

**BEYOND AGENDA SETTING:  
THE NATURE OF POLITICAL BLOGOSPHERE IN MALAYSIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study investigated the utilization of blogs, to disseminate news and information to provide independent, reliable, wide-ranging and relevant information in support of democracy. It also explores how the agenda-setting theory is utilized to shape discussions and thoughts to publicize or highlight issues. This research investigated how bloggers with agenda-setting and hive mentality shaped and directed what the readers should think and how it might influence them. A literature review looked into the recent development of social media and politics internationally and in Malaysia. This study examined the current Malaysian political trend concerning communication and undertook to define ethics in the 20th Century, especially on issues relating to the blurring of reporting lines and freedom of expression related to blogging. It analysed the development of mass communication and the relationship between the Internet, handphones and mobile technology and “blogging.” Given the focus of the study, a qualitative method was employed. The study undertook a content analysis of prominent political blogger’s sites and interviews with political bloggers. The study found that blogs did play a significant role in democratization by facilitating the civil liberties of society as a whole and helping in framing the discourse. The blogs also helped in setting the agenda for public policy-making. They did encourage hive mentality and sharing of information and ideas relating to democracy in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** political communication, agenda-setting theory, blogosphere, Malaysia politics

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The New Media, the Internet, has made communication easier and accessible. This change brought about by technological advancements has deeply affected our sense of distance, space, and time, especially in social, political, urban and rural areas. Many view the new communications technologies as a way to bypass sceptical national mainstream media and provide information directly to citizens (Mohamed, Manan & Ghazali, 2019).

During the past 20 years, there has been a rapid transformation of online media brought upon by digital technologies usage and the Internet. The use of digital computers has also changed the way people use and consume media content (Manaf, Taibi & Manan, 2017). Specifically, blogging which through their “conversation” aims to educate and to a certain extent, to influence and shape the understanding of their readers on a particular issue or topics published.

Blogging utilizes speed, interactiveness, and extensive reach of the Internet overwhelmed conventions and values set upon by traditional media, which included rules and regulations related to media and even legal restrictions and ethics. Blogging actively collects, reports analyzes before disseminating the information or news. Participating in it essentially aims to provide independent, reliable, wide-ranging and relevant information in support of democracy.

Shafizan Mohamed (2017) suggested that there are two kinds of bloggers - the Activist and the Diarist bloggers. The activist bloggers are driven by the altruistic desire to promote change and encourage participation to specific issues that they championed. These bloggers want to create discourses that could attract more attention to the cause that they were fighting for. On the other hand, the diarist bloggers tend to blog about personal and everyday experiences, unlike the activist bloggers who blogged with deliberate political intentions. While the two blogger categories seem to have contrasting characteristics, they are not entirely opposites. Rather, they are simply analytical categorizations of two ways of blogging.

Most bloggers write for the pleasure of it, while some use it as a platform to express themselves which normally will not be published by the mainstream media. On the other hand, some bloggers are “cyber-troopers”, who are paid by parties to push a certain agenda and even to fool or confuse their adversaries.

## 2. BLOGS AS A POLITICAL CAMPAIGN TOOL IN MALAYSIA

The political blogosphere in Malaysia started to grow significantly 10 years ago during the 2008 General Elections. Most Blogs features that enabled instantaneous publishing of reader's comments and its feedback mechanism encourages conversations and discourses opened to public scrutiny. The significant role of blogs has been accepted by many politicians including the former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad who is known as an active blogger himself said that bloggers should find a middle path in expressing their views to help improve the country. He said some blogs and newspapers were either too supportive of the government or too negative about how the country was being run. He hoped the mainstream media would be critical of the government as they were unwilling to criticize the government. Thus, most of the public have switched from mainstream media to blog as the alternative media to consume political information.

The blog has become an alternative medium in which opposition groups utilized the blogs to host their opinions and ideas. Opposition political leaders also used blogs as a channel of communication since they are not given coverage by the mainstream media. The opposition parties were noted, "to have utilized the New Media more than the government and a study concluded that 70% of the election results were influenced by information on blogs." It was so rattling that the situation was described as a "political tsunami", to the extent that the mainstream and government-owned media was seen to have failed in promoting pro-Barisan Nasional propaganda.

Even though the ruling party Barisan Nasional won the 2008 elections, then Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was quoted to have said, "We didn't think it was important. It was a serious misjudgment. We thought that the newspapers, the print media, and the television were important but young people were looking at text messages and blogs. The influence of alternative media was painful. But it came at the right time, not too late" (Mohd Sani & Zengeni, 2008). Moreover, Mohd Sani and Zengeni (2008), in their research pointed out that the New Media, including blogging, had opened the floodgates and allowed opposition parties like DAP, PAS and PKR to reach voters directly at their offices and homes, circumventing the traditional mass media outlets. Similarly, Salman and Hasim (2011), in a nutshell, said, "after the 2008 elections, there was a scramble by both ruling and opposition parties to gain an online presence as both parties were now deeply convinced that control over New Media was of extreme importance in electoral success".

The emergence of a complex evolution of online political information sharing as purported by Rosyidah Muhamad (2016) saw a spike in political networking, be it from the opposition or the government party. Her study suggested that the aspect of networking allows the political parties to strengthen their organization's role in policy-making. It became evident, especially after the 2008 general election. Notably, the blog content of both political blocs is centralized among clusters of blogs and bloggers that support their ideologies, respectively. This trend of political parties hiring bloggers (e.g. Rocky Bru) acts as political leverage that leads to biased and perhaps even misleading information sharing. It is known that these bloggers could systematically publish information on scandals to tarnish political rivals, instead of promoting deliberative democracy. In this sense, political blogging is used as a tool to sway and shape public opinion.

On another note, Yeong's (2013) study, however, concluded that, although 65% of Malaysians trust blogs and blogs were the most frequently used social media, Malaysian bloggers do not have any effect on political results. He stated that Malaysia's 60% Internet penetration rate did not consider the rural and urban divide or the quality of the Internet, that will enable a proper public sphere discussion to occur. Furthermore, although the Internet had opened doors for journalists to create media beyond the grasp of censorships and control by the government, leading to an increase in freedom, perspectives and sympathizers of opposition parties, Pepinsky (2013) believes that the New Media and blogging only helps to shuffle a stagnant political landscape, but does little in truly liberating the public sphere of the country. To Pepinsky, "Malaysia's political structure has always been divided along with ethnicity and economy, and not much can be changed in the public sphere discussion in promoting democracy if this division remains the same."

From all that has been discussed, it is evident that there is still a form of haziness in academic literature with regards to bloggers' participation in public sphere discussion in promoting democracy. From this vantage point, what is clear is that blogs serve to remind us that the blogosphere is a balanced medium which yields relatively fair opportunities for diverse opinions to be shared and scrutinized. Also, blogs are run on a personal level, thus allowing bloggers to be susceptible to infighting and conflicts as with any community, only that these confrontations are logged in cyberspace and can, therefore, be traced for further study.

### 3. AGENDA SETTING

Even though blogging is relatively a new phenomenon in the New Media, existing Mass Communication theories can adequately explain how it works and it is found that certain theories are applicable and relevant. Agenda-setting theory proposes that “the public agenda or what people discuss, think and worry about is powerfully shaped and directed by what the news media choose to publicize” (Dominick, 2013). Furthermore, the news media will decide to give prominence, space and coverage on a particular issue which would then become the most important issue on the audience agenda. Agenda-setting is the concept that the news media, by their consistently displaying news, come to determine the issues the public should think and talk about. Agenda-setting which has been a dominant concept since the early 1970s suggest that mass media can impact society and thus bringing about attitude change. Recent work on agenda-setting suggested that it works not only at the level of issues but also at the level of attributes of issues, or sub-issues. Walter Lippmann, in *Public Opinion* published in 1992 wrote, argued that people do not deal directly with their environment but instead respond to what he termed as “pictures” in their mind. He elaborated that “the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance.” Generally, he explained that we are not equipped enough to deal with subtleties, varieties, numerous permutations, and combinations. To manage it, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can act on it. He concluded that “average people cannot make important political decisions based on their simplified pictures.” Thus, these decisions are left to technocrats. Proponents of the theory elaborated that “the first level of agenda-setting (basic issue salience transfer), second-level agenda-setting (attribute salience transfer), need for orientation (the psychological explanation of the theory), and priming (the evaluative dimension of the theory).”

Agenda-setting research is looking into how the media agenda is set or agenda building, it essentially means a collective process in which the media, government and the public influence one another in determining what issues are considered important. Severin and Tankard Jr (2010) wrote that; “agenda building is broken into six steps; the press highlights some events or activities and makes them stand out. Different kinds of issues require different kinds and amounts of news coverage to gain attention. The events and activities in the focus of attention must be “framed,” or given a field of meanings within which they can be understood. The language used by the media can affect the perception of the importance of an issue. The media link the activities or events that have become the focus of the attention to secondary symbols

whose location on the political landscape is easily recognized. People need to have a basis for taking sides on an issue. Agenda building is accelerated when well-known and credible individuals begin to speak out on an issue.” However, Joseph Klapper (1960) wrote, “Mass communication ordinarily does not serve as a necessary and sufficient use of audience effects, but rather functions among and through a nexus of mediating factors and influences.” Thus, mass media does affect public perceptions and their views on issues but not on their attitude. The mainstream does have their agenda, but at the same time, public concerns and issues do contribute towards agenda-setting which will finally contribute towards the creation of hive mentality. Westley has suggested that in certain circumstances pressure groups or special interest groups can highlight an issue into the media which become part of the media agenda-setting. Shoemaker and Resse (1991), drawing upon the work of Herbert Gans and Todd Gitlin, have proposed that influences on media content could come from interest groups that are lobbying for or against issues, organised events aimed towards getting media coverage and government that regulate contents. Even ideology which represents a society-level phenomenon could influence the content of mass media.

Studies have indicated that blog agenda is becoming more prominent and this reflects an important influence on the media agenda than vice versa. There is also growing evidence that even journalists are taking cues as to what to cover from blogs. Blogs have allowed anybody who is an Internet-savvy to be mass communicators. “In the machine-assisted setting, one or more people are communicating employing a mechanical device (or devices) with one or more receivers. The machine can also extend the range of the message by amplifying it and/or transmitting it over large distances” (Lu, Chang, & Chang, 2014).

Earlier studies on agenda setting mainly focus on the role of traditional media, but by the 90s, new media had already made its presence and it was evident that blogs were making impacts in terms of influencing and shaping public opinion. This is due to the pervasiveness of the social media which provides access to the masses making it easier for anyone to create and share the news. Since the 2008 general election, several observers believed that social media are no longer an alternative, and serve as the forefront of setting the Malaysian political agenda. (Salman, Mustafa, Salleh, & Ali, 2016).

Blogs besides fulfilling the need for affiliation also provide an avenue for self-expression. Self-expression refers to an individual need to express their views, thoughts and feelings and to relate their opinion. Agenda Setting is one of the media effects theories that look into how the media set the agenda for the public by determining what issues are considered important.

Moreover, the public concerns and issues do contribute towards agenda-setting which will finally contribute towards the creation of hive mentality. Westley (1976) has suggested that in certain circumstances pressure groups or special interest groups can highlight an issue into the media which become part of the media agenda-setting.

Muhammad Shawal A. Rashid (2014) believes that Malaysian mass media, which includes both traditional and new media, have a significant impact on influencing public opinion. According to his research, when comparisons were made with categories of issues concerned by the public and the media, results proved that both tallied, indicating that the issues covered by the media could influence what the public perceived as important. The categories of issues involved are crime, social, politics, environment and economy.

Agenda-setting in the context of blogging poses some interesting questions about whether a free-style type blogger can influence the reader. Every blogger is constrained by their ideology that influences the agenda they set in their article. Interestingly, most bloggers tend to fall back to the mainstream media to reaffirm their suspicions or confirm what they heard. But then again, the blogger is free to rewrite or reshape that agenda by choosing which stories they want to link, and what comments to make. Essentially, bloggers become opinion leaders by their blogs being read and then linked to other bloggers.

The quantity and quality of linkage to a blogger's site creates a kind of social status and becomes authoritative with the endorsement by society. A blogger's interest in a topic can bring about opinion leadership in the blogging community. This flow of influence is extended further when followers of blogs share information with others via email, instant messaging, and social networks like Facebook or even face-to-face.

#### **4. MALAYSIAN BLOGGERS AND AGENDA SETTING**

Political blogs are the most favourite type of blogs, with most Malaysian visits based on feedback or comments received on these political blogs. According to Mazril Hameedy Mazlan and Mariah Muda (2010), the rigid control on the Malaysian mainstream media by the government has forced the opposition parties to use alternative media such as the blogs to reach their voters.

With the current voters who are more Internet savvy, alternative media such as blogs has become a bane of information for them. Most of the issues that are played in the mainstream media are cross-checked by the voters via online media. This is because the information that the mainstream media provides which could be heavily slanted towards the government, thus

the voters now can listen to the other opinion and have a clearer view of the issues. The notion of trust more than the online media informs are more reliable and have made blogs a more significant source of political news.

Researchers Ahmad Nadzri, Ali Selamat, Hafiz Selamat, and Mohd Zaidi (2008) elaborated that in Malaysia, a blog is one of the powerful weapons that have been used to influence readers by spreading news and information. The power of blogs has significantly impacted the political situation in Malaysia. For example, during the budget 2009 presentation, bloggers played their role by publishing opinions, rumours and information about it in their blogs. It influences readers which impacted positively and negatively to the Malaysian political situation. This was testified by the former Minister of Information Malaysia, Datuk Seri Zainuddin Maidin that political blogs can influence readers and political situation in Malaysia. The ex-journalist turned politician was quoted as saying that blogs can make the political scenario in Malaysia unfavourable if politicians or authors manipulate rumours and information to fulfil their political issues or agenda.

## **5. OBJECTIVES**

- i. This study aims to examine the role of blogs as a new media platform, its nature, and types of blogs in Malaysia. It will investigate whether existing Mass Communication theories can explain how it works; whether it is applicable and relevant. We hope to explain through these theories, the effects of mass communication especially in delivering its role of informing the public, surveillance and as a watchdog.
- ii. This study will also look into the environment in which blogs exist and laws that regulate them. We will examine the agenda-setting concept where the news media will consistently display certain news to influence what issues the public should think and talk about. Agenda-setting concept suggests that mass media may affect society and thus, influencing attitude change.

## **6. RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN**

The approach taken for this study was qualitative, which by nature deals with valuable perspectives that can hardly be revealed by quantitative approach. The approach taken for this study was qualitative, which by nature deals with valuable perspectives that can hardly be revealed by quantitative approach. A qualitative analytic method involves identifying,



analyzing and reporting patterns of themes within the data. The focus of this interpretive research study will also be to understand to what extent does blogging activities have an impact on the decision making of the voters. This study uses participant interviews as a method to gather the data. This study interviewed the five political bloggers to obtain the relevant information, certain aspects of the blogs have to be evaluated which are the content type of blogs, the slant of content, the political views of the bloggers and the frequency of activity from the bloggers and the readers/followers. The blogs taken for analysis are of prominent politicians who are actively writing and updating their blogs on national or even international issues. It is the intended goal of qualitative research to offer a perspective of issues and provide content analyses that reflect the researcher's ability to document and analyze evidence. To provide credibility towards this study, evidence, specifically blog posts from selected bloggers' websites were collected. To compile and analyse the data, all of the responses were appropriately coded. Though the responses will be qualitative, a classification coding system will be developed that represents a theme for the responses, thus offering the ability to create a coding table allowing for data aggregation and analysis. To test and justify the relevance of agenda-setting theory to this qualitative research as well as to answer the research questions, a total of five participants were selected.

The participants were:

1. Participant A is an owner and managing director involved in training and publishing. He was born in Penang, speaks well in English, Malay, Hokkien and some Tamil. After graduating from a local university, he went into marketing for a multinational before setting up his own company. His core values which are carried in his company are: Adding value, Being universal, Telling the truth, Being creative and innovative, and applying knowledge.

2. Participant B is a resident manager and co-owner of a five-star hotel in Malacca. He is an active blogger and is a member of the Blog House Malaysia. He graduated from a private institution in Malaysia with a Diploma in Business Management. He started his career in the hospitality industry before moving into the transportation industry. He started his blog in 2007 and considers himself as a Media practitioner, a contributing motoring journalist, Entrepreneur, Blogger, 'Twitterer', and a lover of life.

3. Participant C, is an author, professional master of ceremonies, motivational speaker, social activist and former presenter at Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM). She is a graduate of the United Kingdom with a Bachelor of Science in Information System degree. She keeps herself busy by being the host of an online radio station. She is an active member of the Voice

of Women, which is a platform for young women to contribute to society. She was also a candidate for Barisan Nasional in the 13th General Election but lost.

4. Participant D graduated from a local university with specialisation in media and communication. He is UMNO's cyber trooper and was a journalist with a local media group before joining The Barisan Nasional Backbenchers Club for three years. "Backbencher" originated from the British Parliament, denoting a Member of Parliament (MP) but not essentially in the Cabinet or is part of the government by being a Parliamentary Secretary. He then joined the management of UMNO about nine years ago. He is also active in Google + with substantial postings with pictures of UMNO and Barisan Nasional activities and getting more than nine million hits.

5. Participant E was a staff member of a deputy minister. He graduated from a local college a degree in Mechanical Engineering and worked as an engineer for three years. He became an active MIC member in support for Barisan Nasional parliamentary candidate during the 13th General Election. He has his blog which is updated regularly, poses numerous Barisan Nasional activities and answers issues brought upon by the opposition.

Their contents are politically biased, where three were anti-opposition and two were neutral. However, in the beginning, the process of this research, there were only two anti-opposition, which are Participant D and E. But due to personal preference, Participant B who was initially anti-government, had a change of heart and chose to be anti-opposition. All the bloggers are active in producing content and they receive numerous likes and followers. Their followers were also actively engaging with the bloggers via the comment sections provided in every blog posts. The participants were informed regarding the interview via phone calls, SMS and personal meetings.

Despite the small number of samples, it is adequate for this research due to its qualitative nature. To obtain the relevant information, certain aspects of the blogs have to be exposed which are the content type of blogs, the slant of content, the political views of the bloggers and the frequency of activity from the bloggers and the readers/followers. These four aspects are the most important and relevant since this research is qualitatively based. However, other aspects such as the interactive features of the blog sites have been excluded in context to the relevance of this study. Last but not least is the bloggers' or followers' frequency of activities, ranging from the number of blog posts being produced either daily, weekly or monthly basis and the number or the number of likes and followers of the bloggers. The time frame chosen for the sampling is between 2008 till December 2016; 2008 represents the watershed moment

of the political reformation in Malaysia where the use of blogs with political inclinations reached its peak.

## 7. RESULTS

The interview results showed that there are several political views of the bloggers, which are Green Party, Democratic, Conservative and Fusionism. Finally, the bloggers' or followers' frequency of activities, ranging from the number of the blog post being produced either daily, weekly or monthly basis and the number of likes and followers of the bloggers.

Moreover, it is found that the bloggers are actively involved in political discussions; they often write about issues that are close to their heart, subjects they feel should be of public interest and at the same time, benefit them personally. The current generation of bloggers is no longer a passive audience that will blindly accept any information that has been disseminated. The political battleground which has been traditionally poster wars and media monopoly held by *Barisan Nasional* coalition has been replaced by the alternative media, which is a combination of blogs, emails, video uploaded on *YouTube*, *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and the mobile short messaging service (SMS). The Internet was used in tandem with other technological enablers in bridging the digital divide that exists between the urban and rural environment. For instance, Internet-streamed programs and *ceramahs*' talks were copied on VCDs and distributed to rural homes. Bloggers in this study clearly showed that they used blogs to advocate certain issues with certain agenda-setting in mind, highlighting and "spinning" issues, seeking feedback, making clarifications on statements deemed to be a mistake or done with malice.

Blogging allows them to break away from any restrictions imposed upon traditional media, share with minimal constraints while they can dictate and moderate issues. Even though they fully exploited the "freedom" provided by blogging, most of them responsibly researched by double-checking and verifying the facts with their extensive network before sharing the information. Their blogs provided an avenue for information exchange thus making any issue more focused. They do this with a conscious effort to gather support; a good example is a participant who started blogging as an avenue to voice his dissatisfaction of his wife's dismissal from the Malaysian Airline System (MAS). "I started blogging in 2007 when my wife was unlawfully dismissed from MAS. I wanted to highlight our stand and at the same time create awareness of women's rights at the workplace." The blog was picked up by the human resources department of MAS and was highlighted to the top management. The case was

settled out of court. After winning his case, Participant's blog mutated into a blog that talks about any subject, then into more pro-opposition one which scrutinizes the government and more recently, into one that supports the establishment. He changed his support to the government as he thinks that PM Najib will bring positive changes to the country. He was impressed and tended to emulate MGG Pillai's reporting style. Pillai, a Malaysian journalist and political activist died in 2006, was one of the country's pioneers in Internet-based journalism and activism. According to the participant, Pillai was "well known for his straight-talking, no-holds-barred style of reporting and commentary, which resulted in brushes with authorities." His report angered Singaporean top government officials that he was banned from entering the city-state.

This research indicated that bloggers usually started by writing about issues that affect their lives and eventually become political after realizing they have audiences who are interested in what they have to share. In both instances where writing about politics is deliberate or by chance, politics is written and designed according to the bloggers' compass. For participants, a *Barisan Nasional* and UMNO cyber trooper, his blog aims to promote and support UMNO's policies. He started his blog after being an active participant in UMNO related forums. His blog focuses on social issues, business and more towards political topics that support the government. "I believe that we should support the government especially policies related to youths, promoting social responsibility and even to promote business opportunities. I also share my business networking with my subscribers," he explained. To reach out to a wider audience, Participant links his blog with *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *Instagram*. He would post more than once a day even using his handphone, which is then picked up by all of his subscribers and followers. He has a journalistic background and specialises in developing new arguments or breaking new stories.

Participant employs a journalistic-based blog with interviews of experts in various fields to support and strengthen his argument. He gave an example of the recurring water issue in Selangor where he referred to newspapers, quoting experts from conversations and getting information through his networking to present his side of the story. "Even other blogs quote my articles," he added. Being a blogger, he sets his deadlines, the topic of choice, operates without an editor and publishes instantaneously. He often relies on other bloggers or mainstream media for story ideas which he investigates and turns into articles. He is among the most often-cited bloggers online, by liberals and conservatives alike. He updates

consistently, with some original content and some “open threads” so that his community can keep their discussion going. From just being able to discuss issues with friends, Participant is capable of articulating and at the same time creating his own political space, a public space where he poses issues and moderates the discussions. His blog gets an average of about 4,000 hits a day and even as high as 10,000 hits daily, depending on issues being posed. Controversial issues generally attract a lot of comments, even as high as 400 to 500 comments.

Even though bloggers are focused on their interpretation of politics and at the same time fulfilling their mission, their behaviours are connected to their existing political and socio-cultural experiences. Blogging gives them the power to give direction and design how issues are presented. To lend credibility to their blogs, bloggers generally present themselves with an authoritative voice. Authoritative voice means indicating self-proclaimed expertise on issues in a deliberate attempt to influence and infuse political views.

By making and presenting themselves as experts on issues, these bloggers not only personalize politics, set their agenda, promoting it and at the same time exerting an authoritative voice to it. Through the ownership of their blogs which they considered their media, these bloggers are motivated to pursue their political ideals. Although they may be driven by personal goals, the efforts they put in, such as conducting research, initiating discussions then putting it up online, proposing myriad political views and sharing information on issues; rightly benefit the public. At times the blogger’s post, provocative opinions just to elicit response and feedback. It is obvious by doing so; they would be able to test the current political waters and undercurrent which is inherent in the society.

Even though participants in this study are not certain that their blogs do influence voting decisions of their subscribers, they are confident it does provide a platform to see many facets of an issue, obtain valuable information and be able to discuss it with others. Blogging enables them to directly participate in the country’s politics. Through the networking they build with various parties especially the authorities and public, the bloggers perform the vital functions of advising, initiating, providing a public sphere for discussions and participating in political activities. Blogging has increased political participation and diminished the dividing line that separates those who can participate in the country’s politics from those who cannot. Inadvertently, bloggers are finding ways to be part of the particular system that previously sets them apart. If previously they are disconnected from the country’s formal politics, they are now linked to it through the political public sphere. Blogging thus serves more than just a space for resistance but also an avenue for belonging.

## 8. CONCLUSION

### 1. Blogs role in supporting the democratization process.

Media practitioners possess the ability to create and reinforce negative stereotypes and perpetuate misconceptions, frustrate any form of dialogue and develop counterproductive products. The Internet, especially blogs, has become an alternative medium through which the Opposition has been able to have a voice and project well to their targeted audience. As stated by Manaf, Taibi & Manan, (2017), the use of digital computers has also changed the way people use and consume media content, where blogging through their “conversation” tries to educate, influence and shape the understanding of their readers on a specific issue or topics. The bloggers analyzed have used this platform to give their opinions and ideas deemed fit to be highlighted, thus establishing the concept of agenda-setting. It is obvious that blogging came and is here to stay regardless of whatever steps taken by the government to restrict or to a certain extent censor it. Even though blogging is about a decade old, it has grown exponentially and develops itself into a distinctive voice in cyberspace that traverses both public and private boundaries. Blogs have two potential roles to play in democratization. The first is to facilitate the civil liberties of society as a whole; the second is to help in framing the discourse and setting the agenda for public policy-making. Not surprisingly, those who blog on general themes and socio-political bloggers exercise their freedom of expression differently.

### 2. Bloggers as political role models.

Most general bloggers wish to share and document personal experiences, whereas the socio-political bloggers do so with the explicit aim of influencing and motivating others. As suggested by Shafizan Mohamed (2017) that there are two kinds of bloggers - the Activist and the Diarist bloggers. The activist bloggers are driven by the altruistic desire to promote change and encourage participation to specific issues that they championed. These bloggers want to create discourses that could attract more attention to the cause that they were fighting for. On the other hand, the diarist bloggers tend to blog about personal and everyday experiences, unlike the activist bloggers who blogged with deliberate political intentions. All bloggers in this study are free to express their views on almost all subjects without any restrictions. This shows the potential of blogging being free in expressing a political opinion without any control of the states, economic power or fears of others. They are freely providing readers with their

thoughts and views on certain issues. This is contradictory to statements that there are restrictions imposed by the government to the freedom of speech.

While the concept of hive mentality is reinforced when their blogs provide an avenue for instantaneous responses through the publishing of reader's comments with its feedback mechanism, it encourages conversations and discourses which are opened for public scrutiny. Through the usage of various build-in tools in blogs, such as comment boxes and personal communication with a blogger, public discourse on worthy issues will be substantially enhanced and thus contributing even perpetuating the concept of hive mentality.

### 3. Bloggers do exercise freedom of speech

Prominent bloggers, particularly in this study, usually articulate fairly positive motivations for their contribution to society and their ability to act as role models for the rest of the blogosphere. Those marginalized by the mainstream media have also taken to blogging as it offers them an unprecedented avenue to be heard. Portraying a more neutral stand and responsible leadership. Sharizan Mohamed (2017) explained that the activist bloggers who blogged with deliberate political intentions while the diarist bloggers utilize the personal and everyday experiences approach to deliver their message. While the two blogger categories seem to have contrasting characteristics, they are not entirely opposites. They are simply analytical categorizations of two ways of blogging. Even though there have been accusations of censorship by the government and repressive laws targeting bloggers, even online journalists as forcefully as journalists in the traditional media, bloggers are still able to "function" reasonably well without much interference. Bloggers, however, have been cautioned to be responsible, not to indulge into rumour mongering, spreading lies, threatening racial and religious harmony and distributing fake news.

### 4. Bloggers still rely on the mainstream media.

The bloggers understand the importance of verifying their facts and it is not exercised rigorously. Most of them religiously refer to the mainstream media to verify their information even suspicions or seek out relevant sources that might be in the know. Most of them religiously refer to the mainstream media to verify their information even suspicions or seek out relevant sources who might be in the know.

## 5. Blogging challenging the political status quo?

For their part, some bloggers consider their activities in the promotion of their views and ideas as a viable means of challenging the government's unfettered hold on power. Under the country's authoritarian version of a semi-democratic system and with far-reaching state control over the mainstream mass media, the Internet coupled with user-friendly blogging tools is an important opening for those who seek a space to discuss critical socio-political issues. As proposed by Mazril Hameedy Mazlan and Mariah Muda (2010) in their study that the rigid control on the Malaysian mainstream media by the government has forced the opposition parties to use alternative media especially blogs to reach their voters. A close examination of the blogs, however, revealed an ethnic-based discourse which is reflective of the Malaysian society since Independence. Most bloggers are committed to developing better, more progressive and democratic politics. It is noteworthy that the digital divide between the 'wired' and 'less wired' could be detrimental in making blogs as a vehicle for political change and democratization. The digital divide will directly shape the unequal representation of voice in the Net. While the bread and butter issues in terms of access to electronic infrastructure are becoming of lesser significance, the question of addressing a heterogeneous society – both in terms of language as well as a social structure – is only marginally touched upon.

## 9. RECOMMENDATION

Thus, the recommendations we have put forth are after due consideration to the result of the analysis undertaken. There is an urgent need to accelerate the development of professional skills to keep pace with the emergence of New Media and tackle the issues brought by convergence. Professional development programs must instil sensitivity in overcoming stereotypes and emphasising extremes, reducing ill-informed media reports including writings in blogs, resisting sensationalizing issues whilst telling stories creatively. At the same time, intercultural competence must be given due attention for it requires new curricula including modules in journalism training institutions, new career development resources, contemporary ethical guidelines and accountability mechanism. Theoretically, this paper hopes to be the catalyst for more comprehensive research undertaken on blogging, blogs and bloggers. Apart from a qualitative study, future studies can apply quantitative methods in measuring feedback, responses and views from the other end of the spectrum which are the readers of blogs. The dimension of future studies should also be expanded into other areas like gender issues, youth,



culture, social, economics, psychology and even religion. With the current and still evolving changing trend of social media just keeping tabs will be such an exhaustive effort. Due to the changing preference and lifestyle, there seems to be a migration from blogs to *Facebook*, *Twitter* and recently *Instagram*. Having said all that, what does the future hold for us? Convergence and New Media technology development are still evolving at a very rapid pace with no clear end to it. Technology especially related to the smartphone applications will be able to keep up with the demands and requirements of consumers which will work seamlessly and swiftly with the Internet. It will also have a profound impact on how media content is produced, communicated, consumed and even leading into the power base erosion of the old media.

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