

Blogs and Malaysian Civil Society

Blogging as an instrument for democratization is only as effective as the civil society behind it. The discussion now turns to some qualitative and quantitative data to describe the empirical situation of utilizing blogs to fulfil freedom of expression and information in the Malaysian context. There are two sections to this chapter. The first addresses sections of Malaysian civil society exercising their civil liberties through blogs. In terms of freedom of expression, some observations are raised about the motivation of bloggers, blogs as a space for discourse, and the concept of “responsible blogging”, backed by data from the online survey and quotes from interviews. As some bloggers are faced with intimidation by various parties, there is some discussion of these encounters to understand the challenges that certain bloggers have experienced while exercising their right to free expression online. In terms of freedom of information, the types of information available through blogs and the level of trust blog readers have in various forms of media are also analyzed. The next section describes how blogs could play an active role in setting or raising agendas for policy-making by looking at the progress and reactions to some prominent Malaysian blogsites.

Freedom of Expression

Blogs are indisputably avenues for voicing opinions and influencing perceptions. Although this freedom is available to anybody with an Internet connection, the outreach of a relatively obscure blog may differ considerably compared with a popular blog, as already discussed in chapter 2. However, as we have seen, social networks are able to cascade the information from one blog to another and slowly escalate issues to popular blogs. Therefore it is still important to consider opinions from lesser-read blogs, the so-called “long tail” in the power law distribution. The

discussion here examines the multiple dimensions of whether bloggers exercise their freedom of expression, by looking at their motives for blogging, whether they are “responsible”, the space provided for bloggers and “those without blogs” for public expression and discussion of views, and the sort of discourse that is prevalent within that space.

Why do bloggers blog?

Since online diarists outnumber all kinds of other bloggers, it is hardly surprising that most bloggers responded that their motivation for blogging was to document and share their life experiences. Creative self-expression also ranked high on the list, followed by using blogs to keep in touch with acquaintances and family (see Figure 5.1). Socio-political bloggers appear to have somewhat different motivations to blog than their non-socio-political counterparts, with most wanting to “influence or motivate other people”.

Figure 5.1: Major reason for blogging



In interviews, socio-political bloggers profess their motivations to be fairly positive, aspiring to contribute to society and to uphold tenets of blogging as role models. Tony Pua, who blogs at Education in Malaysia and Philosophy Politics Economics believes that: “While there are a lot of ways that you can do your community service, or public service, a lot of it may take a lot of time and effort, which I can’t afford at this point in time. Blogging is something that I think has impact, and yet it is something within the time that I can spare to do the work”.

S. K. Thew who is a seasoned blogger at the age 24, aims to promote civic

consciousness among young people. James Wong, a political analyst at *Malaysiakini* blogs to guide discourse: “[Some bloggers] don’t have the social scientific thinking. That’s why I’m trying also to impart what I see as the correct values of public discourse... Yes, as a role model”.

Jeff Ooi, one of the pioneers of blogging in Malaysia who has inspired at least two other bloggers (Tony Pua and S. K. Thew) to start blogging, says that:

[I would] continue to be a role model for Malaysian bloggers, when it comes to political as well as current issues blogs. The way that you’re very serious about it, and I’m very firm with my readers who wanted to go off tangent. I really reprimand them. I delete some of their sensitive, offensive content, but more as to create a showcase, that when you blog political issues, it can be very harmful to yourself. So, that is the role model. I don’t claim to be right all the time, because I do not think that blogs are about black and white, right and wrong. It’s more about how to trigger people’s thinking processes, thinking out of the box, thinking differently from how the mainstream media prints. I want people to think critically. Critical thinking is something that Malaysians lack.

Many have resorted to the cyberspace simply because the mainstream media will not or cannot represent their voices. Most of these marginalized voices are those of dissenting or critical views of the government, among those veteran journalists, politicians from the opposition, and even academics. As put by Steven Gan, editor-in-chief of *Malaysiakini*,

[Blogging is an effective avenue to voice opinions and to be heard] because of the fact that we have press censorship and because views of the common people are not being heard in our media. It’s not just common people. You’re talking about even professionals. People who have a different opinion than the editors or different political viewpoint is not being aired. I think in that sense, blogging on the Internet gives the ability to all these people to have their voices heard.

The former group editor-in-chief of the NSTP, A. Kadir Jasin, provides a first-hand account of being unable to express his opinions through the mainstream media:

In the last few years, more so after I left the New Straits Times in Year 2000, fewer and fewer newspapers are willing to accept my articles. [...] Well, because generally people believe that I am inclined towards being a bit more critical of the authorities. In fact, I think they have mistaken my intentions, or they have misread or misjudged. Actually I am being analytical, more than critical. But in Malaysia people tend to think that if you are analytical, you are critical. But I am more analytical in my approach to writing. But that is seen by some people by being critical. It is correct. Being critical in the sense that I look at issues more analytically and more critically.

In the case of opposition politicians, it was even harder to reach out through the mainstream newspapers before the emergence of blogs. As a result opposition leaders took to blogging with tremendous enthusiasm, as illustrated by Tony Pua, currently the Economic Advisor to the DAP Secretary General Lim Guan Eng:

One example to use is [Lim] Kit Siang. Previously, how did Kit Siang reach out to the public? You get minimal things in the press. English press don't want you anyway. The Chinese press they do publish. You can't really get anything on the English press. They have the websites which nobody goes to. He issues press statements almost every other day. Almost everyday, you know. He has the Bunga Raya, which is a mailing list, subscription based, which is distributed to at most a couple of hundred of people every day. Suddenly, because of blogging, he gets—and the statistics is available publicly, you go to his site and click on the statistics—anything between four to seven thousand page views per day. Now, if you don't tell me that's a drastic increase in the audience you can reach on a daily basis, what more is it? Even if the circulation of newspapers is 200,000, doesn't mean everyone will be reading your article. Most people just turn to comics and sports and that's it. That sort of thing. Four to seven thousand readers per day, you're certain that they've read it, I think it's a vast difference from before.

Not many socio-political bloggers are able to generate income to outweigh the costs of blogging, such as time consumption or even threats of arrest. As depicted in conversations during the interview sessions, prominent socio-political bloggers are motivated by the thought of contributing to society, being role models and also to point out perceived wrongdoings by the government often missed by the mainstream media. The following section looks at blogs as a space for discourse.

A space for discourse

As mentioned earlier, many have utilized the blogosphere to host their opinions and ideas. These members of the public are not limited only to bloggers, as blogs enable instantaneous publishing of comments as well for readers. The feedback mechanism propels blogs to a different dimension from traditional media as it encourages conversations and discourse to be held up to public scrutiny. Most interviewees agree that the space for discourse is beneficial for the country, empowering individuals to voice their opinions on current issues. The renowned academic Rustam A. Sani believed that “through [leaving comments on blogs], people are getting used to exchanges of ideas, which is not one of our society's strong points. We don't exchange ideas very well...At least now people have a channel through which they can do it now”.

Another perspective was provided by the interviewees on blogs being utilized as

platforms. Due to the huge readership of the bloggers interviewed for this study, they are sometimes approached to act as mouthpieces for opinions or issues to be aired. For instance, the “little birds” often mentioned in Screenshots, Jeff Ooi’s blog, are people in the ICT industry, professionals, or even people within media organizations. According to Ooi, they play a big part in his blog, providing him with links or helping him verify his blog posts. These people are a “very strong support” behind Screenshots. Other bloggers have also had similar requests from acquaintances or even the public to blog about certain issues of interest. The underlying negotiation and discourse broadens the pool of issues and filters useful information from the noise to be propagated. A few interviewees revealed that their blogs have been used as platforms for the government or mainstream media to air issues that cannot surface otherwise.

Given the lively discussions both within and beyond the comment boxes it is pertinent to consider the flavour of the discourse and whether it reflects the democratic discourse as described by Loh (2002). First, as depicted in Figure 4.17, some 74 per cent of responding bloggers blog mostly about personal experiences. In other words, blogs are used as online diaries. This corresponds with Loh’s earlier observations that current democratic discourse is inclined towards individualism. The sheer mass of blogs and comments within them makes it difficult to assess the constructiveness of the discourse. When asked whether the discourse ongoing at the blogs and their comments are constructive, A. Kadir Jasin notes:

I will not use the word constructive. It has been—let me put it this way—it has been more than constructive. It has been instructive. Instructive in the sense that, the comments for instance, instruct me, tells me about what the people out there are thinking. Whether they are constructive or not, I don’t know. But they are instructive. In the sense that they tell you, okay, I don’t like this. We don’t like this person. We like this person. We have a lot of hope in this person. We like these issues. We don’t like these issues. So, to me, it is instructive. In the sense that it instructs me about what is happening out there, in the minds of the people.

Second, it is notable that many interviewees voiced their concern over the surfacing of racial issues, as observed from blog contents or comments. According to Rustam A. Sani:

I think, the thing that attracts people lately, and I get worried about it also, [is] racial issues... Every issue, we give it a racial perspective. To me it’s ok, because I take the perspective too but differently. Because these people, they take the perspective as it was articulated by UMNO leaders in the 70s, or 60s. Today, our discourse is still in that form. Intellectually we have not progressed.

A. Kadir Jasin echoes the observation, with a positive perspective that these statements are indications of public sentiments that can be understood and rectified.

Having started this blog, I realized that our society is not what is reflected in the newspaper. And remember, I worked all my life in the newspaper. When I was editor of the Straits Times, people don't write to me to say that you're a bloody racist. People don't write to me to say, the Chinese are getting away with everything! The Indians are doing nothing but rob and steal these days. But you get that in the websites. So that is also to my mind, the positive side. You can always take whatever, even these are negative statements, but you can always use it to gauge, and to correct it. Yes, as indicators.

The local blogosphere encompasses other elements besides serious political issues. It is observed that the arts and literary segments of the blogosphere are also vibrant and closely knit. Local writers have interactions through blogs, and the "Bloggers Against Book Banning" is an example of a collective movement of book lovers campaigning against the government's restrictions on certain local and foreign books being sold in Malaysia. Another example would be the local arts scene, especially films and theatre. Some segments of the blogosphere are friendly with the film or theatre industry, and some bloggers are invited for screenings so that they can write reviews in their blogs. As the popular blogger Suanie puts it:

For some reason, I've been asked to go to a lot of local movie previews so that I can blog about it. Because, they are smart. They take the approach like, 'We get a few bloggers to come, and they write about it, and we get the publicity.' Because you know, the local entertainment scene is not very encouraging, especially when you're doing something new. So, I write about my experience, how I felt about the movie. I am very proud of local productions that are different from the Senario type of slapstick....I think I'm doing my part for the local arts.

It can be argued that this space given to cultural products is able to broaden horizons indirectly to challenge the constructed notions of a national culture. For instance, film directors such as Amir Muhammad and Yasmin Ahmad are able to utilize blogs (of their own or other bloggers) to promote their works and advance their depictions of Malaysian cultural alternatives to the mainstream stereotypes. The discourse generated is an important process in nation-building and discovering national identity, which can further act as a lubricant of the democratic process.

On responsible blogging

“Responsible blogging” has become a buzzword, an ambiguous code of ethics which many have talked about but none have actually defined. Based on interactions with bloggers and articles from the mainstream media or in the blogosphere, there are two characteristics often discussed to be the crux of responsible blogging. The first is generally agreed upon: substantiating facts before publishing the information on the Internet. This is a diluted version of the professional expectations of professional journalists. Steven Gan of Malaysiakini elaborates:

A lot of bloggers are non-journalists, and therefore may not write in a way that would somehow abide to the kind of ethics that a journalist would have to abide to. Accuracy, you don't spread rumours, double-check your facts, be fair, you give both sides of the story, you give people that you criticize a right of reply, if they complain you correct your mistakes properly, all that. These are the things that we would do as second nature to journalism. A blogger may not have to abide to that. So, I think that would be a bit of a difference. I think Jeff Ooi, though he's not a journalist, I think he is close to what a responsible blogger should do. I think he double-checks his facts, if he's not sure he tries not to write. And then you have those journalists who are bloggers. Those are the people who I have not much problem with. People like Rocky, Kadir Jasin and all that, these guys are trained journalists, they know exactly what to write and what not to write ...So I think there's a diverse group of bloggers out there.”

The survey data show that bloggers are not exceedingly conscientious in verifying facts. A consolation may be that most of them appear to have the awareness that it is appropriate to do so, with only 11 per cent admitting that they do not verify facts at all (See Figure 5.2). However, since most blogs are about personal experiences, people do not always see the need to make sure that all facts are verified before publication. Further evidence reveals that 30 (63 per cent) of the 48 socio-political bloggers confirm that they do verify facts, whereas 17 (35 per cent) do it sometimes.

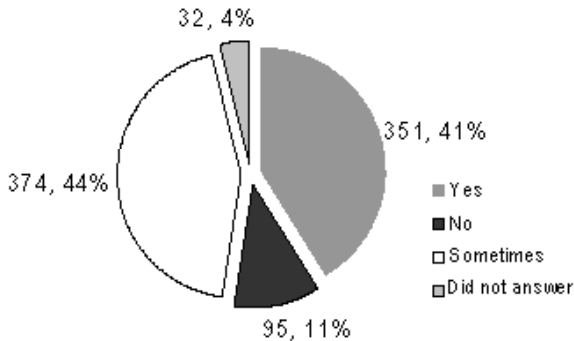
Figure 5.2: Verification of facts by bloggers

Jeff Ooi stresses that

You need to blog with full sense of responsibility. You cannot stray into rumour-mongering, by blogging about unconfirmed, unsubstantiated events, or news or information. That is the thing, when I find that the key is that—some of the bloggers—the good thing is that, they don't have many readers. If they had many readers, they would cause themselves to be in trouble. Some are just ignorant of the existence of

Defamation Act, Libel Act, and Sedition Act.

The second characteristic, reflected by allegations plastered over the mainstream



media that bloggers are “snipers” and “spread lies” under the cover of anonymity, is the question of blogging with a real identity or under a pseudonym. The interviewees are divided in opinions of whether revealing one’s identity on the blog is necessary. It can be argued that an identifiable face lends credibility to the bloggers in question, especially when one is already reputable outside the blogosphere. As Ahirudin Attan a.k.a. Rocky puts it:

I think my blog will make more impact with my name there. Because I am a known person. In journalism, I’m a seasoned journalist. I’m the president of the National Press Club. I was an editor for a couple of papers before that. So I’m quite well-known. So, by using my name, the blog will be more credible. But there is also greater risk.

Jeff Ooi is also of the opinion that bloggers should reveal their identity to be credible.

Credibility means to have a publicly identifiable face. A contactable phone and email address, published for people to contact you. You must not blog anonymously....Nobody has an excuse of blogging behind anonymity if you are serious about blogging. I feel that is very important. That is where you swear and die by what you blog. Not many have that courage. But those who do, we will really refute Ministers who call us “snipers”, you know, *penembak curi*. We are not.

However, a real identity may not be a prerequisite to being a responsible blogger, as not all bloggers may be comfortable in exposing themselves on the Internet, with issues of privacy at stake. Tony Pua of Education in Malaysia suggests that

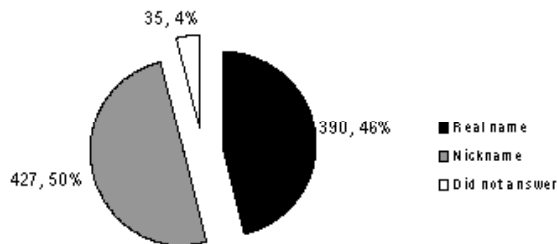
There are blogs that are anonymous but are extremely well-researched and well-written. So, I don't think it is necessary. Although, having put a name there, people tend to want to visit it more than it is an anonymous blog. For the simple reason, if they agree with you, they know who they are agreeing with, and if they don't agree with you, they can whack you because they know who you are. So you'll get anonymous people whacking you, as a public person. So, from that perspective it helps, but it's not necessary.

All bloggers interviewed have chosen to reveal their identity with different levels of openness, from revealing their names and email addresses, to personal photographs and even detailed profiles. However, the survey also shows that bloggers at large are evenly divided in their decision on whether to blog under a pseudonym or with their real identity.

Figure 5.3: Blogger identity

Harassment and intimidation

In the process of exercising their freedom of speech, socio-political bloggers are vulnerable to intimidation and harassment, from authorities like the government and the mainstream media and from unidentified people. It must be clarified that these cases are not widespread, not even amongst bloggers within the interview sample but examples do exist. The blogger Syed Azidi Syed Abdul Aziz a.k.a Sheih of Kickdefella notes that he has been followed by police patrol cars after putting up "Petition Undur-Lah", a campaign to call for the stepping down of the Prime Minister Abdullah



in September 2006:

I borrowed a car from unsuspecting friend and parked at the Rv., waiting for my brother. Guess what, a police patrol car then came and park about ten meters away. Two police

men came down lit their cigarette. After a while, they left. Just for me to recognize that one suspicious unmark car has been making the “tawaf” in front of me.

When my brother from Gen-M arrived to pick me up, he was a mere fifty meters away but we could not even call each other. Both our line are congested. Hurriedly into his car, we managed to get ourselves lost few time and lost the unmark car. However, not for long, while having our conversation over supper, we become conscious of a patrol car constantly passing by in front of us. Around two in the morning, one of our buddy abruptly said precisely this, “I realized that unmark car has been passing in front of us for more than a dozen times, we better make a move before its too late.”¹

In another incident, he was threatened by unknown parties whom he suspected to be “certain factions within UMNO”. The same blog post also linked to another intimidation experienced by former the Member of Parliament Datuk Ruhanie Ahmad, who was warned about “eyes” watching him because of his blogging activities.²

During the interview with Jeff Ooi, details of his clashes with the mainstream media were divulged. He had three encounters with various daily newspapers (not including the latest defamation suit by the NSTP, as he had not been sued at the time of the interview), namely the Malay-language *Berita Harian*, and English dailies *New Straits Times* and *The Sun*. In two cases it was due to insensitive comments posted on his blog by others, and one more by a post in which the *NST* accused Ooi of inciting religious hatred against it. (For the full account, see appendix B). Ooi had had police reports filed against him for inciting racial hatred and causing disharmony in society, and also complained of “constant harassment of the authority”, coming from the police, the mainstream media, and private phone calls, “even from Chief Ministers”. Thus far he has not been convicted of any of the offences, and the defamation court case is still in hearing at the time of writing. In a similar vein, Rustam A. Sani of Vox Populi has had his blog hacked into for four times.

During the early stages, I’ve been hacked, I don’t know by whom, for four times. But lately, no more. I just lost all of my data, like that...I was warned by a fellow blogger, “Whatever you write, try to keep in your files somewhere. Because there’s a chance you may lose them.” True enough, I lost them. Then, I started uploading everything again [laughs]. And I think this fellow, after four times, got frustrated so nowadays ok lah.

S. K. Thew of MageP’s Lab was also harassed by unknown parties after pointing out some discrepancies of media reporting:

I was threatened a few times. Through phone calls and through emails. Someone just emailed me saying, “What about two years in ISA?” It is an anonymous email...There are all kinds of people out there. I also got a call saying, “There are some kinds of action

waiting for you. Be careful of what you blog.” In fact, I talked to Jeff regarding this. If I’m telling you that I’m not scared, I’m telling you a lie. I was a bit scared, but Jeff said just ignore them and continue whatever you’re doing.

Of the chilling effect of the lawsuits against bloggers, there are bloggers who are feeling fearful, such as Rajahram Ramalingam of Rajahram’s Journal who temporarily closed his blog to avoid any legal complications.³ On the other hand, there are also people who started blogging inspired by the plight of Jeff Ooi and Rocky, such as Bernard Khoo of Zorro Unmasked and Tony Gayondato of Stand-up Philosopher.⁴

Freedom of Information

Many socio-political bloggers take their blogging seriously in sharing information and spreading influence. The receiving end of the information shows nearly one-third of blog readers expressing interest in socio-political issues as their first choice of preferred content. Here we attempt to dissect the question on the kind of information available—on how certain blogs are able to fill in information blackouts of the mainstream Malaysian media; and perceptions of the credibility of blogs, contrasted against other variations of mass media.

Access to restricted or extended information

The surface tension between bloggers, on the one hand, and the government and mainstream media, on the other, often masks the fact that they are also the parties feeding the information to these bloggers for the lack of an outlet to expose sensitive issues. Raja Petra Kamaruddin, administrator of widely-read web portal Malaysia Today, stated that the website thrived on information disclosed by informants within the ruling party because of political rivalry and infighting.⁵ Rocky of Rocky’s Bru illustrates this with an example:

[Cabinet ministers] know me, and they also use my blog to sometimes tell me what’s happening. If they are not happy with something with Khairy Jamaluddin is doing, for example, a certain minister will tell me the story, you know. “This is what that happened, Pak Lah’s son-in-law is trying to do this or that to my ministry.” So I will write the story. I will check first, and write the story. There are quite a few examples, for example the Pantai issue. The Pantai Hospital was sold to Singapore, this happened last year, in *Malay Mail*, my paper. We carried the story, front page, for two days. And then the *NST* boss came down and said no more Pantai stories. Basically that’s why I had to resign from the paper.

So when I became a blogger, the affected parties started telling me stories. What

happened and all that, how Khairy Jamaluddin called the Health Minister and the Father-in-Law told him to do this, do this and do this. During Pak Lah's first interview on TV, you remember, he said there is no company controlled by Singapore. That was responding to the blog. He was not responding to anybody else. Unfortunately for him, *The Star* was following up on my stories. The minute he said that, two or three days later *The Star* Weekend Business came up with the story that Singapore owns Pantai Hospital. So Pak Lah had to come up again and say that "I was wrong. I didn't know, it was not my decision."

Jeff Ooi also confirms that he gets insider scoops from people within media organizations that they "cannot publish". Jeff Ooi's and Rocky's connections and social networks are not available to many. But through their blogs they are able to shed light upon issues within the opaque governance of the Malaysian pseudo-democracy to a large number of readers. To some extent, they serve to fulfill freedom of information of the public, previously kept in the dark because of the mainstream's admitted constraints on publishing news.

Analysis and research auxiliary to what is provided by the mainstream media have occasionally been taken up by bloggers with the relevant expertise. For example, Tony Pua and Ong Kian Ming from Education in Malaysia exposed mistakes in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* annual ranking of universities from around the world which was followed up by the mainstream media later:

When the Times Higher Education Rank just came out, and placed [University of Malaya] as 89th, our blog did...I mean, one of the reasons why we got popular was because we did some groundbreaking work which discovered that the 89th position is wrong because they treated all Indian and Chinese students as foreign students.

Although bloggers do break news at times, this is limited to a selected few bloggers and is quite a rarity in the overall pool of bloggers. Interviews reveal that the socio-political bloggers themselves do not consider blogging as a provider of news, but rather as a medium for the provision of commentaries, by interpreting news or providing alternative perspectives. As Sharizal Shaarani of *Les Perceptions Perpétuellement Permutantes* notes,

I think of myself as more of a social commentator. To be a source of news, you have to be there. You have to be in the thick of things, you need to have multiple sources, so that if one source says one thing, you need to double check if it's true, through other sources. Or otherwise, you will end up being you know, very biased, and you'll not be sure that all your information is right.

It is clear, then, that blogging serves a different niche from the mainstream news, of highlighting and discussing issues of importance. Objective and detached

commentaries often demanded from bloggers as being “responsible” is unfair, because bloggers blog in their personal capacities and may be emotional.

Blog Readers’ Perception of Various News Sources

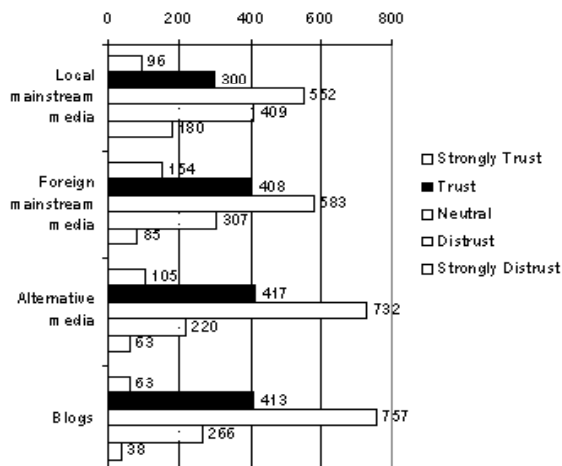
Given the wide selection of information and news sources available to blog readers, it would be interesting to examine the perception of these readers towards the credibility of each source. Here we dissect two questions asked in the online survey to find out the general inclination of blog readers to trust or distrust mainstream media, alternative media and blogs.

Figure 5.4: The extent to which blog readers trust socio-political content in various news sources

Figure 5.4 shows the overall representation of the extent that blog readers trust the respective news sources that they read. Out of four types of news media highlighted, foreign mainstream media has the most votes (154) for “Strongly Trust”. Examples of foreign mainstream media given in the questionnaire were CNN, Bloomberg (English version) and CNN, and al-Jazeera (Malay version). The most votes of “Strongly Distrust” went to the local mainstream media at 180 votes. Examples of local mainstream media given were *The Star*, *New Straits Times* (English Version), and *Berita Harian*, *Utusan Malaysia* (Malay version). *Malaysiakini* and *Aliran* were provided as examples for alternative media. The implication here is not that any of the above-mentioned news sources are more credible than the other. The examples are given to shed light on the context provided to the respondents while answering the survey.

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merged into the category of “Distrust”. The result can be seen through Figure 5.5 which gives a clearer depiction of the readers’ perception of credibility of the news sources.

Figure 5.5: Blog readers’ perception of credibility of news sources

From the simplified presentation, it is apparent that the local mainstream media is perceived to have the least credibility, compared to other forms of news. Thirty-eight percent of blog readers distrust the local mainstream media, whilst 26 percent trust it. Readers appear to be mostly neutral towards alternative media and blogs. This may be due to the diversity of alternative media and blogs compared to mainstream media. The diversity translates to different levels of trustworthiness of individual sources. Although foreign mainstream media have the highest number of “trust” votes, it also scored higher in “distrust” (26 percent), compared to alternative media (18 percent) and blogs (20 percent).

Blog readers were also asked if they felt that various media were unreliable in reporting certain issues, with the proportions of positive and negative answers shown in Figure 5.6. They were then directed to point out the specific issues that they felt were misrepresented in the news sources.

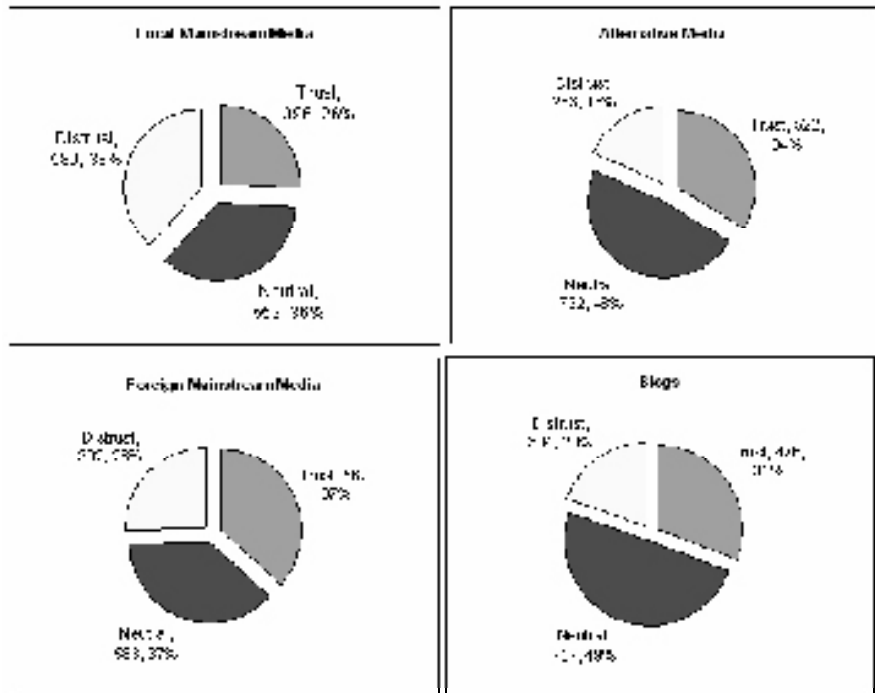
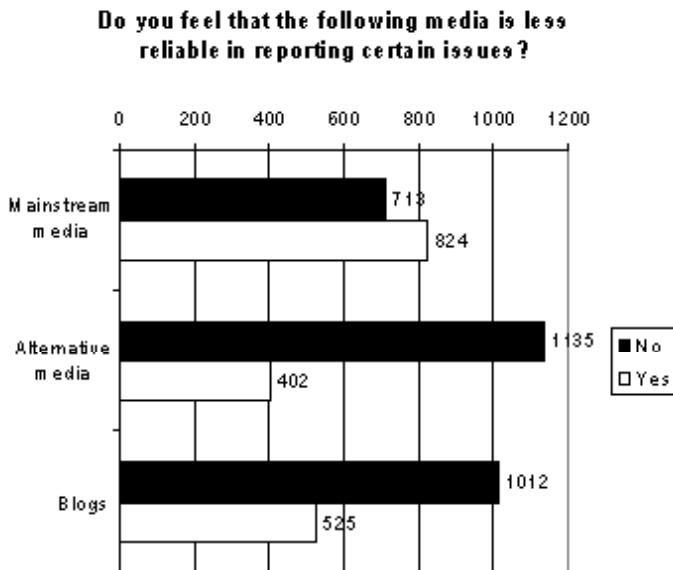


Figure 5.6: Blog readers who felt that various news sources were less reliable in reporting issues

I recorded some popular keywords and performed a series of keyword searches on each onto the database for this question. Tables 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3 show the respective lists of keywords and their number of occurrences within the database. Only keywords with more than 10 occurrences are listed. Because of the larger number of inputs by respondents on mainstream media, the list of keywords is longer.

The top two concerns of issues that blog readers question in the mainstream media and alternative media are apparently the same, i.e. political issues and reports regarding the government. From the raw data, it is clear that the mainstream media are suspected to be overly supportive of the government, whereas the alternative media are perceived to be overly critical of the government. Readers believe that “sensitive” issues, as well as stories of corruption, are played down by the mainstream media. Racial issues rank highly in readers’ scepticism regardless of the medium. Readers also question the objectivity of all forms of media



Some readers reckon that the alternative media have their own agendas and may harbour gossip. As for blogs, readers suggested that the reason for their reservations was the personal nature of blogs, being little more than opinion pieces. Readers are also unsure about facts posted on blogs and suspect that they may spread rumours and gossip as well.

Table 5.1: Most popular keywords on mainstream media

Table 5.2: Most popular keywords on alternative media

Table 5.3: Most popular keywords on blogs

Blogs in Setting Policy Agendas

Another way to analyze the relationship between blogging and democratization is to understand its use in setting policy agendas. Given its limited audience compared with the mainstream media, it would not be justified to use the mainstream media as the yardstick in measuring the effectiveness of blogs in identifying and advancing policy priorities to the policymakers. Moreover, the Malaysian blogosphere is still

Mainstream media (824 distrusted the media)		
1	Political/ Politics/ Politician	420
2	Government	162
3	Race/ Racial	81
4	Religion	32
5	Economy/ Economics/ Socio-economics	32
6	Sensitive	31
7	Social	30
8	Corruption	27
9	Control	25
10	Bias/objectivity	24
11	Policy/ policies	16
12	Opposition	12
13	Criticism/ Critical	12

young
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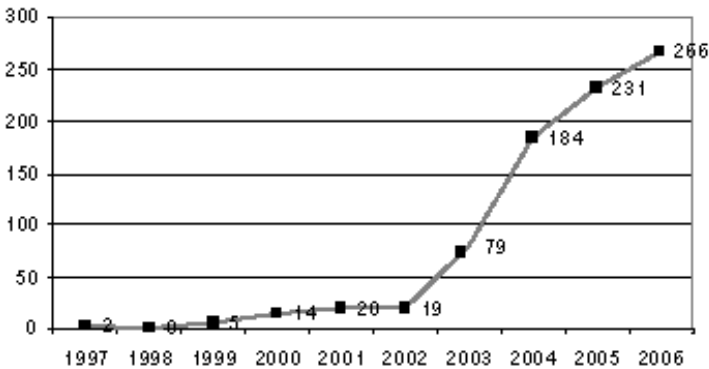
Alternative media (402 distrusted the media)		
1	Political/ Politics/ Politician	115
2	Government	27
3	Bias/ Objectivity	27
4	Race/ Racial	20
5	Agenda	13
6	Rumours/ Gossip	11

Figure 5.7: Start date of blog for survey respondents

Blogs (525 distrusted the medium)		
1	Personal	95
2	Opinion/View	88
3	Political/Politics/Politician	80
4	Bias/Objectivity	48
5	Fact/Factual/Facts	19
6	Race/Racial	12
7	Rumours/Gossip	11

Earlier we suggested that there were circumstances in which bloggers provide information that derive from the government and mainstream media. In a similar vein, Jeff Ooi provides an example of how his blog became a platform to provide leverage for the Ministry of Transport to affect policy changes against the decision of the police force for reducing fines for traffic offences. He says:

One [example] was on the recent dispute between the police and the transport ministry, whereby the police say that they will reduce the fines, or something. For traffic offenses. In order to prevent police from taking bribes. But we say, you know, that will encourage more...because here we are talking about discipline, you talking about promoting road



safety, so there's no coordination between the ministry of transport and the police when it comes to enforcement. I think they made the about-turn within 24 hours....Some ministries contacted me. They thanked me for voicing that out. That sort of helped them to have a platform to counter the police's decision. Unilateral decision, yeah. It's something positive.

Almost all of the bloggers interviewed believe that the government is monitoring

blogs. If viewed positively, the interest is potentially beneficial to the authorities' understanding of the people's thoughts—if they “are committed to a united, progressive Malaysia”—because these thoughts are not reflected by other media such as television or radio. For blogs like Education in Malaysia, which focuses on providing commentaries on education-related policies, the government's attention is even more important to absorb important opinions from the grassroots level and to improve its policies. Tony Pua who is one of the two bloggers behind Education in Malaysia believes that the Ministry of Higher Education keeps tab on the blog:

One reason would be the fact that we know that people like Tok Pa (Minister of Higher Education, Mustapa bin Mohamed) for example, he does read blogs. He responds to issues raised—educational issues—raised in Lim Kit Siang's blog pretty fast. And Kit Siang in his blog has linked to my blog fairly frequently in his articles. That's one way. Two is, I've personally heard that Ong Tee Keat, who is the Deputy Higher Education Minister, said that they do monitor things on the web, on issues and feedbacks and stuff like that, and I would like to think that for higher education and education issues, we are sort of the authoritative blog in Malaysia. I would think that they would have come by the blog one way or another.

Although some bloggers talk up the prospect of influencing public policy through blogging they also recognize that the blogosphere is in its infancy and there is still much room for progress to a level where opinions of bloggers are taken seriously to assist in policy formation or evaluation. There is as yet no critical mass of organized voices. And even if such an organization is present bloggers need to engage other actors to create policy windows for change. Steven Gan from *Malaysiakini* provides a non-blogger's view on the bigger picture:

I think a lot of the minor consumer issues, like Jeff Ooi has taken up issues of Streamyx, issues of...I don't know, he would be able to tell you more about the things that he has done. Those are issues that can be easily resolved. Basically you just need the company to take notice. And the good thing about some blogs, including Jeff's, is that companies are reading them. And they would respond. So it's a good thing. There are bigger issues that even *Malaysiakini* would not be able to solve, and it would require collective effort. Not just one blogger alone would be able to bring about that kind of change. Even *Malaysiakini* itself, alone, would not be able to bring about that kind of change. You would need the mainstream media, taking up the issue, acting as an “echo chamber”, you may need the opposition, politicians to take it up, you would need NGOs to come on board. So all that. It's one change that the Internet alone cannot bring about, if other people are not doing their bit.

Notes

- ¹ “Sheih on Sheih: Are we going to be remembered by history or are we going to be history?” (January, 2007), Kickdefella <http://kickdefella.wordpress.com/2007/01/09/sheih-on-sheih-are-we-going-to-be-remembered-in-history-or-are-we-going-to-be-history/>, accessed on April 6, 2007.
- ² “Kisah Pelangi Tiga Line Dan Blogger Sosio-Politik” (January 7, 2007), Gerbang Ruhanie, <http://kuda-kepang.blogspot.com/2007/01/kisah-pelangi-tiga-line-dan-blogger.html>, accessed on April 6, 2007.
- ³ Personal communication.
- ⁴ “I got a name” (January 31, 2007), Rocky’s Bru, http://rockybru.blogspot.com/2007/01/i-got-name_31.html, accessed on April 6, 2007.
- ⁵ “Malaysia Today thrives on Umno Rivalry” (December 8, 2006), *Malaysiakini*.