

# Cyber Balkanisation: Distraction to the Essence of 1Malaysia

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## **Abstract**

*The concept of cyber balkanisation was initially coined by Cass Sunstein (2001) in Republic.com. It theorises the Internet phenomenon that caused users to be segregated and isolated and to gradually form their own like-minded colonies. Through such character, they hold the tendencies of being hostiled to others who do not agree with them. One of the causal factors highlighted in Sunstein's theory is the Internet technology that allows users to customise, filter and select their needs and wants. Such Internet customisation, filtration and selection are easily prospered among multiethnic Malaysians who had been naturally segregated by their culture, religious belief, education and mother tongues. This social character is further supported by the freedom conferred to the Internet through the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 that places the new media on a different track to that of the traditional one. However, there are paradoxes to such stance when cyber freedom could also be abused and exploited, thus challenging the national envision of 1Malaysia or otherwise 'national integration', particularly in creating an empathetic, interethnic relation among the multiethnic groups. The ideal Malaysian vision is therefore distracted because the mainstream thought of harmonious interethnic relation as envisioned by the 1Malaysia concept is jeopardised through social fragmentation and polarisation via cyber activism. This article shows that there are tendencies of cyber balkanisation among Malaysian Internet users even though the social reality did not suggest any incident of social hostility linked to the Internet.*

**Keywords:** *cyber balkanisation, cyber activism, Internet addiction disorder, ethnocentrism, content filtration and customisation, like-minded colony, social segregation, social polarisation*

## **Introduction**

Literally, 'balkanisation' is a geopolitical concept that refers to the process of segregation, fragmentation, and division of a multinational state into smaller ethnically homogeneous entities. The concept is initially derived from the Balkans of the Ottoman Empire, which had broken up into smaller conflicting states. Presently, the term 'balkanisation' is employed to describe 'the disintegration of some multiethnic states and their devolution into dictatorship, ethnic cleansing, and civil war' (Balkanisation, 2010).

A similar connotation of segregation, fragmentation and division is used to describe cyber balkanisation where like-minded Internet users are fragmented into separate groups. Through the inducement of a particular ideology and belief, which may be explained by a cultivation theory, these users are segregated and divided to form like-minded groups, to an extreme point where they would condone others who do not accept their thoughts and ideologies.

As a result of Internet democracy supported by free accession of Internet content and massive information, where users could customise, filter, and select what they want, the process of fragmentation and segregation against the mainstream society becomes significantly unperturbed. The extreme of such social phenomenon is obsession and possession, which may explain a psychological disorder that would turn them into becoming hostile towards members of different groups.

Cyber balkanisation was initially coined by Cass Sunstein (2001) that points out the social phenomenon of fragmentation generated through the Internet since it had conferred users the liberty to customise, filter and select in order to fit their personal interest and the fascination of like-minded groups. For such, it would lead to social fragmentation, segregation and isolation, which threatens the ideal democratic principles. Thus, it would further lead to 'group polarisation' and 'opinion cascading,' both of which would jeopardize the ideal democratic principles. In democracy, collective decisions are pertinent and only possible when members of the society are informed with open and transparent heterogeneous opinions (Rahmat, 2008).

As Sunstein explained, individualized 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 a polarised state where the society would become not only fragmented and isolated, but also often hostile and non-cooperative with others who are not in agreement with their group.

If the public is balkanised and if different groups are designing their own preferred communications packages, the consequence will be not merely the same but still

more balkanisation, as group members move one another toward 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).

Contradictorily to such notion of cyber balkanisation, is the spirit of 1Malaysia, proposed by the Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak. The main principle of 1Malaysia is to bring together all Malaysians of diverse ethnic groups towards a united society more to that of merely being tolerant and of functional ethnic-relation. Najib (as quoted in Bernama, 8 Feb 2010) pointed out,

Under the concept of 1Malaysia, being tolerant is just the beginning. ...The next paradigm is to move from tolerance to total acceptance. In other words, when we accept the difference in our society we accept diversity as something unique, something that provides us with a very colourful tapestry in our society, something that can actually give us strength and not otherwise. ...And when we move from the paradigm of being tolerant to total acceptance, there is a final apex which is to celebrate our diversity. When we celebrate our diversity then it means we have reached the final destination of Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian nation) of one Malaysia... It is then we will think and we will act as one people, one nation and one dream.

Under such contradiction of cyber balkanisation against the principles of 1Malaysia, this article examined some of the realities of the Internet activism and its opposing direction, which was envisioned through the fundamental essence of 1Malaysia.

### **The Internet and cyber activism**

Malaysian online news portal was inaugurated through the establishment of The Star Online and the New Straits Times Online in 1995. However, it seemingly did not function effectively at that point of time and some years that follow, as a tool of democracy (Siong 2004). During those years after 1995, the existence of stringent media-related laws did not clearly place the Internet

as a ‘freer medium’ as compared to the mainstream mass media. This may help explain the frail condition of cyber activism. The small number of Internet users and insignificant Internet accessibility also contribute to such cyber conditions.

Only after the enactment of the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA 1998) did the internet activism begin to show its potential as a vibrant channel of criticism and dissident voices. This is explained by the assurance of CMA 1998 to ensure the freedom of expression via the Internet or otherwise the freedom of the press.

It is also noted that only after the enactment of CMA 1998 do we see some key players of cyber activism. They stretched from professional 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, which were actively supported by the existence of Internet blogging and chatting. Within such setting, the number of Internet users significantly hiked up from 137,400 users in 1997 to 1.5 million in 1999. As shown in Table 1, the figure increased up to 3.7 million in the year 2000.

**Table 1: Total Internet Users in Malaysia**

1997	<b>137,400</b>
1998	<b>600,000</b>
1999	<b>1,500,000</b>
2000	<b>3,700,000</b>
2001	<b>5,700,000</b>
2002	<b>7,800,000</b>
2003	<b>8,600,000</b>
2004	<b>9,002,000</b>
2005	<b>10,040,000</b>
2006	<b>11,016,000</b>
2007	<b>13,528,000</b>
2008	<b>15,274,000</b>
2009	<b>16,902,600</b>

Source: Internet World Statistics 2009

Exempted from various stringent laws, especially the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984 that restrain the mainstream mass media, the Internet is seen to be moving on a different track under much freer regulatory conditions. That said, online news portals, as well as online social networks carry a different character compared to the mainstream mass media. Among others the difference is marked by open criticism against the ruling power, debate and forums on intercultural issues, and spaces for opposition and minority voices. It provides, otherwise unavailable, avenues for the Malaysian society, bringing together the different ethnic groups to share views and thoughts (Mustafa, 2003:12). Ironically, some of the liberalised stances of the Internet have also disturbed and distracted sensitive areas of ethnicity such as religious belief, Malay privileges and special rights, the ruler's supremacy, as well as the affirmative action on the New Economic Policy.

The year 1998, when CMA was enacted, was an especially influential year. On that year the impacts of the Asian-financial crisis, the Mahathir-Anwar political calamity, the establishment of Multimedia Super Corridor (Malaysia's Information and Communication Technology (ICT) hub), and the 'reformist aggression' merged together resulting in an explosion in the use of the Internet.

The principal explanation for such intense usage of the Internet is the freedom that it offers compared to that of the traditional mass media; the digital character that allows textual, audio, video, pictures, slides, and animation presentation, the huge archive, and, selection and customisation of content had espoused the Internet as a superior medium.

During those years of post 1998, open debate on social and political issues in the Internet was rampant and seen as never having experienced the traditional mass media before. During the period, Abbott (2004:85) 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.

Since then, cyber activism has been seen significantly affecting Malaysia's mass media setting as well as its social and political landscapes. The obvious result of these developments is that the volume of sales of almost all mainstream newspapers had dropped and the number of online newspaper visitors had sharply and continually increased (Arfaeza, 2002:6; Matrade, 2004; Internet World Statistics ,2005).

It is an oversimplification to describe cyber activism, during this period, as a reflection of e-democracy<sup>1</sup> (Hague and Loader, 1999; Ferdinand, 2000; 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 the Internet in Malaysia during the 1998-political crisis, which also marked political reformation movements and activism, points towards pressure for democratic change. As Derichs (2004:105) asserted, 'there was no doubt ...that it was in 1998 that led to considerable overt demand for political change in Malaysia'.

Mustafa (2002:163) observed that cyber activism 'had mushroomed and made considerable impact especially on Malaysians who were desperately seeking for alternative sources of information'. In regards to the current scene, social networks such as Flickr, Friendster, FaceBook, Yahoo Messenger, Flixster, MySpace, Tagged, and Qzone, as to mention a few, are also giving significant impact to Malaysian social and political landscapes. Nevertheless, within the rampant utilisation of the Internet, it also promotes the paradoxes of freedom of expression when irresponsible users post materials that are inclined towards hatred campaign, seditious, defamation, lies as well as destructive ethnocentrism.

### **Media-related laws**

Gan (2003:1) affirms that there are at least 35 media-related laws that directly and indirectly impinge on Malaysian press freedom. 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

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<sup>1</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). 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.

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) 1971, the Official Secrets Act (OSA) 1986, the Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA) 1984, and the Defamation Act 1957.

The most intrusive of laws in regards to press freedom is the PPPA 1984. It gives the government power to suspend or revoke printing and publishing permits, which need to be renewed annually. Its decrees are not subjected to be reviewed or challenged 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 materials likely to prejudice public order or national security (Lent, 1982:263).

Consequently, the mainstream mass media becomes apprehensive and practices self-censorship as 'journalists steer clear of stories or coverage that might result in their prosecution' (Abbott, 2004:81). On the contrary and with regard to cyber activism, 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).

The condition of stringent media control seemed to be toned down when Malaysia embarked on the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project in 1996, a global ICT hub that attempts to imitate Silicon Valley in the United States (Multimedia Super Corridor, 1998). 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, 2003; Siong 2004). Therefore, the CMA 1998 was introduced with Article 3 (3) clearly stating 'Nothing in this Act shall be construed as permitting the censorship of the Internet' (Ministry of

Energy Water and Communication, 1998). Such assurance is being repeated in the Multimedia Super Corridor's Bill of Guarantee.

Since the Internet is not subjected 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 it, such as the Sedition Act 1948, Official Secret Act 1972, Defamation Act 1957, as well as the Internal Security Act 1960.

### **Interethnic relation**

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, Rahmat, 2008). The society has numerous racial tensions, especially when there is economic disparity between different ethnic groups, issues of ethnic preference policies, and problems that challenge Malay supremacy.

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 people, as provisioned in the Federation Constitution, half of the population in 1969, was still suffering 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.

Nevertheless, during those years of post-1998, especially marked by the political conflict of Mahathir-Anwar and the birth of '*reformasi*' activism, ethnic relation in Malaysia came to a juncture which was seemingly seen as unfavourable to sound interethnic relation.



When Mahathir resigned in 2003, press freedom was seen much freer as compared to those years of 1990s. The misuse of freedom of the press and expression were probably causal factors that disturbed Malaysian sound interethnic relation. The incidents of Kg Medan racial fights, Kg Rawa racial conflicts, Hindraf demonstration, religious issues that caused attacks on Churches, the Hindu temples predicament, as to mention a few, reflect a deteriorating integration among Malaysian society. Those occurrences highlight some of the justification in rationalising the concept of 1Malaysia and the reinforcement of national integration policy.

### **Customisation, filtration and selection**

The liberalisation of Malaysian mass media is also strongly supported by the freer media environment of Abdullah Badawi's and Najib's premierships eras as compared to that of the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. It is an apparent change to that of Mahathir's era which had covered a period of 21 years.

It is probably a paradox to a developing nation such as Malaysia, when there are needs to liberalise the mass media and join the band wagon of the developed world in upholding the philosophy of prioritising the dissemination of information, knowledge, education and intellectual pieces among the citizens via the Internet. This is further heightened by the wisdom of turning Malaysia into South East Asia's ICT hub and for that the government has to consider foreign investors and global ICT corporations' requests for cyber freedom (Loo, 2003; Siong, 2004).

In regards to the current scene, political newspapers such as Harakah, Malaysia Today, Buletin Rakyat, Era Baru and other tabloids are available to the public without any control mechanism even though there are laws that limit the sale of political press to only members of the party. Moreover, the web version of almost all political newspapers are available free of charge via the Internet.

Emphasising for more liberal media landscape, Internet users could customise, filter and select new stories and information that they seek for. Such stance is impossible through any of the traditional media. For instance, newspaper readers have no choice in news selection; whatever is

published would be the only selection that they have. A similar situation is seen when radio listeners or TV viewers as well as other traditional media audience attain news and information. Startlingly, the Internet provides them the liberty to select, filter, and customise news and information from massive and huge archives to satisfy their wants and needs.

Through ‘personalisation and customisation’ of the content, Sunstein (2001) asserted that the Internet has the potential to pull users into exploring dimensions that could isolate them from other members of the public. This is further reinforced with the hyperlink facility that made them possible to reach other sources and websites that present similar themes, but of different focus and content.

Selection, filtration and customisation, as Sunstein theorised, would cause Internet addiction when repeated browsing, reading, watching, and listening of a particular website continues. Supporting Sunstein’s claim, DeBonis (2008) reported that ‘overuse of online communication ...can have negative real-world consequences, like social isolation or losing sense of time.’

In scrutinising the mechanism of selection, filtration and customisation, a purposive test was carried out. Using the Google search engine, information about Pelé, the football legend of Brazil, was enquired about. This is termed as selection. As on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2010, there were 15.9 million articles posted on the Internet of various sources; it could be a website, news portal, social network, blog, Video tube, web TV or anything that bears Pelé’s name and stories. Such massive numbers of Pelé’s stories is impossible to be acquired via traditional media, what more the huge archive of the Internet that is available only through a touch of a finger tip.

The search was then filtered for a more specific story about Pelé; ‘Pelé’s football’. There were 1.16 million stories. The filtration was carried out for the more specific details of ‘Pelé’s football career’. The results showed that there were 155,000 articles or stories that discussed on the topic. The search was zoomed further in for ‘Pelé’s international football career’ and it was found that there were 111,000 stories that stood on the topic.

All those filtering processes set to acquire stories about Pelé that are more inclined towards personal interest is termed as ‘customisation’ or as some scholars would prefer the term ‘personalisation’ as well as ‘individualisation’. The term suggests ‘the ability of the user to modify the interface to individual requirements’ (Bowen and Fantoni, 2004).

### **Massive sources and information**

The Internet’s nature that carries massive information, news, and stories in the form of textual, audio, videos, pictures, photographs, slides, animation, sketches and drawings from countless different sources had placed it as a superior medium to that of the traditional media. In regard to Pelé’s stories, it is also within the liberty of the users to attain uncensored stories about Pelé or any other public figure that they wish. Above all, the availability of the Internet materials is almost impossible to control. As some scholars would agree, the Internet had ‘handed over the controlling power to the user’ (Long 2004:90, Gunter 2003).

The strong personal interest upon Pelé would perhaps bring up an idea to form Pelé’s Fan Club through a website, blog, FaceBook, Twitter or other Internet hosts or social networking services. Gradually, through various virtual communications among the club’s members, discussion about Pele and any significant event and development about him would be carried out. For such activities, many more stories about Pelé would be added up to the millions that were already available in Google’s archive.

Users would then be possibly exposed to Internet obsession, since there are millions of stories to be read, viewed, watched and listened to, and some would enthusiastically respond whenever they wish or are required to do so. For that, Horstman (2009) affirms that ‘the Internet has tremendous potential to affect the human emotion and in turn, alter our self-perception and anxiety levels’. Horstman classifies such psychological phenomenon as Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD).

## **Segregation, colony and hostility**

In line with Sunstein's (2001) theory, some of Pelé's Club members would discard fans of other clubs, which would be seen as competitors or opponents to that of theirs. For instance, if there were situations where Pelé's Club members were to encounter David Beckham's Club members under a tensed atmosphere and under the effect of IAD, there would be conflict and aggression between the two groups.

Thriving for public recognition and dignity as a result of obsession, would further develop patches of social colony where communication would be limited to only like-minded groups. For that, further obsession and addiction (see Nauert 2008) would infiltrate those members of the club.

It is probably insignificant to relate the balkanisation phenomenon with Pelé's fan. However, a similar situation of balkanisation would apply to terrorism, anarchism, communism, gangsterism, drug addiction, sex fanatics or pedophilic activities that would threaten social and political security of a nation. This would be more destructive when hatred campaigns, libel and defamation, sedition, lies and other social damaging mechanisms are practiced over the Internet. Malaysians would be more prone to such phenomenon since they are readily tailored for ethnic segregation via political institution, religious belief, custom and culture, ethnocentrism, language and even education.

## **Cyber balkanisation distracts national integration**

A survey on purposive selected samples of Internet users distinguished as loyal readers to a particular online news portal was carried out on July 2009 to January 2010. The samples were made up of 400 respondents. However, as the process of collecting data was carried out, 34 of them did not respond as expected. For that, only 366 respondents had given their cooperation. These samples were distinguished and classified into four categories, specifically as loyal readers of Utusan Malaysia, Harakah, Malaysia Today and MyMassa.

Under such classification the numbers of respondents in regards to their criteria are as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Loyal Readers of News Portal and Websites**

<b>News portal and Websites</b>	<b>Numbers</b>
Utusan Malaysia Online loyal readers	70
Harakah Online loyal readers	124
Malaysia Today.com loyal readers	90
Mymassa.com loyal readers	82
Total	366

To state, Utusan Malaysia Online as well as its offline version belongs to United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), the leading proposition party, and its affiliates. While, in regards to the contents of MyMassa.com, it is judicious to affirm that MyMassa.com highly stands as a government supporter news portal.

MyMassa stands high as a government supporter news portal and for similar reasons critical views on the opposition parties are significantly posted on its websites. For such, this news portal would be highly preferred for its content that exposes the weaknesses of the opposition parties.

On the other hand, Harakah Online belongs to Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS), one of the major opposition political parties. As a matter of fact, Harakah had long been the official press to PAS.

Malaysia Today had significantly been distinguished as a news portal 'unfavourable to the government'. Such outlook is considerably justified, when Raja Petra Kamaruddin, the Chief Editor cum webmaster, was a leading member of Parti Keadilan Rakyat, one of the opposition affiliate parties. He was twice been detained under the Internal Security Act and presently fled to Britain as he was charged for posting seditious and defaming information through Malaysia Today's news portal.

The four websites were purposely selected to see whether there was inclination towards balkanisation among the Internet users, particularly, those who stand strong on their political ideology, which is one significant variable for social segregation.

The respondents' choices on other selected online news portals were further analysed and it was found that those loyal to Utusan Malaysia Online would also significantly read MyMassa news portal. Contradictorily those loyal to Harakah Online would also significantly read Malaysia Today news portal and subsequently reject Utusan Malaysia and MyMassa.

Such trends also considerably suggest that those who read the pro-government's online media would not read those belonging to the opposition party such as Harakah and Malaysia Today. To reinstate the trend, 70% of those who are loyal to Utusan Malaysia Online would also read MyMassa, while 79.2% of loyal readers of MyMassa would also read Utusan Malaysia. Contradictorily, only 17.1% of Utusan Malaysia's loyal readers would read Harakah and 24.3% would read Malaysia Today.

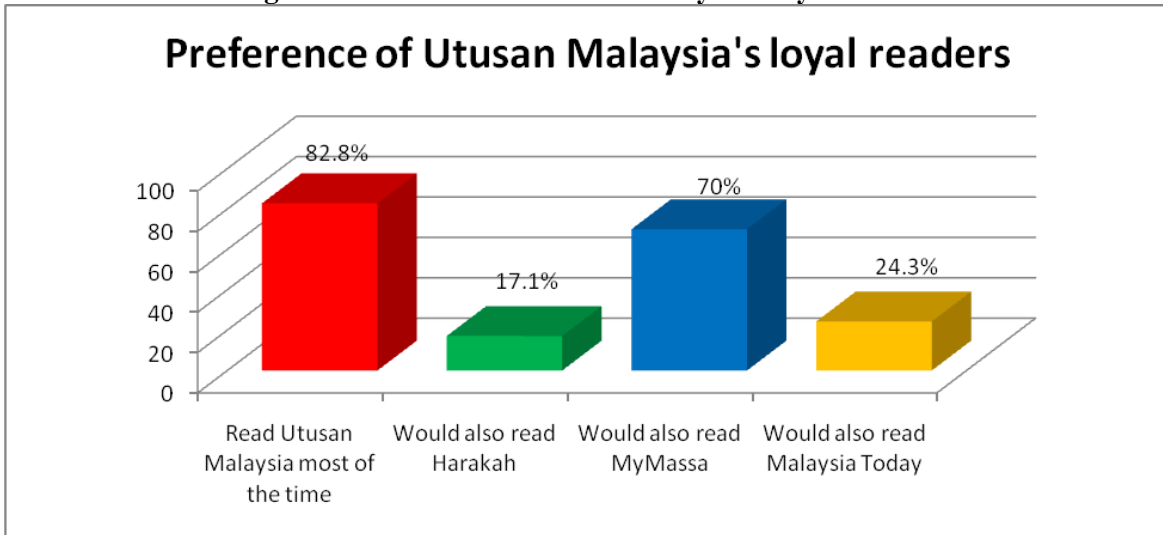
Harakah's loyal readers had shown much more significant isolation when only 5.6% of them would read Utusan Malaysia and only 2.4% read MyMassa.

In more detail, the trends are shown in the figures and tables below:

**Table 3: Preference of Utusan Malaysia's loyal readers**

<b>Preference of Utusan Malaysia's loyal readers</b>	<b>Numbers</b>	<b>%</b>
Read Utusan Malaysia most of the time	58	82.8
Would also read Harakah Online	12	17.1
Would also read MyMassa.com	49	70
Would also read Malaysia Today.com	17	24.3

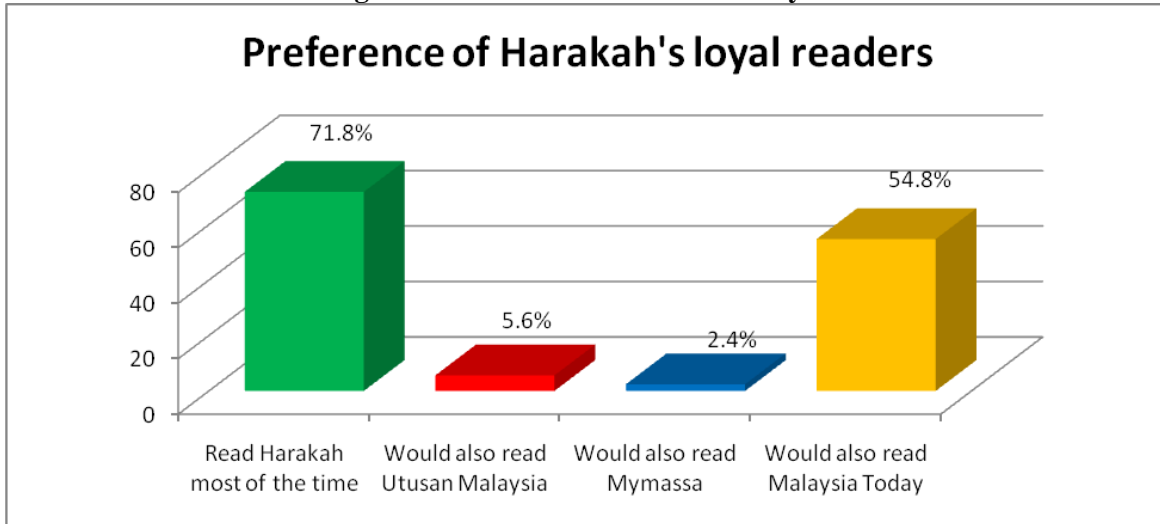
**Figure 1: Preference of Utusan Malaysia's loyal readers**



**Table 4: Preference of Harakah's loyal readers**

Preference of Harakah's loyal readers	Numbers	%
Read Harakah most of the time	89	71.8
Would also read Utusan Malaysia	7	5.6
Would also read MyMassa	3	2.4
Would also read Malaysia Today	68	54.8

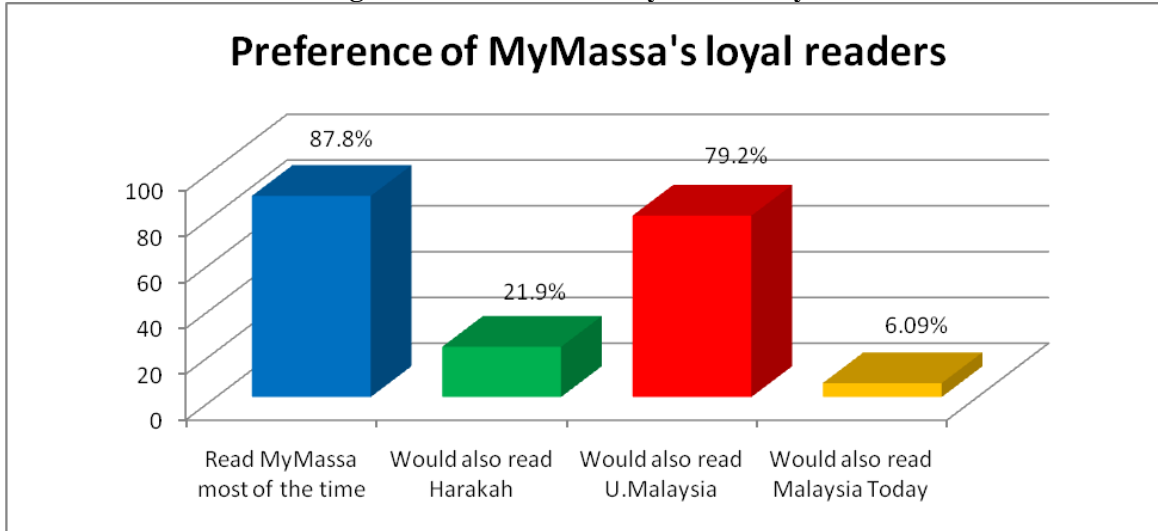
**Figure 2: Preference of Harakah's loyal readers**



**Table 5: Preference of MyMassa's loyal readers**

Choices of Mymassa's loyal readers	Numbers	%
Read MyMassa most of the time	72	87.8
Would also read Harakah	18	21.9
Would also read Utusan Malaysia	65	79.2
Would also read Malaysia Today	5	6.09

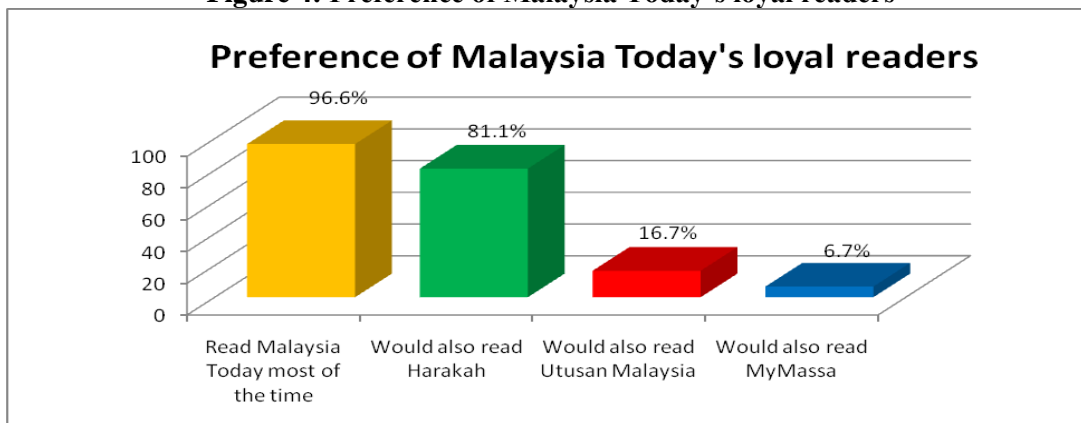
**Figure 3: Preference of MyMassa's loyal readers**



**Table 6: Preference of Malaysia Today's loyal readers**

Choices of Malaysia Today's loyal readers	Numbers	%
Read Malaysia Today most of the time	87	96.6
Would also read Harakah	73	81.1
Would also read Utusan Malaysia	15	16.7
Would also read MyMassa	6	6.7

**Figure 4: Preference of Malaysia Today's loyal readers**





The statistics that reflect a social trend, which signalled segregation among Internet users, is further substantiated through arrogant cyber activism, which may also suggest elements of cyber balkanisation. Ethnocentrism is one of the many social elements that had been noticed to spark hostility among Internet users. In this sense, ethnocentrism is a judgment made on other cultures by the standards of one's own, which is believed to be superior.

Such cyber behaviour is shown when an ethnic group slammed and attacked other ethnic groups using filthy words, curses and swear words. On 12<sup>th</sup> June 2010, through the Google search engine, it was found that a significant number of filthy words were used to condemn a particular ethnic group; Malays, Chinese and Indians. The search is carried out on words such as “Stupid (*Bodoh* in Malay)”, “Pig (*Babi* in Malay)”, and “Damn (*Sial* or *Celaka* in Malay)”. Statistical figures for the findings are shown in Table 7.

Those findings also reflect distracted interethnic relations, or perhaps arrogant and rude, or otherwise immoral communication within the Malaysian multiethnic society. Such trends of Internet behaviour would probably justify cyber balkanisation, which in this sense is undoubtedly a social fragmentation based on ethnocentrism or otherwise ethnic sentiment.

Traditional mass media would certainly not post such ethnic condemnation, even though it is undeniable that there are cases classified as ethnic aggression within Malaysia's history. However, the Internet had provided more avenues for such behaviour, which intensely heightened ethnic balkanisation or cyber balkanisation. With regards to Malaysian social and political stability, Teik, K.B. (2002) observed such social stance as ‘ethnic chauvinism’, which is obstructive to national integration. With similar notion, Teik, G.C. (1978) pointed out that the failure of national integration would lead to racial hostility, which he charged as a ‘time bomb’.

**Table 7: Internet’s Filthy Words, Curses and Swear Words**

<b>Filthy Words, Curses and Swear Words</b>	<b>Numbers of websites, articles, blogs, social networks that posted such filthy words, curses and swearing</b>
“Melayu Bodoh” (Stupid Malays)	16,600
“Melayu Babi” (Pig Malays)	13,300
“Melayu Sial” + “Melayu Celaka” (Damn Malays)	9770
“Cina Bodoh” (Stupid Chinese)	7360
“Cina Babi” (Pig Chinese)	23,500
“Cina Sial” + “Cina Celaka” (Damn Chinese)	2,926
“India (Keling) Bodoh” (Stupid Indian)	2,500
“India (Keling) Babi” (Pig Indians)	1990
“India (Keling) Sial”+“India (Keling) Celaka” (Damn Indians)	3,906

### **Concluding remarks**

Sunstein’s theory on cyber balkanisation in Malaysian context may be seen as insignificant because so far, there are no racial or social aggression that are linked to cyber activism. However, this article considers that the trend towards such Internet phenomenon of cyber balkanisation does exist. There are cases where sensitive issues, which had never been challenged before, were ridiculed in various websites. For instance, issues on Islam as an official religion, Malays’ special rights and privileges, and the Malay rulers, were openly slammed. Some scholars view that such issues should not be raised as they have been agreed and legalised in the Federal Constitution (Looi and Khairil, 2008).

Since the Internet is ‘almost impossible to be controlled’ such unconstructive criticism will constantly be posted on the Internet by ethnic chauvinists, dissidents and irresponsible individuals. The trend would further segregate, polarise and isolate like-minded people who are highly engaged by the customisation, filtration and selection of the Internet. It would polarise and isolate like-minded groups of Internet users; thus, distract the essence of 1Malaysia or otherwise the ideal democracy and national integration. As Sunstein (2001:194) asserted:

....The Internet should be regularly used as an instrument of citizenship mostly national, but sometimes global, in which people continually enlarged their own horizons, often testing their own views by learning about alternatives.

It is also insignificant to conclude that ethnocentrism and discourse on sensitive issues via the Internet is a sign of cyber balkanisation. However, tendencies towards balkanisation among Malaysians or trends towards social fragmentation had already come in existence from Malaysians' past experiences. To state, Malaysians had a list of social chaos such that of Al-Arqam, Hindraf, Ayah Pin cult teaching, Al-Maunah, Memali incident, Kg Medan and Kg Rawa conflicts, and the most talkabout, the 13<sup>th</sup> May racial issue. Cyber balkanisation may be viewed as a complicated issue of social polarisation, but this article affirms that it is a potential causal factor that could lead Malaysians to social segregation, fragmentation and isolation.

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