### **Social**

Contribution towards participatory democracy in social is as follows:

**Table 7: Themes of Participatory Democracy and Readers' Comments in the Social Issues**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Individual and collective participation are accepted and recognize by the policy and decision makers. Develop social responsibility.	<i>Hope the Sarawak state government can help the rural Sarawak. Concentration more for rural.. (Surand85, MT, 23/1, topic: Breaking the poverty cycle in rural Sarawak).</i>
Formulate ideas to policy and decision making process. Continuous and significant public participation.	<i>We will never know the effectiveness of this method if we never to try it (sioponthan, MT, 23/1, topic: Breaking the poverty cycle in rural Sarawak).</i>
Formulate ideas to policy and decision making process. Individual and collective participation are accepted and recognize by the policy and decision makers.	<i>Efforts to help the poor should always be continued (Andykhai, MT, 23/1, topic: Breaking the poverty cycle in rural Sarawak).</i>

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Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.

*Ku Chin Wah... I really pray and hope no one there will be no more Splasher. I hope your daughter or your wife is not splashed on. Over 23 cases and you fellows have no idea on who the culprit, it, I think fair minded citizens have a right to panic. If you have nothing to say.. just shut up!!(artchan, 29/5, MK).*

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Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.

*23 acid attacks in the Klang Valley and we are surprised at the panic in the city! The Police should get real. If the attacks carry on and the police are not any closer to arresting the culprits there will be more panic and more rumors and more false information. We must develop some kind of plan to apprehend the perpetrators. What should the public be on the look out for? How do they look after themselves? When and to whom do they report suspicious activity? How should the police use the media? How do they enlist the support of the public? Have they developed a profile of the perpetrators? Have the victims being able to give a description of the attackers? These attacks cannot go on with impunity. They must be stopped. (David Dass,29/5, MK).*

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In the social issues, there are four themes of participatory democracy: individual and collective participation are accepted and recognised by the policy and decision-makers; formulate ideas to policy and decision-making process; continuous and significant public participation; and develop social responsibility.

### **Foreign affairs**

Contribution towards participatory democracy in foreign affairs as below:

**Table 8: Themes of Participatory Democracy and Readers' Comments in the Foreign Affairs Issues**

Themes	Comments
<p>Individual and collective participation are accepted and recognize by the policy and decision makers.</p> <p>Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.</p>	<p><i>MR MINISTER - please explain how does the growth target benefit the poor employees. Does it means more money in our pockets or more food on the table. Will inflation goes down with your statement, with food prices going higher n costs of living hitting the roof, how does BURSA performance benefit the employees and civil servants. Please clarify and explained as you are the expert (Charlie Chan, TMI, 6/3, topic: Husni: Growth target stays despite Mid East tumult).</i></p>
<p>Individual and collective participation are accepted and recognize by the policy and decision makers.</p>	<p><i>....This in not about Singaporean or Malaysian... this about the failure of the PDRM in carrying out their duties.... I as a local JB resident can vouch that the security in JB really SUCKS!..... My own house was broken into twice in the past 3 years... just last month the pharmacy down the road was robbed in broad day light and the police station was just 150 meters away! Mentioned the word regard to anyone in JB and they will have a story to tell regarding them self or their friends who have been a victim before... I really don't like to compare... but just look at Singapore... and how they managed to keep the crime rate low... apart from good implementation of crime prevention plans.. the system also comes down hard and fast on convicted criminals.... not like in Malaysia where a simple case of theft can drag on for years... and the culprit is let loose to continue doing crime....(iguana, TMI, 27/2, topic: Singapore trader pays RM21m to ransom family).</i></p>
<p>Individual and collective participation are accepted and recognize by the policy and decision makers.</p> <p>Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.</p>	<p><i>Dear Dr. Chua, while you are respecting the special rights of the Malaysian Malays, what about the Malaysian Chinese who have no right? And you want the Malaysian Chinese to continue to vote for MCA? (malaysian, 1/5, TMI)</i></p>

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Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<i>In today's global, dynamic and modern world, there is no such thing as special rights. There are only human rights and equal rights (bertcttk, 1/5, TMI).</i>
Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<i>We have never asked for the removal of the Malay special position. We only want to make sure that we are not suppressed until there is no place in gaming service, no scholarships, 5% bumiputra discount for houses, double draw for new issues of shares, deprived of university entries and much, much more. What is the MCA fighting for. Are you fighting for cabinet representatives and yet not effective in representing us (fairplay lee, 1/5, TMI).</i>
Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	Is it the best PDRM can do? No wonder foreign investors are staying away!! Yet every ban politician claimed that only they can deliver the best services to the people and the PR politicians can only give empty promises. The truth is the PR people are not given a chance. Look at Penang, Selangor, Kelantan and Kedah states, how well they have performed only after the short period of over two years. Give PR a chance, they will certainly perform better... It is time for CHANGE govt. At FEDERAL level!! (Forensic Auditor, TMI, 27/2, topic: Singapore trader pays RM21m to ransom family).

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In the foreign affairs issues, there are two themes of participatory democracy: individual and collective participation are accepted and recognised by the policy and decision-makers; and encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.

**Internal affairs**

Contribution towards participatory democracy in internal affairs is as follows:

Table 9: Themes of Participatory Democracy and Readers' Comments in the Internal Affairs Issues

Themes	Comments
Existence and formation of consensus.	<i>Many Malaysians totally agree with you, steadyaku47. As long as any wrong is done within the boundary of our country, to be precise, within the boundary of BN rule, the government doesn't give a shit what the rest of the world thinks about it. The government controls the police, judiciary, and everything else. Worse come to the worse, the Snr minister will marry or compensate the maid and everything else is back to normal. The BN/UMNO government is untouchable. As far as they are concerned, what can the people or the rest of the world do about it? Such is the arrogance and thick skin attitude of the government (Capricorn, MT, 2/1, topic: Without concern!).</i>
Existence and formation of consensus.  Build community and identity.	<i>Steadyaku, million thanks for keeping us posted with the latest news, and with the picture of the rape victim. You are indeed a very brave man to publish this piece of news, knowing that the power that be will be at your door to reprimand you any time from now. Just be cautious, and alert. I worry about your safety, I do not want any harm done to you by those in order that they could get even with you. At the same time I only wish there will be more people of the same caliber to confront the devil face to face, then with the united voice, the evil regime can easily be toppled...Anyway, I wish you the best in your undertaking, may God keep you safe from the devil's claws... (DreamLady, MT, 2/1, topic: Without concern!).</i>
Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<i>The Star should be honourable enough to close shop for talking sh^^t! I make my million in international trade. I see the majority of Malaysians ESP working class, making less than RM1500 an MTh are suffering and can't meet end needs. Worst the people you voted are the cause of your suffering. Do you know Malaysia is soooooo rich? Few hundred billions just gone for the past 30 years. Just ask around town! PDRM, MACC, YAG, JUDGES, BANK NEGARA, SC will not catch the ministers + MPS + UMNO/BN cronies and put them in jail or death sentence. Will the universal force take them forever. Until now they still play with the tendering process-Mark up/ commission/ kick back. Vote PR! Save Malaysia now! Vote PR! (charli88, MT, 26/1, topic: Anwar should do the honourable thing and resign from office).</i>

In the internal affairs issues, there are three themes of participatory democracy: existence and formation of consensus; encourage desire to participate further and make provocation; and build community and identity.

### **Civil cases**

Contribution towards participatory democracy in civil cases is as below:

*Table 10: Themes of Participatory Democracy and Readers' Comments in the Civil Case Issues*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Develop social responsibility	<i>The police acted ok. They did not detain the demonstrators, but release them after taking their statements. It is just like any other modern country's Labor Day activity for crying out loud. Thank you police keep up the good work the 364 other days of the year (red1, MT, 1/5, topic: May Day rally proceed despite police arrest).</i>
Formulate ideas to policy and decision making process.	<i>Maybe our leaders should look to the UN Declaration of Human Rights and we Malaysians should ask and fight for it. Article 7 of the UNDHR says "All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination." (May87, TMI, 15/5, topic: Police detain four DAP members in anti-Lynas protest).</i>
Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation	<i>Why arrest the four of them? What wrong doings have they committed? Why I Ali not arrested, causing racial tensions? Why double standard?. Where's justice? Where's fair play?(Dr Chuaa Soiled Leg , TMI, 15/5, topic: Police detain four DAP members in anti-Lynas protest).</i>

In the civil case issues, there are three themes of participatory democracy: formulate ideas to policy and decision-making process; encourage desire to participate further and make provocation; and develop social responsibility.

## Human rights

Contribution towards participatory democracy in human rights is as below:

*Table 11: Themes of Participatory Democracy and Readers' Comments Related to the Human Rights Issues*

Themes	Comments
Existence and formation of consensus. Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<i>Correct! Correct! Correct!!! Let every Malaysian see for them whether the PM is a responsibility and a caring PM or a bloody damned bastard SOB who's afraid of losing his unmandated power!!!(eloofk, MT, 26/6, topic: Najib needs to protect human rights).</i>
Continuous and significant public participation. Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<i>How to convince or make the Muslims aware that freedom of religion is every man's right? The Quran says that a Muslim cannot convert out of Islam, but if we think of it, is it right? Or do they fear disbelieve in the Quran or may insult god if they think otherwise? Why can't they stop and think that maybe there is an error in the Quran? Is this fear of god or fear of self? Or is it the leaders are afraid of losing their power over every man that they make this very strict rule? Still searching for the right answer. Does anyone have the right answer?(earthman, MT, 13/2, topic: freedom takes priority under Islamic law).</i>
Existence and formation of consensus. Continuous and significant public participation.	<i>Agreed with you. Islamic teachings cannot uphold freedom, but instead control its followers and people under the strict sharia laws. There will be no freedom, once a nation becomes an Islamic state. Under the guise of god's law, Muslims can't even convert out of Islam. Or the freedom to consume health benefits wine or for women to wear jeans. This man named Al-Qadarawi like many leaders are liars who speaks many tongues. Beware (earthman, MT, 13/2, topic: freedom takes priority under Islamic law)</i>

In the human rights issues, there are three themes of participatory democracy: existence and formation of consensus; continuous and significant public participation; and encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.

## Law

Contribution towards participatory democracy in law is as below:

*Table 12: Themes of Participatory Democracy and Readers' Comments Related to the Legal Issues*

Themes	Comments
Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<i>Why is this Professor always in Malaysian Insider? Is he the only law expert in Malaysia? Is he really a law expert? Does a PhD or professorship entitled one to be recognized as a law expert? Malaysian Insider probably could help us understand better the definition of a law expert (guest, TMI, 23/1, topic: Selangor law changes not for absolute monarchy, says law expert).</i>
Formulate ideas to policy and decision making process.	<i>Just get lawyers or constitution experts to list down all the amendments to our federal/state constitutions since Merdeka and examine if all amendments are fair and justified. If any amendment is against the interest of anyone, be they the Royalty or any Rakyat, it has to be declared null and void.</i>
Individual and collective participation are accepted and recognize by the policy and decision makers. Existence and formation of consensus.	<i>In our system of constitutional monarchy, the ruler could act only through the head of his government. In this instance, with or without the amendment, the MB should have been consulted before the decision is made in the name of the Sultan. This is the basic element of our government system. Take the case at the Federal level, would you believe that the DYMM could just act on the PSD's memo and bypass the PM in the appointment of the CS? So you see where the issue is (sikay, TMI, 23/1, topic: Selangor law changes not for absolute monarchy, says law expert).</i>

In the legal issues, there are four themes of participatory democracy: individual and collective participation are accepted and recognised by the policy and decision-makers; existence and formation of consensus; formulate ideas to policy and decision-making process; and encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.

## General issues

Contribution towards participatory democracy in the general issues is as follows:



Table 13: Themes of Participatory Democracy and Readers' Comments in the General Issues

Themes	Comments
Individual and collective participation are accepted and recognize by the policy and decision makers. Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<i>This was my last time, definitely my last, in so far as Ku Li is concerned. I have asked him before, all in vain, but I shall ask him again for the last time: " Ku Li, what are you? Who are you? What do you stand for? What do you fight for? You still are with a party of thieves, criminals and munafiqs. What are you talking about, pleassssssssssssssssse??(Oscar Winner, MT, 19/6, those were the days).</i>
Individual and collective participation are accepted and recognize by the policy and decision makers.	<i>Shad, who is from Universiti Teknologi Mara's Law faculty, said the article merely states that one has to be Muslim, practice the Malay customs, speak Malay language, is born in Malaya and has at least one Malay parent (ibabonma, MT, 30/1, from special position to ketuanan).</i>
Individual and collective participation are accepted and recognize by the policy and decision makers.	<i>Malaysian Chinese are law obedient people who mostly pay their tax obligation. It is so surprising that 90% of taxpayers are Chinese, whereas many of the Malays are so damned rich and having lots of assets - properties, shares, cars, overseas trips and yet never pay their taxes. The civil servants in govt have 95% are Malay and if you are an Officer, Their income are easily fallen into the tax bracket after considering their allowance income. Yet the dirty tricks come in to avoid tax by the very same gift who employed them by manipulation income to group them into the non taxable groups. Sound familiar? How many of UMNO leaders who are super rich pay their dues accordingly and not under declaring?(SiHangChai, MT, 25/4, topic: Malaysia's dilemma to Chinese dilemma).</i>

In the general issues, there are two themes of participatory democracy: individual and collective participation are accepted and recognised by the policy and decision-makers; and encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.

## Summary

The overview of the findings suggests that there were seven themes of participatory democracy as listed in Figure 1 and such have been further classified into 12 issues that have been commonly discussed within the Internet sphere. The findings have been synthesised in Table 14 that showed the themes of participatory democracy number five (encourage desire to participate further and make provocation) have gained the highest response from the Internet users; meanwhile, theme number six (build community entity) gained a small portion of comments.

The findings were considerably relevant to suggest a model of people participation that would include the public voice via the Internet in regard to participatory democracy. The flow of such communication is very much inclined to diagonal communication where the laymen could directly communicate with the decision and the policy-makers. Nevertheless, the vertical communication and the horizontal communication of the people are not deniable.

Overall there were 70 comments pertaining to the seven themes of participatory democracy. The total number for each themes is presented below.

*Table 14: The Themes of Participatory Democracy, Issue, and Number of Comments*

<b>Themes of participatory democracy</b>	<b>Issue</b>	<b>Number of comments</b>
Individual and collective participation are accepted and recognize by the policy and decision makers	i) Development ii) Social iii) Foreign affair iv) Law v) General issue	10
Existence and formation of consensus.	i) Politics ii) Education iii) Internal affair iv) Human right v) Law vi) Religion	10

Formulate ideas to policy and decision making process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Economy</li> <li>ii) Development</li> <li>iii) Education</li> <li>iv) Social</li> <li>v) Civil case</li> <li>vi) Law</li> </ul>	10
Continuous and significant public participation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Politics</li> <li>ii) Social</li> <li>iii) Human right</li> </ul>	4
Encourage desire to participate further and make provocation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Politics</li> <li>ii) Development</li> <li>iii) Economy</li> <li>iv) Religion</li> <li>v) Foreign affair</li> <li>vi) Internal affair</li> <li>vii) Civil case</li> <li>viii) Human right</li> <li>ix) Law</li> <li>x) General issue</li> <li>xi) Education</li> <li>xii) Social</li> </ul>	31
Build community and identity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Politics</li> <li>ii) Internal affair.</li> </ul>	2
Develop social responsibility.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Religion</li> <li>ii) Social</li> <li>iii) Civil case</li> </ul>	3
<b>Total</b>		<b>70</b>

## Conclusion

The finding implies that participatory democracy practised via the alternative media is less significant. However, there were instances where the peoples' voices through online alternative media have gained attention from the policy and decision-makers and in some other instances it has worked hand in hand with the traditional mass media. Essentially, as an online community, the public used to be anonymous and it becomes a part of attraction for participating in many online discussions and interactions. As such, consumers do not anymore have to feel at odd or frustrated with the government-controlled media as the existence of social media has created more democratic setting to voice out opinions or to vent anger (Ahmad et al., 2012).

The online alternative media continue the development of linking people participating in social networks and geographically isolated people and organisations bound by shared interests with preceding advances in communication equipment. The social network theory suggests that the Internet acts as a social communication supplement and an extension of traditional social behaviours. In line with the social network perspective, it has been found that the more individuals in organisations are connected, communicate face-to-face, and the more intimate their relationships, the more frequently and intimately they use email and a variety of media to communicate.

Examining the association of sociability with the Internet communication will help to generalise our findings with regard to the social network model. Based on the evidence overall, we would predict that high sociability and lack of shyness would be positively associated with more frequent and intimate virtual communities.

According to Gattiker (2001, p. 181-182):

Communities are imagined and can be distinguished based on the style in which they are imagined. Communities are generated by communal experiences and as such, culture and language may be an important ingredient for understanding each other. However, users in the Internet may communicate with the help of the lingua franca English but because the latter may not be their mother tongue, many are unable to use the language to its full richness.

On the other hand, the participants assumed that the news provided in online alternative media are more towards media sensationalism. Media sensationalism means the use of exciting or shocking stories or language at the expense of accuracy, in order to provoke public interest or excitement. Sensationalism should not be tolerated, even if some may argue that sensationalism permits serious social issues to capture the attention of its audiences. There is no benefit in this if such coverage contributes to myths that damage the public perceptions of children and young people. A fine line remains between sensitive,

intelligent reporting by the media and sensationalising the issue. The focus should always be on educating and informing the public and monitoring child rights standards (Nadchatram, 2007).

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