

# **ONLINE JOURNALISM, DEMOCRACY AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION: A CASE STUDY OF MALAYSIA**

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by

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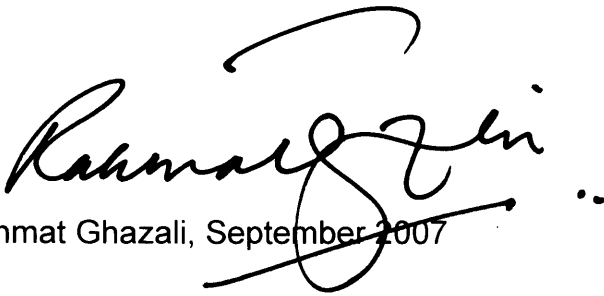


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The work was conducted in the Department of Media and Communications (Incorporating the Centre for Mass Communication Research) University of Leicester, during the period of September 2002 to September 2006.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rahmat Ghazali', with a large, stylized flourish above it and a horizontal line extending from the end of the signature.

Rahmat Ghazali, September 2007

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# Abbreviations and Acronyms

AC -	Academician
AG –	Attorney General
AHRC -	Asian Human Rights Commission
AP –	Approval Permit
ASEAN –	Association of South East Asian Nation
Assoc Prof –	Associate Professor
Barisan	
Nasional -	National Front Party
BERNAMA–	Berita National Malaysia (Malaysia National News Agency)
CAR –	Computer Assisted Reporting
CMA –	Communication and Multimedia Act
CMC -	Computer Mediated Communication
CPM –	Communist Party of Malaya
DAP –	Democratic Action Party
DPS -	Department of Public Services
EPU-	Economic Planning Unit
FOMCA -	Federation of Malaysian Consumer Association
GDP –	Gross Domestic Product
GAIA -	Global Anti Incinerator Alliance
GO –	Government's Organisation
Hakam –	Hak Asasi Manusia Malaysia (Malaysian Human Rights Society)
HRW –	Human Rights Watch
IPCMC -	Independent Police Complaint and Misconduct Commission
IT -	Information Technology
ICT –	Information and Communication Technology
IPI –	International Press Institute
ISA –	Internal Security Act
ISP –	Internet Service Provider
IWS –	Internet World Statistics
JARING –	Joint Advanced Integrated Networking
JUST -	International Movement for Just World
KAMI –	Independent Media Activist Group
KLCC	Kuala Lumpur City Centre
MCA –	Malaysian Chinese Association
MD -	Media practitioner/ Media expert
MDC –	Multimedia Development Corporation
MECM -	Ministry of Energy, Communications and Multimedia
MIC –	Malaysian Indian Congress
MIMOS –	Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic System
MOHE -	Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia
MRSM –	MARA Junior Science College
MTUC -	Malaysia Trade Union Congress
MSC –	Multimedia Super Corridor
NDP –	National Development Policy
NEP –	New Economic Policy
NGO –	Non-Government Organisation
NITC –	National Information Technology Council
NST –	New Straits Times
NSTP –	New Straits Times Press
OSA –	Official Secret Act
Pak Lah -	Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the Prime Minister

PAS -	Party Islam SeMalaysia (Malaysia Islamic Party)
PPPA -	Printing Presses and Publication Act
PSRM -	Malaysian People Socialist Party
Rangkom -	Rangkaian Komputer Malaysia (Malaysian Computer Network)
RTM –	Radio Television Malaysia
SEAPA –	South East Asian Press Alliance
ST -	Straits Times (Singapore)
Suaram -	Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People Voices)
Suhakam –	Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia, Malaysia (Malaysian Human Rights Commission)
UiTM –	Universiti Teknologi MARA (Technology University of MARA)
UIAM -	Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (International Islamic University of Malaysia)
UUM -	Universiti Utara Malaysia (Northern University of Malaysia)
UKM –	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia)
UM –	University of Malaya
UMS -	Universiti Malaysia Sabah (University of Sabah, Malaysia)
UPM -	Universiti Putra Malaysia (was Universiti Pertanian Malaysia)
USM –	Universiti Sains Malaysia (University of Science Malaysia)
UMNO –	United Malay National Organisation
WAO –	World Audit Organisation

# **Abstract**

## **Online Journalism, Democracy and National Integration: A Case Study of Malaysia**

By  
Rahmat Ghazali

This study examines the significance of online journalism towards democracy and national integration in Malaysia. It involves analysis of secondary evidence, a mini case study, and semi-structured interviewing of opinion formers across these areas. The fundamental enquiry is whether the work of online journalism is contributory to democratic change and instrumental towards national integration.

This study explains that 400 years of colonialism has been responsible for the formation of a plural society within which the Malays are the indigenous who make up the largest community, while the Chinese and the Indian form the minorities. The economic disparity among the different ethnic groups has made the issues of Malay supremacy, and interethnic-relations, or principally national integration, as the key concerns in Malaysia's political and social landscapes. This has resulted in the government having to place social orders and national security as high priorities, which became the basis for the enactment of various stringent laws affecting Malaysia's freedom of the press and of speech, and thus democratic practices.

The emergence of online journalism has indicated some trend towards democratic changes and national integration. The government's assurance of 'non-censorship' of the Internet, espoused in the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998, supports more spaces for democracy particularly through online journalism. However, the majority of Malaysian opinion formers are contented with the democratic practices in Malaysia even amidst intense criticism of its substandard label as compared to Western liberal democracy. They are contented that 'Malaysia's style of democracy', which some termed as 'guided democracy', suits its multiethnic society, where social harmony and national security are the precedence. On a similar score, they perceived liberal democracy, press freedom, and the liberty of peaceful assembly as less practical for a developing nation such as Malaysia. On another hand, Malaysian opinion formers also argued that national integration is only functional in the realm of Malaysian society, where empathetic interethnic relation is a distant dream.

There are two major findings: firstly online journalism provides more democratic spaces where social and political discourse, criticism, debates and discussion, has become a common trend. The government is positively responding to some of the criticisms and dissenting pieces highlighted through online journalism but not to a level that could be considered as a significant democratic change. Secondly, this study also finds that there is complexity of reception of online journalism, democracy and national integration among Malaysian opinion formers. This complexity of reception contributes intricacies of thoughts and opinions from various perspectives.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

This thesis is predominantly a study of Malaysian online journalism. Since journalism 'takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates' (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm 1974:2), it would be incomprehensible to study Malaysian online journalism without reference to its social and political dimension. Online journalism, moreover, has been observed to project a considerable amount of social and political criticism, debates and opinions that were never before seen in the mainstream mass media. Such projections affect Malaysia's social and political milieus, especially in relation to ethnicity and democracy. As Malaysia features various cultural, ethnic and religious traditions, customs and values, as well as various political institutions, it is imperative to include in this study, assessment of Malaysia's democratic practices and its multiethnic society.

This study adheres to the idea that online journalism is not simply online news, but covers a much diverse area of online newspapers<sup>1</sup>, informative websites, weblogs<sup>2</sup>, bulletin boards, and chat rooms, where participants discuss, share and debate ideas, opinions and thoughts that concern public interest (Millison 1999; Allen 2000; Hall 2001; Wolk 2001; Deuze 2003; Gunter 2003). The basic principle is that online journalism is 'quality news and information posted on the World Wide Web, where people can read, see, hear it through their computers and other similar devices' (Wolk 2001:6). At a wider spectrum, online journalism changes 'the philosophy underlying the form of journalism' (Ward 2003:9); it brings about a new philosophy of reader, readership and journalism. In the contextual setting of Malaysia's online journalism, I categorise it into three forms: mainstream online journalism, non-mainstream online journalism and 'shared and discussion' informative websites that include weblogs, bulletin boards and chat rooms.

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, the term 'online newspaper' is frequently used to refer to newspapers on the Internet, which operate only online and mainly independent. However, it is noted that there are also online newspapers, which stand as online version of their original print newspapers.

<sup>2</sup> A weblog is a compendium of short entries on a website devoted to a particular topic. Often the topic is the inspiration of the weblog, and as such, the log becomes a personal but public journal. Some weblogs have been established to allow experts or people interested in a certain topic to share ideas and information (Stovall 2004:87).

The emergence of Malaysian online journalism, particularly online newspaper, in 1995, through the inauguration of The Star Online and the New Straits Times Online, to a certain extent did not function effectively as a tool of democracy and national integration (Siong 2004). During that year and some years that follow, the existence of stringent media-related laws that do not clearly place online journalism as a 'freer medium' as compared to the mainstream mass media, explained the situation. Only in 1998, after the enactment of the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA 1998), that assures some forms of freedom, did online journalism begin to show its potential as a vibrant channel of criticism and dissident.

It is also noted that only after the enactment of CMA 1998 that we begin to see some key players of online journalism, particularly online newspapers, weblogs and NGO websites, ranging from independent media organisations (such as Malaysiakini, Agenda Daily and Malaysia Today), political organisations (such as Harakah online, UMNO.com, and DAP online) to NGOs (such as Suaram, Aliran, and Hakam).

Exempted from various stringent laws, especially the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984 that controls the mainstream mass media, online journalism is seen to be moving on a different track under much freer regulatory conditions. As such, online journalism has a different character when compared to mainstream mass media as it contains criticism against the ruling power, debates and forums on sensitive issues, and space for opposition and minority voices. It provides, otherwise unavailable, avenues for Malaysian society, bringing together the various ethnic groups, to share views and thoughts (Mustafa 2003:12), which may also suggests its use as a potential tool for national integration. Therefore, a study of online journalism in Malaysia must be accompanied by the study of social and political institutions.

## **1.2 Research problem**

Four hundred years of colonisation had dominated Malaysian history. This includes the establishment of democracy based on its plural society. The colonists were the ones who brought the tenet of democracy into the Malay States through the first Municipal Council Election in 1951, and later the First Federal Election in 1955. It was also the colonists who initiated the formation of the Malayan Federation in 1957 that gradually diluted the absolute monarchy of the Malay States (Means 1976:52). Moreover, the colonists were also responsible for the influx of the Chinese and Indian

communities into the Malay States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for its tin and rubber industries (Firdaus 1997:192). Ever since then, the issues of ethnicity and national integration have significantly affected the Malaysian social and political setting.

Almost all institutions in Malaysia that involves its multiethnic society, are drawn along ethnic lines such as ethnic-based mass media, ethnic-based education system, and in particular the ethnic-based political institutions. Malaysia has developed as a plural society, the social concept, by which members of a society:

...mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals, they meet, but only in the market place in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Even in the economic sphere, there is a division of labour along racial lines (Furnival 1956:304).

Furnival implies that within such a society, interethnic relationships among the different ethnic groups are only functional, where they communicate mainly in the marketplace or at their workplace, rather than establishing closer personal relationships.

The condition of interethnic relations among Malaysians is not always peaceful. Between 1945 and 2000 there were at least 30 racial-aggression incidences and crises recorded nationally (Means 1976; Andaya and Andaya 1982; Mohd Hamdan 1993; Malek 2000; Pereira 2001). The plural society has numerous racial tensions, especially where there are economic disparities between different ethnic groups, issues of different ethnic preference policies and problems that challenge Malay supremacy. For instance, the income inequality study during the first decade of post-independence in 1970 showed that there was an association between poverty and a particular ethnic group (Roslan 2001:5).

During the period of 1957 to 1970, the incidence of poverty among the Malays was the highest among the three major ethnic groups. In 1970 alone, 65.9 percent of the Malays lived in poverty, compared to only 27.5 percent and 40.2 percent respectively of the Chinese and Indians. Despite the special rights and privileges of the Malays and other indigenous peoples as provisioned in the Federation Constitution, half of the population in 1969, were still suffering from poverty (Roslan 2001:6). The situation of 'the economic backwardness and the poverty of the Malays' was seen as the causal factor of the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 race riots (Means 1976:408). Immediately after the 13<sup>th</sup> May incident, national integration became the catchphrase

of Malaysia's national policy, reckoned important to enhance national unity as well as social and political stability.

The broad background for this thesis is Malaysia's mass media setting, which is inclined to the philosophy of protecting national security, sustaining social order and supporting national development. Government control of the media is directed towards these goals. Mass media control has been established through two strategies: government ownership and the enactment of laws (Mustafa 2002). Many argue that the Malaysian tradition of legislation aimed at controlling the press was inherited from its colonial past with some amendments made, each time resulting in stricter control of the press (Means 1991; Mustafa 2002; Zaharom 2002; Loo 2003b). As for instance, Zaharom (2002:125) points out:

Under certain trying circumstances, the government had to issue emergency decrees (initially introduced by the British Administration) to amend certain laws in order to attain political stability in the country. But, what is evident is that the emergency period has also provided the opportunity for the ruling party, whose political support was eroded in the 1969-General Election, to strengthen its position and, more importantly, enhance the powers of the executive. ...The 1969 tragedy also ushered in an amendment made by the government to the Control of Imported Publication Act (1958) in 1972. This empowered the minister of Home Affairs to ban or censor any imported publication deemed prejudicial to public order, national interest, morality, or security.

Parallel to such moves, the Official Secrets Act (OSA) was also introduced in 1972. This law prohibits a person from gaining information that the government regarded as 'official secret' and which enemies of the country might abuse. In effect, the law has discouraged the people from demanding their rights to information. Consequently, there are notable pressures on freedom of the press and of expression among the people.

Stringent media control seemed to have been toned down when Malaysia embarked on the Multimedia Super Corridor project in 1996 (Multimedia Super Corridor 1998), a global ICT hub that attempts to imitate Silicon Valley in the United States. This project involves the participation of global ICT corporations to ensure technology transfer as well as global commercialisation of its products. In order to attract International ICT companies, the government had to agree that the Internet should be assuredly 'free from censorship' (Loo 2003b; Siong 2004). Thus, the CMA 1998 was introduced with Article Three clearly stating 'Nothing in this Act shall be construed as permitting the censorship of the Internet' (Ministry of Energy Water and

Communication 1998). The enactment of CMA 1998 has opened up a new frontier for Malaysia's press freedom as well as freedom of expression. What is important for this study is that CMA 1998 has significantly placed online journalism, particularly independent online newspapers, weblogs, and NGOs' websites, on a different track from the print and broadcast media.

With regard to Malaysia's democracy, considerable numbers of political observers perceived democratic practices during the earlier stages of Mahathir Mohamad's (the former Prime Minister) regime in 1980s and 1990s as unfavourable. While some described it as semi-democracy (Kroef 1957; Case 1993b; Crouch 1993; Abbott 2004), others perceived it as authoritarian (Vorys 1975; Munro-Kua 1996; Heryanto and Mandal 2003). Even though Mahathir had successfully improved Malaysia's economic achievement, the price may have been the democratic condition of the state, which included a noticeably oppressed press that did not protect freedom of expression. The incidence of corruptions, judicial accountability, repression of press freedom, and the arbitrary use of the Internal Security Act<sup>3</sup> 1960 (Human Rights Watch 1998; Asian Human Rights Commission 1999; Human Rights Watch 1999) were areas of concern and criticism.

There were also problems related to Malaysia's national integration, and incidences that marked unfavourable scenes for Malaysia's interethnic relations. National integration in this sense is the 'unifying of different ethnic groups manifested as united Malaysian society that shares fundamental values identifiable as Malaysian' (Jawan 2003:162). The 13<sup>th</sup> May racial fight<sup>4</sup> (May 1969), the Memali rebellions<sup>5</sup> (November 1985), the Kampong Rawa<sup>6</sup> (March 1998) tragedy, the

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<sup>3</sup> The government can use the Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA) against anyone, including journalists and editors deemed to have acted in a manner detrimental to the country's security and interest (Mustafa 2002:151).

<sup>4</sup> The 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 racial fight refers to the Chinese-Malay bloody war in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, which caused the government to declare a state of national emergency and suspending the Parliament (Tunku A Rahman 1969). The tragedy had taken away a significant numbers of lives.

<sup>5</sup> Memali rebellion refers to an incident that highlights war between followers of an opposition party from a remote village of Memali against the authority. The central issue was their loyalty to a cleric who was allegedly accused as government's enemy. It led to a bloody fight between some villagers who were trying to protect the cleric, and the police. The incident claimed 14 deaths (Rahman 1999).

<sup>6</sup> The Kampong Rawa tragedy is considered as racial dispute that resulted from the 'close proximity' between a Hindu temple and a Muslim mosque of Kampong Rawa. The incident almost caused a racial fight when thousands of Malays gathered at the Kampong Rawa Mosque in attempt to attack the Indian communities because of dispute over noises caused by the nearby Hindu temple (Hilley 2001:123) .

Kampong Medan<sup>7</sup> racial conflict (March 2000), and the Al-Maunah<sup>8</sup> insurgency (July 2000) are some of the major catastrophes clouding Malaysia's efforts towards national integration.

Most Malaysia's outstanding online journalism show that they are opened to all ethnic groups and therefore suggest a moving channel for national integration as well as platforms for interethnic communication. Besides that, most independent online journalisms allow open discussions and debates on social and political issues, which differentiate them from that of the mainstream newspapers. As for instance, Malaysiakini, one of Malaysia's independent online newspapers, succeeds in representing a journalistic medium that cuts across ethnic lines by presenting English, Malay, and Mandarin news and features in a single news website. With three different languages, these journalistic pieces are able to attract readers from the major ethnic groups (Malaysiakini 2006d:1). Malaysia Today is another online newspaper, which also carries a news blog for readers and viewers to have their discussion and comments on current social and political issues. Generally Malaysia Today is very critical of the government as well as of the opposition parties. With its critical stance, Malaysia Today ranks among the top ten websites in Malaysia with 1.5 million hits a day (Tan 2006). Agenda Daily is another online news portal that likens to a daily newspaper. It is based on the principle of pure reporting, and is a non-partisan news provider. However its contents are also richly critical against Malaysia's political scene. While Aliran online, Hakam, and Suaram are NGO websites that pose themselves as public watchdog, particularly on issues that concerned human and civil rights.

The year 1998 was an especially influential. That year, the impact of the Asian-financial crisis, the Mahathir-Anwar political crisis and the enactment of the CMA 1998 merged, resulting in an explosion in the usage of online journalism. The principal explanation for such intense usage of online journalism is the freedom that it offers compared to that of the mainstream mass media. The development of online

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<sup>7</sup> Kampong Medan incident was a racial-clash that involves some Malays and Indians. Five people were killed, 37 injured and 153 arrested in four days of clashes between residents in a racially-mixed district near Kuala Lumpur, although local residents claimed the death and injury toll were higher (Jayakumar 2001:16).

<sup>8</sup> Al-Maunah is a named given to a group of Malay cultist, which was formed to oust the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. In July 2000, some cult members disguised themselves as soldiers and stole more than 100 weapons from two military armouries. They then retreated to a jungle hideout where they broadcasted calls over army radio for Mahathir to quit. The group surrendered after four days during which they murdered a police officer and a soldier they had held hostage. Some observers see the incident as racism since the group had earlier threatened a Church and a Hindu temple (Cameron-Moore 2001).

journalism seen in 1998 and the years that followed has turned out to be not only a channel for political protest, but also a key influence for democratic change and reform (Abbott 2004:85). Open debates on social and political issues in online journalism were rampant during these years but such was never experienced through the conventional mass media. During the period, Abbott affirmed that:

Given the controls on the mainstream mass media, the Internet soon became both principal means of communication for the opposition and increasingly a source of news for Malaysians. Estimates suggest that by the time the Tenth General Election took place on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1999, the number of Internet users in Malaysia had exceeded 500,000, rising to an estimated two million users in 2002. While low by international standards, this figure is quite high among developing world countries and as a proportion of total population on-line, is the seventh highest in East Asia and second highest in ASEAN (Abbott 2004:85).

Another important development that Abbott described is that websites are supported with sophisticated multi-media facilities, most of which are now tri-lingual (English, Malay and Mandarin) and many of these websites 'provide links to each other, thus encouraging interactions and negotiations between supporters of Malaysia's often divided opposition' (Abbott 2004:85).

Since then, online journalism has been seen as significantly affecting Malaysia's mass media setting as well as its social and political landscape. The obvious result of these developments is the drop in volume of sales of almost all mainstream newspapers but a sharp and continual increase in the number of visitors of online newspapers (Arfaeza 2002:6; Matrade 2004; Internet World Statistics 2005). In 1997 for instance, the total number of Internet users in Malaysia was only 137,400. In 2004 however, the total number was 10.04 million, representing a sharp increase of 7207 percent (Matrade 2004; Internet World Statistics 2005). On the other hand, the total major newspapers' readership in Malaysia had dropped from 6.552 million in 1999 to 5.958 million in 2000 representing a decrease of 9.07 percent (Zakiah 2000:1, also see Table 4.5 for statistical details; Nielsen Media Research 2006).

It is an oversimplification to describe the use of online journalism during this period as a reflection of e-democracy<sup>9</sup> (Hague and Loader 1999b; Ferdinand 2000;

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<sup>9</sup> E-democracy, sometimes termed as digital democracy, is defined as 'the use of information and communication technology (ICT) and computer mediated communication (CMC) in all kinds of media (the Internet, interactive broadcasting and digital telephony) for purposes of enhancing political democracy or the participation of citizens in communication' (Hacker and Dijk 2000:1).



Mahrer and Krimmer 2005), or other concepts that basically imply the use of digital technology as a tool for 'enhanced democracy' (Gunter 2003:168). However, the public utilisation of online journalism in Malaysia during the 1998-political crisis, which also marked political reformation movements and activisms, points towards pressure for a democratic change. As Derichs (2004:105) asserts, 'there was no doubt ...that it was in 1998 that led to considerable overt demand for political change in Malaysia'.

Advocating a similar view, Abbott (2004:90) explains that during the post-1998 political crisis:

Eighteen parties and organisations formed a new coalition (Coalition of People's Democracy) to campaign for greater political freedom. The coalition announced a 10-point joint declaration demanding the right to freedom of speech and assembly, the right to fair trial and impartial hearing in a public court of law and abolition of the Internal Security Act 1960.

This situation had coincided with the increased utilisation of online journalism, especially online newspapers, weblogs and NGO websites, which 'has become a popular medium where the latest information, intellectual discourse, criticisms of the government, and even gossip can be obtained' (Mustafa 2002:163). Mustafa (2002:163) also observed that online journalism 'had mushroomed and made considerable impact especially on Malaysians who were desperately seeking for alternative sources of information'. This category of the Malaysian society is mainly made up of Malaysian middle classers, in which some of them hold the role of opinion formers. This is not to suggest that online journalism is singularly utilised for political concerns, but it is instrumental when there are social issues that concerned the public. This is seen when issues such as the 'Approved Permit (AP)', corruptions, unfair treatment to immigrants, police brutality, public health, judiciary integrity, and increase of crime rate, as to mention a few, were highlighted and discussed openly in online newspapers, weblogs and NGO websites (see Aliran 2003a; Aliran 2005; Consumers Association of Penang 2005; Aliran 2006; Beh Lih Yi 2006b; Beh Lih Yi 2006a; Fauwaz 2006b).

Due to the nature of Malaysian society and the history that formed the multiethnic society, the role of the 'opinion formers' in supporting democratic change and national integration is significant. They are the educated and knowledgeable

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Hacker and Dijk advocate digital democracy as a collection of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions using ICT and CMC.

members of society who hold high posts in the public services, higher educational institutions, media organisations, and in NGOs. They also play a significant role in the diffusion of public ideas as well as public opinion (Gitlin 2002:27). As Siong (2004:305) advocates, the opinion formers are the main contributors of thoughts and ideas through Malaysian online journalism, which he describes as the 'English-speaking middle class'. Therefore, researching the views of the opinion formers would be useful and appropriate especially in finding answers to the enquiries regarding Malaysia's democracy and national integration.

### **1.3 Research questions**

The first question is 'What are the perceptions of the Malaysian opinion formers regarding democratic practices and the achievements of national integration in Malaysia?'

This question is principally set to obtain a clearer picture of Malaysia's contemporary scene of democracy and national integration. This question also invites the judgements and critical views of the Malaysian opinion formers on the issues concerned. The views of the opinion formers are considered reliable, intellectual and informative for the purpose of examining Malaysia's democracy and national integration since they are made up of members of the middle class society and are reckoned to hold important and influential roles in developing a nation such as Malaysia (Lipset 1959; Garrard, Jarry, Goldsmith and Oldfield 1978; Wong 2001; Abbott 2004; Derichs 2004). The opinion formers are also seen as closer to the ruling power since their posts, intellectualism, and vibrant activism in the society are important and influential to the decision makers of the political institutions (Garrard et al. 1978:10). For that reason, they are knowledgeable and have certain social and political involvement in Malaysia's affairs through their direct experiences, professional posts, intellectual discourses or their relationships and contacts with political decision makers. This study posits that their views would provide a relevant fundamental picture of Malaysia's democracy and the effort for national integration.

The second question is 'Are there significant changes in democracy and national integration because of active criticisms through online journalism?' This question basically attempts to explore the significance of online journalism in terms of

democracy, freedom of speech and the provision of space for voices (Pavlik 1997; Banerjee 2003; Gan, Gomez and Johannen 2004) that were unheard before in the mainstream mass media. Among the main concerns is the presence of dissident voices and criticism against the ruling parties, which should reflect the call for a democratic change and reform through online journalism. In contrast, such stances are regarded as inappropriate in the mainstream mass media. Many scholars had raised similar enquiries on the issues that link online journalism and democracy. As, for instance, Indrajit Banerjee (2004:50) points out,

Political websites, online discussions and chat rooms, as well as access to a rich and diversified source of political information and views have had an impact on Asian politics. All these have provided an enlarged sphere for political debate and discourse while at the same time providing a space for the dissemination of alternative political views. Opposition parties and civil society groups in many Asian countries, which had been provided with little space in the mainstream mass media, have found in the Internet a new ally and instrument of political mobilisation.

Through this research question, the study focuses particularly on the development of online journalism that shows a significant increase of criticism and dissident voices, not only from opposition political leaders, but also among academics, political observers, NGOs, human rights activists, as well as the general public (Wah 2002:38; Abbott 2004). Criticism in this case is a reflection of freedom of expression that encourages open discussion and debate, which in turn promotes people's participation in democracy.

Criticism as projected through critical theory, promotes changes (Horkheimer 1982:244). Generally, people criticise because of their need and desire for change and reform. Criticism regarding democratic deficiencies could therefore promote changes for the improvement of democracy. It makes sense when criticisms against the political power are able to pull public attention and the concerned parties responded positively towards them. On a similar theme, social and political criticisms that are seen as significant through online journalism in Malaysia, is believed to carry a similar role in highlighting changes for democracy and efforts for national integration (see Holmes and Grieco 2001; George 2003; Loo 2003a; Loo 2003b; Abbott 2004; Gan et al. 2004).

The last question is 'How might it be possible for online journalism to help foster national integration and democracy in Malaysia?' This enquiry explores how online journalism might serve as a vehicle to foster national integration and democracy.

With regard to the 'non-censorship' assurance given to online journalism, as provisioned in the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA 1998), online journalism gains more freedom to promote democracy as compared to the conventional mass media. This is noteworthy as online journalism shows that there are significant freedom of speech and expression, which the people could never attain from the traditional mass media. Furthermore, the exemption from the licensee system as provisioned in the CMA 1998, which is not given to the traditional mass media, has also provides online journalism a greater freedom as compared to its print and broadcast counterparts. The nature of 'real time' online news, interactivity, the facility of 'many-to-many' communication flow, where audiences could communicate among themselves as well as with the news source, also make online journalism to be of potential for greater interethnic communication and therefore supportive of national integration. So, how could such features and facilities that highlight freedom of expression and greater space for interethnic communication be utilised for national integration and democracy in Malaysia? Previously, mainstream mass media have been characteristically ethnic-based, apprehensive of authority, and not effective enough to push for democratic change and to support national integration. Could online journalism begin to carry out those functions effectively?

All of the above enquiries were carefully positioned in a set of interview questions and projected through semi-structured interviews. As the questions were designed to be open-ended, the information to be gathered is expected to be in depth and rich with thoughts. Besides providing some qualitative responses to the research questions, it is also expected to provide ideas that could help explain certain phenomena.

#### **1.4 Research objective**

There are two main objectives in this study related to online journalism, democracy and national integration. The first is to explore the significance of online journalism for national integration and democratic change in Malaysia. This exploration includes documentary research as well as semi-structured interviews carried out with selected Malaysian opinion formers from government organisations, NGOs, media organisations and academics from higher educational institutions. The documentary research covers the historical aspects of colonisation, the formation of

a plural society, Malaysia's democracy, independence, the formation of major political parties, and the efforts towards national integration.

The second is to examine the perceptions of Malaysian opinion formers about online journalism, democracy, and national integration, and their links in the current social and political milieus. This examination is carried out through semi-structured interviews with Malaysian opinion formers.

The rationales for such research objectives are explained in three ways. First, the contemporary scenes of Malaysian social and political milieus suggest that online journalism is increasingly affecting Malaysia's political and social issues. This is especially true when issues that had gained less attention from the mainstream print and broadcast media were given a platform through online journalism. By contrast, the mainstream mass media continue to set aside those issues because they 'steer away from investigative reporting, fill pages with government speeches and campaigns and generally ignore the opposition' (Lent 1982:265). This situation attracted the people to online journalism for untainted news, discussions and open debates on issues that were ignored in the mainstream mass media.

Second, there is high accessibility of online journalism among Malaysian Internet users. As estimated in 2004, there were 10.04 million Internet users throughout the nation, which also suggests a relatively huge audience for online journalism. This figure increased to 15.35 million in the year 2005 (Internet World Statistics 2005), which is more than half of the total national population, estimated at 26.16 million (Department of Statistics 2004:37).

Third, Malaysian opinion formers play a strong role in promoting democratic practices and national integration. Claudia Derichs (2004) views that certain sections of middle class society, which she distinguished from think tanks, intellectuals, mass media and NGOs, are the major players in the diffusion of ideas concerning democratic reform and change. She argues that 'their insights in policy planning and implementation provide insights into changes' (Derichs 2004:105). On a similar note, Abdul Rahman (2001a) views that the middle class is 'the most educated class in society, exposed to democratic and modern ideals and wants its views and stances to be heard.' Rahman (2001a: 99) also stresses:

The consciousness of many of its [middle class] members is bound to be sharpened by their continuing exposure to (and for some, participation in)

the on-going debates on and struggles for democracy, human rights and justice in the country, through their contacts and comparisons with the outside world, and their access to the Internet and other media. They thus will push for further democratisation, demanding greater participation in the affairs of the country.

Pointing to a similar section of the middle class, this thesis adheres that the ideas and thoughts of the opinion formers are important in answering certain intricate enquiries regarding online journalism, democracy and national integration. Meeting them personally and individually through the semi-structured interviews would assist this study to unearth some of their covert thoughts and attitudes on the concerned issues.

## **1.5 Outline of thesis**

This thesis is presented in seven chapters. This chapter briefly introduces the Malaysian socio-political problems that formed the background for this thesis. Online journalism is the principal focus of this study linking democracy and issues of national integration. It also explains the rationale for the linkages across all the three themes.

Chapter Two outlines the methodology of this research, which is basically based on three approaches that are complementary to each other. First, semi-structured interviews of selected opinion formers, second, a secondary analysis of documentary evidence, and third, a mini-case study using content analysis that projects public utilization of online journalism. The rationales for employing the three approaches are explained. However the semi-structured interview of opinion formers is taken as the principal method of this study, while the other two are instrumental in providing supplementary evidence. I had also rationalised why opinion formers' participation, ideas, thoughts and attitudes are significant for this study. This chapter also explains why the interview is an appropriate approach in examining the intricate issues of Malaysia's democracy and national integration, and how they are affected by the emergence of online journalism.

Chapter Three investigates Malaysia's history through the pre- and post-independence periods, issues of ethnicity, Malay supremacy, the formation of a plural society, engagement of democracy, and the call for national integration. Basically, it explains the structures of Malaysia's social and political backgrounds that were affected by colonialism.

Chapter Four explores some details of Malaysia's mass media setting and explains how online journalism is positioned amongst its print and broadcast counterparts. The chapter also explains how online journalism takes a different track from the mainstream mass media. Part of the explanation points towards the enactment of stringent media-laws that impinged on the operation of the mainstream mass media. This chapter also presents a mini-case study through a content analysis, principally to justify why online journalism matters to the mass public. The study compares the work of online journalism with that of the mainstream print media focussing on the issues of the 'Brogia incinerator' and 'police brutality' in Malaysia.

Chapter Five presents the findings of the analysis of interviews. The analysis is carried out correspondingly to all of the nine major semi-structured interview questions. However, this chapter only deals exclusively with questions that concern democracy and national integration. Among the key findings is that Malaysian opinion formers are contented with Malaysia's democratic practices despite criticism of its substandard as compared to that of the Western liberal democracy. They are also pessimistic towards an ideal national integration.

Chapter Six resumes the analysis of the interviews but focuses exclusively on questions regarding online journalism. The principal aim of this chapter is to see how the selected Malaysian opinion formers perceive the potential of online journalism and its significance with regard to democracy and national integration. The findings from the interviews will essentially help to answer and explain certain particular socio-political phenomena, especially issues regarding democratic change and national integration. This chapter finds that online journalism significantly supports democracy and national integration. It suggests that online journalism provides significant space for democratic freedom. However, without supports from the mainstream mass media and the middle classers, online journalism is not effective enough to push for rapid democratic change.

Chapter Seven presents the conclusion of the thesis. It reviews the findings, their meanings and indications. Principally, it presents the major findings of the thesis that are built upon two important themes: 'online journalism provides more democratic space' and 'complexity of reception of online journalism, democracy and national integration among Malaysian opinion formers' which are both intensively communicated through semi-structured interview, the mini-case study, as well as evidence of documentary research. These issues are closely attached to the

research topic of this thesis: online journalism, democracy and national integration. In addition, online journalism is contributory to Malaysia's democracy and national integration, but this study assesses the impact on democratic change and national integration as limited.



# **CHAPTER TWO**

## **Methodology**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the methodology of this research. Predominantly the methodology takes in the form of semi-structured interviews of Malaysian ‘opinion formers’, and a supportive secondary analysis of documentary evidence for the attainment of data. However, to add in some supplementary evidence to highlight the significance of online journalism, a mini-case study on the work of online journalism is also employed. The mini-case study is a content analysis that intent to see the differences between online newspapers and the mainstream newspapers in their styles of covering particular mass appeal issues.

The discussion in this chapter includes the procedures taken in embarking on the methodology. These incorporate the setting of interview questions, a pilot test, time frame, gathering data from a mini-case study, and rationales that support the whole process.

### **2.2 Research method**

This study is predominantly a qualitative research. The qualitative stance is represented through semi-structured interviews of selected elites, which this study termed as opinion formers for certain significant roles that they hold within the Malaysian society. However, this research also employs a qualitative study of documentary evidence and a mini-case study on two significant public issues.

The qualitative study of documentary evidence involves a wide range of historical documents that carry essential discourse with regard to Malaysian history that includes colonialism, the formation of plural society, Malay supremacy, ethnic nationalism, national integration and democracy. Other than those historical discourses, documentary evidence regarding Malaysian mass media setting; media related-laws, and the emergence of online journalism, are also pertinent to examine the core issues of the research problem.

With regard to the semi-structured interview, I do not presume that it is the only appropriate method for this study. However, it does support the idea that it is most constructive to attain information considering the intricate and complex issues that include ethnicity, mass media, national integration and democracy. Most importantly, it helps to explain the inquiries of why, how and what, with regard to the research problems that principally concerned online journalism, democracy and national integration in the context of Malaysian society. The selection of interviewees was made among individuals who were distinguished as opinion formers from four different fields of careers and professionalism: NGO leaders, GO leaders, media practitioners and academicians of higher educational institutions.

The mini-case study focuses on two public issues, namely the 'Broga incinerator', and 'police brutality' that had been covered through independent online newspapers and mainstream print media in the year 2004-2005. The main intention is to explore the work of independent online newspaper within Malaysian society and how it is positioned within the contemporary media setting. It is termed as a mini-case study as it stands as a minor study to complement the bigger depiction of the qualitative information attained through the semi-structured interview and the documentary evidence. The three approaches of the methodology predominantly employ a qualitative style.

Qualitative research is 'any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification. It can refer to research about live experiences, behaviours, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements...and cultural phenomena' (Strauss and Corbin 1998:11). The phenomena that underpinned the research problems of this study involve social movements, ethnicity, democracy, mass media, history, colonialism, political and sociological affairs that highlight 'pluralisation of life worlds' (Flick 2002). Key expressions for this pluralisation are:

...the growing individualisation of ways of living and biographical patterns and the dissolution of old social inequalities into the new diversity of milieus, subcultures, lifestyles and ways of living (Flick 1998:2).

Among the principal advantages of qualitative research method is that it is constructive in collecting substantial amounts of data essential in explaining intricate phenomena and in developing novel understandings of all or perhaps some of the compounds that form the complexity. As Flick (1998:5) asserts, what is essential in

understanding and solving a problem is 'to design methods so open that they do justice to the complexity'.

I see that such a justice is best presented through openness, which is attainable if the opinion formers were to be approached directly, under a face-to-face situation. For such intention, I decided to meet the concerned characters in person, in their natural complexity and entirety and in their everyday context, to unearth their opinions, experiences, views, ideas, insights and thoughts regarding the research problems and issues.

On account of the above rationales of qualitative research, I use semi-structured interviews as the key method to examine thoughts, ideas, experiences, and views on the concerned issues. This is further advocated by the idea that this research is an attempt to explore the meaning and nature of problems underpinning online journalism, democracy and national integration: three areas that intertwined between social and political milieus. For such an attempt, I see that meeting media experts, who have direct experience with journalistic commitments, would help to gain first hand information regarding online journalism and its relation to Malaysia's mass media setting. However, in other related issues that concerned democracy and national integration, I see that NGO leaders, and GO leaders would be effectual. For scholastic point of views on all issues under study, I affirmed that it is comprehensible to meet academicians of higher educational institutions. These four categories of professional backgrounds provide a broad area of information to explain the complexity of the concerned research problems as well as the 'pluralisation of life worlds'.

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

## **2.3 Semi-structured interview**

I have decided to embark on semi-structured interviews as the principal means of data collection. This would facilitate to attain as much information as possible from a broad range of perspectives. The root reason for carrying out semi-structured interviews as a research approach is my interest to understand the experiences of the interviewees, specifically the opinion formers, with regard to Malaysia's democracy, national integration, and how they link these themes with the emergence of online journalism. Most importantly, to meet them personally and unearth the meaning that they make of their experiences (Seidman 1998:3) in explaining Malaysia's social and political phenomena as explained in the research problems. Besides, I wish to try to explore, as far as possible, the personal and social world of the interviewees, who are perceived as experts and who perhaps may have been directly involved in the areas being studied. Moreover through these interviews, the interviewees are given full liberty to tell his or her own story on issues of concern (Smith 1995:9-26) through open-ended questions as well as the chance to elaborate their views at my request or through their own initiative. Such interview strategy would facilitate this study with significant information in explaining intricate issues relating to interethnic relations and Malaysia's political scenes.

During the interview, each interviewee was asked a set of predetermined questions. However, as the semi-structured interview procedure suggests, based on the exigencies of the situation and perspectives that surfaced from the interviewees' answers, some extended questions on particular issues were also asked (Flick 2002:80-81). Through this process, new factors were identified and a deeper understanding resulted. However, extended questions were asked only if they were seen as relevant to the research questions as well as to issues related to the research problems.

The same set of questions was used for all interviewees but different coverage would be possible for extended discussion. Such approach distinguished semi-structured interviewing from non-structured interviewing where no predetermined set of questions is used and from structured interviewing where the discussion is rigidly limited to only the predetermined questions.

All of the questions asked were open-ended and carefully designed to generate information that would help answer the research questions. The open-ended

questions also provide the interviewees space to diverge if they wished to. The set of questions was arranged in such a way that it funnelled down to specific issues of concern. This was done through arrangement of questions, starting with general issues and gradually moving on to questions on specific issues. This would help to establish a rapport with interviewee before serious and specifically focussed questions were asked.

It is determined that the interview is best set in a dyad mode, meaning a single participant in a single face-to-face interview. Under such strategy, issues to be discussed and enquired are predetermined before the interview.

A pilot test was carried out prior to the interviews to ascertain if the questions designed would help address the issues being studied. The pilot test involved three interviewees. First, a Malaysian General Accountant, who was on study leave at Birmingham University, second, an Associate Professor, who was doing postgraduate research on advertising at Loughborough University, and third, a Malaysian Magistrate who was doing his research on International Law at Leicester University. The interviews were carried out on 9<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> February 2003. After the pilot test, the interview questions were reviewed in the light of responses from the three interviewees. Only minor changes were made on the interview questions after the pilot test. Two questions asking, "Do you agree that Malaysia is less democratic as compared to neighbouring countries of the ASEAN region?" and "Do you think that Malaysia needs democratic change since there are significant criticisms against the government on online journalism?" were deleted from the list as they were viewed as sensitive and confrontational, especially to Government Organisation leaders.

The interviews were conducted between 12<sup>th</sup> April 2004 and 30<sup>th</sup> July of the same year following my initial research on theoretical areas and historical backgrounds. The interviews were carried out in Malaysia at different time and location, to the convenience of each interviewee. Most of the interviews were carried out during office hours in the offices of the respective interviewees, while a few of them were undertaken in their private residences at their request. The interviewees were selected for their capacity as experts in the areas of journalism, ICT, mass media, social sciences, political sciences, government policies, cultural studies, law, and national integration in Malaysia. The interviews were tape-recorded and were later transcribed to facilitate data analysis.

There were two main challenges with regard to the semi-structured interviews carried out in this study. First and most importantly, I needed to make sure that interviewees were confident with the procedure, especially when sensitive questions were asked. For that, I had to assure them that the information given would be confidential and that their names would not be revealed in this thesis. Questions that touch on issues of government's integrity need to be carefully worded in a manner that would not discourage response, especially when the interviewee is a government servant. Every government servant in Malaysia has given and signed their 'oath of loyalty' to the government through an official document named 'Aku Janji' letter. The oath states that the signatory 'will not disobey or behave in any way that can be interpreted as disobedience [to the government]' (Malaysiakini 2002a; Tony P 2005:2). For this reason I did not ask direct questions such as 'Do you think that we need democratic change?' even though such direct question would have been productive for my research. Instead, I asked them 'What is your opinion of the democratic practice in Malaysia?'

For similar reasons I did not ask them, 'Do you think that Malaysia needs democratic change since there are significant criticisms against the government in online journalism?' Instead, a subtly different question was asked: 'Do you agree that online journalism is more critical of the government as compared to the conventional media? In your opinion why does this trend occur and is it advantageous to democracy and national integration?' In this case, I firstly need to establish rapport with the interviewees to gain their confidence. With the rapport built, Instead of withholding their thoughts and providing what they think the interviewer expects, they would be able to freely share their actual thoughts and feelings about the issues in question.

Second, this interview method is time consuming compared to survey method or postal questionnaires in terms of transcribing the interviews into textual form for analysis. Most of the interview sessions would take more than half an hour. It would take more time translating the interview, when carried out in a native language (there are two such cases in this study).

To assist in the analysis, I used the software 'N-vivo 2.0' to manage the classification of the responses into nodes. These nodes were corresponded with codes taken from the transcribed responses of interviewees. The N-vivo importantly

facilitate in the coding process, as cross-sectional analysis of certain nodes is made easier.

There are more than 100 nodes created based on the interviewees' responses on all of the questions asked. To give an idea about the volume of responses, the total number of words in all the responses is 135,417. This represents an average of 2821 words transcribed from each interview. Only responses closely linked to the themes of the study were selected and analysed.

Data analysis of the semi-structured interview is presented in Chapter Five and Six.

### **2.3.1 Opinion formers**

The 'opinion formers' are chosen in this research as they are relevance in providing crucial information regarding online journalism, democracy, and national integration. This is not to deny that there are other ways of achieving the objectives of this thesis. However, I find that opinion formers are most relevant because of their professional backgrounds, intellectualism, experiences and dedication to commitments related to the issues studied, as well as their close interaction with Malaysian politicians and leadership. They are made up of the members of the middle class who, as generally argued, frequently dare to speak out, suggesting their participatory concern in democracy (Garrard et al. 1978). According to Garrard et al (1978:10):

It is the middle class who can be claimed to have been the inventors of such crucial concepts of political modernity as 'citizenship' and 'liberty'; it is members of the middle class who, more often than not, have been the architects of revolutionary, as well as of conservative or reactionary, political movements.

The opinion formers are distinguished from the professionals of Malaysian society. They play prominent role in the diffusion of public ideas as well as public opinion when they enact the roles that mediate decisively between mass communicators and audiences, which also flags up their contribution to the multiplier effect of communication (Gitlin 2002: 27). At the same time, they are perceived to play important roles in democratic reform and change, especially in a developing nation such as Malaysia (Derichs 2004:105). This is not to imply that mass media is

less important because the fundamental ideas that developed the thoughts of the opinion formers are also partly originated from the mass media itself.

It is also observable that these opinion formers of the middle class have contributed to the expansion of civil society that distinctively associates with democratisation, as seen in many Third World nations (Huntington 1991; Abdul Rahman 2001b). As Huntington (1991:45) argues, among the imperative factors that contribute to democratising changes is 'the unprecedented global economic growth, which raised living standards, increased education, and greatly expanded the urban middle class in many countries'. Lipset (1959:83) emphasises 'increased education and an enlarged middle class as key elements for democratic extension', while through a panel study of 100 countries from 1960 to 1995, Barro (1999:182) finds that democracy rises in parallel to the expansion of the middle class. This is seen when the education facility is enlarged and economic performance increased. The middle class is distinguished for possessing democratic reformist potentials since it is this middle class society that arguably led the movements to topple authoritarian rule, particularly in Indonesia, as in the downfall of President Suharto had illustrated, and in Thailand and the Philippines (Gomez 2004:5).

In the Malaysian context, as Siong (2004:305) finds, the opinion formers are groups of middle class that actively contribute their thoughts in Malaysia's online journalism, which he describes as mainly the professionals, who are well-versed in English. Claudia Derichs (2004:105), who had also selected a similar group of the middle class in her research on 'Political crisis and reform in Malaysia', named these groups in her study as the 'think tanks'. She selected them among the Governmental Organisation, the NGO, the media and the intellectuals. The opinion formers that were chosen in this study comprised of all the three major ethnic groups; Malay, Chinese and Indian. They may not come from English-educated backgrounds, but all could communicate in English except for two. For these two interviewees, their recorded words were translated into English.

The basic guideline used in this study to determine and select the interviewee is their 'middle class' features, which differentiate them from the upper class and the members of the lower 'working class' society. Cole's (1950:286) classification of the opinion formers identifies them from the following groups:

- The main body of salaried administrators, managers, technicians and accountants in similar types of business, including businesses publicly or co-



operatively owned; and the higher salaried officers of a wide range of institutions and societies, from political parties and trade unions or trade associations to philanthropies, educational, and cultural bodies;

- The members of the principal recognised professions, whether salaried or working as consultants and remunerated by professional fees; including medical men, lawyers, ministers of religion, officers of armed services, the upper ranges of teaching profession, and the upper and middle ranges of artistic professions.
- The higher and middle grades of the Civil Service, the local government service, and of other public or semi-public administrative services; and the corresponding grades of 'voluntary' social service employees.

To cover a diverse range of social commitments, I have decided that the interviewees should be selected among NGO leaders, GO leaders, media practitioners, and academicians of higher educational institutions.

The credibility of the selected professionals is reinforced when among these professionals are distinguished personalities that include media experts. As to mention a few, I had managed to interview some of the prominent figures such as:

- The President of JUST (International Movement for a Just World), a respectable Malaysian NGO. He is recognised for his scholarly thoughts regarding Malaysian society and their cultural setting. The President was also a PhD holder who had before taught at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Malaya. He has been frequently invited to Malaysia's TV talk show as well as local and international seminar especially when it has to do with Malaysia's social environment. One of the key rationales for the establishment of JUST is explained as follows. Such principle projects that the president participation in this interview is significant as representing Malaysian opinion former.

The challenge that confronts us now is to harness our values and our knowledge to create a just world. The International Movement for a Just World (JUST) is a response to that challenge. It is because of our commitment to a just world that we have decided to establish a society which will seek, in a modest way, to develop global awareness of the injustices within the existing system with the aim of evolving an alternative international order which will enhance human dignity and social justice. More specifically, our primary goal is to establish a spiritual and intellectual foundation for a just world (JUST 2005).

- The President of Malaysian Bar Council; another prominent NGO that established itself as one of the major critics with regard to the democratic practices in

Malaysia. This is in accord with one of its establishment purposes that states 'to uphold the cause of justice without regard to its own interests or that of its members, uninfluenced by fear or favour' (see Malaysian Bar Council 2004).

- A Malaysian prominent lawyer who is also a legal advisor to Malaysia's largest university (with an enrolment of 100,000 students). He is also frequently invited by RTM, as well as TV3 to have his opinions shared with the public (Soo Ewe Jin 2006; Raja Petra 2007).
- The commissioner of Malaysian Human Rights Commission (Suhakam), who is also a well known figure of Malaysia's higher institution. He was a former President of Malaysia's prominent consumer association, the Federation of Malaysian Consumer Association (FOMCA) (Andrew Ong 2005).
- The Vice President of Malaysia's Trade Union Congress (MTUC) that holds more than a million members among Malaysian labours, traders and entrepreneurs (MTUC 2004; Netto 2007).
- The Editor-in-Chief of Malaysiakini; the leading independent online newspaper recognised in the national arena as well as the international arena. As a point of fact, the editor and Malaysiakini, had been conferred a number of awards for his wisdom in fighting for the freedom of the press, and of expression (Malaysiakini 2006a).
- The Editor-in-Chief of Agenda Daily, who left an established Malay mainstream press in search of freedom and away from the hands that, impinged his philosophy on press freedom (Agenda Daily 2004).
- The editor/journalist of a prominent Malay mainstream offline newspaper, who is in charge of the online department. I am confident that he is one of the significant experts who are well informed of the Malaysian mass media setting.
- The Director of Selangor National Unity and Integration Department; the right person to refer to for exclusive evidence with regard to Malaysia's national integration.
- A political analyst of a prominent Malay mainstream press, who is also a well known journalist. He is frequently seen accompanying the Prime Minister to highlight government policies and programmes as well as breaking news on matters that have to do with Malaysia's economic and social establishment.
- A public radio station manager who also holds a PhD degree in broadcast studies
- A chief executive of a TV station
- A group manager of a prominent media corporation that published a number of mainstream dailies (English and Malay)

- A Director General of the Malaysian Information Department
- A Manager of BERNAMA.com; one of BERNAMA's departments that administers its online section. To note, BERNAMA is the one and only, Malaysian national news agency (BERNAMA 2004).
- A number of journalists from both the mainstream media, which include Chinese dailies such as Nan Yang Siang Pau, and Sin Chew Jit Poh, as well as independent online newspapers.
- Learned scholars of law, media, communication, and journalism studies; most of them are Associated Professors of renowned Malaysian universities, namely Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Universiti Malaysia Sabah and International Islamic University.

With regard to some of the professional backgrounds discussed above, I am amply confident that their participation in this research as interview participants, and as representing Malaysia's opinion formers, is significantly credible.

However, because of their availability and also because of the 'time factor' the selection is not complying with an equal proportion from each of the professional backgrounds, where there are more media professionals and academicians as compared to GO and NGO leaders. Also with regard to gender proportion, there are more males as compared to females interviewees. However, in terms of ethnic backgrounds, I had arranged that they represent a similar proportion of the Malays and non-Malays as seen in the 2004 population statistics. This is not to suggest a representative sample from which findings could be generalised, but it is intended to include some reflection of multiethnic composition of Malaysia. This will be further explained in the following section.

### **2.3.2 The selected interviewees**

I had initially selected 52 interviewees for the project. However, two of the recorded tapes were damaged due to some unforeseen circumstances. Accidental contacts with high frequency electronic device at certain points of my long distance travel could have destroyed the voice recordings. Another two were rejected because of poor quality recordings which made them impossible to transcribe. Those

damaged tapes were dismissed, but their exclusion is not significant to this study. Thus, there were 48 interviews that were taken into account for this project.

As shown in Table 2.1, the interviews involved 48 selected individuals from four different backgrounds as follows.

- Governmental Organisation Leaders (GO)
- Non-Governmental-Organisation Leaders (NGO)
- Media Practitioners (MD)
- Academicians of higher educational institution (AC)

**Table 2.1**  
**Interviewee's Demography**

Groups	Ethnic			Total	%
	Malay	Chinese	Indian		
<b>Governmental Organisation Leader</b>	8	-	2	10	20.8
<b>Non-Governmental Organisation Leader</b>	5	1	4	10	20.8
<b>Media Practitioner</b>	8	6	1	15	31.3
<b>Academician</b>	11	1	1	13	27.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>

Gender	Number	%
<b>Male</b>	39	81.3
<b>Female</b>	9	18.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>

Ethnic	Number	%
<b>Malay</b>	32	66.6
<b>Chinese</b>	8	16.7
<b>Indian</b>	8	16.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>

With regard to each particular category, the selection is made up of 10 Government Organisation Leaders, 10 NGO Leaders, 15 Media Practitioners and 13 Academicians. In gender classification, 29 are male and 9 females. Their age ranges from 34 years to 57 years, reflecting their maturity and to a certain extent their seniority in their concerned posts. All of them are university educated holding a Bachelor degree at least, while some of them, especially those chosen from the higher educational institutions, hold a PhD degree.

The Government Organisation Leaders (GO) are chosen from various government ministries, agencies, and departments, which are relevant in terms of their responsibilities and functions that are closely related to the issues being studied. The 'GO Leaders' category refers to executives in government ministries, who hold distinguished administration posts. These are people with wide experience, well trained and knowledgeable in their fields of concern. The respective bodies are as follows:

- Information Department of Malaysia
- National Unity and Integration Department of Malaysia
- National Accreditation Syndicate of Malaysia
- Language and Literature Chamber of Malaysia
- Attorney General Chamber of Malaysia
- Malaysia Malaysian News Agency (BERNAMA) (BERNAMA)
- Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM)
- Legal Department Universiti Teknologi MARA

The 'NGO Leaders' category consists of individuals and personalities holding positions varying from the president of an NGO to an executive officer. Some of them may also hold a position in corporate and government sector, but their selection is based on their leadership of the concerned NGOs.

The interviewees for the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Leaders group were selected from the list of Malaysian NGOs presented at Malaysian Central; a website that listed and linked various key NGOs in Malaysia (Malaysian Central 2003). These NGOs were intentionally selected because they are seen as important figures among Malaysian middle classers. Some of them are well known in the domestic as well as international arena for their social and human rights activism that include areas of democracy and national integration.

The respective NGOs whose leaders were selected for the interviews were as follows:

- JUST (World JUST movement of Malaysia)
- Consumer Association of Pahang (Malaysia)
- Bar Council of Malaysia
- Malaysian Trade Union Congress
- Malaysian Institute of Public Relations

- Malaysian Young Professional and Entrepreneur Chamber
- Malaysian Islamic Youth Organization
- All Women Action of Malaysia
- Malaysian Malay Society
- Malaysian Association of Counsellors

The 'Media Practitioner' includes editors, journalists and those holding administrative posts in the mass media corporations, either of conventional mass media or online journalism. This category served this study through their wide experiences by providing information, especially on issues regarding press freedom, online journalism and also conventional journalism. Their inclusion is worthy of ideas from different perspectives and angles, especially in viewing and assessing democracy, press freedom and national integration. The media organisations involved are as follows:

- New Straits Times Press (English)
- News Straits Times Online (English)
- Nanyang Siang Pau (Chinese)
- Malaysiakini.Com (English/Malay/Mandarin)
- AgendaDaily.Com (English/Malay)
- Radio UiTM
- BERNAMA (Malaysia National News Agency)
- Utusan Online (Malay)
- Utusan Malaysia (Malay)
- The Star (English)
- Guang Ming Daily (Chinese)
- Sin Chew Jit Poh (Chinese)
- DNA Communication

The 'Academicians' were selected from among senior lecturers of distinguished universities and higher academic institutions. Their expertise and academic backgrounds vary from areas of journalism, computer and information studies, social science, political science, communication and media studies, to administration and law studies. Most of them are senior lecturers in public universities and institutions of higher learning, and based in faculties or departments of fields relevant to this research. Their names and positions were attained from the relevant universities' and

institutions' web pages. The respective universities and higher educational institutions are as follows:

- Universiti Teknologi MARA
- Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
- International Islamic University of Malaysia
- Universiti Malaysia Sabah
- Universiti Putra Malaysia
- Universiti Utara Malaysia
- Institute of Knowledge Advancement, UiTM

Principally, these four categories of interviewees facilitated this study by providing ideas and opinions of different grounds and perspectives as reflected through their professions, positions, social contributions and commitments. In relation to the nature of their broad variety of backgrounds, it is apparent that they will be worthy of providing information from their own stories and reveal novel aspects through their experiences, as well as their shared experiences with their counterparts.

In terms of ethnic background, the interviewees are made up of 32 Malays, 8 Chinese and 8 Indians. There are 32 Malays and 16 non-Malays; a ratio of 2:1 reflecting a close similarity to national statistics regarding the composition of the Malays to that of the non-Malays. With reference to the 2004 population statistics, the estimation of Malay's population was 15.7 million, while that of non-Malays was 7.9 million (Department of Statistics 2004:37). This forms a ratio of 157:79 (or approximately 2:1) as of Malays to non-Malays, which is close to that of the interviewee ethnic group's ratio of 2:1. This ratio is not quantified as to conduct a scientific sampling, or to generalise the findings for the whole population, but is intended to reflect Malaysia's actual ethnic composition. I was unable to set up a similar ratio of 'Malay: Chinese: Indian' ethnic groups to that of the national statistics (approximately 8:3:1) because of the difficulties in gaining the involvement of non-Malay interviewees, especially from the GO and NGO groups. Many of them refused my request for personal reasons that they did not explain. However, I perceived that their rejection might have to do with issues regarding 'online journalism', which some Malaysians would link it with 'reformist movement'<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Reformist or 'reformasi' movement is the term used to describe the supporters of the sacked-Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, which was made known in the aftermath of the financial and political crisis in 1998. Literally it means a movement that aims for reform, but

As shown in Table 2.2, the ratio of female to male interviewees is 3:13 (or 9:39), which does not illustrate a balanced proportion. Such an unbalanced ratio is not intentional. There are two principal reasons that made it difficult to gain a larger number of interviewees among female professionals. First, there are not many female professionals in areas such as the media, and second, some of them rejected my invitation to participate.

**Table 2.2**  
**Interviewee: Gender and Group**

Gender	GO	NGO	MD	AC	Total
Male	9	7	14	11	39
Female	1	3	1	4	9
Total	10	10	15	13	48

There were two female professionals from the GO group who declined to participate once the questions that I wished to ask were revealed. There were a few more from the media industry who outrightly rejected my invitation. There was no reason given for their rejection, but most hinted that they were not in favour of most of the questions as well as some extended questions that they expected. Nevertheless, I still managed to gain the involvement of nine female interviewees, some of whom I found to be very responsive and participative.

### **2.3.3 Interview questions**

The enquiry of the interview questions centres on issues that relate to online journalism, democracy and national integration in the Malaysian context. The principal strategy is to gain as much information as possible through the exploration of interviewees' thoughts and perceptions on the concerned issues.

Direct and open-ended questions were designed for the purpose of initiating and giving full liberty to the interviewees to express their thoughts, ideas and

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practically its activities were mainly seen as going against the government particularly of Mahathir's regime (see Saravanamuttu 2001a:104-107).



opinions freely on issues discussed. However, it was expected that some of them may go for judgemental views and attitudes. These may include criticisms and supporting remarks on issues regarding Malaysia's online journalism, democracy and national integration. These answers, ideas, perceptions, thoughts and insights would not be challenged but instead would be respected for the interviewees' knowledge, experience, willingness to participate, as well as their liberty of expression. The principal intention is to attain data in explaining the phenomena of the research problems and not to initiate any debate on their responses and views.

The sets of questions sought the interviewees' perceptions on the three themes of online journalism, democracy, and national integration. For instance, the first, second, third and seventh interview questions address the first research questions on 'perception of the opinion formers on democracy and national integration'. The fourth, fifth, seventh and eighth interview questions however, aimed to discover answers to the second and third research questions that link the work of online journalism with national integration and democratic change in Malaysia.

The interview questions are as follows:

- i. What is your opinion of the democratic practice in Malaysia?  
(When the interviewees had elaborated their answers, a 'sub-question' to the above follows). If you were to rank Malaysia's democracy in a Likerts scale of 'very good', 'good', 'fair', 'bad' and 'very bad', where would you rank it?
- ii. What would be your choice between democratic idealism and social harmony?
- iii. What is your opinion regarding the "Freedom of the Press" in Malaysia? (When the interviewees had elaborated their answers, a 'sub-question' to the above follows). How would you rank Malaysia's press freedom under a Likert's scale of 'very good', 'good', 'fair', 'bad' and 'very bad'?
- iv. What is your opinion of the pros and cons (advantages and disadvantages) of online journalism in Malaysia?
- v. In terms of national policies and aspirations, do you think that the current development of Malaysian online journalism is on the right track?
- vi. How should online journalism play its role to foster a cohesive national integration among Malaysians?
- vii. Do you think that genuine national integration among Malaysians is achievable with regard to the current government policies and the public responses? Or, do you think that Malaysians are currently nationally integrated?
- viii. 'Do you agree that online journalism is more critical of the government as compared to conventional mass media?' and followed by the question, 'Why does this trend occur and is it advantageous to democracy and national integration?'

- ix. Before we end, do you have any additional comments with regard to online journalism, democracy and national integration?

Most of the questions are designed in an open-ended structure that would give the interviewees the liberty to express their ideas and elaborate as they wish. This is important as such responses would contribute to considerable amount of information on the concerned issues, which would benefit this study. The time and location of the interview sessions were scheduled upon each interviewee's preference, and thus providing the most comfortable setting. I saw that such liberty would most likely enhance their willingness to communicate. Building a good rapport between the interviewees and me, as well as establishing a friendly interview atmosphere, were part of the priorities.

The interview began with the first question on their opinion of democratic practices in Malaysia. This open-ended question would neither draw limit to their ideas and thoughts nor direct their focus. However, I would lead them indirectly for more information if the response was seen to lack details. At the same time, I would avoid any manner that could be construed as 'pressing the interviewees for answers that they were not willing to give'. Again, the good rapport would be maintained. The first question would be followed with a simple 'Likert Scale' assessment of Malaysia's democracy presented in a line-up of 'Very Good', 'Good', 'Fair', 'Bad', and 'Very Bad'. This 'Likert scale' rating was used to facilitate this study by giving the interviewee liberty to generalise their opinions and assessment of issues that they had explained in the 'parent' question.

The second question funnelled down to issues of democracy: a choice between democratic idealism and social harmony. The interviewees were asked to choose between the two. Prior to that, I had explained to the interviewees that democratic idealism could be referred to the Western liberal democracy where freedom of the press, of speech and expression are very much emphasised, while the concept of social harmony, as projected in Malaysian context, may need to sacrifice some of these idealistic freedom, with serious consideration on religious and customary differences of the multiracial society. This question is very important because in many academic discourses as well as literatures, the government is said to place higher priority on social harmony at the expense of democracy (Lent 1982; Khalil 1985; Mahathir 2000b). Their answers would lead to their assessment of Malaysia's democratic practices, and quite frequently, given the liberty, the interviewees would

elaborate further on their answers. It is important to note here that there were also interviewees who would prefer to have a blend of both choices.

The third question went further regarding the 'freedom of the press', a constituent of democracy and also an issue that was most likely to intertwine with the mechanisms of social harmony, national security and national integration. This question shares an understanding of the degree of freedom of the press in Malaysia (Lent 1982; Mustafa 2000; Siong 2004; Mohd Azizuddin 2005). It was expected that some of the interviewees might have different ideas and perceptions. Most of them however, were expected to be knowledgeable about the legislation and aware of the various Acts that control the freedom of the press. However, they might not agree with the notion that there is no 'press freedom' in Malaysia.

In the fourth question, the interviewees were presented with issues focusing on online journalism: its advantages and disadvantages. The conceptual definition of online journalism was explained before the fourth question was asked. This explanation is important to avoid confusion since there are many different familiar terms that may be used, such as 'web journalism', 'Internet news', 'digital journalism', 'online newspaper'. It is also important so that they would not focus merely on online news, but open their thoughts on other materials like weblogs and bulletin boards as well, which in this study, are also categorised as online journalism. This question on online journalism is also linked to the former question on 'freedom of the press'. The advantages and disadvantages of online journalism covered two important areas: the technological features of online journalism, and the socio-political implication. The interviewees were given the liberty to touch on either or both of these two prospects.

The process of narrowing down, further examined their perceptions of online journalism and its contribution to national policies and aspirations. This was carried out in question five. The idea about national policies and aspiration was not clarified and the interviewees were at liberty to relate them to any government policy that they had in mind.

The enquiry on online journalism goes further in-depth in the sixth question when they were asked to give their opinion on how online journalism should function to foster a cohesive national integration. This question is imperative to scrutinise their thoughts and ideas about how online journalism should operate and how they wished it to function with regard to national integration. It was assumed that they understood

Agenda Daily and Malaysia Today, and asked them to suggest ways that these online media should work.

Based on the issues around national integration, the interviewees were asked in the seventh question, how they perceived the level of national integration; whether genuine national integration is achievable and whether they think that Malaysians are currently nationally integrated. This question was set with the intention of capturing their thoughts on whether they saw any significant influence from online journalism in terms of promoting democracy and national integration. For that reason, question eight touched on the trend of criticism in online journalism. The interviewees were asked whether they agree that online journalism is more critical of the government as compared to the conventional mass media. After they had responded to the question, they were then asked to comment on whether such trends of criticism (either less or more critical of the government) were advantageous to democracy and national integration. These questions are relevant since online journalism is purported to carry the weight of a 'democratic tool' (Hague and Loader 1999b; Hall 2001; Banerjee 2003:11; Abbott 2004).

Question nine ends the interview session with another open-ended question. They were asked whether they had any further comments or additional information on issues already discussed. This question frequently led to other substantive information constructive to this study.

#### **2.3.4 Interviewees' attitude and distraction**

Generally, all interviewees have given their full support and cooperation except for three, who showed certain attitudes that distract from the smooth flow of the interview. In principle, such distraction is inconsequential to the result of this study. There were one Chinese-male academician and two Malay-female media practitioners, who refused to participate in the interview after they had scanned the interview questions.

The 'fear factor' was probably the cause since the issues discussed are sensitive and involved criticism and dissenting thoughts. The fear factor may also have been present in the thoughts and minds of the interviewees through events that

they had experienced when their fellow counterparts were charged with infraction of the various stringent Acts. This may have prevented them from expressing themselves freely. However, this occurrence is insignificant. Some responded reluctantly to certain questions even though they were given the assurance that their names would be confidential and the interview data would be used for research purposes only.

The fear factor may also explain a sceptical attitude towards the interviewer, possibly resulting in some unreliable and insincere answers. This attitude was identified in two interviewees, a Chinese journalist and a Malay academician. There may also be some undetected incidents where the interviewees decided to respond only casually on issues that challenge the government credibility, especially when revealing their ideas on democracy and press freedom. Some answered inconsistently, highlighting at one point that Malaysia's democracy is weak and unacceptable, while at another point emphasising that Malaysia's democracy is 'good and fair'. They had shown that their open criticism is purposely hidden, which could indicate the existence of a fear factor in their thoughts. This only involved one or two interviewees and overall, is inconsequential to the result of this study.

There were also difficulties in getting the consent of non-Malay to participate in the interview, especially the Chinese, which could also be explained by the fear factor.

There was also an incident when a Malay-GO executive became furious when questioned on the role of online journalism. The interviewee perceived independent online journalism such as Malaysiakini as troublemakers to Malaysia's social harmony. This is seen as 'hate factor' for the critical posture that independent online journalism such as Malaysiakini played in the socio-political milieu. This is in agreement with Mahathir's view of Malaysiakini, when he told the nation that 'loyal Malaysians' should stop reading Malaysiakini and barred Malaysiakini reporters from attending government press conferences on the grounds that 'their credibility is doubtful' (as quoted in Human Rights Watch 2002a:4). This is also parallel to Giddens's (2001:428) assertion, when he wrote: 'the dynamic spread of the Internet is perceived as a threat by authoritarian governments that recognise the potential of online activity to subvert state authority'. All of the above suggest that 'fear factor' and 'hate factor' were constraints to this research but not significant in its findings.

### 2.3.5 The time frame

In relation to the political setting in Malaysia, it is important to note that the period of Mahathir's regime, from 1981 to 2003, is of great concern. This is because Mahathir is seen as the major player in Malaysia's contemporary democracy. Mahathir's government had brought substantial changes such as his 'Privatisation Policy', 'Asian Values', 'Vision 2020', MSC, economic achievement, democratic change, and political and social crises, that were closely linked to the regime. Grounded by such reasons, substantial references to Mahathir and his regime were frequently noted in the interviews. However, some of the data and documentary research stretched beyond the year 2003 in the era of Abdullah Badawi, the new Prime Minister.

When this research was initially planned in 2002, Mahathir Mohamad was still in power and had shown no hint of his intention to resign until the UMNO 2002-General Assembly. He had alarmed an estimated 4 million registered UMNO members by his emotionally announced resignation (Time Asia 2003). However, an hour later, 'officials said he had changed his mind after protests from other senior politicians' (Time Asia 2003:1). The resignation was postponed to October 2003, suggesting a premiership transition period of 16 months before the official resignation were executed (Suh 2002). Through such conditions, this study was carried out under a cloud of uncertainty over whether Mahathir would truly resign. However, in October 2003 Mahathir did resign and took Abdullah Badawi as his successor. Abdullah had apparently mentioned 'some of Mahathir's policy will be continued' (as quoted in Firdaus and Farrah 2003:10). As Abdullah (2003:1) asserts:

In shouldering these heavy responsibilities, I assure that I will continue the policies that have been laid out by the leaders who came before me. Vision 2020 will continue to inspire and drive this nation towards holistic development, to become a developed country. We must bring comprehensive human development in the areas of politics, ethics and morality, and socially. The national vision policy will continue to underpin our national economic policy.

At the time this research was written up in 2004 and 2005, and completed in 2006, Mahathir's regime was still popular among the people. Much of the literature on Malaysia's political and social affairs used in this study also places great emphasis on Mahathir's regime. In addition, in 2005 and 2006, many political observers would view Mahathir as still actively involved in Malaysian politics. However, at this time Mahathir was seen as very critical of the new Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi. Much

of Mahathir's criticism was presented through online journalism as the mainstream mass media deemed some of Mahathir's views as unfavourable to the government (Beh Lih Yi 2006c; Mahathir 2006; Malaysiakini 2006d). Lih Yi (2006:1) writes:

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Mohd Nazri Abdul Aziz remains adamant that former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad had attempted to discredit the current administration. He also denied Mahathir's allegation that the government was trying to suppress his criticism... The minister also contended that the approach taken by the former premier had gone beyond the line of criticism.

It is interesting to see that during this period Mahathir used online journalism to criticise the government, whereas while he was the Prime Minister, he was very unsupportive of online journalism due to the criticisms towards the government. I also discovered similar attitudes within the mainstream mass media that were unsupportive to radical discourses and criticism against the government. These media are still addressing Mahathir's views in a similar manner. As Malaysiakini writes:

With his comments increasingly 'censored' in the pro-government mainstream mass media, former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad has now resorted to air his hard-hitting arguments in cyberspace (Malaysiakini 2006d:1).

With that, Mahathir probably realised how it feels when the mainstream mass media ignored him, and remarkably, he turned to online journalism for space to criticise the government, where freedom of speech is more attainable (Gan 2006; Malaysiakini 2006d).

## **2.4 Secondary analysis of documentary evidence**

Secondary analysis of documentary evidence refers to existing data presented by other researchers on similar issues or that are related to this study. The existing data may not be in the form of statistical data but made up of ranges of documentary resources that are relevant and convenient in explaining certain phenomenon discussed in this research. As Neuman (2002: 321) asserted, it is the reanalysis of previous collected data that were originally gathered by others. Therefore, as opposed to primary research, the focus is on analysing secondary data for the purpose of explaining the contemporary situation and its relationship with that of what had been found earlier, rather than collecting new data.

In this study, documentary evidence mainly refers to books and journals regarding social and political issues. In order to capture a better understanding of Malaysian society it is also essential to scrutinise the history that covers a period of 400 years of colonialism, which had considerably been responsible for the formation of Malaysia's plural society.

It is also noted that the study of Malaysian historical documents is pertinent to explain other issues regarding ethnicity such as Malay supremacy, ethnic nationalism, distinctive cultures and customs and more to that, the practices of democracy and the effort of national integration. Other than those mentioned, the 1969-racial conflict needs to be highlighted as an important juncture of Malaysian politics that affects the bigger scene of its social and political milieus and therefore documents regarding the incident are vital. In this regard, a book written by the first Prime Minister entitled '13<sup>th</sup> May: Before and After', is constructive as it provides first hand information especially from the chief executive of the state.

The complexity of Malaysian post colonial politics that affects the democratic scene as well as the mass media setting had been frequently examined and discussed by Western scholars such as R S Milne, D K Mauzy, W Case, G P Means, JM Gullick, K G Tregonning, Munro-Kua, J A Lent as well as many other local scholars like Zaharom Nain, Mustafa K Anuar, Khoo Boo Teik, and Francis L K Wah, to mention a few. It is also important to note that documentary evidence on Malaysian mass media setting needs to include the move of government's media privatisation policy of the 1980s; it changes the ownership of public media into corporate hands as well as government affiliates, which for instance Mustafa, Zaharom, Khoo Boo Teik and Siong had studied.

Even though some may advocate that online journalism in Malaysia is still at its infant stage, it is notable that many scholars have embarked on researches concerning the new media. Indrajit Banerjee, T Y Siong, Mustafa K Anuar, J P Abbott, Claudia Derich, James Gomez, Uwe Johannsen and even Steven Gan of Malaysia's prominent online newspaper are some of the examples who examined the implication of online journalism upon Malaysian social and political milieus.

Basically the documentary evidence is classified into the following themes:

- Malaysian history; colonialism, communism, and ethnicity
- Malaysian post colonial politics and Independence



- Malaysian interethnic relation and national integration
- Malaysian democracy and mass media setting
- Malaysian online journalism

Details of the documentary evidence are listed in Appendix 3.

## **2.5 Mini-case study on the work of online journalism**

The mini-case study takes in the form of content analysis; a 'very flexible method that has been widely applied to text by linguists, journalists, communication scholars, as well as professionals in psychology and sociology' (Reinard 2001). It is crucial to verify through content analysis the work of online journalism, particularly online newspaper and weblog, to identify the different track that it takes as compared to the mainstream print newspapers. As Reinard asserted, 'content analyses are useful to monitor the content of mass media communication' (Reinard 2001:169). In addition, verifications through the mini-case study are constructive to help explain the significance of online journalism, or in other words, to justify whether online journalism, in particular online newspaper and weblog, matters to Malaysian public. Nevertheless, this is not to deny that the purpose of such mini-case study taking the form of content analysis, is to 'confirm what is already believed', 'to reflect attitudes, interests, and values of population groups', and 'to reveal the focus of attention' (see Krippendorff 2004:45).

In the light of the above argument, the objective of the mini-case study on the work of online journalism is set as follows:

- To compare the different stance of coverage between online newspaper and the mainstream print newspapers on two mass appeal issues, namely the 'Broga incinerator' and 'police brutality'
- To examine the significance of online newspaper with regard to those two issues

Corresponding to such intention, this study advocates the importance of examining the different stance between independent online newspapers and mainstream print newspapers, the pattern of their coverage, and the weight given on public-concern issues, so as to determine how online journalism has play its role in

providing democratic space for the people. The findings would project how significant is online journalism to the Malaysian public. The comparison between the independent online and mainstream offline newspapers would also explain the different posture that online journalism had illustrated especially during the 1998-political crisis (Abbott 2004; Derichs 2004) and the years that follow.

The dates of publications of the involved online and offline newspapers are given due concern for three important reasons: first, the publication must be within the contemporary setting, second, the comparison must be based on similar time frame so that the validity is protected, and third both online and offline media are locally set.

The comparison is carried out by studying the archives of two online newspapers, namely Malaysiakini and Malaysia Today (Malaysia Today also carries a weblog on its website), and some mainstream print newspapers namely The Star, The New Straits Times, The Malay Mail and Berita Harian. Though this study highlighted clearly that the stated mainstream print newspapers indeed have their own online versions, it must be fully understood that their online versions are only patches of content taken from their bigger offline version (see Siong 2004). In other words it is not a true copy of the offline version.

Focus is given on the number of coverage of particular issues that are distinguished as important to the mass public, namely the 'Broga incinerator' and 'police brutality' issues. A comparative approach is used to show the different weight given on these issues through online newspapers and the mainstream offline newspapers. However other players of online journalism that includes NGO websites, weblog and other shared and discussion sites, such as Suaram, Aliran Online, Global Anti Incinerator Alliance (GAIA), Screeshots weblog, Malaysian Bar Council, and Asian Human Rights Commission are also referred to as they are instrumental to understand why online journalism matters to the Malaysian public.

The mini-case study utilising content analysis method is divided into three sections as follow:

- Content analysis on the 'Broga incinerator' issue published from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2005 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2005
- Content analysis on 'Francis Udayapan case' published from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2004 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2004

- Content analysis on 'police brutality' issue published from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2005 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2005

The archives of the concerned newspapers are made up of a year of journalistic contents that include news, features, opinion pieces, columns and letter-to-editor that stretched from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2005 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2005. However to reemphasise, with regard to the case of a police detainee named Francis Udayapan, the time frame for its content analysis were taken from a period a year earlier, as this case, which is closely linked and perceived to the issue of 'police brutality', cropped up in the year 2004. The reason to include Udayapan case is that it is an exclusive case linked to the issue of 'police misused of power' (Asian Human Rights Commission 2004b; Asian Human Rights Commission 2004a; Suaram 2004a). Precisely, Udayapan case is just an addition to the content analysis of police brutality issue.

The concerned mainstream print newspaper companies, specifically The Star, The New Straits Times, Malay Mail, and Berita Harian, were contacted for permission to access to their archives through their library authority. Certain fees were paid for the library access. The archives are electronic-based library, which had significantly facilitated this study in terms of time and effort.

The data collection for the independent online journalism, namely Malaysiakini and Malaysia Today were much easier. Access to Malaysia Today is free of charge, while for Malaysiakini, I have to register (online) as a subscriber and pay certain fees in order to have access to its archive.

The process of data collection firstly includes data search work, which is principally a computer-assisted process. It primarily involved customisation of the data search particularly of the following material

- i. Specific journalistic materials of 'news' 'columns', 'opinion features' and 'letter to editor'.
- ii. Specific issues or topics, which are termed as 'themes' are customised in this data search. The themes are 'Broga incinerator', and 'Police brutality' that include 'police abused' and 'police assault', which are framed to consider only incidences in Malaysia.
- iii. Specific time frame of one year that stretched from 1<sup>st</sup> January and 31<sup>st</sup> December of a particular year is determined.

Secondly, when search results were displayed on the computer screen, they were subsequently printed. The data were then counter-checked to ensure that the accessed customised items were that of what were required.

Thirdly, an analysis was carried out to distinguish the qualitative pattern of coverage in terms of how the issues were discussed, the slant of the coverage as well as the emphasis made. For the latter, the word count and the frequency of coverage on the concerned issues were recorded to highlight the weight and the emphasis given to those public issues.

Fourthly, the mini-case study scrutinises the different track that online journalism stands and in what way that it matters to the Malaysian public.

The evidence attained from the mini-case study as well as the analysis of the evidence are presented in Chapter Four.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

The methodology of this research is predominantly a qualitative style that principally takes in the form of semi-structured interview. However, supplementary evidence is also provided through documentary evidence that involved a wide range of books and journals. And driven from the thoughts that the significance of online journalism is imperative to be highlighted, a mini-case study is also employed.

All the three methods formed a synergy that compliments each other especially to provide some verification on the evidence of the semi-structured interviews, which are also instrumental in explaining the bigger picture of Malaysian democracy, interethnic relationship and the implication of the emergence of online journalism within the society.

# **CHAPTER THREE**

## **Democracy, Ethnicity and National Integration**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter traces social and political issues embedded in Malaysia's history, which are linked to colonialism, democracy and national integration. The issues of Malay supremacy and the plural society that took root during the colonial periods are highlighted to address the justifications for Malay's special rights and privileges espoused in the Federal Constitution. It will also discuss how the colonists contributed to the formation of Malaysia's plural society through the influx of Chinese and Indian migrants. Most importantly, ethnic pluralism has contributed to the establishment of the cultural distinctiveness of Malaysia's multiethnic society (Nagata 1979). However, at the same time, the multiethnic composition has contributed certain political resentments especially among the indigenous ethnic groups as they see that the non-indigenous groups acquire better economic achievement (Firdaus 1997). The considerable size of non-indigenous population has further exacerbated such issue.

This chapter also explains how the Second World War had disrupted interethnic relationships, especially between the Malay and Chinese communities. The Japan-China War since 1937 explains the harsh Japanese military treatment upon the Chinese in Malaya. There were incidences of Chinese massacre in Malaya during the war (Andaya and Andaya 1982:251). On the other hand, the Malays and Indians communities were treated more affable and accommodated, rather than punished as enemies. Communism during the post-Second World War and post independence period between 1948 and 1960 had also fomented during the years of Japanese occupation. Ethnicity issues were contributory causes to the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 racial clash, which led to calls for national integration. The discussion will then narrow to the concepts and direction of national integration in Malaysia.

The last section of this chapter scrutinises the establishment of democracy during the British administration that changed the absolute monarchy of the Malay States. I will also discuss 'Asian style democracy', and guided democracy to explain

how Malaysia's democracy distanced itself from the 'Western liberal democracy' model.

### 3.2 Malaysia's multiethnic composition

Malaysia is a federation of thirteen states located seven degrees north of the equator in the heart of Southeast Asia. It covers an area of about 206,250 sq. miles, occupying West Malaysia (or the Peninsula Malaysia) and East Malaysia on the north-western side of the Island of Borneo. West Malaysia is made up of eleven states, namely Perlis, Kedah, Penang, Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, Malacca, Johore, Pahang, Trengganu and Kelantan, while East Malaysia is made of the states of Sabah and Sarawak.

The South China Sea separates the two regions of West and East Malaysia, making the areas about 331 miles distant. West Malaysia or the Peninsula has frontiers bordering Thailand in the north, and Singapore in the south, while Sabah and Sarawak of East Malaysia share their borders with the Philippines in the north and Indonesia in the south.



Source: (Department of Statistics 2004:404)

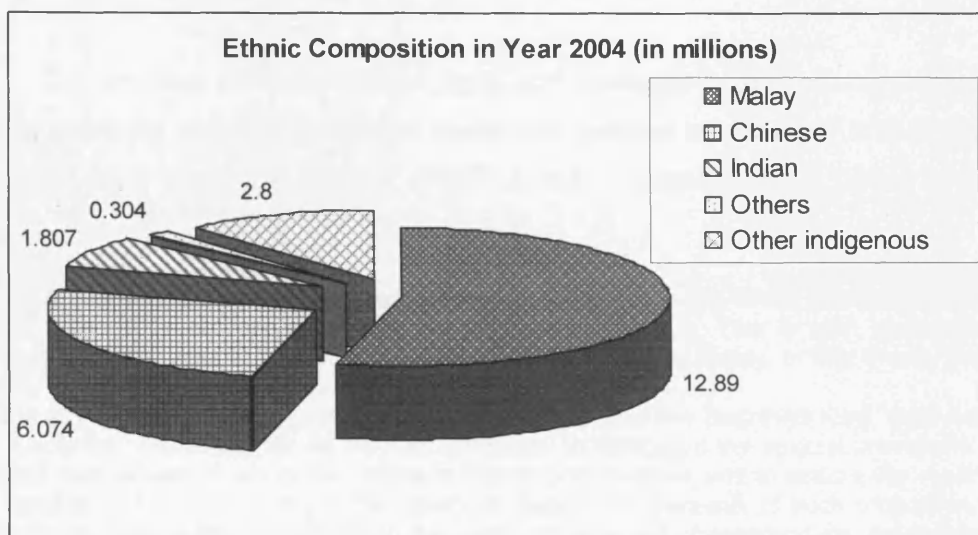
**Figure 3.1**  
**Map of Malaysia**

Malaysia's multiethnic population (as shown in Table 3.1 and Figure 3.2), as estimated in the year 2004, is 23.89 million, comprising 54 percent Malay indigenous, 11.7 percent other indigenous, 25.4 percent Chinese, 7.6 percent Indian and 1.3 percent other ethnics such as Arabs, Singhalese and Europeans (Department of Statistics 2004:37).

**Table 3.1**  
**Malaysia's Population Composition**

Population Composition			
Ethnic Group		Population	Percentage
Indigenous	Malay	12.89 million	54%
	Other indigenous	2.8 million	11.7%
Chinese		6.074 million	25.4%
Indian		1.807 million	7.6%
Others		0.304 million	1.3%
Total		23.89 million	100%

Source: (Department of Statistics 2004:37)



Source: (Department of Statistics 2004:37)

**Figure 3.2**  
**Malaysia's Ethnic Composition 2004**

The Malays and other indigenous peoples are collectively called Bumiputera<sup>11</sup>, which literally means 'son of the soil'. The Malays are the main Bumiputera in Peninsula Malaysia. In Sabah, the main Bumiputera are Kadazan, Bajau and Murut, while in Sarawak they are Iban, Malay, Bidayuh and Melanau. The non-Bumiputeras are predominantly made up of Chinese and Indian groups who, during the colonial period, migrated on a large scale from China and India respectively. This terminology is imperative because in many instances the term non-Bumiputera or non-Malay would carry a similar connotation in stressing identity as belonging to non-indigenous groups. This is especially true in understanding race relations in Malaysia where the Bumiputera, connotatively referred to as the Malays, enjoy certain special rights and privileges as provisioned in the Federal Constitution (Jones 1998:65-66).

The provision of Malay special rights and privileges in the constitution implemented since 1957 reflects the founding fathers of Malaysia's recognition of Malay supremacy and distinguished their rights as the indigenous people of the land. Among others, the Malay special rights and privileges<sup>12</sup> provisioned in the Federal Constitution are first marked through the appointment of the Paramount King chosen amongst the Malay Rulers. Second, the Malay language is taken as the official national language. Third, certain economic opportunities, such as employment in public services and the quota system for university entrance, favour the Malays (Rabushka 1973:31; Vorys 1975:134; Jones 1998:65-66; Guan 2000:26).

The provision of Malay special rights and privileges in the Federal Constitution has significantly affected Malaysia's social and political landscapes, and its uses in the 1971-New Economic Policy<sup>13</sup> (NEP) further translated as a policy of ethnic

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<sup>11</sup> The Malaysian mass media frequently refers to the Bumiputera, which basically means 'the indigenous', as interchangeable with the Malay ethnic group. This is also true with most Malaysian social scientists that refer to the Bumiputera as the Malay. In this thesis, the term 'Malay' and 'Bumiputera' will be used interchangeably.

<sup>12</sup> It is stated in Article 153 of the Federal Constitution that the Supreme King 'shall exercise his functions ... in a manner as may be necessary to safeguard the special provisions of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and to ensure the reservation for Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak of such proportion as he may deem reasonable of positions in the public service and of scholarships, exhibitions and other similar educational or training privileges or special facilities given or accorded by the Federal Government (Jones 1998:123-124).

<sup>13</sup> The NEP was a two-pronged national policy for development. 'The first prong was to reduce and eventually eradicate poverty by increasing income levels and increasing employment opportunities. The second prong aims at accelerating the process of restructuring Malaysian society to correct economic imbalance, so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the identification of race with economic function' (Means 1976:408). However part of the strategy was the affirmative action that gives more opportunities to the



preference, favouring the Bumiputera, arguably at the expense of the non-Bumiputera (Guan 2000). Certain quarters of non-Malay political parties challenged such provisions especially during the period prior to the 1969-13<sup>th</sup> May tragedy that saw Malay-Chinese ethnic war. However, when the Sedition Act 1948 was implemented, it endorsed as an offence against the law, to question Malay's special rights and privileges, citizenship, national language and the sovereignty of Malay rulers (Means 1976:402).

To a certain extent, history has shown that Malaysia's ethnic composition, has affected the issues of ethnicity. As for instance in 1964, there were 56.1 percent non-indigenous in Malaysia as compared to 43.9 percent of the indigenous (Means 1976:294). It had also caused tension when the non-Malays were more economically advanced as compared to the Malays. As shown in Table 3.2, the household mean income of the Malays in 1957 and 1970 as compared to the non-Malays was in apparent disparity. The household mean income of the Chinese community doubled that of the Malays while almost the same pattern applies when compared to the Indian community mean income (Firdaus 1997:201).

**Table 3.2**  
**The Household Mean Incomes in Peninsula Malaysia**  
**(in Malaysian Ringgit)**

<b>Ethnic</b>	<b>1957</b>	<b>1970</b>
<b>Malays</b>	MR 144	MR 172
<b>Chinese</b>	MR 272	MR 394
<b>Indians</b>	MR 217	MR 304

Source:(Firdaus 1997:201)

During the 1969-General Election, even though the government's Alliance party won 74 parliamentary seats out of 144 seats contested (or 51.6 percent), it had only gained 44.9% of the total votes (Means 1976:396; Raja Petra 2005:3). Thus, the nation found that the opposition parties, which are mainly made up of the non-Malay political parties, won more than half of the total votes. In the state of Selangor the non-Malays political parties, mainly DAP and Gerakan, won 13 out of the 28

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Malays to raise their capital assets from only 1.5 percent of limited company in 1970 to at least 30 percent by the year 1990 (Means 1976:410; Firdaus 1997:202).

Parliamentary seats contested (Teik 1971:15; Means 1976:396). For such election result, the Malays believed that their political supremacy had been agitated partly because of the large non-indigenous or specifically the non-Malays population (Means 1976: 365; Nagata 1979:11).

The issue of ethnicity is also highlighted because Malaysians' cultural practices are factionalised. The greatest consequence is their religious distinctiveness, where all Malays are Muslims, the Chinese are largely Taoists and Buddhists, and the Indians are Hindus. There are also small fractions of Christians among the Chinese, Indians, Sabahans and Sarawakians indigenous peoples. In many cases, it is notable that there is little ethnic assimilation when it involves religious beliefs, interethnic-marriage and matters of cultural practice. In Western society, ethnic assimilation is increased through interethnic marriage (Birch 1989). In Malaysia, however, interethnic marriage would only be possible if either of the two parties converted his or her religious belief. The Malays would not compromise their religious belief for interethnic marriage. Despite this, there are interethnic marriages between the Malays and the non-Malays, but these are very rare also due to their religious beliefs. As Nagata (1979:28) points out:

Not only are interethnic marriages statistically rare in modern Malaysia, but the climate for such union is discouraging. Any marriage involving a Muslim and a non-Muslim now requires the latter to convert to Islam and for all the offspring to be raised in that faith.

This is one reason why national integration through ethnic assimilation is a limited prospect in the Malaysian social landscape.

### **3.3 Malay supremacy**

Within Malaysia's multiethnic composition, the combination of Chinese, Indians and others, equals more than half of the Malay population (as shown in Table 3.1 and Figure 3.2). The 2004 population composition also shows that the non-Malay totals 7.185 million, while the Malay population is 12.89 million. The fractions of non-Malays were much bigger during the pre-independence period and during the post-formation of Malaysia in 1964 (see Table 3.3 and Figure 3.4). However, the exclusion of Singapore from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965 had reduced the non-Malays population, particularly the Chinese community. The large proportion of the non-Malays has threatened the Malays especially through a fear of impact on their

political supremacy and their natural right to political control over the country (Firdaus 1997:193).

Before the era of British colonialism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Malays had over many centuries established their supremacy on the Malay Peninsula setting up a complete socio-political community. Their supremacy is marked through the establishment of the Malacca Empire as early as the second century that included the kingdoms of Kampar, Perlak, Bentan, Riau, Aceh, Inderapura, and Pasai with Malacca as the central government (Shellabear 1975).

Prior to the establishment of the Malacca Sultanate, many Malay kingdoms in the surrounding region, like the Srivijaya Empire in Sumatra in the fifth and sixth centuries, the Langkasuka Empire in the sixth and seventh centuries, and the Java-based Majapahit Empire in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, had their territorial claim on the Malay Peninsula (Firdaus 1997). Evidently, very much earlier than the establishment of these civilised ancient kingdoms, the Malays had already established their long history of occupancy and residency in the Peninsula, and these habitations, as Firdaus (1997:193) writes, 'justify their claim to be the indigenous people of the region'.

Means (1976:15) argues that the great island empires of insular Southeast Asia, which flourished from the second century until after the arrival of the Europeans, were the creation of the Malays. However, the decline of Malay political domination in the region was evident during the beginning of European colonisation, specifically with the fall of the Malacca Sultanate to the Portuguese colonists in 1511. This caused the Malay Empire, centralised in Malacca, to become weaker. However, in 1641, the Malays of Johore Sultanate, with the help of the Dutch, successfully defeated the Portuguese of Malacca. The enthusiasm of winning back their dignity against the Portuguese exhibited the Malays' determination to be accountable for the right to rule over the region. Firdaus (1997:193) stresses that:

Under any circumstances, despite the superiority of the colonists and the decline of the Malay Kingdom of Malacca, there should not be any reason to misrepresent the Malay as the indigenous people of Malaysia.

History also shows that other Malay Kingdoms, such as the Johore-Riau Empire and their allegiance of Pahang, Kedah, Selangor, Perak, and Negri Sembilan, had also surfaced during the European domination in the Malay States. In other

words, excluding Malacca, the Malay still acquired many other states to claim that they possessed the political control in the region. Firdaus (1997:193) also points out:

The long history of Malay occupancy and supremacy before the Portuguese conquest, as well as the Dutch and the British occupation justify the Malays' demand to be the indigenous people of Malaysia, and in conjunction with this demand, they believe that they possess the natural right of political control over the land.

This understanding, to a certain extent, is a historical explanation of the provision of Malay special rights and privileges as espoused in the 1963-Malaysian Constitution of Article 153 (Jones 1998:65-66) as well as the NEP's ethnic preference policy, which is in favour of the Malay ethnic group (Firdaus 1997).

### **3.4 Colonialism and the formation of a plural society**

The term 'plural society' was first introduced through Furnival's (1956) research. Basically, the plural society concept in this study is used because it captures the ethnic features of Malaysian society so well. Basically, the pluralism of Malaysian society is identifiable through three aspects.

Firstly, different cultural practices of the Malays, Chinese, Indians, the Sabahans, and the Sarawakians of East Malaysia that identify distinct cultural diversity mark Malaysia's pluralism. Cultural diversity also includes belief in different religions. Secondly, Malaysia's pluralism is also seen through the existence of politically organised cultural communities. The three dominating ethnic-based political parties, namely the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) principally representing the Malay populace, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) representing the Chinese communities, and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) representing the Indian communities identify such a pluralism pattern. As Nagata (1979:13) asserts 'ethnicity or communalism [forms] the basis of most political parties.' Thirdly, there is the overwhelming prominence of race in governance such as the affirmative action espoused in the NEP, the Malay special rights and privileges, and the ethnic-based school system of the education policy.

The plural society in Malaysia is rooted in the history of colonialism. The arrival of three European powers: the Portuguese in 1511, the Dutch in 1641 and the British in 1786 underlined such a history of colonialism. It covers a period of more than 400

years and significantly affects the Malaysian social and political landscapes. However, colonialism, especially under the British democracy and administration system, had also brought modernisation to the Malaysians.

Examining the effects of colonialism is imperative in this research for three reasons. First, British colonialism had contributed to the multiracial composition of Malaysian population through their commitment to tin and rubber industries. These industries were responsible for the influx of Chinese and Indian migrant workers in the nineteenth century, which then developed into resident communities. Second, the British administration introduced the fundamentals of the contemporary Malaysian judiciary system and the British 'federation' proposal, integrated the compartmentalised Malay States and brought democracy to Malaysia. The 'Federation of Malaya' in 1950 and later the 'Federation of Malaysia' in 1963, changed the absolute monarchy to a parliamentary democracy (Means 1976:55,59,293). Third, Malaysia gained its independence from the British in 1957, not through a people's insurgency, as seen in Indonesia's struggles for independence from the Dutch, but proffered on a silver platter. In other words, Malaysia independence was conferred through negotiations and compromises between the British government and the founding fathers of Malaysia.

Long before the British came to the Malay States, port of Malacca, in the fifteenth century, was a strategic terminal for the trading of goods, as it is located on the trading route where the West meets the East. Besides Malacca, other Malay ports dotted along the straits, such as Pasai, Pidie and Temasik, had long been Asian trading centres before the arrival of Western traders (Tregonning 1964:46). Malacca is located at the narrowest part of the Straits of Malacca and accessible in any monsoon condition because it is more sheltered from storms than other Malay ports. Also, having no dangerous shallow waters, it provides a naturally safe anchorage for foreign shipping in any kind of weather (Bastin and Winks 1966:22). At a later stage, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, shortening trade routes from Europe to China, also contributed to the establishment of Malacca as a central trading port, most especially when spices were discovered in the Malay region. Spices were very important at that time and were in great demand for use in food preservation and flavouring, and also in drugs (Bastin and Winks 1966:33).

Malacca's prosperity in the fifteenth century created interest among some of the Western colonials like the Dutch East Indies, the French in Indochina, the Spanish in

the Philippines, the Portuguese and also the Germans. The first to attempt to conquer Malacca was the Portuguese, acknowledging Malacca at that period as:

The richest seaport with the greatest number of wholesale merchants and abundance of shipping and trade that can be found in the whole world...  
A city that was made for merchandise, fitter than any other in the world  
(Bastin and Winks 1966:34).

Colonialism in Malaysia started when the Portuguese conquered the port of Malacca in 1511. Then there was the Dutch, who also had a strong interest in Malacca with their intention to monopolise the spice trade. Allied with the Johore Ruler, the Dutch managed to defeat the Portuguese fortress in 1641 after several earlier attempts that failed (Gullick 1964:26-28).

British involvement in the Malay policy begins when Penang and Singapore were established as their ports of trade under an agreement made with the Malay Sultanates during the eighteenth century. British policy of free trade duty gradually strengthened the prosperity of Penang and Singapore ports, which on the other hand affected the Dutch of Malacca. The situation forced the Dutch to surrender their possession of Malacca to the British formally through the Anglo-Dutch Treaty held in London in 1824 (Allen 1968:34). Subsequently Penang, Malacca and Singapore were placed under a single British administration, known as the British Straits Settlement.

Initially the British were not keen to interfere with the Malay States' affairs. However, their non-interventionist policy ended when the British saw that disputes among the local rulers, as well as among the Chinese tin miners, disrupted their trade business. This led to the endorsement of the Treaty of Pangkor<sup>14</sup>, the first treaty that officially marked British interventionist policy in the Malay States.

The Treaty of Pangkor also inaugurated the appointment of a British Resident adviser to the Malay rulers in the state of Perak (Rabushka 1973:27). The role of the British Resident included monitoring and supervising tax collection, but he had no

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<sup>14</sup> The Treaty of Pangkor inaugurated the British policy of 'indirect rule' in the Malay States. It is emphasized that the British were initially 'unwilling imperialists' in this entire affair. They refused several earlier requests and reluctantly intervened only when British firms in the Straits Settlements supported a direct request from one of the three claimants to the Sultanate of Perak. The Sultan indicated his willingness, to accept a resident British adviser. The Perak chiefs ultimately chose the British-supported candidate through this treaty that provided for a British resident whose advice was to be respected and obeyed on all matters except for Malay religions and customs. Law and order, and revenue collection henceforth lay in British hands (Rabushka 1973:23).

involvement in matters concerning Malay customs and religion. Similar agreements to the Treaty of Pangkor were established in other Malay States and gradually each state in the Malay Peninsula appointed a British Resident as a state's adviser.

The British intervention led to Britain's involvement in the burgeoning tin mining sector, as a reliable source of tin was also needed to support Britain's industrialisation in the nineteenth century. Generally speaking, the Malays were not keen to involve themselves in tin mining although they had long extracted tin and traded in small-scale commerce (Rabushka 1973:18; Nagata 1979:17). Their commitment to subsistence agriculture was most essential as it contributed revenues to the Malay rulers and governors through taxes (Henderson, Hulme, Phillips and Nur 2002: 4). Also, the British policy did not support the involvement of the Malays in the tin industry, as it would disrupt the source of wealth of Malay Rulers and thus the Rulers' good will. The Malays also believed that the process of tin mining would have a negative effect on paddy cultivation, where the tin sludge and wastes deposited into streams and rivers that provide water to paddy fields and village lands, would ruin these lands permanently (Abraham 1997:79). For these reasons the Malays were not enthusiastic to work in tin mines. The alternative for the British was to encourage the influx of Chinese immigrants for the tin industry.

Certain push factors supported the early migration of the Chinese communities. These includes poverty, famines and floods, over-populated residences, unemployment and injustice in their homeland<sup>15</sup> (Tregonning 1964; Bastin and Winks 1966). The availability of work in tin mines promised a better life overseas, while the supportive policy and protection<sup>16</sup> of the British administration convinced them further and pulled them to the rich tin fields of the Malay States (Bastin and Winks 1966; Andaya and Andaya 1982: 172).

The rate of migration during the second half of the nineteenth century was high. Before 1850, there were only three Chinese in one tin mine in the Larut Valley of Perak, but a decade later, there were between 20,000 to 25,000 new Chinese immigrants working in the tin mines in Perak. By the end of 1871, their numbers had increased to 40,000 (Means 1976:26).

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<sup>15</sup> The migration is similar to the pattern of migration of Europeans in the late nineteenth century, where millions migrated to America (Tregonning 1964:175).

<sup>16</sup> The establishment of the Chinese Protectorate in 1877 for purposes of protecting them from abusive mine owners as well as to monitor their living conditions, marked the British protectionist policy (Bastin and Winks 1966:273).

Similar to the large-scale arrival of Chinese immigrants to the Malay States, the British commercial interests also encouraged migration of Indians at the end of the nineteenth century. This time it was for rubber plantations, another cash crop important to Britain's industrialisation.

A continuous mass influx of Indian immigrants began at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the exceptional growth of the rubber industry suffused the demand for cheap labourers (Nagata 1979:17). In fact, Andaya and Andaya (1982:179) observe that the British administration even established a Tamil Immigration Fund intended to intensify Indian migration.

As a result of British involvement, the open door policy and the sudden growth of the tin mining industry in the Malay States, there had been a rapid growth of immigrant populations in Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan as well as the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore. Within a relatively short period of less than 40 years, there was a significant increase from about 400,000 in 1891 to 1.7 million in 1931, representing a more than 400 percent growth (Means 1976:26).

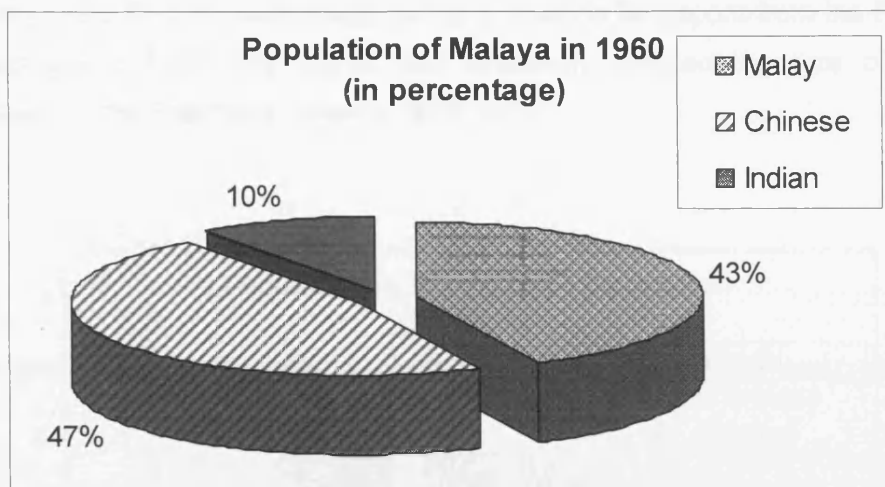
**Table 3.3**  
**Population of Malaya in 1960**

<b>Areas</b>	<b>Ethnic Groups in 1960</b>		
	<b>Malays</b>	<b>Chinese</b>	<b>Indians</b>
Peninsula Malaya	3,461,000	2,552,000	773,000
Singapore	227,000	1,231,000	138,000
Sarawak	129,000	229,000	2,000
Sabah	25,000	105,000	3,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,842,000</b>	<b>4,117,000</b>	<b>916,000</b>

Source: (Purcell 1965: 186)

As illustrated in Table 3.3 and in Figure 3.3, 1960 statistics show that the Chinese population (4,117,000) alone, without inclusion of the Indian community, outnumbered the Malays (3,842,000). The Chinese and Indian populations outnumbered the Malays by almost 1.2 million or 31 percent.





Source: Purcell (1965:186)

**Figure 3.3  
Ethnic Composition in 1960**

The increase continued when Malaysia was formed in 1963 with the inclusion of Singapore, a predominantly Chinese state, into the Federation of Malaysia. This noticeably reworked the population distribution, relegating the Malay population to a minority. For a clearer picture of the situation, Table 3.3 and Figure 3.4 compare the population composition with and without the inclusion of Singapore in the Federation of Malaysia, as well as the recent 2004 estimation.

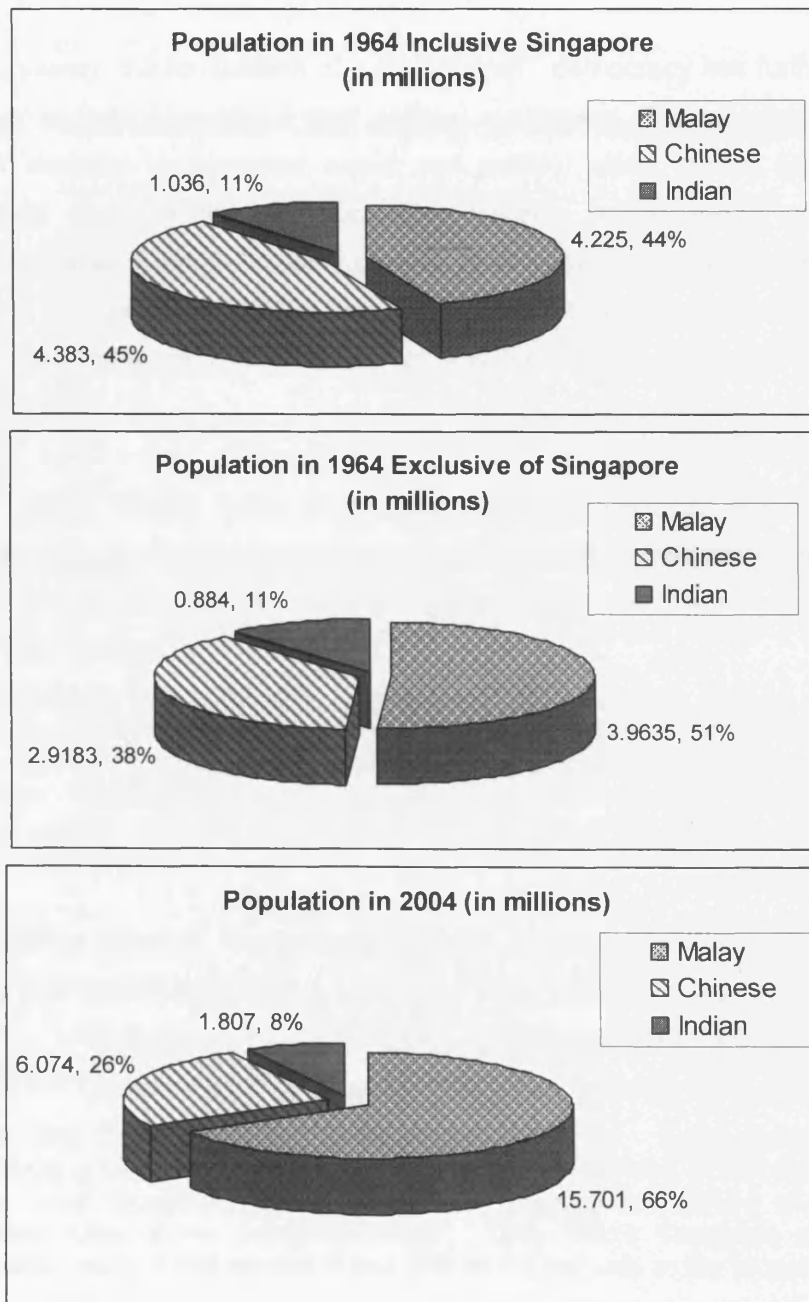
**Table 3.4  
Comparison of Population Composition 1964-2004  
(Figures in millions)**

Ethnic groups	1964 (inclusive of Singapore)	1964 (exclusive of Singapore)	2004
Malay (Bumiputera)	4.225	3.963	15.701
Chinese	4.383	2.918	6.074
Indian	1.036	0.884	1.807

Source: Means (1976:294) and Department of Statistics (2004:37)

The Chinese population as estimated in 1964 was 4.383 million and this figure outnumbers the Malays by 0.157 million. Also illustrated in the charts of Figure 3.4, with the exclusion of Singapore, the Malay population was higher than that of the Chinese by 1.045 million. Such demographic features explain Tunku Abdul

Rahman's (the First Prime Minister) action to exclude Singapore from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965. The action had effectively reduced the size of Chinese population in the Federation (Means 1976: 365).



Source: Means (1976:294) and Department of Statistics (2004:37)

**Figure 3.4**  
**Population Composition in 1964 and 2004**

Even so, the high total population of the major non-Malay ethnic groups (Chinese and Indians) after the exclusion of Singapore in 1967, would not have given the Malay politicians grounds for complacency. The Malay population at that time was 3.994 million, while the combination of Chinese and Indians were 3.791 million (Nagata 1979:261), making a small difference of only 0.2 million.

Consequently, the formulation of a majoritarian<sup>17</sup> democracy has further agitated the Malays' complacency about their political supremacy. The situation thus drew significant attention to a greater social and political effect, where obviously the Malays, with their insignificant population fraction, would be at an electoral disadvantage when a simple majority decides political power. During the period of the formation of Malaysia, the Malays had begun to feel that they were being reduced from a 'nation' to a mere 'community' or just 'one ethnic group among several' (Nagata 1979:11).

As Means (1976) notes, there was also a pronounced feeling of ethnic nationalism among the Chinese because of their views regarding their cultural superiority. Morally this served to further segregate them from the indigenous people. Means (1976:33) asserts:

The Chinese are not readily assimilated with either the Malays or the Indians. There is an almost universal feeling among the Chinese that they are superior in both individual attributes and culture to the Malays and the Indians. This attitude may be partly the result of their awareness of their great culture heritage, and partly the result of an increasing sense of Chinese nationalism.

In another instance, Tunku Abdul Rahman described the Chinese as strongly holding to their ethnic nationalism, which was more inclined to the mainland China. During the 1969-General Election victory parades of the opposition parties, particularly the Chinese-based DAP and the Gerakan, Rahman (1969:56) saw that:

They (the Chinese) started to harangue the crowd, singing songs and distributing pamphlets with Mao's [the Communist China Chairman, Mao Tze Tung] thoughts, pasting pamphlets on walls and pillars of shop-houses. One of the pamphlets read ... 'Only Mao's Thoughts can be practised here.' They carried Mao's picture on placards in the procession.

There were conflicts of values; the Malay perceived they were politically superior, while the Chinese perceived that they were culturally superior. In 1971, the

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<sup>17</sup> The majoritarian democracy suggests a government by the majority, which means that the people's involvement affects government decision through the voices of the majority. This principle would directly reject government by and responsive to a minority or individual (Lijphart 1999).

government introduced the National Cultural Policy, which was inclined more towards the Malay culture. Under this policy, the state implemented various projects to advance the presence of Malay cultural symbols (Guan 2000). Guan asserts that:

The public standing of Chinese culture became subjected to varying government regulations and control. Thus, the public display of a number of Chinese cultural and religious symbols was strongly discouraged, and gradually marginalized by the state. This generated much anxiety among the Chinese (Guan 2000:10).

Certain political observers described this state of ethnic relations as a 'time bomb' (Teik 1978:34).

The social segregation is also evident in terms of work-related places of residence. The Indian communities were largely employed as rubber estate labourers, in port services, and railway and road construction. The Chinese were concentrated mainly in the tin mines and business sectors in urban areas, while the Malays were mostly located in lowland areas of paddy fields, remote subsistence farming, and east coast fishing (Nagata 1979: 63). The different communities lived as isolated communities, socially and geographically apart from each other during the period of pre-independence and until the 1970's.

The Malay political leaders were alarmed to see that their political supremacy was being challenged through the following three events. First, in 1963 when the People's Action Party of Singapore, representing a huge section of Chinese electorate, criticised the Federal government for the lack of egalitarian policy in the allocation of Malays' special rights and privileges (Allen 1968:210). Second, the 1969-General Election showed that the votes of non-Malays outnumbered that of Malays resulting in the Selangor State Legislative almost falling into the hands of non-Malay opposition parties (Means 1976:396). Third, the economic performance of the Chinese communities was significantly more advanced than that of the Malays' and had consequently marginalized the Malays in the economic sector. These demoralising events caused tensions among Malay political factions, especially UMNO, to such a degree that after the 1969-General Election, the 13<sup>th</sup> May race riots broke out. It was estimated that the clash had taken the lives of about 1000 innocent people and created about 6000 refugees (Means 1976:412). Hari Singh (2001:50) explains:

The poorer Malays experienced relative deprivation, and felt that political power was meaningless without, economic power. ...When the Malays felt that their political power was also slipping away –underlined by the

Alliance government's lost of its two-thirds parliamentary majority in 1969 –violence became the midwife of the rearrangement of the ethnic-based constellation of political forces in Malaysia.

The Chinese and the Indian communities see that they also have their rightful citizenry as provisioned in the Article 8 (2) of the Federal Constitution that states:

There shall be no discrimination against citizens on the ground only of religion, race, descent or place of birth in any law relating to the acquisition, holding or disposition of property or establishing or carrying on of any trade, business, profession, vocation or employment (Jones 1998:5).

After the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 incident, considerable numbers of the Chinese population migrated from Malaysia, and combined with the high birth rate of the Malays and immigration of Indonesians, especially the Sumatrans into West Malaysia, the ethnic balance was redressed by the increasing Malay population (Tugby 1977). The Indonesian ethnic groups such as Banjar, Bugis Mendailing, Rawa and Javanese are also taken as indigenous Malay, most probably due to their religion, language and complexion (Nagata 1979:25, 44). This significantly contributed to the current Malay population (see Figure 3.4) showing an increase compared to the years after Malaysia was formed with the inclusion of Singapore in 1964.

### **3.5 The Second World War, communism and racism**

Japanese occupation during the Second World War, also contributed to ethnic tensions. During the war, the Japanese military administration gave the Malay and the Indian communities favoured treatment, while the Chinese community was treated brutally. The Japan-China War in 1937 explained the Japanese appalling treatment towards the Chinese during the occupation in Malaya between 1941 and 1945. For instance, the Japanese arrested the Chinese male population in Singapore during the first week of their occupation and executed between 5,000 and 25,000 of them (Andaya and Andaya 1982:251). Meanwhile, the Malay and Indian communities were treated differently. Strategically the Japanese required allies during the Second World War; the Malay community could be a possible ally in the government of Malaya, while the Indian community a probable ally in the government of India (Tregonning 1964; Means 1976:47). The Japanese military administration even treated the Malay aristocrats pleasantly. Such favouritism encouraged a supportive

and cooperative reaction from the Malays towards the Japanese military government. However, the situation triggered racism and inflated antagonism between the Malay and the Chinese communities.

In their efforts to retaliate, the Chinese established communist guerrilla groups supported by Communist Russia and China. Their insurgency activities were mostly based in the Malayan jungle. As communism does not correspond to Malay culture and religious belief, the Malay perceived it as intolerable threat to their community (Tunku A Rahman 1969:5). Consequently, Malay-Chinese relations deteriorated further.

The situation was made worse when immediately after the Second World War ended in 1945, the communists took over the state, and savagely settled some old scores amongst the Malay police and public who had formerly collaborated with the Japanese military government (Tregonning 1964:285). They planned to turn Malaya into a communist state in opposition to the British independence proposal. The communist armed violence claimed many lives. These included rubber entrepreneurs and a British High Commissioner, Sir Henry Gurney, who was murdered in an ambush carried out by communist guerrillas (Allen 1968: 98). Consequently some Malays retaliated and severe combat took place in parts of Johore, Perak, Pahang and Trengganu (Tregonning 1964:286). As Nagata (1979: 14) points out:

The most extreme manifestation of ethnic sentiment, and one which came close to destroying Malayan society, was the sustained jungle guerrilla activity of the communist insurgency, or 'the Emergency', in the aftermath of the Second World War, usually identified as a largely Chinese movement.

Even before the 13<sup>th</sup> May racial clash, the Chinese were seen glorifying Mao Tze Tung, China's communist leader, during the DAP victory parade of the 1969-General Election. Immediately after the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 tragedy, the government realised that a determined effort was needed to enhance profound interethnic relations. However, with various incidences of racial crisis such as the Kampong Medan incident in 1998, the Al-Maunah insurgence in 2000, and the Kampong Rawa tragedy in 2001, to mention a few, pessimism grew among many social scientists regarding the degree of national integration that would be possible in Malaysia (Suh and Ranawana 1999; Guan 2000; Hari Singh 2001; Tate 2001).

### 3.6 National integration

Immediately after the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 tragedy, the government saw a crucial need for the three major ethnic groups to build a strong empathetic relationship so that they could live and work together peacefully. A comprehensive effort was taken as a reactive measure. The National Consultative Council was generated to design an affirmative action policy to rectify economic disparity and communal segregation in the multiethnic society. The government saw that economic disparity and communal segregation were the causal factors of the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 racial conflict. As a result the government commenced the NEP in 1971 and implemented the policy for a period of 20 years (Gullick 1981: 144-158).

The NEP's ultimate objective was to establish national unity among the people (Means 1976: 408). To achieve this objective, the NEP was designed with a dual development programme. The first programme was aimed at reducing and eventually eradicating poverty through economic efforts of raising income levels and increasing employment opportunities for all Malaysians irrespective of their race. The second programme was targeted at accelerating the process of restructuring Malaysian society by rectifying economic imbalances within it, so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the reference of specific race to specific economic functions (E.P.U 1971). In other words, the objective was to reduce and finally eliminate the identification of Malays as paddy planters and fishermen, Indians as rubber-tapers and plantation labourers, and Chinese as traders and businessmen, and thus, structuring greater chances of interacting with one another.

The term integration generally refers to a process of mixing several parts to produce a whole unit. National integration in the Malaysian context would be the task of 'integrating Malaysia's many ethnic groups, manifested in a united Malaysian society, one that shares the fundamental values identifiable as Malaysian' (Jawan 2003:162). The concept of unification of Malaysian society and sharing fundamental values, points to the notion of nationalism. Thus, one of the important component of national integration is nationalism, which is also closely linked to national unity.

Birch (1989) observes that even though nationalism is the most successful political ideology in human history, its achievement in integrating different ethnic groups and cultural minorities in many Western countries faces considerable

problems. The process and frequent failures of national integration have been of central importance, especially marked by political asylum seekers and diaspora of the Chinese, Indian, African and European communities. Issues of national integration are linked to issues of minority rights, preserving cultural identities, and equality. As for instance, in the 1960s the African-American citizens of the United States claimed that school and college curriculum should include programs of 'black studies'. Considered as a community, they claimed that American blacks had a distinctive cultural identity, which was threatened by integrative developments and therefore deserved protection. It was also a claim to preserve differences from white society, but paradoxically it is distinct from a claim to eliminate differences for a closer interethnic relationship. Birch (1989:55) points out that the claims raise questions, which 'some scholars have called an ethnic trap, whereby the preservation of cultural distinctiveness makes the achievement of economic equality more difficult'. This suggests that the effort of national integration is intricate and problematic.

In relation to Birch's remarks, national integration could be further defined as the incorporation of various communities of a nation or state at national level in materialising the goal of nation building (Nagata 1979). The foundation of this incorporation of various communities is an active sense of loyalty to the government, whom they are obeying, as well as committing a sense of love to their country (Birch 1989:39). The loyalty and obedience to the government and the country are presented when they make sacrifices such as paying a proportion of their income through taxation, accepting conscription in times of war and enduring hardship when it transpires, and also abiding by numerous laws and regulations. In other words the basis of the communities' incorporation is the presence of a committed sense of nationalism towards the government and the country.

Nazrul (1989) emphasises that the task of national integration always appears to be an arduous process. The difficulties of this process are more conspicuous in the context of new states in Asia, where most of them had an experience of colonialism. In the Malaysian context, Nazrul sees that the problem of national integration is the unique distinction of the multi-racial composition of its society, where it has to contain three main racial groups, of whom about half are immigrant and recent settlers. This suggests intricacy of cultural barriers. The immediate problem for Malaysia is how to develop a national feeling among the discrete national groups comprising diverse social, cultural and racial elements (M. Nazrul 1989:19).



In the Malaysian context, national integration is principally an effort of social engineering to dissolve the identification of its citizenry through ethnic origin and restructure them for national identity of Malaysia (Jawan 2003:162). However, what is defined as national identity is vague. Social scientists use different perspectives to examine it in the context of Malaysia.

In theory, the task of national integration could be established through various possible directions of cultural integration. Nagata (1979:220), Comber (1983:87), and Jawan (2003:162) suggest three similar directions of cultural integration, which they see as principal to national integration. The first direction would be a Malay-based nation through the encouragement of assimilation of 'Malayness'. A second possibility would be the development of a new Malaysian cultural and national identity through the hybrid of Malaysian culture, composed of traditional elements of all major communities. Almost under the same concept, Birch (1989:49) used the term cultural assimilation or a melting pot that points out a 'blend of different cultures.' A third alternative is a pluralistic arrangement, whereby each of the communities maintains its essential cultural distinctiveness and institutional separateness, which would more or less represent a continuation of the status quo (Nagata 1979:220).

Besides the above three directions, Nagata (1979:220) also suggests a fourth alternative to the Malaysian integration process, which she calls Westernisation. This integration adopts the Western culture and style of life, which to Nagata is a kind of 'neutral' solution to all of the above alternatives. Through this integration, the Western culture would transcend local and traditional cultural and social differences as exercised in Singapore.

In Malaysian context, out of the alternatives that Nagata, Birch, Jawan and Comber advocate, the direction that is taken largely through government policies is more towards the pluralistic arrangement. Such inclination is also termed 'salad bowl' integration, where different ethnic groups stay together but do not assimilate (Anderson 2000: 263). Through this 'salad bowl' concept, different ethnic groups retain their ethnic particularity. Anderson (2000:263) asserts that an important implication of this 'salad bowl' integration has been the continuation of racial and ethnic competition.

Tun Razak, the Second Prime Minister of Malaysia, through his effort of social restructuring, immediately after the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969, suggested:

The government policy on national integration is not by process of assimilation but by integration, that is, by mutual adjustment of diverse cultural and social traits, acceptable to all races in the country (As quoted in Milne and Mauzy 1978: 366).

However, Mahathir Mohamad during his early premiership in 1982 reiterated an uncompromising stand upon the effort of cultural assimilation.

The majority view was that Malay culture should be the predominant ingredient of the national culture – to be accepted and practiced by all – as opposed to merely coexisting parallel to the cultures of the other communities. There were others who desired it to be the sole ingredient (as quoted in Munro-Kua 1996:116).

Much later in 1995, Mahathir showed a diversion from the earlier concept of cultural assimilation and was more inclined towards the pluralist model. He pointed out:

Bangsa Malaysia [Malaysian nation] means people who are able to identify themselves with the country, speak Bahasa Malaysia (Malaysian language) and accept the Constitution. To realize the goal of Bangsa Malaysia, the people should start accepting each other as they are, regardless of race and religion (as quoted in Wah 2002: 33).

The government's standpoint on national integration is strongly affirmed with the announcement of Vision 2020 in 1991, which is also taken as the policy commitment of the current government. Mahathir's Vision 2020 stated that, 'Malaysians of all colours and creeds are free to practise and profess their customs, cultures and religious beliefs and yet feeling that they belong to one nation' (Mahathir 1990:2).

From Mahathir's Vision 2020, to the current government's policy, the direction of Malaysia's national integration outlines the principles of pluralism. This is illustrated through the education and social system which is patterned on pluralistic peculiarity, where there are ethnic-based schools, ethnic-based mass media, ethnic-based political institutions, while the use of languages of different ethnic groups in business and other activities are clearly provisioned in the Federal Constitution (Jones 1998).

It is noticeable that the pressure of moulding an integrated plural nation is crucial to the economic, social and political stability. In fact one of the main factors that made the British grant independence to Malaysia in 1957 (at that time Malaya) was the apparently strong commitments to national unity among the major races

represented through the Alliance Party, which is made up of the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). Each of them represents the major ethnic group. However, such strong political commitments were also perceived as only involving the political elites, while less enthusiasm was seen at the grassroots level (Slimming 1969; Teik 1978).

### **3.6.1 Ways to foster national integration**

Birch (1989:40) suggests four ways of fostering national integration among the different ethnic groups. These four ways could be implemented through direct initiatives and by reactive measures of government to minimise political effects of ethnic and cultural cleavages within the multiethnic society.

First is to create particular symbols of national identity as a sense of national pride. Flags, anthems and cultural uniqueness, and customary attires all serve this purpose.

Second is to create a system of socialisation through the educational system where certain fundamentals of nationalism could be induced especially through curriculum and teaching materials. This may include the virtues of the nation to which the society develops the sense of belonging.

Third is through the establishment of political institutions to represent all sections of society. In Malaysia, as the formation of the National Front Party exemplifies, the major political institutions are established from two different levels: the primary level and the secondary level. The primary level is formed within a particular community of ethnic group, on the secondary level it merges or affiliates itself with other major ethnic communities. The National Front Party could be seen as a secondary level establishment, with its primary levels based on the UMNO, MCA and MIC parties. Through this system, many issues, such as cultural, religious and linguistic, need to be tolerated in many forms in the affiliations.

The fourth way takes the form of reactive measures of the government like redressing the economic disparity between ethnic groups, encouraging interethnic

dialogues, or regulating mixed residential areas. Nothing is more important than making them mix together, an opposite view to Furnival's pluralism.

The process of national integration in countries where ethnic group identities are not diverse, as in differences of complexion, religious beliefs, languages, origins and culture, may be less problematic. Birch suggests that the use of national language in business and education 'could lead in time to erosion of ethnic barriers, to intermarriage, and to a situation in which ethnic consciousness diminishes (Birch 1989:43). Such a process would greatly contribute to national integration. However, such measures were ignored in the beginnings of the colonial legacy and had little prospect especially when the minority compositions were large compared to the host ethnic group.

### **3.7 Malaysia's Democracy**

Democracy in Malaysia begins with the British's conferment of independence on August 31, 1957. It was not only a matter of having government 'rule by the people', but it was the achievement of close cooperation among different ethnic group leaderships. There were a lot of sacrifices and compromises in making agreements under the allegiance of the major ethnic-based political parties made up of UMNO-MCA-MIC (Tunku A Rahman 1969) especially through the Alliance Party.

The Malay's special rights and privileges provisioned in the Federal Constitution marked such sacrifices and compromises of the nation, especially from the non-Malay based political parties. After the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 incident, the Alliance party was renamed the National Front Party (or 'Barisan Nasional' in Malay term). The strength of the political alliance that involves the three major ethnic-based parties was the collaboration on the level of national politics that avoided electoral contention at every parliamentary and state level. This is reflected through compromises made whereby an MCA candidate will represent an electoral area dominated by the Chinese community, while an MIC candidate will represent a constituency dominated by the Indians and so it goes too that UMNO will represent a constituency of Malay domination (Ratnam 1965:189; Andaya and Andaya 1982:261).

Malaysia's democracy reflects a unique model of its own that differs from the Western model and conventional practice. In Malaysia, the practices of democracy are

predominantly concerned with matters pertaining to social order and racial harmony, which are important to the plural society, rather than the principles of liberal democracy. This plural society is not only segregated along ethnic lines but also language, culture, religion, and economic activities. It is a legacy of the colonial past. The 'divide and rule' policy of the colonials legitimated the contemporary segregation of the different races of Malaysia along those lines (Firdaus 1997:196).

However, democracy in Malaysia changed and united the divided and compartmentalised states from a feudal system of government to a unified federated Malaysian nation made up of thirteen states. This brought a stronger nation effective in designing and implementing better political, economic and social policies. Since Malaysia adopted democracy, the process of modernization<sup>18</sup> accelerated and transformed its economy from agrarian to manufacturing and industrial. With annual economic growth of more than 7 percent during the first half of 1990's and the early years of 2000's, Malaysia is considered as one of the most prosperous countries in the region (Somun 2003).

Domestic and international social scientists, media practitioners, and human rights activists generally perceive Malaysia's democracy as derailed from the standard of the idealism of Western democracy (Diamond, Linz and Lipset 1989; Zakaria 1989; Crouch 1993; Munro-Kua 1996; Heufers 2002). As Heufers (2002: 40) attests, even though Malaysians enjoy regular elections and political stability, there are democratic setbacks because a full-pledge democracy requires fulfilment of some other democratic tenets that include extensive political competition, high levels of political participation and guaranteed civil and political liberties. Most critiques of Malaysian democracy are based on the comparison with the Western model.

However, Malaysia is perceived as democratic in many ways, even though in the political realm there are some elements that do not apply the call for idealistic, totally free and unrestrained democracy. As Banerjee (2004:34) suggests, any conceptualising of democracy is problematic because it constitutes a complex historical and political process involving a multiplicity of interrelated elements. Moreover, democracy is essentially a process in fulfilment, an ideal and therefore can never be fully achieved.

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<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the process of modernisation is perceived as slow before the formation of the Federation of Malaya as well as the formation of Malaysia's Federation, which before 1948, marked feudal government of non-federated Malay States.

As the former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad frequently emphasised, Malaysia engages a democratic system of its own mould, which corresponds to Asian values. According to Mahathir, Asian values stress duty to society and all the concomitant benefits that entails, such as social order, stable families, a solid work ethic, and a beneficent morality long since lost in the West (Dori 1998). In one instance Mahathir (2000a:139) asserts:

For centuries, many of us in Asia believed that our values and ways were second best. But today, Asians have discovered that Asian ways and values are not inferior simply because they are Asian, and are often superior despite the fact that they are Asian. Why must we change ourselves to suit the West and their values? Why are so many in the West insisting that we become just like them?

As most of its leaders would agree, the democratic practices in Malaysia are incorporated into government policy with the need for social security and social harmony in mind. As Mahathir (2000b:130) argues:

Domestically we have forgone much of our old authoritarian ways. We are not all democratic but elements of democratic thinking and caring for our people have influenced our thoughts and action...I commend democracy despite the fact that democracy does have many weaknesses and can be unproductive or even counterproductive at times. I commend democracy despite the fact that many Asian countries have succeeded only in establishing democracies where democracy's weaknesses run riot, rather than building democracies where democracy's profound strengths hold sway.

Thus in practice, democracy among different nations varies because the level of freedom they attain, their national aspirations and also their social, political and historical backgrounds varies. This is more noticeable when comparison is made between the nations of the developing Third World and those of the Developed West. The variation becomes more intricate when democracy is misunderstood as merely a political system or political process. Other fundamentals of democracy such as public participation, civil and political liberties, justice, and equality were often missing, even though democratic institutions were in place. Some political observers claimed that these other elements had been less emphasised in Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia. For instance, Bertrand (1998) points out that new self-assured form of political organisations are developing in East Asia. Much of this has to do with the unprecedented economic growth of the area and also from the fact that authoritarianism seems to co-exist with a lot of public consent. While Means (1996)

and Emerson (1995) observe that the idea of 'Asian democracy', guided democracy<sup>19</sup> and 'Asian form of human rights' are advocated by political leaders in South East Asia. These ideas focus on the necessity to restrict civil liberties and developing a whole range of different mechanisms for societal control. This is seen through dominant party systems, vote-buying, legal fine-tuning, ethnic affirmative action, co-option, restrictions on the right to organise, debate and voice opinions (Case 1996; Jesudason 1996). Just as Young (2005:5) points out:

Indeed, most societies have some democratic practices. Democracy is not an all-or-nothing affair, but a matter of degree: societies can vary in both the extent and the intensity of their commitment to democratic practice.

On such grounds, democracy of the Western nations is different to the democracy of the Third World, except for some similar electoral systems and institutions of democracy that support 'liberal participation and electoral contestation' (Hilley 2001:39). This is not to suggest that liberal democracy is the only and the best alternative for the developing nations. It is only an alternative to many others as there are also weaknesses in certain aspects of liberal democracy. As Barber (1984:4) observes:

[Liberal democracy] is based on premises about human nature, knowledge, and politics that are genuinely liberal but that are not intrinsically democratic. Its conception of the individual and of individual interest undermines the democratic practices upon which both individuals and their interest depend.

Thus, there are variations of democracy and this is further made complicated when the variation has to adapt to the contextual environment of its existence, history, colonialism, culture and values. Such democratic variants have created catchwords like 'Asian style democracy', 'guided democracy' or 'semi-democracy' (Kroef 1957; Palmier 1973; Case 1993b). On similar argument, some view 'Asian-style democracy' and guided democracy as substandard. They are perceived as such because principally they are seen as less democratic than liberal democracy.

The proponents of 'Asian style democracy' argue that Asians demonstrate a cultural propensity towards stable government, economic prosperity and safeguarding social harmony (Bilahari 1997:29-30). Thus, stable government should

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<sup>19</sup> To most Malaysians, guided democracy is a concept particularly referred to Sukarno's regime (Indonesia) democratic style that defined democracy as authoritative power legitimately given to the government. It is the government that guides the people of what is decent and what is not. Kimura (2001:3) describes guided democracy as an authoritarian form of rule couched in democratic language, where political freedom is suppressed.

be supported to sustain its power to govern. The proponents also suggest that Asians are communitarian, placing priority to collectivism of the society rather than individualism (Hood 1998:854). The collective welfare, intuitive respect for authority and social harmony is more important than individual rights. Such priority shows an inclination to consensus rather than a tendency towards dissent or confrontation. This view is extended to assert that Asians accept a strong, even autocratic government, provided its policies and actions deliver economic prosperity (Teik 2002:52-53). Malaysian government illustrates such inclination as portrayed through the 'affirmative action' of the NEP since 1970, which worked successfully to increase economic performance, and sustain social harmony (Means 1976). Malaysia remains democratic, in a way where all major communal political institutions work together, under the National Front party coalition. It is also seen as democratic because the opposition parties are given the liberty to contest elections and hold a number of parliamentary constituencies, and are even respected for having captured two states during the 1999-General Election. However, according to Teik and Wah (2002:4-5), Malaysia is also perceived as inclined to 'authoritarianism'.

The Malaysian trend towards authoritarianism, unlike trends elsewhere in Asia for example, was routinely justified by the ruling coalition as essential to the containment of interethnic tensions, especially those associated with disputes over the New Economic Policy (NEP). But the political crises of the 1980s – the constitutional crisis (1983-84), turmoil in Sabah (1984-86), violence at Memali (1985) financial scandals (1984-86) ...and the crisis of judiciary (1988) showed the pro-authoritarian trend.

Teik's and Wah's assertion denotes that Malaysia's democracy is problematic: the social restructuring of the NEP, used to justify ethnic preferential policy through affirmative action that favours the indigenous Malay, raised tensions in interethnic relationships. On a similar score, the opponents of 'Asian democracy' (Case 1993a; Jesudason 1996; Means 1996) argue that Malaysia's democracy scarcely supports pluralism, respect for individual rights and civil liberties that are customarily associated with 'liberal democracy'. In a less extreme variant, some of the opponents see it as neither democratic nor authoritarian (Means 1996; Hood 1998:853). Such a standpoint is largely based on the stringent laws, such as the ISA 1960, Police Act 1967 and Sedition Act 1948, that the government enacted since independent to curb communist insurgencies and racial tensions, and most importantly to sustain social harmony and national security.

In addition to Asian-style democracy, there is also a popular conception of guided democracy that stands parallel to Malaysian democracy (Kroef 1957; Palmier



1973; Guerin 2001). Some political observers see guided democracy as appropriate to describe Malaysian democracy (Cecilia Ng 2003; Pintak 2004). Ikrar Nusa (2002) in his study of democracy suggests that guided democracy carries the tendency of authoritarianism where most of the power goes to the Chief Executive of the state. He affirms:

Guided democracy concentrated power within the executives, particularly the President. Guided democracy was a great contrast to liberal democracy. While liberal democracy put the emphasis on the process, guided democracy emphasised the attainment of one major objective: a just and prosperous society only to be achieved by a systematic and planned democracy (Ikrar Nusa 2002:198).

From a different perspective, some political scientists charge that the concept of guided democracy is authoritarianism (Guerin 2001) because the government decides or guides the people on what is good for them and what is not. Only the good would be legitimised in the process of governance. Guerin (2001) observes that guided democracy as seen in Indonesia's democracy failed to change the Indonesians and to bring them out of backwardness. The root of the concept of guided democracy lies within Sukarno's figurehead position. Sukarno was seen to resent such figurehead position and anticipate the increasing disorder during his reign to claim for more power and to intervene more in the country's political milieu. He claimed that the Western-style democracy was not fit for Indonesians, and pointed out that guided democracy best suited the traditional Indonesian principles. The Indonesian way of deciding important questions, he argued, was by way of prolonged deliberation designed to achieve a consensus. He proposed a government based not only on political parties but on 'functional groups' (of his affiliates) composed of the nation's basic elements, in which a national consensus could express itself under presidential guidance.

Guerin even points out that the ideal of democracy, as in Indonesia, was used to camouflage the appalling aspect of guided democracy when the virtue of constitution was emphasised.

Many Indonesians are culturally more suited to a guided democracy, where the dream is more important than the reality, where the constitution is used as a tool to convince them that they really are being governed democratically (Guerin 2001:1).

I see similar depiction of guided democracy used in Malaysia. Immediately after the tragedy of 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969, Rukun Negara<sup>20</sup> was formulated and announced as national ideology. The idea of Rukun Negara resembles that of Indonesian national ideology of 'Pancasila'. Two of the five principles of Rukun Negara are 'respect for the supremacy of the Constitution' and 'Rule of law', which underlined the supremacy of the constitution and law. With regards to Guerin observation, such ideology of Rukun Negara strengthened the essence of guided democracy. In the 1970s the presence of various laws, which were initially used to curb communists' subversive movements, such as the ISA 1960, the Sedition Act 1948, and the Defamation Act 1957, remained in tack, even until now.

Recently towards the end of the last millennium the catchword 'illiberal democracy' appeared on the world political scene (Zakaria 1997; Zakaria 2003) to describe some defects of democracy that are inclined to authoritarian posture. This adds some unfavourable colours to Malaysian democracy especially when certain national crises like the 13<sup>th</sup> May racial clash, and the '1987 Operation Lalang'<sup>21</sup> that marked ethnic tension as well as the 1998-political crisis, are linked to democratic discrepancy. Critics of Malaysian democracy charge that the conventional tenets of democratic rule have been flouted in many instances (Teik 2002; Abbott 2004). For example, Teik (2002:61) claims that 'direct representation' and 'majority rule' have been subverted by ethnic forms of gerrymandering that favour the Malay, while Eng (2002:2) claims that in 1988, the parliamentary 'separation of powers' was jeopardised when the government interfered with the appointment of judges. Human rights oppression and police brutality were also widely criticised, leading to the establishment of the Malaysian Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) in 2000 and the recommendation for an Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission in 2006.

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<sup>20</sup> Rukun Negara is translated as national ideology that emphasised 'five basic principles of the nation' as follows: i. Belief in God; ii. Loyalty to the King and Country; iii. Respect for the supremacy of the Constitution; iv. Rule of Law; and, v. Good behaviour and morality. It was proclaimed during the 1970 Independence anniversary. The government intends to make it as a cornerstone of its basic strategy for policies and communal issues. Among others the proclamation is also linked to the 13<sup>th</sup> May tragedy, where the effort for national unity and national integration are highly promoted (Means 1976:401).

<sup>21</sup> Operation Lalang was a police operation, principally against the Association of Chinese Educationists also known as Dong Jiao Zhong. The operation was carried out for the reason that Dong Jiao Zhong had initiated a mass rally to protest against the Ministry of Education, which was linked to the appointment of some one hundred Chinese school officers. The appointment was against the consent of Dong Jiao Zhong (Munro-Kua 1996:134; Milne and Mauzy 1999:107; Teik and Wah 2002:38).

Despite Malaysia's democratic stand, there are also areas within such democracy that are seen to fall short (Zakaria 1989; Munro-Kua 1996; Zaharom and Mustafa 1998; Teik 2002; Aliran 2003b; Derichs 2004). Stringent laws such as the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984, and the Official Secrets Act 1986, that oppress freedom of the press and expression have led to such democratic deficiencies. Other problems such as accountability of the judiciary, rejection of minority voices in the mainstream mass media, corruption, accountability of election process, oppression of the public expression and some others that are linked to limited democratic stances, are also evident. This could also be explained through Huntington's 'third wave democracy'<sup>22</sup> that distinguishes the reversal as well as positive development of democratic regimes during the end of the last millennium.

Essentially, democracy should be based on a form of government that allows space for the different ethnic groups regardless of race, class, gender or economic backgrounds to engage in public life with equal opportunities and to realise their political, economic, cultural and social potential. Their voices should not be ignored. For such ideals of democracy, the mass media holds a crucial role. Also, for such ideals, the proponents of democracy propose active public participation in the process of political decision-making. This suggests 'participations in the process of democracy' that considers the voices of the people for policy and decision-making courses (Barber 1984; Giddens 2001).

Despite the above issue, there are evidence that suggest Malaysia leadership's rejection of liberal democracy, which to a certain extent affect democracy and its impact on national integration. As the former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, pointed out, 'Where democracy is introduced, riots, civil unrest, and killings take place' (as quoted in Dori 1998:3). Such standpoints of the country's top executive reflect that Malaysian leaders are less enthusiastic for liberal democracy, particularly in terms of freedom of the press and of expression. They see that such freedom would impede and possibly imperil national programmes of economic development and political stability (Vorys 1975:9).

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<sup>22</sup> Through 'third wave democracy,' Huntington (1991:14) discovers that there are reversal and also forward directions of democratic process suggesting changes from democratic to less democratic practices and also the positive direction. Huntington recognises that democratic transitions, consolidations and collapses can all result from a variety of dynamics that includes the legitimacy of authoritarian, modernisation that led to individualism and extreme commercialism, the increase of middle classes, involvement of external actors in promoting democracy and the rise of civil and human rights awareness among the people.

### **3.8 Challenges to Malaysia's democratic practices**

Challenges to Malaysia's democratic practices occur in the social realm rather than within the democratic institution of the parliament. These challenges are not only reflected through people's criticism, protests from NGOs, social and political scientists, and political dissents via the media, but also through street demonstrations. However, most democratic criticisms are centred on the need for more freedom of the press and freedom of expression as the International Press Institute, Vienna advocated (IPI 2004b). This freedom is strictly restrained through various laws such as the Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA) 1984, the Sedition Act 1948, the Internal Security Act (ISA) 1960, the Official Secrets Act 1972, and the Police Act 1967. These laws will be considered in detail in the next chapter.

There were two major incidents that reflect peoples' vibrant criticism of Malaysia's democracy. These incidents, to some political observers, were as bad as the 13<sup>th</sup> May racial clash (Milne and Mauzy 1999:107; Teik and Wah 2002:38). First, the political crisis, as the 1987 'Operation Lalang' illustrated, and second, the 1998-political crisis that highlighted the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim from the post of Deputy Prime Minister.

'Operation Lalang' was a 1987-police operation against dissident voices that protested against the government's appointment of Chinese school officers. It sparked off when the Association of Chinese Educationists or also known as Dong Jiao Zhong, held a big gathering to protest the Education Minister's appointment of some 100 senior assistants and principals of Chinese primary schools. These appointed school officers were not Chinese-educated and therefore did not have good command of Mandarin (the official language in Chinese schools). To counteract the Chinese communities' protest against the Minister, UMNO's Youth hold a mammoth rally with an attendance of half a million members to retaliate (Aliran 1988:2). Some perceived this as UMNO aggressive interference of the use of Mandarin as a medium of instruction in Chinese schools (Munro-Kua 1996). The UMNO Youth action also reflected a distraction to the fundamental liberty of a democratic state. However, the UMNO mammoth rally was cancelled, when it was viewed as liable to cause racial fighting between the Malays and the Chinese. Consequently, 97 people were arrested under the ISA 1960 for their involvement in the conflict including prominent politicians, human rights and civil rights activists, teachers and journalists.

The incident had also caused the suspension of a number of newspaper publication licences (Saravanamutu 2001:2) when the government claimed that they had abused their power in order to agitate the well being of national integration. The newspapers were Sin Chew Jit Poh, The Star, The Sunday Star, and Watan. This is an example of government's stringent action executed whenever media operators challenged the policy of national unity or whenever the mass media are seen as failing to convince the authority that they are inculcating national integration. However, many political observers would see the government's reactive stance towards the incident as a democratic flaw (Munro-Kua 1996:134; Milne and Mauzy 1999:107; Teik and Wah 2002:38)

The 1997-Asian financial crisis principally sparked the 1998-polical crisis, which gradually inflamed disagreement between the Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and his Deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, on issues concerning the management of the nation's economy. Anwar was also the Finance Minister at that period of time. The dispute turned into a political conflict. The consequence of their disagreement underlined the end to Anwar's political career; he was sacked from all his cabinet posts in September 1998 (Hilley 2001:106). After his dismissal, Anwar was detained without trial under the provisions of the ISA 1960 (Clarke 1998:3). Much later, he was charged for corruption and sexual misconduct and was subsequently sent to prison for five years. The situation in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur was chaotic during those periods as Anwar's supporters frequently organised demonstrations to show their support for him after he was charged for corruption and sexual misconduct. The government observed that close surveillance of the mass media was necessary for the reasons the Deputy Information Minister, Suleiman Mohamad, had affirmed when he said:

If the media indulges in activities that threaten political stability or national unity we will come down hard regardless of whether they are local or foreign... The local media is kept in check with the Internal Security Act<sup>23</sup> (as quoted in IPI 2004b).

Online journalism had then became the platform and tool for Anwar's supporters and government's political opponents, to spread their brand of protest as

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<sup>23</sup> Malaysia's Internal Security Act (or ISA) originally was a preventive detention law enacted in 1960 during a national state of emergency as a temporary measure to fight a communist rebellion. Under Section 73 (1) of the ISA, police may detain any person for up to 60 days, without warrant or trial and without access to legal counsel, on suspicion that 'he has acted or is about to act or is likely to act in any manner prejudicial to the security of Malaysia, or any part thereof or to maintenance of essential services therein or to the economic life thereof.' After 60 days, the Minister of Home Affairs can extend the period of detention without trial for up to two years, without submitting any evidence for review by the courts, by issuing a detention order, which is renewable indefinitely (HRW 2002a).

the authorities tightly controlled the local media, while street protests were banned (Siong 2004: 280). The court released Anwar in 2005, and cleared him of the sexual-misconduct charge, not long after Mahathir officially resigned from the premier post.

High-ranking editors of two Malaysia's media corporations, Johan Jaafar of Utusan Melayu Berhad and Ahmad Nazri Abdullah of The New Straits Times Berhad, resigned on 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> July 1998 respectively. Some political observers perceived that their resignations were the result of the newspapers' espousal of a more independent editorial stance, with which the government was not comfortable (IPI 2004b). An UMNO leader admits that both editors got into trouble because they strayed from the official line. He claimed:

Both editors went too far. Both were appointed with the PM's approval, but now it has been withdrawn. They had their own personal agenda without any interest in promoting the party line (as quoted in Suh, Shameen and Oorjitham 1998:34).

Political opposition leader, Lim Kit Siang charged that the two editors were forced to resign for trying 'to promote greater space for independent, investigative, and critical journalism' (IPI 2004b). The government denied reports of a clampdown on the country's media and refuted allegations that the resignation of the two leading editors was due to political pressure (IPI 2004b). Much later, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January 2000, Abdul Kadir Jasin, the editor-in-chief of the New Straits Times Press Berhad also resigned. Reuters concludes that Jasin had been removed after an apparent disagreement with the government (as quoted in IPI 2004b). Both incidents highlight certain government's oppressive stance against the tenets of democracy: the freedom of the press and of expression.

There were also other incidents that challenged Malaysia's democracy. For instance in January 2003, Malaysiakini, the most talked-about independent online newspaper, drew the attention of the authority after it published a letter-to-the-editor criticising the government for favouring ethnic Malays. The writer charged that the ruling party was unfair to the minorities, with attitudes of racism similar to that of the Ku Klux Klan of the United States (Berita Harian 2003). The UMNO Youth movement then filed a police report accusing Malaysiakini of sedition and instilling hatred against the government, and inflaming ethnic sentiments. Ten days after the letter had been posted on the Internet, police raided Malaysiakini's office and confiscated 15 computers and four servers. To worsen the impact, two days after the raid the landlord of the office premises informed Malaysiakini's administration that they were

being evicted from their offices for activities 'contravening the laws of the land' (BBC 2003; IPI 2004b).

With the use of the ISA 1960 on individuals and political dissenters, in order to curb risks to national security and national integration, the government has had for decades received both international and internal criticism (HRW 2002a). The legislation violates internationally recognised human rights standards, and has been accused of being used arbitrarily against political dissenters and opponents. More than 4,000 people have been detained under the ISA 1960 since its inception in the 1960s (HRW 2002a). Using the ISA 1960, the government could arrest and detain any person legitimately, including any Member of Parliament (MP), if they were found 'to act in any manner prejudicial to the security of the state' (Fritz and Flaherty 2003:1379).

In an attempt to deflect growing international and domestic criticisms for their repression of human rights, the government set up the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia<sup>24</sup> (HRCM or Suhakam) as advisor in matters concerning human rights (Suhakam 2000). In August 2001, HRCM presented its first report of a case of police attack on a major political rally organised by opposition parties on November 5, 2000. HRCM findings from a four-month investigation took evidence from 46 witnesses, including 16 police officers, and videotapes. The report ends with a recommendation for a police investigation into the violent actions of their own officers. The report also provides a rare insight into police procedures and hints at the political motives for the action. The Commission also charged that:

There was also evidence that the police carried out the cruel and inhuman treatment of detainees, and took advantage of their situation for the purpose of forcing them to confess or otherwise incriminate themselves (as quoted in Roberts 2001).

Malaysia's judiciary has also been criticised for its lack of accountability. Since the sacking of the Former Lord President and highest judge of the country, Tun Salleh Abas in 1988, the independence of Malaysia's judiciary has been questionable (Asian Human Rights Commission 1999). In recent years, a number of corruption

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<sup>24</sup> The main functions of HRCM are: (i) to promote awareness of and provide education in relation to human rights. (ii) to advise and assist the Government in formulating legislation and administrative directives and procedures and recommend the necessary measures to be taken. (iii) to recommend to the Government with regards to the subscription or accession of treaties and other international instruments in the field of human rights. (iv) to inquire into complaints regarding infringement of human rights (Baria 2001).

cases that involved high profile personalities have together demonstrated the judiciary's failings, representing challenges to Malaysia's democracy.

To many political and social scientists, and proponents of liberal democracy, especially of the domestic and international Human Rights movement, NGOs and political oppositions, Malaysia's democracy is perceived unsatisfactory to that of the Western standard. Such perception was reflected in the World Democracy Audit of 2004 ranking Malaysia's democracy 94<sup>th</sup> of 149 nation states throughout the globe (Lindley 2004:1-5), as shown in Table 2.4. In these circumstances, it signifies that Malaysia's democracy is not corresponding to the standard recognized by the United Nations. Despite Malaysia's sixth ranking in Southeast Asia's democracy audit, it is clear that Malaysia stands amongst the least democratic states in the region.

**Table 3.5**  
**World Democracy Audit 2004**

<b>S.E.A Countries</b>	<b>Democracy Rank</b>
Thailand	55
Philippines	57
Cambodia	75
Singapore	79
Laos	85
<b>Malaysia</b>	<b>96</b>
Indonesia	114
Vietnam	140
Myanmar	149

(Lindley 2004:1-5)

However, the government countered that Malaysia has its own pragmatic democracy, which benefits the nation. As Mahathir argues:

Malaysia is not over-zealous about the democratic system to the point where we accept without question everything that is done in the name of democracy. If the people and the country benefit, then we will accept practices, which are said to be democratic. If the people and the nation get only the worst from any practice that is said to be democratic, we will give priority to what is good for the country and the people, and put aside the questions of whether or not it is democratic (as quoted in Saliha 2002:198).

Mahathir made his point when Malaysia's democracy positively enhanced economic achievement and social stability. On this note, Dori (1998:2) observes:



Despite recent troubles, Prime Minister Mahathir deserves a great deal of credit for the positive strides he has made for his country. Gross domestic product (GDP) has grown at an average rate of more than seven percent per year...Economic successes over the past decade have been particularly marked, with GDP growth averaging almost 9 percent – along with reduced inflation, unemployment, and poverty, and an increase in per capita income. Mahathir also deserves credit for modernizing Malaysia's economy, transforming it from an exporter of commodities...into a manufacturer of such high value-added products as semiconductors, cellular telephones, and electronic equipment. Moreover, he more closely integrated Malaysia into the world economy by moving to ease restrictions on foreign ownership and investment in the mid-1980s. Mahathir also presided over a stabilization of racial relations in Malaysia. His faithful implementation of the 1971 vintage New Economic Policy - a type of affirmative action program intended to boost the economic, social, and educational fortunes of native Malays – has gone a long way toward reducing income inequalities in an economy traditionally dominated by minority ethnic Chinese. This is an extremely important consideration in a society that is a volatile mix: roughly 60 percent Malay, 30 percent Chinese, and 10 percent Indian, and that in 1969 was wracked by violent racial clashes that left hundreds dead.

From the above discussion, this study takes the view that Malaysia's democracy does not correspond to the liberal democracy of the Western model. Malaysian democracy stands on its own model by being selective about 'what is good for the country and the people' as Mahathir advocates (as quoted in Saliha 2002:199). The model gives high priority for the government to ensure peace and harmony through political stability, which is also perceived to create a conducive environment for economic prosperity. As Saliha (2002:201) points out, 'Malaysian democracy therefore has restrictive laws to regulate, monitor, depoliticise, and if necessary, eliminate critics, dissenters and confrontational figures, especially if their opposition is regarded as jeopardising national agendas' that disrupt established development. Through such style of democracy, which many termed as guided democracy, more power is given to the executive rather than the balanced power of judiciary and constitution, as conventional democratic practices propose. Hence, as Saliha (2002:201) advocates, 'the resulting political structure is a combination of strong central government, executive dominance and controlled democratic practices'. Thus, there are democratic setbacks and there are also supporting achievements such as Malaysia's economic success, and political and social stability have illustrated.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

This chapter provides some fundamental discussion of Malaysia's socio-political background, especially historical points of colonial and post-colonial periods. Among the main issues discussed were Malay supremacy, colonialism, the formation of a plural society, the effort of national integration and the foundations of Malaysian democracy.

There are four important issues highlighted in this chapter: firstly the issue of pluralism or the formation of a multiracial society that is linked to colonialism. Secondly, the issue of national integration, which ethnic conflicts, such as the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 tragedy had affected. Thirdly, the Japanese occupation during the Second World War had contributed to the infiltration of communism among the Chinese community and their insurgence. The Chinese involvement in communism had also inflated racism between the Chinese and the Malay communities. Fourthly, the British colonialism bringing the formation of a Malaysian Federation, democracy, and modernisation, particularly in terms of judiciary, defence and governance. During the periods leading towards independence in 1957, the British were answering to the appeals of the Malay community and were concerned with the Malays' sentiments. This is reflected through significant consideration of Malay special rights and privileges in the Federation of Malaya Constitution. The government's attitude on economic development, social and political stability, has drawn Malaysia's democracy away from the conventional liberal democracy. Asian values and guided democracy are dominant, and many would perceive Malaysia's style of democracy as inclined towards authoritarianism.

# **CHAPTER FOUR**

## **Mass Media and Online Journalism**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines the mass media setting in Malaysia and how online journalism has developed. The examination will include the principal features of Malaysia's mass media, which underlined an ethnic-based orientation and government control. This chapter also examines the various laws that directly and indirectly impinge on the freedom of the press.

Online journalism is considered new to the Malaysian public, even though the first ISP was launched as early as 1990. This chapter will explain that vibrant utilisation of online journalism only began in 1998, when parliament instituted the 'non-censorship' assurance through the CMA 1998. The explanation will include the technological aspects of online journalism to distinguish its uniqueness compared to the mass media. Its distinct technological features and much freer environment have taken online journalism onto a different track to that of its print and broadcast counterparts. Much of the discussion will focus on its significance and strengths in the mass media setting as well as in relation to Malaysia's social and political landscapes. The final part of this chapter will present the potential of online journalism in areas that concern Malaysia's democracy and national integration.

### **4.2 Mass media setting**

The emergence of online journalism has significantly changed Malaysia's mass media setting. Contemporary online journalism is providing space for the public to voice their participation in the process of democracy, using freedom of expression and the freedom to participate in political debates. However, to have a clear sense of how the changes are taking place, it is important to look into some of the foundations forming Malaysia's mass media setting. These foundations are basically formed on three fundamentals: their ethnic-based structure, the enactment of media-related laws, and ownership of the mainstream mass media.

#### **4.2.1 Ethnic-based mass media**

Malaysia's mass media is constructed along ethnic lines (Lent 1982). This is seen through the establishment of ethnic-based presses that cater to the appeal of each of the different ethnic groups. Such a pattern ignores the formation of a collective idea of a national agenda, and tends to focus on singular ethnic groups. With the exception of Malaysia's television, the broadcast media also provides ethnic-based radio channels to separately focus on each of the different ethnic groups. As shown in the work of RTM (Radio Television Malaysia) the natives of Sabah and Sarawak are provided their own radio channels for three different native groups in different respective languages (Radio Television Malaysia 2004). For the peninsula audiences, Radio Five caters to the Chinese listeners, Radio Six for the Indians, while the National Channel is broadcast in Malay language principally for the Malay listeners. The same pattern goes for the mainstream presses; each of them is seen to cater to a single ethnic group through an ethnic-based medium (Lent 1982:252-260).

Under such patterns we can see that each medium carries the tendency to extend more coverage on issues that concerned the respective communities (Halimahton 1997:3) and thus promoting ethnic nationalism rather than 'Malaysian nationalism'.

Furthermore, almost all of the mainstream press are associated with media corporations that are linked to the ethnic-based political parties, which are usually the ruling affiliates: UMNO, MCA and MIC. This also suggests that besides ethnic nationalism, political sentiments would also be easily communicated among party members of particular ethnic groups as well as the general public. Again this would not accommodate the philosophy of national integration: integrating Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups into one that shares the fundamental values identifiable as Malaysian (Jawan 2003:162).

Consequently, such ethnic-based media features work against national integration, which would require all the different ethnic groups to communicate with each other in order to advocate closer interethnic relation. Ethnocentrism, even among the indigenous groups is likely to be heightened under the influence of such an ethnic-based mass media environment. The classical consequences to such ethnocentrism were illustrated in the 13<sup>th</sup> May racial conflict that saw the deaths of

about 1000 civilians, while the more recent incidents could be traced back to the Kampong Medan and the Kampong Rawa racial conflicts (Slimming 1969; Tunku A Rahman 1969; Hari Singh 2001).

Online journalism differs in that it can accommodate different languages in a single entity. For instance, Malaysiakini provides news stories in Mandarin, Malay and English, while Agenda Daily and Malaysia Today have both English and the national language for their audiences. There are supportive software programmes that automatically translate textual stories from one language into another. Malaysiakini also shows that it employs reporters and journalists of mixed ethnic backgrounds: Malay, Chinese and Indian. In this environment, transparency of stories and opportunities for interethnic communication through the medium are greater than in traditional mass media. This is explained when all different ethnic groups could access to the same stories and news through online journalism, and therefore if there were elements of ethnocentrism, they could be dealt with and debated openly. On the other hand, the ethnic-based traditional mass media basically accommodates to a specific ethnic group. As for instance, the Malays would not read Nanyang Siang Pau and Tamil Nesan newspapers, which are presented in Chinese and Indian respectively. Through such logic, news transparency within the different ethnic groups is limited.

#### **4.2.2 Ownership and control of the mainstream mass media**

The freedom of the press in Malaysia, one of the fundamentals of democracy, is effectively denied through two routes; the government political affiliates' ownership of the mass media, and the enactment of laws. The bottom line is that mainstream mass media in Malaysia operates under the control of the ruling parties. Among the consequences of this control is that the power is frequently used to remove editors and journalists when their journalistic pieces are disagreeable to their masters (Saliha 2002; International Press Institute 2004).

The ruling party's acquisition of most prominent mass media corporations is observable during the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the 1970s and heightened when the National Privatisation Policy was implemented in the 1980s. Through the NEP, the affiliates of the ruling coalition parties were encouraged to invest in the country's major newspapers so as to exert control over the

newspapers and to utilise them to achieve national agenda (Mustafa 2002). However, the trend also exploits the mass media for a political agenda.

A much greater control of the mainstream mass media was also proposed when the government decided to change the ownership structure of foreign-owned press. This proposal, as part of the NEP project, collaborated with the amendment of the Printing Presses and Publication Act in 1984, to warrant that all foreign ownership of Malaysian newspapers would gradually end, and that Malaysians would be the majority shareholders of foreign-owned newspapers. The move appeared commendable, but in practice it resulted in the ruling political parties and their affiliates' monopolisation of the Malaysian presses (Mustafa 2002).

Another aspect of the NEP policy that affects the media setting is the move toward the privatisation of public sectors through the 'National Privatisation Policy' implemented in 1983 (Gomez and Jomo 1997; Abbott 2004). Since its implementation, the privatisation policy has considerably changed the mass media setting, especially the broadcasting sector. Through the new policy we could see that private radio channels and private TV stations were established, such as Radio ERA TV3, NTV7, 8TV, MiTV, and ASTRO (McDaniel 1994) and most recently TV9. Principally the motives of the privatisation policy were to open a new phase of the Malaysian mass media toward more freedom of expression and democratic practices, whereby privatisation would liberalise the media and rescue it from the stranglehold of the authority. Ironically many see that the stranglehold of the authority became more obvious when the media moved from the hands of the government to the hands of the ruling parties (Lent 1982:265; Zaharom 2002; Abbott 2004:81). As Zaharom (2002:130) asserts:

The economic liberalisation has not really resulted in a loosening of government control over the media, contrary to the initial beliefs of many. The reverse has in fact happened. The main forms of control over the media – legal, political and economic – have certainly been tightened since the 1980s. ...The ownership and control of the media are in the hands of a few who are closely aligned to the government and who also wish to profit from the situation.

Consequently, the results of the NEP and privatisation policy affect the mass media because almost all major presses are currently in the hands of the ruling political parties and their economic allies. For instance the NSTP, which is linked to UMNO's media corporation (Zaharom and Mustafa 1998), is the publisher of The New Straits Times, one of the most popular English dailies. Utusan Melayu

(Malaysia) Berhad, also belongs to UMNO's affiliate (Zaharom 2002:120). It publishes Utusan Malaysia, the second largest Malay press in circulation and a number of other Malay language weeklies and magazines. The leading daily press, The Star, the most-circulated English language daily, belongs to MCA, another affiliate of the ruling coalition. MCA also owns Sin Chew Jit Poh, Nanyang Siang Pau, and China Press (Loone 2001). The Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the third most influential party of the ruling coalition holds majority stakes in Tamil Nesan and Malaysia Namban, two influential dailies that appeal to Indian readers (Heufers 2002: 57). The full complement of major ethnic-based mainstream presses is in the complete control of the ruling parties and its allies.

Remarkably, another media giant named Media Prima was established in 2003 (Netto 2005:1). Besides acquiring NSTP and TV3, Media Prima also owns NTV7, 8TV and TV9. Thus, Media Prima becomes the country's biggest media conglomerate and the only organisation that owns broadcast and print media. It is believed to be linked to the key ruling party UMNO (Puah 2005:1). Such ownership highlights Media Prima's monopoly of all the private TVs in the country, apart from ASTRO satellite TV and MiTV, belonging to business tycoons, Ananda Krishnan and Vincent Tan respectively.

The establishment of Media Prima suggests the government's tighter grip upon the mass media, which include all major mainstream presses and almost all private TVs. This also suggests the increasing apprehension of reporters and journalists when working in the watchdog role and investigative reporting. It is obvious that this setting has consequently led the mass media:

...to offer their audience a daily diet of mainly business news and social features while neglecting the more fundamental issues of poverty, public corruption, nepotism, cronyism, or the activities of opposition political parties and advocacy groups' (Loo 2003b:186).

Consequently what would be seen in the Malaysian mass media would conform to Lent's (1982:266) words, that:

[The Malaysian mass media] ...can be defined as economically sound but nearly bankrupt when it comes to political freedom. By relinquishing their watchdog posts...they have become less than credible champions of governmental priorities. There is little chance of this latter trend being reversed.

In principal, independent online journalism such as Malaysiakini, Malaysia Today, Agenda Daily, Malaysian Voters Union, Aliran, Suaram, and Hakam, to

mention few, remain untouched by such monopoly. These online journalisms belong to organisations that are free from political parties. As for instance, two journalists of a mainstream press, who was against the interference of gatekeepers had resigned and established Malaysiakini (Siong 2004). While Raja Petra, who was one of the key players of the 'reformasi'<sup>25</sup> activism had initiated Malaysia Today that holds the philosophy of 'your source of independent news'. These online journalisms provide considerable space in terms of facilitating the voices of the minority, the opposition, dissenting views, criticisms, and academic and intellectual discourses. However, the online versions of the mainstream print media do not cover the whole content of the print version; a marketing strategy to retain print readers (Siong 2004). Siong observes that:

Most of these sites were, and remain, mirror of their content in their print edition, although some interactive features such as forum and greeting card services were inserted to add value to the sites (Siong 2004:279).

So audiences who want untainted news, balanced reporting, criticism, and open debate on social and political issues prefer to read independent online journalism rather than online version of print media (Abbott 2004). As Raja Petra of Malaysia Today pointed out during the 1998-political crisis, 'the mainstream mass media was no help and no one trusted its news anyway. So they turned to the Internet for what they felt was the best source of accurate news' (as quoted in Abbott 2004:85).

#### **4.3 Media-related law and freedom of the press**

There are at least 35 laws that directly and indirectly impinge on press freedom in Malaysia (Gan 2003:1). The existence of these laws in the backdrop of Malaysia's mass media constitute a 'stringent control' which has considerable impact on the way media practitioners work (Lent 1982:265; Mustafa 2002; Abbott 2004:81). Among the most common laws that are seen intruding on the free operation of the mass media are the Sedition Act 1948, the Internal Security Act (ISA) 1960, the Official Secrets Act (OSA) 1972, the Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA) 1984, and the Defamation Act 1957.

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<sup>25</sup> 'Reformasi' or reformist movement is the term used to describe the supporters of the sacked-Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, which was made known in the aftermath of the financial and political crisis in 1998. Literally it means a movement that aims for reform, but practically its activities were mainly seen as going against the government particularly of Mahathir's regime (see Saravanamuttu 2001a:104-107).



As far as journalists are concerned, the most intrusive of the laws is the PPPA 1984 (Gan 2003:1). It gives the government power to suspend or revoke printing and publishing permits, which need to be renewed annually. Its decrees are not subject to review or challenge in court. The Act stipulates that:

A potential publisher must secure a license to use a printing press and a permit to publish a newspaper. Both must be renewed annually through The Ministry of Home Affairs, which can withdraw either without cause at any time...All license holders must guarantee that their publications will not distort facts relating to public order incidents in Malaysia, will not inflame or stir communal hostility or use material likely to prejudice public order or national security (Lent 1982:263).

Consequently, the mainstream mass media becomes apprehensive and practices self-censorship. Abbott (2004:81) affirms that 'such regulation while not exclusively limited to the mass media, nonetheless often results in a form of self-censorship as journalists steer clear of stories or coverage that might result in their prosecution.' On the contrary and with regard to online journalism, the CMA 1998 'does not curtail the freedom of expression but [is] merely aimed at preventing computer crimes and ensuring security related primarily to online business activity' (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission 2005).

Since online journalism is not subject to the PPPA 1984, it does not require a license for operation. However this is not to deny the significance of other laws that could indirectly affect online journalism, such as the Sedition Act 1948, OSA 1972, Defamation Act 1957, as well as the ISA 1960. However, compared to the mainstream presses and broadcast media, online journalism carries more rational-critical discussions, intellectual discourses, interethnic communications, diverse opinions, dissident voices, suggesting a freer environment as compared to that of the traditional mass media.

To highlight their respective distinctiveness the various media-related laws are listed in Table 4.1. The table shows that the enactment and the amendments of these laws reflect a 'reactive stance' from the government to counter particular crises encroaching on issues of national security and public order. However, some of the amendment turned out to be a move to implement much stricter laws and thus is seen as a greater repression on the freedom of the press and of expression.

**Table 4.1**  
**Media-related Laws**

Name of Acts	Historical background	Key Provision
<b>The Sedition Act 1948</b>	It was introduced through the Sedition Ordinance 1948 by the colonial government to curb the communist movement and subversive activism. Amended in 1971 in response to the 13 <sup>th</sup> May racial clash.	The Act provisions that any public speech is criminalized if judged to carry 'seditious tendency', including hatred and contempt, or to excite disaffection with the government, promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races.
<b>The Internal Security Act 1960</b>	It was first introduced during the communist insurgence in 1948, and then amended in 1960 to give the power to the Home Ministry to detain without trial anyone prejudicial to national security as a reactive stance to the communist insurgencies. Again, it was amended in 1971 for a more stringent provision in response to the 13 <sup>th</sup> May racial clash.	The Internal Security Act allows for indefinite detention without trial for a minimum of 90 days and allows for arrest without a warrant of anyone that the authority has reason to believe has acted or is likely to act in any manner prejudicial to the security of Malaysia.
<b>The Official Secrets Act 1972</b>	It is based on an ordinance enacted by the colonial government in 1911 and amended in 1972 in response to the 13 <sup>th</sup> May racial clash and again amended in 1986 for a broader inclusion.	It carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment, as well as significant lesser penalties, for the actions associated with the wrongful collection, possession or communication of official information. Any public officer can declare any material an official secret - a certification, which cannot be questioned in court.
<b>The Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984</b>	It is based on an ordinance of a newly independent Malaya in 1958. Amended in 1974 and again in 1984 in response to the privatisation policy of the government and in response to foreign	The Act makes it compulsory for all print media to obtain a permit from the Home Affairs Ministry and renew it annually. Foreign publication requires payment of a large deposit for a permit. The amendment in 1987 empowers

	<p>controlled publications in Malaysia. The Act was also amended in 1987 in reaction to the 1987 political crisis of the ruling affiliates. It extended the power of the Minister to revoke licences when deemed fit and such action could not be challenged in the court of law.</p>	<p>the concerned Minister to revoke a license without judicial review.</p>
<p><b>The Communication and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998</b></p>	<p>It was introduced in 1998 to provide a regulatory, converging framework for telecommunication, broadcasting and computing industries. The enactment of this law repealed the Telecommunication Act 1950 and Broadcasting Act 1988. It collaborates with the Bill of Guarantees.</p>	<p>The Act was passed to fulfil the need to regulate an increasingly convergent communications and multimedia industry. It is based on the basic principles of transparency and clarity; more competition and less regulation; flexibility; bias towards generic rules; regulatory forbearance; emphasis on process rather than content; administrative and sector transparency; and industry self-regulation.</p> <p>Basically, this law does not curtail the freedom of expression but is merely aimed at preventing computer crimes and ensuring security related primarily to online business activity. It is clearly stated in Article 3 (3) that 'Nothing in this Act shall be construed as permitting the censorship of the Internet'.</p>

Sources: (Jones 1998; Human Rights Watch 2003b; Siong 2004:293; Suaram 2005b:68)

To draw attention to some instances of such a reactive stance, the Sedition Ordinance 1948 was amended to Sedition Ordinance 1960, in response to the pre-independence communist insurgency led by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). The communist insurrection took over the state in large areas of the peninsula (Andaya and Andaya 1982:257). The colonial government's central motive for enacting this law was to curb racial tension, as well as to restrain the dissemination of communist propaganda among the people. This Ordinance was again amended in

1971, as a reactive response to the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 tragedy, and to expand stringent action against those who inflamed racial hatred, disaffection with the government, inciting contempt for the administration of justice, and raising discontent among the people (Siong 2004:295).

In another instance, during the aftermath of the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 tragedy the government amended Article 149 of the Sedition Ordinance 1960 and the ISA 1960 – the most fearsome law, which some describe as draconian law (Amnesty International 2001:1). In the contemporary context, the ISA remains the core law that gives power to any police officer to:

...without warrant, arrest and detain pending enquiries, any person in respect of whom he has reason to believe that he has acted or is about to act or is likely to act in any manner prejudicial to the security of Malaysia (Fritz and Flaherty 2003:1379).

It was also during this period of post-13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 that the OSA 1972 was introduced. This Act gives the government punitive powers to prosecute any journalist who publishes official information without authorisation (Abbott 2004:81). This is another piece of legislation that suggests the tendency to hamper the working of journalists and dampen the development of investigative journalism. Subsequent amendments to this Act have had the effect of making almost all official documents 'official secrets', thus making it virtually illegal for journalists to have access to them (Mustafa 2002:151).

The PPPA 1958 was amended in 1984 to correspond with the 'National Privatisation Policy', when part of the policy involved public companies changing ownership to private corporations. However the PPPA 1984 was again amended in 1987 as the government's 'reactive' response to the 1987-political crisis, which also highlighted the 'Operation Lalang'. The new PPPA 1984 provides tougher punishment for publication of 'false news' (McDaniel 1994:93-94). Editors, writers, printers and publishers are punishable for a maximum three-year sentence and stiff fines if found guilty through the provisions. The amendment directly affects the mass media setting in Malaysia, where more controlling power is delegated to the Minister of Home Affairs and cannot be challenged in the court of law. The Home Affairs Minister is empowered to reject applications for a printing license and to revoke or suspend a permit if he deems fit (Heufers 2002:56; Zaharom 2002:128).

There are several instances that illustrate stringent implementation of laws against the freedom of the press and of expression in Malaysia. International Press Institute (IPI 2004a), an association of journalists of more than 120 countries, in its annual report provides exclusive detail of incidences that indicate authoritative control over Malaysia's mass media. For instance, in 2002 the management of *The Sun*, the third largest English language daily in Malaysia, sacked more than forty staff members to avoid stringent punishment of the PPPA 1984. The action was related to a page-one story about a plot to assassinate the then Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, and his deputy, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was also the Home Minister. The story mentioned that the police had uncovered the plot and the editors concerned consistently stood by the story, saying that government officials had verified the report.

Inevitably, control also comes from ownership of the media, where the bottom line is the power of the ruling parties and their affiliates. In this respect we can see that many editors of the prominent media such as Nazri Abdullah and Johan Jaafar, both of Utusan Melayu, Kadir Jasin and Abdullah Ahmad of the New Straits Times press, Robert Ho, Manirajan and Anita Nasir of the Sun were sacked for their pieces that were unfavourable to their superiors (International Press Institute 2004).

**Table 4.2**  
**World Press Freedom Audit 2004**

S.E.A Country	Press Freedom Rank
Philippines	45
Thailand	61
Indonesia	84
Cambodia	92
Singapore	102
<b>Malaysia</b>	<b>113</b>
Laos	137
Vietnam	135
Myanmar	147

Source: (Lindley 2004:1-5)

As shown in Table 4.2, it is not surprising that in 2005, the World Audit Organization (WAO) ranked Malaysia at 113<sup>th</sup> place out of 149 nation states all over the world for the standard of 'press freedom'. In this ranking system, WAO classified

countries scoring 0 to 30 as having 'free media', 31 to 60 as having 'partly free media' and 61 to 100 as having 'not free media'. Malaysia has this ranking, which is based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights policy that states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression that includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers (Lindley 2005:1).

In the South East Asian region Malaysia is ranked 6<sup>th</sup> out of nine countries, just ahead of Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar, which, significantly, were the three least-developed countries in the region. Although this is unacceptable to many Malaysians, with reference to the condition of Malaysian mass media and the state's stringent control as argued above, the ranking would seem justified.

The former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad (2000b:23) asserted the need for control of mass media due to its power to damage the nation:

The press is a very powerful institution. It is not called the Fourth Estate for nothing...It is one of the powers which determine the fate of human society...Unfortunately the media itself is often tempted to misuse power. In Malaysia we have a serious political problem made more serious by the manner the problem is being presented to the whole world by the all-powerful media.

Lent (1982:265) affirms that government policy has silenced the media when he points out: 'all newspapers steer away from investigative reporting, fill pages with government speeches and campaigns, and generally ignore the opposition'. Lent also quotes one Malay newspaper editor as saying, that 'it is not the newspaper's role to check on government, the papers here are not pro or anti-government, but supporters of government.' The statement reflects Malaysian mass media's position highlighting restriction on press freedom and consequently entrenching of self-censorship and fear in the Malaysian psyche.

Although all the Acts were drafted well before the advent of the Internet, except for the CMA 1998, it is arguable that undesirable material put up on the Internet would be caught by any of these Acts. One of the crucial questions is, what would the government's action be if any of the critical websites upload materials that do not conform to the government's position, despite the 'non-censorship' assurance given through the CMA 1998? This question was indirectly answered when the authorities raided the office of Malaysiakini when one of its 'letters to the editor' strongly criticised the government (BBC 2003). Nineteen computers and servers belonging to

Malaysiakini were seized but no one was charged with an offence. The freedom given to online journalism clearly has its limits.

There are dilemmas between the need for Internet regulation, economic development and social order. The government holds that social and national security factors are important and must not be compromised (Fritz and Flaherty 2003). Despite that, the need to pull international investors to the Multimedia Super Corridor Project, the enactment of CMA 1998 leads to a 'non-censorship' assurance by the government. Some political observers suggest that the freedom of expression given through CMA 1998 to online journalism has shown some paradoxes. As for instance, for the first time in Malaysian history, two states of the peninsula fell into the hands of the opposition party after the 1999-General election. This is the outcome of the opposition parties political campaigns carried out through online journalism. As Syed Ahmad (2002:105) asserts:

For the first time in history, UMNO seats in parliament were less than its coalition allies. UMNO also failed to regain the state of Kelantan from PAS [Islamic Party of Malaysia- one of the dominant opposition parties], and it lost the state of Trengganu to it.

Such consequences were significantly linked to the freedom of the press, especially through online journalism, because criticisms against the government were freely and largely communicated to the public during the opposition parties' political campaign, prior to the 1999-General Election. The campaigns carried out largely through online journalism were instrumental to the opposition parties, especially when they failed to attain space in the mainstream mass media. However many would see such election results as healthy in terms of democracy.

#### **4.4 Online journalism**

There are considerable numbers of literatures that scrutinize the implications of the Internet on democracy in Malaysia's contextual setting. However, as far as I have discovered, none of them have focused solely on the work of 'online journalism' and its collective implications towards democracy and national integration in Malaysian. Most of the literatures focus on the impact of the Internet on democracy, with less emphasis given to its journalistic features.

Many scholars such as Indrajit Banerjee (2003), Eric Loo (2003), T.Y. Siong (2004) Steven Gan (2004) and Jason Abbott (2001) argue that the principal aspect that makes the Internet significant to democracy in Malaysia is the distinctiveness of its technological features. Since online journalism is the product of the Internet, the distinctiveness of the technology also forms the fundamentals that differentiate the work of online journalism from its print and broadcast counterparts. The technological distinctiveness has significantly changed the way news is produced, disseminated and consumed. Peritt Jr (1998) describes the Internet as new information technology, which he sees as significant for democracy. He explains:

New information technologies threaten sovereigns that depend on maximum political, economic, and cultural control over their peoples... no longer can totalitarian regimes ensure themselves a safe environment by controlling the newspapers, radio and television stations because the World Wide Web remains beyond their control and manipulation (Peritt Jr 1998:431).

Eric Loo (2003c) and Abbot (2001) are pessimistic that the emergence of online journalism in Malaysia's social and political arena could make a serious impact on the regime with regard to democratic reform and change. While it does provide politically oppressed groups with an alternative medium for communication, dissemination and organisation of information, it has failed to become 'a substitute for more traditional forms of political mobilisation and action' (Abbott 2001:111).

Pessimistic and optimistic arguments regarding online journalism are common, but some social scientists are also reserving their views because online journalism is still a new arena. MGG Pillai (as quoted in Loo 2003b:196) refers to the utilization of online journalism as 'e-democracy', asserting that it is 'a non-starter in Malaysia so long as there is a disinterest about it amongst the citizenry, despite its promise to be at the cutting edge of technology.' Pillai's statement denotes that online journalism in the Malaysian context is a dependent variable in determining democratic change. If the people are interested collectively in making themselves heard, then online journalism will be contributory to positive democratic outcomes. On a similar note, as illustrated through the 1998-Indonesian reformation movement, the determinant for democratic change is highly correlated to the courage of the people and their collective participation (Somantri 2003; Banerjee 2004).

The technological distinctiveness of online journalism begins with computer technology. Basically, the technology has merged the traits of print medium and broadcast medium into a single entity. This enables the audience to access news



and informative content textually, to listen to them if they were presented in audible format, and watch them through a video streaming facility. The computer technology also created the World Wide Web: a hypermedia-based system that interlinks huge numbers of sites all over the globe through a gigantic network, which is referred to as the Internet. The linkage of sites on the Internet is hugely multifaceted that it is described as hyperlink (Deuze 2003). The technology facilitates users to access practically unlimited quantities of electronic information, including journalistic materials such as online newspapers, online journals and magazines, weblogs and bulletin boards. These journalistic materials contribute to 'online journalism'. To develop a better understanding of the terminology, I scrutinise it through two separate root words: 'journalism' and 'online'.

'Journalism' could be defined as any non-fiction or documentary narrative that reports or analyses facts and events firmly rooted in time. Reporters, writers, and editors select and arrange such materials to tell a story from a particular point of view through one or more forms of media; audio, video, textual and pictures. McQuail (2000: 498) asserts that journalism is the product or the work of professional 'news people'. In this sense, journalism is another word for 'news', with its many typical and familiar features, especially of being up to date, relevant, credible and interesting to a chosen audience.

'Online' is a generic term often used loosely to describe the process of accessing, retrieving or disseminating of digital information (Ward 2003). A person is described as going 'online' when accessing the Internet or browsing the World Wide Web. In relation to that, a website created for news presentation refers to 'online news'. Similarly, a newspaper that has a website to complement its published paper editions is described as 'online version' of the newspaper. However there are also 'online newspapers,' which are exclusively online, with no 'print version'. Wolk (2001: 6) defines online journalism as 'quality news and information posted on the World Wide Web, where people can read, see and hear it through their computers and other similar devices'. It is on these conceptions of Ward (2003) and Wolk (2001) that this study focuses: journalism on the World Wide Web that offers quality news and information accessible through texts, audio and visual, that bring about a new philosophy of journalism. However, as this study would highlight (especially through a mini-case study in Chapter Four), online newspapers, weblogs, and NGOs websites, have projected key roles in Malaysia's contemporary social and political milieus. This is also to suggest that there are a few dominant players of online journalism such as

Malaysiakini, Malaysia Today, Screenshots, Aliran, and Suaram and these are supported by other independent online news providers such as Berita Mu, Buletin Malaysia, Inteligencia, Malaysian Media Monitors Diary, Malaysia News and Malaysia Post, weblogs such as Shahrir-UMNO.blogspot, Kadirjasin.blogspot, Bakrimusa.com, Rocky.bru.blogspot, and NGOs websites such as ABIM, Awam, Amnesty International Malaysia, Balai Rakyat, CAP, FOMCA, HAKAM, Jerita and JUST (see Malaysia Central 2003).

Wolk (2001:15) discovers that online journalism allows the audience to go deep into a story and to access a great deal of in-depth information if the audience choose to. This is facilitated through multimedia technology. Thus, online journalism entails a process of packaging stories that includes three basic levels. First, it provides a brief summary that is more than a headline, but quickly lets the audience decide whether it wants more stories. With hypertext and hyperlink facilities, journalist can supply the audience with manifold navigation pathways, branching options that encourage them to continue to explore various narrative threads that the reporter, writer or editor assembled (Millison 1999:1). Second, it opens up a story and allows the audience to go deeper into it via different modes of medium, such as textual, graphics, images, animation, slides, audio and video. Hyperlinks support this feature to connect the story to numerous websites where enormous amounts of information are available.

Besides being able to watch, listen, and read textual materials, the audience could also respond to reporters or editors interactively via the Internet. Thus, the interaction, which was traditionally defined as one-way, from the writer to the reader, has been changed. Online journalism has made the communication interactive in both directions and with promptness via emails, bulletin boards, and chat rooms (Millison 1999:1). Besides that, interlinked web pages also provide an ideal mechanism to give an audience access to a library of source documents and background information that forms the foundation of an extensive journalistic investigation. Consequently, this communication traffic contends with the one-way direction of the conventional media and changes the traditional one-to-many, to a new many-to-one and many-to-many communication flow. Hall (2001:5) sees that these many-to-one and many-to-many communication patterns have made readers become their own storytellers.

Advocating similar traits of online journalism, Gunter (2003:7) points out that through a many-to-many communication flow, 'many points co-exist that makes

many-to-one scenario as unique' in contrast to the common idea of 'one-to-many' flow of communication as seen in the traditional mass media. This implies that online audiences are able to communicate among themselves, and also with the source of news, reporter and editor, in contrast with the traditional print media, where communication mainly connects editor and audiences. In addition, through cyber chat and mailing lists, online journalism 'will simultaneously connect people with common interests' (Gunter 2003:7). This is interesting with regard to the potential of online journalism to cross ethnic lines of communication in Malaysia. In addition, the vertical-upward flow as well as the horizontal flow, promote democracy in such a way that the people are able to communicate directly with the news providers, the news source and among themselves.

One of the crucial traits of online journalism that is linked to democratic practices is its 'freedom from gatekeeper'. Such freedom is limited for mainstream mass media because of corporate control, and in the Malaysian context, because of various stringent media-related laws. Contemporarily, the term gatekeeping has been widely used as a metaphor to describe the selection process made in media works, especially decisions on whether or not to allow a particular news report to pass through the 'gates' of a news medium into the news channels. Shoemaker (1991) observes that gatekeepers serve as a funnel that narrows down the number of messages to the available medium. In a broader sense, McQuail (2000: 277) translates gatekeeping as the power to give or withhold access to different voices in society and is often a locus of conflict. One common tension in democratic societies, as McQuail observes, is between governments, particularly politicians, and the media, over the amount of attention they receive in mass media.

What is important is that the notion of gatekeeper is less relevant with online journalism because consumers have direct access to the source (Singer 1998). Consequently, journalists or media owners are now changing their role from gatekeepers to facilitators. As Allen (2000: 51) points out, 'online journalism has diminished journalists' control over the media'. Not only are journalists no longer the only ones producing news, but they are also no longer the only ones with access to first-hand information. The information had to go through them in the past because there was no other choice. However, through online journalism the audience is able to get raw data and original documents.

Jim Hall (2201: 05) finds online journalist rejects the role of the sole storyteller and rather acts as guide to and commentator on primary sources. Readers now become their own storytellers and the role of gatekeeper is largely passed from the journalist to them. In this sense, online journalism has created a new media realm, where news no longer passes through a checkpoint of gatekeeper but reaches the audience directly from the source. Even if those journalistic pieces have to bow to the demands of the powerful, where news is biased, the source of the news has the potential to interfere.

Under such situation where gatekeeper is less relevant, quality control on materials that are posted directly from the source would still be affected. Even though the web master could edit materials sent through them, the source could always object to the changes if they were made without their consent. This suggests the changing role of editor from gatekeeper to facilitator (Allen 2000:51). It would also be beyond the webmaster's control in cases where audiences were able to participate directly, for instance in mailing lists, message boards and bulletin boards.

In terms of time and immediacy, online journalism takes much less time to publish and update online news. Much more, it takes place in 'real' and 'shifted' capacities, just as TV and radio do. It takes place in 'real time' because the new technology of portable computers (pocket computer) and wireless internet broadband have allowed the news of an event to be updated immediately at the moment it happens. While news and media contents are presented in 'shifted time' just the way news are presented in newspapers, online audiences could also access huge archives, which in certain cases are kept for years. Thus, the shifted time trait of online journalism is seen as convenient for investigative purposes.

With regards to space usage, online journalism expands to limits not thought possible previously (Stovall 2004:7). A reporter can take as many words or as much time as necessary to tell a story. A photographer can post ten or more pictures of an event, not just one as normally posted in print. News reporters can include their reports with the full text of speeches they cover together with biographical information on their source, maps, charts, and pictures that help expand the reader's understanding of the story.

In online journalism, vertical and horizontal flows are possible, space is opened to the audience, and truthfulness could be challenged directly in real time, with less

gatekeeping, while it also projects the traits of being an alternative medium<sup>26</sup>. These may explain why the mass turned onto online journalism for untainted news, investigative-based news stories and balanced reporting. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that the numbers of online news audience are increasing at a very fast rate. The emergence of online journalism has breed speculation about the impending demise of print media and one can see why this new medium might in the future form a threat to traditional journalism.

#### **4.4.1 Establishment of online journalism in Malaysia**

Malaysia has shown consistent commitment in accommodating information and communication technology as a top priority through its national development policy. Commitment to technology development is clearly stated in the Rukun Negara philosophy, proclaimed in 1970 that aims 'to build a progressive society, which shall be oriented to modern science and technology'. The philosophy is extended with the establishment of Vision 2020 predominantly espoused in 1991 through Mahathir's visionary thoughts of 'The Way Forward'. Through this vision, the government aspires to transform Malaysia into a developed nation by the year 2020 (Mahathir 1991). Ideally, the vision projects Malaysia as an industrialised country equipped to compete effectively in the information age. As Mahathir (1991:1) announced:

By the year 2020, Malaysia can be a united nation, with a confident Malaysian society, infused by strong moral and ethical values, living in a society that is democratic, liberal and tolerant, caring, economically just and equitable, progressive and prosperous, and in full possession of an economy that is competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient.

One of the vision goals is to ensure that Malaysia would be able to double its gross national product every ten years so that by the year 2020 Malaysia's economic output will be eight times that of the year 1990. The Mahathir government launched a series of ambitious infrastructure projects to help Malaysia materialise its Vision 2020, including the establishment of Ministry of Energy, Communication and Multimedia. However, with regard to Malaysia's place as a high-tech ICT-based nation, the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) is seen as a central focus to all of the infrastructures' advancement.

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<sup>26</sup> Alternative media refers to the non-mainstream mass media, which ownership is free from the dominant political power or giant corporate. In describing alternative media, some scholars used the term 'small media' (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1997:221), or radical media (Downing 2000:45).

The establishment of the Ministry of Energy, Communications and Multimedia (MECM) in 1998 significantly reflects the government's policy in placing information and communication technology (ICT) as an important driver towards development. Principally it was formed with the intention to develop the communications and multimedia industry based on the concept of converging telecommunications, broadcasting and computing services. Its concern with ICT is envisioned in the statements of the Ministry:

To ensure a conducive climate for the development of the energy, communications and multimedia, and to ensure continuous technological advancement for the energy, communications and multimedia industry through encouragement of research and development (Ministry of Energy Water and Communication 1998:3).

Among the prominent infrastructures of the MSC is the establishment of smart cities namely Putrajaya and Cyberjaya. These cities promote the concept of electronic government (Putrajaya) and an intelligent city with multimedia industries (Cyberjaya). The project also includes research and development (R & D) centre, a Multimedia University, and operational headquarters for multinationals to direct their worldwide manufacturing and trading activities, where the use of ICT in administration and communication is highly practiced (Radhakrishna 2003).

The MSC is located on a dedicated 15km-by-50km at the south of Kuala Lumpur that encompasses several infrastructure projects including the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, the Kuala Lumpur City Centre, Putrajaya, and Cyberjaya, R&D centres and Multimedia University (Wong and Sien 2001: 16). It is designed to function as a catalyst for ICT industries and products as well as providing the backbone for an information superhighway.

Malaysia could not work alone for such high-tech ICT technology. For that reason, MSC operates as an ICT hub hosting foreign-owned as well as domestic companies that focused on multimedia and communication products, solutions, services and research and development (MDC 2002:1-2). As of January 2006, there were 1297 MSC companies including 67 world-class high-tech ICT companies like Netscape, IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Oracle, Compact, Silicon Graphics, Siemens, and Sony (Multimedia Super Corridor 2006).

The imperative linking Vision 2020 to this study is that it does not only place technological infrastructures as its sole concern. Social development in terms of

national integration is also emphasised. For instance, the emphasis is on the formation of 'a single Malaysian society' rather than employing the divisive terminology of 'Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera' as stipulated in the former NEP. As the Vision 2020 proclaims:

The first of these is the challenges of establishing a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny. This must be a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one 'Bangsa Malaysia' with political loyalty and dedication to the nation (Mahathir 1990:1).

Remarkably we could see that many Malaysians welcomed Vision 2020 (Gomez 2004:3) that espoused such an explicit commitment to forging a '*bangsa Malaysia*', or a Malaysian nation, which cuts across ethnic lines, ethnic identities and ethnic nationalism. The need to develop a '*bangsa Malaysia*' drew attention to the issue of equality for all citizens, be they Malays or non-Malays, Bumiputera or non-Bumiputera. This vision is to be achieved partly through the creation of an 'economically just' society that cuts across ethnic lines. Vision 2020 also shows that the government demonstrates serious commitment to ICT development through its policy and practices, and also recognises its links to national integration.

Online journalism did not surface much as a popular media immediately after the Internet was established in Malaysia, when the first Malaysia's ISP named JARING was set up. Even when the Star Online was launched in 1995, online journalism was still largely 'unknown' to the public. It gained major attention only in response to the 1998-political crisis with public protests against the unbalanced reporting of the mainstream mass media. The dynamic utilisation of online journalism was also highlighted when the public found that their voices of criticism and adversary were blocked through the mainstream mass media (Hilley 2001:265; Siong 2004:279). As Siong (2004:279) describes, the irregularities of certain incidents 'were blacked out and trivialised by...the mainstream mass media as they were controlled'.

Currently together with JARING and TMnet, there are four other ISPs in operation, namely Maxis Net, DiGi, Celcom, and TimeDotCom (Arfaeza 2002:5). Their operations have raised the number of internet users in Malaysia from 600,000 in 1998 to 10.04 million in 2004 (IWS 2005:1-11). As shown in Table 4.3, the figure represents 37.9 percent of Malaysia's total population. As of October 2004, Malaysia's Internet penetration was the second highest behind Singapore when compared to other major South East Asian countries.

**Table 4.3**  
**Internet Users in South East Asian Countries: 2004 Statistics**

Countries	Total Internet Users (in million)	Percentage of Internet Penetration
Singapore	2.4	68.3 percent
<b>Malaysia</b>	<b>10.04</b>	<b>37.9 percent</b>
Thailand	8.4	12.8 percent
Philippines	7.8	9.3 percent
Brunei	0.56	14.6 percent
Indonesia	15.3	7.0 percent
Vietnam	5.87	7.1 percent
Laos	0.21	0.37 percent
Cambodia	0.41	0.28 percent
Myanmar	0.64	0.1 percent

Source: (IWS 2005: 1-11)

This study categorises online journalism in Malaysia into three major groups: mainstream online journalism, non-mainstream online journalism and, 'shared and discussion' sites that include weblogs. As shown in Table 4.4, the first category is made up of two subgroups. The first subgroup is the online version of the mainstream presses, such as New Straits Times online, Star online, Malay Mail online, Berita Harian online, Utusan online, Nanyang.com, and Sinchew-i.com. The second subgroup is made up of the mainstream electronic media that have no print version, such as BERNAMA.com, TV3.com, and RTM.net.

The second category is the online version of non-mainstream mass media and informative websites. This group is basically made up of two subgroups, firstly the online newspaper and informative websites without print (parent) version such as Malaysiakini, Malaysia Today, Malaysian Today, Agenda Daily, Free Media, Rengah Sarawak, which includes NGO websites, for instance, Suaram, Hakam, Awam, Bar Council, and Malaysian Voters Union. Secondly is the online version of non-mainstream newspapers and informative websites, which also have their print versions such as Aliran, HarakahDaily.Net<sup>27</sup> and Sun2Surf<sup>28</sup>. It is important to note that most of them in these categories are independently managed, that is to say they are free from the ruling parties and their affiliates.

<sup>27</sup> HarakahDaily belongs to the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS). It is bilingual: providing news in English and Malay. Its print version is licensed to publish only twice a month, while the online version is updated daily.

<sup>28</sup> The Sun is Malaysia's first free tabloid-form daily newspaper. It is published from Monday to Friday, with a target audience of the mainly busy, highly mobile white-collar community and the urban young. Its online version is named Sun2Surf.



**Table 4.4**  
**Division of Online Journalism**

Category of Online Journalism		Subcategory	Examples of online journalism
First	Online version of mainstream mass media	i. Online version of mainstream presses	New Straits Times Online, The Star Online, Berita Harian Online, Utusan Online, Sinchew-i.com
		ii. Online version of broadcasting media	TV3, BERNAMA online, RTM.net, NTV7
Second	Non-mainstream online journalism	i. Online journalism without print version	Malaysiakini, Malaysia Today, Agenda Daily, Free Media, Suaram, Hakam
		ii. Online journalism with print version	HarakahDaily, The Sun2Surf, Aliran Online
Third	Shared and discussion sites <sup>29</sup>	i. Online compendium devoted to a particular subject, which includes weblog, mailing list, and bulletin board	Screenshots, Shahrir-UMNO.blogspot, Kadirjasin.blogspot, Bakrimusa.com, Rocky.bru.blogspot Source: (Malaysian Central 2003)

The third category is the 'shared and discussion' sites, which is simply made up of websites, where people share information and views that include weblogs, mailing lists and bulletin boards. Basically, a weblog is a compendium devoted to a particular subject. Stoval (2004: 31) explains that 'most weblogs have managers to monitor but not necessarily to censor the content'. Some of the prominent weblogs in Malaysia are Screenshots, Shahrir-UMNO.blogspot, Kadirjasin.blogspot, Bakrimusa.com, and Rocky.bru.blogspot.

The inauguration of Malaysia's online journalism begins with The Star Online, the best-selling English-language daily. It is the first Malaysian mainstream newspaper to shovelware<sup>30</sup> its online version. It was launched in June 1995 followed

<sup>29</sup> This category is taken from the categorisation made by Mark Deuze (2003: 210).

<sup>30</sup> The term shovelware, often used in a pejorative way by people interested in web development, refers to the practice of simply shifting the content produced by the organisation for another

shortly by the New Straits Times Online (Siong 2004: 279). Much later, the Utusan Group also established its Utusan Online, the highest circulated Malay-language mainstream newspaper, followed by Berita Harian Online, Malay Mail Online, Chinapress.com, Sinchew-i.com, Guangming.com, Kwongwah.com and few others from the Malaysian press line-up. All these online newspapers are mirrors of their parents' print version (Siong 2004:279).

It is important to note that the online version of the mainstream presses such as the New Straits Times Online, Berita Harian Online, the Star Online and Utusan Online, do not carry all the contents of their parents' print versions. This is seen as part of their marketing strategies, whereby a consumer would still have to subscribe the print version if they prefer to read more news or the complete content of each issue. This is the point that separates online newspapers that have no parent version of the print compared to those that have. We can see that non-mainstream online journalism such as Malaysiakini, Malaysia Today, Agenda Daily, Malaysian Voters Union, Aliran, Suaram, Hakam, to mention a few, carry all the content they acquire on their news desks. This means that their audience could access all the stories available. Even past editions can be accessed through their archives.

Almost all the mainstream presses have applied the shovelware transmission of their print version to online version. However, in line with what Stovall (2004:16) as well as Hall (2001:28) observed, many of these newspapers 'simply sprayed all or parts of their printed editions onto the Web with a few distractions to liven them up'. However as they are mirrors of their print versions, all the news of their online versions are also subjected to the rules and legal regulation of the print version (Siong 2004:280) especially the PPPA 1984. On the other hand, non-mainstream online journalism that have no parent print version, are basically free from the regulations in the PPPA 1984. As a point of fact, they are given the assurance of 'no censorship' from the authority through the CMA 1998. Generally, these non-mainstream online journalisms claim that they are independent from any political organisation that includes government affiliates. They are more critical in their news, features, and opinion pieces. Much more, as some<sup>31</sup> of them illustrate, their columns of 'letter to editor' portray more criticisms against social and political issues, which normally would not be published in the mainstream print newspaper.

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medium (newspaper, radio, or television) to the website with little or no change (Hall 2001; Stovall 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Criticism and adversary view against government's policy is significantly seen in Malaysiakini, Malaysia Today, and Screenshot.

Among the most successful of Malaysian online journalism is Malaysiakini, which has carved a niche for itself as 'an independent' news site. The style of Malaysiakini leads some others to follow such as Sang Kancil, Malaysia Today, Agenda Daily, Malaysia News, Malaysian Voters Union, Aliran Online, Sharir@UMNO.Com and Screenshots. To introduce, some of the prominent independent online journalisms in Malaysia are discussed as follows; Malaysiakini, Agenda Daily, Malaysia Today, Screenshots and Aliran Online.

Malaysiakini is the leading Malaysia's independent online newspaper. It was launched on November 1999 and since then offers between 20 to 30 items of news, opinions, editorials, features and letters a day. In 2001, Malaysiakini claimed that its daily readership had reached the 150,000-mark. Many would agree that Malaysiakini has become the leading source of independent news and views on Malaysia social and political setting (Committee to Protect Journalists 2001; Pillai 2001). The editorial of Malaysiakini claimed that unlike the mainstream mass media, it is not owned by any political party. Its subscribers are made up of both the government as well as the opposition, while the majority are the Malaysian middle classers with over three million page views a month. In the Year 2000, Malaysiakini editor Steven Gan was awarded the International Press Freedom Award by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), a New York-based journalist organisation dedicated to the defence of press freedom internationally. CPJ described Steven Gan as 'bravely stand up to tyrants who won't allow free discussion, who want to hide corruption, who want to keep the world from witnessing their deeds' (Committee to Protect Journalists 2000b; Committee to Protect Journalists 2001; Malaysiakini 2005a).

Agenda Daily is another Malaysia online newspaper established since 2001. The editorial claimed that Agenda Daily is completely owned by independent local media activists suggesting a non-aligned stance with any political party. The Chief Editor is an experienced journalist who had previously worked with a number of local newspapers that include independent dailies such as Bintang Timur, Watan as well as UMNO's Utusan Malaysia. Most of Agenda Daily stories carry analysis of Malaysia political scene.

Malaysia Today is another most-talked about online newspaper that also carries a weblog as an added attraction to its webpage. It is a new breed on Malaysian scene, launched in 2004 but had gained significant attention for its bold and provocative criticism against the government's proponents as well as the

opponents. It is led by Raja Petra Kamarudin who holds the Chief Editor position. In one of his articles Raja Petra claimed that his online newspaper is unpopular in both government and opposition circles because, 'We will whack UMNO. We will whack the powers-that-be. We will whack the opposition, and we will whack the opposition leaders' (Raja Petra 2004), which consistently correspond to the websites 'no censorship policy'. Such bold and provocative stance of Malaysia Today had been linked to Raja Petra's ISA detention, while some of his operating computers were seized (Marina Lee 2001; Bakri 2005a).

Screenshots, one of Malaysia's most popular weblog is described as 'Malaysia's most influential blog' (Malaysiakini 2004b) while its owner, Jeff Ooi has been portrayed as 'the undisputed icon of Malaysian blogosphere'. The weblog was first seen on the web on January 2003 and had come under fire when one of its readers made a harsh statement that ridiculed Islam. However, the concerned reader had revealed himself to the public and the authority and had made an apology. A mainstream press charged Jeff Ooi as 'failing to control the forum by allowing an opinion ridiculing Islam to be published' (Theophilus 2004). In 2005, Screenshots won the Asia category of the freedom Blogs Awards given by Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Without Borders 2006)

One of the most popular NGO websites is Aliran Online, which also publishes a monthly magazine called Aliran Monthly. This organisation is pioneered by seven Malaysians of different ethnic backgrounds. This NGO existed since 1977 to raise 'public awareness of critical political, economic and social issues' (Aliran 2004a) Aliran claimed that their Aliran Online, is Malaysia's leading independent English-language online magazine that carries pages of independent articles and in-depth analyses. It is also perceived as a national reform movement with members, friends and supporters from different parts of the country. As its editorial described,

Aliran is the first movement of its kind in the history of our country. We are multi-ethnic in our philosophy, policies, programmes and membership - unlike most movements in the past, which were confined to one community or another (Aliran 2004a).

The impacts of online newspapers on the mainstream mass media are notable. As for instance MGG Pillai of Sang Kancil weblog concludes, 'Malaysiakini had caused pages of the main English and Malay newspapers to seem weak and tired' (as quoted in Abbott 2004:86). From other perspective, Zakiah (2000) and Arfaeza (2002) observe that between 1999 and 2000, the readership of all mainstream press

except for the Star and Guang Ming dailies plunged between 1.5 percent and 37.5 percent. The year 1999 marked the 'explosion of online journalism' partly because of the effects of the CMA 1998 that assured 'non-censorship' of Internet content.

Zakiah (2000:1) also pointed out that in the year 2000, the readership of major mainstream newspapers such as The New Straits Times dropped by 27 percent, Berita Harian plunged by 30 percent and Utusan Malaysia fell by 27 percent.

**Table 4.5**  
**Major Newspaper Readership 1999-2000**

<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>1999 in '000</b>	<b>2000 in '000</b>	<b>2005-06 in '000</b>
<b>The New Straits Times</b>	557	491	295
<b>Malay Mail</b>	168	105	74
<b>The Sun</b>	205	145	146
<b>Sin Chew Jit Poh</b>	891	847	1109
<b>China Press</b>	553	507	509
<b>Nanyang Siang Pau</b>	522	496	900
<b>Kwong Wah</b>	272	268	265
<b>Berita Harian</b>	1560	1404	1470
<b>Utusan Malaysia</b>	1538	1420	1497
<b>Nanban</b>	182	174	173
<b>Tamil Nesan</b>	104	101	100

Sources: Zakiah (2000:1) and Nielsen Media Research (2006)

The drop in readership of the major newspapers in the year 1999 and 2000 is shown in Table 4.5. The explosion of online journalism in the year 1999 may explain the significant drop of newspapers readership in the year 2000. To some of the newspapers, the readership of year 2000 remains stable. However, the drop in readership of the New Straits Times, and Malay Mail were obvious. Except for Nanyang Siang Pau, the rest failed to regain year 1999 readership figures.

As Zakiah (2000:1) interprets, the decreasing readership of year 2000 indicates that more Malaysians are spending more time on online journalism. Supporting Zakiah's assertion, Siong (2004:283) claims that in June 2000, barely a year after its commencement, Malaysiakini recorded over 100,000 viewers on average per day. The number of hits reached an all time high on August 8, 2000 when over 319,000 viewers logged on to read the verdict of the trial of Anwar's corruption charges.

There is no statistic available to show the exact figures of online journalism audience in Malaysia. However, as Table 4.6 shows that the total number of internet users in Malaysia is consistently increasing, it is likely that the number of daily hits for online journalism would also increase. Calculating the users' growth rate from the year 2000 to year 2004, the average annual growth rate is estimated at 52.91 percent. If this annual growth rate of Malaysia's Internet users were taken into account, at the end of 2005 the total numbers of Internet users would reach 15.35 million. This represents more than half of Malaysia's population in 2004.

**Table 4.6**  
**1997-2004: Sharp Increase of Malaysia's Internet Users**

1997	137,400
1998	600,000
1999	1,500,000
2000	3,700,000
2001	5,700,000
2002	7,800,000
2003	8,600,000
2004	10,040,000

Sources: (Matrade 2004; IWS 2005)

Corresponding to Abbott (2004), Gomez and Gan (2004), Mustafa (2002), and Zaharom (2002) observations, the increase of Internet users would support democratic environment in Malaysia, especially in terms of freedom of speech and expression. The pluralist trend of online journalism also generates communication that cuts across ethnic lines, which would likely enhance better understanding and empathetic relationship among the different ethnic groups.

#### **4.4.2 The potential of online journalism**

It is notable that freedom of expression as reflected in dissenting pieces and criticism against the government, political discourse on issues of judiciary accountability, police brutality and public corruption never before discussed in such diversity in the traditional mass media, have become common in online journalism, especially online newspapers, weblogs, and NGOs websites (Amnesty International 1999; Asian Human Rights Commission 1999; Human Rights Watch 1999).

Important issues linked to democracy and national integration: human and civil rights, interfaith issues, and issues of ethnicity and religion, suppressed from the mainstream mass media have filled most of the space in online journalism particularly during and after the 1998-political crisis.

In Malaysian political history, the 1998-political crisis denotes a critical point of freedom of the press, which also marked 'an explosion of online journalism' (Abbott 2004:85; Gomez 2004:2). In terms of national integration, Abbott (2004:90) asserts that online journalism was 'a catalyst for coordination and cooperation' among the community that stimulated them into a 'united action and consequently forging horizontal relations across civil society'. That was the period when we could see the minorities, the NGOs, civil and human rights activists, intellectuals as well as politicians across different ethnic backgrounds taking part in online journalism to have their voices communicated and be informed.

During the 1998-political crisis and the approach of the 1999-General Election, the mainstream mass media failed to provide truthful and transparent information to the people. Heufers (2002:58) affirms:

Observers were struck by the blatant bias seen in both in the print and electronic (broadcast) media, in favour of the ruling coalition. Both Bahasa (Malay language) and English-language newspapers ran full-page ads, some of which used reworked or faked photos, aimed at showing the opposition in a bad light. As well, stories alleging corruption and sexual impropriety were widely circulated in government-controlled press.

Consequently, 'many Malaysians, troubled by the seemingly lack of credibility in the mainstream presses, turned to online journalism in search of accurate news, fair reporting and critical commentary' (Mustafa 2002:161). Noticeably, during the 1998-political crisis, online journalism, particularly online newspapers and NGO websites were preferred because 'the mainstream press had engaged in a certain degree of spreading misinformation' (Mustafa 2002:163). Evidently during the aftermath of the crisis, the number of news websites mushroomed to more than fifty that significantly suggests plausible shifts in the attention of the public towards online journalism (Abbott 2004:85). Subsequently, Mustafa (2002:163) asserts that 'much of the mainstream presses then became widely unpopular among many concerned Malaysians'. Similarly Netto (1999a:1) observes that 'readers of the mainstream newspapers realised that they were not getting the whole picture of the disturbing events in the country from official media' and that made them turn to online journalism.

In May 2000, over 500 journalists, largely from the mainstream mass media, signed a memorandum urging the government to repeal media laws, most importantly the PPPA 1984. 'These journalists argued that the credibility of the media was at stake as Malaysians increasingly turned to alternative sources of information' (Siong 2004:298).

The democratising effect of online journalism is distinguished by the way it provides space and freedom for ordinary citizens to have their opinions and thoughts heard. The presentations of opinions and thoughts are delivered in many forms, such as criticism, political discourse, debate, reports or some others. The bottom line is that those public discourses in certain cases, had successfully reached the government or the decision makers. Such a situation suggests more democratic space as compared to the limitation of such in the mainstream media. It may not ideally take on 'a system in which all members of a group or community participate collectively in the making of major decisions' to conform with Giddens's (2001:422) description of participatory democracy<sup>32</sup>. However, it does communicate the concerns of ordinary citizens, which is perceived as their citizens' rights.

For a democratic participation to materialise, the information must flow, not only through a downward channel from the leaders to the people, but also upward to the leaders, and also laterally, so that people can talk things over and arrive at group decisions (Schramm 1964; Hall 2001). It is not easy to show how such process is taking place, but some government reactions to certain national issues discussed through online newspapers, weblogs and NGO websites show certain tendencies towards such process. For instance, the government reacted positively to vigorous public complaints of police brutality as seen through the intended establishment of the Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission in 2006 (BERNAMA 2006). The issue took the national spotlight when online journalism such as Malaysiakini, Malaysia Today, Suaram and Aliran continuously discussed incidences of police brutality, some of which had caused the deaths of alleged convicts in police lockups (Lim 2002; Suaram 2005a). To highlight an example, Suaram reported through its website that:

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<sup>32</sup> Participatory democracy is the involvement of ordinary citizens to govern themselves, as initially practiced during the ancient Greece (Giddens 2001:422). This participation of the citizens does not necessarily require the citizens to attend as to be involved in parliamentary debates. One of the ways of such participation is through the mass media that openly and freely allow their ideas and thoughts to be heard and shared. Giddens (2001:423) stresses that in participatory democracy, decisions are made communally by those affected by the decisions.



The Home Ministry released a statistic that 23 people died in the country's police lock-ups between 2002 and July 2003 out of which 16 died in 2002. During the same period, 425 prisoners died during their incarceration (Suaram 2005a).

Interfaith issue is another attraction with regard to the work of online journalism. As more discussions on the issue were highlighted through online journalism, the government had given an assurance that it would look into ways of enacting provisions in the law so that there are rooms for all religious disputes to be handled through the court of law.

As shown through the case of Moorthy<sup>33</sup>, there is a need for the government to coordinate 'Sharia (Muslim) Law' with Civil Law. Moorthy, a Hindu believer who converted to Islam had passed away, but there was a dispute between his relatives and the Federal Territory Islamic Department in deciding to bury him at the Hindu cemetery or the Muslim cemetery. His relatives had difficulties in claiming his body for a Hindu burial, because the Sharia Law would not allow that. Furthermore, the 'Civil Law', could not overrule the case that was placed under the 'Sharia (Islamic) Law' (Malaysia Today 2005a; Fauwaz 2006b; Kuppusamy 2006a; Malaysiakini 2006c). The issue gained attention through online journalism, such as Malaysia Today, Malaysiakini, and Aliran, but less coverage was provided in the mainstream mass media. With the government assertion of looking into the matters seriously for such interfaith problem resolution, it shows that the government is positively responding to issues highlighted through online journalism. It also shows that the public had managed to convey their message to the top state executive, prompting an upward flow of communication through online journalism and thus suggesting participatory democracy, or otherwise freer democratic space.

The portrayal of online journalism as alternative media is also seen during the 1998-political crisis. It is an alternative media in the sense that it satisfies demand for different content, catering to different tastes, interests and orientations not catered to by mainstream mass media output (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1997:221). Some scholars use the terms alternative media and radical media interchangeably, for journalism primarily concerned with social and often

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<sup>33</sup> The issue of religion conversion as exemplified by the case of Moorthy has sparked a storm among non-Muslim and moderate Muslims alike. The problem is that Islamic law, which is only applicable to Muslims, could not be challenged by the Civil law. Many NGOs demand that the government amend the Constitution to make Civil law supreme over Islamic law especially in cases where non-Muslims are involved (Malaysia Today 2005a; Fauwaz 2006b).

revolutionary change (Atton 2002:9). In an environment where the authority oppresses alternative media, it is normally because they are associated with vibrant social and political reform. In such cases, they are described as radical media (Atton 2002:9-10). They are radical because they dare to project what the mainstream mass media dare not touch.

Often in developing countries, alternative media are unfriendly to the authorities. These alternative media, which are also described as radical media, are frequently linked to certain protest movements (Atton 2002:81). This is apparent in Malaysia where the freedom of the press is suppressed (Gan et al. 2004: xiv). A number of alternative presses such as Detik, Wasilah, Eksklusif and Watan are no longer in existence because their licenses were revoked for their 'unfriendly' postures. The authority raided online journalism offices such as Malaysiakini and Malaysia Today, while their computers were seized principally because they had demonstrated a radical stance (Netto 2003; Siong 2004:307).

On the other hand, in one instance, Malaysiakini, one of Malaysia's prominent online newspapers, came to win the hearts of the people when it broke a story about 'doctoring a photograph of government leaders' in a mainstream newspaper. The superimposed photograph was used to support the ruling party's propaganda and political campaign (Siong 2004:282). Since then, Malaysiakini is seen as an alternative medium that 'tells the truth'. However, this is not to deny that there also exists irresponsible online journalism that fills websites with filthy content, racism and abhorrent materials, which are not contributory to either democracy or national integration. As Abbott (2004:98) asserts, 'many of these were little more than accusatory scandal sheets.'

The alternative feature of online journalism is also supported with the irrelevant 'gate-keeper' phenomenon. As many cyber libertarians suggest, one of the key features that makes online journalism a tool of democracy is that the liberty of the Internet makes attempts at censorship and control a difficult, if not an impossible task. As Banerjee (2004:40) argues, even in a repressive government, which gives partial freedom to the Internet, they 'cannot contain the flood of information, which then has a very strong democratising effect on the country'. On the same note, the information superhighway was difficult to police as the authorities could not tamper with or shut down websites without violating the freedom of 'no Internet censorship' (Teik 2003:105; Abbott 2004:82). This suggests that the CMA 1998 and the

promising ICT policy have turned out to be a blessing for the public's democratic concern.

As illustrated during the Malaysian 1999-General Election, as a result of gatekeeping, the oppositions are often presented in an 'unfavourable light' in the mainstream mass media (Heufers 2002:58). The highest circulated daily of Malaysia, the Star states:

The press in a democracy has a right to decide and express a stand in an election. Some publications opt to support the Barisan Nasional (ruling coalition); others the opposition. Each is free to make the choice. We have made ours (as quoted in Mustafa 2002:159).

This may explain why gatekeepers and the power to control the media become important to Malaysian politicians. The consequence is that the members of the Malaysian middle class especially, are increasingly disappointed with the lack of critical commentary and political analysis. Many Malaysians were pulled towards online journalism during the crucial period of 1998-political crisis when a lack of credibility tainted the mainstream mass media (Heufers 2002:58; Mustafa 2002:163). The people were longing for accurate news, fair reporting and critical commentary, which were more noticeable in online journalism. Such a situation highlights the implication of gatekeeping as significant on the mainstream mass media, whereby criticism and dissent pieces against the government were blocked. However, criticism against the government, investigative reporting on issues of public corruption, and debates on police misconduct and brutality were some of the issues that had gained much attention through online journalism. This is not to suggest that gatekeeping is not operating at all through online journalism. What is seen is that gatekeeper of online journalism works differently as compared to that of the mainstream mass media. The principal point is that political and social criticisms, debates and sensitive interethnic issues are openly discussed through online journalism.

Besides enhancing democracy and holding the role of alternative media, online journalism may also carry notable potential to promote national integration. In this regard, Abbott (2004: 98) observes that online journalism 'facilitated greater communication and cooperation between disparate groups in civil society, and importantly in the context of Malaysian politics, across ethnic lines.' It is also evident that online journalism has opened up greater avenues and space for different ethnic groups to communicate, discuss, critique, and debate besides uploading rational-critical discourse on intercultural and inter-religious issues. As Malaysiakini, Malaysia

Today, Aliran, and Suaram exemplify, opinion pieces posted on them go across ethnic lines. For instance, Malaysiakini reveals that its 'Letter to Editor' section 'has generated active participation from readers of all races and religions and of various ideological backgrounds, creating an open and well-informed arena of public debate,' which 'the mainstream mass media often neglected' (Kabilan 1999:1).

Discussions of 'taboo subjects' through online journalism, such as the racial preferential policy, have generated new understanding of these issues among Malaysians. The government has also positively responded to such discussions through policy change. As for instance, the 'quota system of the public university intake' as part of the government's Malay preferential policy, has been discussed frequently in online journalism. The quota system gives more chances for Malay applicants to be accepted corresponding to the numbers required in the quota. Normally the quota ratio of Malays to Chinese to Indians is 6:3:1, which corresponds to ratio of the national population (Brown 2005). Responding to public protest, beginning in the year 2000, the government employed a merit system to select candidates for almost all public university intakes (Daily Express 2003; Reme 2005), thus replacing the quota system. Even the MARA Science Junior College, which was principally meant for 'Malay only', was opened to the non-Malays for the first time in 2004 (Malaysian Indian Congress 2004). This signifies that the government is answering the call for equal treatment in its education system, highlighting some positive trends supporting national integration.

Chandra (1999:2) points out that online journalism is likely to be 'an efficient tool for national integration' because 90 percent of the populace are classified as literate, with a greater majority going for higher education. With huge numbers of Internet users, the issue of the digital divide is seen as less significant. Furthermore, as Banerjee (2004:54) argues, 'numbers do not matter as much as the determination of political groups and parties.' In instances such as Malaysia's 1998-political crisis, online journalism has been utilised remarkably. With the multiplication effect of grapevine communication, and accessibility for opinion formers and opinion leaders, online journalism is seen as a powerful medium.

Numerous online journalisms, as shown during the 1998-political crisis as well as the 1999-General Election, utilised the freedom provisioned through the CMA 1998 to openly criticise the government (Mustafa 2000; Loo 2003a; Abbott 2004). Looking at the contemporary development, even the former Prime Minister, Mahathir,

uses online journalism to highlight his criticism towards the government (Mahathir 2006). In point of fact, Mahathir recently accepted Malaysiakini request for an interview (Fauwaz 2006a). This is quite a reversal stance, since it was during his regime that Malaysiakini was raided. Many more politicians and parliamentarians such as Shahrir Samad of UMNO, Lim Kit Siang of DAP, Syed Hussein Ali of PKR, to mention a few, have their own websites. This suggests how important online journalism is to their political mileage, as it connects them with their electorates and provides them a platform to get to know issues that the general public are concerned about.

#### **4.5 A mini-case study: comparing the work of independent online newspaper and mainstream press**

It is instrumental to show some verifications through a mini-case study, the work of online journalism that highlight a different track it takes as compared to the mainstream print newspapers. In addition, verifications through this mini study would suggest why online journalism matters to the Malaysian public especially in providing democratic space. Corresponding to such intention, this study is aware of the importance to compare the pattern of coverage and the priority given on public-concern issues, between online newspaper and the mainstream print newspaper. The comparison would also explain the different posture that online journalism had illustrated especially during the 1998-political crisis (Abbott 2004; Derichs 2004) and the years that follow.

The rationale and justification of the mini study had been discussed in Chapter Two. To re-emphasise, the purpose of this mini-case study is as follows:

- To compare the different stance of coverage between online newspapers and the mainstream print newspapers on two mass appeal issues, namely the 'Broga incinerator' and 'police brutality'
- To examine the significance of online newspaper with regard to those two issues

The comparison is carried out by studying the archives of two online newspapers, namely Malaysiakini and Malaysia Today, and some mainstream print newspapers namely The Star, The New Straits Times, The Malay Mail and Berita Harian. Focus is given on the number of coverage of particular issues that are distinguished as important to the mass public, namely the 'Broga incinerator' and

'police brutality' issues. A comparative approach is used to show the different priority given on these issues through online journalism and the mainstream newspaper. However other players of online journalism that includes online newspaper, weblog and other shared and discussion sites, such as Suaram, Aliran Online, Global Anti Incinerator Alliance (GAIA), Screeshots Blog, Malaysian Bar Council, and Asian Human Rights Watch are also referred to as they are also seen as instrumental to underline why online journalism matters to Malaysians.

#### 4.5.1 Media coverage on 'Broga incinerator' issue

The Broga incinerator issue started in 2002 when the government decided to embark on a mega-incinerator project at Kampong Bohol, in Puchong. The incinerator, estimated to cost RM1.5 billion (equivalent to £200 million), will cost RM50 million (equivalent to £7.1million) in annual maintenance and is said to be the biggest of its kind in the world (Ooi 2002). It was meant to grind down 16,000 tonnes of waste products daily, but had gained public protest when it was seen to be hazardous to about one million neighbourhood residents (Theophilus 2002a) through the emission of dioxin<sup>34</sup>. The government were seen less empathetic towards the residents, while the mainstream mass media were criticised for closing their eyes on the issue. As Teresa Kok, an opposition MP, pointed out,

'The manner in which the government had kept mum about the issue, ordered a media blackout and attempted to play down the potential health hazard is disconcerting (as quoted in Theophilus 2002b:2).

Theophilus of Malaysiakini claimed that the major newspaper even downplayed the issue. She wrote,

Noting that a few news and feature articles have been published by the *New Straits Times* and the *Malay Mail* on the incinerator in Kampong Bohol, Puchong, the residents nevertheless sense political pressure playing a role in the matter being ignored or downplayed by major newspapers. Some charge that one English daily tabloid had even placed a 'total ban' on the subject (Theophilus 2002d:1).

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<sup>34</sup> All types of incinerator produce dioxins that cause health problems including cancer, altered sexual development, reproductive problems, suppression of immune system, diabetes and hormone effects. Pollutants emitted into the atmosphere from the incinerator stack, as well as fugitive emissions, may be deposited into the ground near to the incinerator and may also be transported great distances on air currents. As a consequence, there is a possibility of agricultural produce be contaminated and effecting livestock largely through ingestion of contaminated vegetation and soil. In some instances this led to cow's milk being banned from sale due to unacceptable high levels of dioxins and recommendations to avoid the consumption of eggs and poultry.

Corresponding to above claim, a Bohol resident, named Ng said,

I read The Star (one of Malaysia's mainstream English daily) every day. I didn't even realise that there was a proposal to build a giant incinerator practically next to my home. If not for this talk, I would have been totally ignorant, but now I know the potential dangers and problems (as quoted in Theophilus 2002d:1-2).

Through various campaigns against the project, especially channelled through independent online newspapers and weblogs such as Malaysiakini, United Subang Jaya e-Community<sup>35</sup>, Screenshot<sup>36</sup>, BolehTalk<sup>37</sup>, Lone<sup>38</sup>, The Malaysian<sup>39</sup>, AWAM<sup>40</sup> and DAPMalaysia.com<sup>41</sup>, the protest had successfully attained 135,000 signatures of within the Bohol neighbourhood residents who opposed the project (Kok 2002; Ooi 2002; Theophilus 2002a). As a point of fact, Malaysiakini had chosen the Bohol incinerator issue as one of the top-ten news of 2002 and reckoned that 'more Malaysians took vociferous part in debating issues that affected their civil and political rights, chalking up small but significant victories' (Malaysiakini 2002b). It is also important to note at this point that independent online newspapers, NGOs websites, and blogs had played principal roles towards the government's decision to relocate the project. As Theophilus observed, at the earlier stage, when the government begin to move on with the project,

The residents began mobilising neighbouring residents associations in July to campaign against the proposed project, and set up a website containing information on the hazards of dioxin, a cancer-causing agent found in incinerator emissions (Theophilus 2002b:2).

Reme (2002:1) of Singapore Straits Times affirmed that one of the websites named 'No-incinerator.com',

...had attracted more than 33,600 visitors (by 23 November 2002) ...and the campaign moved up by a gear in the past few weeks. The residents' committee began urging people to register as voters so that they could show their unhappiness at the ballot box. It was perhaps no surprise, then, that Housing and Local Government Minister Ong Ka Ting announced on a decision to remove [the project].

The anti-incinerator campaign, which was significantly taken forward through the Internet had finally and successfully reached the government. Consequently the

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<sup>35</sup> United Subang Jaya e-community is accessible at <http://www.usj.com.my/usjXpress/>

<sup>36</sup> Screenshots is accessible at [http://jeffooi.blogspot.com/2003\\_03\\_30\\_jeffooi\\_archive.html](http://jeffooi.blogspot.com/2003_03_30_jeffooi_archive.html)

<sup>37</sup> BolehTalk.blogspot is accessible at <http://bolehtalk.blogspot.com/>

<sup>38</sup> Lone is accessible at [http://lonestar9.blogspot.com/2003\\_06\\_15\\_lonestar9\\_archive.html](http://lonestar9.blogspot.com/2003_06_15_lonestar9_archive.html)

<sup>39</sup> The Malaysian is accessible at <http://theMalaysian.blogspot.com/>

<sup>40</sup> AWAM is accessible at [http://www.awam.org.my/pdfs/tzeyeng\\_recycling\\_letter.htm](http://www.awam.org.my/pdfs/tzeyeng_recycling_letter.htm)

<sup>41</sup> DAPMalaysia.com website is accessible at: <http://dapmalaysia.org/newenglish/index.htm>

project was relocated to a remote area at Broga of Semenyih district. Stressing on this point, the USJ e-community, on 21 November 2002 pointed out that:

The rakyat's (people's) objections have reached the ears of the Barisan Nasional government. The controversial incinerator project ...will now be relocated to another site near a forest reserve along the border of Semenyih and Broga, Selangor (away from Bohol). Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting said the government made the decision ...after listening to the views of the people (USJXpress Team 2002).

In spite of the government compromising decision, the new location of the project had also drawn significant public protest. The protest against the new location in Broga was significantly pushed by a number of reasons. Firstly, the geographical location of Broga, which is within a water catchment area of Semenyih Dam, would expose the people to dioxin-contaminated water (Consumers Association of Penang 2005:4-5). This dam supplies 650 million litres drinking water per day to more than 1.5 million people in the Klang Valley, which includes the capital city of Kuala Lumpur as well as Selangor's Royal City of Shah Alam. Secondly, the incinerator could harm the public with poisonous dioxin, exposing them with testicular, prostate and breast cancers (Lin 2006). Thirdly, the company in charge of the project, namely Ebara Corporation of Japan, 'is found contaminating the Hikiji River in Fukukawa, Japan' (Liu 2005b) using the same incinerator system. Fourthly, the incinerator technology has been rejected in many countries like Japan, USA, UK, Belgium, South Africa, and Denmark for its disastrous consequences to human health, as well as potential damages to the environment (Liu 2005b).

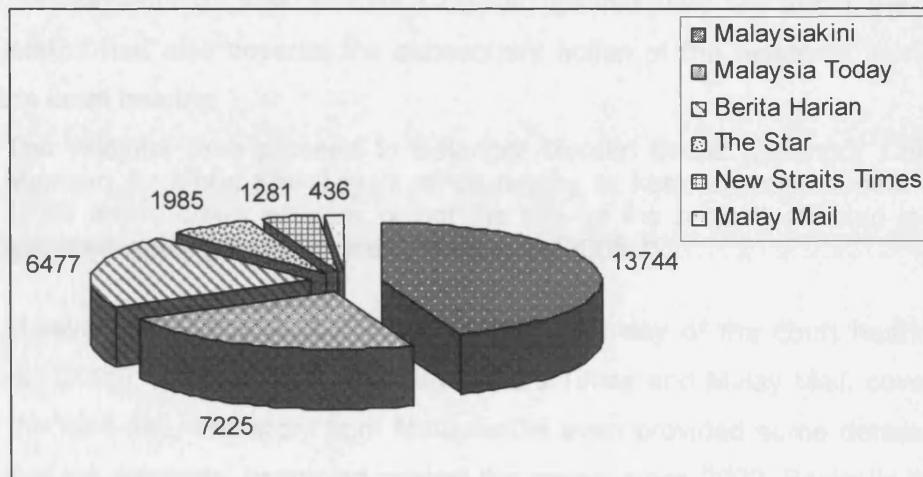
Online journalism, particularly independent online newspaper and weblog, such as Malaysiakini and Malaysia Today are seen to triumphant the campaign against Broga incinerator. As for instance, throughout 2005 (from 1<sup>st</sup> January to 31<sup>st</sup> Dec 2005) both had published the highest numbers of journalistic pieces that include news, columns, opinion features and 'letter to editor' that mainly highlighting disagreement with the Broga incinerator project.

As shown in Table 4.7 and Figure 4.1, online newspaper, Malaysiakini, had covered the highest numbers of stories regarding the 'Broga incinerator' issue with a total number of 23 journalistic pieces that made up a total of 13744 word count as compared with the mainstream print newspaper (see Appendix 6 for details).



**Table 4.7**  
**Media Coverage on Broga Incinerator Issue in 2005**

Coverage on 'Broga incinerator' issue	Online Journalism		Mainstream Print Newspaper			
	Malaysiakini	Malaysia Today	Berita Harian	The Star	New Straits Times	Malay Mail
Total no. of coverage	23	10	6	4	3	7
Total word count	13744	7225	6477	1985	1281	436



**Figure 4.1**  
**Word Count on Media Coverage of Broga Incinerator Issue in 2005**

Malaysia Today had also shown significant interest in the campaign against Broga incinerator project when a total number of 10 stories regarding the issue were published throughout 2005. These stories of Malaysia Today were made up of 7225 word count, more of that published in the Star and the New Straits Times, two most prominent mainstream dailies.

In comparison, the mainstream print newspapers had given less space on the concerned issue. This is especially true with The Star, the mainstream print newspaper that stands as the highest circulated English daily of the nation (The Star Online 2006), which had only published four stories regarding the issue throughout 2005. In terms of word count, as to reflect an in-depth coverage and discourse, the mainstream print media were also seen as less keen to highlight the issue.

The pattern of coverage of the mainstream dailies on this issue conform Teresa Kok and Theophilus assertion that the mainstream mass media were less concerned to campaign against the project.

This study also finds that online journalism had consistently stood against the project while informing the public the consequences of the incinerator to their health and the environment. As for instance, on 14 February 2005, when the High Court of Shah Alam granted the residents of Broga an interim stay order that temporarily halting full implementation of the multi-billion ringgit incinerator, Malaysiakini online had made a significant report under the headline 'Anti-incinerator lobby wins first round'. The news had given 944 total word count and highlighted some quotations from the residents as well as their Counsel of what they felt about the project. Malaysiakini had also covered the subsequent action of the residents immediately after the court hearing.

The villagers then proceed to Selangor Menteri Besar (Selangor Chief Minister) Dr Mohd Khir Toyo's office nearby to keep an appointment at 11.30 am to clarify whether or not the site (of the project) affected is a gazetted water catchment area (Theophilus 2005:1).

Malaysiakini published the story on the same day of the court hearing (14<sup>th</sup> February 2005), while the Star, the New Straits Times and Malay Mail, covered the story the next day. The story from Malaysiakini even provided some details on the history of the residents' campaign against the project since 2002. Basically the story supports the campaign against the project. This could be seen when the story quoted the residents' Counsel as saying,

Today's order is good news for us all. Even though this is temporary reprieve, at least we don't have to worry about work starting at the project site before we can present our case at a proper hearing (Theophilus 2005:2).

A 126-word count of the event published in the Star on 15<sup>th</sup> of February 2005, (see Appendix 6) significantly reflects a less enthusiastic stance of the mainstream print as compared to that of an independent online newspaper, Malaysiakini. It was a plain report that merely focused on the court decision rather than going for an investigative stance to point out why the residents of Broga were unhappy with the incinerator project.

The coverage of the event in the New Straits Times (NST) took a 392-word count, about one-third presented by Malaysiakini. NST described the result of the

court hearing as 'a small victory' of Broga residents in their battle to stop the construction of the incinerator. Under the headline of 'Court grants interim stay against Broga incinerator' NST showed that there was significant intention to downplay the campaign, which also reflects NST unsupportive stand towards the voices of the residents. Projecting the headline as 'Anti-incinerator lobby wins first round' online newspaper, Malaysiakini had shown an empathetic stand in favour of the residents' mission. The Malay Mail precisely on the same day, under the headline 'Kampung Broga residents force waste plant project on hold' showed a similar stance to that of the NST, and the Star. With a 259-word count coverage, the Malay Mail basically informed the public of the result of the court hearing. No words of appreciation or gratitude were used to highlight its stand in supporting the campaign and to favour the Broga residents' achievement with regards to their demand to put a stop on the project.

Two days after the court hearing, on 16 February 2005, Malaysiakini came out with another follow up news under a headline 'AG (Attorney General): Govt to try and strike out court order on incinerator', while five days later, another two stories on the issue were published. As for the Star, no more stories were published with regard to the issue except to announce a documentary show regarding the Broga incinerator issue, and this was only carried out on 15 October, eight month after the story of the court hearing was reported on 14 February 2005.

The campaign against the Broga incinerator continued with more participation of online journalism, which includes national and foreign-based NGO websites, online news and blogs such as Suaram, Global Anti Incinerator Alliance, Screenshots, DapMalaysia, and Neighbourhood Watch, as to mention a few (GAIA 2005; Liu 2005a; Suaram 2005c). However, Malaysiakini had consistently stood as the champion of the campaign. As its archive illustrated, there were at least 68 journalistic pieces throughout year 2006 that had continuously highlighted the issue of Broga incinerator (see Appendix 6). The anti-Broga incinerator campaign successfully hit its target, when on 14 Aug 2006, the government officially announced its termination (Malaysiakini 2006b; Theophilus 2006).

#### **4.5.2 Media coverage on 'police brutality' issue**

The issue of 'police brutality' in Malaysia is another public-concern issue that had gained more attention from online journalism as compared to the mainstream print newspaper, and even lesser coverage made through the broadcast media. It is significant to raise this issue as a public-concern issue because police brutality as marked through various incidences in Malaysia have shown police act of violence upon crime suspects. Frequent incidents of police brutality would direct the public to the idea that police violence against a suspect is an acceptable norm. When such attitudes are tolerated it would also lead to more violence, which could cause death to the innocents. 'Professional police personnel do not have to use torture (or any act of brutality) to do their work' (Devaraj 2002:16). Torture in police custody is in direct violation of the Article 3 of the United Nation Declaration on the 'Protection of All Persons from Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment 1975.' The article states,

No State may permit or tolerate torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Exceptional circumstances such as a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency may not be invoked as a justification of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (United Nations 2002).

The issue of police brutality encompasses cases that are linked to high occurrence of deaths and injuries of suspects while they were in police custody. However a wider perspective may focus on the following evidence (Suaram 2004b:4):

- High level of incidents of death of suspects while in police custody
- High level of incidents of death of suspects by police shooting
- Abuse of remand procedure by the police and Magistrates
- Absence of accountability and transparency of the police in the investigation of complaints of police brutality

Guarded by the PPPA 1984, Seditious Act 1971, the Defamation Act 1957, the ISA 1960, and some other media-related laws, the mainstream mass media are particularly cautious with publication that would offend the law. Most probably, for similar reason, the mainstream mass media view that the publication of malicious news as punishable offence (Human Rights Watch 2003a) and thus expands their appeal to fear, which consequently limit publications of materials that highlight

dissent views and opinions. The licensee system enacted through the PPPA 1984 is also contributory to shore up an atmosphere that inhibits independent or investigative journalism and results in extensive self-censorship (Lent 1982; Gan 2003). Corresponding to the PPPA 1984, the Malaysia Minister of Information even stated that the media 'do not have a responsibility to provide news coverage to people outside the Government' (as quoted in U.S Department of State 2001:11) and subsequently limiting the range of views. Justifying such stand, the government views that the law is imperative to protect national security and provide assurance of public order. Consequently it is also restricting transparent discourse on public issues, silencing political opponents, and manipulating the news delivered to the people.

Conversely to the lesser coverage of the mainstream mass media on issue of police brutality, independent online newspapers such as Malaysiakini and Agenda Daily, and weblogs such as Malaysia Today, Screenshots, Bakrimusa.com, MGG Pilai, Socialistworld.net, and Notorture.com, together with NGOs' websites such as Suaram, Hakam, Aliran, Amnesty International, Malaysian Bar Council, and Tenaganita, have placed more emphasis on this issue. As for instance, Malaysiakini had cited Amnesty International's annual report quoting there have been repeated complaints on police excessive use of force, ill-treatment and unlawful killings of crime suspects (Malaysiakini 2004a). In accord with the report, the Home Ministry announced an increase in the average number of death of police detainees; from 19 to 26 per month, and as many as 27 shot dead by police from January to October in 2003 (Malaysiakini 2004a).

Also corresponding to public concern on police brutality, Malaysian NGOs have made combined effort to push the government in setting up an independent commission named 'Independent Police Complaint and Misconduct Commission' (IPCMC) to check on police abuse of power. A 'joint memorandum to the Inspector General of Police on abuse of police power' (Suaram 2004b), had shown that a total of 44 NGOs and six political parties in Malaysia were significantly concerned with the public protest against police brutality. The memorandum points out:

We note that complaints raised by the public and NGOs had reached such level that the government saw fit to set up 'a commission' to look into the police with fairly broad terms of reference including human rights violations by the police. ...Such violations ought to be stopped immediately. The important work of the Commission would be meaningless if serious violations of human rights such as deaths in

(police) custody and deaths by shooting by the police continue unabated (Suaram 2004b:1).

In a more courageous stance with regard to the issue of police brutality, Aliran, Hakam and Suaram had issued a joint statement that challenged the Inspector General of Police (IGP) to resign or be sacked if he cannot accept the setting up of the IPCMC (Aliran 2006:3). The joint statement stressed that,

Even though the Prime Minister has, in practice, supported the setting up of the proposed IPCMC, the IGP has since gone on record in openly rejecting the setting up of the Independent Commission. ...The Prime Minister must put a stop to this nonsensical stance of the IGP and sack him if he chooses to remain as IGP while continuing to oppose the IPCMC. This is the only way for the Prime Minister to honour his pledge to Malaysians – to make the police accountable and transparent at long last.

Suaram through its website, reported that in October 2003, the Home Minister revealed in Parliament that 23 people had died while in lock-ups (Suaram 2004b:2). Many of the incidents were viewed with suspicion by the concerned family members of the deceased as they were generally in good health before being placed under police custody. Also in the same year as reported in the Parliament, some 29 persons had been shot dead by the police. In most cases, the police had claimed that 'the suspects had started their gun shot causing the police to return fire and killed them'. However with regard to a case in a town named Tumpat in 1998, where six men were shot dead by the police, the High Court found that such common claims of the police could be challenged. The High Court found out that there was no evidence for the police to claim that they were shot at by the six men who were then killed in a hail of 47 bullets (Suaram 2004b:2). Families of those shot dead have often protested that the deceased had no history or track record of any criminal activity. This had raised questions regarding the integrity of the police claim.

Asian Human Rights Commission (2004:2) also reported that in many of the numerous incidents of police brutality, the victims were poor, had little education and lacked the proper 'connections' to ensure proper treatment from the police. The commission even stated,

The police act as though they were above the law. Complaints from the public that police are rude, corrupt, violent or high-handed have become commonplace. Basic civil, political, legal and constitutional rights are easily and often transgressed as then police accuse people of some 'crime' due to 'suspicion' even though objectively one would not think that an offence has been committed (Asian Human Rights Commission 2004b:2).

Attentive stances of online journalism, especially independent online newspaper, weblogs and NGO websites, in addressing, informing and revealing the issue of police brutality to the public are evidenced in the following instances. On 26 February 2004, Malaysiakini quoted the US State Department report that 11 people have died in police custody and the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) was aware of 'numerous' complaints of deaths in police custody, police brutality, and negligence. Suaram also asserted that 'when the authorities do investigate police personnel, the government routinely does not release information on the results of investigations, and whether those responsible are punished is not always known' (Yoon Szu-Mae 2004).

Malaysiakini also highlighted other incidents linked to the issue of police brutality as well as police accountability. As for instance, on 4<sup>th</sup> February 2004, Hector, a columnist of Malaysiakini asserted a list of incidents that seriously highlighted the issue. He underlined that there is a loss in public confidence in the Malaysian police. Some of the main complaints levied against the police have been corruption, failure to act on complaints, abuse of powers, use of unreasonable force, torture and deaths in police custody and the 'shoot to kill' attitude (Hector 2004:1). Hector also pointed the following points as to emphasize the issue of police brutality:

- Seven policemen, including two chief inspectors, were arrested for their alleged involvement in an armed robbery at a hotel on 2004 New Year's Day.
- Two police inspectors have been arrested for alleged extortion after their victim identified them during an identification parade on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2004.
- In Parliament, it was revealed that in 2002, 16 persons died in police lock-ups. And until July 2003, there were seven deaths for that year. In 2002, it was also reported that 237 inmates died, and in 2003 (until July), 188 died in prison.
- On 8<sup>th</sup> August 2003, a policeman has been sentenced to 15 years in jail and ordered to be given 17 lashes of *rotan* (cane) for raping a Filipino and an Indonesian woman in a police lock-up.
- On September 2003, a Police Chief beat up a detainee in custody. This incident refers to the infamous 'black eye' incident.
- In April 1999, Parliament was informed that in the past 10 years, 635 people had been shot dead by the police. This means an average of 1.2 persons were shot dead per week over the said period.
- In October 2003, Dr Hasan Ali (PAS-Parit Buntar) in Parliament said that '...statistics showed an alarming increase in the number of deaths from police shootouts. He claimed 1.3 people were killed every week' (Hector 2004:1)

One prominent case of police brutality, points out to the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim who was assaulted and beaten while in police custody in September 1998. The story had gained public attention when coverage was made mainly through online journalism such as Suaram, Aliran Online, Community Communication Online, and JUST, and various international websites such World Socialist Web Site, Amnesty International, Asiaweek.com, Tribuneindia, and many others. On 29 September, 1998, Amnesty International stressed that:

Anwar's treatment at the hands of the police shows the government's blatant disregard for basic human rights. If a high-profile figure can be subjected to such treatment, we fear for the safety of those who are not so well known and who continue to be denied access to lawyers and their families (Amnesty International 1998b).

On the same day, Aliran Online showed some sense of sympathy or otherwise supportive stance with the former Deputy Prime Minister when its media statement came up with a suggestion that the Inspector General of Police should resign if what Anwar had claimed were true. The report highlights:

Aliran is outraged and revolted to hear Anwar testifying that he was beaten and punched until he bled and fainted while in police custody. We strongly condemn such blatant and barbaric abuse of power and brutality inflicted on a helpless detainee. Anwar reportedly had a swollen eye and bruises on his right arm when he was produced in court this morning, nine days after being arrested under the infamous Internal Security Act (Aliran 1998).

Responding to the same incident, on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2004, Suaram reported a much detailed version and asserted that the case was broadly highlighted via online journalism.

The highest ranking police officer in the country (Inspector General of Police - IGP), Rahim Noor was found to have punched and beaten the just sacked Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim resulting in serious bodily injuries. The IGP broke every rule and indulged himself to criminal assault of the worst kind. Regretfully Mahathir, the then prime minister and home minister, suggested that the injury could be self-inflicted. If not for the strong criticism by human rights groups... we would not have seen justice and Rahim Noor brought to the dock. The royal commission found Rahim Noor culpable in the beating and recommended that he be prosecuted. The Anwar 'black eye' incident and the massive use of violence on peaceful demonstrations, unwarranted arrests and assaults by the police were broadly broadcasted in international media, news wires and many websites (Suaram 2004c).

In December 2004, Suaram went further for its mission to fight against police brutality when a campaign against them was launched. In this campaign Suaram emphasised that:



Under no circumstances should a person be subjected to torture, cruel, inhuman, degrading treatment or punishment. International law unequivocally and absolutely prohibits torture in all circumstances. Yet, despite condemnation and outcry ...the police continue to inflict physical agony and mental anguish on many victims. The police wield strong and coercive powers to arrest, detain and subject victims to torture, far from accountability, redress and justice. We campaign for the accountability and reform of the police force, intervene in crisis situation, provides support and advice for victims of police brutality and documents the human rights violations (Suaram 2005a).

Another most talk-about incident in regard to 'police brutality' issue was the death of a police detainee named Francis Udayapan. On 16<sup>th</sup> April, 2004, Udayapan, 24, had been arrested and taken into police custody at the Brickfields Police Station on suspicion of an alleged theft of a mobile phone and the use of a stolen motorbike. The Brickfields police claimed that Udayapan, who was expected to be released on 17<sup>th</sup> April 2004, escaped on the day he was arrested by jumping out of the first floor window, while he was taken for an interrogation. Police also claimed that Udayapan jumped into the nearby river and disappeared. On 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2004, investigations into his disappearance were taken over by Bukit Aman Police Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2004, Udayapan's body was found in the Klang River covered with deep bruises but suspicion of police's foul play arose as the body did not look to have been submerged in water for 37 days (the amount of time that elapsed since Udayapan allegedly jumped into the Klang River). His mother, Sara Lily, identified the body as that of Udayapan but insisted that her son might have died during police custody due to the torture by the police and could have been dumped into the river to cover up his death. She and some NGO groups questioned the fact that the discovered body looked too good and too intact for one that has been submerged in water for more than a month (Asian Human Rights Commission 2004a).

The next day (24<sup>th</sup> May) when Udayapan's body was found in the Klang River, Malaysiakini was the first to break the news with a 386-word count story under the headline 'Missing detainee's mom unable to identify body'. On 25<sup>th</sup> May, Malaysiakini made another report with a word count of 795 under the headline 'Family identifies missing detainee's body' (the figures are shown in Table 4.8 and for more details see Appendix 7).

**Table 4.8**  
**Media Coverage on 'Udayapan's Case'**  
**between 23<sup>rd</sup> May and 26<sup>th</sup> May 2004**

Coverage on Udayapan's case	Online Newspaper	Mainstream Print Newspaper			
	Malaysiakini	Berita Harian	The Star	New Straits Time	Malay Mail
Total no. of coverage	2	1	1	0	1
Total word count	1181	338	174	0	210

The New Straits Times, one of the prominent mainstream newspapers, did not take any initiative to highlight breaking of news on the case. While only on 26<sup>th</sup> May, did the Malay Mail make a plain 210-word count report on the incident (see Leonard 2004:1) The Star, the highest circulated English mainstream press, only carried a-174-word news on 24<sup>th</sup> May. It had also presented a plain story on the case, which projected a less-enthusiastic stance to unearth verifications that may help readers to find answers to some of the concerned issue as 'what had actually caused Udayapan's death'.

Malaysiakini, as seen in the 25<sup>th</sup> May 2004 news, had provided details of the incident and even quoted the words of V Selvam, a politician as saying:

The police should explain the results, and take responsibility for the flawed investigations. In my opinion, either [federal criminal investigation director] Musa Hassan or the Inspector-General of Police [Mohd Bakri Omar] should resign (Yun Szu-Mae 2004:2).

Malaysiakini also had quoted the words of R.N. Rajah, the President of an independent Police Watch and Human Rights Committee, who was suspicious over the condition of the deceased body that 'looking too good for something that had apparently been submerged in water for 37 days' (Yun Szu-Mae 2004:1). Showing attentive stance on the case, Malaysiakini had also cited Eric Paulsen of Suaram, one of Malaysian Independent Human Rights groups, who charged the police for the 'slow and non-transparent investigations even though the case had been passed on to higher jurisdictions'. Paulsen was also quoted as saying, 'the entire investigation, including the suspension of the officer in charge must be subjected to public scrutiny' (Yun Szu-Mae 2004:3).

Through a bigger picture, as shown in Table 4.9, throughout 2005 Malaysiakini had published 39 stories on Udayapan's case, an acute amount of coverage as compared to any of the mainstream press. As a point of fact it carries more items, even if compared to the total amount of coverage made by all other mainstream press in the list. It also carries 21,540 word counts more than 700 percent of the Malay Mail, which stands the highest among the mainstream press. Such figures highlight Malaysiakini's concern on public appeal issues and significantly projected a public watchdog stance, especially against police brutality.

**Table 4.9**  
**Media Coverage on 'Udayapan's Case' in 2004**

Coverage on Udayapan's case	Online Newspaper	Mainstream Print Newspaper			
	Malaysiakini	Berita Harian	The Star	New Straits Time	Malay Mail
Total no. of coverage	39	7	8	4	11
Total word count	21540	2015	2164	1241	2797

In its June 2004 edition, Aliran Online had also highlighted Udayapan case, which had turned worst when a lawyer P Uthayakumar 'who heads the Police Watch and Human Rights Committee, and was acting on behalf of the mother of the deceased, was beaten and assaulted at gunpoint. When Uthayakumar asked for 24-hour police protection, his request was denied' (Loh 2004:8). Aliran also reported that in May 2004, Uthayakumar, who believes that the police were behind his assault, left for the United Kingdom to seek temporary asylum. He did not return until a cabinet minister announced that his safety would be assured and that the IGP had been put in charge of the Udayapan case (Loh 2004:9).

Also with regard to Udayapan's case, Malaysian Bar Council<sup>42</sup>, through its weblog, had urged the Attorney General and the Inspector General of Police to promptly hold an inquest so that a fair interrogation is made. It's Vice Chairman, Yeo Yang Poh wrote,

In the circumstance of these conflicting allegations (between the Brickfield Police and Udayapan's mother), it is imperative that an inquest into the

<sup>42</sup> Malaysian Bar Council website is accessible at <http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/index.html>

death of Francis Udayapan be held, so that the many questions and unexplained issues may be fully and thoroughly investigated and examined. The Bar Council urges both the Attorney General and the Inspector General of Police to ensure that such inquest will be promptly held (Yeo 2004) .

Supporting the Bar Council, Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) published an online report on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2004, inviting readers to sign an appeal letter to Malaysian authority and suggesting an independent inquest regarding Udayapan's death. The report stated,

The AHRC has received information about suspicious death of G. Francis Udayapan. His body was found in the Klang River on 23 May 2004. It was covered with deep bruises. Even though the police reported that he escaped from the Brickfields Police Station on 16 April 2004, Udayapan's mother claims that her son might die in police custody due to the torture by the police and could have been dumped into the river to cover up his death. The family has not been allowed to access the post-mortem report and an independent inquest has not been held despite the family's several requests. Please send a letter to the local authorities demanding to hold an appropriate inquest and an independent and thorough investigation into this matter. Also ask them to allow Udayapan's family to access the official post-mortem report without delay (Asian Human Rights Commission 2004a:1).

The above evidence highlight that online journalism as seen through independent online newspaper Malaysiakini, NGOs' websites such as AHRC, Suaram, Aliran Online and Malaysian Bar Council, had significantly provided more space to inform the public the issue of police brutality, which had raised greater public concern, as well as to reflect an empathetic stance on those who were victimised through such brutality.

In supporting the impression that online journalism had contributed more journalistic materials to inform the people regarding the issue of police brutality, Din Merican, a popular columnist of Malaysia Today attributed his gratitude to the Internet with regard to the extensive coverage and information concerning police brutality issue. He said,

Those who dare speak and offer alternative views are marginalized. ...Sadder still, some have been placed under detention and suffered police brutality. ...Fortunately, thanks to the internet, we have websites like Bakrimusa.com, Kassimahmad.com, Malaysia Today, Malaysiakini, to name a few, as well as the bloggers. They allow us to express our views and discuss our concerns in an open and responsible way (Merican 2005:3).

Merican's words match up Mustafa's (2002:163) assertion that online journalism provides more space for criticisms against the government and for that reason it attracts more Malaysians seeking for alternative views rather than the mainstream media that biased towards the authority. On similar score Hilley (2001: 170) asserts that for many Malaysians, notably the middle class, 'it was the Internet that helped fill the journalistic vacuum, not in its immediate availability, but in its use as a medium for accessing, exchanging and spreading information'.

In the midst of the above state of affairs, the mainstream mass media were seen as less dedicated to inform the public about incidences that challenged police accountability and integrity. For instance, on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2004, the New Straits Times daily did not highlight on the issue of police brutality when the Prime Minister Department announced the establishment of Special Commission on the Police Force. Instead the news report only plainly projected the welcome statement of the Inspector General of Police towards the establishment of Special Commission on the Police Force, which only took a 246 word count (see News Straits Times 2004:2). The story did not hint any criticism against police brutality as loudly projected through independent online newspapers. Such stance affirmed Lent's words that the mainstream media were more inclined to 'steer away from investigative reporting, fill pages with government speeches and campaigns' (Lent 1982:265). On the other hand, a day earlier Malaysiakini had published a newstory under the headline: '1,700 deaths in prisons, police custody in last 15 years' with a 501-word count (see Appendix 8).

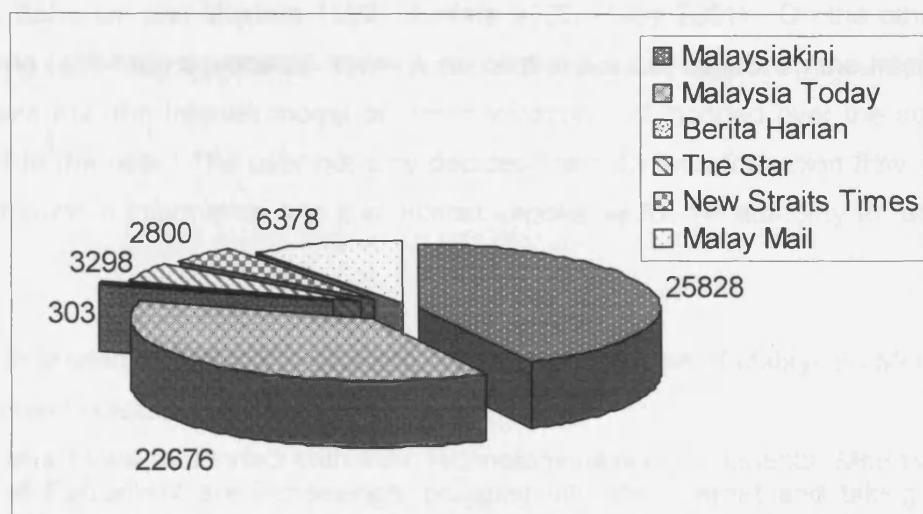
Scrutinising the 2005-archive of news, columns, opinion features and 'letter to editor' of online journalism, particularly, independent online newspapers such as Malaysiakini and Malaysia Today on issue of 'police brutality' and comparing them with that of the mainstream print newspaper namely the Star, the New Straits Times, Malay Mail and Berita Harian, it is found that independent online newspapers provide more coverage in terms of numbers of journalistic pieces and word count.

As Table 4.10 and Figure 4.2 illustrate, Malaysiakini alone had published a total of 43 journalistic pieces concerning or mentioning 'police brutality' more than the sum of stories concerning similar issue published in the Star (14), the New Straits Times (8), Malay Mail (14) and Berita Harian (1). Malaysia Today had contributed 29 journalistic pieces, doubled that of the Star, as well as Malay Mail. In terms of word count, Malaysiakini had also championed the coverage on the concerned issue when

there were a total of 25828 words, followed by Malaysia Today with a total of 22676 (for more details see Appendix 8).

**Table 4.10**  
**Media Coverage on 'Police Brutality' Issue in 2005**

Coverage on 'police brutality' issue	Online Journalism		Mainstream Print Newspaper			
	Malaysiakini	Malaysia Today	Berita Harian	The Star	New Straits Time	Malay Mail
Total no. of coverage	43	29	1	14	8	14
Total word count	25828	22676	303	3298	2800	6378



**Figure 4.2**  
**Word Count on Media Coverage of 'Police Brutality' Issue in 2005**

The patterns of media coverage significantly illustrate that independent online newspapers, weblogs and NGO websites of civil and human rights groups have given more space on the issue of police brutality as compared to that of the mainstream print newspaper. With regard to the total number of word count, Malaysiakini and Malaysia Today had also suggested more in-depth coverage on the issue and more space for opinion features. This would also suggest more views,

opinions, comments and criticisms. Malaysiakini has even highlighted the issue of police brutality as one of the 'Top Ten News of 2005' (Malaysiakini 2005b).

With reference to Table 4.10 and Figure 4.2, it is significant to point out that independent online newspapers, as represented by Malaysiakini and Malaysia Today, carried more stories on police brutality. Also, with regard to the case of Udayapan, online newspapers, NGO websites, and weblogs were more enthusiastic and opened in criticising and highlighting police misconduct and abused of power as compared to that of the mainstream media.

In relation to the licensee system and the PPPA 1984 with the mainstream print media, it is sensible to see that the mainstream print media are less keen to report on issues that challenge the authority. Besides the stringent law and the licensee system, media ownership also contributes distraction to freedom of the press, self-censorship, and limitation for a watchdog role against the authority (Lent 1982; Zaharom and Mustafa 1998; Mustafa 2000; Hilley 2001). On the other hand, as Long (2004:90) advocates, 'there is no central point of control on the Internet'. He stresses that the Internet model of communication had 'handed over the controlling power to the user.' The user not only decides the path for information flow, but also the amount of information and it is 'almost impossible for the authority to restrict the flow.'

In tandem with Long's assertion, Shahrir Samad, one of Malaysian Members of Parliament points out in his weblog,

In a move to connect with their technology-savvy constituents, Members of Parliament are increasingly plugging into the Internet and taking to 'blogging'. Many have begun to realise that they can engage a wider and younger audience by riding the Internet wave, because younger Malaysians are comfortable online. They are finding that web logs or blogs are an effective way of making known their stand and feelings on issues and ideas. Since it is also an interactive medium, they can get a finger on the pulse of younger Malaysians. The ultimate aim, of course, is to score points with voters (Shahrir 2005:1).

On similar regard, an opposition political leader, Lim Kit Siang emphasised, 'As leaders, MPs should be more IT-savvy, in line with the Government's call for people to be well-versed in ICT' (as quoted in Eileen Ng 2005:1). Lim, who started his blog named limkitsiang.com in August 2005 also points out that blogging provides a good platform for him with the Internet-savvy community and make him able to get his views read and obtain feedback. Lim also see that a number of MPs turned to

blogging because they wanted to reach a wider group of Malaysians, as they were not getting the coverage they wanted from the mainstream mass media.

The findings of the mini-case study also indicate that online journalism matters on five scores. Firstly, online journalism, particularly online newspapers, weblogs and NGO websites, provides more space to the public to have their voices sent to the government and be shared among members of the public. This would include the voices of the dissenters as well as the voices of the minority. Secondly, it allows more in-depth discussions, opinions, thoughts as well as criticisms, which would be rejected or otherwise less respected, in the mainstream mass media. Thirdly it enables the public to be informed of the 'other side of the story' which in some cases, the mainstream mass media would try to avoid. Fourthly, there are sense of empathy and support, inflicted through online journalism with regard to those who failed to gain their civil rights from the authority. Lastly, the findings also underlined that online journalism, as represented through various online newspapers, weblogs, and NGO websites such as that of Suaram, Aliran, Suhakam, Awam, and Asian Human Rights Commission, is significance to Malaysian social and political milieus. With that the mini-case study confirmed what is already believed.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

This chapter highlights issues and problems of Malaysia's mass media setting especially in areas of press freedom, democracy and national integration. It also explains the existence of authoritative control of the mass media through two foundations; first through the legislative control and second, through ownership control. Basically the mainstream mass media are in the hands of the ruling party and its affiliates: UMNO, MCA and MIC. The implication of such a setting is that the political freedom of the press is limited and investigative journalism is discouraged when they have to deal with democratic defect. Parallel to those issues there are various laws that encroach upon the journalistic commitment of the mass media.

Under the policy of Vision 2020 and its focus on ICT development, the establishment of the MSC, and the supportive provision of the CMA 1998, online journalism has flourished. Along with the support of the people, the NGOs, the minorities, the oppositions, the academics, as well as the domestic and international human and civil rights movements, online journalism's position is further secured.



This chapter shows that the establishment of online journalism is not simply 'just another medium' in the Malaysian mass media context. It is becoming a potential medium for the people to communicate and share their thoughts and opinions with the government and also among themselves.

Moving on a different track to that of the traditional mass media and privileged through the exemption from the PPPA 1984, online journalism portrays itself as alternative media while at the same time promoting participatory democracy. The mini-case study on media coverage of the 'Broga incinerator' and 'police brutality' issues justify that online journalism has opened up more space for the people to inform, particularly the government, and be informed, on matters that concerned their rights for safety, security, and most importantly their democratic participation. In addition, online journalism has shown greater inclination for empathetic posture with the people and those who think that their civil rights are being denied. Part of the supportive factors, are the unique technological features of the Internet that have made online journalism a potential tool for more freedom of the press and freedom of expression.

# **CHAPTER FIVE**

## **Perceptions of Democracy and National Integration**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the analysis of and findings from semi-structured interviews regarding the major themes of democracy and national integration. The issues regarding online journalism will be discussed in the proceeding chapter. The intention of the analysis is to present the foreground of Malaysia's social and political milieus and subsequently analyse how the emergence of online journalism would affect them. The interconnectivity underpinning the three themes is considered throughout this analysis.

The primary questions of the semi-structured interview linked to democracy and national integration are as follows:

- What is your opinion regarding democratic practices in Malaysia?
- What would be your choice between democratic idealism and social harmony?
- What is your opinion regarding the 'freedom of the press' in Malaysia?
- Do you think that genuine national integration among Malaysians is achievable with regard to current government policies?
- Do you think that Malaysians are currently nationally integrated?

Questions regarding the issue of 'freedom of the press' are included in this chapter as they are intrinsically related to the issue of democracy. The principal aspects of the responses in the interviews will be made up of opinions, perceptions, thoughts, ideas and attitudes of the selected opinion formers regarding Malaysia's democracy and national integration. It is important to note that I am not in the position to be judgemental towards their responses in such a way to assess whether their opinions are right or wrong. All of their responses are translated objectively.

### **5.2 Perception of Malaysia's democracy**

This study attempts to see how perceptions of opinion formers are linked to the process of democracy and contemporary national integration, and the involvement of

online journalism within these two domains. Their perceptions would denote their responses to democratic practices, especially when there are trends of criticism regarding the call for democratic change. Precisely it would highlight certain trend of elitist opinion on democracy. On a similar note, their perceptions also marked their level of acceptance or rejection of the contemporary democratic practices in Malaysia. These perceptions, which include reasoning, views and attitudes regarding democracy, would also prompt a certain weighting for democratic change and reform.

### 5.2.1 The contented majority

The first interview question attempts to capture the interviewees' opinions of Malaysia's democratic practices. They were given liberty to elaborate their thoughts and ideas on the issue until they indicated that they had volunteered enough information. Only then, was this question followed by a request for the interviewee to give a simple assessment of Malaysia's democratic practices by using a Likert scale of 'Very Good', 'Good', 'Fair', 'Bad' and 'Very Bad'. This is to give them a fair chance to generalise their views regarding Malaysia's democracy.

**Table 5.1**  
**Perception on Malaysia's democracy**

Perception on Malaysia's Democracy	GO	NGO	MD	AC	Total	%
Very Good	-	-	-	-	-	-
Good	6	1	-	2	9	18.7
Fair	4	5	11	8	28	58.3
Bad	-	4	2	3	9	18.8
Very Bad	-	-	2	-	2	4.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>

Having assessed the responses to the Likert scale, as well as their thoughts, opinions and ideas concerning Malaysia's democracy, it is determined that the majority (77%) of the interviewees perceived Malaysia's democracy as either 'Good' or 'Fair', while the rest (23%) formed a small minority that perceived Malaysia's democracy as 'Bad' or 'Very Bad'. The most positive views came from the GOs where all of them (100%) ranked Malaysia's democracy either 'Good' or 'Fair'. On the

other hand the NGOs formed the most pessimistic group with 40% (4/10) of them perceived Malaysia's democracy as 'Bad', while 36% (4/15) of the Media group also perceived Malaysia's democracy on similar standard. It is also noted that 13% of the Media group, in particular the independent online journalist, perceived Malaysia's democracy as 'Very Bad'. None of the interviewees considered Malaysia's democracy as 'Very Good'. Such pattern of perception is shown in Table 5.1.

Using the pattern of their perceptions on Malaysia's democracy, the interviewees are categorised into two groups: the contented group and the discontented group. The contented group (77%) is labelled as such because they perceived Malaysia's democracy as 'Good' or 'Fair', although they do acknowledged that there are deficiencies in Malaysia's democracy during their initial explanations and elaborations. This opinion was expressed in their direct speech as well as by the implication of their words. It is important to note that some of them even realised that the Malaysian style of democracy is 'semi-authoritarian' as espoused in the instance of guided democracy.

The other group, however, is categorised as the discontented group (23%) because they viewed Malaysia's democracy as unacceptable, which some of them perceived as closer to the level of 'authoritarian'. This may explain the 'illiberal democracy' that Fareed Zakaria (2003) suggested, through which the people are willing to accept certain defects of democratic practices and to accommodate and adapt to it. Gradually such democracy becomes a democracy of consensus by the people. On similar grounds it also suggests the reversal democracy by which the democratic practices of a nation gradually take up a reverse direction as a result of political abuse of power (Huntington 1991:14). In Malaysian context, Abbott (2000:248) observes that:

In the 1980s and 1990s, during the so-called 'third wave of democratisation,' Malaysia became less democratic... the independence of the judiciary was curtailed and the powers of the elected monarchy weakened.

The following data explains how the contented group and the discontented group expressed their thoughts on Malaysia's democracy. Some of the major claims from the contented group are that 'Malaysia's democracy opposes Western democracy', 'Malaysia's democracy suits its multiracial society', 'it is an Asian-style democracy', and 'Malaysia's democracy is a guided democracy.' Basically, the general pattern of their perceptions suggests that Malaysia's democracy is unsuitable

for assessment using the Western scale. Liberal democracy of the Western style is seen detrimental to Malaysia's multiracial society, where national security and social harmony are most preferred (Economic Planning Unit 2004:3). Expressing a similar view, the former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad had frequently pointed out that democracy of Western interest had failed to correspond to the contextual setting of Malaysia's social and political landscape. Advocating the conception of an Asian style democracy, Mahathir frequently criticised Western democracy. One of his stern critiques delivered at the United Nation Organisation conference in 1991, was:

If democracy means to carry guns, to flaunt homosexuality, to disregard the institutions of marriage, to disrupt and damage the well-being of the community in the name of individual rights, to destroy a particular faith, to have privileged institutions i.e. the Western Press, which are sacrosanct even if they indulge in lies and instigations, which undermine society, the economy, and international relations, to permit foreigners to break national laws; if they are the essential details; can't the new converts opt to reject them? (as quoted in Bello 1998).

On the other hand, the discontented group pointed out that 'Malaysia's guided democracy is principally 'authoritarian' and 'strict legislation and preventive laws disrupt the fundamentals of democracy'. Some of the interviewees even relate corruption incidences with the Malaysian style of democracy. Some of their evidence is discussed below.

#### **5.2.1.1 Malaysia's democracy opposes Western democracy**

With reference to positive views of Malaysia's democracy, a noticeable number (21%) of interviewees advocate that Malaysia's democratic practices differ from the Western style of democracy. In spite of which, they think Malaysia's democracy is acceptable and to some of them pleasing and justified for Malaysia's socio-political context. Such views to a large extent contradict the trends of criticism and protest against Malaysia's democracy especially as projected through online journalism (Netto 1999; Hakam 2000; Aliran 2003a; Malaysiakini 2003; Saravanamuttu 2003; Suaram 2003; Netto 2005). The phrase 'democracy of our own style' and Malaysia's democracy 'suits our own society' are frequently mentioned, claiming that Malaysia's democratic practices go well with the 'multiracial feature' of Malaysian society.

It was understood that most of these interviewees realised that international observers, social scientists, NGOs as well as human rights activists see Malaysia's democracy as a substandard. This is seen especially in terms of freedom of the

press and expression, human and civil rights, accountability of judiciary, and use of repressive laws, as some of them often made references to this viewpoint. They highlighted that: 'we cannot practice completely as what the Western do', 'we cannot use the same scale as what the Western is practicing', 'how can you have the context of Western views', 'not a total democracy as what is being practiced in most of the Western country'.

This contented group also opposed negative assessments of Malaysia's democracy (as WAO exemplify), which many of them viewed as unreliable because it used the Western democracy indicator and the score was based on the Western scale of assessment.

A GO executive of Malaysia Information Department quoted the words of former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamed that the democratic practice in Malaysia is in accord to Malaysia's own mould, opposing the Western style, and is in accord with its multiracial society. He said:

Democratic practice in Malaysia is, of course, suitable to our country. Like our former PM said, 'Democratic practice in Malaysia is according to our own mould'...so definitely it is suitable for us. ...We are in a multiracial country. Definitely we cannot practice completely as what the Western do ...Also very important, it is based on our own culture, on our own people (GO8, Director, Malay, male, aged 50).

He stressed on the individualistic stance of the Western democracy, which is significantly different to Malaysia's democracy. He also supported the affirmative action implemented through the New Economic policy, by which ethnic preference directive of the government is seen in favour of the Malay ethnic group. Such action is important to highlight a fair treatment to the indigenous society that was economically underprivileged.

If we see, in terms of the basic principles of the Western democratic style, ...they placed more on individual equality, whereby the opportunity given to all individuals are equal. More or less they are individualistic, but yet we know that in our society the disparity in terms of level of education is significant, the difference in terms of background is also significant, as well as the difference of religious belief and culture. For all these reasons, we cannot use the same scale as what the Western is practicing because we see the economic prospect of the people as equal but their background and their ability, their affordability and strength are not in equality, which would definitely jeopardise the principles of fairness to the people. For example we could see that years before, the Malays were very backwards as compared to the Chinese or foreigners in terms of economic performance as the Chinese and the foreigners were more equipped in terms of knowledge and education in this area. The Malays

were more engaged to subsistence agriculture, fishing and working as government servants. If we take those [factors] into consideration then the equality in economic activities would then make the Malays ...more backwards whereas they are the indigenous people of the country and they are made up of 60% of the population. Furthermore, this would create a wider disparity between the Malays and the non-Malays and would cause discomfort and discontentment among them, which I see as very bad for social harmony. This is one of the main reasons that caused the 13<sup>th</sup> May incident, where the Malays were discontented with their economic situation as compared to the non-Malays. That is why we have the kind of democracy of our own mould, which is suitable for our country and our people. It is pragmatic to the different ethnic groups, as well as the realm of our country (GO8, Director, Malay, male, aged 50).

In a similar note, a Director of a news agency raised his voice to emphasise his rejection of the Western style of democracy, which he perceived as incompatible with Malaysia's demographic profile:

We must look at the context of Malaysia. How can you have the context of Western democratic practices viewed with someone else's interest? It has to suit the scenario; suit the demographic backgrounds of our people. You cannot have democratic practices, which is generally propagated especially under the perception of the West (GO3, Director, Malay, male, aged 50).

'No Western nation ever practices ideal democracy, especially in terms of giving a fair treatment to all different ethnic groups'. A manager of a highest-circulated mainstream English newspaper pointed such point of view. He does not see that the United States or Australia has given a fair treatment to the indigenous people to suggest a decent democratic practice. On the other hand, he argued that Malaysia do not ill-treat the minority. He said:

I think in Malaysia democracy is given a very vast outlook. At the same time, it cannot be borderless. For the simple reason we are living in a plural society so we have to be very careful. Under the garnish of democracy, you tell me which country, include America, do you think have complete democracy? You know how they treated the blacks? Here in Malaysia, we don't ill-treat any of our races. Even in another part of the world, where you find a plural society like Australia, do you see how do they treat their bushman? So what Western democracy are you talking about? As far as we are concerned, I think if you ask me personally, I think we enjoy quite a bit of liberalism but at the same time as we advocate there must be a certain parameters. You cannot make it borderless so much so under the garnish of democracy each person can say anything he likes; can you imagine what will happen to our country? So there must be certain limitation but that limitation should not be such that it affects the growth of the mind; that is bad. So as far as I'm concerned ...living in a plural society we must be sensitive to other people's views and also to how they perceive things (MD10, Manager, Indian, male, aged 52).

A journalist for a Chinese mainstream newspaper supported Malaysia's style of democracy. He claimed that total freedom, as the Western democracy promoted does not go well with Malaysian society. He affirmed that the democratic practices in Malaysia are fine and 'fit the people':

Malaysia practices democracy, which seems to be different from those practiced in the Western countries. ...I think our democracy fits the people and the way the general Malaysians would want it to be. Most of us agree that total freedom as recommended by the ideal of democracy is not good (MD6, Journalist, Chinese, male, aged 37).

A Magistrate asserted that Malaysia's democratic practices might be seen as different to that of the Western democracy but he insisted that it is acceptable in its own unique way. He said:

I believe in Malaysia we do practice democracy in the real sense but it is in our own unique way. It is not like what is being practiced in the United States or any other country. There are certain elements in Malaysia where we do apply to Western views and thinking besides our own customary law. I believe, so far, we uphold the principles of democracy and I don't think there is anyone in Malaysia who has been prejudiced about this (GO2, Magistrate, Malay, male, aged 42).

It is apparent that the majority (77%) of the interviewees are contented with the contemporary democratic practices in Malaysia. As reflected through their assertions, opinions and thoughts, they suggested that Malaysia's democratic practice is unique, in the sense that it is customised for its social and political milieus, thereby making them unsuitable to assessment of the same scale as the Western standard. These findings also indicate that the majority of these opinion formers do not support the critical discourses on Malaysia's democratic defects as often portrayed through online journalism. As for instance, in terms of freedom of the press, an online newspaper, Malaysiakini, boldly criticising Malaysia's democracy, which the mainstream daily perceived as giving priority to 'sensitivity of local standards and norms':

Somehow, recent opinion features in the state-controlled media in Malaysia propelled by the police ambush of Malaysiakini... appear to have the self-appointed right and a quickly acquired wisdom to expound more canard. On the other hand the Malaysian police's recent political dirty work is deemed necessary and legitimate. On the other hand it is deserved on the 'nuisance' Malaysiakini because it dares to directly confront even assail, what one New Straits Times columnist, John Teo, bestows as maintaining 'sensitivity to local standards and norms' [in his column Wavelength under the headline 'Sword of damocles hangs over press for good reason'] (Bhatia 2003).



In another instance Susan Loone (2003) through an independent online newspaper, Malaysiakini, wrote:

Malaysiakini supporters, mostly from the opposition have been given space to air their views on the independent online publication, have come out in full force to defend its rights to freedom of speech. DAP national chairperson Lim Kit Siang described the raid [on Malaysiakini] as a 'triple blow' to Malaysia – marking a new climax, post-Sept 11, of 'authoritarian syndrome trampling on democracy and human rights' (Loone 2003)

From other online source, Raja Petra, the current editor in-chief of an online newspaper, Malaysia Today, sternly criticised Malaysia's democracy when he wrote:

Malaysia's political leaders on both sides of the divide are starting to get very worried. UMNO has played the racial card and they know, once sentiments are fuelled, there is no stopping the mob. As the Malay proverb goes, 'once spat, one cannot lick it back' – and a lot of spitting has been going on these last few days. How does UMNO lick back the spit they have levelled at the Chinese? Of course, this may not be too difficult for UMNO leaders. I know of some whom have said they will 'piss on Mahathir's grave when he dies', and 'even if they die and be born again they will never rejoin UMNO'. Today, these same people are UMNO diehards and staunch Mahathirians (Raja Petra 2002).

Conversely, such democratic defects are taken as necessary in order to achieve social harmony and to consider cultural sensitivity. One of the justifications for 'an imperfect democracy' is that Malaysia's democracy suits its multiracial society, which is perceived differently from the Western standard. Malaysia's mainstream press, the New Straits Times in its editorial page, once pointed out:

Let us get certain historical facts out of the way. Today's rich and developed countries in Western Europe and North America did not become 'free and democratic' on a clean sheet of paper. They got to where they are now through their own sordid eras of robber barons, slave-owners and colonisers. So, there is no need for today's self-appointed guardians of freedom and democracy coming from the West. Now look at all the 'new' countries which have since made good. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Chile, and now China itself; they all 'arrived' on the back of an authoritarian streak of varying, sometimes doubtful, benignity (John Teo 2003).

Other than that, as one of the media executive highlighted, the implementation of stringent laws such as the Police Act 1967, which prohibits public assembly of more than three persons, also challenged Malaysia's democratic stance.

### **5.2.1.2 Malaysia's democracy suits its multiethnic society**

The contented interviewees frequently pointed out the phrase 'multiracial composition of Malaysian society' in order to justify that Malaysia's democratic practices are 'good' and 'fair'. As some of them emphasised, greater consideration on the diverse ethnic composition should be given for a fair assessment on Malaysia's democracy. This contented group claimed that Malaysia's democratic style fits the multiracial feature whereby tolerance, accommodation, freedom of religion and culture are fundamentals. To most of these opinion formers, Malaysia is unique in terms of demographic features, which makes it relevant for Malaysia to design a style of democracy according to its own mould.

An academician claimed Malaysia's democracy fits the unique multiracial composition. He stressed that the concession of the Constitution on the Malay special rights and the wealth-sharing economic programmes of the NEP are among the necessities of Malaysia's democracy.

I believe that the democratic practice in Malaysia is good in the sense that it fits the needs and requirement of our unique society, a multiracial composition, which could be taken into account in comparison with the Western concept of democracy. There are many consideration that need to be checked especially the rights of the indigenous people, the Bumiputera, the social harmony or the public order, the balance in wealth-sharing endeavours, the disparity in terms of economy, the polarisation in terms of occupation, the social sensitivity and many more. The government has done so well so far even though there are minor setbacks. But to compare with the other Third World or even among ASEAN, I believe that our government had performed well in terms of democracy. Politically we are very stable as compared to Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Myanmar, and Cambodia and of course Vietnam. We had already undergone 11 general elections; it is fair, where we can find that even the opposition have won two states in the 1999 election (AC3, Senior Lecturer, Malay, male, aged 47).

A senior manager of a prominent media company was of the opinion that democratic practices in Malaysia are justified because diverse culture and ethnic composition are integral to its style of democracy. Even when compared to its neighbours, Malaysia's composition is volatile from many sensitive issues.

Well, I think Malaysia's democracy is not bad at all compared with some other developing countries. Of course, if you compare with Indonesia or Thailand or Philippines there is a bit of difference because we are multiracial while they are not. There are so many issues that are sensitive to our public sphere with regard to culture, belief, language, and religion while our neighbours are having a different composition, where the

majority of their people are the indigenous people (MD2, Senior Manager, Malay, male, aged 45).

On a similar note, a journalist of a Chinese daily suggested that Malaysia should take up a kind of democracy that could accommodate its multiethnic society. This is important because without careful management of intricate interethnic relations, especially on cultural and customary issues, it would result in racial conflicts.

What is the use of democracy if there are commotions all over the country? We can't afford to have...democracy as what is practiced in the West. We have a unique population of different ethnic groups with different culture, language and religion. The social atmosphere in Malaysia is fragile in terms of sensitive issues among the different races. (MD6, Journalist, Chinese, male, aged 37).

A GO executive observed that cooperation, tolerance and accommodation among the different ethnic groups, are very important aspects that help them to live together in a harmonious atmosphere. He said:

There is a great deal that can be pointed out about democratic values, for example the democratic values of tolerance. Malaysia had an exceptional record in this area, better than most of the countries, in terms of give and take in terms of accommodation; compromise...between the Malays and the non-Malays. There is a great deal of consultation between each other (GO9, Legal Advisor, Prof. Indian, male, aged 52).

A manager of a media corporation pointed to Malaysia's unique society being very different when compared to the neighbouring countries. The issue of ethnicity, interwoven through the different cultures, religions, languages and even complexions, should be taken into account when assessing Malaysia's democracy. He affirmed his contentment with the democratic practices in Malaysia:

Malaysia's democracy is not bad when compared to Indonesia, Thailand or the Philippines. They are not heterogeneous societies. We are different because we are multiracial with different language, religion and cultural backgrounds. ...So, Malaysia's democracy has to consider such differences. (MD1, Manager, Malay, male, aged 46).

A journalist of a Chinese mainstream daily similarly agreed that Malaysia's democracy should be in tandem with its multiracial society. For such reason, he stressed that the people should be careful when dealing with sensitive issue that touched on religion and culture. If not properly handled, it would result in unnecessary commotions and racial chaos.

I think it is fair to associate it with the multiracial country like Malaysia. We have to be very careful of many sensitive issues. We cannot have democracy of the fullest concept. In fact, I do not believe that any country

can go for the fullest democratic practice. There will be chaos all over if you give the people all the rights and all the freedom as suggested by the absolute democracy. That would not be good for Malaysia (MD12, Journalist, Chinese, male, aged 50).

A journalist of prominent Malay mainstream daily also underlined the multiracial feature of Malaysia's society. He argued that the affirmative action reflects Malaysia's democratic style, which corresponds to the multiethnic society. Other than that he sees that the democratic practices improve as the society changes for development.

Malaysia has a different way of democratic practice because it comprises of a multiracial society, so you have to make sure that every society or race in Malaysia is being taken care of. There was the big 1969 riot and then the government had implemented an affirmative action just to make sure that this won't be happen again. And I think Malaysian society has accepted this action or policy, which have been practiced ever since. From my point of view, that [affirmative action] is part of a democratic practice of the Malaysian model. So you can see that the [democratic] trend has been changed in 1980s. There are also some other changes in our democracy especially in the freedom of speech, where you can see the uprising of NGOs for example, [and] the channels of Internet. The online medium has been mushrooming, and this is also ...a democratic exercise that has materialised in Malaysia. You cannot say that democracy is one factor that is static, democracy is growing according to the changes of the society (MD15, Journalist, Malay, male, aged 47).

A GO leader, who is a manager of a public radio station, viewed that Malaysia's democracy is not ideal. One of the justifications that he pointed out was the prioritising of national security and social harmony, which is also a norm of Malaysia's style of democracy. Such measures might take away the people's freedom. However, he is contented with Malaysia's style of democracy because it ensures social harmony and national security:

Frankly speaking, we are not hundred percent democratic, but being a third world country we have reasons for being so. I think among the important reasons is to maintain national security and social harmony among the people as we are a multiracial society (GO4, Radio Station Manager, Malay, male, aged 46).

On a similar note, an academician perceived that Malaysia's democracy is not perfect but she stressed that it is justified for some reasons that marked Malaysia's style of democracy. Among others, she asserted that historical and ethnic compositions are principals in determining Malaysia's democracy that emphasised social security as crucial.

One can see that ...Malaysia reflects a sound democratic practice ...even though [it] is not hundred percent democratic. This is due to the nature of history and composition of races. As the indigenous people are weak in economic performance as well as in education opportunities, special

treatment are given to them to balance up the situation through the practice of affirmative actions such as the New Economic Policy. This is what I see as the most important factor that gives us some form of antidote to the communalised situation that separates us in the economic sector. So, the indigenous ethnic group is pushed to join the minority who dominates the economic sector. I believe that since 1970 the social and political stability are mainly determined through the affirmative action of the government. Only then, the other elements of democracy, such as the election practices, the rights to be represented, the rights to speak, the rights to be protected, the rights to education, the rights to property and etcetera are looked upon and given assurance. Anyway, we need some form of control to most of the democratic customs. There shouldn't be absolute freedom and rights. We have to consider the security of the society and not the principles of individualism. We work that way (AC9, Assoc. Prof. Malay, female, aged 51).

The above evidence provides some explanations of Malaysia's multiracial composition, as to a certain extent, a rationale to justify Malaysia's own mould of democracy. In addition, by implication and direct speech, notable numbers (21%) of the interviewees rejected Western liberal democracy: three from GO, three from Media group and four from the Academician group. There was no NGO who had showed any opposing views against Western democracy. Those opponents of Western democracy viewed that such societal complexities need to be given due consideration, especially on sensitive issues relating to religions, cultures and customs. In an 'Asian style democracy' the collective rights of the society are given the priority over individual rights as espoused through liberal democracy (Hood 1998:854). Nevertheless, Malaysians are increasingly mature in many aspects and that made them more informed of their social and political rights. With such justification, the government should provide more allowance for the people to be heard. Some of the evidence also highlight the justification of the affirmative action of the NEP that basically favours the Malay ethnic group, even though to some political observers, such government policy seems to be undemocratic (Gomez and Jomo 1997; Guan 2000).

#### **5.2.1.3 Malaysia's democracy is guided democracy**

There are also a few (25%) among the contented interviewees who described Malaysia's democracy as a guided democracy. These few contented interviewees did not show objection to such a concept, but were more in support of it. Contrary to the arguments of opponents of guided democracy, such a democratic concept is perceived to portray authoritarianism (Kroef 1957; Palmier 1973; Guerin 2001). As for

instance, Kroef (1957:114) sees that guided democracy, as the late Sukarno (Indonesia's former President) advocated, is a modification of the conventional parliamentary system while rejecting a Western style democracy in order to promote domestic peace and 'national unity'. As Sukarno affirmed, this style of democracy emphasises Indonesia's 'original form of democracy, which is not imported from abroad', but rather 'a guided democracy, with a leadership' (as quoted in Kroef 1957:115). Through guided democracy, Sukarno emphasised that the people are given the rights to have their opinions and thoughts shared in the political decision-making through some forms of deliberative process. However, much of the concept stayed as political rhetoric, where the end result showed that the executive power frequently controlled the decisions on 'what is good' and 'what is not' for the nation. As Guerin (2001) observes, this exposed the nation to abuses of political power. At the end of the day, Sukarno's guided democracy was seen as a failure in Indonesian development (Guerin 2001:1).

In this regard, this study finds that the interviewees were aware and knowledgeable about the concept of guided democracy. Through their understanding of the concept, as implied in their words, this group of interviewees perceived guided democracy as significantly relevant for Malaysia's social and political landscape.

This contented group, by implication or through their direct speech, realised that guided democracy suppresses their freedom of expression. Some of the interviewees pointed out that 'the democratic practice in Malaysia bears some weaknesses in terms of women rights', 'there are some aspects of the democratic practice which could be improved', and, 'democratic practice in Malaysia still hampered by many regulations including Internal Security Act 1960, the Emergency Ordinance, which allows for detention of people without trial'. They did not support such claims with details of the positive contribution of guided democracy but simply stated that it is good for Malaysians for the reason that 'it brings peace and harmony' and that 'it suits Malaysia's diverse ethnic demographic'. Their positive opinions of guided democracy are justified by three important perceptions. First, they denied that guided democracy is authoritarian. Second, they viewed that guided democracy opposes liberal democracy, and third, they believed that guided democracy had successfully projected and protected national security as well as social harmony. The following projects some evidence of such thoughts.

An academician was of the opinion that Malaysia's democracy is a guided democracy in the sense that it is not total democracy in isolation. He also stressed that Malaysia could not be too democratic because of the multiracial features of the society. He said:

We do practice democracy in Malaysia but it is guided democracy. It is not a total *per se* in terms of democracy. Also to some extent is that, you cannot be too democratic because...we have a lot of different cultures, different religions, and different backgrounds. (AC4, Assoc. Prof., Malay, male, aged 47)

An executive of a TV station, who positively perceived guided democracy, argued that it does not reflect true democracy but it is also non-authoritative as such.

In our case, we are not that authoritative, and we are not truly free compared to the US. We are like what Sukarno used to say; guided democracy. So, we are still in that situation (MD5, Chief Executive, Malay, male, aged 49).

A GO executive asserted that Malaysia's guided democracy offers limited freedom because the authority guides the people towards 'nation building'.

We do have the freedom but in a very limited manner. It means that ...we are some sorts of guided democracy... There are a lot of other elements that really need the government to guide, to build the nation. (GO1, Executive, Malay, male, aged 39).

A journalist of a Chinese newspaper also expressed a similar state of mind. He emphasised that Malaysia's democracy needs to be a guided democracy to ensure that only:

What is found or thought to be good and beneficial to the people is allowed to be carried out, but what is detrimental to the social order will be avoided (MD6, Journalist, Chinese, male, aged 37).

A female academician viewed guided democracy as acceptable in Malaysia because 'there shouldn't be limitless freedom and rights'. She argued that Malaysians 'have to consider the security of the society and not the principles of individualism'. She also affirmed that Malaysia's democracy 'may not be perfect but it is fair, it is what we called guided democracy' (AC9, Assoc. Prof., Malay, female, aged 51).

The above evidence illustrates that guided democracy allows authoritative control upon various freedoms, which the government distinguishes as imperative for social harmony. The government and not the decision of the people, determines the

judgement of 'what is good and what is bad for the nation'. From another perspective, a GO leader even described Malaysia's press as 'guided press' when he said:

So the press in Malaysia is actually 'guided press' and abides by all these Acts, one the ISA, Sedition Act, Printing Presses Act, the Official Secret Act, the Police Act and others' (GO10, General Accountant, Malay, male, aged 50).

The concept of a 'guided press' is also seen as closely supportive of the mechanism of guided democracy. Lent (1982:265) observes that the 'guided press' supports the 'development mass media' where the national agenda is given priority. In order to be in tandem with such intention, Lent sees that 'all aspects of information and entertainment in the Malaysian press must be guided by the government' (Lent 1982:264). On a similar note, a manager of a prominent media company uses the term 'guided freedom' (MD1) to describe Malaysia's press freedom and freedom of expression.

This study finds that the fundamental justification for the relevance of guided democracy is based mainly on the fact that the government has successfully protected and sustained social harmony and national security despite several crises that jeopardised interethnic relations as well as the nation's political and economic stability. On such grounds, some Malaysian opinion formers accept guided democracy even though they acknowledged that it curtails their freedom in areas such as freedom of the press.

The above selected evidence also projects significant distinction between media experts and other groups with regard to their point of views. Among the apparent distinctions are as follows. Firstly, the media experts had directly pointed out the sensitivity of the different ethnic groups in relation to their religions, cultures and customs (see MD2, MD6). Consequently, Malaysia democracy must accommodate such a situation to assure social and political stability. Secondly, national security and social harmony are important facets of Malaysia democracy. For that, absolute freedom would not be constructive (see MD10). Malaysia has to consider the security of the society, while the principles of individualism, as the Western concept highlights, would not help. Thirdly, the media experts also highlighted the concept of 'guided freedom', which I see as an extended facet of the guided democracy. Such limited democracy that affects Malaysian mass media are emphasised through the enactment and implementation of various media laws (see MD1).



## **5.2.2 The discontented minority**

In addition to the contented group who perceived Malaysia's democracy as 'Good' or 'Fair', there is a small fraction (23%) of the interviewees who classified Malaysia's democracy as either 'Bad' or 'Very Bad' (see Table 5.1). This group is made up of interviewees mainly from the NGO (8.3%), the Media practitioner (8.3%), and a small fraction of the Academician group (6.3%). Those Media practitioners are mainly of the independent media companies. The different standpoints of this discontented group may also suggest that the GO, the mainstream Media Practitioners and a large fraction of the Academicians are supportive of Malaysia's democracy. There is no GO member among the discontented group. This corresponds with the assumption that the GO members are government advocates or they are constrained in expressing their views within their area.

Among the reasons that this discontented group highlights to justify their claims that democratic practice in Malaysia is 'Bad' are the issues of media control, preventive laws, restrictions to freedom of expression, the practices of neo-feudal culture that promote bigotry, the defects of guided democracy, election defects, and corruption. Contrary to the contented majority this section of interviewees would not compromise democratic defects for the sake of pluralism, ethnic composition, and social harmony. They viewed the rights of free expression, freedom of the press, and the rights of free election as imperative components for Malaysia's democracy. They are also discontented with Malaysia's style of democracy as they see it fails to stop corruption and it fails to avoid the arbitrary use of preventive laws. Also contrary to the contented group, this group observed that guided democracy is against the good practices of democracy.

### **5.2.2.1 Guided democracy is principally authoritarian**

Much has been said about guided democracy, mainly the negative aspects that would not support the fundamentals of liberal democracy. This section reveals how the discontented group of Malaysia's democracy viewed guided democracy as opposed to the principles of democracy and presumably invites elements of authoritarianism. Some of the evidence shows that 'some of the laws are inimical to the growth of democracy like the Internal Security Act 1960, which tends to frighten

the people from speaking out'. Others stress that, 'I wouldn't say that Malaysia is a dictatorship; it is democracy with a lot of limitations', 'you see corruption: money politics, corrupted police, corrupted red tape', 'it has some elements of autocracy', and 'in Malaysia, like judiciary, preventive laws, the responsibility of the police for public security, are quite disappointing'.

A director of a media company that deals on advertising industry, argued:

There is no total democracy, and no total freedom of expression. Not everyone can really speak or give their minds freely because there are laws prohibiting them to do so. So,...in Malaysia there is guided democracy; the right term to describe Malaysian democracy (MD3, Director, Malay, male, aged 47).

Such an argument points out that guided democracy promotes limited freedom of expression, which as elaborated in the preceding chapters, is noticeable through the work of the mainstream mass media. The executive further linked the issue to online journalism as it highlights the limited freedom of the mainstream mass media. He said:

The advantage is that you provide an alternative for those who want to read on things that are not printed in the mainstream mass media, especially in Malaysia, because the online media is not controlled by the Printing Presses Act (MD3, Director, Malay, male, aged 47).

An academician in Communication Studies perceived that 'guided democracy is an imitation of the respectable good practices of democracy'. He rejected guided democracy, which he claimed 'most people are confused by and would accept it just because they see that the plural society is living in peace'. He insisted that it is:

...not the true democracy as the West understands. It is democracy no doubt, but it has some element of autocracy... So it is not democracy in its pure form. It is guided democracy (AC8, Associate Professor, Chinese, male, aged 46).

He also asserted that the governance of such guided democracy cultivates a passive culture and bigotry, which is contrary to an advanced progressive society as the Vision 2020 proposed. He said:

We are moving towards an industrialised country. We have the Multimedia Super Corridor. ...That is good. The infrastructure is there, while the government must also continue to be opened towards critical evaluation, critical analysis and encourage the people to be critical, to be open-minded and not to be close-minded because the danger of close-mindedness is that you end up usually in some form of being parochial and bigoted (AC8, Associate Professor, Chinese, male, aged 46).

Another academician used the term 'semi-autocratic' to describe various restrictions in areas of freedom of speech and of the press. She said:

In Malaysia, we are not really a democratic country as such...if compared to the liberal Western democratic countries we are more like semi-autocratic. So, democratic practices...[are] in existence but there are some limitations to it (AC13, Assoc. Prof., Malay, female, aged 45).

A chief executive of a TV station criticised Malaysia's democracy which he claimed as dented with stringent laws that impinged the freedom of expression. He pointed out the Police Act 1967 (see Malaysia Today 2005b:1) that severely affects public's rights for peaceful assembly, when any gathering that involve three persons requires police permit.

Some of our law is restrictive in comparison with the West. ...For example we have the illegal assembly regulation whereby you cannot assemble five people [in actual fact, three] or more without getting a police permit. That is very restrictive. ...The reason is that the government thinks that the people are not mature enough, which is not a good reason to me. But then can we also be responsible? There are people [political leaders] who claim to be democratic but the rule and regulation within that country may not reflect true democracy (MD5, Chief Executive, Malay, male, aged 49).

Corruption is also an issue associated with defective democracy. It relates to democracy when the government executives are seen as less enthusiastic to curb social deficiency, especially when it involves judiciary, high profile individuals and governmental bodies (Hilley 2001:107; Leong 2001:3; Sazali 2001). The issue of corruption among the political executives, the police and public service officers are among the democratic defects that a journalist from a Chinese press, emphasised. She said:

I am quite disappointed...Corruption: money politics, corrupted police, corrupted red tape at the public services. Well, you read in newspaper about the Land Office [corruption case]. I don't think this is the democracy that we always wanted (MD7, Journalist, Chinese, female, aged 39).

On similar grounds, an executive of a media organisation asserted that the occurrence of corruption has indeed increased. He charged that:

The government has placed too much emphasis on infra-structural development but less on spiritual development or value development, human values...ethics and moral, so there are opportunities for a lot of people to abuse that kind of development (MD5, Chief Executive, Malay, male, aged 49).

One important remark to be included in this discussion is an NGO leader's opinion on Election Commission, which he distinguished as not being established as an independent body. For such a feature to be missing from a democratic institution

such as Election Commission would significantly upset the process of democracy, especially the rights to electoral contestation.

I think there are some [democratic] shortcomings...The Election Commission should be independent of the government. It must be answerable to the parliament. It should not come under any ministry. ...From the last election, there have been lot of shortcomings of the Election Commission. ...In order for a country to practice democracy I think the Election Commission should be independent of the government and they should be able to convince the electorate that they are really independent and not in favour of the government nor partisan (NGO6, President, Indian, male, aged 51).

Some of the above claims were frequently highlighted in online journalism. As for instance, World Socialist Web Site correspondence stated that:

At one point in the [1999-General Election] campaign, Mahathir felt compelled to respond to criticisms that the opposition had no media access. Freedom of the press, he insisted, also meant the right not to run stories, omitting to mention, of course, that most or all the major newspapers, TV and radio stations are either owned by the state or by individuals and companies closely linked to the ruling parties. He was particularly niggled by the criticisms in the few, relatively small circulation opposition newspapers such as *Harakah* produced by the Islamic fundamentalists of Parti Islam se-Malaysia [PAS]. Then he focussed on the international press, pointing out that they had covered the opposition campaign, and adding magnanimously, 'and we have not banned their distribution in Malaysia' (as quoted in Aliran 1999a).

Such a description, taken from online journalism, illustrates some elements of guided democracy, which effectively favours the ruling parties.

#### **5.2.2.2 Stringent legislation and preventive laws disrupt democracy**

The use of strict legislation and preventive laws, which are perceived as disruptive to democracy, also gained attention from this discontent group of interviewees. The issue here is not that the laws were used to ensure public order, but are distinguished to curb the freedom of speech and freedom of expression. There are those among the journalists, who even pointed out that the stringent laws have created paranoia among the public, which potentially would enhance bigotry and gullible society.

As for instance a Director of a Media company pointed out that stringent media-related laws have consequently disturbed the work of Malaysian reporters and

journalists. He also referred cases where editors of NST, Berita Harian, The Sun and Utusan, who were advised to resign because of their critical journalistic pieces.

Not everyone can really speak freely giving their minds because there are laws prohibited them. ...There are so many laws that strictly impinged the freedom of the press. Not only the law; you also have to consider the gatekeepers, and the media 'Taukey' [media masters] too. I think it is very hard for reporters and journalists to write something that criticise the authority or precisely the government. Most of them have to go for self-censorship. I think you know that there were many editors of the 'akhbar mainstream' [mainstream newspaper] who had been advised to resigned, but as a point of fact they were sacked. If this is the case I will regret that the journalists will become Pak Turut [gullible] (MD3, Director, Malay, male, aged 47).

An Editor-in-Chief of an independent online newspaper pointed out that Malaysian media is not free because of the enactment of various media-related laws. Besides that, Malaysian civil society is not strong enough to fight for the press freedom. Consequently the mainstream media would avoid publishing anything that highlights democratic defects.

The media is ...not free. They would not talk about [something that criticise the authority], they would only talk about good things. Civil society is not very strong. So that is the situation we are facing. Civil society depends on the fact that we got so many laws that control freedom of expression; ISA, Sedition Acts, Official Secret Acts and some others. That is the situation (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

An academician, asserted that the Malaysian Constitution does provide freedom of expression to the people through various Acts, but those freedoms are negated in other Acts. As for instance, Clause 1 of Article 10 of the Federal Constitution provides that 'every citizens has the rights to freedom of speech and expression; all citizens have the rights to assemble peaceably and without arms' (Jones 1998:8). However, Clause 2 of the same Article, stated that:

'Parliament may by law impose: on the rights conferred by paragraph of Clause 1, such restrictions as it deems necessary or expedient in the interest of the security of the Federation or any part thereof, friendly relations with other countries, public order or morality and restrictions designed to protect the privileges of Parliament or of any Legislative Assembly, or to provide against contempt of court, defamation, or incitement to any offence' (as quoted in Jones 1998).

Such a provision is also negated through the Police Act 1967, which carries provisions that severely affect upon 'the people's rights for a peaceful assembly' (Amnesty International 2004:3). The Police Act 1967 charges that it is against the law for a group of three persons to assemble without police permit (Amnesty International 2004:3). The liberty to assemble is an intrinsic part of the rights to freedom of

expression; an assembly attempts to collectively express an opinion. The extent to which such laws have been applied includes forum in hotels, and FOMCA campaign to discuss water shortage. This reflects inconsistencies in the law, which also illustrates that in many instances 'the law would not compromise the public order even at the expense of democracy or precisely the freedom of expression' (AC13, Assoc. Prof., Malay, female, aged 45). This is particularly true with the preventive laws such as the ISA 1960 or the Sedition Act 1948 (HRW 2002b:1; HRW 2003: 1).

A Malaysian Trade Union executive perceived that 'the people are against the Sedition Act 1948, and the Internal Security Act 1960, which in their opinion restrict the freedom of speech and freedom of expression'. He claimed that:

These acts are restricting people from speaking and many of them are not even related to ISA [Internal Security Act 1960]. Even among the Trade Union leaders...any little things that they do [someone would remind] "Wah Internal Security Act man!" It's not related to them at all. It's like there are ghosts around. It's fear. It's there, you could be caught...See the fear instilled in them (NGO8, Vice President, Indian, male, aged 50).

Under such an environment of restrictive laws, a prominent NGO leader asserted that potentially the law has created a situation of anxiety that frightens the public from speaking out. He noticed that:

Some of the laws are inimical to the growth of democracy like the Internal Security Act, which tends to frighten the people from speaking out. On the whole there are a lot of laws that restrict the political freedom, ranging from the Police Act, Societies Act, University College Act, and a lot more of those sorts' (NGO3, President, Indian, male, aged 51).

He also deduced that the restrictive laws have created bigotry among the people, which he described as a neo-feudal culture:

It is feudal but it is neo because it expresses itself with the modern setting, in fact contemporary but basically its attitude is feudal, you don't question the leader, the leader in turn will protect you as long as you are loyal. Don't question, don't challenge and all that sorts of mentality. Should there be some of our shortcomings, but I wouldn't say that Malaysia is dictatorship as such; it is democracy with a lot of limitations (NGO3, President, Indian, male, aged 51).

The above remarks highlight certain defects of the democratic practice in Malaysian context. Contradictory to participatory democracy, the situation does not 'offer the opportunity for the participation of citizens in all those decisions concerning issues which impinge upon and are important to them' (Hague and Loader 1999b:7).

The evidence shows that some of the interviewees do not see how stringent legislation, especially the preventive laws such as the ISA 1960, support democracy. The greatest consequence is when the law is perceived to have been arbitrarily used to silence individuals who protest for the people's freedom of expression (Hakam 2000; Suaram 2002; Aliran 2003a; Aliran 2003b; Suaram 2005b). Worse still, as some of the interviewees cited, the stringent laws are responsible for creating a 'neo-feudal' culture that would cultivate a parochial and gullible society.

### **5.2.3 Patterns of perception among the four groups**

A cross-examination of patterns of perception among the four groups shows that to a certain extent there is a reflection of diametric opposition between the GO group and 'independent online journalists' (which is not to suggest all members from the media group). All members of the GO group perceived Malaysia's democracy as either 'Good' or 'Fair', while all those who distinguished Malaysia's democracy as 'Very Bad' are the independent online journalists. Such a pattern of diametrical opposition is expected because the GO are the government's agents, promoting government's policy and programmes, as well as to back the government that employs them. As for instance, a Director of Selangor National Unity and Integration Department was of the opinion that:

We have been democratic because there are free elections, we have always had free elections, you see. So, democratic practice in Malaysia is good. I mean it is obvious that the election is free, so it is democratic, and nobody is forced, there is no central government control telling you to vote this way, or that way (GO6, Director, Indian, male, aged 52).

On the other hand, online journalists are significantly knowledgeable about stringent media-laws that impinge on Malaysia's democracy especially with regard to press freedom, which they see as unreasonable restrictions on their profession. Moreover, their professional experience may have exposed them to certain incidents that build up such negative perceptions of Malaysia's democracy. Highlighting such opposing views, an independent journalist assessed Malaysia's democracy in a different way:

When you look at the election's procedure, whether it's UMNO supreme election or the National General Election, there are similarities. There are hands that play the scene. Somebody controls it. They have to come up with the EC (Election Commission) to conduct the general election. This EC is under Prime Minister Department and Prime Minister Department is under the Prime Minister's [authority]. The Prime Minister is also the

president of UMNO. So if you ask me about democratic practices in Malaysia, I would say that it is against the principles of democracy, and it is being manipulated by those people in power (MD8, Editor/Journalist, Malay, male, aged 48).

A manager of BERNAMA.com, a subsidiary company of Malaysian News Agency (BERNAMA), a government's owned agency, was supportive of Malaysia's press freedom observing that there is considerable number of the opposition party's newspapers being given permits for publication. She said:

Looking at the numbers of newspaper... even the opposition has the Harakah (opposition party's newspaper), print and online, and they could criticise the government from their own perspectives, from that we can clearly see that democracy is well practiced. The same situation also applies to the government media, which means there are no restrictions for freedom of the press (GO7, Manager, Malay, female, aged 46).

Opposing such ideas, an editor on an online newspaper noticed that Malaysia 'doesn't have free media'. He said:

I think there is definitely a deficit in democracy in Malaysia. There are a lot of things that are not right. I think a lot of people understand it through the past few decades. Although we do have election for every four or five years but people tend to see that there is still a lack of democracy because democracy is not just going to the ballot box every few years. You need to have a vibrant civil society, [and] you need to have free media. ...Malaysia doesn't have free media, there are also a lot of things that are lacking (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

Another GO leader also positively perceived Malaysia's democracy. He pointed out that restricted freedom benefits the nation.

The democratic practice in Malaysia is good. Malaysia practices good democracy. Although there are various Acts that restrict freedom in Malaysia for example like the Seditious Act, Official Secrets Act and ISA, Internal Security Act. These Acts are basically being enacted for the good of Malaysians (GO10, General Accountant, Malay, male, aged 50).

Opposing such ideas, a journalist from an independent media company asserted:

Democracy in Malaysia, like judiciary, preventive laws, the responsibility of the police for public security, [are] quite disappointing. ...Here you seldom see a policeman; it is not that the rate of crime is low. No, crimes happened here and there, now and then. (MD7, Journalist, Chinese, female, aged 39).

An academician, asserted that the Malaysian Constitution does provide freedom of expression to the people through various Acts, but those freedoms are negated in other Acts. As for instance, Clause 1 of Article 10 of the Federal Constitution



provides that 'every citizens has the rights to freedom of speech and expression; all citizens have the rights to assemble peaceably and without arms' (Jones 1998:8). However, Clause 2 of the same Article, stated that:

'Parliament may by law impose: on the rights conferred by paragraph of Clause 1, such restrictions as it deems necessary or expedient in the interest of the security of the Federation or any part thereof, friendly relations with other countries, public order or morality and restrictions designed to protect the privileges of Parliament or of any Legislative Assembly, or to provide against contempt of court, defamation, or incitement to any offence' (as quoted in Jones 1998).

Such a provision is also negated through the Police Act 1967, which carries provisions that severely affect upon 'the people's rights for a peaceful assembly' (Amnesty International 2004:3). The Police Act 1967 charges that it is against the law for a group of three persons to assemble without police permit (Amnesty International 2004:3). The liberty to assemble is an intrinsic part of the rights to freedom of expression; an assembly attempts to collectively express an opinion. The extent to which such laws have been applied includes forum in hotels, and FOMCA campaign to discuss water shortage. This reflects inconsistencies in the law, which also illustrates that in many instances 'the law would not compromise the public order even at the expense of democracy or precisely the freedom of expression' (AC13, Assoc. Prof., Malay, female, aged 45). This is particularly true with the preventive laws such as the ISA 1960 or the Sedition Act 1948 (HRW 2002b:1; HRW 2003: 1).

A Malaysian Trade Union executive perceived that 'the people are against the Sedition Act 1948 and the Internal Security Act 1960, which in their opinion restrict the freedom of speech and freedom of expression'. He claimed that:

These acts are restricting people from speaking and many of them are not even related to ISA [Internal Security Act 1960]. Even among the Trade Union leaders...any little things that they do [someone would remind] "Wah Internal Security Act man!" It's not related to them at all. It's like there are ghosts around. It's fear. It's there, you could be caught...See the fear instilled in them (NGO8, Vice President, Indian, male, aged 50).

Under such an environment of restrictive laws, a prominent NGO leader asserted that potentially the law has created a situation of anxiety that frightens the public from speaking out. He noticed that:

Some of the laws are inimical to the growth of democracy like the Internal Security Act, which tends to frighten the people from speaking out. On the whole there are a lot of laws that restrict the political freedom, ranging from the Police Act, Societies Act, University College Act, and a lot more of those sorts' (NGO3, President, Indian, male, aged 51).

He also deduced that the restrictive laws have created bigotry among the people, which he described as a neo-feudal culture:

It is feudal but it is neo because it expresses itself with the modern setting, in fact contemporary but basically its attitude is feudal, you don't question the leader, the leader in turn will protect you as long as you are loyal. Don't question, don't challenge and all that sorts of mentality. Should there be some of our shortcomings, but I wouldn't say that Malaysia is dictatorship as such; it is democracy with a lot of limitations (NGO3, President, Indian, male, aged 51).

The above remarks highlight certain defects of the democratic practice in Malaysian context. Contradictory to participatory democracy, the situation does not 'offer the opportunity for the participation of citizens in all those decisions concerning issues which impinge upon and are important to them' (Hague and Loader 1999b:7).

The evidence shows that some of the interviewees do not see how stringent legislation, especially the preventive laws such as the ISA 1960, support democracy. The greatest consequence is when the law is perceived to have been arbitrarily used to silence individuals who protest for the people's freedom of expression (Hakam 2000; Suaram 2002; Aliran 2003a; Aliran 2003b; Suaram 2005b). Worse still, as some of the interviewees cited, the stringent laws are responsible for creating a 'neo-feudal' culture that would cultivate a parochial and gullible society.

The evidence indicates that, first, the contented group deliberately supports Malaysia's democracy even though they understand that it has its deficiencies for instance, limited human rights, freedom of speech and expression, the rights for peaceful assembly and in terms of the rights to vote and the rights to electoral contestation. Their contented views of national security and social harmony, as more important than abiding by an ideal democracy, also indicate their support for Malaysia's democracy. Past traumatic experience such as the communist insurgencies of 1948-1960, the ethnic clash of 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969, the Memali tragedy, the Al-Maunah insurgency, the Kampong Medan racial clash, the Kampong Rawa conflict, as well as other racial disturbances could have influenced this state of mind.

Second, this contented group also affirmed that Malaysia's democratic practices should be customised according to its own multiracial composition and its own unique features, for which most use the words 'of its own mould'. Subsequently some of the interviewees opposed the Western style of democracy, which is incompatible with Malaysia's diverse ethnic composition, diverse culture, religious

beliefs, and language differences. Under such stands, the Western scale of democracy is misapplied if used to assess Malaysia's democracy.

Third, this contented group has faith in guided democracy, even though they understand that it principally carries some elements of authoritarianism as Guerin (2001:1) and Kroef (1957:116) observe. The contented group also agree, by implication and through their direct speech, that government's authoritative measures are acceptable for the sake of peace and social harmony. They agree with guided democracy assumption that the government has the rights to guide the people in determining what is right and what is wrong, and what is allowed and what is restricted. However, from a different perspective, there is a notable minority (23%) among the interviewees perceiving Malaysia's democracy as detrimental to the fundamentals of good practices of democracy. Contrary to the ideas of the contented group, these discontented interviewees viewed Malaysia's democracy as substandard, which they classified as 'Bad' and 'Very Bad' for the following reasons.

First, the discontented group sees fallacies in guided democracy, which the contented group interprets as a normal practice of democracy. This group of discontented Malaysian opinion formers significantly oppose the idea of guided democracy, which is potentially creating a passive culture, leading the people to 'some form of bigotry or parochial' (AC8). Such culture is in conflict with an advanced progressive society the Vision 2020 proposes. They also see that guided democracy has the potential to disrupt the freedom of speech, where criticism and openness of ideas via the mass media are restricted and avoided. The worst consequence of guided democracy is that the people are prohibited from peaceful assembly<sup>43</sup>. Contrary to the objective of Vision 2020, guided democracy has also curtailed the establishment of intellectualism, which in terms of journalistic commitment has enhanced active gatekeeping and self-censorship.

Second, the discontented group also views that the various stringent laws are generating paranoia among the people as well as fabricating a parochial society. This would lead to the idea that the government is not open to differences of opinions, public debates, and discussions as reflected through the arbitrary use of stringent laws. In terms of national integration among the different ethnic groups, this

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<sup>43</sup> Under the Police Act 1967, assembly of more than three people without police permission is prohibited (Amnesty International 2004:3).

environment of a 'parochial and bigoted society' would not support interethnic relationships where understanding and openness are deficient.

Third, election defect is also seen as part of the chain-effect of the democratic deficiency. The Election Commission, which is suppose to function as a free-institution in conducting the election did not perform well. Furthermore, the Commission is criticised for not being established as a truly free institution as it is instituted under the Prime Minister Department, where the Chief Executive is also the head of the ruling party (Prime Minister Department 2005:1). This would also suggest an authoritative control of the government upon the election mechanism, which under the spell of guided democracy, would not have its credibility questioned by many.

Fourthly, I find that the media experts (MD3 and MD5) are more concerned about the freedom of speech and freedom of expression that were stringently restricted through various laws. One of them even mentioned the restriction (Police Act 1967) on peaceful assembly to the extent that any public meeting that involves more than three persons is made compulsory to apply for a police permit. Conversely MD11 stressed that the country is very much in need of free media to stimulate a vibrant civil society. Malaysia democracy is very much lacking such freedom.

Lastly, public corruption is also found to be the most talked-about issue among some of the interviewees in both the contented and discontented groups, and more from media experts (see MD5 and MD7). The criticisms on corruptions was linked to executives who were seen as less enthusiastic fighters of corruption, especially when it involves governmental bodies that include high profile individuals (Hilley 2001:107; Leong 2001:3). Also, as part of the chain-effects of the stringent laws that covertly prohibit the freedom of the press, journalists are forcefully cornered towards practices of self-censorship (Lent 1982:265). This was illustrated in May 2000, when 500 journalists mostly from the mainstream mass media, signed a memorandum urging the government to repeal media laws, most notably the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984 (Siong 2004: 298-299). These journalists argued that the credibility of the media was at stake as Malaysians increasingly turned to alternative sources of information, specifically the online journalism.

In the real political environment, it is significant to see that the pattern of such diverse perceptions exists. Probably this explains the existence of those dissidents who went strongly for democratic reform in the 1998-political crisis. Their voices and

discourses continue through online journalism as Malaysiakini, Malaysia Today, Aliran, Suaram, Hakam, Screenshots, Malaysian Voters Union and dozens more exemplify. However, these dissidents failed to transform entirely the whole political scene. Could this be linked to the support of the large majority (77%) of opinion formers for Malaysia's democracy as reflected through the interviewees' thoughts and attitudes? While on the other hand, only a small minority (23%) of them opposed such contemporary democratic practices.

As asserted in the earlier discussion, as well as from various academic literatures, the voices of this minority of opinion formers are increasingly present in online journalism. It is observed that there is no significant democratic change but there are certain developments that show some responses to democratic change. To mention a few, Mahathir did resign, which some political observers see as a response to public calls. In other development that were seen as the implication of the work of online journalism Anwar Ibrahim was released from prison, Malaysian Human Rights Commission was instituted, while the establishment of Independent Police Complaint and Misconduct Commission to check on police misconduct was discussed in the Parliament. Also relevant to include, are the vibrant discussions of social issues, before considered as taboo, are now common on online journalism, and more space is given to the non-Malays for equal treatment through meritocracy system, with regard to public university intake. These developments in Malaysia's social and political landscape do illustrate democratic change, but not to the extent that would be considered as a significant change in relation to the limited democratic practices that had gained significant criticism. It is not a democratic change to the same extent as that of Indonesia in the 1998-revolution or the Philippines revolution against President Marcos in 1986 (Heryanto and Mandal 2003; Windows on Asia 2006). This is because, issues such as the abolishment of ISA 1960, freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of the press, freedom of speech and expression and election reform are yet to be seen.

#### **5.2.4 Democratic idealism and social harmony**

Through the second question of the semi-structured interview, the interviewees were asked 'to choose between democratic idealism and social harmony'. This question is relevant because much academic analysis emphasise the preference

given to social harmony over democratic performance (Lent 1982; Khalil 1985; Mahathir 2000b; Loo 2003b).

Before I begin analysing the preferences of the opinion formers between 'democratic idealism' and 'social harmony', it is important to recall various national crises. These crises are marked by the Communist insurgency (Nagata 1979: 14), the 13<sup>th</sup> May racial conflict (Tunku A Rahman 1969), the Memali tragedy (Rahman 1999: 1-3), the Al-Maunah insurgency (Moore 2001: 3), the Kampong Rawa (Hilley 2001:123) racial conflict, the Kampong Medan racial fights (Jayakumar 2001:16), and the Reformasi riot (Teik 2003: 99). These were among some of the social and political tragedies that had severe implications towards Malaysia's democracy and interethnic relations. These incidences also may have, to a certain extent, affected the people's minds and thoughts and developed the psyche of fear (Aliran 1999b). One implication is that the crises had created an awareness that violence would not bring any good to the plural society and that social harmony as promoted through discussions, dialogues, negotiations and tolerance are among the best solutions. Grounded by such thought, Goh Cheng Teik, the former President of Gerakan Party, which is one of the strong affiliates of Barisan Nasional said:

Chinese and Indian political leaders must sit down with their Malay counterparts and talk, talk, talk. Since all of them have one common denominator – they are Malaysians – they should be able to see each other's view points and defuse the 'time bomb' (Teik 1978:34).

The former Prime Minister, Mahathir pointed out:

Malaysia is not over-zealous about the democratic system to the point where we accept without question everything that is done in the name of democracy. ...If the people and the nation get only the worst from any practice that is said to be democratic, we will give priority to what is good for the country and the people, and put aside the questions of whether or not it is democratic (as quoted in Saliha 2002:198).

Interviewees' standpoints in choosing between democratic idealism and social harmony are significant to explain the pattern of their perceptions on the overall democratic practices in Malaysia. In this regard, the pattern of opinion and argument are important to explain how they perceive the importance of national integration, because national integration would also lead to social harmony. Their perceptions also explain how social harmony could be achieved within the contemporary environment of 'Malaysian style of democracy'. Under those circumstances, the link between democracy and national integration will likely surface.

Table 5.2 shows a notable number (9/15 or 60%) among media practitioners gave high preference to 'Social Harmony', and there was none among them who preferred the 'Ideal of Democracy'. The rest of them preferred a blend of both: 'Ideal Democracy' and 'Social Harmony'. Half (5/10 or 50%) of the NGO preferred a 'Blend of Both'. Other than that, there is no clear distinction to be drawn among the different groups of interviewees as their preferences were clearly split between the 'Ideal of Democracy', 'Social Harmony' and a 'Blend of Both' with high preference for 'Social Harmony'.

**Table 5.2**  
**Preference of Ideal Democracy and Social Harmony**

<b>Preferences</b>	<b>GO</b>	<b>NGO</b>	<b>MD</b>	<b>AC</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Ideal Democracy</b>	1	2	-	1	4	8.3
<b>Social Harmony</b>	7	3	9	9	28	58.4
<b>Blend of Both (Ideal Democracy and Social Harmony)</b>	2	5	6	3	16	33.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>

Examination across all groups shows that the majority (58.4%) of the interviewees also preferred 'Social Harmony' rather than the 'Ideal of Democracy', while a very small minority (8.3%) preferred the 'Ideal of Democracy'. There is also a small section (33.3%) of the interviewees who chose the 'Blend of Both'. This finding indicates that there are certain issues that rationalised their rejection of 'Ideal Democracy'.

Among the common rationales indicated were that 'Malaysian society is volatile', 'Malaysia is very stiff in racial sensitivities' and 'Malaysians had many bad experiences on racial issues'. The majority of the interviewees see that maintaining social harmony is important for the reason that Malaysian social and political stability are volatile mainly because of ethnic composition. They perceived that the assurance of social harmony in the sense that the different ethnic groups would be able to 'live in peace and work together' should be the priority in governing this country rather than going for an ideal democratic government.

#### **5.2.4.1 Preference for social harmony**

By a small majority (58.4%), the interviewees preferred 'Social Harmony' even at the expense of democracy as they distinguished that social harmony is more crucial to a multiracial society such as Malaysia. Malaysians also consciously perceive liberal democracy to be detrimental to such a volatile society.

The majority (58.4%) see that ideal democracy could not ensure peace and order for a multiracial society such as Malaysia, where social harmony is crucial in determining political and economic performance. As shown in Table 5.2, more than half of the members of GOs (70%), media practitioners (60%), and academicians (69%), prefer social harmony rather than the ideal of democracy. However, only 30% among the NGOs prefer social harmony, while 50% of them (NGOs) would choose a blend of ideal democracy and social harmony. Some of the interviewees are pessimistic with ideal democracy for failing to address social harmony in the Western world. The ideal of democracy is perceived as worth rejected, and social harmony is highly preferred even to the extent that authoritarianism were to be engaged in Malaysian politics or precisely the Malaysian government.

The diverse multiethnic composition of Malaysian society, as compared to any of the Western nations or even the ASEAN countries, is seen as the most important variable affecting social, economic and political stability. Some of the interviewees argued that Malaysia's multiethnic society needs to be dealt with full awareness and wisdom. This is because sensitivity of the different ethnicities, different religions, cultures and languages need to be handled with careful consideration in order to avoid inevitable social conflict.

An academician specialising in journalism studies, was of the opinion that the sensitivity of the different ethnic groups is important:

We are a country, which is very stiff in racial sensitivity and stability. We cannot run away from that. How much freedom, how much idealism that we want to have, we have to take into consideration the sensitivity and stability of the different races within the society. (AC1, Associate Prof., Malay, female, aged 47)

On that same note, a journalist pointed out that he preferred 'Social Harmony' rather than the 'Ideal of Democracy' because:



The social atmosphere in Malaysia is fragile in terms of sensitivity among the different races. We need a lot of consideration, respect and tolerance. If anything goes wrong between two different ethnic groups here, then there will be a big problem when matters of religion and culture come in as well. (MD6, Journalist, Chinese, male, aged 37).

Another academician chose 'social harmony' because he saw that 'sometimes democracy cannot be used or sometimes democracy failed in certain areas; people want to live in harmony rather than going for democracy' (AC4, Assoc. Prof., Malay, male, aged 47). He pointed out that the multiethnic feature is seen as 'volatile or capricious where any incidence that transgressed racial sensitivity would cause racial conflict', which is evidenced during the Kampong Rawa and the Kampong Medan racial conflict.

In the light of such perception, many of the interviewees saw that ideal democracy, as practiced in the West, has failed to bring social harmony. They also implied that they would even prefer to accept authoritarian government as long as it would ensure social harmony. On similar grounds, an academician stressed that 'It is no point having so-called full democracy, [if] at the same time you allow that democracy to destroy social harmony' (AC5, Assoc. Prof., Indian, male, aged 57). He also asserted his views by looking at the success that Singapore has achieved.

The government thinks that authoritarian government is essential to maintain social harmony. Most of the governments in the third world countries are authoritarian government. Lee Kuan Yew (former PM of Singapore) says this all the time, 'no point having full democracy if you get the society destroyed'

In addition he also pointed out that Mahathir 'was always an authoritarian'. However, supporting such a stance, he rationalised that Mahathir's intention was to:

...maintain social harmony, and at the same time through authoritarianism, the government could slowly build up the basis for democracy. Even the people agree to have an authoritarian government (AC5, Assoc. Prof., Indian, male, aged 57).

Interviewees also viewed that the West has failed to ensure public order through the practices of ideal democracy. A Magistrate pointed out that the former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, was right when he said that 'democracy could not preclude commotions, riots and chaotic situations'. This is in line with Dori's article when he quoted Mahathir as saying, 'where democracy is introduced, riots, civil unrest, and killings take place' (as quoted in Dori 1998:3). The Magistrate asserted:

I agree with our former Prime Minister. ...We can't really have total democracy like those being...practiced in the United States. ...Now with

the Patriot Act<sup>44</sup> they realise the need for peace and security in the country rather than total democratic practice (GO2, Magistrate, Malay male, aged 42).

An interviewee highlighted the racial conflict of 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969, which he called a 'bad experience when democratic idealism was tested. This is mainly the work of opportunists and democracy extremists'. For that he rejected ideal democracy because:

Ideal democracy would not be good for the country...We are not opened enough, we are not ready for peaceful rallies. Most of us are easily driven by emotions, and plus that our political structure are of communal in traits, so racism would easily penetrate in all our actions. Everything that we engage in, it must be based on social harmony, if not many innocent people will lose their lives (MD12, Journalist, Chinese, male, aged 50).

Arguments based on economic issues were also encountered. It is seen as part of the requirement of social harmony in Malaysia. The economic equity principles are clearly spelt out in the NEP and programmed in the affirmative action of the national economic plans. It was formulated to redress the ethnic socio-economic imbalance in the country. The imbalance was identified as the key factor contributing to the 1969 racial fights. It laid down affirmative action policies in favour of the Malays and other indigenous peoples (Wah 2002: 24). Concerning the affirmative action of the NEP, a GO executive pointed out:

I think what is important is not the ideal but what is pragmatic, what could be implemented...If the dominant race continues to remain in poverty it will only invite disharmony, because what we want to see...[is that] everybody has got his or her share in our society. So, this is a question of tolerance and understanding each other (GO3, Director, Malay, male, aged 50).

On a similar note, another GO leader also advocated economic equity among the different ethnic groups where:

...the weak would be assisted while the strong should not be greedy to conquer all the wealth only for his own belly; without this principle, democracy would bring no meaning' (GO8, Director, Malay, male, aged 50).

Another common point that the interviewees highlighted to deny the ideal of democracy is 'Asian values' rather than the Western way. The former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad highly promoted the Asian values (Mahathir 2000b:139). The

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<sup>44</sup> The USA Patriot Act, enacted on 26 Oct 2001, is seen as critical in preventing another terrorist attack on the United States. It brought the US federal government's ability to investigate threats to national security and eliminate barriers to effective national security investigations (Department of Justice 2006:1). The interviewee observed that the Act is similar to Malaysia's ISA 1960.

proponents of Asian values suggested that communitarian and not individualism, collective welfare and not individual rights, should be prioritised. Besides that, an intuitive respect for authority and social harmony, and thus an inclination to consensus rather than a tendency towards dissident or confrontation are considered fundamental to Asian values (Teik and Wah 2002: 2). Supporting this argument, an academician asserted that:

Asian values [are] important. We have ...social harmony and in terms of fewer riots, and less public disorder in the country. ...This is very much of Asian ways of handling things, and very much incline towards humanitarian. It's very much on collectivism rather than individualism. So, I think we valued social harmony more than democratic idealism (AC13, Assoc. Prof., Malay, female, aged 45).

In examining interviewees' perception of Malaysia's democracy, this study also finds that there is a consistent pattern of opinion, where the groups who perceived Malaysia's democracy as 'Good' and 'Fair' also gave high preference to 'Social Harmony' rather than 'Ideal Democracy'. It is relevant to note that to some political scientists the so-called 'Malaysian style of democracy', as discussed earlier, would be principally classified as authoritarian. This is consistently marked through the Malaysian political scene as observed in the 1990s (Kahn and Wah 1992; Munro-Kua 1996; Milne and Mauzy 1999). Kahn and Wah (1992:10) affirm that, 'By the 1990's the Malaysian state had become increasingly authoritarian, in response to a heightened fragmentation of a cultural and political situation'. However, such fragmentation of social, cultural and political institutions, which were seen as partly the result of colonialism (Furnival 1956; Firdaus 1997:196), and political manipulation, did not receive significant protest from the people because the government had successfully maintained social harmony as well as rapid economic achievement (Milne and Mauzy 1999; Abdul Rahman 2001a). Abdul Rahman (2001a:85) asserts that economic achievement has contributed to 'the growth of Malaysian new middle class', who as this study finds, are mostly contented with Malaysia's democratic practices. Rahman (2001a:89) also points out:

Members of the new middle-class tend to be security-oriented. ...Being a middle class, their agenda is to consolidate and enhance their economic position and to reproduce their children into the same class. Thus, their ideology ...tends to be supportive of the status quo, which they perceive as having delivered the 'economic goods' for change.

Their contentment with Malaysia's democracy is reflected through their support and the victories of the National Front party in 1995, 1999, as well as in the recent 2004-General Election. However, as this study suggests, the situation of political

manipulation that heightened the state of pluralism has gradually inclined towards a limited democratic state. 'Democracy without consensus', as Vorys (1975) advocates has moved significantly towards a condition of 'illiberal democracy with consensus', which Maznah and Koon (2001:26) affirm. Such descriptions implicitly explain the limited democratic practices of Malaysian government.

Scrutinising the perception of media experts, I find that almost half (40%) of them see that there should be a balance of democratic idealism with social harmony, while the rest (60%) would prefer social harmony. Similar to the earlier discussions on Malaysia's democracy, members of the media group are concerned about ethnic sensitivities and social stability, which to some of them is best described by the term 'fragile'. The different ethnic groups need to compromise on certain policy that may seemingly disturb democracy. To some of them, the risk is very high if ideal democracy that offers absolute freedom were to be prioritised (see MD6). Advocating similar view, MD12 sees that Malaysians are not mature enough for democratic values such as peaceful rallies and public demonstrations, where many would be driven by emotions and ethnocentrism. For those reasons, a journalist of a prominent Malay mainstream newspaper takes into account for a blend of both elements. He pointed out that unbalance preferences on any two of them would disturb interethnic relation as what had happened during the 1969-racial conflict.

In Malaysia we have to balance both (social harmony and ideal democracy)...whether we are heterogeneous society or not, [we] have to balance the social harmony and democracy because both are principles and are at odds with each other. Certain democratic principles may require an extreme understanding of individual rights. ...In Malaysia we have a lot of racial groups, and [we had] experienced racial disharmony [clash] in 1969. It is important for us to balance social harmony and democracy. At one point, democracy is important [and] at another point social harmony is important, so it's a kind of a balance approach to find equilibrium at a certain point of the time so that it become stable; it is not something static but something that moving from left to right. I think both elements would support each other if the population [people] were to understand the importance of both. ...But there may be instances where people stressed too much on democracy and infringe on social harmony. And there are people who would disguise certain things as social harmony and infringe democracy. So it could work at opposite end; if you stressed too much [on social harmony] you may jeopardise democracy (MD4, Editor/Journalist, Malay, male, aged 42).

Almost on similar grounds a Chief Executive of a TV station asserted that there is dilemma in highlighting any of the two choices. As a point of fact, he emphasised that even autocratic government would place their endeavour on social harmony.

Democracy proposes social harmony. ...An autocratic leader or a non-autocratic leader will also propose to the people social harmony. It is a difficult choice basically because the two different ideologies propose the same thing to the population [people]. [For] democratic idealism, basically you want to have free choice [freedom] for any individual in the society. But that free choice [freedom] may not result in social harmony. For example there will be groups within society who want to have pornography freedom in their expression of whatever they believe in. However what they believe in may be regarded by other members, or members within the society as being detrimental ...[because] that may not bring social harmony. ...So ... it's quite difficult to say which one that I prefer. ...But then in order to have social harmony if I have to release some of my freedom ...that may not be the kind of thing that I want. So it's a balance. ...Would I want to surrender the freedom of an extremist group that can create social disharmony in order to have true democratic practices? For that, I may not want to do. But in order to have social harmony I have to surrender some of my freedom in decision-making (MD5, Chief Executive, Malay, male, aged 49).

Conversely there is also a media expert (a public radio station manager) who questioned the genuineness of Malaysia's social harmony. For his sceptical view on Malaysia's social harmony, he strongly emphasised that democracy should not be compromised. He affirmed that social harmony is crucial in Malaysia's social setting. However, he challenged the idea that criticism and discussion on certain sensitive issues among the different ethnic group would jeopardise social harmony, suggesting no constraints on freedom of the press. He believes that interethnic relations and therefore social harmony would be better if open and transparent discussions would be allowed. He said:

The first question is, are we with [having] the real social harmony or just something that we claimed. [In] some countries they are ...so-called social harmony because of the restrictions, the laws and regulation, but whether they are within that 'social harmony' or not, are yet to be tested. ...We are not tested; it [social harmony] is just slogan, it is just [a] claim [that] the Malays and the Chinese [were] like brothers and sisters. I can see that we [interethnic relationships] are ...not very peaceful position in this country. ...Of course I prefer to have social harmony but I believe if we do it correctly even with democracy, the real democracy like in some of the [Western] countries we can get social harmony. If ...you are not satisfied with me, you argue with me, you criticise me; to me in a way [that] is harmony. We don't expect that harmony mean you don't question the situation, or you cannot have different opinions. You criticise me constructively for some constructive reasons that is social harmony. For your information, the disagreement doesn't mean to destruct social harmony; it could be made to improve social harmony (GO4, Radio Station Manager, Malay, male, aged 46).

Generally, the majority (58.4%) of the interviewees have showed less interest in democracy, but more in peace and social harmony. Nevertheless there are also

notable numbers (33%) of them who prefer a blend of both, especially the media experts (12.5%) and the NGOs (10.4%). Political debates, critical-rational discourses, and the public watchdog roles of the mass media were often perceived as dissenting trends and confrontational, and therefore irrelevant to most of them. Most importantly is social harmony even at the expense of democracy and notwithstanding any political manipulation. Thus, to a certain extent there are complexity of reception of Malaysia's democracy and social harmony.

### 5.2.5 Perception of Malaysia's press freedom

Malaysian press freedom receives unfavourable descriptions from many observers through vast discourses and literature. Not to repeat what had been often said about Malaysia's press freedom, most observers see that the major contributor to the limited freedom of the press is the pattern of ownership and stringent laws (Zaharom and Mustafa 1998; Mustafa 2000; Harun Mahmud 2003: 5).

The interviewees were approached with a question "What is your opinion regarding the 'freedom of the press' in Malaysia?" that would help unearth their perceptions on Malaysia's press freedom. The question is set to elicit their personal views on Malaysia's press freedom that they had experienced, witnessed, read, watched or listened to through relevant debates and news coverage. The main aim is to see how such views would relate to the democratic practices in Malaysia. Subsequently I link the findings of this enquiry to online journalism, in particular the independent online newspaper, weblog and NGOs websites, which, as discussed in the preceding chapters, are placed in a much freer environment when compared to the mainstream mass media.

**Table 5.3**  
**Perception on Malaysia's Press Freedom**

Perception on Press Freedom	GO	NGO	MD	AC	Total	%
<b>Very Good</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Good</b>	1	1	1	-	3	6.3
<b>Fair</b>	8	3	11	7	29	60.4
<b>Bad</b>	1	6	3	6	16	33.3
<b>Very Bad</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>

The findings in this section show that a small majority (66.7%) of the interviewees perceived the level of Malaysia's press freedom as acceptable. Interestingly the majority of the media experts (80% among MD), particularly those from the mainstream mass media, were contented with the standard of Malaysia's press freedom. However there are also a small numbers (33.3%) of the interviewees who perceived Malaysia's press freedom as 'Bad'. Among them, the biggest fraction came from the NGOs (60% among NGOs). Also among the Media persons, all those (20% among MDs) who perceived Malaysia's press freedom as 'Bad' were distinguished from the independent media companies. For a better picture, the pattern of their perceptions is shown in Table 5.3.

Among the justifications presented are that 'press control is crucial for social harmony', 'the press is guided', and 'the press have to be careful'. Despite their positive views, they realise that there are many laws blocking Malaysia's press freedom. However, they see that such laws are necessary to ensure that social harmony, public order, and national security are preserved.

A closer examination of the pattern of perception among the four groups finds that a majority among the NGO members (60% among NGOs) observed Malaysia's press freedom as 'Bad'. They formed the biggest fraction among all groups who were unhappy with the standard of Malaysia's press freedom. This would indicate that the majority of the NGO members viewed Malaysia's press freedom as below their expectations. Almost half of the Academicians (46% among ACs) viewed that Malaysia's press freedom is 'Bad'. Perceiving Malaysia's press freedom negatively, they claimed that 'too many laws restrict press freedom', 'mainstream presses are biased', and 'self-censorship is common'. Almost in accord to the earlier perceptions on Malaysia's democracy, the majority (60.4%) of the interviewees agree that Malaysia's press freedom is 'Fair'. It is important to note that such 'Fair' perception on Malaysia's press freedom largely comes from the media experts. However, all of the journalists of the independent online newspaper criticised Malaysia's press freedom, which they ranked as 'Bad'.

#### **5.2.5.1 Press control is crucial for social harmony**

Governmental control of the media through the implementation of various laws restricting press freedom has been one of the main issues the interviewees brought up. Many of them enthusiastically talked about the practices of media control through various legislations. However, the interviewees were contented with such measures, which they associated with the effort of ensuring social harmony, as well as using the media for developmental purposes. This is explained when the ruling parties owned most prominent mass media corporations, as for instance, NSTP and Utusan Melayu Ltd belong to UMNO, The Star and Nan Yang belong to MCA, while Tamil Neesan belong to MIC. Recently a newly born media giant named Media Prima, that control TV3, NTV7, 8TV and TV9 is linked to UMNO.

Many proponents of Malaysia's democracy agree that the media, as Schramm (1964:114-115) suggests through the development media theory, could be used to carry positive development tasks, such as promoting government's programmes and policies, and utilised as government propaganda tools, which often corresponds to nation building. The principal aim of the use of mass media is for economic development and for such, its premise of 'media-government partnership' is most crucial.

In Malaysia, the justification for such a partnership is frequently linked to historical and cultural bases, which take the media track away from the Western liberal approach, where freedom of speech and expression are required to be controlled or otherwise restricted. This is also interwoven with the 'Asian values' to emphasise communitarian rather than individualism, collective welfare and not individual rights (Teik and Wah 2002: 2). As for instance the implementation of NEP during the 1970s, as well as the privatisation policy of the 1980s had made some of the foreign-owned media corporations, such as NSTP, to change hand to the government's affiliate companies (Mustafa 2002). In line to that, a number of media-related laws were amended and enacted such as the Sedition Act 1948 (amended), the ISA 1960 (amended), the Official Secret Act 1972 (enacted), the PPPA 1984 (enacted) and the Broadcasting Act 1988 (enacted) (also see page 88) to suggest more control upon the mass media.



The most significant justification from many opinion formers is that Malaysia's need for social harmony should be set higher than the need for complete press freedom. The greater need for social harmony is frequently related to the multiracial composition of the population. An academican asserted that:

We cannot have total press freedom because if we have total press freedom, then I bet there is going to be another May 1969 incident. And then you remember the Kampong Medan incident. I think at that time if the press were to practice total press freedom there will be more 'huru hara' [commotion]. We have to have some modicum of press control by the country (AC1, Assoc. Prof., Malay, female, aged 47).

Another academican also referred to the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969-racial conflict to justify the significance of media control.

They have to be careful with what they write and say in the newspaper so as not to jeopardise the racial balance in the country, especially after 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969, where we have experienced riots regarding the racial imbalance. We have to be careful. So, in order not to let it happen again we have to curb their [media] freedom (AC11, Senior Lecturer, Malay, female, aged 43).

Striking the same chord, a GO director recalled the 1987-Operation Lalang incident, which he claimed was partly due to the work of the press.

Freedom of the press in a multiethnic society like us...we must be ...cautious of how we report, of how we say. ...You would have seen it in 1987 how Utusan Malaysia [Malay daily] created a problem, how the Star [English daily] created a problem between the Malays and the Chinese. What I'm trying to say is actually freedom of press in a constructive way, but not making comments in papers that will destroy (GO6, Director, Indian, male, aged 52).

Volatile interethnic relations are another rationale for a GO who supported the existence of stringent laws in Malaysia that controlled the mass media. He said,

If the media would jeopardise social harmony and spark riots and chaos, then surely that freedom should be stopped. There is no point in giving the freedom if it jeopardises peace and order as what is practiced in the Western countries (GO8, Director, Malay, male, aged 50).

On a similar note, a GO executive was of the opinion that press control is crucial to Malaysia's social harmony. He explained that:

...There should be some sort of restriction to the press. If you were to take the social harmony, for example, if you would integrate the society by means of using the social harmony elements, I think it would be better to have this kind of restriction or else people would be saying what they want and hurting everybody without having to bother about the elements of sedition, defamation and everything. ...How would you create social harmony, to create national identity, and to have nation building? In the end, the society would be very chaotic. Through that element [press

control] that the government have been imposing so far, the country seems to be very harmonious even though there are some negative elements here and there, but then I think the government is successful in terms of implementing these (social harmony and nation building objectives). I think I would rather say that our press control is fair (GO1, Executive, Malay, male, aged 39).

Another GO leader also perceived that it is important to control the freedom of the press in Malaysia particularly because of the multiracial composition. To him, absolute freedom would invite unnecessary racial hatred, when sensitive issues such as religion and culture were challenged. He asserted:

If you want to talk about absolute freedom, certainly it is not helpful because our population is divided in such [multiracial] composition. [If] the freedom [points] to your own ethnic interest [and] at the expense of other community's interest then you would invite unnecessary catastrophe. ...We should be having a practical freedom in the context of our own population composition but we cannot have absolute freedom (GO3, Director, Malay, male, aged 50).

Almost similar to the above opinion, an editor of a Malay mainstream press pointed out that absolute press freedom is not practical in Malaysia; suggesting that it is fair enough to control the press. In fact he stressed that there is no absolute press freedom anywhere to imply that restriction against freedom of the press is a norm. He also emphasised on 'development journalism' to suggest that press freedom would jeopardise social harmony.

There is no absolute freedom of the press in Malaysia, and there is no absolute freedom of the press anywhere in the world. In fact ...newspaper freedom is based on working code, I mean if you're working with a press company, the company will set you certain 'guidelines' or certain things that you can and cannot write. In Malaysia I guess we have in fact able to move quite responsibly towards getting a greater freedom for journalists' right. We can write almost anything for development for supporting the people rights to progress and to modernise, but to write just for the sake of writing it, and then creating social disharmony, creating havoc for the economy, then that is something that I personally would not agree. I mean why write something and put yourself and the society in jeopardy (MD4, Editor/Journalist, Malay, male, aged 42).

A journalist of a Chinese mainstream daily supports the way press freedom is being dealt with in Malaysia. The licences given to the opposition publication proved that Malaysia's press freedom is decent. He said,

The government is giving some space for freedom. You can see that [the opposition newspapers] Harakah is there, Rocket is there, and Keadilan publication is there as well as the PRM. So, I think press freedom is all right in Malaysia. It is not to the extent that the government would go around and seize books, or journals or newspapers that are not in line with the government policies or ideologies. Of course there are cases

when some newspapers are being bared from circulation, but those incidences are isolated and were carried out to ensure peace and order. Like I said we are practicing guided democracy, so these kinds of action should be expected (MD6, Journalist, Chinese, male, aged 37).

All of the above evidence is in agreement that the restrictions placed upon the freedom of the press are relevant for the sake of social harmony. The misuse of freedom of the press as marked through the 'Operation Lalang' of 1987, where daily presses such as the Star, and Utusan Melayu inflamed racial hatred among the major ethnic groups, is an instance noted as showing how dangerous the freedom could be.

Another important feature of the responses is their views of the mechanism of restrictions as reflected in the use of law and legislation. In accordance with the acceptance of guided democracy, some interviewees perceived those media-related laws as mechanisms of guided democracy. In other words the laws are the mechanism of authorised power that guides the media in deciding what to publish and what not to publish. In relation to the above evidence, they also affirmed that the laws are the elements of guided democracy acceptable to a third world country such as Malaysia.

The following responses indicate that the respective interviewees were of the opinion that a guided democracy is constructive in facilitating social harmony among the people. One of them linked the use of stringent laws as 'guided freedom', which to a certain extent implies an association with the philosophy of guided democracy. The interviewee said:

So far, I think...as long as the media do not go beyond the limit of the Acts, ...the freedom of the press is ok. ...So the press in Malaysia is actually guided and abides by all these Acts, one the ISA, the Sedition Act, Printing Presses Act and the Official Secrets Act, the Police Act and others. So, what I could say is that the press freedom in Malaysia is not really freedom per se but is 'guided freedom' (GO10, General Accountant, Malay, male, aged 50).

On a similar note, another interviewee referred to Malaysia's press freedom as 'guided freedom'. Although he indicated ambivalence about the concept of guided freedom, his words communicated a sense of acceptance.

I think it's a guided freedom. I think it's quite fair too in the sense that freedom comes with responsibility and in this situation, knowing the social fabric of our country, the economic situation, and the level of our country's development (MD1, Manager, Malay, male, aged 46).

Of a similar state of mind, an academician used the term 'guarded and guided' to describe Malaysia's press freedom. She asserted:

Our press freedom is more guarded and guided. And I would like to again stress the fact that because of the racial and religious sensitivity that we have in our country, whether we like it or not, that have to be taken into consideration (AC1, Assoc. Prof., Malay, female, aged 47).

The above responses emphasise the use of stringent laws, which also imply press control as relevant to Malaysia's social setting, especially to protect the state from racial conflict. This is parallel to the earlier evidence on Malaysia's democracy that place a higher priority on the good of the society collectively, rather than on individuals.

#### **5.2.5.2 Restrictive laws restrain press freedom**

Some of the interviewees perceived that stringent legislation limits freedom of the press and are not conducive to freedom of expression. The following evidence depicts their acknowledgement of such stringent laws and their negative views of the restriction upon freedom of the press. As for instance, an Editor-in-Chief of an online newspaper asserted that stringent laws have caused dissatisfaction among the people towards the mainstream mass media. For that reason there is significant demand for independent newspaper. He said:

A lot of people would argue that there is a lack of freedom; press freedom in Malaysia. The success of [my online newspaper] ...shows that there is a demand for independent newspaper; independent commentary, opinion and all that. So I ...I think ...Malaysia has got to the point where there is ...an expression of dissatisfaction with the [mainstream] media; ...not just print media but also TV and radio. I worked in the mainstream media for a while. ...I think there is still a few good journalists in the mainstream media, people are still giving problems to the editors ...but a lot of them would decide to get the easy way out. Meaning that they'll write [what the people] want them to write. So I think that is the saddest part in Malaysian journalism in the sense that we see ...very clearly in terms of government censorship. ...You got the licensing system [but] you [also] got ...all the different Acts...In that sense, there is a major problem in Malaysian journalism (MD11, Editor in Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

Another journalist of an independent online newspaper, also advocated that press freedom in Malaysia is not respectable. He implied that the freedom of the online media is a paradox of the CMA 1998, but not principally acquired through the enlightenment of philosophy of freedom of expression. In many instances he argued that the government officials were reluctant to cooperate with online journalists in

their tasks of news gathering. They were denied press permits to enter any government functions and for that they failed to get responses from government political leaders. More than that they were perceived as enemy and should be avoided. He explained:

In Malaysia, from my observation, [independent online newspaper] will not be in existence, if not because of the loophole of our law [not on the principles of press freedom]; because the law said [it] don't need a permit to operate an online media, but [it is] still subjected to other laws; Sedition Acts, and other laws. ...The problem we [independent online newspapers] faced is to get the reaction [responses]. Sometimes when somebody complained, we try to be objective; we try to be fair, we try to be impartial, we try to get both sides of the story. We hardly get response from the government side. ...As far as government servant is concerned, or the government officials, they are very reluctant [to cooperate with us]. The reason they gave us is that that "We are not supposed to talk to you." And at the same time we are being misunderstood by the opposition. They thought we are supposed to be on their side. The reason that we cannot get access to the politicians is because we are not given the press permit in any of the government function. ...We are not considered as official media as we do not bear any licence. We are not allowed to make any coverage on any government's functions. Anyway we are allowed to make coverage at the Parliament because it is opened to the public. We told them about democracy. If we are not allowed to have access to the parliament, how can we say that we are protecting democracy? Even though if we report something that we know very well that the government would not respond to, at least we know that we can still get the matter across if somebody reads them. ...So in that sense, the freedom of the press exists in Malaysia, but of course there are many avenues of control applied by the authority such as the ISA, Printing Presses Act, Secret Official Acts so on and so forth. ...Last time there was a raid on us, because there was a report made against us with regard to a letter from a reader that was considered as seditious. [However] we had never received any call [from the authority] not even from KSDN<sup>45</sup> [Ministry of Internal Security] (MD8, Editor/Journalist, Malay, male, aged 48).

An NGO executive certainly agreed that many stringent laws pressurised the press freedom in Malaysia. Adding to those views he charged that the 'freedom of the press' means 'freedom to publish favourable stories concerning the government', and restrictions for criticism.

When we talk about the 'freedom of the press', we must not forget the Parliament Acts that are related to our media institutions. ...Therefore, freedom of the press is more of the government's interpretation rather than the press itself. ...Freedom of the press only works well when it comes in line with the 'government's consent' rather than the real meaning of freedom of the press that needs to be independent, objective and without fear or favour (NGO9, Executive, Malay, male, aged 45).

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<sup>45</sup> KSDN stands for Kementerian Keselamatan Dalam Negeri, which is translatable as the Ministry of Internal Security.

Aligned to the above view, a female NGO leader viewed the freedom of the press as unequally apportioned to different ranks and files. The elites are seen to be gaining more attention from the press than the common people. He asserted:

I don't think we enjoy the freedom of the press. ...[The notion] that everybody gets equal opportunity and equal weight in the press does not exist. I think we do find that elites have a bigger slice of the press compared to the non-elite and therefore it is not fair to say that we enjoy the true freedom of the press (NGO7, Executive, Indian, female, aged 48).

An academician even claimed that the media are not doing enough for the state but instead are being used by the government in an unconstructive way, which he did not explain in detail. He compared the role of Utusan Melayu (a Malay mainstream newspaper) during the pre-independence years when it was the most important medium used to fight for Malaysia's independence. Currently he viewed Utusan Melayu as having failed to function in a similar way, but instead now being used 'as [an] instrument for achieving government's interests' rather than being a channel for people's voices. He asserted:

I fear that it had been used as an instrument of government power. This happens because the press, the newspapers are controlled by the government (AC5, Assoc. Prof., Indian, male, aged 57).

Similarly, a journalist from a Chinese newspaper observed that the press is being used in the 'government's interest' mainly to 'retain power'. She warned that:

You had better be careful. There are many Acts around you that could end you in prison...It has nothing to do with the different ethnic groups of our society at all. It is the fear of losing power. The people are told that this is taboo and that is taboo, that is sensitive and this is sensitive so that people would not talk. What about corruption, what about the failure of government's mega project? Can't we as the citizens have the rights to say, to question or point out our views even in a civilised manner? (MD7, Journalist, Chinese, female, aged 39).

She was also unhappy with Malaysia's press freedom as she asserted that some of the media laws are acutely stringent to the extent that it could cost a media person an imprisonment sentence.

Freedom of the press is not so good either. If you write something that you think is right but the authority thinks otherwise, then you had better be careful. There are many Acts around you that could take you to the prison (MD7, Journalist, Chinese, female, aged 39).

Corresponding to the above evidence, an academician mentioned that the stringent laws in Malaysia have created a norm of imbalanced reporting. The laws

have created fear among journalists causing them to write pieces communicating good impressions of the government, while the voices of the opposition were ignored.

In Malaysia we don't really have the freedom of the press...From what you see in the papers it's all very much lopsided towards the government. Sometimes, you see very little on the side of the opposition being mentioned, no matter how much the media tries to present the other side. (AC13, Assoc. Prof., Malay, female, aged 45).

There are instances where media-related laws were used to bar certain media from publication as the Operasi Lalang of 1987 exemplified (Aliran 1988:22). Less directly, the implication of these laws in one way or another fanned paranoia among media practitioners fearing that any of those laws may be used against them. This 'state of fear' leads to practical self-censorship, reducing openness in objective reporting, especially on issues that reveal government defects. Much has been said about this in preceding chapters. The following responses show that interviewees do acknowledge the implication of those stringent laws and their potential to cultivate problematic self-censorship among media practitioners. A GO legal advisor said:

Daily presses are subjected to tremendous shackles under the Printing Presses Act. ...The fear is there as the permit may be cancelled or may not be renewed. So what is happening is actually the press tends to indulge a great deal of censorship. So I understand that a lot of it is not official restriction, a lot of it is actually self-censorship (GO9, Legal Advisor, Prof. Indian, male, aged 52).

Self-censorship that frequently obscures the roots of an issue, and probably the truth behind a story, is often a challenge to most editors and journalists in Malaysia. An Editor-in-Chief of an online newspaper revealed that self-censorship is frequently practiced to avoid trouble relating to the stringent laws. He said:

Self-censorship is something that is unseen. It occurs in the mind of the journalists and the editors; ...people cannot see it and that's why it's so insidious. It is harder for us to campaign against self-censorship than against the government self-censorship. ...Being a journalist, I do know that self-censorship is an obsession in the media, it happens. ...We are not talking about everyday; we are talking about every hour. Really, everything that comes through the editorial room, people will be looking at how to write in such a way that would not bring up, would not create problem for the government. Partly because they are worried about the fact that the Minister would call upon them the next day, or that the police will call upon them. ...So the editors do self-censor themselves to the point where the journalists also self-censor themselves (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 47).

Basically, all of the above responses suggest that there are opponents and proponents of Malaysia's stringent laws controlling the mass media. The findings show that the interviewees acknowledged the existence of stringent legislations that

limit the freedom of the press. However, the findings also suggest that they understood that such freedoms are covertly taken back in Article 149. Article 149 is also known as the 'ISA 1960', which some of them described as draconian law. Such stringent laws cultivate fear and apprehension among media practitioners that lead to self-censorship among them, thus making dissenting pieces or voices of the opposition a rarity. Other than ISA 1960, there are also Sedition Act 1948, Defamation Act 1957, and the Official Secret Act 1972 that impinged Malaysia's press freedom in certain ways. However, some of the interviewees behold that stringent laws concerning freedom of the press are also essential in controlling seditious and defamatory articles that would incite hatred among different ethnic groups.

The evidence in this section suggests that a minority (33.3%) of the interviewees perceived the press freedom in Malaysia as unsatisfactory for various reasons, while a noteworthy majority (66.7%) of the interviewees gave positive remarks. These findings are echoed in the audit made by the World Audit Organisation ranking Malaysia's press freedom in 113<sup>th</sup> place out of 149 nations of the world (Lindley 2004:4). Most of the interviewees are contented with the stringent laws, which they perceived as relevant and important to a multiracial country like Malaysia. Among others, the findings suggest the following.

First, it is apparent that the interviewees acknowledged that there are stringent laws that restrict media freedom but they are also contented with such a situation. They acknowledged that ISA 1960, Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984, Sedition Act 1948 and some other legal instruments, which Gan (2003:1) observed as numbering 35 altogether, exist and affect the freedom of the press. Some of them even realised that some other Acts, particularly Article 149, known infamously as the Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA) overrule Article 10 of the Constitution that provisions the freedoms of speech, expression, and peaceful assembly. These interviewees acknowledged that media-related laws are imperative to sustaining social harmony even at the expense of freedom of the press and of expression.

Second, the interviewees are contented that the law is crucial to control media content in order to ensure that sensitive issues that raised interracial misunderstanding and hatred would not be amplified through the media.



Third, the interviewees acknowledged that interethnic-relations in Malaysia are volatile in such a way that racial-sensitivities have to be dealt with careful consideration and awareness. Past experience of racial conflicts are frequently mentioned and linked to the work of the press.

Fourth, in line with the provision of stringent laws on press freedom, some interviewees see that the element of authoritarianism such as guided democracy, and with regard to press freedom some used the term 'guided freedom', are acceptable for the same reason: that it would ensure 'social harmony' or 'social order'. By 'guided freedom', the interviewees implied that the authority or the government decides how much freedom would be relevant for the mass media. This led to the understanding that dissident pieces and debates on issues considered sensitive should be avoided. Remarkably, the catchword of 'guided' in many of their references is seemingly common and acceptable to the interviewees.

Last, in relation to the earlier findings, a dilemma exists whereby one perspective of the stringent media-related laws says it is imperative to preserve social order, but from another perspective, it works at the expense of the freedom of speech and freedom of expression. There are potentials for the laws to be abused for political interests and in that sense it would jeopardise the good practices of democracy where criticisms, the public watchdog role of the media, and the voices of the minority would be ignored (Lent 1982:265). This would further suggest that the call for democratic change is less relevant to the large majority (77%) of the opinion formers who perceive Malaysia's democracy as 'Good' and 'Fair'. This is not to say that there is no objection to such control upon the freedom of the press, but support of the opinion formers for radical democratic change is insignificant. Before we take the discussion any further, let us examine how the opinion formers see Malaysia's national integration.

### **5.3 National Integration**

In studying Malaysia's achievement of national integration, two questions were asked. These questions address how the achievement of national integration would be linked to democratic practices and the emergence of online journalism. Those two questions are: 'Do you think that genuine national integration among Malaysians is achievable?' and 'Do you think that Malaysians are currently nationally integrated?'

The national integration referred to in this context is the task of social integration between the different ethnic groups, not as delineated by their cultural commitments and religious beliefs, but manifested in a united Malaysian society, that shares the fundamental values identifiable as Malaysian (Jawan 2003:162). It is with this understanding that the questions were devised.

### 5.3.1 Genuine national integration is insignificant

In response to the question 'Do you think that genuine national integration among Malaysians is achievable with regard to the current government's policies and the public responses?' almost half (45.8%) of all of the interviewees perceived that it is impossible for Malaysia to reach a point of genuine national integration. Other than this pessimistic group, there are also interviewees (39.6%) who see that genuine national integration is possible. A cross-examination of the patterns of perception among the four groups shows that the most pessimistic views on national integration came from the Media group (67% among MDs), and the NGO group (50% among NGOs). The pattern is shown on Table 5.4.

**Table 5.4**  
**Perception on Achievability of Genuine National Integration**

<b>Views</b>	<b>GO</b>	<b>NGO</b>	<b>MD</b>	<b>AC</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Possible</b>	7	3	3	6	19	39.6
<b>Impossible</b>	2	5	10	5	22	45.8
<b>Not certain</b>	1	2	2	2	7	14.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>

A minority of interviewees (39.6%) perceived that genuine national integration is possible if certain procedures are followed. Those procedures mainly concerned democratic practices of the government such as transparency, the amendment and dilution of certain stringent laws that curb freedom of expression, social and economic equality, and the avoidance of communalism trends within the ruling parties.

Genuine national integration in this sense is fundamentally based on empathetic relationships that are in contrast to functional relationships. It also

contradicts Furnival's (1956) conception of a plural society, which is principally linked to the effect of colonialism. Genuine national integration would deny any sense of prejudice, animosity and jealousy among the different ethnic groups and ethnic nationalism is significantly rejected in favour of a collective attitude towards 'Malaysian nationalism'.

In response to a follow up question that asks, "Are Malaysians currently nationally integrated," a majority of interviewees (52.1%) see that 'Malaysians are only partially integrated'. On the other hand, there is a small minority (10.4%) who optimistically perceived that Malaysians are currently nationally integrated. In addition, many of them (37.5%) even perceived that Malaysians are 'not integrated at all'. Thus, a significant majority (89.6%) of the interviewees were pessimistic about national integration. The pattern of their responses is shown in Table 5.5.

**Table 5.5**  
**Perception on Current National Integration**

Perception	GO	NGO	MD	AC	Total	%
<b>Yes thoroughly</b>	2	1	-	2	5	10.4
<b>Yes partly</b>	6	5	8	6	25	52.1
<b>Definitely no</b>	2	4	7	5	18	37.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>

One of the justifications that some of interviewees raised was that the relationship among the different ethnic groups is only a functional relationship, which is the adverse of an empathetic relationship. This pattern of relationship among the different ethnic groups would not support national integration where understanding, tolerance and accommodation are essential. An executive of an NGO said:

We have not achieved what we called empathetic relationship. We have functional relationships, like they will come together to work in the same office, maybe play in a same team for football in school. All the different community will play together...that is what we call functional. Empathetic is like you go to his house, if you have a problem you would share with him. I don't think that is happening. How I realised this is very strong in Malaysia that we interact only within our own community, we don't have empathetic relationship (NGO3, President, Indian, male, aged 51).

The pattern of communication, which is highly intra-community rather than intercommunity, highlights the functional relationship among the different ethnic groups, which again would not support national integration. Access to intercommunity

communication is normally limited through formal communication such as through political parties, NGO bodies, workplace and other impersonal environments. The NGO executive added that:

We cannot run away from the fact that interaction at the social level is still intra-community and not intercommunity, meaning by which we interact with one another most of the time, with members, with your own kind, like Chinese girl working in an office would spend her weekend with another Chinese. An Indian boy would go for film with an Indian girl and Malay would stick to his own kind too. ...It is not across community. So what does it show? We don't really achieve national integration (NGO3, President, Indian, male, aged 51).

An Accountant expressed the same thought that intercommunity relationship is scarcely practiced, if not totally neglected. He deduced that with regard to intercommunity interaction, Malaysians do not mix. He explained that most intercommunity interaction is promoted through political parties and not naturally carried out through personal obligation at the grassroots level. An empathetic relationship is almost non-existent and this situation is risky whenever there are circumstances that would expose them to potential conflict.

We integrate through the political leaders and also through our social structure. The only thing is that we do not really mix with each other...To me, genuine integration is just a political gimmick, but in actual fact I do not think it is achievable. For example, if a Malay driver knocked down a Chinese pedestrian, I believe there will be chaos if it happened in a Chinese-dominant area. Then if you mentioned in the news the races involved in such accident then it will ignite antagonism and chaos among the different races (GO10, General Accountant, Malay, male, aged 50).

An NGO executive officer similarly stressed that a functional relationship is more prevalent among the different ethnic groups rather than an empathetic relationship. According to him, Malaysians are not truly integrated in terms of empathetic integration.

They are not genuinely integrated. However, they work together on certain issues...especially issues with regard to international affairs. But in national issues, I don't think genuinely there is a national integration. However, artificially the integration is there. They can sit together, they can eat together, they can play together, but back home, I don't think so. So currently, they are not nationally integrated (NGO1, Vice Secretary, Malay, male, aged 46).

The executive officer also emphasised that working under the same roof would not be a good indicator of national integration. It is very common for the different ethnic groups to work in the same place, but after their working hours, their

relationship would not go further. This indicates that empathetic relationship is irrelevant among them. He said:

If we can work together doesn't mean we are integrated. You can be working with Britons and Americans, but you are not integrated with them. So working together or eating together is not a good indicator for national integration (NGO1, Vice Secretary, Malay, male, aged 46).

An executive member of an NGO affirmed that there are many distractions, which do not support cohesive national integration in Malaysia such as the ethnic-based schools, political institutions, and the mass media. She pointed out:

I think ...cohesive national integration is very difficult to achieve. You know, integration takes time and the major principles like communal parties, vernacular schools, vernacular newspapers, communal associations and other institutions that are based on racial lines should be abolished if we would sincerely want to be integrated. But these things exist around us. No way that they are going to be abandoned. Interethnic marriage would be impossible to many of us, as the religion could not be compromised. So, cohesive national integration is almost impossible (NGO2, Executive, Chinese, female, aged 34).

An Editor-in-Chief of an independent online newspaper was of the opinion that the policy of national integration does not work well. He also observed the education system as not conforming to the national unity policy. With regard to intercommunity relationships, he stressed that the education system is not supportive enough in fostering national integration.

I think, somehow, we are doing it very wrongly. We have to start at primary schools. When you get to the university, you can already see that there are disgust feelings, though people don't mix because of all the angst, and all the perceptions that we have about each other and all that. If you go to University Malaya you can see it. In the canteens you don't see Malays and Chinese sitting together, they are all on separate tables (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

Basically, the editor referred to the ethnic-based primary schools separating young Malaysians from each other, where the Chinese community as well as the Indians are sending their children to their respective ethnic-based primary schools, while the Malays are sending their children to the national primary schools. It indicates that the education system is drawn along ethnic lines.

Other interviewees also observed that the government's policy, as seen through the education system, does not function effectively to promote national integration in the sense that empathetic relationships among the people are significantly overlooked, if not rejected. Even a Commissioner of a GO perceived that

the policy deficiency undermines national integration. The ethnic relationship is very fragile and most probably it would be worsened, where the younger generation are further separated from each other. His views also indicate that the relationship among the people is more inclined towards a functional relationship rather than an empathetic one. He said:

We still look at each other as a race not as Malaysian. Our integration is still very fragile. We find that even now under the national service there are also problems and people tend to flock according to their ethnic group and race and actually this is normal because, like we know, birds of same feathers flock together, but then again, here we have to examine our education system (GO5, Commissioner, Malay, male, aged 54).

The allowance for pluralism in the Constitution (Tennant 1975:81), political institution, cultural and religious practices also cause the problem of separation among the different ethnic groups. Numerous interviewees emphasised these problems that affect the movement for national integration among the different ethnic groups. They perceived these pluralistic practices have developed hindrances that disturbed the endeavour of true national integration.

A GO executive saw that religion has been the major obstacle to genuine national integration. He asserted that true national integration would not be achieved through pluralistic practices but rather through the process of assimilation, which would be greatly assisted through interethnic marriage. He said:

If you were to look at Europe, they don't have problem in terms of interethnic marriage. Because of that they can be fully integrated. But in our country, the problem we are facing is that for Chinese to be integrated with the Malays ...they need to convert to Muslim and then they would be part of the Muslim society and be well integrated with the Malays. However not the other way round because the Malays would not ...compromise with their religion (GO1, Executive, Malay, male, aged 39).

Another constituent of culture is language. The different ethnic groups in Malaysia speak their own mother tongue. This is also seen as a hindrance to national integration. A Senior Manager of a mainstream newspaper asserted:

Even in language also we are not integrated. So now we are supposed to talk in Bahasa (Malay language) because we want to integrate, but this is not happening, we are communicating in English because most like English better. So there is no proper integration as planned by the government there. Since you are separated by the languages, by the religions, by the races...it is not effective if we use any of their language because the others will see that it is used at the expense of the others (MD2, Senior Manager, Malay, male, aged 45).

The above responses explain why an empathetic relationship would not work among the diverse ethnic groups. This is in accordance with Comber's (1983: xv) claim that the social and religious structure of the Malays made it impossible for any other religious or ethnic group to be integrated with them.

However a journalist of a Malay mainstream daily challenged such views of MD2. From a different perspective there is a need to tolerate and to provide some rooms for the minority's mother tongues. Giving instances as seen in the United States, where there are various ethnic-based mass media, he asserted that the medium of communication would not jeopardise national integration. He stressed that the crucial issue is the content. Furthermore, through ethnic-based mass media, it would be possible to know, to understand and to inform each of the ethnic group on issues that concerned interethnic relation. He said:

There is a need for the newspapers to sacrifice racial needs because initially not everybody is well verse in Bahasa (Malay) or English. So they [newspapers] need ...to be in their own mother tongue. I think languages will not jeopardise national integration. You also see in the West where ethnic newspapers are getting more important too. In America they have Spanish newspaper, Arabic newspaper, [and] that would not jeopardise integration. A Chinese newspaper or even a Malay newspaper will not jeopardise [integration]. The only thing in newspaper that would jeopardise integration is what you write... Do you write secretly in your own mother tongue condemning other races? I mean I could write in Bahasa [Malay language] secretly ...bad things about Chinese or Indians. Another Chinese could write bad things about Malays in their own language. So the language ...will not jeopardise integration. It is not the media but the substance. ...It is not the language, but how the people use the language, whether it's for a good purpose or whether it's for hidden agenda. We [also] tend to check on each other. It is not that we don't trust Chinese newspaper or Indian newspaper, but it is just that we also would like to know what is their thinking, what the Chinese community thinks about politics, [and] what the Indians community thinks about certain issues. ...We are not suspicious of the Indian or Chinese newspapers (MD4, Editor/Journalist, Malay, male, aged 42).

Political interest, as a number of interviewees indicate, is also a setback for national integration. This is seen as very much driven by political gain rather than fulfilling the needs of the nation. With regard to the contemporary political scene, considerable numbers of interviewees criticised the attitude of Malaysian politicians towards national integration, of which some of them were seen as unsupportive. A manager of a mainstream mass media commented that many Malaysian politicians still think along racial lines. Giving an instance of MIC politicians, he said:

How many politicians actually think Malaysian? Many of them still look at race, for example, MIC proposed that we must uphold the Indian culture.

We must do something to bring the Indian up. So this thing keeps on coming, ...but why not [Malaysian nation]? Barisan (National Alliance party) is made up of all those different component parties. It is going to take a long time. I won't bother whether you are from MIC, you're from UMNO or you're from MCA, we are all Malaysians (MD10, Manager, Indian, male, aged 52).

Supporting the above state of mind, an editor of an online newspaper, also observed that the political system in Malaysia is racially and communally based. However, he charged that this racially based feature is politically important to stabilise the power sharing within the National Front party.

Politically speaking if you look at our political system it is still racial-based or communal-based. That is very important for the purpose of check and balance among the National Front party members. So, we are getting along very well because the Malay realised that they have the political power, the Chinese got the economic power, and the Indians have the stabilizing power (MD8, Editor/Journalist, Malay, male, aged 48).

An editor of a mainstream newspaper also viewed national integration as impossible. He pointed out that some politicians had manipulated the issue of national integration for reasons that he did not explain. He said:

I think in Malaysia [national integration] is an on-going experiment... because of too much politics involved in the word integration. ...Polarisation and integration are actually the same thing on two sides of a coin. If you don't integrate you are polarised. So unfortunately, it is used as a political tool and not as a national agenda. We are very far off national integration. We are nowhere nearby. We are yet to be nationally integrated and nowhere near (MD14, Editor, Chinese, male, aged 43).

A journalist of a Chinese mainstream press believed that true national integration would not be good for Malaysians. He claimed that the indigenous community would not accept a fully integrated Malaysian society. Fully integrated would mean assimilation among the different ethnic groups in society, which would diminish any ethnic identification, whereby all members of the society would be seen as Malaysians. Thailand's and Indonesia's society are seen close to such assimilation. He asserted:

I think genuine national integration is not possible. Anything ideal is impossible. Anyway, I don't think the government is even going for genuine integration. It won't be good for the nation, the indigenous society would not like it if there ever be a genuine integration (MD12, Journalist, Chinese, male, aged 50).

On a similar note, an academician observed that in the very beginning, the founding fathers of Malaysia decided that Malaysians would not go for full integration as the concept of assimilation advocates or what he termed as 'melting society'. This



is parallel to Tennant's (1975:81) assertion that when the Federation of Malaya was designed, the founding fathers of the Alliance Party had agreed the system should ensure all three major ethnic groups 'remain separated'. This suggests that they have opted for pluralism, where every ethnic group is given the rights to practice their own culture and religious belief. He said:

To call Malaysia an integrated nation society is wrong in the sense that this nation was not founded upon the principles of melting society. ...Malaysia has opted for a plural society. So if you are thinking of an integrated society like the Thai's society, we will never be. ...I say Malaysia will never be an integrated society. Malaysia will never be a melting pot (AC5, Assoc. Prof., Indian, male, aged 57).

The political leaders were seemingly hypocritical in promoting national integration. This is what a media expert alleged. He implies that racism is used to gain support from one's own ethnic group. He charged that national integration would be a difficult task for Malaysians. The leaders themselves should firstly integrate; only then their followers would tag along.

The leaders ...the Malay-Chinese-Indian leaders especially, should be sincere to themselves. They are leading intelligent people. ...The problem is that they [the leaders] are not sincere. They betray their own people. They are there to serve the people. And if you are integrated at that level, BN [among political leaders of National Front] and all that, I think we have no problem. I think we can do that [national integration] provided that we have more transparent leaders (GO4, Radio Station Manager, Malay, male, aged 46).

The above evidence shows that political interest, or what Teik (2002:59) terms as 'ethnic chauvinism', is obstructive to national integration. As a matter of fact, G.C.Teik (1978:34) even sees that the failure of national integration would lead to racial aggression, which he terms as a 'time bomb'. Some of the interviewees highlight such issue of racism and for that reason they see that the National Service Training Programme<sup>46</sup> is significant. An editorial of a Malay mainstream newspaper pointed out the significance of the programme, which he sees vital for national integration. He said:

It is difficult to say [about genuine national integration] because we can see now that there is social polarisation among the ethnic groups, I mean the Chinese, the Indians and the Malays, they have been distanced from one ...another. Because of that I think the Malaysian government, starting this year, they introduced [the] national service programme. National

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<sup>46</sup> National Service Training Programme is a government programme made compulsory for every citizen aged 17 years old. The key objective of this programme is to enhance closer interethnic relations among the younger generation, which includes motivational and physical training courses. However, contradicts to its aim, there were a number of cases that highlights interethnic fights among the participants (Aliran 2004b; Netto 2004; Kuppusamy 2006b).

service programme is meant to reduce the social gap between the three main races in Malaysia and ...the main objective is to integrate these three main races ...[and] a more solid national integration among the Malaysians (MD15, Journalist, Malay, male, aged 47).

However giving instances of racial fights among the different ethnic groups of the National Service Training Programme participants, an Editor of an online newspaper underlined that national integration is not an easy task. He pointed out that the media play vital roles of national integration, but conversely the ethnic-based mainstream newspapers are not sincere in holding such roles. Using the term compartmentalisation, he charged that the mainstream presses are more incline towards ethnic nationalism. He said:

This morning we were discussing about problems of National Service. In Johore [and] Trengganu, people are already fighting against each other just like crazy. Come on ...the whole intention is to bring them together and understand each other and yet you are raising antagonism between each of the different races. It is not helping. ...It has been 20-30 years [since 1969] and the situation has gone worst and that we need to overcome that problem. I think we are still talking about tolerance [not genuine national integration]. We should have gone beyond that. It is not a matter of tolerating each other. I think we should be living in harmony by now, which is not the case. A lot of journalists here have not gone through the '1969'. We are the post-1969 generation. I like to see that [our online newspaper] speaks ...for Malaysians, for all Malaysians. We try to overcome the kind ...of compartmentalisation that the mainstream media may have. ...For instance if you work for Utusan, you will have a different kind of perception. If you work for Sin Chew, you will have a different kind of perception. ...But I think [in my online newspaper] when we do things, we see things from all perspectives, rather than just from the eyes of the Malays or from the eyes of the Chinese. So I think in terms of national integration, we still have a long way to go. Unfortunately we are going backward (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

Contradicts to some of earlier perceptions on the affirmative action of the NEP that grants special privilege to the indigenous people to suggest a decent democratic practice, a chief executive of a TV station sees that such affirmative action is outdated. In terms of national integration he does not see that the policy of affirmative action would help to enhance national integration, instead it seemingly projects racism.

I don't think we are nationally integrated; ...we [only] have an understanding. For example ...affirmative action is implemented here to support the majority of the nation [the Malays]. But the affirmative action in the US is to assist the black, the Chicanos, the Puerto Rican [the minorities] so that they can be integrated in the bigger economic community. But here we have the minority being displaced economically, so the government policy now is good in a way to support the Malays so that they can quickly integrate within the economic activity, or economic

mainstream of the country. But, we have been doing this for more than 30 years and we don't seem to be successful. ...There is disparity of economic distribution. ...The affirmative action doesn't seem to work. ...You can't continue like this. The other races will say "Haa you are discriminating us." ...So that is the problem. The minority [the Chinese and Indians community] are saying that they are being discriminated. Sooner or later the non-bumiputera will say "Hey how long I will be discriminated? I've given you more than 30 years already." So looking at [the situation] now, it won't be a perpetual thing. ...The Vision 2020 stated that the affirmative action will soon be dissolved to have more equality among the races by the year 2020. But... there was objection by the UMNO and the Malays. So [the government] must continue with the economic policy of the affirmative action to support the Malays; to achieve a certain percentage of [economic] development (MD5, Chief Executive, Malay, male, aged 49).

With the difficulties mentioned above, the efforts of national integration are seen intricate. It needs tolerance and understanding among the different ethnic groups, intercommunity communication and relationships, through personal interaction, in the social as well as in the political arena. Understanding one another and respecting one's rights, one's religious belief and customs are what Malaysians need to accomplish in order to develop national integration within the plural society.

The evidence in this section drawn from the two questions focusing on national integration, suggests three important dimensions of thoughts, ideas and attitudes of the interviewees.

First, almost half (45.8%) of the interviewees perceived that genuine national integration is 'impossible'. The pessimistic views came mostly (20.8%) from the media experts. The idea that interethnic relationships are considerably 'functional', which is contrary to 'empathetic' relationships, marked such pessimistic views of national integration. To many of them, national integration is 'functional' for the reason that the different ethnic groups communicate only for certain functions like in the workplace, the marketplace or sport. The interviewees viewed that sharing personal problems, staying under one roof or to the extent of interethnic marriage, which indicate 'empathetic' relationships among the different ethnic groups, are very rare.

Second, the findings also suggest that some interviewees viewed cultural and religious differences as the main hindrance to national integration. Because of the large proportion of minorities, the task of assimilation as practiced in the United States or even in Thailand and Indonesia is not possible in Malaysia. One of the most

significant directions of national integration is through the concept of pluralism where every ethnic group is given the liberty to practice their own culture, to use their own language and to practice their own religious belief. This pattern of national integration is in fact the initial intention of the founding fathers of Malaysia. It is reflected in the Constitution, where the minorities are given the right to practice their own culture and religious belief, and most importantly their own language. This led to the allowance of the establishment of vernacular schools as well as vernacular mass media. Article 152 of the Constitution stipulates:

The national language shall be the Malay language and shall be in such script as Parliament may by law provide: Provided that (a) no person shall be prohibited or prevented from using (otherwise than for official purposes), or from teaching or learning, any other language; and (b) nothing in this Clause shall prejudice the rights of the Federal Government or of any State Government to preserve and sustain the use and study of the language of any other community in the Federation (Jones 1998:65).

Language differences, which is further increased through the existence of ethnic-based schools as well as ethnic-based mass media, both print and electronic, are seen as contrary to the course of national integration. Interethnic marriage among the different ethnic groups is almost impossible unless one of them would willingly forego their religion. Under those circumstances, the project of national integration is seen as contrary to the concept of 'melting pot' but instead a 'mosaic' of different cultures.

Third, the political interest at the outset of independence is seen as not in accordance with the effort of materialising national integration. As for instance even the Constitution in Article 152 (Jones 1998: 65) has provided the rights of the minorities to use their own mother tongue in communication that detracts from the implementation of the Malay language as the national language. National language is only stressed for official purposes and, practically in many circumstance the non-Malays have shown little interest except when dealing with business activities that involve Malays. Such scenes are in contrast to action taken by many governments to establish the process of national integration. For instance, Birch (1989:11) asserts that at crucial stages in the integrative process of some European countries, the teaching of minority languages is banned and the authority even instituted punishment for children communicating in minority languages in school buildings and grounds.

By measure of this kind the French almost stamped out the speaking of Breton, the lowland Scots rendered Gaelic extinct on the Scottish

mainland, and the English drove the Welsh language into decline (Birch 1989:11).

Such serious commitment was never implemented in Malaysia. To a certain extent, the situation of pluralism propagates ethnocentrism, which is irrelevant in supporting the effort of national integration.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has brought to light some of the major dimensions regarding the perceptions of Malaysian opinion formers. It also provides the fundamentals required to answer the first research question that seeks the perceptions of Malaysian opinion formers on democratic practices and achievements of Malaysia's national integration. The principle of the findings is that there is no absolute single common idea among the opinion formers with regard to democratic practices in Malaysia from which to propose a common agreement.

It is also important to note that the overall analysis did not show any inclination or intention among the interviewees to raise any particular ethnic issue, except for insignificant negative perception on the affirmative action (see MD5) and ethnic-based media (see MD11). Generally interviewees from the minority ethnic groups did not show any such inclination to raise ethnic issue in relation to Malaysia's democracy and national integration. However there are those among the interviewees of the Malay ethnic group who drew attention in supporting the NEP affirmative action that aimed to balance the economic share among the people.

The general pattern in terms of their opinions on Malaysia's democratic practices can be classified in two directions; the contented and the discontented. They are contented despite their best knowledge that there are shortfalls to Malaysia's democratic practices. However, those shortfalls are justified for the virtue of social harmony, national security, economic and political stability, and not to forget, the 'Malaysian style democracy'.

Since the colonial administration and even the post independence era, the government has firmly attached itself to the policy of 'preventive measures' against dissident and confrontational stances. With such policy in mind, stringent 'preventive

laws' were enacted to curb seditious materials, to detain alleged criminals without trial, to control publication and printing activities, to restrain unfavourable public assembly and many other actions that carry potentials to causing public disorder (Crouch 1993; Human Rights Watch 2002b; Aliran 2003a). Many of the restrictions point to the freedom of the press, stipulating that 'the media should not promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of population' (Loo 2003b:184).

The proponents of Malaysia's democracy justified it in a way that the restrictions should be viewed from a different perspective from Western democracy. Among others, the justifications are tied to the thought that Malaysia's society is multiracial in character and therefore volatile and vulnerable to interethnic confrontation. For that reason preventive measures are rationalised to prevent any attempt to destroy social harmony and public order. Contrary to the proponents of Malaysia's guided democracy, the discontented group in this study is representative of those who oppose Malaysia's democratic failings. They see guided democracy as a mockery, and to some of them even simply authoritarian.

These findings show the opinion formers believe that 'genuine national integration' is irrelevant to Malaysian society. Such a pattern of pessimistic views about national integration would generally highlight the government's effort for national integration as limited. In relation to that, this study also finds that the Federal Constitution, as seen in Article 152 (Jones 1998:65), that supports ethnic-based mass media, ethnic-based school system, and political institutions drawn along ethnic lines, distract the idea of national integration. The Constitution even advocates ethnic nationalism.

In the next chapter, I discuss how interviewees perceive online journalism and its links to democracy and national integration.

# **CHAPTER SIX**

## **Online Journalism: Contributing to Democracy and National integration**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The analysis of responses to the semi-structured interview continues in this chapter with a focus on enquiries regarding online journalism. The main purpose is to examine the perceptions of Malaysian opinion formers regarding online journalism in relation to democracy and national integration. Central to this task is the exploration of the significance of online journalism to democratic changes and national integration in Malaysia. This includes the trend of criticism in online journalism that marks a different trend as compared to the conventional mass media.

The questions on online journalism were arranged to begin with general ideas and gradually narrow down to focus on the issues as follows:

- What is your opinion of the advantages and disadvantages of online journalism in Malaysia?
- In terms of national policies and aspirations, do you think that the current development of Malaysian online journalism is on the right track?
- How should online journalism play its role to foster a cohesive national integration among Malaysians?
- Do you agree that online journalism is more critical of the government as compared to conventional mass media? In your opinion why does this trend occur and is it advantageous to democracy and national integration?

The discussion section will draw attention to the contribution of online journalism towards social and political matters, and by extension pertaining to the practices of democracy and national integration. Technical features of online journalism such as 'fast and immediate', 'interactive', 'borderless', 'hyperlinked' and 'selectivity' would not be discussed because these areas have been discussed in the earlier chapter.

## 6.2 Advantages and disadvantages of online journalism

One important outcome of this analysis is that the interviewees had listed the advantages of online journalism, in particular online newspapers, weblogs and NGO websites, as heavily outweighing the disadvantages. This is shown in Table 6.1 and Table 6.2.

**Table 6.1**  
**Advantages of Online Journalism**

Advantages of Online Journalism as interviewees suggested	Repeated reference	G.O	NGO	MD	AC
1. Less Government Control	14	2	3	4	5
2. Alternative media	14	2	1	4	7
3. Fast and immediate	12	2	1	6	3
4. Timely and real time news	11	-	3	5	3
5. More and easy accessibility	10	2	2	4	2
6. Massive information	9	2	1	5	1
7. Less censorship	9	1	1	5	2
8. Promotion of intellectualism	8	1	2	1	4
9. It merges the traditional mass media	7	0	1	4	2
10. Diverse news and opinions	6	-	2	-	4
11. Preferred by younger generation	6	-	-	4	2
12. Interactive	5	1	1	1	2
13. Borderless	5	1	-	3	1
14. Channels minority and people's voices	5	2	-	1	2
15. They dare to speak	5	1	3	-	1
16. Personal choices of selection	4	-	-	4	-
17. Non-biased and balanced reporting	4	1	2	-	1
18. Immediate editing	3	-	-	2	1
19. Huge global audience	3	1	1	-	1
20. It promotes knowledge-society	3	1	1	-	1
21. Accessible archive	3	-	-	1	2
22. Time saving	1	1	-	-	-
23. It initiates new journalism	1	-	-	-	1
24. It undermines status quo	1	-	-	-	1

The findings show that the ideas and perceptions of the advantages of online journalism are linked to its effect on issues of democratisation. For instance, there are more repeated references made on issues of democracy such as 'less government control', 'online journalism is alternative media', 'less censorship', 'online journalism channels minority voices', and 'online journalism dares to speak' besides some technical features that underlined the advantage of online journalism.



The most repeated references were made on the issue of freedom of the press, which is also closely related to issues of freedom of speech and expression. In addition, online journalism is also heavily referred to as 'alternative media' with less interference of gatekeeping in comparison to the mainstream mass media. Its technological features that enable vertical and horizontal communication supported by masses of information also facilitate freedom of communication among the people. Such features served to enhance democracy.

**Table 6.2**  
**Disadvantages of Online Journalism**

<b>Disadvantages of Online Journalism as interviewees suggested</b>	<b>Repeated reference</b>	<b>G.O</b>	<b>NGO</b>	<b>MD</b>	<b>AC</b>
1. Abusive, seditious, defamatory, libellous	14	4	4	2	4
2. No control and no censorship	7	1	2	3	1
3. Doubtful accuracy	6	2	2	-	2
4. Criticism against government	3	-	-	1	2
5. No recognition as official press	3	1	-	2	-
6. Sensations and speculation of stories	2	-	1	1	-
7. Perceived as anti-establishment	2	-	1	1	-
8. Detrimental to national unity	2	1	-	-	1
9. Participation of non-pro journalist	1	-	-	1	-

Even though the analysis shows that there is more emphasis given to the advantages of online journalism, it is incomprehensible to disregard the interviewees' projection on the disadvantages. The most repeated references highlight on the ethical aspects, particularly on contents that carry 'abusive, seditious, defamatory, and libellous', 'doubtful accuracy', and 'sensationalising stories'. Such perceptions on the advantages of online journalism stemmed from the freedom that it attained from CMA 1998 and less government control as it is exempted from the licensee regulation.

### **6.2.1 The advantages of online journalism**

Those major advantages were distinguished from the responses and the emphasis the interviewees made through repeated references. The repeated references were seen on two scores: first, the repeated references from each interviewee and second, the repeated references across all interviewees.

All of the advantages discussed in this section are classified into three areas according to the perceptions of interviewees. First, 'online journalism gained less government control and less self-censorship.' Secondly, 'online journalism functions as alternative media', and thirdly, 'online journalism promotes intellectualism, diverse opinions and minority voices.'

#### **6.2.1.1 Less government control and self-censorship**

The advantage of online journalism that gained the most attention from the interviewees is that it enjoys less governmental control and therefore it highlights more freedom of the press as compared to the traditional mass media. The term 'less governmental control' is used to avoid any over-simplification of the issues because there are isolated incidents where online journalists were detained for reasons linked to their journalistic work (Netto 2003; Bakri 2005a) despite the assurance of 'no-censorship' provisions in the CMA 1998. As for instance, Hishamuddin Rais, who was an online columnist for Malaysiakini, was sentenced for two years in 2001 under the ISA 1960 and Police Act 1967. He was charged for participating in illegal assembly but was released in 2003. However, some political observers believed that his arrest was linked to his dissenting piece published on Malaysiakini (Arfaeza 2002; Teik 2003:163). Arfaeza (2002) affirms,

Malaysiakini columnist Hishamuddin Rais is ...under ISA detention ...after writing the article 'Pilihanraya atau pilihan jalanraya' (Election or Street Demonstration) in his weekly column 'Dotmai' [in Malaysiakini]. Although the 51-year-old writer cum film producer has succeeded in challenging the arrest, the government had refused to release him ...on the pretext of national security.

In this regard, some of the interviewees realised that online journalism is not absolutely free even though CMA 1998 has provisioned the assurance of 'non-censorship'. As for instance, an interviewee was aware of other laws besides CMA 1998 with the potentials to impinge upon online journalism. He said:

I could see there is immense freedom [given to online journalism]. They are not abided to the licensing system and the government promises no censorship on the Internet. But I believe there are other form of surveillance that come under the Sedition Act, Internal Security Act, Official Secrets Act and others (AC7, Senior lecturer, Malay, male, aged 47).

The above evidence and the incident regarding Hishamuddin Rais of Malaysiakini are significant to support that it is too simplistic to state online journalism

in Malaysia as absolutely liberal, as what may have been perceived through the provision of the CMA 1998. Other Acts are also applicable to online journalists and reporters, such as the Official Secret Act 1972, Sedition Act 1948, Defamation Act 1957, as well as that of ISA 1960.

A Magistrate who has served Malaysian Session Court for a couple of years, viewed that online journalism is advantageous to the people as it provides more and easily accessible information covering a wider scope from all kinds of areas. In this matter, it includes government policies as well as the opposition ideologies, which he asserted as necessary for Malaysia's democracy. This perception also underlined that there is less government control especially in publication of different social and political discourse, which is less seen in the mainstream mass media. He pointed out,

I think it [online journalism] is one avenue for the opposition parties to have their say, to voice out their thoughts, and an opportunity for the public to access the views of the opposition. And that also proves that democratic process is very much alive in Malaysia. So people cannot really say that we totally restrict the freedom of the press (GO2, Magistrate, Malay, male, aged 42).

'Less government control,' as some interviewees proposed, also implies that online journalism attains more press freedom compared to print and electronic media. It also suggests less self-censorship practices in online journalism. Furthermore, the interviewees perceived that much of the censorship practices of the conventional mass media are related to government's control as reflected through the licensee decree. In other words, online journalism does not abide by the licensing system with regard to the PPPA 1984. The exemption of online journalism from the licensing system implies that it is free from Ministerial control, particularly the Home Affairs Minister. Some of the evidence that highlight less governmental control and less censorship are as follows.

Among the media professionals, whom I also referred to as media experts, is the Editor-in-Chief and the founder of one of Malaysia's prominent online newspapers. The editor revealed some incidences during his past experience with the mainstream, where ministers would interfere directly with the newsroom, to emphasize that online journalism is much freer as compared to the mainstream media. He implied that the mainstream mass media are being controlled while online journalism enjoys a freer environment. Nevertheless, he stressed that in terms of government attitudes and treatment, online journalism also faces a lot of disadvantages. The principal advantage that he sees is that online journalism is free

of the licensing system. For that online journalism is legitimate for whatever posture that they have adopted, even in voicing out criticism and dissent opinions.

The advantage is that we do not have to apply for a licence. ...We don't have to worry about the fact that the government can actually shut us down. They can shut us down using other means, but that would be harder. [Under] the Sedition Act, or whatever it is, they [the authority] can come and raid us off [but] but that would also be harder. It [with the licensing system] is quite easy [to shut us down] if we don't have a license as we will be made illegal. The good thing is that the people are watching. I think if they have a licensing system [for online journalism], it will be much harder for us because people will say that the law is there, [and] you broke the law. But good thing is that there is no such law. So we can operate legally. So that is the advantage, we don't have to worry about the government shutting us down (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

Through current undertaking with his online newspaper, he claimed that online journalism also benefits from less pressure from ministers who may view certain pieces as unfavourable to their ministries. Since any complaint against his online newspaper from a minister or ministry would be highlighted in a news story, the concerned minister would try to avoid such action. He said:

We do not have to worry about ministers calling us out and complain about whatever story that we have written. If they go and complain, we would write about it and it would become a news story. In fact surprisingly we do not get any of that kind of direct pressure from ministers because they know that they cannot actually put pressure on us because if they call us out ...and complain, it would become a news story and they know that they have been watched. So we don't keep it quiet (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

Quoted from an interview with CPJ<sup>47</sup>, the editor had pointed out,

The mainstream media is either completely or directly owned by political parties in Malaysia, so in that sense there is very little room for editors to go beyond, in terms of criticizing the governing political parties in Malaysia. ...I have a strong belief in media freedom. I think that by setting up [our online newspaper] we can actually ... help to improve the media situation in Malaysia, and I think we are doing that. We are putting pressure on the mainstream media simply because we are reporting things that are not being reported by mainstream media. In that sense, people are able to see that there is other news that is not being reported and they can compare and say 'hey look, the mainstream [media are] definitely censoring themselves on certain issues'... As a journalist I believe in being able to do my task, do my job. Journalism is also very much a part of a movement for democracy, good governance ... it should play a watchdog role. And that is why I have decided to come back here

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<sup>47</sup> CPJ stands for Committee to Project Journalists. This nonprofit journalists' organisation was established in 1981 by a group US foreign correspondents in response to the often brutal treatment of their foreign colleagues by authoritarian governments and other enemies of independent journalism (Committee to Protect Journalists 2000a).

to set up [an online newspaper] (as quoted in Committee to Protect Journalists 2000b).

The editor also specifically drew attention to the freedom of exposing certain issues that concerned politicians. Such trends had gained significant support from the Prime Minister. Pointing out such advantage of online journalism, he also implied that such stance would be less seen in the mainstream mass media. He said,

I think Pak Lah [the Prime Minister] is very keen when he said that "I want to hear the truth [and] I want you to speak the truth." I think [our online newspaper] is doing that. We are not malicious that we want to *hentam* [attack] the government all the time. We would pinpoint areas where the government is weak. If Pak Lah doesn't know about it, we'll tell him. For instance a minister [Minister X] is... not suppose to be involved in business. ... We found out ...there was a law suit against him ... and there were some research done about the fact that he still owns a company. So we make a news story about it. I don't know if that have any impact, but he was not appointed as a Minister anymore, he was dropped. So I think it's good in that sense, as you need Ministers who are honest, who would do their work without any conflict of interests, and Pak Lah should know about it. The mainstream may not inform him. I think Pak Lah is a good man personally. I do not have that kind of impression of the other people around him. Some people ...especially those who have been long in the government may be tainted with allegations, corruptions and all that. I think Pak Lah should be informed about it, and I think [our online newspaper] is playing a role (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

Another senior editor of a Malay section of an independent online newspaper, who has been holding the post since year 2000 and formerly was a reporter, agreed that the exemption of the licensing system has given more freedom to online journalism. The advantage is that more space is now available for the NGOs as well as the opposition parties. His online newspaper would also highlight 'letters to editor', to imply that the voices of the people are given attentive treatment. He said:

The first advantage is that we are free from the licensing system. ...Secondly we are timely and fast, meaning that the stories of today could be accessed today. It's also of real time. Another thing is that if there is any mistake we can do the correction now and then. Then you can easily update the stories. That means you would not be handicapped. You are first to publish [as compared to the traditional media] and you have access to latest information. And thirdly of course online newspaper can reflect the blues of the opposition. It can be political opposition or the NGO. We have the 'letters to editor'. We do not censor those letters as long as it is not a personal attack. Probably, we may just edit the grammar if there is any grammatical mistake. But content wise, we retain it as it is. These are our advantages (MD8, Editor/Journalist, Malay, male, aged 48).

With regard to the above views, a senior editor of an online version of a mainstream newspaper had sent a different judgement. He has been holding the editorial post of the online publication department since year 2000. He agreed that there is more freedom given to the independent online newspaper. However he challenged the reliability of the online news stories when non-media professionals are involved. He said,

The advantage is that you can write almost anything online. ...So the writing of news is no more limited to journalist. Among journalists they can almost write anything and put it online, as for example Malaysiakini website. An opinion piece or a letter piece for the editor can become a newsletter. ...And they are not subjected to the same ethical standard. A journalist would have a certain standard, a certain guideline, a certain ethics to write, but a writer may not have that altogether. When he has an opinion and feels like writing, he will write. [When] he has certain disagreement, hatred or whatever, he will just write when he feels like it. ...It allows anyone to write now (MD4, Editor/Journalist, Malay, male, aged 42).

Another media expert, who is a member of the board of directors of a media company that deals with advertisement, viewed online journalism, and in particular online newspaper from a more positive perspective. He believed that online newspapers are becoming more significant to Malaysians, especially the urban middle class. He asserts that the intellectuals are now beginning to accept online media as their news sources. He also emphasised that the educated middle class are utilising online newspaper for more democratic space.

As an urban educated middle class, I believe that online newspaper is very important especially now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. People like me, we tend to be more aware and concerned about the socio-political environment in Malaysia and as it is now, mainstream newspaper is not sufficient to give us all those information. So, we depend a lot on online newspaper. I believe I'm representing a lot of the educated urban middle class today in Malaysia. We depend a lot on the online newspaper such as Malaysiakini. In fact, it has been proven that a lot of information we get from this online newspaper and [online] news portal are important information that we do not get from the mainstream, [and] and we also get more detailed information online. For instance news relating to some sensitive political issues which are not carried by mainstream newspaper are carried by these online newspaper. It has been proven to be credible news. For the past few months I noticed that the mainstream newspapers are indirectly getting information from online newspaper. So, ...definitely online newspapers provide more democratic space, more freedom of speech and opinion for the urban middle class who can really express themselves without having their opinions edited or cut off [as seen] in the mainstream newspapers (MD3, Director, Malay, male, aged 47).

Some other interviewees linked the ministerial licensee exemption with the current ICT policy in which the government encourages and supports the people to be computer literate. As for instance an NGO leader pointed out:

The government is committed to developing ICT in the country in line with the commitment to Information age. They would be reluctant to censor online journalism the way they have been able to control the print. This is an advantage and as far as online journalism is concerned, censorship is less, besides it is difficult to censor (NGO3, President, Indian, male, aged 51).

On a similar note, an academician said:

So, these are the advantages in a way because the government cannot stop that. The web is one place where the government cannot control the citizen to read and to get information (AC8, Assoc. Prof., Chinese, male, aged 46).

Such views correspond to Banerjee's assertion as she suggests that one of the important characteristics of the Internet is the near impossibility of controlling the medium. 'In fact, cyber libertarians believe that this feature of the Internet makes attempts at censorship and control a difficult, if not an impossible task' (Banerjee 2004:40).

Another merit of the exemption from PPPA 1984 is the encouragement of international ICT investors to participate in the MSC project. The 1998-political crisis showed that there are certain investors who voiced their concerns and pulled out their investments in response to the government's attitude towards audiences of online journalism (Holmes and Grieco 2001). For instance Alvin Toffler, one of the advisory committee members to assist MSC, slammed the former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, for his actions that notably disturbed democratic practices in the country. Toffler charged that:

What made the (MSC) project particularly worthwhile was Mahathir's promise to pass a set of 'cyber-laws' that would guarantee participating companies complete freedom of access to information, freedom to bring in knowledgeable workers from other countries, and the best intellectual-property protection in the world. ...Regrettably, Mahathir's vision seems to have evaporated. Instead of a sound strategy to compete in the global information age, he seems to be adopting the tactics of police state. Like many Malaysians, I am both perplexed and shocked that Anwar Ibrahim (Deputy Prime Minister) who was just one month ago was the appointed successor to Mahathir, was not only arrested on politically motivated charges, ...but also turned up in court showing signs that he had been severely beaten (Toffler 1998:2).

In another instance, a Japanese-based Info-Tech consultant, Kenichi Ohmae, an affiliate and advisor of the MSC project also withdrew from the MSC project for the same reason Toffler had given (Toffler 1998). Ohmae is one of the members of a 41-member International Advisory Panel that comprised some of the biggest names in the MSC project.

Toffler's assertion and Ohmae withdrawal from the MSC project had warned the government for a lenient and compromising treatment towards online journalism and online political activism.. In relation to that, an NGO leader said:

The advantage that I can see is that the government is promoting Malaysia and the MSC. So, they do not want to show that there is control in this aspect (NGO6, President, Indian, male, aged 51).

Another positive feature of online journalism is that the freedom attained is seen as immense. An academician pointed out:

It has made the production of the non-print outside the normal process possible. This is to say that we do not have to go through any process or procedures of licensee constraints. Anybody having this technology can disseminate and can spread whatever idea or information they have. (AC6, Assoc. Prof., Malay, male aged 48).

Supporting the freedom given to online media, some interviewees see that the natural features of online journalism have made it almost impossible for the authority to control, and some use the term 'not censorable'. A News Editor asserted, 'as a professional newsman you see the Internet and cyber news as not censorable, you can't censor it, you can't stop it' (MD14, Editor, Chinese, male, aged 43).

Interviewees also highlighted presentation of diverse news and opinion pieces as among the advantages of online journalism. An NGO leader pointed out:

If we look at what freedom of the press really is, in the end, it is having a variety and diversity of news. So even if you have people who are so pro to one side and they have their news media, so-called online, you will also have those people who are the cons, or of the other side and they also have their news media. As a citizen, I can have access to both views before I make up my own mind (NGO7, Executive, Indian, female, aged 48).

It makes sense that diversity of opinions and news would be contributory to social enlightenment, where people could rationalise issues from different points of view. This is especially pertinent with regard to certain sensitive issues that many would not talk about. Diverse perspectives would contribute a better understanding of certain intricate issues. Along these lines, an academician pointed out that those



varieties of pieces, even if they promote criticism, would assist readers for better judgement. She said:

It is good to read different opinions or criticism from other sectors in order to form a better judgement of our own, or at least to know the truth as some matters would not be discussed in the mainstream mass media (AC9, Assoc. Prof., Malay, female, aged 51)

From another perspective, there are notable numbers of interviewee who repeatedly pointed out that online journalism 'dares to speak'. They referred to articles that debate and challenge Malay special rights, inter-religious issues and high profile corruptions. One example in the real setting is an article on Malaysiakini that describes similarities between certain politicians and American's 'Ku Klux Klan' (Siong 2004: 308). However, such daring stances had caused Malaysiakini to suffer a police raid, which ended with the seizure of the computers used in their newsroom (Theophilus 2003). However, with regard to the article, the authority had taken no judiciary action on any of Malaysiakini's journalists or reporters.

Supporting the notion that online journalism 'dares to speak', a manager of a radio station, who has hold the post for the last four years, asserted:

In country like Malaysia, online newspaper... like Malaysiakini, has contributed greatly [to Malaysian freedom of expression]. As for example when something happened, 100 percent of the story is covered by online newspaper. This is not possible through the mainstream newspaper, because a lot of things I cannot find from the mainstream print newspaper [but I found it in the online newspaper]. So I believe that one good thing regarding online newspaper is that they can write and they can give us new perspectives, which I would say something 'real'. Well for the print, they have a lot of constraints they do not dare. ...They [the independent online reporters] have no constraints. That's why if you want to know the real thing and issues like that, you would rather go online because you can find them there [in the online media] (GO4, Radio Station Manager, Malay, male, aged 46).

Another interviewee also emphasised that online journalism 'dares to speak', which she described as fewer feelings of 'fear and scare' among online journalists. She also affirmed that in the long run, such freedom would benefit the country when political leaders get more feedback from public opinions on matters that would promote good governance. This underlines participatory democracy.

First of all, I see that by having online journalism people are not afraid to say whatever they had in their minds. They are free to speak their minds. So this, in the long term, is good for the country as well, because whatever they say, and when they say it without fear, could benefit the country. The leader could, you know, learn something from whatever being said (AC11, Senior Lecturer, Malay, female, aged 43).

By and large, the above evidence suggests that online journalism enjoys less government control. With regard to stringent Acts like the PPPA 1984, online journalism is exempted. Online journalism contributes more space for journalistic as well as opinion pieces critical of or unfavourable to the government, dissident voices and discourses on sensitive issues, which would not be heard through the mainstream mass media. This online activism clusters under one common theme: criticism. It is inevitable to see pieces of criticism through online journalism because criticism is seen as a force for change. As Horkheimer (1982:244) asserts in his critical theory, criticism is fundamental 'to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them' (Horkheimer 1982, 244).

#### **6.2.1.2 Online journalism is alternative media**

A noticeable numbers of interviewees (29%) also distinguished online journalism, particularly online newspapers, weblogs and NGOs websites, as alternative media (as shown in Table 6.1). Most of the proposal came from the Academician group (15%) and the Media group (8%). It is an alternative media because it provides different interpretations from the perspective of the mainstream mass media, and information about the world that we simply will not find anywhere else (Atton 2002:12). The alternative media in Malaysian society had gained attention because the mainstream mass media culture appears less interested in in-depth investigative reporting. However, generally most of the offline alternative media such as Detik, Wasilah, Eksklusif and Watan, as to mention few were no more in existence when their publication licenses were terminated (Netto 2003; Siong 2004:307).

Many scholars claim that 'governmental control' as well as 'corporate control' that affect the freedom of the press have consequently led to the practices of gatekeeping and self-censorship on Malaysia's mainstream mass media (Lent 1982; Zaharom and Mustafa 1998; Mustafa 2002; Abbott 2004). Proponents of alternative media often argue that mainstream mass media is heavily biased (Hilley 2001:123). The causes of this bias include political interests of media owners, government influence and profit motive (Atton 2002:12).

The interviewees see the advantage of online journalism as alternative media from diverse angles. It presents the audience with news stories from 'different

perspectives', 'from other sides of the story', 'investigative reporting', and 'analytical reporting', which differ from the common trend of the mainstream mass media.

A director of a media company who expressively stresses that online journalism serves the people an alternative news source different to that of the mainstream media. He implies that the different stance of online media as something that the mainstream mass media would try to avoid. He said:

The pro part (of online journalism) is that you are being provided with an alternative ...on things that are not printed in the mainstream media especially in Malaysia because online media is not controlled by the Printing Presses Act or anything like that. It means that there are certain informations that may be good for the ... people that are not available in the mainstream media (MD3, Director, Malay, male, aged 47).

He further claims that the mainstream mass media are inclined to publish materials that would please the government. Such approach of the mainstream mass media had caused some section of the people to search for something different from the online media, particularly the independent online newspaper.

The mainstream newspapers...are bias towards the government. They are slanted towards the government so that are the reasons why these other online newspapers like Malaysiakini and Aliran, decide to be more critical of the government because they can be alternative media. So ...you can read both and decide whether to believe [the reports] or not (MD3, Director, Malay, male, aged 47).

The director's words are in line with Bob Paquin of the Ottawa Citizen newspaper, whom through a succinct analysis of Malaysia's Internet, pointed out that:

The Malaysian government of Mahathir Mohamad may have silenced [its political opponents] – but thanks to the Internet and other electronic media channels, [as] message of reform continues to be heard throughout the country. ...The fact that Malaysian citizens have been able to obtain relatively unbiased news ...exemplifies the increasing difficulty governments have in managing the flow of information within their borders – even when they control the major print and broadcast media (as quoted in Holmes and Grieco 2001:59).

An NGO leader viewed that Malaysiakini, the idol among Malaysian online newspapers, adopts the role of analytical and investigative reporting, which the mainstream mass media failed to perform. He said:

I think online journalism has played a clear role. They spoke up, they analysed issues, they reported on things that were not being reported on the mainstream newspaper. If you look at Malaysiakini, which is the best-known online newspaper in the country...it has made very significant

contributions, which the mainstream newspapers would not like to talk about (NGO3, President, Indian, male, aged 51).

Another media professional, who is a radio station manager, stressed on the alternative feature of online journalism when he observed that it provides a different perspective as compared to that of the mainstream media, which often present the same familiar stance.

The word is the alternative media...meaning alternative views, alternative opinions because mainstream mass media are basically giving the same [old] perspective, the same story, the same angle, slant or whatever you call it. So if you want to look at something different or something on the other side...you need to have access to online journalism (GO4, Radio station Manager, Malay, male, aged 46).

A manager of a prominent mainstream English newspaper agreed that online journalism provides some alternative views on social and political issues. However he pointed out that such alternative views are more inclined to highlight anti-establishment stand. Differing to earlier positive perceptions, the manager suggests that it is important for online journalist to change such depiction. He said,

They [online newspapers] are providing an alternative views towards developing the country. The only problem or the only challenge they have to overcome is the perception; perceptions, which the current or the previous online journalists, some names that I don't have to mention, have ...allowing themselves to be perceived as anti-government. So they have to address that issue. They have to put forward a new perception of themselves that they are providing alternative views. ...But now, sadly to say the online newspapers and weblogs are portraying themselves as critics without providing constructive alternatives. I think once online journalists could provide or could address that issue then they will be better. Then they will get more and more subscription to their web (MD1, Manager, Malay, male, aged 46).

Corresponding with the above opinions regarding online journalism, a manager of an independent online newspaper, who is also a journalist, noticed that the problem with online journalism is that it is often linked to the Reformasi movement of the 1998, which would be perceived as an anti-establishment. He said:

The problem with online journalism in Malaysia is that, initially when it was introduced in Malaysia, people identified [them] with the movement of Reformasi. That is the problem because the start of online journalism is very much associated with Reformasi. Agenda Daily and Malaysiakini are independent online newspapers, Harakah is linked with PAS and people seldom look at Utusan online, the Star online, NST online or Berita Harian online because they are the siblings of the mainstream media. So because of the 1997-1998 Reformasi movement, most online journalisms in Malaysia are perceived as being associated with Reformasi. The image of online journalism is seen as negative to the establishment since Reformasi led by the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was

perceived as anti-establishment movement. In fact to some it was created to topple the government and for that reason it had attained negative portrayal by the people (MD9, Editor-in-Chief, Malay, male, aged 48).

From a different point of view, another independent online journalist asserts that people's depiction on them as anti-government is only a matter of perception. He pointed out that online journalism; particularly online newspapers would project more critical views because they are free from the hands of the ruling parties and their affiliates. It is different with the mainstream media. As a point of fact, the independent online newspapers are also free from commercial gains of advertisement, which the mainstream mass media are committed with. For such reasons they are opened for diverse views of social and political discourses. He said,

If you talk about the mainstream media, there are other considerations. Firstly there is financial consideration, secondly is the political consideration and whoever up there, they are politically appointed. ...They are there to serve their master. That is the choice they have to make. Furthermore, the commercial consideration [that is] to get advertisements, you have to be seen as pro-government because most of the companies there are getting contracts from the government. ...We [online newspaper] don't want to be seen as anti-government, but they [the mainstream media] have that notion, not us. So that is why. Firstly they [mainstream media] are politically appointed, they have to be very careful, they are there to promote their master, otherwise they won't get contracts, license, permit, and so on. Commercially if you are not seen to be pro-government you don't get the ads. For online media, as we own them [not the politician] we are not going for the ads. Nobody controls us; we don't have to renew any permit, so we have to say we have the advantage. We use the advantage to highlight whatever we think important for the people. To me, I think, to criticise and to provide avenues for people to voice out things that they are not happy with, as to rectify any weaknesses of the government, would be advantageous to the people ...We do our part by highlighting the different situations... so that the information can be relayed to the government. That is our pure concern. We are not going against the government but we are telling them (the government) that this is what the people are complaining about (MD8, Editor/Journalist, Malay, male, aged 48).

An editor-in-chief of an independent online newspaper asserts that not all online newspapers post a critical stance against the government. However, he agrees that his online newspaper is more critical against the government for some good reason. Such standpoint supports the earlier notion of MD8 that online journalism attained a freer environment, especially in informing the government of public appeal issues.

Not all online newspapers in Malaysia are critical of the government. We have NST Online, Utusan Online, STAR online, and all that, which are just another version of the print mainstream newspapers. These newspapers are owned by the government or the government proxies. ...Of course we

are more critical because we criticise and try to inform the government of what is happening on the ground. We want the government to know that there are things going on wrongly. We can do that, but the mainstream newspapers cannot do that. They are tied up to the licensing system that the government employed. Another thing is that, they are owned by the politicians and businessmen who have to be very friendly with the government in order to make their positions safe and comfortable. If not they will suffer. We [are] free from government control. We can say things even if it offends the government. We say it not because we want to be an enemy, but we say it because we want to inform... Sometimes you have to say it even if it hurts because you are saying it for the truth (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

Almost on a similar point of view, a chief executive of a TV station charged that the mainstream mass media has failed to provide analytical and critical materials. This happens because the mainstream presses would not allow differences of ideas that challenged the government policies and ideologies.

This online thing [issue] happens because people of differing opinions are not given the opportunity to voice their opinions. When I go to the Malay [press], almost 90% are for the government, when I go to the Chinese press almost 100% are for the government. You tell me if there is any newspaper that is truly independent. No I don't think so. Tamil Nesan is owned by the MIC investment arm. Berita Harian, NST [are] owned by UMNO, and Nan Yang is directly under MCA. Online journalism is open, and willing to give the dissenting voices from groups that don't believe what they (the government's newspaper) believe. So then, what alternative is open to them? Online journalism is there for them (MD5, Chief Executive, Malay, male, aged 49).

Again, the evidence shows that the advantages of online journalism are basically stemming from the freedom that it attains. The interviewees see online journalism as an alternative media because mainly, it provides contents that are not available on the mainstream mass media. It is also an alternative because it presents different materials that the mainstream mass media try to avoid. Most of the evidence basically points to the freer environment of online journalism, particularly online newspapers that had supported them to be an alternative media. Principally they are the alternative to the mainstream because they project a different approach and views. The mainstream media had failed to portray such trend because of the constraints from various media-related laws as well as their linked to the ruling parties and their affiliates. However the evidence also highlights how a mainstream media expert perceived the online newspaper in a different perspective that points to the idea that independent online newspapers are inclined towards anti-government stance. Supporting such notion, an online newspaper journalist explained that the perception was established when online journalism is linked to the 1998-Reformasi

movement. However this section has also highlights other evidence that opposed such views.

#### **6.2.1.3 Online journalism promotes diverse opinions, intellectualism, and minority voices**

The analysis also finds that 'promoting diverse opinions', 'promoting intellectualism and minority views' are among the distinguished advantages of online journalism. Diverse voices, or 'multi-polarity', are common in the network society.

An academician in journalism studies emphasised that the pro-government community should be able to accept the approach of online journalism that is not in agreement with the government. Parallel to that, the government should establish their own online journalism to counteract the websites that they see as their opponents. Even though he viewed the situation as somewhat chaotic, the diversity reflects the freedom of expression. This idea is seen in accordance with the concept of participatory democracy that accepts dissenting opinion and ideas, which promote open debates. He said:

Here online journalism has provided the space and the democratisation. It liberalises capability and it democratises opinions, so in the sense, the community must take this opportunity to utilise this technology so that the system and the process that we want or idealised, can perpetuate every truth and the rights of the people. In other words, if we complain about Harakah, Malaysiakini, Aliran, and we have so many critical websites in Malaysia,...why can't these so called pro-government groups design websites that could counter these critical websites? (AC6, Assoc. Prof., Malay, male, aged 48).

A magistrate asserted that online journalism provides vast opportunities to the minority and in particular, the opposition parties, to voice out their opinions and thoughts. This would enhance democratic practices within the society where diversity and minority voices would be heard and that includes the opposition. Such scenes of diversity reflect freedom of expression and thus, democracy. He also implied that such opportunity would not be available via the mainstream mass media.

I think there is one avenue for the opposition parties to have their say, to voice out their thoughts and the public have their opportunity to access whatever the views of the oppositions. And that also proves that democratic process is very much alive in Malaysia. (GO2, Magistrate, Malay, male, aged 42).

Parallel to the above evidence, a GO executive observed that online journalism provides more opportunities to the people to voice their views, which the traditional mass media would limit. He viewed this development as in accord with democracy and national aspiration. He said:

If you were to take the traditional mass media, there are a lot of restrictions. ...Even though there are some people who would see that online journalism is jeopardising the elements of national aspiration because it gives more voices to the oppositions, to the alternative parties, to the left wings, and to those who could not have their voices heard through the traditional mass media, but then, it gives some opportunities for the people to think and to analyse what is good and what is bad, which I think is also a good element of democracy and in terms of building national aspirations (GO1, Executive, Malay, male, aged 39).

The above evidence points out that criticism, and the opposition's minds and thoughts, should not be singularly regarded as destructive to nation building but should be taken as part of the process of democracy. Critical views and ideas are reflections of diversity and pluralism and the society should be given the rights to decide what is good and what is not.

A senior lecturer emphasised that online journalism contributes more space for the voices of the minorities. He said:

I see that online journalism had opened some form of free space for the voices of the minorities and with regard to press freedom, online journalism has provided more space (AC3, Senior lecturer, Malay, male, aged 47).

The issue of diversity and the opportunity given to the minority also gained attention from an academician. He affirmed that online journalism is a source of information as he referred to ethnic groups who are remotely located. It informs people in remote area and connects them to the whole nation. He said:

Let say a small ethnic group in which their voices were not being heard through the mainstream newspaper or any alternative. So, when we have this online journalism they can always set up and upload their own newspaper or information, then I can know about them, let's say, the Bidayuh in Sarawak or ethnic group in Perak for that matter (AC4, Assoc. Prof., Malay, male, aged 47).

Such evidence also suggests that online journalism is contributory to national integration. It brings together different people of different areas and of different ethnic backgrounds to meet each other, not physically but virtually. However, the philosophy of interethnic communication is maintained. This is among the suggestions that Birch (1989) points out as a way of national integration.



Interestingly, an Editor-in-Chief of a prominent online newspaper agreed that even though many would see his online newspaper as anti-government, he affirmed that his newspaper is not 'an enemy to anybody'. He stressed that his online newspaper should be seen as 'important people's voices' to inform the government what is happening on the ground. He pointed out:

I think there is still a long way to go for him [The Prime Minister], for his people, for his party and for all the other party components, to come and see ours [online journalism] not as an enemy, but as an important people's voices that can help in strengthening and also acting as feedbacks for the government. ...[This helps the government] to know what is happening on the ground and also providing suggestions and all that stuffs. We can play a role ...not as an enemy (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

The above interview was carried out on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2004, and it is noteworthy to mention here that two years later on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2006, Mahathir accepted an online newspaper to carry out an interview with him. In the past, the same online newspaper (Malaysiakini) was charged as his 'enemy' (Aliran 2003b; BBC 2003; Beh Lih Yi 2003; Siong 2004:308). For such reason, no official press pass is given to Malaysiakini. Currently Mahathir perceived that the mainstream mass media are blocking his thoughts and opinions (as quoted in Fauwaz 2006a:1), the same manner they did to other pieces of criticisms, since he no longer holds the Premier post.

A journalist of a Chinese print newspaper believed that online journalism could do more than that of the print media. He was not sure how much online journalism has done in promoting diverse opinions and representing the voices of the minority, but he suggested that the government must recognise online journalism. He said:

I think [online journalism] would promote diverse opinions and also the voices of the minorities as well as promoting intellectualism among the people. The writing of the idiots, the ignorant and emotional readers should be barred. ...Allows criticisms that are constructive, supported by facts and good rationales via the online. Of course the online media must be recognised and made known to the people (MD12, Journalist, Chinese, male, aged 50).

Taking the issue of Vision School as an instance, an online journalist claimed that his online newspaper has shown some commitment to highlight the voices of the minority and giving them space to communicate their rights with the government.

People were complaining about ...the Vision School. Earlier on we were told that they were going to put the entire three vernacular schools together sharing the same (common) facilities (within one compound). But later on [we were told that] they (the government) would convert it into one school. So there would be no more Tamil School, no more Chinese

school but all will become one National School. ...The people considered that as cheating [to the non-Malays]. But we tell the government what the people are complaining about. You say one thing but you are doing different thing. The constitution promises them that their mother tongues could be used in school. That doesn't mean that we are against the Vision School. We give the right to the minority to be heard. That's the sort of rule that we play. We have 'letters to editor', we have 'opinion-features', and those are avenues for the people to have open discussions (MD8, Editor/Journalist, Malay, male, aged 48).

A manager of an independent online newspaper, who is also a journalist, claimed that his online newspaper had carried out analysis and diverse views for the purpose of pulling intellectuals. Furthermore, his online newspaper also employs prominent writers to heighten the attraction. He said,

We promote more materials to pull intellectuals to our online newspaper. We carried out analysis and diverse views through our opinion features and columns. We allow space for critical views on issues that challenged the mainstream paradigm. We also invite prominent writers and intellectuals such as Kadir Jasin<sup>48</sup> and Raihan Sulaiman Palestin<sup>49</sup> to be our columnists. However ours have more emphasis on political issues. This area could pull more readers. People are more concerned on the political development of the country, especially the Malays because they would want to make sure that their political supremacy is sustained (MD9, Editor-in-Chief, Malay, male, aged 48).

The above evidence, selected from the various groups of interviewees, indicates that online journalism has contributed a new dimension of freedom of speech and of the press. The freedom enhances diverse opinions that represent the multiracial society as well as the voices of the minorities, which many perceived as failed to claim their share through the mainstream mass media (Mustafa 2002:147; Zaharom 2002:130). More to the point, there are trends to attract the intellectuals or otherwise educated middle class towards online journalism.

Malaysiakini has been frequently quoted as one of Malaysia's online newspapers that had performed a good job in this matter. With regard to the voices of the opposition and the minority via online journalism, it helps the government to be informed about 'what is happening on the ground' (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

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<sup>48</sup> Kadir Jasin was formally a journalist and a columnist of Utusan Melayu. He is now the Director of Berita Publishing.

<sup>49</sup> Raihan Sulaiman Palestin is a prolific columnist who wrote for Agenda Daily, one of Malaysian independent online newspapers.

From the analysis, I find that the media experts stressed more on the alternative stance of online journalism. It is highlighted as an alternative media because it serves different contents, catering to tastes, interests and orientations not catered to by mainstream media (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1997:221). This could be explained by the ownership pattern linked to the ruling parties and their affiliates, as well as the stringent media laws. As MD8 revealed, the management of the mainstream media were politically appointed. The alternative posture of the online journalism, especially online newspapers and NGO weblogs, is further heightened by the fact that the mainstream dailies serve the 'same old perspective, same story, the same angle'. Such features are turning away the middle classers from the mainstream press as MD3 pointed out. I see that such perception is in tandem with the action taken by more than 500 journalists, largely from the mainstream mass media, who signed a memorandum that urged urging the government to allow more freedom of the press. As Siong (2004:298) emphasised, 'these journalists argued that the credibility of the media was at stake as Malaysians increasingly turned to alternative sources of information' (Siong 2004:298).

By and large, the evidence in this section suggests that the advantages of online journalism have stemmed from the freedom that it has attained. This is explained from the following perspectives:

Firstly, it is apparent that the interviewees highlight online newspaper and NGO websites more than that of other category of online journalism. Such references distinguished the particular feature of online journalism that this study is concerned with. Malaysiakini, Malaysia's most prominent online newspaper had been repeatedly mentioned to project the positivism of online journalism that has challenged the monopoly of the mainstream mass media in providing news and information (see MD4, MD3, GO4, NGO3, MD9, AC6, and MD1). The positive perception is distinguished not merely from the non-media related groups but most importantly from the mainstream press professionals such as MD4 (a journalist from the Malay mainstream press), MD1 (English mainstream press group manager) and GO4 (a public radio station manager). Such evidence justifying the work of online newspaper is further emphasised through the words of independent online journalists such as MD9 and MD8. Aliran Online, an NGO website, which carries considerable pieces of social and political discourses, had also been mentioned (MD3 and AC6) as one of the prominent online media. Weblogs were also mentioned but no specific reference was made. Along these lines of perceptions it is significant to deduce that

independent online newspapers and NGO websites are the key representation of the generalised terms of 'online journalism'.

Secondly, the evidence projected in this section indicates that online journalism is significantly perceived as freer to that of the mainstream mass media. It has contributed and is continuously contributing a new dimension of freedom of speech and of the press with diverse opinions of a multiracial society and the voices of the minorities, which have failed to claim their part through the mainstream mass media (Mustafa 2002:147; Zaharom 2002:130). With regard to the voices of the opposition via online journalism, it helps the government to be knowledgeable about 'what is happening on the ground'. Besides that, as one of the interviewees stressed, 'online journalism should not be taken as an enemy of the state, or enemy of the government' (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

The interviewees perceived that the freedom presumed from the exemption of Printing, Presses and Publication Act 1984 has placed online journalism in an advantageous position as compared to the conventional mass media. The exemption means that online journalism does not need to abide by the licensing system, which has inhibited other conventional mass media. Under such circumstances, online journalism is utilised in a manner that is seen as freer from gatekeeping problems, more balanced in its reporting by covering the other side of the story and more open in discussing interethnic issues as compared to that of the mainstream mass media. The most important consequence of this freedom is that online journalism promotes democracy and enhances national integration.

Together with the exemption of the licensing system, the freedom is coupled with the assurance of being 'free of censorship' provisioned in the CMA 1998. The interviewees viewed that this double-impact inevitably changes the mass media setting, where 'open discussion', 'voices of the minority', 'intellectual discourse', and 'criticism' are frequently seen in online journalism. Such developments suggest that political participation is becoming increasingly common through online journalism. Besides this, participatory democracy is increasingly enhanced, where 'the voices of the minorities and the opposition', 'political and social criticism', and 'the alternative views' are frequently published in online journalism. The government has responded positively to some of such 'people's participation'. This is in tandem with the idea that the new media, 'supported by a blend of liberal philosophies, ...has prompted

less hierarchical discourses, characterised by the prospect of a more intense democratic participation, visible-ness, public-ness, and open-ness' (Malina 2001).

Many instances have shown that Parliamentary decisions have taken into consideration the people's views, mainly expressed through online journalism. For instance, the issue of the ethnic quota system exercised for university intakes is currently being revised and replaced with a merit system (Daily Express 2003; Reme 2005). The establishment of an 'Independent Police Complaint and Misconduct Commission' (Asian Human Rights Commission 2004b; Tikamdas 2005; BERNAMA 2006), the termination of the Broga incinerator project (Theophilus 2002e; Theophilus 2002c), and the enhancement of Vision School for national integration (Leigh and Lip 2004; Ministry of Education 2005), are some of the positive responses to participatory democracy. Such positive governmental responses confirm Jefres's (1997) and Banerjee's (2003) assertions that the Internet affects the political agenda and influences, to some extent, people's effective links to candidates, and therefore their political behaviour. These enhance participation in democracy.

Thirdly, among the important messages from the interviewees is that online journalism is presenting what the conventional mass media are unable to present. This goes back to the licensing system and the stringent media-related laws that restrict Malaysian mass media. Issues such as 'balanced reporting', 'investigative reporting', 'the other side of the story', and 'they dare to speak' are some of the content issues which the conventional mass media, especially the mainstream, failed to deliver. One of the common perceptions of the mainstream mass media is that it is devoted to 'development journalism' where 'investigative journalism' as practiced in the West is not compatible to the sensitivity of the Malaysian public. This suggests that the media 'is committed to national development and thus must give their undivided support to the government by publishing positive news about the government and its development policies and programmes' (Mustafa 2002:149).

Fourthly, online journalism as the interviewees suggested, is a channel of criticism against authority, if not the government. Seen from a positive perspective there are benefits for democracy, such as: 'the critics are advantageous to national integration', 'intellectual development of people takes place so criticism helps' and 'it is good to read criticisms in order to form a better judgement of ourselves'. As some of them perceived, criticism is closely intertwined with intellectualism and therefore they viewed online journalism as corresponding to the national aspirations of Vision

2020. An Associate Professor affirmed that 'we are moving towards an industrialised country, so...the government must continue to be open towards critical evaluation.' Thus criticism is associated with online journalism, where it is not necessary to underline it as 'anti-government' but, as the proponent of online journalism suggested, it should be perceived as constructive for 'intellectual development and the intellectual capability to critically analyse'.

Fifth, in terms of national integration, online journalism also has the potential of becoming a forum where different ethnic groups as well as different levels of society can discuss and create more understanding and a better informed society.

### **6.2.2 Disadvantages of online journalism**

Some of the disadvantages were repeated to suggest emphasis and common thoughts among the interviewees. The disadvantages are mainly enfolded along the following aspects. First, the interviewees perceived that online journalism is abusive, seditious, defamatory and libellous. Second, online journalism is seen to 'lack control and censorship' that 'it often crosses the line', and third, 'its content is of doubtful accuracy.'

A leader of an NGO agreed that online journalism holds a positive role in some forms but he also argued that they have to be careful when it comes to uploading pieces that challenged ethnic relations and social harmony.

They had played a role, but at the same time I wish sometimes they would show some restraints ...on two scores. One, on issues pertaining to ethnic relation, everyone has to be a bit more careful so as not to give an impression that you are not as concerned about ethnic unity and social views and so on. And ...you cannot make wild accusations and the source must be reliable (NGO3, President, Indian, male, aged 51).

He implied that in Malaysia's multiethnic society, journalists have to be very careful as not to touch on sensitive issues such as religion and culture, as such would potentially cause public furore. While any accusations made must be based on evidence, fact and figures, the information provided must also be verified. Such thought is most likely derived from the idea that online journalism is free from government control, and such freedom to this interviewee would mean danger to the

society. Thus, he implied that the advantage of online journalism is a dependent variable, meaning that it is only situational.

As stated earlier, attempts at 'character assassination' of the former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, were frequently found in some Malaysian weblogs, which highlights the 'negative' of online journalism. A prominent GO executive asserted that:

You can see what happened before, when there were personal attacks on Mahathir, which are purely defamation and irresponsible emotive attacks. It would be good if the online were used to voice out opinions and ideas. Why not? That would be advantageous to the country (GO8, Director, Malay, male, aged 50).

The GO executive also referred to some 'unfavourable' charges about Mahathir Mohamad through online journalism. This could be traced to the work of online journalism especially during the beginning of 1998-political crisis. Some of which as Abbott (2004:98) observes, were seemingly accusatory sites. However, Abbott also asserts that:

Many of the more accusatory sites have simply disappeared or are no longer operational. What has become clear in Malaysia is that the 'reformasi' movement on the Internet has matured from a cacophony of accusatory and insulting diatribes into a more mature, alternative, independent medium. ...Over time a more mature independent medium that facilitated greater communication and cooperation between disparate groups in civil society and importantly in the context of Malaysian politics, across ethnic lines (Abbott 2004:85, 98).

On a similar note, Raja Petra, the webmaster of Malaysia Today stressed that:

The Internet in Malaysia has now matured. People now expect more from the Internet. In the beginning, it was a case of anything goes ...as long as it was news, never mind it was true or not. It just had to be sensational. Today, people expect accurate news and the writers need to substantiate what they write and put their name to their writings. Anonymous writings and slander that cannot be verified is no longer on. You can say, in short, the people have become more choosy, or sophisticated in what they read (as quoted in Abbott 2004: 85-86).

The notion that online journalism carries seditious potential was recorded from a media person; a Chief executive of a TV station. He perceived that the freedom that it attained had exposed online journalism to abusive affairs such as hate campaigns and seditions. He suggested a control mechanism to overcome the issue. However, executing control may cause a problem.

Online journalism is very good to me because it tends to be free [liberal], but when you have something that is free it can also be further abused,

there will be hate campaigns. So it is possible to go in there and see hate campaigns. You can also see seditious statements being made beyond control, but then is control good? That is the question that we have to ask ourselves. May be some people don't like to have control. May be there should be some balance between certain freedom and control, because if not, you are going to see a lot of rubbish going into online journalism (MD5, Chief Executive, Malay, male, aged 49).

An academician pointed out that 'freedom is the root to sedition and defamation'. However, he also claimed that the law 'could not stop' stories from damaging one's reputation. He was also of the opinion that part of the problem comes from the public.

I think total freedom for the press would not do much to us, it would create chaos when one starts to voice freely and subsequently, seditious and defamation would start to come in. Even though the law is there but sometimes, it could not stop stories from damaging one's reputation. It is the public's attitude; the law is another story (AC3, Senior Lecturer, Malay, male, aged 47).

An executive of a media company observed that online journalism 'used' criticism to attract readers as that would make them a different breed of journalism as compared to the conventional mass media. Such stance of online journalism is common as there is no control mechanism for online journalism. He said:

At the moment, what is happening now is more on criticism because that will attract the attention of the reader. Normally online journalism needs to be of profit entity, it has to be like that. If it is just a normal news, then people would not go online. ...People tends to go overboard because there is no control. Unless there is control on online journalism then it will be better (MD2, Senior Manager, Malay, male, aged 45).

The availability of obscenity, images of atrocity and violence are among the disadvantages of online journalism. An NGO executive observed that enormous liberty given to online journalism have sometimes been misused to present such materials, which he regarded as unhealthy. He said:

The disadvantage is that the contents are not censored and this is where abusers will come in. Obscenity, pictures of atrocity, violence and etcetera are common in the online media. Accessibility could also go to the children, which I think is not healthy for them to browse on to the red area (NGO2, Executive, Chinese, female, aged 34).

Thus, most claims like the 'abusive, defamatory, and libellous' potential of online journalism are stemmed from the liberty that it attained. Some interviewees in the earlier analysis mentioned that it is almost 'impossible' to control the Internet content. However, the central concern of this study is not to question the immoral



potential of online journalism, but to focus on the significance of online journalism for democracy and national integration.

Inaccuracy in news reporting is another issue that some of the interviewees classified as disadvantage of online journalism. What causes such outcomes is the lack of censorship and minimal control. On such account, an academician asserted:

The disadvantage is that this [liberty] is not being controlled, in the sense that there is minimal censorship over the websites operated by loose groups. This is where you could see that the accuracy of the story is questionable (AC2, Assoc. Prof., Malay, male, aged 49)

On a similar score, an NGO leader charged that inaccuracy on online journalism damages 'reliability of information' (NGO5, President, Malay, male, aged 36), while another NGO executive pointed out that online pieces could be part of a plan to achieve a certain, or what he described as a propaganda. Such feature has its roots in the freedom that it attained. He said:

Sometimes if you're not careful we may get news which is not actually correct or accurate but they are just basically propaganda, and perhaps they may give some false hopes to the people (NGO4, Executive, Malay, male, aged 46).

Journalistic irresponsibility could be the reason for the inaccuracy of online journalism as lack of responsibility would cause online journalism to be full of 'rubbish'. This is what an academician indicated when he pointed out the disadvantages of online journalism. He said:

The cons or disadvantage is that sometimes those who are not really responsible, they can just have their own websites or anything, and they can always put in 'rubbish'. We are afraid that when we read or when we have access to or surf into such websites, we are not getting the truth (AC4, Assoc. Prof., Malay, male, aged 47).

Some of the media professionals also see certain defects of online journalism as seen through the work of online newspapers and weblogs. Sedition, defamation, inaccuracy are some of the issues that they highlighted. Some of the selected evidence is as follows.

A senior journalist of a Malay mainstream newspaper who is the head of its online news department sees that the Internet penetration mainly reached the middle and upper class of Malaysian population. For that reason, he asserted that the journalistic setting of online journalism focuses more on issues that have to do with the elites. To him this is one of the disadvantages of online journalism.

Another disadvantage in Malaysia [is that] the penetration rate for online is limited ...to the middle and upper class, whereas the mass population would not be able to read online. So it tends to carry a very slanted view of things. People who write will be people who are well off and they are doing well in terms of working or social level, whereas the other population does not read or even send [messages to] their peers online (MD4, Editor/Journalist, Malay, male, aged 42).

Even though there is liberty in terms of presenting social and political discourse, there are constraints in exercising their news gathering particularly when dealing with government department and officials. This is one disadvantage of online journalism that an online journalist asserted.

The disadvantage that we faced here (in Malaysia) is that we are not considered as an official press and by that standard we are not given the permit to access any of the government official functions. So it is difficult for us to get to the primary source when it concerned stories that come from a government source. Anyway, as I have told you earlier, there are ministers who responded to us and give us comments on certain issues (MD8, Editor/Journalist, Malay, male, aged 48).

Other than the above negative views against online journalism, there are other interviewees who point out that online journalism carries some disadvantages. A journalist of a Chinese mainstream press views that independent online newspaper are not contributing to national aspiration, for the reasons that they are not commercially oriented. As such they tend to sensationalise stories.

Well I think most of the mainstreams [print media] are doing their good job ...The Star Online, Utusan Online, the NST Interactive, Nan Yang Siang Pau, Shin Chew Jit Poh, Tamil Nesan, all of them are coping well to support national aspirations. The independent online media [newspaper and weblogs] is a bit different. They are not commercialised. They need to pull readers by some other ways. They would sensationalise stories to pull readers. If they are just moving around pleasing the government, then who will read their online news? They [will] do something different, only then people would come to them (MD7, Journalist, Chinese, female, aged 39).

An editor of an English mainstream print media also viewed independent online journalism as not aligned to national aspiration. He asserted:

Freedom [of the press in Malaysia] is towards controlled freedom, meaning ...there must be some limits. You must not let emotion inside. That means you should know that the press should be mature as to understand where the limit is. Do not go into seditious statements. I think that would be wrong, because if you get full freedom, you will cause a lot of problem. To be seditious is also freedom. That is why our former PM [Prime Minister] used to say, 'We cannot give you everything' (MD13, Editor, Chinese, male, aged 39).

A senior manager of an English mainstream press directly points out that social and political criticism through online journalism, particularly online newspapers and weblogs, would not benefit the nation. It would result in social fragmentation where like-minded members of the society, especially the oppositions and their supporters, would inflame hatred against the government.

It [criticism] is not advantageous [to Malaysians] because it would create ...discontentment and hatred against the government. ...When they [discontentment and hatred] are made public, then the public will realise that there are many more others having the same kind of feeling. ...If you intend to promote integration ...then you should go more directly to integration rather than criticism. ...So if we see democracy in terms of freedom of this and that, then there should be more control and balance in our society. You cannot allow democracy to give too much freedom when there are so many areas that are volatile to public order or social harmony. You cannot allow too much freedom in terms of speech, in terms of critics, in terms of protest, also in terms of opinions. This would cause problems, chaos, and hatred between one another (MD2, Senior Manager, Malay, male, aged 45).

It is relevant to relate the above media manager's point of view with Cass Sunstein (2001) theory of social fragmentation generated through the Internet, particularly when the manager said, "the public will realise that there are many more others having the same kind of feeling..." This has become possible because the Internet materials are made possible to be customised and filtered to fit personal interest and like-minded group fascination. Thus it would lead to 'group polarisation' and 'opinion cascading,' both of which threaten the ideal of democratic principles. In democracy collective decisions are pertinent and only possible when members of the society are informed with open and transparent heterogeneous opinions. As Sunstein explained, individualised filtering has the potential to form...

...a breeding ground for extremism, precisely because like-minded people are deliberating with greater ease and frequency with one another, and often without hearing contrary views. Repeated exposure to an extreme position, with the suggestion that many people hold that position, will predictably move those exposed, and likely predisposed, to believe in it. One consequence can be a high degree of fragmentation, as diverse people, not originally fixed in their views and perhaps not so far apart, end up in extremely different places, simply because of what they are reading and viewing (Sunstein 2001:71).

Sunstein also relates his theory to the phenomenon of 'balkanisation' where the society would become not only fragmented and isolated but also often hostile and non-cooperative with some others who are not in agreement with their group.

If the public is balkanized and if different groups are designing their own preferred communication packages, the consequence will be not merely the same but still more balkanization, as group members move one

another towards more extreme points in line with their initial tendencies. At the same time, different deliberating groups, each consisting of like-minded people, will be driven increasingly far apart simply because most of their discussions are with one another (Sunstein, 2001, 66).

Probably many would agree that during the 1998-political crisis, such polarised groups and social fragmentation that were generated through the Internet, particularly weblogs, news portals and anti-government websites, explained trends of extremism among the people. These were seen through street demonstrations and commotions especially in the city of Kuala Lumpur, which to some political observers, had never happened before. Such incidences were also in tandem with the existence of weblogs and websites such as Mahafiraun and Mahazalim, which extremely projected a common theme: extreme hatred against the government. This social extremism, which go well with Sunstein group polarization and social cascades 'presents serious dangers' (Sunstein 2001:193) to the nation.

In the light of responses discussed above, it is apparent that the interviewees perceived 'freedom of the press' bestowed to online journalism has turned out as a cause of inaccuracy, unreliability, exposure to propaganda and social fragmentation. While in the earlier discussion, seditious, defamatory and libellous reports are also accessible in online journalism. Such views favour guided democracy through which, elected authority is endorsed with power to control and monitor the liberty of 'freedom of speech'. This point of view also suggests that liberal democracy does not contribute to a harmonious environment in Malaysia's multiracial society. This also suggests a paradox of liberal democracy. It is a paradox because many Malaysians see that freedom of speech and expression would lead to sedition, defamation and libel, and some sees it as false hopes, which are unhealthy to Malaysia's multiethnic society.

Again, standing almost on similar ground as the rationales to justify the advantages of online journalism, the disadvantages of online journalism are also stemmed from the freedom that it attained. The rationales of disadvantages of online journalism are explained from the following perspectives: First, some interviewees who are pessimistic about online journalism see that there are many Acts that restrict the freedom of online journalism. Those Acts such as the Sedition Act 1948, Defamation Act 1957, Official Secrets Act 1972, and the infamous ISA 1960 are applicable to online journalism. They give less attention to the PPPA 1984 that exempts online journalism from the licensing system. In fact, their pessimistic views

are strengthened when the government took actions against those who uploaded pieces prejudicial to national security and public order through the Internet. For instance, in August 1998, four people were detained under the ISA 1960 for circulating emails claiming that religious riots had broken out in Kuala Lumpur (Amnesty International 1998c:5). While another report stated that in December 2002 ten people were arrested, also under the ISA 1960, for allegedly circulating e-mails about planned bombings in the capital city, which had caused public chaos (Raslan 2003:2). These Internet activists also provide a forum for forms of 'character assassination' as many would see it, through the work of websites such as Mahafiraun 2020<sup>50</sup> that published materials attacking the good name of the former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad (Mustafa 2003:12). These damaging effects, as the interviewees pointed out, are embedded in the liberty that online journalism enjoys.

Secondly and conversely there are also significant numbers of interviewees who perceived that the freedom attained from the exemption of the licensee regulation had caused online journalism to go beyond the limit, in the sense that there are inaccurate reports, seditious, defamation and libellous contents, notwithstanding obscenity and some even mentioned atrocity and violence (see AC3 and AC4). Some even generalised that online journalism is given too much freedom that it would cause 'chaos' to the public order. Towards a more extreme perception, online journalism could be made a 'rubbish dumpsite', where truthfulness is not a principle obligation.

Thirdly, the media experts are not consistently in agreement with regard to the benefits of online journalism. Some of them also see that there are disadvantages of online journalism that significantly stemmed from the freedom that it attained, especially the exemption of the PPPA 1984. Furthermore, there are also different receptions towards online journalism between the mainstream offline journalists and the independent online journalists. Among the crucial comment is that online journalism has been used for hate campaign and sensationalising stories to attract audience.

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<sup>50</sup> The website of Mahafiraun 2020 is not in existence anymore. It is believed that Tripod had terminated its existence and a dozen more, which seemingly was a reactive measure following the September 11 terrorism incident in the United States (Straits Times 2001:2).

Fourthly, through a more serious impact, online journalism is also a potential to cause social fragmentation as Cass Sunstein (2001) theorised. A significant scene of Sunstein's argument may yet to be proved in Malaysia, but inclination to such social fragmentation is noticed in the 1998-political crisis.

### **6.3 The significance of online journalism in fostering national integration**

The exploration of the significance of online journalism proceeds with a narrower focus. At this stage, the exploration involves two aspects. The interviewees were asked whether online journalism is functioning on the right track with regard to national policies and aspiration. Second, the interviewees were asked how online journalism should play its role to foster cohesive national integration.

Principally, the intention was to get a general idea of what they think about the way online journalism deals with the public, its contents, and its relevance to national policies and aspiration. As shown in Table 6.3, a large majority (87.5%) of the interviewees perceived that online journalism is on the right track, while an insignificant fraction (4.2%) viewed otherwise. A cross-sectional analysis among the four groups also finds that within each group, there is a similar pattern of perceptions among them: the members of each group perceived online journalism as moving on the right track with regard to government policies and aspiration with an insignificant minority who observed it the other way round. This is to suggest that there are divided opinions within each group but there is no major distinction drawn from the results.

**Table 6.3**  
**Online Journalism on the Right Track with regard to National Policies**

<b>Views</b>	<b>G.O</b>	<b>NGO</b>	<b>MD</b>	<b>AC</b>	<b>Frgcy</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Agree</b>	8	8	14	12	42	87.5
<b>Disagree</b>	-	1	1	-	2	4.2
<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	2	1	-	1	4	8.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>

The first evidence that I would like to project is a detailed account given by an editor of a prominent independent online newspaper. To note, he had formerly worked with a Malay mainstream newspaper for many years but later joined Malaysia's first independent online newspaper for some personal reasons. He underlined that online journalism; particularly the independent online media has greatly contributed to Malaysia's democracy and national aspiration. He had taken the issue of ISA detainees and the Broga incinerator as instances which had gained exclusive attention from online newspapers. He highlighted some chronological changes where the government are eventually corresponding to issues, which independent online newspapers and weblogs had continuously advocating while the mainstream mass media had often avoided. He said:

I think most of the major newspapers have their own online newspaper. But you must understand that those are only carbon copy of the print newspapers, but not fully copied, and most of them are the mainstream media, which in one way or another belong to the government or its proxies. We [independent online newspaper] ...are independent; we do not belong to the government or the opposition. So, as much as we are concerned about the news, we would like to highlight whatever we think is not right [of government wrongdoings]... So as an independent online media we would like to counter as much as possible [on government wrongdoings]. Even now, I remember when I first I joined [an online newspaper] they [the government] would not react to our report at all. They just sort of ignored [us]. But now you can see that they [the government] are responding... on online reports. And because they admitted that our influence on the public now is growing. Now the public is aware of the ISA report, normally when they read the newspaper there are no [ISA report]. Now they can get the information [from us]. Either the family members [of ISA detainees] or their friends will call us. So we look at this kind of situation as in line with the government aspiration whereby the public are inculcated with awareness of things that are happening around them, especially their rights in the sense of human rights principles. Another example is the Broga project<sup>51</sup> that we highlighted, which is environmentally detrimental to the public. It gained extensive response from the people. Earlier this project was not properly briefed to the people. The people got information from the Internet; they read reports in Japan and everywhere else that such project is harmful to the population living around them. First the government tried to ignore but later the Star picked up the story [about Broga project], probably due to competition, and NST followed suit. [However] They tried to counter by saying how safe it is and that you can have that kind of project within housing estates. I see that all these press scenes [differences of opinions] and critics are positive to government aspiration. To me this is healthy because we open up the minds of the people and not to create bigotry among them. Again to me, this development is on the right track as far as national aspiration is concerned (MD8, Editor/Journalist, Malay, male, aged 48).

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<sup>51</sup> Broga project refers to the Broga incinerator project, which had been discussed in Chapter Four.

Some empirical evidence in terms of quantitative and qualitative data of online media coverage on the Broga incinerator issue and the police brutality issue had been presented in Chapter Four. The findings significantly support the less enthusiastic approach of the mainstream print media as what the editor had pointed out in the above evidence. His words have further emphasised the democratic stance, which also highlights national aspiration; equal rights to all citizens despite their ethnic backgrounds as espoused in the Vision 2020 (Mahathir 1990).

Another journalist pointed out that online journalism is on the right track because it shares common national policies and aspirations as the mainstream mass media. The only difference is that they are more critical, and for that the journalist viewed it as more attractive:

Yes, they are on the right track. The philosophy, in terms of supporting national policies and national aspirations, must be the same as the print. ... Sometimes, when you read them, you can feel that you enjoy reading them because they are different in terms of their approaches as compared to the print media. They are more critical and more attractive (MD12, Journalist, Chinese, male, aged 50).

Such a view implies that online journalism carries similar responsibilities as the mainstream mass media, with the exception that online journalism is critical in approach. This also implies that the interviewee agrees that there is nothing wrong with criticism. National aspirations could also be achieved through criticisms that would enhance new ideas through certain process of public assessment.

An NGO leader agreed that online journalism is on the right track with regard to national aspiration because it provides coverage of issues that the mainstream mass media avoids. Such notion highlights freedom of the press and also the people's right to know; which are parts of the democratic doctrines. He asserted:

By and large, they [online journalism] have done good jobs; they are fulfilling a role, which print media is not able to perform. One of the roles is providing information and analysis on sensitive issues that they [the mainstream mass media] do not want to discuss for whatever reason. Both Malaysiakini and Agenda Daily are playing this role with full support (NGO3, President, Indian, male, aged 51).

In a similar note, a GO executive pointed out that online journalism is on the right track because it has opened up channels for the opposition to reach the electorate. Thus, in a way it promotes democracy. He said:

We can say yes [online journalism is on the right track] if the government continue not to censor. We see that what is happening now, as for



example in the 1999-General Election, ...Harakah Daily [PAS online newspaper] made full use of its websites to gain and attract more voters to their side and what happened was that the government gained a very low majority vote at that time. It means that the use of online journalism is more towards the democratic elements. It means that the government and the society [are given the opportunity] to think which is right and which is wrong, and, to analyse what is right and what is wrong (GO1, Executive, Malay, male, aged 39).

From another perspective, in supporting the development of online journalism, an academic asserted that the government policies on ICT, MSC and Vision 2020 facilitate online journalism, and that it is much needed to correspond with all those policies. She said:

If we do not have online journalism then we are a few steps backward. So to be in tandem with the development, we should have online journalism. I think the online journalism is on the right track because I think...we need to be open to be in tandem with development and Malaysia is much into that now (AC1, Assoc. Prof., Malay, female, aged 47).

The academic also implied that online journalism opens up public's minds to many issues that are not discussed on the mainstream mass media. She suggested that the government policies on ICT should also correspond to such openness.

An NGO leader also proposed similar ideas with regard to online journalism and ICT policies.

Talking about Multimedia Super Corridor, and the global village, and all these, I think we are on the right track. We are actually promoting news on the Internet, but then again there're rooms for improvement. Newspapers [offline mainstream] tend to be a little bias. So I think if online journalism can provide fairness in reporting, I think it is on the right track (NGO4, Executive, Malay, male, aged 46).

The NGO executive also stressed that online journalism should stand on a different platform from that of the mainstream press. He viewed online journalism would balanced out the mainstream press, which he perceived as unfair and biased.

Having listed their views, thoughts, suggestions, and attitudes regarding the role of online journalism in fostering national integration, as the interviewees suggested, it is noted that there are at least twenty ways that online journalism could be utilised to foster national integration. As shown in Table 6.4, the suggestions vary from assuring the freedom of opinions and criticism to promoting cultural and religious research. The evidence implies that there are abundant views that online journalism could potentially function for the purpose of fostering national integration.

The findings suggest that most of the interviewees were optimistic about the potential of online journalism in fostering national integration, with the NGOs the most positive, followed by the Academicians, the Media Practitioners and the GOs respectively. Interviewees suggested that online journalism should 'allow freedom of opinions and criticism', 'enhance more understanding among different ethnic groups', 'promote open forums and dialogues', 'channel minority voices', 'practice balanced reporting', and 'avoid criticism of religious and sensitive issues'.

**Table 6.4**  
**Ways to Foster National Integration**

<b>Ways online journalism should function to help foster national integration</b>	<b>Repeated reference</b>	<b>GO</b>	<b>NGO</b>	<b>MD</b>	<b>AC</b>
1. Allows freedom of opinions & critics	14	4	3	3	4
2. Enhances more understanding among races	11	1	2	4	4
3. Promotes open forums & dialogues	9	1	2	5	1
4. Channels the minority voices	8	2	3	2	1
5. Avoid criticism of religious and sensitive issues	8	2	2	1	3
6. Contents need to be controlled	7	1	1	-	5
7. Utilises diverse opinions	6	1	1	2	2
8. Accountable, responsible & accurate	6	-	4	2	-
9. Similar role as mainstream mass media	5	-	-	4	1
10. Discusses more issues on Human Rights	4	1	3	-	-
11. More common issues among races	3	-	1	1	1
12. Be transparent and tell the truth	2	1	-	-	1
13. Experts discuss sensitive issues	2	1	1	-	-
14. Emphasis on education of the young	2	-	1	1	-
15. Promotes nationalism	1	-	1	-	-
16. Works within the rule of law	1	-	-	-	1
17. Practices balanced reporting	1	-	-	-	1
18. Emphasis on national language	1	-	-	-	1
19. Covers stories of all races	1	1	-	-	-
20. Promotes cultural & religious research	1	-	1	-	-

The findings also illustrate that the interviewees repeatedly mentioned that online journalism should 'allow freedom of opinion and criticism'. Such response highlights that freedom of opinion and criticism is crucial to the minds and thoughts of the interviewees in terms of fostering national integration. They also advocate that the allowance of 'freedom of opinion and criticism' should be promoted through 'open forums, debates and rational-critical discourse' among the different ethnic groups. In addition, they suggest that the role of online journalism should closely adhere to the fundamentals of democracy where liberty of speech and expression are honoured.

A Manager of a radio station suggested that online journalism should allow opinion pieces on national integration to help explain its virtues and directions. He added ethnic preferences should be avoided. This means that space for opinion pieces must be opened to all ethnic groups because, presumably, they would promote more understanding.

Online newspaper can play that role [to foster national integration], and I believe that some online newspapers are doing that, giving their ...opinions on this newspaper. Giving their opinions about the real meaning of national integration...If you are still with this attitude of protecting certain races then you will spoil them (GO4, Radio Station Manager, Malay, male, aged 46).

The phrase 'protecting certain races...will spoil them' points to the affirmative action of the NEP that projects an ethnic preference policy for the Bumiputera or the Malay ethnic groups. As explained earlier, the policy was implemented to restructure the economic share among the Malays and the non-Malays. Here we see that the policy grabbed attention, even from a member of the Malay elite, suggesting that such a policy may not be relevant anymore. It may have been most relevant in the 1970s or the 1980s. As Guan (2000:25) observes, 'the preferential policies that continue to discriminate Malaysians based on the colour of their skin will remain a thorn in the relations between the rival ethnic communities'.

The radio station manager also pointed on the issue of meritocracy, which had been frequently highlighted in online newspapers and weblogs (see Bakri 2005b; Khoo 2005; Sim 2005). The issue is significantly linked to government's affirmative action of 'quota system for university entrance' exercised after the 1969-racial conflict that offers more places for the bumiputera. He advocates that it is high time for Malaysians to reject the quota system and replace it with the 'meritocracy' system. This is one instance of promoting equality among the different ethnicity, which would enhance national integration. He said:

We have to look [at] national integration from a new perspective. [Look at] meritocracy and things like that. We have special privileges for the Malays but again since our previous Prime Minister mentioned about meritocracy we have now changed the mindset of the Malays from being strong believers in protectionism to be more responsible and accountable to themselves. This time around they (the Malay) need to be on their own feet, they need to be good, meaning if they are accepted [for a place in university] they are good based on their own merit not based on the privileges. ...So I'm of the same opinion of our former Prime Minister, give them [the Malays] a chance to prove themselves and I think we are prepared and ready. It would help national integration (GO4, Radio Station Manager, Malay, male, aged 46).

An academician observed that criticism is an important way of promoting national integration and online journalism should allow criticism. He suggested that the government should be informed of public criticism to look for ways of improvement. For that reason, government leaders and particularly politicians should listen to the minority, the NGOs, as well as the opposition voices most likely voiced in online journalism. He explained that:

Our government; the ministers, and members of parliament, would be wise to seek out information in online journalism to see what the other side is saying ...So I think this would definitely contribute towards integration and of course by doing so they can also come out with ideas towards changes (AC8, Assoc Prof., Chinese, male, aged 46).

In accord with the above views, a manager of a prominent mainstream press stresses that exchange of ideas especially among the heterogeneous ethnic groups is imperative to help materialise national integration.

They (online media) must create or they must provide more forums for exchange of ideas without anguish; exchange of ideas that can lead to more actions, [not] only complaining without means of how to act on those development issue or whatever issue [of national integration] that are being discussed (MD1, Manager, Malay, male, aged 46).

On a different note, an Editor-in-Chief of a mainstream newspaper who is in charge of the online version highlights that online media, particularly the independent non-mainstream media, must be cautious with everything that they published online, especially when it comes to sensitive issues that touch on religious and cultural matters. He emphasised:

We have to be very careful when we write news stories so that we would not cause any chaos, especially among the different races ...We have to be careful that social order would not be destroyed (MD9, Editor-in-Chief, Malay, male, age 48).

Another suggestion is that online journalism should enhance more understanding among different ethnic groups. In this regard, a media person of a Chinese daily suggested that such constructive understanding should be referred back to the most basic tenet of national integration. For that reason he recommended that the people should first understand the history and especially the Independence Constitution that explains the rights of every ethnic group. He said:

The national integration that we aim for could be achieved. Make everybody understand each other. Be open-minded. Everybody should be willing to discuss and everybody should be willing to give and take. The Chinese and the Indians should first understand the history of the Independence Constitution and as well as the Constitution itself. Why are there allocations for the Malay Rulers in the constitution? Why are there

allocation for Malay special rights and privileges? Why we need Malay language as our national language? All these things need to be understood and respected (MD6, Journalist, Chinese, male, aged 37).

On a similar note, an academician believed that online journalism should allow discussion of matters that people are ignorant about; especially the basics of ethnic relations in the country. This would create more understanding. She asserted:

As a matter of fact the national integration starts with the communication of the different races, discussion on things that they are ignorant about and matters that could create more understanding and empathy between them (AC9, Assoc. Prof., Malay, female, aged 51).

Online journalism should promote open forums and dialogues among the different ethnic groups. This includes exchange of ideas. By implication, her notion would also mean debates and discussions. She emphasized that such effort should be carried out in online journalism without element of anguish.

Another journalist of a Chinese mainstream daily suggested that openness in interethnic discussion would help but he stressed that it should be based on diplomacy. He claimed that there are huge space on online journalism that could accommodate discussions, such as features, columns and letters to editors.

I think they [online journalism] need to be more open...in terms of promoting national integration. More room and space should be given... to discuss openly... but with more diplomacy and under an environment of greater understanding. Put aside all the emotive elements that could jeopardise the atmosphere of understandings as well as the racial fabrics. Discussions, forums and dialogues among different races should be promoted through letters to editors, feature writings, essays, columns and whatsoever (MD12, Journalist, Chinese, male, aged 50).

An Editor-in-Chief of an independent online newspaper perceived that open forum in online journalism is very important to promote national integration. He also pointed out the problem of interethnic relations and developments that had caused misunderstanding among them.

We are bringing different groups together to an open forum where they can really discuss things. ...One of the reasons why people got the dented perception about race relations among Malaysians is because we are not talking to each other. Over the 10 to 20 years we've been all pushing to our own little group and we are not communicating (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

He also added that his online newspaper is providing space for interethnic communication to correct the wrong perceptions about race relations:

So I think what is important is to initiate some kind of dialogue between all these groups [different ethnic groups] so that they can actually understand each other and they could be judgmental that certain perceptions they have may be true or may not be true and that we come to openly discuss them (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

Another NGO leader stressed that independent online journalism other than that of the mainstream media should channel more minority voices for the purpose of fostering national integration. She was concerned about women's rights and emphasised that the mass media had given less attention on the matter.

Another thing is that voices of the minority should be given space for them to be heard. The voices of women as against the abuse of men should also be given more space for them to voice out their rights. The people should be made known about the unfair treatment given to women employees, housewives, maids and others of female gender (NGO2, Executive, Chinese, female, aged 34).

Practice of balanced reporting is also another stance that online journalism should address. An NGO executive said that not all online journalisms are doing their best to promote cohesive national integration. However, she agreed that there are constructive online newspapers (referring to Malaysiakini, Agenda Daily and Aliran online) that practice balanced reporting, which facilitate space for the opposition parties. She also asserted that balanced reporting is helpful in promoting national integration.

There are some websites which are quite constructive in ways they criticise both sides; the government and the opposition parties. This is what we call a balanced reporting. This balanced reporting would be very beneficial to national integration as it will open up people's way of thinking (NGO10, Executive, Malay, female, aged 45).

On a similar note, a senior academician pointed out that whatever issues online journalism are committed to, the principles of balanced reporting should be emphasised. He said, 'there are some forms of intellectual discourse going on through independent online media, but the rules of balanced reporting must be applied' (AC3, Senior lecturer, Malay, male, aged 47).

Besides the above point of views regarding ways online journalism could foster national integration, there were also a number of interviewees who suggested certain stance that online journalism should avoid. Among others, criticism on religious and cultural issues that were sensitive to various ethnic groups should be avoided. The interviewees believed that such stance would not support national integration, as

some incidences of racial conflict, such as the 13<sup>th</sup> May tragedy, and the Kampong Rawa and the Kampong Medan incidences had illustrated.

A Magistrate was concerned that presenting sensitive issues through online journalism would not help national integration. He suggested that such issues should be addressed directly to the government instead of the mass media. He explained:

Online journalism should address the things that are beneficial and useful for the people but not to incite or to provoke [the people] because certain matters are better brought directly to the government to be considered. So, I believe that if they have that in mind they can help ...national integration. But if their purpose is only to raise sensitive issues then it won't achieve the target of national integration (GO2, Magistrate, Malay, male, aged 42).

A prominent NGO leader gave a similar view. He stressed that online journalism should avoid making swift comments about different communities, which he viewed as unconstructive to national integration.

Number one, I think it is a great need in our country to fight ethnic prejudices, ethnic stereotypes, ethnic generalisation, which are very common in our society where people make swift comments about the different communities (NGO3, President, Indian, male, aged 51).

Another NGO executive was also concerned about misreporting issues that could damage interethnic relationships.

They [online journalism] must also be very cautious and sensitive to avoid misreporting issues than can damage relationship between races. Online journalism should be used as a tool or medium to create an open society that involves and promotes healthy environment. Also, public forums that respect and recognise each other's view (NGO9, Executive, Malay, male, aged 45).

However a director of an independent media company challenged such point of views when he advocates that suppression of feelings would be fatal for interethnic relation. He is optimistic that online journalism could be an efficient vehicle in fostering national integration if it allows more freedom of expression. For that reason he views that the different ethnic groups of Malaysia should be exposed to open discussions, which he views as part of the mechanism of national integration. He said:

You can utilise opinions by all factors of the society, they must not be bounded by certain stringent rules meaning they must be allowed freedom of expression because the society now is no longer like years before. We have a lot of technologies now. ...The world can be reached by a touch of a button and you can get information by a touch of a button. So I think freedom of expression, freedom of opinions and comments

must be allowed to be expressed [and let] people make up their minds. ...Allow total freedom of expression among the races. Let them express themselves. What you see now among Malaysians is suppressed feelings. They dare not say it out because the culture doesn't allow that, the surrounding doesn't allow that, although there are inner feelings. This is how I see. This is called undercurrent discontentment. So they keep it to themselves, because of the laws, rules and so on. ...So it is suppression. It is dangerous when it is suppressed because it can explode and time will tell. So the best thing is to allow them to get it out of their chests and then discuss it intellectually, rationally. ...Things have changed. It is no longer like 1969. During those days in 1969 there is no Internet. I believe that people are open- minded now (MD3, Director, Malay, male, aged 47).

One critical view with regard to the role of online journalism towards national integration came from an editor of an online news desk of a Malay mainstream daily. He asserted that there should not be any distinction regarding the role of online and offline media in terms of fostering national integration. The only difference is the technology; but journalism principles stay put. For that he diverted the discussion towards the role of online media in promoting 'developmental journalism'. He said:

There should not be a kind of distinction between online or offline, print [or] electronic. I think everybody plays the same function. The only thing that differ them is the media. ...But online has now expanded beyond just Internet. It is going to SMS, it is going to MMS, video images, voice images, so what differentiate us from anybody else is that our media is interactive, is dynamic and is fast. Right now Utusan sent out news through SMS. So people can get news quite instantly. ...So online journalism, may be in some way is competing with the electronic journalism, with TV, with radio. But that differentiation of media ...should not focus on different ideas or different ethics or different ways of writing. Journalism is always journalism. The only thing that differentiates us is the media itself. So, online journalism should also be parts and parcels of [conventional] journalism (MD4, Editor/Journalist, Malay, male, aged 42).

The above selected evidence on 'the role of online journalism in fostering national integration' suggests the following findings.

Firstly, the majority (87.5%) of the interviewees are optimistic about the potential of online journalism with regard to national policies and aspiration. Their views also recognise that online journalism carries the potential to foster national integration through various constructive roles. However, it is inevitable to see some pessimistic views among the interviewees regarding online journalism as discussed in the earlier section. This suggests diversity of opinions, even though such pessimistic views are marginal compared to the positive views. Despite that, there is no clear evidence to substantiate that the work of online journalism has apparently



destroyed or deconstructed interethnic relations among Malaysians. On those grounds, it is important to highlight what MGG Pillai, a webmaster of a weblog named Sang Kancil, points out about the relevance of open discussions through online journalism. He did not see online journalism as a problem to race relations but he was worried about digital divide.

There is no evidence at the moment to suggest that open discussion via the Internet has led to or stirred greater racial conflict. If we assume that ethnic conflicts occurred within the marginalized groups then it is unlikely that e-democracy will lead to greater conflict given that e-democracy users will come from the lower middle income group and above. The new conflict will be between those who are 'connected' and those who are 'not connected', hence the digital divide. E-democracy is viable only when all Malaysians are connected (as quoted in Loo 2003b:197).

Besides an overwhelming support for online journalism, which highlights that 'it is on the right track with regard to national policies and aspiration', most of the interviewees are optimistic about its potential to foster national integration. Predominant in most interviewees' thoughts about online journalism, is the perception that there is more space for freedom compared to the conventional mass media. For that reason, freedom is honoured and would encourage empathetic relationships among the different ethnic groups. Through increased understanding, they see that online journalism would help to enhance national integration. Using the liberty of the Internet, some of the interviewees argue that the technological traits such as space, time and speed should be utilised to promote opinions, rational-critical discourses, forums, and dialogues so as to build up understanding and the exchange of ideas among different ethnic groups. As the interviewees stress, these should be undertaken with 'openness, and diplomacy under the environment of understanding'.

Secondly, by implication, many of them suggest that participation of any group in society, no matter of what class, should not be denied in online journalism, especially those of the minority communities and certain sections that were seemingly marginalized<sup>52</sup>. What they denote by the term 'minority' is normally the non-Malay populace, but for some it also refers to the oppositions, women, the rural community, workers, and farmers of all 'creeds and ranks.'

Thirdly, online journalism should allow criticism, precisely, intellectual criticism and rational-critical discourse. For some, criticism is a 'way of learning' and as such,

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<sup>52</sup> As MGG Pillai suggested (as quoted in Loo 2003b:197).

journalistic self-censorship would not help. One of them even refers criticism to that of the renaissance period where 'criticism was used to change the old paradigm'. Criticism also protects society from being 'parochial and bigoted', where bigotry is the contrary of developed society as espoused in the Vision 2020. Online journalism should also commit balanced reporting, telling stories from the point of view of all conflicting parties. Balanced reporting would reveal the real setting of an event and this would discourage speculation that may lead to wrong perceptions and misleading facts, which would not help national integration. Thus, in addition to those areas of national integration, the freer environment of online journalism, the open space that it offers to the opposition and the minorities, and criticism and debate on social and political issues, also highlight its role of enhancing democracy.

Fourthly, suggestions highlighting the 'don'ts of online journalism' like avoiding 'publishing sensitive issues that challenged religious beliefs, cultures and customs of the different ethnic groups', also imply that discourses on certain sensitive issues would be destructive to Malaysian society if they were infiltrated with animosity, jealousy, hatred and irresponsibility. Such views on freedom of expression through online journalism also imply that some of the respondents are pessimistic about the freedom that online journalism enjoys. The detrimental effect on national integration is invoked if certain journalistic ethics were ignored, which may lead to libellous, seditious and defamatory pieces. Therefore, it is also noted that some of the interviewees also see that the freedom of speech and expression attained through online journalism is exposed to abuse or exploitation by certain irresponsible parties that could incite ethnic hatred.

Lastly, one important message from a media expert that I see different to most of other views is that total freedom of expression should be allowed through the media (see MD3). Suppression of expression would lead to more dangerous situation especially when dealing with religious and cultural issues. Basically suppression of expression would block interethnic understanding of important matters that touch on their religious, cultural and customary undertakings. This is specifically points to undercurrent discontentment. To MD3, such situation is dangerous because it could turn into a racial war. However, it is emphasised that with regard to MGG Pillai's observation, so far there is no evidence that 'online journalism has led to racial conflict' (as quoted in Loo 2003b:197) in Malaysia's contextual setting.

#### 6.4 Online journalism is more critical

Interview regarding discourses of criticism through online journalism were approached with the following questions, 'Do you agree that online journalism is more critical of the government compared to the conventional mass media?' and the question 'Why does this trend occur, and is it advantageous to democracy and national integration?' These questions were asked to deliberately unearth interviewees' perceptions of criticism: whether they agree that the presence of criticism is more profound in online journalism; and whether criticism supports democracy and national integration.

In analysing the responses, it is notable that an overwhelming majority (91.7%) of interviewees agree that online journalism carries more criticism against the government as compared to the mainstream mass media (see Table 6.5). The most important driver to such capacity of criticism, as the interviewees mentioned, is the notion that online journalism offers a freer environment. Such trend of perceptions principally highlights the lenient provision of the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998, the Bill of Guarantees and the remarkable exemption of the Internet from the PPPA 1984.

**Table 6.5**  
**Online Journalism is more Critical**

<b>Views</b>	<b>GO</b>	<b>NGO</b>	<b>MD</b>	<b>AC</b>	<b>Frqcy</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Agree</b>	10	9	14	11	44	91.7
<b>Disagree</b>	-	1	-	2	3	6.2
<b>Not certain / no comment</b>	-	-	1	-	1	2.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>

On the other hand there are legislation constraints and demands from the top management of the mainstream mass media. Self-censorship may explain the reluctance of the mainstream mass media to publicise criticisms especially that exposes the government's deficiencies. Thus the pull and push factors are relevant to explain the convenience of online journalism in staging the people's criticism against the government as they see that when they need to voice out certain issue, the opportunity is always available online. However, as a journalist of a Chinese

press emphasised, criticism does not imply any trend of rebellion against the government, the virtue of responsibility and care that encouraged criticism markedly.

Criticism is good if you could perform it constructively with some form of philosophy, [and] diplomacy, using rationales rather than feelings and emotion, using facts, ...[and] good persuasive words. Along the way, show some alternatives or ways to overcome those weakness that you criticised (MD6, Journalist, Chinese, male, aged 37).

The findings also suggest that the mainstream mass media are perceived as less critical especially in areas that touch on sensitive issues, such as ethnic relations, religion, culture, government deficiency, and corruption. Such attitudes of the mainstream mass media have made online journalism gain the spotlight from the public.

A manager of BERNAMA.com, an online newspaper that belongs to Malaysian News Agency (BERNAMA) asserts two principal points. First the freer environment of the Internet has made criticism more viable through online journalism as compared to that of the offline media, particularly the mainstream. Secondly the exemption from the licensee regulation has made online media more daring for criticism. She said:

The trend of criticism on online newspapers or articles could be done very easily as there are no restrictions. However in print journalism you have to go through editors who will determine what should be printed and what should not. There are limitations. However through online, writing would be much easier as well as publication. If there are any mistakes in your story, you can always quite easily take it out immediately from the websites. If anything happened like not conforming to the government policy, you don't have any problem such as being banned and so on and you do not have to apply for any licence. But at the end of the day we could see that constructive critics that people voiced out could be good for the government (GO7, Manager, Malay, female, aged 46).

Besides the above manager there are other significant numbers of interviewee (see Appendix 9) who point out that the freer environment of the online media forms the ground for their critical stance. However that does not justify online media as the only platform of criticism. A journalist of an independent online newspaper stresses that print tabloids portray more critical stance as compared to online journalism. He said,

If you pass the street and read the tabloids, you will find that they are even worst [in terms of criticism] to compare with online journalism. I think those tabloids should be abolished (MD9, Editor-in-Chief, Malay, male, aged 48)

A senior academician of Law Studies argued that there is some form of pull and push factors that catch the attention of the people towards online journalism for criticism. The push factor is that the mainstream mass media fail to answer their appeal for critical pieces, while the pull factor is that online journalism welcomes such criticism with more space and an open media environment.

Online journalism is more critical because they [the people] can't voice out in the conventional newspaper so they have to find a way to voice out their opinions. So, they go online (AC11, Senior lecturer, Malay, female, aged 43).

Challenging the above assertion, a senior editor of a Malay mainstream newspaper who is also the head of the online department, emphasised that the mainstream newspapers are also critical of certain policies of the government, to suggest that they do not bluntly bow to the command of their master. However on certain issues they are more careful not to inflame tension among the multiracial society.

We [mainstream print media] are getting more mature in terms of democracy and freedom. I think the mainstream newspaper ...have also reach maturity or become more mature in terms of their write up. They are also critical about government policy. Utusan Malaysia is also more critical about cabinet ministers. We also write, not nasty things, but we also write about certain issues, which is not in good terms with certain ministers, even in the government. The only thing that differentiates the Utusan and Malaysiakini is that we have responsibility to the country, to the people. Malaysiakini tend to go beyond, I would not say ignore, but still produce material that create uneasiness or even disharmony within the population, may be because they serve a different audience (MD4, Editor/Journalist, Malay, male, aged 42).

The above evidence also indicates the negative views of mainstream media against independent online newspaper, particularly Malaysiakini.

An executive of a media organisation was of the same state of mind when he claimed that the mainstream mass media are not competitive mainly because their liberties are restricted through certain laws, especially the PPPA 1984.

In order to be strong and to compete with the international market, to go global...you need to be tested, you're open to be subjected to comments and all that. So, these print newspapers, especially mainstream...they are not doing that, and they will never do that because of the constraints...like the Printing Presses Act [PPPA] (MD5, Chief Executive, Malay, male, aged 49).

It is agreed that limitations and constraints of press freedom as apply to mainstream mass media, contribute remarkably to the use of online journalism in

channelling the public's problems and discontentment. One of the aims of criticism, according to an academician is to attract the government's attention to their discontentment.

Those who feel that their voices are not being heard they resort to [independent] online journalism, and they would always voice out their problems; their discontentment, and discrimination against them. This is where you can see the difference between conventional media and the online media, because of the limitations and constraint (AC4, Assoc. Prof., Malay, male, aged 47).

Explaining the trend of criticism, an academician pointed out that the people turned to online journalism when they saw certain flaws in the state administration, which they felt necessary to be made known to the public. This suggests that there are social justifications that push them to criticise, precisely their 'accumulated discontentment' on issues that are related to the government. As the mainstream mass media are unsupportive, online journalism is the best way out. The academician added that those criticisms had their foundations and were not merely based on favouritism or partisanship.

Of course the online journalism is more critical, especially the independent and the political-based newspaper. ...When there are issues such as corruption, failure of government's projects, or inconveniences of government programmes, then it would open some form of opportunities to the people to critic or to voice out their thoughts, discontentment, ideas and suggestions (AC9, Assoc. Prof., Malay, female, aged 51).

A political journalist of a Malay mainstream press, have the same opinion as the above academician. He observes that criticism projected through online media only emerged when there are issues, giving an instance of the 1998-political crisis and the 2004-election campaign. Other than that, he implied criticism as mainly insignificant political hiccup, specifically linked to the opposition parties. He said:

I think the trend [of criticism] has been changed tremendously after the [2004] election or after the political crisis of 1997-1998. You can see that the situation is non-issue now. So it is difficult to find an online [media] that is too critical towards the government. But if you want to find an online [media] which is critical of the government I think you can find it from the opposition's [media] such Harakah. ...It [criticism] is only growing [significant] when the country is in a mess for example in 1997-98 where you can see that people are more trusting of online newspaper than the mainstream newspaper because of the crisis of the politics in Malaysia (MD15, Journalist, Malay, male, aged 47).

Conversely to the above opinion, this study finds that issues such as the campaigns of anti-Broga incinerator, against police brutality, and for the abolishment of ISA, are some of the social issues that had continuously projected through online

journalism, specifically the online newspapers, weblogs and the civil and human rights organisation websites. In addition, criticism against the authority through such campaigns has become a familiar outlook.

When it comes to explaining why online journalism is more critical of the government than the mainstream mass media, it is important to scrutinise why such a trend emerges. Among the common justification the interviewees point out, circulates around issue of 'freedom of online journalism'. This is linked to issues of 'less government control' and 'less legal constraints'. Besides 'political, social and personal discontentment', 'the mainstream mass media is slanted' also gained considerable attention from the interviewees to justify the critical trend of online journalism. However, one important issue that is surprisingly highlighted and gained notable response is that 'online journalism works through sensationalised issues'. This assertion points to the notion that some of the criticisms were sensationalised and exaggerated rather than highlighting the actual situation.

Regarding the trends of criticism through online journalism, I would highlight responses from the interviewees that mainly circulate around the issues of 'public discontentment' that include complaints, grievances, and dissent pieces, as well as the issue of 'sensationalising stories' to attract audience. This study suggests that such 'public discontentment' is the foreground that established criticism through online journalism.

An academician observed criticism via online journalism that includes online newspapers, news portal, weblogs and NGO websites, is notably a result of public discontentment on issues that were normally rejected for inclusion in the mainstream mass media. However, she stressed that criticism is not an unceasing trait, because its presence is only occasional, especially when there are issues that raised public discontent and while the mainstream mass media seemingly unsupportive. Giving an instance of racial fight at the National Service Training Centre (also see Aliran 2004b; Netto 2004; Kuppusamy 2006b) she said:

I think this trend [criticism through online journalism] occurs occasionally when the criticism has its standing point based on a particular situation...As for instance the National Service Training Programme gained attention from the people when the administration showed that there are weaknesses in their handling of the youths as well as the trainers. Racial clashes should not have happened and cases like rape and sexual abuse should not have happened, especially during the National Service exercise (AC9, Assoc. Prof., Malay, female, aged 51).

The stated case of racial fight during the National Service exercise was extensively discussed in Asia Times Online (Netto 2004) and Aliran Online (Aliran 2004b). It is important to note that Aliran's editor pointed out that such piece of criticism gained no attention from the mainstream mass media when he stated 'this statement was sent to the local media including The Star and the Sun. We have stopped sending statements to the New Straits Times as they have never been carried.'

From other perspective, an NGO executive was unhappy as he saw that some mainstream mass media were biased in presenting political pieces; meaning that they are very critical against the opposition but not on matters that deal with the government. He was of the opinion that the mainstream mass media should stand neutral rather than taking sides, particularly on political issues.

I can understand why Harakah online is very critical of the government because it is politically based. But I can't understand why the mainstream newspaper biased on one side; they are not political newspapers and they are mainstream newspapers that are meant for every body (NGO1, Vice Secretary, Malay, male, aged 46).

A GO legal advisor viewed criticism as necessary in a democratic nation. He pointed out that impingement on public opinion as illustrated in the USSR as well as Yugoslavia, would not bring any benefit to the people. In the end, such a distraction to democracy will destroy the nation. He asserted:

You see what happened in USSR? Everything was kept bottled up. There was artificial unity of the USSR. The moment Gorbachev gave a little bit of freedom and openness, everything burst out. So, that kind of thing is also dangerous. He was able to unite the republics into one huge nation! And in Yugoslavia; Tito was able to keep all the groups together but through an iron hand. The moment Tito left; we all know what happened to Yugoslavia. The groups are now killing each other. Sadly, the killing is still going on (GO9, Legal Advisor, Prof. Indian, male, aged 52).

Challenging the above opinion, a journalist of a prominent Malay mainstream newspaper, who manage the online version of the daily, asserted that Malaysian mainstream media hold a different role to correspond to the country's development goal. The mainstream media must support the government to portray an image or situation that would help overcome political and financial crisis. For that he reluctantly accepts criticism against the government as necessary. He said:

In Malaysia we [the mainstream press] ...need to write more on how the country progress. When the country was in trouble in 1985, in 1995 ...when the Malaysian Ringgit was attacked by outsiders you see a lot of people loosing their jobs just because of the devaluation of the Ringgit



and somebody from outside decided that so and so would no longer be working. So I think with all that happening in the country, there is a need for people to understand, you know, development is something that we need to promote in our writing not necessarily about personal importance, not necessarily just on politics; not on differences of opinion between one media and another, because that would not stop us from ...getting a better life (MD4, Editor/Journalist, Malay, male, aged 42).

The best explanation for the above assertions would be 'development journalism', which some social scientists would describe as 'development mass media' (Schramm 1964). With regard to the development agenda, the mainstream mass media are made by necessity to carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy. However, in performing such tasks, the mainstream mass media are subjected to state control, restrictions and regulations. Part of the consequences is self-censorship, which to the more observant audience would mean the presence of bias and slant. On the other hand, such stance of the mainstream mass media would enhance alternative media for criticism against the government.

A GO leader viewed some of the criticisms projected through online journalism as basically objective reporting rather than criticism. As the government are not accustomed to criticism, especially before the emergence of online journalism, they perceived such objective reporting as criticism.

Their [online newspapers, principally Malaysiakini] stories are objective but because the government are not used to criticism the objectivity is seen as criticism, anti-government and pro-opposition simply because they try to give us more balanced outlook if compared to what is labelled on the mainstream mass media. Surely, the mainstream mass media want to survive because they are subjected to annual licensee. Therefore, they have to be more careful. You can't blame them for having the inclination or to slant towards the government (GO5, Commissioner, Malay, male, aged 54).

In line with the above assertion, this study principally finds that online journalism is largely critical of the government. This is proven when Malaysiakini's Editor-in-Chief, Steven Gan, in a recent interview with Mahathir, admitted that they are critical of the government. In the interview, Mahathir made a clear statement: 'I never liked Malaysiakini. It was very critical of me before'. Gan then responded that, 'We're just doing our job. We have also been critical of the present government (Abdullah Badawi's leadership) as well'. Mahathir then cut in, 'You are critical of everybody. Wait until you become the government. Then others will have a chance to take pot shots at you' (as quoted in Chuan 2006:2).

The interview shows both of them, one representing the former government, and one representing an online newspaper, agree that online journalism is critical of the government in many respects.

Another issue, which is linked to the critical stance of online journalism, is that the critical posture is perceived as a sensationalising mechanism to pull readers towards them. As an editor of an independent online newspaper revealed, sensationalising issues is part of the marketing strategies of most online newspapers.

We can carry articles that encourage interethnic relationship. But the problem is that the independent online journalism like ours, and Malaysiakini is self-funded. ...You see people would want to read something sensational. I believe that people go for online journalism because of the sensational stories. So we can't entertain that kind of stories about 'rukun tetangga'<sup>53</sup> or stories on good interethnic relations. Who would want to read them? Unless you are a government-funded company then it would be all right because the strong financial standing would allow that. Since we have to find our own revenue then the only good way to gain money is to pull as many readers as we could. In order to do that, we have to have sensationalised stories (MD9, Editor-in-Chief, Malay, male, aged 48).

Most prominent online newspapers such as Daily Express, the Edge Daily, Agenda Daily, and Malaysia Today, weblogs such Sang Kancil, Malaysian Voters Union, and Shahril@UMNO.com, are free to access. Online advertising is part of their sources of revenue. However, certain online newspapers are encountering problems with regard to advertising revenue. An editor of a prominent independent online newspaper pointed out:

Because of the fact we are been seen as critical of the government, advertisers tend to be a bit uneasy about advertising in our online newspaper. So, we don't earn much from advertising. I think during our first few years there were a lot of pressures being put on our advertisers. I can tell you a few incidences where our advertisers pulled out because they received phone calls and was pressured by their own board of directors, including big multinational. I think again, you know things will hopefully change where people will recognise that we are independent news organisation and that they should not fear to advertise in ours [online newspaper]. It also depends on the attitude of the government, whether they still treat [us] as an adversary or whether they treat us as a proper media organisation. (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

This study observed that there are local and international companies and organisations that have their products advertised in some of Malaysia's independent

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<sup>53</sup> 'Rukun Tetangga' (neighbourhood goodwill) is a Ministry of Social Development's advocated programme, exercised to promote closer interethnic relations among the people.

online journalisms, which include government's companies and organisations as well as the NGOs. As for instance advertisement of Proton that produces national cars, Zeenath Begum Jewellery, and Virgo Travel agency are seen on Malaysia Today, an online newspaper, which also carries a weblog. Another independent online newspaper named Agenda Daily, advertises among others, the Malaysian National Train services and the KL International Airport, Star LRT<sup>54</sup>, Putra LRT and KL monorail. It makes sense that in terms of marketing strategy, pulling viewers to their websites would be very crucial in order to attract advertisers. Therefore, the claim that they are sensationalising issues to pull readers makes sense.

Asserting on similar views, Kiranjit Kaur, a Chairlady of a GO body points out that besides functioning as a tool of public discourse, online journalism was also used to sensationalise certain issues.

[It] works to a point only. Often the contributors begin to use it as a tool to condemn certain parties rather than giving productive viewpoints or opinions... The public get abusive on the site, calling politicians all kinds of names... They were misusing the privilege (as quoted in Loo 2003b:220).

A GO leader also perceived that there are space and opportunity for online journalism to exploit and sensationalise issues. However, he did not point to any online publication that had engaged in such a practice.

If online journalism is to play a positive role creating a national integration, it should be done constructively. Criticism can be allowed provided it is constructive but not condemnation that would lead people to violence and all that. ...We must be able to face up to the issues confronting us and not just sensationalise things unnecessarily. There must be some kind of discipline in handling this kind of things (GO6, Director, Indian, male, aged 52).

It is worth noting that sensationalising issues does not mean telling lies. It may exaggerate a point or go to focus on certain points of the story based on manipulation of perceptions. If there are any lies, then they have to face serious consequences, because the sources of the story could sternly challenge lies in online journalism (Hall 2001:130).

Principally, the evidence shows that a large majority (91.7%) of interviewees agree that online journalism is critical of the government. It is critical because of the fact that it acquires massive space and freedom to publish critical pieces. It is critical

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<sup>54</sup> LRT stands for Light Rapid Transit which is similar to that of British Underground tube train transport system.

also for the reason that the mainstream mass media would avoid critical pieces projected against the government as well as the authority. In other words, public discontentment on certain issues related to state governance also contributes to the critical stance of online journalism, whereby the mainstream mass media fail to provide space (Hilley 2001:172).

## 6.5 Criticism supports democracy and national integration

From another perspective, and relative to the earlier question on criticism, it is noted that a large majority (75%) of the interviewees agree that criticism through online journalism is advantageous to democracy and national integration. A commitment to national integration is significantly linked to democracy because democracy bestows the rights of the people to freedom of speech and expression that cuts across ethnic lines. Furthermore, such freedom also advocates criticism when people believe that it is necessary to make their voices heard, even to the extent of participating in street protest and demonstration (Pickles 1970:167).

**Table 6.6**  
**Criticism Supports Democracy and National Integration**

<b>Views</b>	<b>GO</b>	<b>NGO</b>	<b>MD</b>	<b>AC</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>
Agree	9	7	9	11	36	75.0
Disagree	1	2	5	1	9	18.7
Not certain / no comment	-	1	1	1	3	6.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>

Examination of the four groups (see Table 6.6) shows that the pattern of perceptions is fairly divided within each group. In other words, there is no clear distinction of opinions drawn among the different groups of interviewees. The academicians (22.9%) are the most responsive group positively viewing online journalism as significantly promoting democracy and freedom of speech. According to this group, democracy that espouses freedom of speech and of the press is important. This is represented through apparent criticism on issues of democracy, which is less presented in the traditional mass media. However Table 6.6 also shows that a notable section (5/15 or 33%) among media group disagree that criticism would support democracy and national integration. By implication, this finding also

signifies that criticism in the mainstream mass media is significantly limited, which confirms the claims of many political observers (Munro-Kua 1996; Milne and Mauzy 1999:113; Mustafa 2002:164; Saliha 2002; Zaharom 2002:125; Teik 2003:106; Abbott 2004:81).

A GO legal advisor argued that the mass media should allow a certain amount of leeway for people to criticise, to disagree or vent their anger. This is one of the fundamentals of democracy.

I would think that criticism has to be tolerated. ...Criticism may be destructive in some aspects. ...Imposing too much control in anyway hurts the democracy. I think certain amount of opposition have got to be allowed. ...We have to give the people a certain amount of leeway here. What I'm afraid is that if you don't give people the freedom to criticise, to disagree, or to vent their anger, it could lead to disorder (GO9, Legal Advisor, Prof. Indian, male, aged 52).

An NGO Executive pointed out that criticism is good for a democratic government.

If you allow criticism I think it is good for a democratic government and people are able to voice up their opinion. If it is ultimately the majority view I think the government should consider. If it is the minority view they can consider, they may not want to implement because it is a minority view, I think to certain extent criticism should be allowed (NGO6, President, Indian, male, aged 51).

Another NGO executive preferred to know how the opposition perceived government policies, or in other words, how the opposition analysed and criticised those policies. For that reason he argued that the authorities should allow criticism, which reflects the allowance of freedom of speech and expression.

Suppressing the opinions of the opposition will only result in people having only one perspective of thinking. This would be disadvantageous to nation building...If you practice democracy you should allow people to voice their opinions and seek the best opinions without suppressing them, even though it doesn't come from you. (NGO4, Executive, Malay, male, aged 46).

On a similar score, an academician observed that in terms of criticism, online journalism has provided space that advocate democratisation. This tendency opens up space for participatory democracy where the people are given the opportunity to forward their ideas and views. He suggested that the proponents of the government should also use online journalism 'to counteract the opponents, rather than suppress the dissident voices' (AC6, Assoc. Prof., Malay, male aged 48).

Another suggestion from the interviewees is that criticism opens up people's minds. An academican pointed out that critical evaluation and analysis encourage people to be open-minded and prevents them from being parochial and bigoted. This assertion is in agreement with an Associate Professor in Journalism when he said:

Utusan [a Malay mainstream newspaper] or the Star [an English mainstream newspaper] or Harakah [a weekly political newspaper] can be partisan. ...We live in a community, we have aspirations, we subscribe to certain values and we want civilised way of life. Therefore whatever opinion advanced and expressed by any media partisan, should be done in a rational manner. It cannot be bigot or zealous. It must be rational (AC4, Assoc. Prof., Malay, male, aged 47).

On a similar note and with a straightforward tone, an academician in Law Studies stressed that renaissance begins with criticism that assists the people in searching for the truth. He said:

Without criticism, lots of society would be left behind. ...The concept of renaissance is basically criticism against the religion, against the literature, against the motion of divine rights and so on. So criticism is very-very essential in a country like ours (AC5, Assoc. Prof., Indian, male, aged 57).

Besides assisting people to open up their minds, criticism is also perceived as a component of intellectualism. In this matter the words of an Executive member of National Accreditation Syndicate is highlighted. He viewed criticism as part of the process of learning that would create a knowledgeable society. He said:

If you were to look back at the Vision 2020 policy, the government has seriously stated on creating knowledgeable society [and] ...creating a democratic society through the ICT. If they were to create democratic elements, they have to accept criticism in online journalism as part of the process of democracy (GO1, Executive, Malay, male, aged 39).

Implying that the mainstream mass media are less approachable in terms of criticism, an NGO executive argued that the authority should not suppress dissenting opinions as what the implementation of stringent laws had done to the mass media. Criticism, dissent and diverse opinions should be allowed in the media, as they are advantageous to national integration as well as contributing to intellectualism. He explained:

Suppressing an opinion from other groups of people would result in making them unable to mature in their thinking. This situation is disadvantageous to national integration. In a democratic country, we should allow the people to see from various angles, the different opinions and suggestions so that the people can understand better the process of developing the country (NGO4, Executive, Malay, male, aged 46).

Understanding among the different ethnic groups is a fundamental component of national integration. Without such understanding, the idea of empathetic relationship or even functional relationship would deteriorate. To understand means to communicate open heartedly, exchanging and sharing of ideas and to accept the differences within the multiethnic society. Quite a number of interviewees were of the opinion that criticism or specifically, constructive criticism could generate such a fundamental of national integration. On this stand, an executive member of an NGO pointed out:

Well I see online journalism could generate more understanding among the people on many issues, not only political issues...I guess we should have news or articles that will generate people's understanding on the idealism of democracy, social harmony and so on. So this may contribute much towards national integration (NGO1, Vice Secretary, Malay, male, aged 46).

Discussion of sensitive issues is important to avoid wrong perceptions that would lead to bigotry, scepticism and zealousness would enhance understanding among the different ethnic groups. An Editor-in-Chief of an online newspaper emphasised:

We need to discuss sensitive matters among the different races so that we could understand and correct the wrong perceptions between each other. So I think open discussion will definitely be advantageous to national integration (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

On a similar note, a senior lecturer in Communication Studies observed that in the past, open discussion of sensitive issues through the mainstream mass media had been blocked. Contrary to that online journalism has provided access to such discussion.

Online journalism could help by giving space for the people of different ethnic groups to have some open discussion on matters that so far had blocked their social integration. There are still many issues such as understanding of religions and cultures that could be discussed in a level-headed manner so that the understanding could help promote social integration (AC3, Senior Lecturer, Malay, male, aged 47).

However, criticism and open discussion of sensitive issues should also follow some basic rules. It should be carefully carried out with politeness, responsibility and respect. Hatred inciting criticism would be harmful especially on sensitive issues that touched on religion and cultural aspects of the different ethnic groups. An academician stressed that:

The people should take criticism openly and look at it positively. Criticism should be done politely and responsibly. Emotions and connecting

criticism with sensitive elements such as religions should be avoided. Many could not accept if their religions are criticised (AC9, Assoc. Prof., Malay, female, aged 51).

The findings suggest that criticism, which most of the interviewees consented, is substantial in online journalism. Along with open debates and discussions, criticism would enhance more understanding among the different ethnic groups. However, all those discourses should be consciously carried out with responsibility, politeness and respect. Hatred and condemnation of one's culture and religion would be detrimental and affect national integration.

From the overall evidence presented in this section, it is noticeable that the opinions, ideas, perceptions and attitudes of the interviewees agree that criticism, which is frequently presented in online journalism, could promote national integration. Consequently, where freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and freedom of expression are concerned, criticism substantively reflects democratic practices. Criticism, which some perceived as perilous to the credibility of those being criticised, is seen markedly in these findings as advantageous to national integration. It is fervently proposed that criticism would 'open up the people's minds', 'enhances more understanding' where ethnicity-related issues are better clarified and explained. This atmosphere would certainly lead the people beyond the limits of a functional relationship where 'understanding and openness' to negotiate and 'to give and take' would enhance 'empathetic relationship'. Furthermore, all of the advantages of criticism, as some of the interviewees suggested, are principally the fundamentals of democratic practices.

The analysis also finds that 'free of governmental control' contributes to the notable levels of criticism. Furthermore, the interviewees' perception that online journalism serves the people as an alternative media also contributes to criticism. However, there are pockets of interviewees who disagree and argue that the term critical is just not the right word; what they see as relevant is that online journalism presents balanced journalistic stances. They agree that when there are pieces that present criticism, there are also pieces that comment on issues of social, cultural and political with a balanced approach of journalism. This suggests that opponents' views are presented correspondingly, together with the proponents' views.

The setbacks of the mainstream mass media, in terms of freedom of expression, also increasingly promotes online journalism as a channel to voice public



discontent, ideas, thoughts and people's fight against what they distinguish as political and social suppression. As John Hilley (2001:173) points out, there is a sense of 'crisis of containment' with regard to the utilisation of online journalism especially seen during the peak of 1998-political crisis. He asserts that:

With many Malaysians now abandoning the mainstream press altogether in search of alternative news sources, the ability to stem political dissent through conventional media controls and persuasion had been severely tested.

When the mainstream mass media were seen to avoid criticism against the government and opposition pieces, more and more people were relying on online journalism. As the work of webloggers such as Gerak, Kampusnegara, Screetshot, Laman Marhaen, and 'The Malaysians' show, it is important to note that this kind of online journalism accepts almost any form of criticism. In terms of criticism on weblog, Coleman describes it as:

A listening post of modern democracy, and to blog is to declare your presence; to disclose to the world that you exist and what it's like to be you; to affirm that your thoughts are at least as worth hearing as anyone else's; to emerge from the spectating audience as a player and maker of meanings (Coleman 2005:274).

Criticism does not necessarily cause commotion among the people. According to an editor of an online newspaper, criticism helps people to understand an issue better when it leads to rational discussion and explanation. In cases where criticism is erroneous, there will be people among the audience who will check and correct them. He said:

We [our online newspaper] are bringing different races, different people of different religion to come and discuss issues that are considered taboo. I think it has to be discussed because if Malaysia wants to remain multiracial, multicultural and multi-religious society, you cannot hide all these problems. Somehow, we need to understand how other people feel and try to negotiate some kind of a solution to whatever our angst was. Sometimes criticism may not be fair and there will be responses from other groups, and people will see reasons. I think we are doing that though people will criticise us for touching taboo, sensitive issues and all that. I think we [Malaysians] have matured, after thirty years after 1969 [13<sup>th</sup> May incident], I think Malaysians can discuss those issues in a level-headed manner without going out for riot (MD11, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese, male, aged 43).

Online journalism indeed complies with the words of Milton: 'a marketplace of ideas where the truth and the false meet' (as quoted in Altschull 1990: 40).

The evidence shows that the majority (75%) of the interviewees agree that criticism through online journalism is not only advantageous to national integration but also advantageous to Malaysia's democracy.

This study also finds that there are pockets of democratic change that can be seen through government responses to the appeal of public criticism through online journalism. However, significant democratic change is not happening. Despite all the efforts for democracy through online journalism, the changes would not take place if the people are not interested in and enthusiastic for change. As MGG Pillai sees, 'Malaysians are not interested in making themselves heard', which also suggests the unsupportive stance of the mainstream mass media (as quoted in Loo 2003b: 196). On a similar note, Abbott (2004:99) affirms that while online journalism 'does have an important impact on mobilisation', it should not lead us to be too optimistic with regard to democratic change, as online journalism 'itself cannot effect regime change'. In addition, Claudia Derichs (2004:126) advocates that 'only with the support of the politically well-connected segment of the middle class can the reform movement be galvanised effectively'.

The evidence suggests that online journalism alone is not enough to create significant democratic change and effective national integration in Malaysia. Other supportive agents are required for an effective move towards positive democratic change and national integration including the mainstream mass media.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

The findings suggest that online journalism continuously and increasingly intensifies the tenets of democracy through freedom of speech and expression. In addition, it opens up unlimited space for the different ethnic groups in Malaysia to communicate with each other, through public discourse, debates and discussions, thus creating more empathetic interethnic relationships. Demonstrating that online journalism is advantageous to national integration, as well as for the nation in general, by implication, most of the interviewees, suggest that there should be more online journalism. Their acceptance is based on justifications not simply focusing on the many advanced technical advantages of online journalism, but above all the democratic opportunities that online journalism provides for the people.

Thus, in principle, this chapter provides some explanation for the third research question that intends to discover how it might be possible for online journalism to help foster national integration and democracy in Malaysia.

Democratic features of online journalism, as exemplified through the promotion of 'freedom of speech and expression', 'space for criticism and intellectual discourse', space for 'unheard voices of the minorities and the oppositions', 'enhancement of diverse opinions', 'intellectual discourse', 'public opinion and debates', 'alternative media', and 'watchdog against the government' were raised. This is in line with many of the literatures that suggest democratic stance of online journalism (Loo 2003b; Abbott 2004; Banerjee 2004; Clarke 2004; Gan et al. 2004).

Parallel to Malaysian strong emphasis on national integration, online journalism is seen as markedly supportive in promoting open discussions, forums and dialogues among the different ethnic groups, different creeds and classes. This study suggests that national integration would be impossible without the involvement of all ethnic groups in interethnic communication and online journalism provides considerable space for such communication process. This interethnic communication is promoted and generated through forums, dialogues, journalistic columns, editorials, feature writings, letters to editor, weblogs, commentaries, and many more, which are fast and immediate, and in most cases Malaysians may not find them in the traditional mass media. As the former MCA President, Goh Cheng Teik emphasises, the most important strategy for national unity in Malaysia is nothing more than getting the different ethnic groups to sit down together and to 'talk, talk, talk' (Teik 1978:34). Online journalism does contribute the facility of a 'discussion tool' in a space that allows diverse participation from different ethnic groups of different ranks and files. Noticeably, online journalism has opened new frontiers of freedom of expression for the less-democratic environment of Malaysia (Abbott 2004).

This chapter also suggests that there are some forms of synergy between the three domains: online journalism, democracy and national integration. Each of the domains is responsively seen to support the other two. This is relevant when Zaharom (2002: 136) asserts that online journalism, or as he termed it, the 'web-based newspaper', plays the role of alternative media. They are believed to be more accurate, to be regarded as necessary irritants to regimes, whose existence allows the regime to continuously assert that 'freedom of expression does exist in Malaysia'. No matter how much the regime of Zaharom's perception has exploited the

emergence of online journalism, what is important is that online journalism is posing the role of alternative media, as most of the interviewees agreed. This is important as the numbers of Internet users are growing acutely in the country.

In his paper focusing on the challenges of online journalism in Malaysia, Siong (2004:312) advocates that online journalism with the new technology carries notable creative potential to communicate universal ideas of democracy to a fragmented society without resorting to ethnic appeals or offending their sensitivities. He also amplifies the 'virtual democracy' that exists among Internet users, which consequently would 'spill over' to non-Internet users and encourage public participation in politics and debate of ideas.

From other perspectives, the existence of non-communal online journalism such as Malaysiakini, Malaysia Today, Agenda Daily, Aliran, Suaram, Screenshots and many more that pull interethnic participation and readership, show that online journalism has great potential in enhancing national integration. By and large, the evidence presented in this chapter reflect the Malaysians' optimistic views that online journalism has notable capacity as a tool of national integration amid the communal traits of Utusan Melayu, Berita Harian, Sin Chew Jit Poh, Nanyang Siang Pau and Tamil Nesan. Strengthened by the legislative assurance of the Energy, Water and Communication Ministry as espoused in the Multimedia and Communication Act 1998, that Internet content would not be censored, online journalism champions the freedom of expression in a state where the offline press freedom is very restricted.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In conclusion, I focus on two areas; first, online journalism provides more democratic space in Malaysia's setting beyond that of the established mainstream mass media, and second, there is complexity of reception of online journalism, democracy and national integration among Malaysian opinion formers. This complexity of reception contributes intricacies of thoughts and opinions from various perspectives, in which some of them contradict with each other.

#### **7.1 Democratic space through online journalism**

The overall outcome of this study underlines that online journalism provides more democratic space highlighted through social and political discourses and debates, which were frequently blocked and avoided in the mainstream mass media that includes criticism against the defects of state governance, dissident thoughts, minority voices, and opponent opinions. The public reliance for news stories, and social discourses from independent online newspapers, NGO websites and blogs as shown in the mini-case study on the 'Broga incinerator' and 'police brutality' issues, also support the argument towards a more democratic space through online journalism. Online journalism such as that practiced in Malaysia Today, Malaysiakini, Agenda Daily, Sharir@UMNO.com, Aliran, and Screenshots, as to mention a few, considerably highlights current issues regarding social and political discourses, debates and criticism. The mini-case study highlights some of the significant evidence for such democratic posture when more reports and newstories with bigger volume were presented through independent online newspapers, NGO's websites and weblogs. As there is more space, it allows more in-depth discussions, opinions, thoughts as well as criticisms, which would be rejected or otherwise less respected, in the mainstream mass media when they are link to democratic defect. Furthermore, there are sense of empathy and support, inflicted through online journalism with regard to those who failed to claim their civil rights from the authority; precisely those who were oppressed. To a certain extent it provides more democratic space to address oppression and promote a culture of justice.

There is evidence that the government is giving attention and takes into account some of the social issues discussed in online journalism. 'The meritocracy system that took over the quota system for university entrance', 'the termination of Broga incinerator', 'the establishment of Malaysian Human Rights Commission', 'the Parliamentary discussion on the IPCMC' as to mention a few are some of the positive stance resulted from the work of online journalism. On the other hand, the mainstream mass media was seen to avoid discussing such issues, which could be explained by the existence of various media-related laws as well as their pattern of ownership. On such circumstances, online journalism provides more democratic space and supports participatory democracy.

Also with the removal of societal markings as well as the assurance of freer environment from the CMA 1998, independent online newspapers, weblogs and NGO websites have the liberty to communicate their opinions, social and political criticism across the different ethnic groups. Ethnic nationalism induced through ethnic-based mass media such as Utusan Malaysia, Sin Chew Jit Poh, Nanyang Siang Pau or Tamil Neesan would promote compartmentalisation of the society, which would not support national integration.

Online journalism, particularly the independent online newspapers, weblogs and NGO websites, also has potential to attract audience because of the different posture that it carried as compared to the conventional mass media. The in-depth presentations of news as well as social and political issues are more significant as compared to that of the mainstream mass media. Those who feel that their voices are ignored, resort to independent online journalism where they could always voice out their problems, discontentment, and discrimination against them. Udayapan's case and the Broga incinerator issue are good examples of such situation. This is one of the points that differentiate conventional media and online journalism, significantly because of the limitations and constraint of the former.

Additionally, the technological traits of online journalism that made vertical and horizontal communication possible among the audience support the ideas of more liberal online media. These possibilities through online journalism allow anyone to tell, share, discuss and debate social and political issues that would promote democracy in terms of freedom of the press and of expression. This corresponds to the 'many to many' and 'many to one' communication flow, facilitated through online journalism (Gunter 2003), while on a similar score, online journalism, especially the

online newspapers, weblogs, and NGO's websites also make the 'vertical communication flow' (Schramm 1964) significant. The bulletin boards, conference rooms or in general the 'shared and discussion sites', which can be seen in Malaysia Today, Screenshots and Malaysiakini, correspond to the communication flow described as 'many to many' as well as the vertical communication flow. Whether the government like it or not, those stories will reach their desk and need to be responded to. As one of the media experts (MD11) pointed out,

We have made some contribution in putting pressure on the government. We are also putting pressure on the mainstream media because they know that if they don't report it, other online newspapers and other online journalists will report it. I think in that sense the government will come under pressure. If you have read the mainstream media for the past four years, have they talked about police brutality? No. And why would Pak Lah [the Prime Minister] want to call for Royal Commission (IPCMC)? That's because of the pressure. The pressure doesn't come from the mainstream media. The pressure comes from online newspapers, NGOs, Bar Council and all that.

Through such online media environment, criticism and dissident opinion against state's defects and public concerned issues often gained attention especially when they were blocked by the mainstream mass media. The mini-case study on the Broga incinerator issue, Udayapan's case and police brutality issue are some of the examples. Other than those discussed in the mini-case study, the issue of the former Prime Minister's (Mahathir Mohamad) criticism against the government, regarding certain projects, which had gained outstanding public attention and discussion through independent online journalism is also a good example. As for instance, the issues of 'Approval Permit' offered to certain political affiliates to import luxurious cars for business purposes (George 2005), and the Malaysia-Singapore crooked bridge project, which Mahathir had severely criticised, had gained public interest (Queck 2003). This is not to deny that there were also issues unearthed from the past regime of Mahathir's premiership, as for instance the MAS's (Malaysian Airline System) bailout issue (Malaysiakini 2000; Jalleh 2005), which was highlighted through independent online journalism, particularly independent online newspapers, weblogs and NGO websites. Some of these issues were highly censored during the Mahathir's regime. Extended discussions and debates on such issues were later covered through the mainstream mass media. This positive quality attributed to online journalism projects a more liberal democratic space where people can discuss matters of public concern in an unrestricted public fashion, with a guarantee of freedom to express and publish their opinions.

Strengthening its freer posture, online journalism, particularly the independent online newspapers, weblogs and NGO websites, also subverts traditional power structures through public interaction and network dissemination of information. Such actions are carried out with liberty, away from strangleholds and control, and most importantly, free from the gatekeeping hands. This is evidence when prominent independent online newspapers, NGO websites and blogs are free from the powerful control of the masters of media corporations as well as the politicians. As some of the editors of independent online journalism had communicated through the interview, citizens interact within online journalism in a terrain less shaped by the efforts of media manipulators and the ruling parties, as considerably practiced through the conventional print and broadcast media.

On top of that, the social and political discourses in online journalism are also notably attributable to the work and participation of the Malaysian middle class (Abdul Rahman 2001b; Loh 2002; Siong 2004), which this study considers as exerting more supportive impact upon online journalism. As Abdul Rahman (2001a:95) observes:

There was a groundswell of protests, ...led by an increasingly vocal middle class element in a number of opposition parties and NGOs, who managed to galvanise support from substantial proportion of the masses, especially the Malays. [They were] dissatisfied with a whole gamut of issues ...of democracies, transparency, good governance, abuses of power, corruption, and of Mahathir's autocratic leadership style.

On a similar note, Francis Loh (2002:4-8) affirms that:

Since 1980s, a small but articulate group of the middle class often organised into NGOs, have promoted a new discourse and practice of participatory democracy. By the latter is meant not only the institutional checks and balances associated with free and fair elections and procedural democracy. It further refers to the creation of an autonomous public sphere that allows for alternative views of development and democratic participation to be aired, and [further enhanced] with the emergence of ...online news dailies and other independent websites.

Thus, the evidence suggests more space for democracy that supports greater public participation through online journalism. However, the effective impact of such online media is yet to be seen because online journalism is still considered novel as compared to the established mainstream mass media.

This study also finds that thorough ongoing discourses on democratic change through online journalism do not affect Malaysia's democracy as significantly as Western theories might predict (Tarrow 1994). However, this is not to deny that there



are patches of changes that reflect the effect of online journalism on democracy and national integration. As the semi-structured interviews highlight, most Malaysian opinion formers do not actively seek for a significant democratic change because they associate democratic change with instability, disorder and potential losses. For that, currently there are no distinct major changes in the Malaysian democracy. This is observed from various perspectives as follows.

Firstly, the preventive laws such as the ISA 1960, the PPPA 1984, and the Police Act 1967 are still in existence, impinging the nation and causing an apprehensive stance in the mainstream mass media. Secondly, the ethnic preference policy is still taken as the fundamental basis of Malaysia's development programme, which to some political observers, significantly favours the Malay ethnic group (Guan 2000; Hari Singh 2001). Thirdly, the mass media control through dominant ruling parties and their affiliates' ownership is still in practice and impinges on freedom of speech and expression (Mustafa 2000; Mustafa 2002; Zaharom 2002). Fourthly, the same ruling parties of the 1970s still managed to win the hearts of the electorate in the 1999 and 2004-General Elections even though the results showed that there was a drop in the overall majority votes, thus signalling public concern for democratic change.

From another perspective, there are also some unsupportive factors that discourage the people from getting involved in online journalism. This is seen when the trend of criticism, dissident and opposition opinion against political defects are seen as trademark of Malaysia's independent online journalisms. The trend of criticism and dissident opinion are mainly directed more towards the government and the ruling parties. With that, the government supporters are less attracted to such online journalism. This situation is heightened when online journalism is linked to the work of 'reformasi movement', which to a certain extent contributes the 'fear factor' or 'fear appeal' among the people. The 'oath of loyalty' made compulsory for every government servant to endorse their loyalty to the government also discourages them from getting involved with dissident voices, social and political criticism on online journalism. Consequently, there exist certain forms of hindrance against the active involvement of the people on online journalism.

Another unsupportive factor is seen within the attitude of Malaysian opinion formers. As communicated through the interview, the opinion formers, who are supposed to be part of the main players of public expression and discourse, hold

divided consciousness. There is complexity of reception of online journalism, democracy and national integration. The majority of them are contented with Malaysia's style of democracy, which some of them honoured as 'guided democracy'. Challenging the contented majority is the discontented minority who see that Malaysians need more freedom of the press, of expression and speech. On the one hand, they see the obligation to sustain social harmony, and on the other hand, they also see the obligation for a democratic change. This confirms several views on the dualism of Malaysia's middle class (Abdul Rahman 1995; Kessler 2001). As Kessler asserts:

Dualism is apparent among the middle classes of Southeast Asia. ...On the one hand, many of them recognise that they have enjoyed advantages, which they wish to hold onto and are reluctant to imperil, and they recognise that they largely owe their enjoyment of many of these benefits to government policies and sponsorship. At the same time, as they become more habituated to their middle-class position and its accompanying attitudes and habits of mind, the more sceptical many of them tend to become of government paternalism, even authoritarianism (Kessler 2001:31).

Under such dualism, this study finds that democratic change exerted through online journalism is weakened. The opinion formers or generally, the Malaysian middle classers, see that less democratic stance of the government is acceptable as it ensures economic performance, social harmony, public order and national security. Such contentment is further strengthened through past traumatic experiences of interethnic aggression that also instilled the 'fear factor' within their psyches. This fear factor also notably increases when the ruling parties frequently remind the people of the past racial conflicts. For instance, during the 1999-General Election, Aliran (1999:1) observed that:

Instead of addressing the serious issues of democracy and justice, accountability and transparency, corruption and cronyism, the integrity and the independence of the judiciary, the roles of the police and the mass media, public participation and welfare, the BN (National Front party) has resorted to the politics of fear. The BN published and broadcasted advertisements depicting scenes of violence. ...The Prime Minister himself has also been warning of the possibility of riots occurring.

This study also finds that without the support of the mainstream mass media, the impact of online journalism for significant democratic change is less effective. The results of the interview indicate that a number of editors and journalists from the mainstream mass media had implied unsupportive stances in relation to the work of online journalism. We see that the mainstream mass media carry a different standpoints from the 'freedom of expression' adhered through the independent online

journalism. However, we also see that 'limited freedom' or 'controlled freedom', which the mainstream mass media had advocated, may also mean to bow to the order of their media masters and gatekeepers, which the independent online journalism rejects.

Support from the mainstream mass media would be important in pushing the government towards democratic change, but such support significantly fails to arise in Malaysian contemporary social and political milieus due to legal and ownership constraint outlined. Such circumstances also explain the limited discourse, debate and criticism on issues that do not conform to the interests of the media masters in the mainstream mass media. Without significant support from the mainstream mass media, the work of independent online journalism would not affect Malaysia's democracy as strongly as Western theories proposed (Pickles 1970; Garrard et al. 1978; Barber 1984; Abdul Rahman 2001a). Again, this is not to deny that to a certain extent there are patches of democratic changes in Malaysia. However, the changes are limited.

## **7.2 Complexity of reception of online journalism, democracy and national integration**

The second major finding proposes complexity of reception of online journalism, democracy and national integration in the context of attitudes of a sample of opinion formers to their potential. The complexity is identified in four different settings, some of which might be seen to overlap though they reflect different situations.

First, there are different reception upon the functional features of the mainstream mass media and of online journalism, particularly the independent online newspapers, weblogs and NGO websites. This is demonstrated as such when some factions of the opinion formers are in favour of online journalism, particularly independent online newspapers, weblogs and NGO websites, where its freer environment challenges the work of the mainstream mass media. They are of the opinion that such online journalism offers 'less government control', 'easy accessibility', 'alternative media', 'less censorship', 'massive information', 'promotion of intellectualism', 'diverse news and opinions', and besides, 'it channels minority voices', 'they dare to speak' and 'challenges status quo'. The mini-case study on the

'Broga incinerator' and 'police brutality' are also evidence to support such claims that highlight conflicting functions between online journalism and the mainstream mass media, or otherwise the mainstream press. The main point to be drawn from their perceptions is that online journalism allows for 'freedom of speech and expression'. Such enthusiasm for freedom of speech and expression was further indicated when the people's freedom for peaceful assembly was blocked through stringent law, specifically the Police Act 1967 (Amnesty International 1998a; Suaram 2006). As for instance, Suaram (2006:1) reported:

On 26 March 2006, the Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) that represents more than 750,000 workers in the country together with NGOs and political parties organised a... protest assembly at KLCC<sup>55</sup> to voice the plights of the workers that were heavily burdened by the fuel price hike. Unfortunately, the peaceful assembly was stopped by the police, violently. 22 people were arrested...while many were beaten and kicked by the police.

However, on the other hand, among the sample of opinion formers, there are also those who see freedom of speech and expression results in defamation, libel, gossip, and sensationalised pieces that would be detrimental to a multiracial society such as Malaysia. Due to such attitude and perception, they see that the mainstream mass media contributes beneficially towards social harmony and the developmental goals of the state. Such posture and stance of the mainstream mass media reflects the ideology of 'guided press', which to some Malaysians is regarded as 'developmental journalism'. In addition, despite the fact that freedom of the press is impinged by various media-related laws, these opinion formers suggest that online journalism should be controlled. Along such perception, they also regard online journalism as difficult to control.

Evidence shows that the former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, who initially did not favour online journalism during his premiership (Amnesty International 2001; Aliran 2003a; Siong 2004), had utilised it when his criticism against the government were blocked through the mainstream mass media (Malaysiakini 2006d). In such a situation, many of the opinion formers see that online journalism is indeed a freer medium for public expression and discourse in a limited democratic state such as Malaysia. While on the other hand, the proponents of 'development journalism' or precisely the mainstream mass media, view online journalism, particularly independent online newspaper, weblogs and NGOs websites as detrimental to governmental programmes. Thus, the situation creates intricacies of arguments

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<sup>55</sup> KLCC stands for Kuala Lumpur City Centre.

regarding online journalism that are seen challenging the mainstream mass media (also see Agenda Daily 2006). To an extended situation such intricacies of reception may lead to social tension.

Secondly, there is complexity of reception among the opinion formers in terms of employing a full pledge democracy and sustaining social harmony. The complexity is significant when there are contradicting ideas and opinions among the opinion formers with regard to democracy and social harmony. As reflected through the interview, the opinion formers are indecisive regarding their views on the virtue of democracy and social harmony. They perceive democracy and social harmony as moving on two diametrically opposed tracks and in competition with each other. They do not perceive that both elements of democracy and social harmony could, one way or another, be merged and move forward in a common track and direction. Social harmony is generally viewed as more essential than a commitment towards the ideal of democracy. In addition, for the same reason, the opinion formers believe that the government is able to attain social harmony with limited freedom of speech and expression, with limited freedom of the press, and with limited freedom for peaceful assembly.

However, with reference to the social and political realms, Malaysia's social harmony does not reflect an entirely peaceful and harmonious environment. There were incidences which reflect that social harmony in Malaysia is frequently being challenged. Much of these issues have been discussed in the preceding chapters. The incidence of various outbreaks of ethnic aggression reflects that flawless social harmony could not be achieved without the virtue of democracy.

Thirdly, there are the complexity of reception of ideal democracy when the opinion formers acknowledged that 'Malaysia's style of democracy', or what some termed as 'guided democracy', suits the Malaysian political and social environment, and its multiracial society. They perceived that guided democracy ensures social harmony and national security, which are essential to national unity and national development. On the other hand, they perceived that 'democracy of Western style' or precisely liberal democracy would not ensure social harmony and national security for the reason that the 'Western style of democracy' prioritises individualism instead of collectivism in society as projected in 'Asian values'. In addition, Western democracy allows freedom of speech and expression that some of these opinion formers perceived as detrimental to interethnic relations and likely to increase ethnic

aggression when sensitive issues regarding culture and religion were openly challenged. However, on the other hand, they also find that 'Malaysia's style of democracy' had restricted the freedom of the press and of speech, groomed public corruption, flaws in police integrity, flaws in judiciary accountability<sup>56</sup> (Amnesty International 2005; Yap 2006), and could not entirely ensure social harmony. In some aspects, social harmony is attained through stringent preventive laws, but does not create empathetic interethnic relations. Some of the opinion formers also see that guided democracy bolsters 'parochial and bigoted' phenomena among the people, when they need to be guided in making social and political decisions. In this sense, there exists intricacy of thoughts that diverges the 'Malaysian style of democracy' and the 'Western style of democracy'.

The implementation of the NEP that has contributed to the increase in the numbers of the Malay middle class, also explains the opinion formers' positive attitudes towards 'Malaysia's style of democracy'. This significantly encouraged Malaysian elites, and many of its politicians from the dominant ruling parties, to be complacent towards the current democratic environment (Abdul Rahman 2001a: 89) and thus to subtly reject efforts for democratic change (Munro-Kua 1996; Derichs 2004). Some of the opinion formers also perceived that the contemporary limited democratic practices are significant contributors to the present economic achievement. This is proven when during the last two decades before the 1997-financial crisis, Malaysia's average GDP growth continuously reach the eight percent per annum mark, which highlights profound achievement as compared to other third world nations (Jomo 1990). However, it was also within those two decades that Malaysia's democracy was challenged as substandard to that of liberal democracy (Vorys 1975; Munro-Kua 1996; Teik and Wah 2002). Thus, some of the opinion formers have accepted an autocratic system as exemplified through guided democracy that benefits economic achievement. On the other hand, they also perceived that the 'liberal democracy of the West' is not pragmatic in the Malaysian context. Yet, within the environment of guided democracy, they could not find freedom of speech, but when a way to speak out is found, they perceived that it would jeopardise social harmony.

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<sup>56</sup> As for instance, Alvin Yap (2006:1) of Malaysiakini reported: 'The Bar Council has received strong backing for its call to probe the 1988 judicial crisis which saw the Supreme Court compromised by then prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad's sacking of Lord President Salleh Abbas and other top judges. Earlier, the Bar Council - which represents the country's 12,000 lawyers - urged the government to reopen investigations into events that led to Malaysia's darkest hours in judicial history.'

Fourthly, the opinion formers are inconsistent regarding their receptions towards government's efforts for national integration. Most of them are pessimistic about national integration as they perceived that the current moves towards national integration fail to establish empathetic interethnic relations, at a time when national integration is principally important for national unity. The ethnic-based school system, the ethnic-based mass media, political institutions that are established along ethnic lines, and the ethnic preferential policy, explained some of the contributory factors to such pessimism. Under these elements of ethnic separation, the opinion formers see that interethnic relationship in Malaysia falters, whenever an interethnic problem arise (see Hari Singh 2001). On a similar note, this study also finds that social harmony in Malaysia is not a true reflection of national integration, but is more as a result of the effective use of stringent laws to curb ethnic aggression. Generally, open discussions and debates on issues that touch on culture, religion and Malay supremacy for better interethnic understanding are not encouraged through the mainstream mass media.

On top of that, the Malaysian government does not show significant enthusiasm for closer interethnic relations such as ethnic assimilation, or cultural and political integration. Some of the ruling elites even perceived that thorough social integration would deteriorate the 'Malayness', while 'Malayness' and Malay political supremacy are very important to the dominant ruling party as well as to the dominant ethnic group. In addition, in the very beginning of the formation of Malaysia, the Federal Constitution was designed in such a way that it allows subtle space for ethnic nationalism among the different ethnic groups. This is shown in Article 152, which in terms of the use of communicative ethnic-based language among the people, is principally contradictory to Article 153 that points out the use of the national language (Jones 1998:65-66) that espoused Malaysian nationalism. As a point of fact, even Malaysian leaders were inconsistent about the direction of national integration. For instance, Tun Razak's (the Second Prime Minister) conception of national integration is different to that of Mahathir's conception. Razak's was inclined to pluralism (Milne and Mauzy 1978: 366), while the former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, during his earlier premiership was more interested towards ethnic assimilation with 'Malayness' as the dominant culture (Munro-Kua 1996:116). Much later in 1995, Mahathir changed his conception of national integration towards pluralism (Wah 2002: 33). Precisely, such complexity of thoughts highlights differences between the need for national integration and the unsupportive socio-political realm.

### 7.3 Future research

This thesis is not the first that studies the significance of online journalism in relation to democracy, but it is the first to associate 'Malaysian online journalism' with 'democracy, and national integration'. Therefore, it is expected that the findings of this study would contribute new thoughts and insights on the role of online journalism as well as 'the new philosophy of journalism' in relation to Malaysia's democracy and national integration.

Since online journalism is still new to most Malaysians, moving from its infancy towards maturity, there are other related areas of research that could be embarked on. Among others such as 'the role of online journalism in promoting empathetic relationships among the different ethnic groups' or 'the implication of criticism and dissident discourses through online journalism on Malaysia's socio-political landscape'. In Malaysia, as this thesis finds, there is trend of competition between the mainstream mass media and online journalism, particularly the independent online newspaper (see Agenda Daily 2006). Therefore, it may also be essential to understand 'how competition between online and offline mass media affects Malaysia's public sphere'. Besides that, it would also be useful to explore 'the attitudes of Malaysian mainstream mass media journalists towards independent online newspaper'.

The emergence of ICT is changing the way news is being produced, disseminated and accessed. Under such circumstances, the network society is increasingly challenging the traditional way of accessing news (Pavlik 1997; Allen 2000; Castells 2000; Pavlik 2001; Stovall 2004). In this regard, it is important to examine 'the changing role of Malaysian mainstream mass media organizations in relation to the emergence of the network society' as well as, 'how do the mainstream mass media adjust and adapt their role with the emergence and mass accessibility of online journalism?' The new role of the mainstream mass media in this era of ICT also affects the effort for national integration as well as the democratic practices of developing nations like Malaysia. Media control is becoming less relevant when freedoms of the press and of expression are seen as vibrant within online journalism. Such studies are important to help policy-makers to reconsider their strategies and programmes for enhancing interethnic understanding, and creating empathetic race relations in place of functional relations.



# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1 Interviewee's Guide



Centre for Mass Communication Research  
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Leicester, United Kingdom

### *Interviewee's Guide*

Thanks for giving me your most kind consent to be interviewed. This interview is conducted as a requirement for a PhD research project entitled 'Online Journalism, Democracy and National Integration: A Case Study of Malaysia'. The agenda of this interview is for you to voice out your opinions freely at your own liberty on issues pertinent to the study.

You have been selected for this interview because you are a recognised and respected figure with relevant expertise, background and experience in at least one of the following areas: journalism, democracy, and national integration. As I am informed, you are also familiar with some of the Malaysian online journalisms. More importantly your profile fits the focus of the research.

For your information, online journalism in this interview refers to quality news and information posted on the Internet where people can read, see and hear them through their computers and other similar device. Therefore online journalism includes mainstream and independent online newspapers like Malaysiakini, Agenda Daily, Utusan Online, NST online, weblogs such as Screenshots, Sharir@Umno.com and NGOs websites like Aliran, Suaram, Hakam, FOMCA and CAP. In general, the term democracy indicates a form of government where all the state's decisions are exercised directly or indirectly by a majority of its citizenry through a fair elective process, while national integration is defined as unification of different ethnic groups manifested as united Malaysian society that shares fundamental values identifiable as Malaysian.

The purpose of this interview is to gather as much information as possible drawn from your ideas, views, opinions, stories, experiences and expertise on areas of online journalism, democracy and national integration within the parameter of Malaysian affairs and society. In line with the research scope, interview questions are designed to gain responses on the concerned issues.

Your name and identity will be treated as confidential; therefore only a second person pronoun be it 'Sir/Madam/Miss' or your conferred title of 'Dato'/Datin' will be used in this interview without mentioning your respective name.

This interview will take between 30 minutes and an hour. However, if you are comfortable and willing to forward more views and opinions, you are most welcome to spend more time with me.

This interview will be tape-recorded and the recordings will strictly be used for the research purposes only.

Your participation and cooperation are very much appreciated.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rahmat Ghazali', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Rahmat Ghazali**

Researcher / Interviewer

Centre for Mass Communication Research,

University of Leicester, United Kingdom

Email: rghazali22@yahoo.co.uk

## Appendix 2

### Letter of Acknowledgment



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Leicester LE1 7RH  
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Tel: +44 (0) 116 252 3863  
Fax: +44 (0) 116 252 3874

Date: 20<sup>th</sup> Feb 2004

Mr/Madam/Miss

.....  
.....  
.....

Dear Sir / Madam,

This is to certify that **Mr Rahmat Ghazali (IC: 580922-71-5023)** is a PhD candidate of the Centre for Mass Communication Research, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Leicester, United Kingdom.

He is currently conducting a research entitled 'Online Journalism, Democracy and National Integration: A Case Study of Malaysia'. For this purpose, he is carrying out interviews to gather relevant information on areas of journalism, democracy, and national integration. You have been selected as one of the respected interviewees for the reason that your profile fits the research requirement. However your name and identity will be treated as confidential.

We would be happy if you could spare between 30 minutes and an hour of your time for this interview.

Your participation and cooperation is very much appreciated.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "G. Youngs".

**Dr Gillian Youngs**

PhD Supervisor

Senior Lecturer and Course Director MA Globalisation and Communications  
Department of Politics and Centre for Mass Communication Research  
University of Leicester

### Appendix 3

#### List of Documentary Evidence

Themes	Major documents / resources
<b>Malaysian history; colonialism, communism, and ethnicity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A History of Malaysia by W Andaya and Y Andaya, 1982, MacMillan Press, London</li> <li>• Affirmative Action Policy in Malaysia to Restructure Society, to Eradicate Poverty by Firdaus Abdullah, 1997, Ethnic Studies Report <b>15</b></li> <li>• Malaysia: Selected Historical Readings by Bastin and Winks, 1996, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur.</li> </ul>
<b>Malaysian post colonial politics and Independence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Democracy Without Consensus: Communalism and Political Stability in Malaysia by K v Vorys, 1975, Princeton University Press, Princeton</li> <li>• Malaysia: Economic Expansion and National Unity by J M Gullick, 1981, Ernest Benn, London</li> <li>• A History of Modern Malaya by K G Tregonning, 1964, Eastern Universities Press, London</li> </ul>
<b>Malaysian interethnic relation and national integration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Malaysian Mosaic: Perspectives from a Poly-Ethnic Society by Judith Nagata, 1979, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver</li> <li>• Ethnic Relations in Peninsular Malaysia: The Cultural and Economic Dimensions by Lee Hock Guan, 2000, Social and Cultural Issues (1)</li> <li>• Nationalism and National Integration by A H Birch, 1989, Unwin Hyman, London</li> <li>• The May Thirteenth Incident and Democracy in Malaysia by Goh Cheng Teik, 1971, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur</li> <li>• Colonial Policy and Practice by J S Furnival, 1956, New York University Press, New York</li> <li>• May 13: Before and After by T. A Rahman, 1969, Utusan Melayu Press, Kuala Lumpur</li> <li>• Malaysian Politics and Government Jayum A Jawan, 2003, Karisma Publication, Shah Alam</li> <li>• 13 May 1969: A historical Survey of Sino-Malay Relations by Leon Comber, 1983, Heinemann Asia, Kuala Lumpur</li> </ul>
<b>Malaysian democracy and mass media setting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Malaysian Politics: The Second Generation by Gordon P Means, 1991, Oxford University Press, Singapore</li> <li>• Authoritarian Populism In Malaysia by Munro-Kua, 1996, Macmillan Press Ltd, London</li> <li>• Politics and Government in Malaysia by Milne and Mauzy, 1997, Oxford University Press, Singapore</li> <li>• Semi-Democracy in Malaysia: Withstanding the Pressures for Regime Change W Case, 1993, Pacific Affairs <b>66</b></li> <li>• Guided Democracy in Indonesia by Justus Kroef, 1957, Far Eastern Survey <b>26</b></li> <li>• Indonesia's guided democracy by Bill Guerin, 2001, Retrieved from <a href="http://www.atimes.com/se-asia/CG31Ae04.html">http://www.atimes.com/se-asia/CG31Ae04.html</a></li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices by K Boo Teik and F L K Wah, 2002, Curzon Press, Surrey</li> <li>• The Structure of the Media Industry: Implications for Democracy by Zaharom Nain, 2002, Curzon Press, Richmond</li> <li>• Commercialisation with a conscience? Restoring the credibility of the Malaysian media by Zaharom Nain, 1996, Aliran Monthly</li> <li>• Ownership and control of the Malaysian Media by Z Nain and M K Anuar, 1998, Media Development 4</li> <li>• Newspaper in Asia; Contemporary Trend and Problems by J A Lent, 1982, Heinemann Asia, Singapore</li> </ul>
<b>Online journalism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rhetoric and Reality: the Internet Challenge for Democracy in Asia by I Banerjee, 2003, Times Media Private Limited, Singapore</li> <li>• Cyber democracy in Asia: issues, challenges and prospects by I Banerjee, 2004, Freidrich Naumann Foundation, Bangkok</li> <li>• Asian Cyberactivisim: Freedom of Expression and Media Censorship by Steven Gan, Gomez and Johannen, 2004, Freidrich Naumann Foundation, Bangkok</li> <li>• The Internet, reformasi and democratisation in Malaysia by J P Abbott, 2004, RoutledgeCurzon, London</li> <li>• Malaysiakini: treading a tightrope of political pressure and market factors by Siong, 2004, Freidrich Naumann Foundation, Bangkok</li> <li>• News and the Net by B Gunter, 2003</li> <li>• Online Journalism: A Critical Primer by J Hall, 2001, Pluto Press, London</li> <li>• Introduction to Online Journalism: Publishing News and Information by R D Wolk, 2001, Allyn and Bacon, Boston</li> </ul>

## Appendix 4 Interviewees' Data

GOVERNMENT ORGANISATION LEADER								
No	Group Code	Post	Age	Gender	Ethnic	Date of Interview	Time of Interview	Place of Interview
1	GO1	Executive Officer of National Accreditation Syndicate	39	Male	Malay	21.7.2004	10.00	Shah Alam
2	GO2	Magistrate	42	Male	Malay	15.7.2004	10.00	Putrajaya
3	GO3	Director of BERNAMA	50	Male	Malay	30.7.2004	14.00	Kuala Lumpur
4	GO4	Radio Station (Government's owned) Manager	46	Male	Malay	25.4.2004	11.00	Shah Alam
5	GO5	Malaysian Human Rights Commissioner	54	Male	Malay	6.5.2004	20.00	Sungai Buluh
6	GO6	Director of Selangor National Unity and Integration Department	52	Male	Indian	4.7.2004	10.00	Kuala Lumpur
7	GO7	Manager of BERNAMA.Com	46	Female	Malay	11.5.2004	15.00	Kuala Lumpur
8	GO8	Director General of Malaysia's Information Department	50	Male	Malay	3.5.2004	15.00	Kuala Lumpur
9	GO9	Legal Advisor and Lawyer	52	Male	Indian	14.5.2004	16.00	Shah Alam
10	GO10	General Accountant	50	Male	Malay	18.7.2004	16.00	Kuala Lumpur
NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATION LEADER								
No	Group Code	Post	Age	Gender	Ethnic	Date of Interview	Time of Interview	Place of Interview
11	NGO1	Vice Secretary of Consumer Association	46	Male	Malay	20.4.2004	10.00	Shah Alam
12	NGO2	Executive Officer of AWAM	34	Female	Chinese	3.5.2004	9.30	Kuala Lumpur
13	NGO3	President of JUST	51	Male	Indian	5.4.2004	15.00	Petaling Jaya
14	NGO4	Executive Member of Malaysian Islamic Youth Association	46	Male	Malay	1.5.2004	20.00	Shah Alam
15	NGO5	President of Malaysian Young Professional and Entrepreneurs Chamber (MYPEC)	36	Male	Malay	20.7.2004	10.30	Kuala Lumpur
16	NGO6	President of Malaysia Bar Council	51	Male	Indian	6.5.2004	10.30	Kuala Lumpur
17	NGO7	Executive Officer of Malaysian Public Relation Association	48	Female	Indian	12.4.2004	11.00	Shah Alam
18	NGO8	Vice President of Malaysian Trade Union Council	50	Male	Indian	30.4.2004	10.30	Petaling Jaya
19	NGO9	Executive Member of Malaysian Public Relation Association	45	Male	Malay	16.5.2004	11.15	Kuala Lumpur
20	NGO10	Executive Member of Malaysian Assoc. of Counsellors	45	Female	Malay	2.5.2004	21.00	Serdang

## MEDIA PRACTITIONER

No	Group Code	Post	Age	Gender	Ethnic	Date of Interview	Time of Interview	Place of Interview
21	MD1	Manager of Mainstream Newspaper (English)	46	Male	Malay	20.7.2004	15.30	Kuala Lumpur
22	MD2	Senior Manager of Mainstream Newspaper (English)	45	Male	Malay	15.4.2004	15.00	Kuala Lumpur
23	MD3	Member of Board of Director (DNA Communication)	47	Male	Malay	4.5.2004	10.00	Shah Alam
24	MD4	Editor/Journalist of Mainstream Online Newspaper (Malay)	42	Male	Malay	6.5.2004	15.00	Shah Alam
25	MD5	TV (Corporation) Chief Executive	49	Male	Malay	1.7.2004	10.30	Kuala Lumpur
26	MD6	Journalist of Mainstream Newspaper (Chinese)	37	Male	Chinese	8.6.2004	11.30	Kuala Lumpur
27	MD7	Editor/Journalist of Mainstream Newspaper (Chinese)	39	Female	Chinese	10.6.2004	10.30	Kuala Lumpur
28	MD8	Editor/Journalist of Independent Online Newspaper	48	Male	Malay	15.5.2004	13.00	Kuala Lumpur
29	MD9	Editor-in-Chief of Independent Online Newspaper	48	Male	Malay	13.6.2004	10.45	Daman-sara
30	MD10	Manager of English Mainstream Newspaper	52	Male	Indian	21.4.2004	11.00	Kuala Lumpur
31	MD11	Editor-in-Chief of Independent Online Newspaper	43	Male	Chinese	15.4.2004	11.30	Kuala Lumpur
32	MD12	Editor/Journalist of Mainstream Newspaper (Chinese)	50	Male	Chinese	15.3.2004	14.30	Kuala Lumpur
33	MD13	Editor of Mainstream Online Newspaper (English)	39	Male	Chinese	16.4.2004	11.30	Kuala Lumpur
34	MD14	Editor of Mainstream Newspaper (English)	43	Male	Chinese	6.4.2004	10.30	Daman-sara
35	MD15	Editor/Journalist of Mainstream Newspaper (Malay)	47	Male	Malay	18.4.2004	11.30	Shah Alam

## ACADEMICIAN

No	Group Code	Post	Age	Gender	Ethnic	Date of Interview	Time of Interview	Place of Interview
36	AC1	Associate Professor, PhD (Journalism Studies)	47	Female	Malay	6.3.2004	10.00	Shah Alam
37	AC2	Associate Professor, Dean (Communication Studies)	49	Male	Malay	8.4.2004	14.00	Shah Alam
38	AC3	Senior Lecturer (Media Studies)	47	Male	Malay	20.5.2004	11.00	Kuala Lumpur
39	AC4	Associate Professor, PhD (Journalism Studies)	47	Male	Malay	25.4.2004	15.00	Kuala Lumpur
40	AC5	Associate Professor, PhD (Law Studies)	57	Male	Indian	5.3.2004	10.00	Shah Alam
41	AC6	Associate Professor, PhD (Journalism Studies)	48	Male	Malay	27.4.2004	10.00	Subang Jaya
42	AC7	Senior Lecturer, PhD (Media Studies)	47	Male	Malay	15.4.2004	9.30	Bangi
43	AC8	Associate Professor, PhD (Communication Studies)	46	Male	Chinese	12.5.2004	15.00	Shah Alam
44	AC9	Associate Professor, PhD (Communication Studies)	51	Female	Malay	28.4.2004	9.30	Sintok

45	AC10	Senior Lecturer (Communication Studies)	44	Male	Malay	30.4.2004	15.30	Serdang
46	AC11	Senior Lecturer (Law Studies)	43	Female	Malay	20.3.2004	11.30	Kuala Lumpur
47	AC12	Associate Professor, PhD (Communication Studies)	48	Male	Malay	10.3.2004	11.00	Gombak
48	AC13	Associate Professor, PhD (Law Studies)	45	Female	Malay	21.4.2004	11.00	Shah Alam



## Appendix 5

### An Example of Transcribed Interview

**CODE: MD11**

**Respondent's Name:** .....

**Ethnic:** Chinese

**Gender:** Male

**Age:** 43

**Position:** Media Person, Editor-in-Chief

**Organisation:** Independent Online Newspaper

**Education:** Bachelor Degree

**Date:** April 15, 2004

**Day:** Thursday

**Time:** 11.30 am

**Venue:** Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur

**1. (i) What is your opinion of the democratic practice in Malaysia?**

**Answer:** Err..err I think there is definitely a aa.. aa.. deficit in democracy in Malaysia. Aa..aa there are a lot of thing that is not right, I think a lot of people aa... aaa ...understand it. throughout the past few decades. I think we gone through the recent election, and though you know we do have election for every four five years at least but people tend to see that you know there is not aaa.. there is still a lack of democracy because democracy is not just, you know, going to the ballot box every few years that you need to have vibrant civil society, you need to have aa..aa. a free media, you need to have also local election, you know, in the local council and all that, you know that kind of democracy on the ground so that people can actually make decision which is affecting their lives, daily lives, and all that kind of things it not just making decision every five years, or something like that. So I think aaa.. aa.. and because of all that that Malaysia doesn't have as I say you know free media, aa.. aa.. that kind of aa..aa.. the fact that, you know, there is also a lot of thing that is lacking. And I think we got to the point where we believe that aaa... aaa.. that, you know, we need to have general democracy, and for that one of the things would be to ensure that the media is free.

**1. (ii) If you were to rank Malaysia's democracy in a Likerts scale of 'very good', 'good', 'fair', 'bad' and 'very bad', where would you rank it?**

VERY GOOD [ ]      GOOD [ ]      FAIR [ ]      BAD [ ]      VERY BAD [ ✓ ]

**2. What would be your choice if you were to choose between democratic idealism and social harmony?**

**Answer:**

I think that is a question that was asked by a lot of people. I don't think it is really a choice, really, I think we want both. I think its not either its not a question, either one or either this or the other. I think journalists are responsible people. We be trained to report the truth and to be responsible as well. I think there is a code of ethic. We know exactly what can be reported and what cannot be reported. Even in Malaysiakini, there is aaa.. aaa a process of check and balance, you know, aa.. aa.. our stories are checked through by at least two person before it goes out. And also I think aa..aa we do know that there are sensitive area, which, you know, which sometimes you know aa.. aa.. we thought aa.. aa..perhaps you know aa.. aa we would not going to. But I think it really depends on the maturity of the society. Aa.. aa are we ready for a discussion on, say for instance, race, religion and all that. And I think, you know, to a certain extend yes. Aa..aa.. and I think Malaysiakini has, you know, done that through not just in our news stories, but also in our columns and opinions pieces but also in our letters and

that is very important. We have done that and, and, and I think you know, we can do it even talking about discussing taboo topic aa.. aa.. to the point where I think, you know aaa...aa people come to the understanding that such discussion can actually happened without riot on the street. I think that is important, because I think that Malaysia has, has matured, you know, all throughout these years that, you know, you cannot used the issue of that there will be riot on the street as an excuse to scuffle the media, because I think given the freedom the journalist can be responsible too that the first thing that they would do is not to write inflammatory you know article in such a way that there will be riot on the street. I think you know, if you were to look at the past the people who are actually you know stride out on the street are the politicians not the journalists. So you know, so in that sense I think you know that it is important that we recognise that solely not really a choice between whether we want social quality and peace and all that and, and press freedom. I think we want both. Now is a question of how we can, you know, make sure that the society can actually enjoy both, you know, and that that there is such a thing. Its not you know that because we need to have peace and stability and all that we can forget about press freedom. I don't think that's really a choice.

### **3. (i) What is your opinion regarding the “Freedom of the Press’ in Malaysia?**

#### **Answer:**

I think you know a lot of people would argue that there is a lack of freedom, press freedom in Malaysia aa I think you know, that Malaysiakini, the success of Malaysiakini also shows that there is a demand for independent newspaper, independent commentary, opinion and all that, so I ... I think aaa.. Malaysia has got to the point where there is aaa.. an expression of dissatisfaction with the media that we have right now, not just print media but also TV and radio and all that, so I think aaa you know being a journalist for also, I work in the mainstream media for a while, I can.. I do know that you know, self-censorship is an obsession in the media, it happens, you know, we are not talking about everyday, we are talking about every hour. Really everything that come through aa through the editorial room people will be looking at how to write in such a way that would not, you know, will not bring up errr. would not create problem for the government, partly because they are worried about the fact that Minister would call them the next day, or that the police will call them, you know, or what ever. So I think errr.. errr.. the editor do self-censor themselves and to the point where the journalist also self-censor themselves aaa.. aaa.. you know, you may have, you know people eerrr.. journalism student from fresh from university or whatever it is, they may have, you know, certain ideas about what the media is suppose to be, but when they start working they find that it's a bit its quite different, the reality is different, so I think aa.. and then they.. they you know.. after a while they would fit into that reality, you know, they would, because everything that they write you know is being changed aaa sometime its not being use you know so you would go to the point where you would start wanting to please your editor, aaa.. and.. and that you know you would write to, the way they want you to write in order to get your story in, you would write in such a way that you know you would pass through the editorial.. the editorial desk. Otherwise you feel that you know you have been working as a journalist and yet you don't get, you don't see your story publish because in everything you write you know not being publish or the editor is being, you know, or you being seeing as being a difficult journalist, why you have been making so much problems for everybody and I was one of those difficult journalists when I was working for the SUN you know, so it is, it is like that you know after a while you know a lot of them of them, I'm not saying everyone, I think there is still a few good journalists in the mainstream media, people are still giving problems to the editors and that a good thing in some way aaa.. but a lot of them would decide to get the easy way out meaning that you write they that they want you to write. So I think that is the saddest part in Malaysian journalism in the sense that we see the aaa.. very clearly in terms of government censorship you know you got the licensing system you got aaa.. all the different Acts and all that, that is very obvious and you can see for everybody, but self-censorship is something that is unseen it happens in the mind of the journalists and the editors. Its not happening in here, people cannot see it and that's why it's so insidious. It is harder for us to campaign against self-censorship than against the government self-censorship. So I think you know, in that sense it is a major problem in Malaysia journalism.

**3. (ii) How would you rank Malaysia's press freedom under a Likert's scale of 'very good', 'good', 'fair', 'bad' and 'very bad'?**

VERY GOOD [ ]      GOOD [ ]      FAIR [ ]      BAD [ ✓ ]      VERY BAD [ ]

**4. What is your opinion of the pros and cons (advantages and disadvantages) of online journalism in Malaysia?**

**Answer:**

There are a lot of disadvantages. I think there is only one advantage over the mainstream media and that advantage is that we do not have to apply for licence. That is the only advantage we have. We do not have to worry about ministers calling us out and complain about whatever story that we have written. If they go and complain we would write about it and it would become a news story so that I think, in fact surprisingly we do not get any that kind of direct pressure ministers because they know that they cannot actually put pressure on us because if they call us out, if Zainuddin Mydin or whoever call us out and complain, it becomes a news story and know that they have been watch also. So we don't keep it quiet. So I think aaa.. the good thing is yeah.. that we don't have to worry about the fact that the government can actually shut us down by using the licensing system. They can shut us down using other means, but that is harder. You know, the Sedition Act, whatever it is, they come and raid us off whatever it is, that is harder. Its quite easy if don't a license you will be made illegal. The good thing is that the people are watching but I think you know if there have a licensing system for Malaysiakini, it will be much harder for us because you know people will say the law is there, you broke the law. So what you know, but good thing is there is no such law. So we can operate legally. So that is the advantage, we don't have to worry about the government shutting us down. But the disadvantages are definitely a lot. I think number one we do not have press passes. You know we are not consider, we are not recognised as journalists. The press passes are being issued by the Information Ministry our application have been rejected, so we our journalist are basically going in there you know covering function and all that basically based on our very own press tag, you know, we don't have the official press tag. Now err.. the good thing is that most people allow us.. I think Malaysiakini has been recognised to the point where our journalists are recognised as journalist. That's the good thing about it, but of course there are still few people who do not recognise Malaysiakini. Police have been.. aaa.. they have a running ban on Malaysikini, they won't allow us into any of their function, press conferences or whatever. Paliarment try to ban us but now after some protest they decided to allow us in. We said look, this is a public place, why couldn't we aaa.. go in. So Ministers sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. It depends on the situation. If they got something happy to announce they allow us in, but something, you know, if they know that we are going to ask them difficult question, they won't allow us in. It depends, even Pak Lah himself. So it depends on the situation. In fact you know sometimes it depends on not on the minister but on the people who are the political secretary or the press secretary of the minister. They are the gate keeper, you know, they are the one who decide who to let in the press conference and sometimes we go above them, you know, for instance, there was one incident where one of our journalists were not allowed into the press conference by Pak Lahs aide. That was like two years ago. Pak Lah was dealing with a speech at the main hall and after that he was supposed to go into a smaller room for a press conference so the journalists are ready waiting inside the small room. But when our journalist wanted to get in there he was stop by one of the aides. So our journalist waited outside the conference room and waited for Pak Lah to walk in and then asked Pak Lah directly. Is Malaysiakini being banned? And of course, you know, Pak Lah being a nice guy said "No no please come in." So I think that kind of situation we have to take that kind of code and un-code situation to make sure our journalist can get in. So it is a problem in the sense that our journalists do not have, do not feel that they have the recognition as a journalist without the press tag that they have to always fight their way into the function, press conferences and all that. So that one thing. Other kind of aaa... problem that we face is definitely is financial, that is still a major question. We have gone into a subscription model; we are making half of our money income through subscription, the other half we still need to raise from through donation, through grant, whatever it is. We still haven't, we have been breaking even (no loss

and no profit) every year. This is a good thing partly because we have been quite prudent in our running the operation of Malaysiakini. But you know we haven't got to the point where we can earn all of our money through subscription alone. That would take maybe another a few more years, because I think Malaysians just like everybody else are still hesitant in paying on content for the internet. That is something that we have to somehow note, we hope that our readers will come around sooner or latter. But it will take time. So I think, and also the technology is not good enough to make sure that payment system is smooth because right now we have credit card, people do not like to use credit card, so you have to think of all the other mechanism and in fact a lot of people still using old way of subscribing Malaysiakini. Meaning that they go to Maybank, because we got a Maybank account, they queue up, they put in RM50 or RM100, they take the receipt and they go and fax it to us. That is really, really long process. You know that it something that we hope that people would not have to go through because you know how many people want to do something like that. So we are looking at some of the ways, working with some other telephone company to see whether, you know, when they pay their phone bill they can actually pay for Malaysiakini as well. Things like that will make it a lot easier. Payment system is a problem. Other problem would be yeah I think because of the fact we are being seen as critical for the government people tend to aaa.. Advertisers tend to be a bit uneasy about advertising in Malaysiakini. So much so actually without earning so much advertising so that ..and also I think in our first few years there were a lot of pressures being put on advertisers on ours.. I can tell you a few incidences where our advertisers pull out because they receive phone calls also pressure from their own board of directors, whatever it is, including big multinational. I think things will hopefully change where people will recognise that we are independent news organisation and that they should not fear to advertise in Malaysiakini and all that, and also depend on the attitude of the government, whether they still treat Malaysiakini as an adversary or whether they.. they treat us as a proper media organisation. I think things are changing with the government now with the new administration, but I think you know it is still a long way to go. Pak Lah hasn't said much about press freedom. He has been a little bit more open towards Malaysiakini, he invited us to talk to him, and all that, but I think there still a long way to go for him to, not for him for his people, for his party and for all the other component parties to come and see Malaysiakini as not as an enemy but as, you know as an important people voice, you know, that can help in strengthening, you know, and also acting as a feed back for the government for them to know what is happening on the ground and also providing suggestions and all that stuff that we can play a role there not as an enemy. I think it will take time. There are a lot of other problems, in terms of lack of staff, since carrying the election over the pass few weeks was a nightmare for us. We have only six journalists, how we are going to cover the whole country with six journalists? So it is not easy. We deploy one person in Penang, one person in Kedah, one person in Trengganu, and that's all we can afford. The rest have to stay here. One person will cover Federal Territory, Kuala Lumpur and all that. So it is not much ready, but I think we did pretty well, even the kind of constraint we are hindered, so we would like to have a lot more people but I think our income doesn't really allow us to expend to the extend that we do not want to over stretch ourselves, because no point borrowing money and not knowing when we can actually repay. So, we are happy with what we have right now because we know we can sustain the level of operation that we have right now without much problem but if we got we are to hire more people and to expend, we are going to have problem. So we thought that perhaps we do not want to do that because we cannot compare Malaysiakini with The Star, Berita Harian, and all that, their news desk is much much bigger. They have you know one hundred and up to two hundred people; there is no competition. We don't have that kind of resources that they can throw. So what we do is simply because with the lack of resources that we have we tend to be varial-focus in our news reporting. We know what we want to do what we do not want to do. Every morning we have our meeting here we know instantly this is the story that we want to do because we think that these are stories that we can do better than the mainstream papers and people come to Malaysiakini because of that additional extra that they could get it. And we don't want to cover crime story, we don't want to cover accident story, you know because we don't have to. We want to do that people have been asking me to cover sport and all that stuff, well you know we don't have the capacity to do that. So we leave it up. If there is an accident out there aaa and if it involve politician, we would report it. But if it is just another accident, we won't report it. So we know exactly what we want. So we are quite focus in our story, you know, the way we run our news desk. So in

that sense it will be easier for us, otherwise we try to do everything and we'll get all burnt out. That's not very good.

**4 (ii) So do have any plan to produce a print version to overcome the press permit, problem as well as journalist perception?**

**Answer:**

In fact we have applied for the license (for print version) we applied, we put in the application for weekly for Malaysiakini, aaa two years ago. We were testing the government in terms we put in proper application and all that we didn't expect Mahathir to do anything but now Pak Lah is in power, they are putting some pressure on him. And the good thing so far, they haven't say no, even though it has all ready been two years.. they haven't say that they rejected the application. That's the good thing about it. Bad thing it that of course you know they said "Wait, wait, wait..". So yeah we are waiting but I think definitely we want to go print. But it would not be a daily it will be a weekly because I don't think we have the capacity to do it daily.

**5. In terms of national policies and aspirations, do you think that the current development of Malaysian online journalism is on the right track?**

**Answer:**

I think Pak Lah is very keen and said that "I want to here the truth, I want you to speak the truth, I think that Malaysiakini is doing that. We are not malicious that we want to hentam (attack) the government all the time. I think you know, if the government aaa.. we would pinpoint areas if the government is weak. Pak Lah doesn't know about it, we'll tell them aaa. For instance (Minister X) you know the story about the fact as a minister you are not suppose to be involve in business. We found out he had this about.. aaa.. you know.. there was a law suit against him which you know... and there were some research done about the fact that he still owning a company. So we make a news story about it. I don't know whether that have any impact, but (Minister X) was not appointed as a Minister anymore, he was dropped. So I think it's a good thing in that sense you need Ministers who are honest, who would do their work without any conflict of interest, you know and all that and Pak Lah should know about it. I think Pak Lah is a good man personally. I do not, may not have that kind of impression of the other people around him. Some people especially those who have been long time in the government, may be tainted with allegation, corruption and all that. I think Pak Lah should be informed about it, and I think Malaysia kini is playing a role. I think the other thing that Malaysiakini is doing is also bringing some kind of inter-culture and inter-religious dialogue within Malaysiakini, because I think as you know we could look at the mainstream media, the Malays will read the bahasa (Malay) papers, the Chinese will read Chinese papers, only a certain group of elite will read the English papers. I think for Malaysiakini our demographic is quite different. It is very very multiracial. You look at our subscribers and all that it is completely 40%, 50% are Malays, and all that more or less reflecting what is happening out there. So in that sense we are, if you look at the latest column you can see we are bringing different races, different people of different religion to come and discuss issues that are considered taboo. But I think it has to be discussed because if Malaysia want, you know, if Malaysia is to remain multiracial, multicultural and multi-religion society, you cannot hide all these problems that somehow you know, different people different group of people, we need to understand how other people feel and then come to curb to that try to negotiate some kind of a solution to whatever our angst are. Sometimes the criticism may not be fair and there will be responses from the other group and people will see reason, sxo that kind of discussion, and all that that. So I think aaa.. we are doing that though people will criticise us for touching taboo, sensitive issues and all that. I think we have matured, after thirty years after 1969 and all that, I think Malaysians can discuss those issues in a level headed manner without going out for riot and all that. I think there are definitely other areas; there are certain areas that I would not go to. I would not allow say for instance, Christians defending Christianity and attacking Islam. I would not allow vice versa, because that issue has been going on for 2000 years. Debating that issue in Malaysiakini would not resolve the problem. So things like that I would not allow and we do receive a lot of stuff like that. So are certain boundaries that I

would draw. And I think you know even issue of special privileges (to Malays) and all that. Sometimes we look at the situation and see whether that can be done or not. So it is not something that we would do just like that you know, we make decision, we think ok well Mahathir talk about trying to get the Malays to start relying on themselves and not to depend too much on Malay special privileges. There is in certain extent self-censorship here because we recognised that Malaysia is a multi-religion, multi-cultural nation. There will be sensitivity but we decide on how far we think, you know, discussion on all those sensitive topics can be done. We don't do it without thinking. We made decision and those are hard decision, very hard decision to make.

**5. (ii) You successfully did something to (Minister X) case, but we can see that the new cabinet line-up is not as what people had been expected. What do you think about that?**

**Answer:**

I agree, I think there is aa... there is definitely a lot of people were disappointed and you don't get that, if you read the STAR, or Berita Harian, or Utusan and all that. I think that is again a way for Malaysiakini, a contribution of Malaysiakini to show that. The mainstream media may want to hide it but this is how a lot of people feel that the cabinet, the recent cabinet, the new cabinet is a disappointment. People have expected a lot from Pak Lah and he did not manage to deliver. There is still a lot of people that shouldn't be in the cabinet, should have been stopped. Pak Lah has promised that he didn't manage to deliver out his promise. I think we will be going on, definitely I think we are very worried, [and] quite difficult for the Election Commission. There is a lot of things that are not going right, with the how the lection was conducted and all that. So I think you know, we'll continue to keep making sure that Pak Lah have kept on his toes and not to feel too comfortable and thought that he got this big mandate, 90% mandate and all that, somehow he can do whatever he wants. So I think we play a role in making sure that in spite we got smaller opposition they are not so vocal or whatever it is, Kit Siang is still there. It's a good thing, but they are not as big as before. Last time they got about 40 something seats, but now they got only half of that. So in that sense, it is incumbent on alternative media like Malaysiakini to continue on and take up that role.

**6. How should online journalism play its role to foster a cohesive national integration among Malaysians?**

**Answer:**

I think I already mentioned about the fact that we are bringing different group together to an open forum where they can really discuss things and I think one of the reasons why people got the dented perception about race relationship among Malaysians is because we are not talking to each other. Over the 10-20 years we've been all pushing to our own little group and we are not communicating. So when we go like, for instance, teachers, politicians and all that, they are telling our students about the wrong perception of race relationship among Malaysians. So when they go to universities they are already not mixing. So I think what is important is to initiate some kind of dialogue between all these groups and so that they can actually understand each other and they could be judgmental that certain perceptions that they have may be true or may not be true that we come to openly discuss them. I think things were improving a bit perhaps four years ago when we got the Reformasi Movement and all that where people tend to see things on issue not based on race and religion but more on issue of human rights, press freedom and all that stuff. But I think things are now going back to normal which is unfortunate, but Malaysiakini will have to go on.

**7. Do you think that genuine national integration among Malaysians is achievable with regards to the current government policies and the public responses? Or do you think that Malaysians are currently nationally integrated?**

**Answer:**

A very good question. I don't think so. I think if you look at just, in fact, this morning we were discussing about problems of National Service. You know in Johore, Trengganu and all that people are already fighting against each other just like crazy. Come on you know the whole intention is to bring them together and understand each other and yet you are raising antagonism between each the different races and all that. Its not helping it. And I think we are somehow doing it very wrongly. We have to start at primary school. When you get to the university you can see already there is disgust feeling, though people don't mix because of all the angst, and all the perception that we have about each other and all that. If you go to University Malaya you can see, you go to the canteen you don't see Malays and Chinese sitting together, all separate tables. It has been 20-30 years [since 1969] and the situation has gone worst and that we need to overcome that problem. To me national integration right now, I don't think so really, I think we are still talking about tolerance. In fact we should have gone beyond that. You know its not a matter of tolerating each other, I think we should be living in harmony really by now, which is not the case. I think I like to see Malaysiakini something that coming from the new generation. Though we are all born in the 60's and all that a lot of journalists here have not gone through the '1969'. We are the post-1969 generation. And that I like to see that Malaysiakini speaks, in terms of editorial, in terms of opinion pieces, stories and that we do, we speak for Malaysians, for all Malaysians. We try to overcome the kind of compartmentalisation that the mainstream media may have. Like for instance if you work for Utusan, you will have a different kind of perception. If you work for SinChew, you will have a different kind of perceptioun. You know exactly what you are supposed to do. But I think Malaysiakini when we do things, we see things from over all perspectives, rather than just from the eyes of the Malays or from the eyes of the Chinese. If you work for Straits Times, you work for the STAR, you know exactly. So I thinking terms of national integration, yeah, we still have a long way to go really. Unfortunately we are going backward.

**8. Presently, we find that online newspapers and other online media are more critical of the government compared to the conventional publications. In your opinion why does this trend occur and is it advantageous to democracy and national integration?**

**Answer:**

Not all online newspapers in Malaysia are critical of the government. We have NST Online, Utusan Online, STAR online, and all that, which are just another version of the print mainstream newspapers. These newspapers are owned by the government or the government proxies. The online online newspaper that is critical of the government is Malaysiakini. Of course we are more critical because we critics and try to inform the government what is happening on the ground. We want the government to know that there are things going on wrongly. We can do that, but the mainstream newspapers cannot do that. They are tight up to the licensing system that the government employed and another thing is that they are owned by the politicians and businessmen who have to be very friendly with the government in other to make their position safe and comfortable. If not they will suffer. Malaysiakini is free from government control. We can say things even though if it doesn't please the government. But we said it not because we want to be an enemy, but we said it because we want to inform. Sometimes you have to say it even if it hurts because you are saying it for the truthfulness.

I think to tell the truth will be good for national integration. We need to openly discuss and not just sweeping the problems under the carpet. We need to discuss sensitive matters among the different races so that we could understand and correct the wrong perception between each other. So I think open discussion will definitely be advantageous to national integration. We haven't really done that, and you can see that our national integration is not genuine.. it is only on the surface but not deep in your heart.

**9. Do you think Abdullah Badawi, the New Premier, someone who is very gentle and friendly will be successful to overcome problems such as corruptions and others, as what he had promised?**

**Answer:**

I fear that he would not be successful. In fact when I wrote in my editorial the day before the election, I said, I told the people that they should go for strong opposition so we may support what Pak Lah's agenda for anti-corruption. We still need a strong opposition to make sure.. this is the best way to support Pak Lah because we don't trust his party. He is still coming from a party that is highly corrupted. His people, people around him are highly corrupted. So you may trust one man but there are other people, a lot of people you cannot trust them and this problem cannot be fought by only one man alone. He has to have support from the party, from the media, from the civil society. And the problem is that I could see that the party is not with him. The media is also not free. They would not talk about, they would only talk about good things. Civil society is not very strong. So that that is the situation we are facing. Civil society depends on the fact that we got so many laws that control freedom of expression, ISA, Sedition Acts, Official Secret Acts and whatever. That is the situation. I would differ from a lot of people that Pak Lah can bring about change. But I think what Pak Lah has done is that he has said all the right things. Now is the time to make sure that he deliver and that is better than Mahathir. Mahathir had never said all those things. So its hard for you to pressure him. Now Pak Lah have said it so its up to Malaysiakini, SUARAM, NGO, ALIRAN and all that to push him and tell him "Hey you said it. You have promised," And being a Muslim he is, he will feel the pressure. Whether he is going to do anything about it, I don't know. But I think we have to come out pushing him. So I do not have much hope to UMNO. Its hard for UMNO to change. It will require, even strong man like Mahathir cannot do anything. He had to cry in order to, even that people won't listen to him. He was talking about so much corruption in the party and all that, yet people won't listen. Who do you think would listen to Pak Lah?

**10. Before we end, do you have any additional comments with regard to online journalism, democracy and national integration?****Answer:**

I think online journalism in Malaysia has helped in.. I wouldn't be so presumptuous to say that we have done it. We are the one who somehow managed to bring the downfall of Mahathir or whatever it is. I think we have made some contributions in putting pressure on the government over the 4-5 years. We are also helped putting pressure on the mainstream media because they know that if they don't report it, it doesn't mean that everybody doesn't know, there is still be Malaysiakini and other online journalist will report on it. So you cannot hide everything. I think that sense the government came under pressure and that the reason why you got, say for instance, police brutality. Mainstream media, if you read mainstream media for the past 4 years, where have they talked about police brutality? No. And why would Pak Lah want to call for Royal Commission? That is because of the pressure or say for instance judiciary. The pressure is there. The pressure doesn't come from the mainstream media; the pressure is coming from Malaysiakini, NGO, Bar Council and all that. So those are the good things. I think because the NGO Bar Council and all that, they have alternative avenue now, through Malaysiakini, and because the Malaysiakini is reporting what they said, that will put it on public record and definitely a lot of politician are reading Malaysiakini and that will put pressure on the government. So in that sense we have made contribution over the years to the point where UMNO, Pak Lah, and all that, felt that they have to be some reform at least some promises of reform. And hopefully things will continue on. Whether it will continue on we don't know, but the contribution is there. Hopefully I think we'll come to the point where the government would recognise that there is need for press freedom, that they may not want to change the rule in terms of ownership and all that. I think UMNO and MCA and all that would want to continue to own newspapers but at least they allow other people to come in, to compete yourself and its up to the people to decide do you want to read The STAR or do you want to read Malaysiakini? Its up to you. Give us the people's playing field and we want to compete. We know that we can compete. So eventually we hope that the government will come to their realisation that they may have to... they may... even if they do not want to do way with the licensing system at least allow new comers to get into the picture and then slowly we can put pressure on. Right now we, online its hard for us to.. there is no competition there between Malaysiakini online, with the NST and the STAR or Utusan and all that because of the fact that we are really difficult medium. There will be real competition if you allow Malaysiakini to print. Then only we can only give them a run for the money. If



people go to the news store, news agency, you have Straits Times, STAR, Malaysiakini, then only there will be real competition. Right now, come on, that is not real competition. We are putting pressure, but this is not real pressure. We hope that the government will give us the license to print but we also know the reality that we are not going to get it. So we continue on as it is and if the license come around that's great and hopefully with the license we can bring more change. We'll see.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

## Appendix 6

### Media Coverage on 'Broga Incinerator' Issue

<b>The Star</b>			
<b>Issue: Broga Incinerator</b>			
<b>Dated from 1 January 2005 to 31 December 2005</b>			
<b>No.</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Headline</b>	<b>Word Count</b>
1	13.01	Residents against project	64
2	15.02	Stay order for Broga incinerator	126
3	15.10	Documentary Show	170
4	19.11	Fundraiser	76
<b>Total</b>			<b>436</b>

<b>Malay Mail</b>			
<b>Issue: Broga Incinerator</b>			
<b>Coverage dated from 1 January 2005 to 31 Dec 2005</b>			
<b>No.</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Headline</b>	<b>Word Count</b>
1	13.01	Protest memo presented to PM's Dept	340
2	04.02	Khir's help sought to stop incinerator project	224
3	15.02	Kampong Broga residents force waste plant project on hold	259
4	16.02	Residents willing to settle out of court	406
5	04.03	Parliament: Yes to pass Solid Waste Management Bill	324
6	05.04	Sanitary landfill cell on trial at Bukit Tagar	180
7	08.06	Kajang council's garbage solution	252
<b>Total</b>			<b>1985</b>

<b>Berita Harian</b>			
<b>Issue: Broga Incinerator</b>			
<b>Coverage dated from 1 January 2005 to 31 Dec 2005</b>			
<b>No.</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Headline</b>	<b>Word Count</b>
1	08.03	Buat penilaian kesan alam sekitar sebelum lulus projek	1284
2	21.04	Pertambahan pesat penduduk ancam pembangunan lestari	2432
3	13.05	Denmark bukti insinerator tidak cemarkan alam sekitar	865
4	02.06	Strategi 'sampah sifar' tingkat kadar guna semula bahan	1311
5	08.06	Selesai isu bina insinerator menerusi perundingan	426
6	13.09	Pejabat tangguh ambil tanah	159
<b>Total</b>			<b>6477</b>

<b>New Straits Times</b>			
<b>Issue: Broga Incinerator</b>			
<b>Coverage dated from 1 January 2005 to 31 Dec 2005</b>			
<b>No.</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Headline</b>	<b>Word Count</b>
1	15.02	Court grants interim stay against Broga incinerator	392
2	05.03	Broga incinerator on ice again	148
3	05.06	Who's green	741
<b>Total</b>			<b>1281</b>

<b>Malaysia Today</b>			
<b>Issue: Broga Incinerator</b>			
<b>Coverage dated from 1 January 2005 to 31 Dec 2005</b>			
<b>No.</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Headline</b>	<b>Word Count</b>
1	05.03	MB Selangor should be accountable for all the bad records under his leadership	383
2	10.03	The Third Vote: Bukit Cahaya incident shows the need for the restoration of local government election	557
3	11.04	Hentikan projek Broga	665
4	26.05	Insinerator di Broga berbahaya	997
5	15. 06	Jangan gadaikan nyawa penduduk Broga	709
6	02.07	Suara rakyat Broga	788
7	05.09	Keadilan Hulu Langat buka Pusat Khidmat Komuniti	553
8	17.10	The world largest 'Cancer Factory': Another Japanese invasion in Malaysia?	778
9	17.10	Open letter to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on the issue of Broga incinerator	1061
10	25.10	MCA supporters get angry when taken for a ride...for too long	734
<b>Total</b>			<b>7225</b>

<b>Malaysiakini</b>			
<b>Issue: Broga Incinerator</b>			
<b>Coverage dated from 1 January 2005 to 31 Dec 2005</b>			
<b>No.</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Headline</b>	<b>Word Count</b>
1	04.01	Still no clarity on mega-incinerator plan, says Broga group	591
2	11.01	Selangor gov't in a rush to start up recycling plant	861
3	18.01	Broga residents: Please listen, Pak Lah	722
4	25.01	Consider alternatives to mega-incinerator, plead Broga residents	803
5	03.02	Broga folks have Valentine date with Selangor MB	472
6	14.02	Anti-incinerator lobby wins first round	944
7	16.02	AG: Gov't to try and strike out court order on incinerator	414
8	21.02	Broga incinerator judgement not 'in default' nor an 'injucntion'	460
9	21.02	PM's Office tells ministry to clarify points in Broga memo	600
10	25.02	Save Broga, don't go ga-ga over incineration	625
11	22.03	Greater disaster in the making at Broga, say residents	556
12	25.03	Applications filed against incinerator stay order	421
13	06.06	Anti-incinerator group rides luck in seeking update	248
14	05.07	Broga incinerator film set to burn at Freedom Film Fest	439
15	07.07	Residents will shoulder burden if Broga project is on	598
16	08.09	'Stop Broga' application hearing on Oct 13	602
17	09.09	Broga incinerator: State govt shelves land acquisition	720
18	26.09	Police harass Broga 'welcome' party for PM	792
19	17.11	More residents to sue over Broga incinerator	467
20	22.11	Anti-incinerator campaign catches on	668
21	05.12	Human rights award: And the winner is...	398
22	14.12	Broga residents decry EIA printing delay	622
23	31.12	Broga's new site hits potential snag	721
<b>Total</b>			<b>13744</b>

## Appendix 7

### Media Coverage on Udayapan's Case

<b>The Star</b>			
<b>Issue: Udayapan's Case</b>			
<b>Coverage dated from 1 January 2004 to 31 Dec 2004</b>			
No.	Date	Headline	Word Count
1	27.04	Federal cops to investigate case of missing detainee	445
2	06.05	Police believe escapee is alive	265
3	24.05	Decomposed body of man found	174
4	26.05	Fugitive's mum refuses DNA test	252
5	29.05	Bar Council: Be transparent in investigating deaths	264
6	03.06	Party leader applied for asylum in Britain	136
7	10.06	Cops urge fugitive's mum to take test	278
8	21.07	IGP, five others face RM2m suit	350
<b>Total</b>			<b>2164</b>

<b>New Straits Times</b>			
<b>Issue: Udayapan's Case</b>			
<b>Coverage dated from 1 January 2004 to 31 Dec 2004</b>			
No.	Date	Headline	Word Count
1	18.04	Prisoner Falls into river in escape	296
2	12.05	Escapee's family seeks Suhakam's help	288
3	05.07	Breakouts in past four years	384
4	10.09	Lawyer arrested over statement	273
<b>Total</b>			<b>1241</b>

<b>Berita Harian</b>			
<b>Issue: Udayapan's Case</b>			
<b>Coverage dated from 1 January 2004 to 31 Dec 2004</b>			
No.	Date	Headline	Word Count
1	18.04	Gerakan mencari tahanan terjun sungai diteruskan	389
2	25.05	Polis temui rangka mayat lelaki hampir reput	338
3	26.05	Ibu enggan buat ujian DNA	202
4	27.05	Keluarga mahu laporan lengkap	348
5	10.06	Ibu diminta buat ujian DNA	118
6	11.06	Suruhanjaya puas hati tindakan polis	317
7	10.07	Laporan suruhanjaya polis bulan depan	339
<b>Total</b>			<b>2051</b>

<b>Malay Mail</b>			
<b>Issue: Udayapan's Case</b>			
<b>Coverage dated from 1 January 2004 to 31 Dec 2004</b>			
No.	Date	Headline	Word Count
1	22.04	Police rebut family's claim that fugitive was murdered	260
2	23.04	No hiding the facts, says City police chief	183
3	24.04	Fugitive's mom wants probe by Federal police	352
4	25.04	Memorandum on fugitive's disappearance	147
5	27.04	CID director cancels meeting fugitive's family	257

6	28.04	Lawyer claims cops smashed his car	266
7	06.05	Brickfields escapee may still be alive	272
8	14.05	Police chief lodges report on lawyer's claim	195
9	26.05	Decomposed body identified as that of lockup escapee	210
10	29.05	High commission unaware of bid	446
11	21.07	Families take their case to the Opposition	209
<b>Total</b>			<b>2797</b>

<b>Malaysiakini</b>			
<b>Issue: Udayapan's Case</b>			
<b>Coverage dated from 1 January 2004 to 31 Dec 2004</b>			
No.	Date	Headline	Word Count
1	20.04	Mother challenges police version of missing son	1035
2	21.04	Brickfields OCPD withholding facts says detainee's mother	814
3	23.04	KL police takes over probe into missing detainee	835
4	26.04	Bukit Aman takes over case of missing detainee	627
5	30.04	Missing detainee case: 12 nabbed outside police station	695
6	30.04	Suaram Hakam condemn police over Brickfields arrest	482
7	1.05	Six police reports lodged over Brickfields arrest	371
8	1.05	Politician: Body found in river could be missing detainee	499
9	7.05	Suhakam to probe missing detainee case	1286
10	11.05	Peguam hak asasi cedera diserang diacu pistol	656
11	11.05	Police and the invisible detainee	316
12	12.05	Bar Council asks IGP to probe lawyer's assault	446
13	13.05	Human rights lawyer vows to continue raising hell with the police	1459
14	18.05	Human rights lawyer applies for gun licence after assault	521
15	20.05	67 police custody deaths since 1999 reveals ministry	355
16	21.05	Police: Lawyer's 'no faith' hampering assault probe	419
17	24.05	Missing detainee's mom unable to identify body	386
18	25.05	Family identifies missing detainee's body	795
19	27.05	Uthayakumar fearing for his life seeks asylum in UK	438
20	29.05	Uthayakumar's backers blast paper for 'mischievous' asylum report	396
21	2.06	Lawyer in British 'safe house' pending asylum request	444
22	2.06	Body not claimed as family awaits post-mortem report	357
23	5.06	Uthayakumar to get QC's services if charged	387
24	7.06	Gov't pledges safety of human rights lawyer	487
25	8.06	Police want DNA sample from dead detainee's mother	634
26	10.06	Udayapan's family wasting time	260
27	11.06	Lawyer: Francis' mom willing to give blood sample for DNA test	629
28	14.06	Uthayakumar returns fires first salvo	560
29	17.06	Police reject family's request for copy of DNA test	325
30	17.06	Strict rules will prevent police custody deaths	773
31	18.06	Francis' mom gives blood under 'duress' for DNA test	512
32	21.06	Family laud police commission's probe into Francis' case	405
33	24.06	Uthayakumar to apply for court protection	421
34	28.06	Mother seeks PM's help for release of son's body	492
35	1.07	Missing detainee's mom accuses police doctors of 'collusion'	448
36	10.07	Group wants end to police-hospital 'collusion'	519
37	29.07	Lawyer: Cops delaying independent DNA test	661
38	10.08	T-shirt poser in Udayappan's case	393
39	12.08	Dubious aims dictating inquest	471
<b>Total</b>			<b>22009</b>

## Appendix 8 Media Coverage on 'Police Brutality' Issue

<b>New Straits Times</b>			
<b>Issue: Police Brutality</b>			
<b>Coverage dated from 1 January 2005 to 31 Dec 2005</b>			
No.	Date	Headline	Word Count
1	30.04	Job's Done	514
2	11.05	Lorry driver, sons charged	186
3	31.08	Crime and Confession	474
4	02.09	The 'reluctant' witness	412
5	29.10	I saw cops manhandle detainee	282
6	01.12	Criminalise it!	73
7	02.12	Unacceptable to label police unprofessional	376
8	14.12	We'll hold public inquiries	483
<b>Total</b>			<b>2800</b>

<b>Malay Mail</b>			
<b>Issue: Police Brutality</b>			
<b>Coverage dated from 1 January 2005 to 31 Dec 2005</b>			
No.	Date	Headline	Word Count
1	28.01	Salesman alleges police brutality while under detention	387
2	20.03	The JAWI Debates continue	1387
3	01.06	NO copping out	648
4	17.06	Suntharesan's detention a police road show	279
5	21.06	Call for more humane treatment of detainees	356
6	02.09	Counsel dwells on the 'reluctant' witness	355
7	09.09	Escapee's wife alleges abuse by cops	324
8	10.08	Student alleges police brutality	236
9	02.11	Call for independent team to probe incident	415
10	05.11	Alleged police brutality: Student still waiting for Bukit Aman to act	215
11	25.11	Suspect was tortured	477
12	01.12	Kit Siang asks Nazri to bring another police brutality case to Cabinet	206
13	16.12	Azmi to answer 'burning questions' today	679
14	18.12	Ketuk-Ketampi	423
<b>Total</b>			<b>6378</b>

<b>The Star</b>			
<b>Issue: Police Brutality</b>			
<b>Coverage dated from 1 January 2005 to 31 Dec 2005</b>			
No.	Date	Headline	Word Count
1	18.05	Always subject to scrutiny	382
2	12.05	Soosai's faking death	362
3	12.05	Report on police to be released on Monday	461
4	12.06	Independent tribunal to check police abuses proposed	410
5	01.07	Judge slams officer for being absent	259
6	07.07	Trio didn't get to lodge report despite order	231
7	12.08	Court: No criminal elements	277
8	12.08	Exec died of natural causes	287



9	14.09	Corporal suspended over escape of suspect	200
10	18.10	Lawyer: Confession involuntary	231
11	07.11	M-cyclist lodges report, alleging police brutality	178
12	30.11	Sexual harassment a blow to tourism industry	170
13	07.12	Teen sues over alleged police brutality	177
14	14.12	Suhakam to hold public inquiries into custodial deaths	303
<b>Total</b>			<b>3298</b>

<b>Berita Harian</b>			
<b>Issue: Police Brutality</b>			
<b>Coverage dated from 1 January 2005 to 31 Dec 2005</b>			
No.	Date	Headline	Word Count
1	14.12	Suhakam siasat 3 kes	303
<b>Total</b>			<b>303</b>

<b>Malaysia Today</b>			
<b>Issue: Police Brutality</b>			
<b>Coverage dated from 1 January 2005 to 31 Dec 2005</b>			
No	Date	Headline	Word Count
1	22.01	Malaysian activists call for revamping of police force, citing rights abuses	376
2	18.02	Stop police beatings	521
3	14.03	'Reformasi' without reforms?	1186
4	23.04	Mission impossible to stop the rot in Malaysia	723
5	16.05	Malaysian royal commission urges security law review, police reform	725
6	20.05	Moves to 'halt the rot' in Malaysia	1186
7	23.05	The times, they are a changing	1163
8	26.05	The battle goes on: In the face of the charges against him, Anwar Ibrahim pleads not guilty and vows to continue his fight for reform	2254
9	02.06	Challenge to Mahathir: In his struggle with Anwar, let Malaysians be the winners	874
10	10.06	Stage satires become new platform for Malaysian rights activists to challenge security law	406
11	28.07	The Malay today	1098
12	30.09	Isteri Michael Soosai mahu penjelasan dari akhbar yang burukkan suaminya	534
13	02.11	Call for independent team to probe incident	413
14	25.11	Police criticised again	352
15	26.11	A Malaysian police state?	689
16	26.11	Everyone bears the responsibility to safeguard human dignity	298
17	26.11	Parliamentarians should pass the IPCMC Bill today	298
18	26.11	No more excuse: Establish IPCMC now!	357
19	26.11	Calls for inquiry in Malaysia over video of naked detainee	834
20	27.11	Media Statement by LK Siang	715
21	27.11	Anwar slams police over naked detainee video	359
22	28.11	Malaysia's Anwar pulls big crowd on comeback trail	568
23	28.11	Malaysia's Anwar back on the campaign trail	882
24	28.11	It's all about the money	1396
25	28.11	Malaysia defends police over abuse of ethnic Chinese woman	435
26	28.11	Policing of the policemen	627
27	30.11	Another problem Malaysia cannot solve	1278
28	30.11	China asks Malaysia to probe assault cases against Chinese	324
29	19.12	Let's play the race card	1805
<b>Total</b>			<b>22676</b>

<b>Malaysiakini</b>			
<b>Issue: Police Brutality</b>			
<b>Coverage dated from 1 January 2005 to 31 Dec 2005</b>			
<b>No.</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Headline</b>	<b>Word Count</b>
1	05.02	1,700 deaths in prisons, police custody in last 15 years	501
2	23.02	Stop the police beatings now	552
3	09.03	Lawyers lobby Bar Council against police abuse	464
4	15.03	Death in police custody, wife alleges murder	582
5	18.03	No 'whitewash' report please, police commission told	529
6	21.03	Anti-war protestors condemn police action	412
7	23.03	Suhakam: Police action 'foolish'	641
8	25.03	Cheras police left to investigate reports against their chief	603
9	07.04	AI: M'sia needs statutory police complaints body	862
10	03.05	Release Police Commission report 'in toto'	460
11	24.05	Pain for police, gain for Abdullah?	1169
12	31.05	Kit Siang to push for police complaints commission	522
13	07.06	Pak Lah's duty to curb police misdeeds, say NGOs	573
14	08.06	All for freedom	1240
15	10.06	Table that police watchdog bill now!	786
16	01.08	Black eye: Anwar sues Rahim Noor, govt	781
17	03.08	Anwar gets apology, settles suit	1684
18	15.08	Who pays for police violence?	327
19	17.10	Azmin's perjury charge can't stand, court told	452
20	19.10	Don't let bad cops take over country	427
21	20.10	Drug bust story shocking, disgusting	193
22	25.10	Findings on police commission report out soon	175
23	15.11	Corrupt police may turn away Chinese investors	256
24	11.11	Cops ask for 'yum cha' money, strip me and grab my breasts...	694
25	14.11	Chinese nationals to sue for 'cruelty, torture'	614
26	18.11	Bar Council: Act against police abuse	324
27	24.11	Naked woman police abuse clip sparks uproar	692
28	28.11	Anwar draws 10,000 crowd in Pengkalan Pasir	832
29	28.11	Security guard claims police assault	379
30	29.11	Kudos to policeman who recorded abuse video	211
31	30.11	Caution: Not to be taken lightly	752
32	30.11	Policing without abuse, brutality	1984
33	30.11	Police should protect witnesses, not prosecute them	240
34	30.11	Police have become arrogant, insensitive	289
35	02.12	Police power has corrupted absolutely	320
36	05.12	1,164 cops faced disciplinary action last year	269
37	07.12	How much 'graphic' proof before action taken?	157
38	08.12	Damning public perception of the police	478
39	10.12	Human rights still dismal under Pak Lah	791
40	10.12	Lawyers urged to sacrifice for detainees	1089
41	13.12	Suhakam to hold open inquiries on police abuse	665
42	14.12	Chinese voters not 'shackled by bigotry'	512
43	27.12	Malaysian elections no better than Iraq's	345
<b>Total</b>			<b>25828</b>



## Appendix 9

### Statistical Data from Semi-structured Interview

#### Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Journalism

Advantages of Online Journalism as suggested by interviewees	Frequency	G.O	NGO	MD	AC
1. Less Government Control	14	2	3	4	5
2. Alternative media	14	2	1	4	7
3. Fast and immediate	12	2	1	6	3
4. Timely and real time news	11	-	3	5	3
5. More and easy accessibility	10	2	2	4	2
6. Massive information	9	2	1	5	1
7. Less censorship	9	1	1	5	2
8. Promotion of intellectualism	8	1	2	1	4
9. It merges the traditional media	7	0	1	4	2
10. Diverse news and opinions	6	-	2	-	4
11. Preferred by younger generation	6	-	-	4	2
12. Interactive	5	1	1	1	2
13. Borderless	5	1	-	3	1
14. Channels minority and people's voices	5	2	-	1	2
15. They dare to speak	5	1	3	-	1
16. Personal choices of selection	4	-	-	4	-
17. Non-bias and balance reporting	4	1	2	-	1
18. Immediate editing	3	-	-	2	1
19. Huge global audience	3	1	1	-	1
20. It promotes k-society	3	1	1	-	1
21. Accessible archive	3	-	-	1	2
22. Time saving	1	1	-	-	-
23. It initiates new journalism	1	-	-	-	1
24. It undermines status quo	1	-	-	-	1

Disadvantages of Online Journalism as suggested by interviewees	Frequency	GO	NGO	MD	AC
1. Abusive, seditious, defamatory and libel	14	4	4	2	4
2. No control and no censorship	7	1	2	3	1
3. Doubtful accuracy	6	2	2	-	2
4. Criticism against government	3	-	-	1	2
5. No recognition as official press	3	1	-	2	-
6. Sensations and speculation of stories	2	-	1	1	-
7. Perceive as anti-establishment	2	-	1	1	-
8. Detrimental to national unity	2	1	-	-	1
9. Participation of non-pro journalist	1	-	-	1	-

**Do you think the current development of online journalism is on the right track with regard to national policies and aspiration?**

Views	Total	%	G.O	NGO	MD	AC
Yes, it is on the right track	42	87.5	8	8	14	12
No, it is on the wrong track	2	4.2	-	1	1	-
Neither right nor wrong	4	8.3	2	1	-	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>

**Do you think genuine national integration among Malaysians achievable?**

Views	Total	%	GO	NGO	MD	AC
Possible	19	39.6	7	3	3	6
Impossible	22	45.8	2	5	10	5
Not certain	7	14.6	1	2	2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>

**Do you think that Malaysians are currently nationally integrated?**

Views	Total	%	GO	NGO	MD	AC
Yes thoroughly	5	10.4	2	1	-	2
Yes partly	25	52.1	6	5	8	6
Definitely no	18	37.5	2	4	7	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>

**Do you agree online journalism more critical of the government compared to traditional media?**

Views	Total	%	GO	NGO	MD	AC
Agree	44	91.7	10	9	14	11
Disagree	3	6.3	-	1	-	2
Not certain / no comment	1	2.1	-	-	1	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>

**Why does online journalism more critical towards the government?**

Rationales of being critical as suggested by interviewees	Frequency	G.O	NGO	MD	AC
1. Free of Govt control	24	6	5	6	7
2. Serves as alternative media	10	1	2	2	5
3. Contender to mainstream media	9	-	2	4	4
4. Political, social & personal discontentment	6	1	1	-	4
5. Less professional	6	-	-	4	1
6. The effect of ICT development	5	1	2	-	2
7. It works through sensationalised issues	5	1	-	2	2
8. The mainstream is deemed slanted	4	2	2	-	-
9. Less legal constrains	3	2	-	-	1
10. Money-driven	2	1	-	1	-
11. It is very opinionated in content	2	-	-	1	1
12. Supported by international freedom movement	1	-	-	1	0
13. It is naturally anti-establishment	1	-	-	1	-
14. The impact of Human Right campaign	1	1	-	-	-
15. They choose to be watchdog	1	-	1	-	-
16. It is a process of modernisation	1				1

### How criticism supports democracy and national integration?

Ways criticism supports national integration as suggested by interviewees	Frequency	GO	NGO	MD	AC
1. It promotes democracy & freedom of speech	13	2	2	1	8
2. It generates intellectualism	9	2	2	1	4
3. Helps government rectify weaknesses	6	3	1	1	1
4. It generates more understanding	5	1	1	3	-
5. It criticises constructively	5	3	-	1	1
6. It is a way of learning	4	-	1	1	2
7. It acts as watchdog to the government	4	1	2	1	-
8. It promotes diverse opinions	4	1	2	-	1
9. It promotes transparency	4	-	-	2	2
10. It initiates government accountability	3	-	-	2	1
11. Criticism promotes positive changes	3	-	1	1	1
12. Foster open-minded society	3	-	2	-	1
13. Audience could read between lines	2	-	-	1	1
14. It channels voices of oppositions	2	-	1	-	1
15. It channels voices of minorities	2	-	2	-	-
16. It promotes truthfulness	2	-	-	2	-
17. It generates K-society	1	1	-	-	-
18. It avoids bigotry society	1				1

### How criticism jeopardises national integration?

How criticism jeopardises national integration?	Frequency	GO	NGO	MD	AC
1. It promotes destructive criticism	6	1	1	3	1
2. It is biased	5	1	1	2	1
3. It promotes hatred	4	1	-	3	-
4. It needs facts & figures not emotion	1	-	1	-	-
5. It promotes commotion and chaos	1	-	-	1	-

#### Abbreviation:

<b>GO</b>	Government Organisation
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>MD</b>	Media Practitioner
<b>AC</b>	Academician

# Appendix 10 Some Examples of Malaysian Online Journalism

Malaysia Today: Your source of independent news

Page 1 of 3

## Current Issues in Malaysian Politics

By Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed

**THE HORRORS OF POWER**  
The speaker's address: your choice

**THE KHAIRY CHRONICLES**  
Part 33: The Little Begin: The Mahathir at work - Cansur becomes Bivins

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed was an experienced and Minister Daim. He was a member of the cabinet while he was in Tokyo attending a conference.

In fact, it was the app. Mahathir was only about 10 days away from the Prime Minister's office when he was in Tokyo attending a conference.

To be successful, the Mahathir must have a good idea of the situation. He must be able to see the situation from the inside. He must be able to see the situation from the outside. He must be able to see the situation from the inside. He must be able to see the situation from the outside.

**WOMEN SAY NO TO WAR**

News & Commentaries

file://C:/Documents and Settings/Win xp/My Documents/MalaysiaToday.htm 13/06/2006

Agenda Daily: Real News For New People

Page 1 of 3

Agenda Daily: Real News For New People

## AGENDA DAILY

Insight News

**Mahathir vs the Hindu god and Muslim priest**

Agenda Daily: Real News For New People

file://C:/Documents and Settings/Win xp/My Documents/Agenda Daily.htm 13/06/2006

Shahrir-umno.com

Page 1 of 1

## Shahrir-umno.com

NEWS, COMMENTARIES AND OPINIONS

**Shahrir-umno.com**

file://C:/Documents and Settings/Win xp/My Documents/SHAHRIR-UMNO.com.htm 13/06/2006

malaysiakini

news and views that matter

**malaysiakini**

file://C:/Documents and Settings/Win xp/My Documents/malaysiakini.htm 13/06/2006

In clockwise: Malaysia Today, Agenda Daily, Malaysiakini and Shahrir-Umno.com

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