

WAR AGAINST PERCEPTION: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN GAINING PUBLIC SUPPORT

*Ahmad Khusairi Yahaya**

“Social media can draw in lots of people quickly through network effects. Perhaps too quickly for most hierarchical security agencies. Research on the properties of networks demonstrated that they can be powerful tools for encouraging anti-social opinion and behavior. Social scientists at Syracuse University recently theorized that it would only take 10 percent of population distributed by social networks to the right places to radically alter public opinion and large scale behaviors.”

“The uprising of political revolution across North Africa managed to topple repressive regimes and demand political voice, much to the credit of the new social media. By utilizing YouTube, Face book, Twitter and other platforms to conveys images and first-hand reports of the events, protestors were able to connect in solidarity with supportive observers from around the world.”

Source: Reuters May 9, 2011

I. INTRODUCTION

Internet based social media has profoundly changed the way we engage with others in the private and public sphere. Social activists, political campaigners, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), government and business communities increasingly make use of the connective power of these communication tools to mobilize support, produce knowledge, disseminate information, deliver services and engage with their stakeholders. Inspiring examples for innovation, use of social media tools for fighting corruption and fostering support from the public have emerged all over the world.

The uprising of political revolution across North Africa, which managed to topple repressive regimes and demand political voice, happened much to the credit of the new social media. By utilizing YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and other platforms to convey images and first-hand reports of the events, protestors were able to connect in solidarity with supportive observers from around the world. This is an example of how effective and powerful the social media are in shaping today's public opinion towards the government and its agencies.

Corruption has become a major issue and an important weapon to topple leaders and government. The negative perception created by the opposition towards leaders and existing government were disseminated through social media. The younger generation has become an important target group for them in order to shape antagonism and hatred against a government. A government will subsequently be labelled and perceived as corrupted and undemocratic.

War against corruption nowadays, has become more complicated when every action and policy introduced by any said agency is being politicized. Based on Malaysia's experience, corruption has become an important political agenda for the opposition to win the heart of voters, especially amongst the young voters between 21 to 40 years old. The practice of using

* Chief Senior Assistant Commission, Director of Policy, Research and Planning Division, Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC).

corruption as political agenda has subsequently created a strong impact and it was afterward reflected in the outcome of the 12th General Election when five of the so called stronghold states of the Government Coalition Parties fell into the hands of the opposition.

Although, the Government of Malaysia has always regarded addressing the threat and problems of corruption since its independence in 1957 as its main agenda and an on-going commitment, but these efforts indeed were toned down by the negative perception generated by the oppositions. The Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA Malaysia), an enforcement agency established to fight corruption, was nevertheless perceived as a “toothless tiger” which is dependent, ineffective, biased and is one-sided particularly towards the ruling party.

The Government of Malaysia under the premiership of Dato’ Sri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak, Prime Minister of Malaysia has unflaggingly performed numerous actions for the benefits of the country. One of the tremendous actions taken by the honourable Prime Minister is to transform the entire government’s machineries through the strategic actions plan namely the Government Transformation Programme (GTP).

Under the GTP, six key priority areas have been identified where challenges within each area have been divided into short-term priorities and long-term issues. These areas of development are known as the National Key Result Areas (NKRAs) as below:

- Reducing Crime
- Fighting Corruption
- Improving Student Outcomes
- Raising Living Standards of Low-Income Households
- Improving Rural Basic Infrastructure
- Improving Urban Public Transport

One of the main priorities under the National Key Result Areas is the systematic and concerted measures taken by the Government to fight corruption.

Getting to the root of the anti-corruption establishment, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission or commonly known as the MACC has officially begun its operation on 1 January 2009 replacing the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) of Malaysia established in year 1967. The MACC is officially established through the enactment of the MACC Act 2009. The transformation of MACC creates a new dimension of anti-corruption efforts in Malaysia with the establishment of five independent committees as a check and balance mechanism to oversee the entire system of MACC including operation, prosecution, prevention, administration, etc. The members consisting of 42 persons who are appointed by the King and the Prime Minister of Malaysia include Members of Parliament from both the ruling and opposition parties, former Chief Justice, former Solicitor General, prominent lawyers, members of the NGOs, from the academia, former Auditor General and others who have rendered distinguished public service or have achieved distinction in their respective professions. The five (5) independent oversight bodies are:

- Anti-Corruption Advisory Board;
- Special Committee on Corruption;
- Complaints Committee;
- Operations Review Panel; and
- Consultation and Corruption Prevention Panel

Although the government had shown its strong political will in the fight against corruption, this does not hamper the other parties to generate stronger perception of war against the government through social media.

II. SOCIAL MEDIA: A NEW WEAPON OF WAR AGAINST PERCEPTION

“We are in the midst of a communications upheaval more significant than the introduction of the printing press. The change began in rarefied academic circles in the 1960s, gathered pace with the emergence of the World Wide Web in the 1990s, but exploded into its most decisive phase in 2004 with the arrival of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is about opening up the internet to ordinary users, where they add and share their content. It signifies the transfer of control of the internet, and ultimately the platform for communication, from the few to many.”

Dr. Rob Brown, York University 2009

A. Facebook

- There are more than 600 million Facebook users as of January 2011;
- If it was a country, it would have been the third largest country in the world;
- Facebook monthly growth in 2011 is 3.5%;
- According to Social Media Today as of April 2010, it is estimated that 41.6% of the U.S. population has a Facebook account;
- 50% of active FB users log on to FB in any given day;
- An average user has 130 friends;
- People spend over 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook;
- Average users create 90 pieces of content each month;
- More than 30 billion pieces of content (web links, news, stories, blog posts, notes, photos etc) shared each month
- There are more than 200 million active users currently accessing FB through their mobile phones.

B. Twitter

- Since its creation, in March 2006, Twitter has gained popularity worldwide and is estimated to have 190 million users;
- Generates 650 million tweets a day;
- Handles over 800,000 search queries per day;
- It is sometimes described as the “SMS of the Internet”;
- The average number of tweets per hour is around 1.3 mins;
- At the current rate, Twitter will process almost 10 billion tweets in a single year;
- 93.6% of users have less than 100 followers, while 92.4% follow less than 100 people.

C. YouTube

- 3rd largest site on Internet;
- Number 1 largest video site on the web;
- 100 million visitors per month;
- 5 billion video streams every month;
- 15 hours of video uploaded every minute;
- With nearly 3.5 million people visiting the site every single day, the type of videos they watch and interact with, has a huge impact on the way they view the world;
- How can we forget the videos of January 25th Egypt Revolution in YouTube?

- Exceeds 2 billion views a day;
- 24 hours of video uploaded every minute;
- Every person spends 15 mins a day on YouTube;
- Localized in 23 countries across 24 different languages.

III. MACC'S STRATEGIC PLAN IN GAINING PUBLIC SUPPORT VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

The biggest challenge faced by the MACC in the year 2010 was to prevail in the eyes of the public as being independent, transparent and professional in its efforts to combat corruption. The MACC strategic campaign in enhancing its public support and to reverse the negative perception started intensively right from January 2010.

This is aligned with the MACC 2010 Aspiration that outlines *“strengthening confidence and enhance domestic and international perception on the effectiveness of the MACC in combating corruption based on the principles of independence, transparency and professionalism.”*

Social media such as Frenz of MACC, Facebook, Twitter, Blog, YouTube, etc. were developed and used consistently to disseminate information and answers (“our side of stories”) relating to any news or issues highlighted by the public. By providing such platform, members of the public could actively participate and obtain facts from discussion generated through the social media. This will slowly reverse the negative perception created by the parties bearing their own personal agendas.

A. Frenz of MACC

Frenz of MACC (FOMACC) is an in-house developed SMS Gateway system that acts as a communication tool to disseminate information to various people on educational and anti-corruption campaign materials. The system currently runs SMS messages and is in the progress stage of development to cater email groups as well. The system in the near future will be able to disseminate short messages to recipients’ mobile as well as full text articles to recipients’ email.

The FOMACC was officially launched on 23rd April 2010 by the Chief Commissioner of MACC. There are currently 2,000 registered recipients and it has the capability of running no less than 10,000 recipients. Recipients are segmented into groups such as MACC officers, Public Relations Officers of various departments, MACC retiree, Media Journalists, Media Editors, Head of Federal Government Departments, Head of State Government Departments, Government Officials, Bloggers, Higher Learning Institution’s Anti-Corruption Secretariat, Civil Society, the members of MACC Independent Oversight Bodies, Politicians and last but not the least is the Certified Integrity Officers Alumni. The recipients are considered as key communicators and they on receiving the messages could forward it to other unregistered recipients.

The system is being managed by an administrator, who composes the text messages in no more than 160 characters. The text message is typed in the field provided in the desk-top or Notebook of the administrator. The administrator then sends the text message to the SMS Server which manipulates the message in the back-end server (SMS Database) and returns the message back to the SMS Server which then relays the message to SMS Center at the

respective Telecommunication Companies (TELCO) through SMS Gateway. The SMS Center then sends the message to respective recipients or users.

At present FOMACC uses a modem which has 8 SIM card slots. The modem could be added on as the need arises. Thus, the sending of the SMS to users takes much shorter time. The messages sent from Keycomm server queues and are sent to SMS Center immediately, then to users. At the moment, Malaysia has 6 main Telcos namely TM, Celcom, Maxis, DIGI, UMobile, and iTune. All these telcos have their own respective SMS Centers.

FOMACC is used to send anti-corruption quotes, articles, issues, functions, campaigns, success stories, statistics, etc. Some of the messages sent thus far:

- i. Let's make a difference – fight corruption
By: Dato' Abu Kassim Mohamed, Chief Commissioner of MACC
- ii. Impersonation as MACC Officer and the demand of RM50,000 from mayor. Full report view at www.sprm.gov.my.
- iii. Two plead guilty on charges of impersonation as MACC officer to solicit corrupt payments. Sentenced to 1 day imprisonment and fined RM10,000 i/d 15 months imprisonment.
- iv. Fight against corruption: there shall not be consideration on political parties whether ruling or opposition, race, gender and sector – Tun Hamid, former Chief Justice of Malaysia.
- v. I will not walk through my mind with their feet – Mahatma Ghandi
- vi. Fight against giver campaign: Report any offer of bribe to MACC at 1-800-88-6000.
- vii. MACC and Government Inspectorate of Vietnam signed MoU to enhance cooperation to fight corruption.
- viii. Austrian ambassador to Malaysia, Andrea Wicke suggests cooperation between Malaysia Anti-Corruption Academy and similar academy in Austria.

FOMACC is an innovative tool in out-reach program to educate and deter any potential offender of corruption by constantly reminding registered and unregistered recipients of messages, the consequences of corruption. Likewise, messages sent to individuals who have been investigated for offences of corruption but not charged due to lack of evidence helps to prevent them from involving themselves in corrupt practices for fear that they are being watched. Hence, it becomes a prevention effort.

B. Facebook

Facebook is a very popular social network in the present days. It caters to the young and youth generations. It does attract a large number of fans and is fast becoming a new platform for interaction. It is a very effective mode of interactive communication and has a wide coverage.

As an enforcement entity, the MACC has to engage such social network in communicating and educating the public on the efforts of anti-corruption. It is another form of

out-reach tool in education and dissemination of information to deter individuals from corrupt practices. Hence, the MACC has developed and launched its very own facebook page on 24 July 2010. For viewing, one can visit the MACC's facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/SPRM>.

At present the MACC Facebook is registered with a total of 5,155 fans. It is fast growing and tremendously gaining popularity especially amongst younger generation aged between 18 and 24. However, at the moment the dominant age group participating in discussions is between 25 and 35 which takes up about 43% of the total followers.

The social network hits between 100 and 150 active participation per issue or discussion. The MACC Facebook has a discussion board which periodically discusses matters on arrests, community education information, current issues, guidance on anti-corruption, offences and sentences on corruption, etc.

C. Other Media

The MACC has also developed and engaged in other communication mediums such as blog-site, twitter, YouTube, and flickr.

The MACC's official blog-spot can be viewed at <http://www.ourdifferentview.com>. This site has attracted more than 65,000 viewers and has many articles and information one can look for in countering new issues on the MACC and on corruption. Most of the articles in the site were written and posted by MACC's own officers. The site has also been linked by many other independent blog-spots.

The MACC also uses twitter to disseminate short and precise information on corruption and can be accessed by logging on into <http://twitter.com/odvmacc>.

The MACC has also developed and engaged YouTube to disseminate information. Speeches, recordings of presentations and views of the Chief Commissioner and other prominent figures on issues of corruption can be viewed through the <http://www.youtube.com/odvmacc>.

The MACC also uses Flickr to disseminate information on all of MACC's activities. It is no doubt another popular site to disseminate photographic messages to the public. The site can be viewed at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ourdifferentview>.

IV. THE IMPACT OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN BUILDING POSITIVE PERCEPTION

The MACC and the issue of corruption had become important topics discussed almost everyday in both the mainstream and the blogs. Approximately 500 write-ups in the form of news, articles, and comments are posted every month with an average of 16 write-ups per day.

For the year of 2010, the MACC had appointed a Media Monitoring Consultant to monitor the entire media including the mainstream and social media. All the write-ups are further categorized into three categories which are Positive, Neutral and Negative.

The following are examples of each category:

A. Positive

- **PUTRAJAYA:** MACC - ACB Brunei cooperation in investigation resulted in 33 arrested for smuggling diesel to Brunei.
- **KUALA LUMPUR:** Director of a company convicted under the offence of offering RM3,000 to a civil servant. Sentenced to 8 years imprisonment and fined RM15,000.
- **PETALING JAYA:** Keretapi Tanah Melayu Bhd (KTMB) or Malayan Railways Limited is being investigated by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) for allegedly awarding a multi-million ringgit contract to an "under qualified" company. The MACC investigation director Datuk Mustafar Ali confirmed that a team of officers was sent to obtain whole lots of documents in connection with the allegation. He, however, declined further to comment when asked on investigations into the case.

B. Neutral

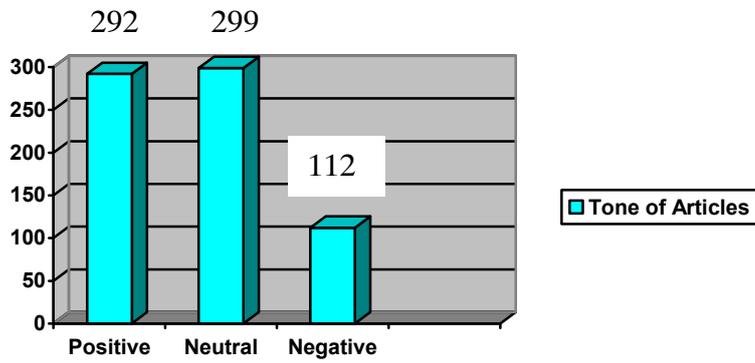
- **KUALA LUMPUR:** Austrian Ambassador to Malaysia, Andrea Wicke suggests cooperation between Malaysia Anti-Corruption Academy and similar academy in Austria.
- **PUTRAJAYA:** Dr Ponthip agrees to attend the TBH inquest and government of Malaysia assures her safety.
- **PETALING JAYA:** The government must give its full backing to the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) if it wants graft to be stamped out. Apart from such a mandate, the commission must be accorded sufficient financial allocations and the right personnel to fulfil its role as the country's graft buster. These were among the recommendations by former MACC advisor Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam, who said the commission was not being seen as a premier government agency.

C. Negative

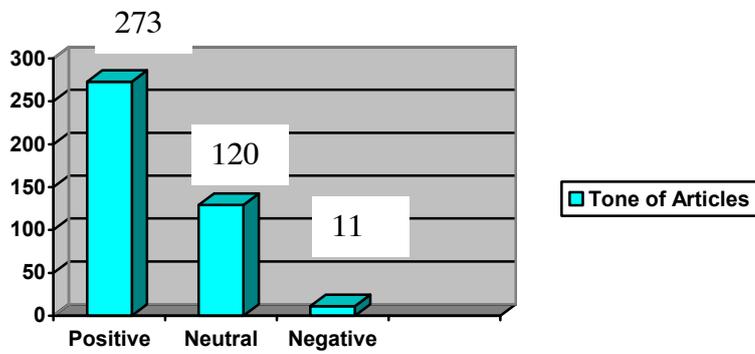
- **PUTRAJAYA:** The Malaysian Anti Corruption Commission yesterday issued an apology to the disabled community over a remark made by its head of prosecution Datuk Abdul Razak Musa during the Teoh Beng Hock inquest on Friday.
- **KUALA LUMPUR:** A former assistant superintendant of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) was sentenced to six months' jail by the High Court here after the court reverted a Sessions Court decision which had acquitted him for allegedly accepting a luxury watch from a 'middleman' linked to former Selangor state executive councillor Datuk Saidin Tamby in 1998
- **KUALA LUMPUR:** A senior Customs officer assisting in the investigation of a graft case fell to his death from the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) building in Jalan Cochrane, this morning.

IV. RESULT ON MEDIA MONITORING

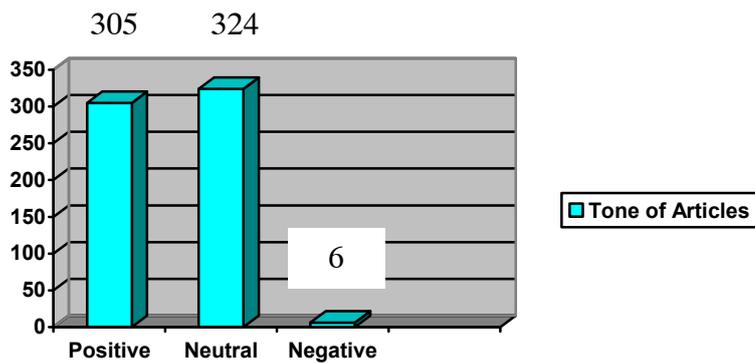
January 2010



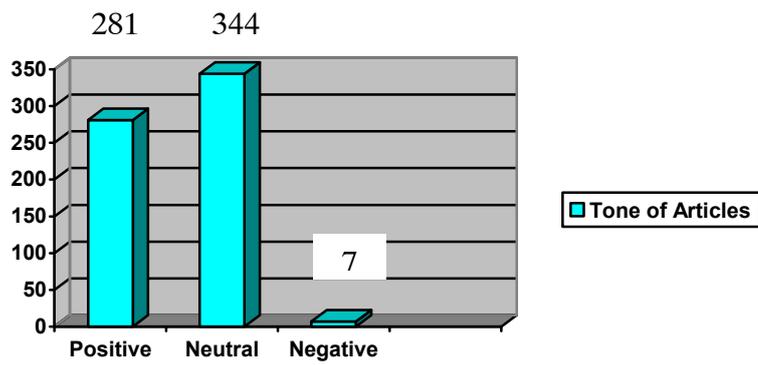
February 2010



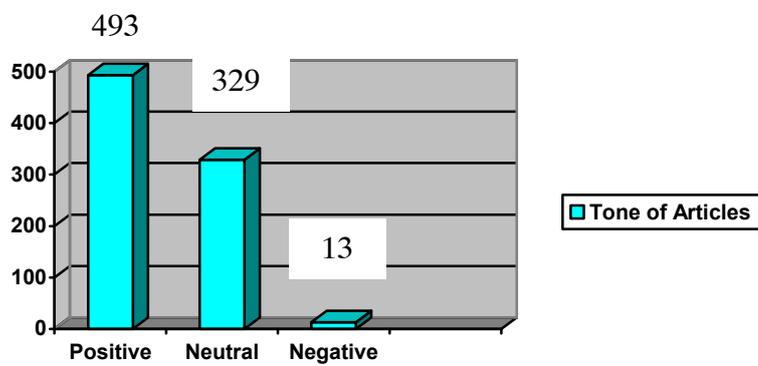
March 2010



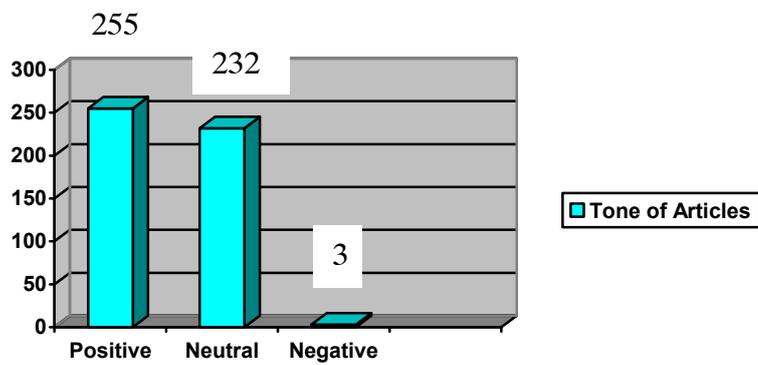
April 2010



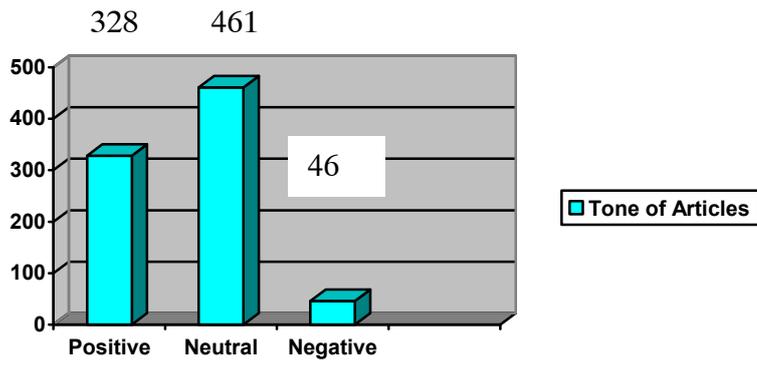
May 2010



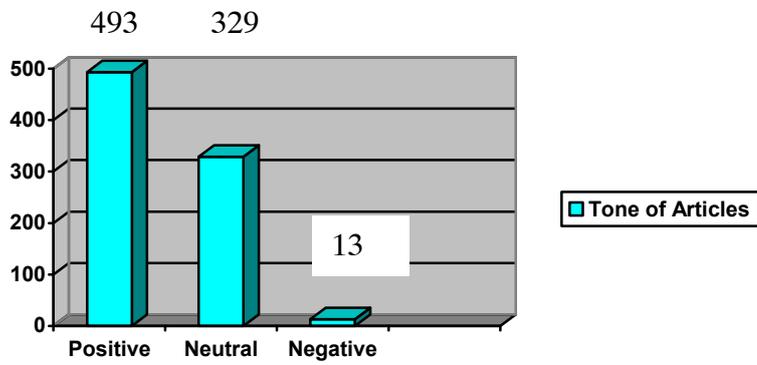
June 2010



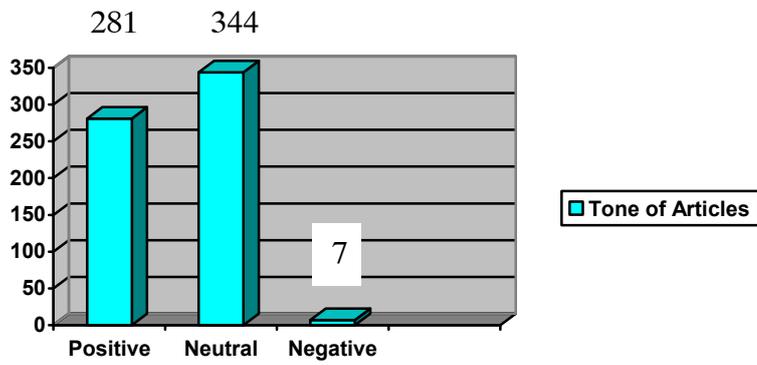
July 2010



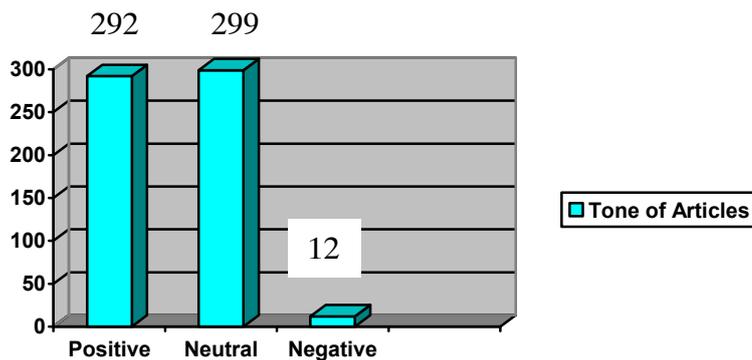
August 2010



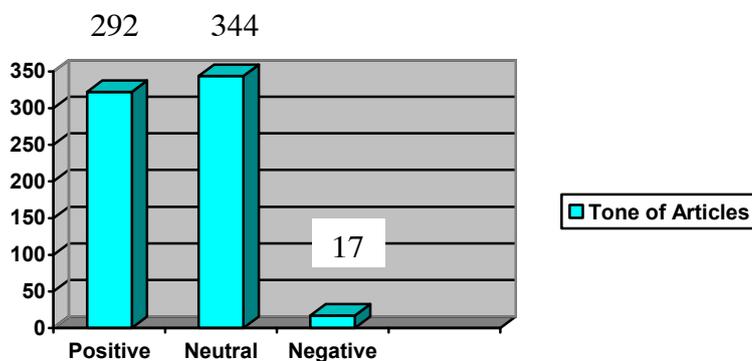
September 2010



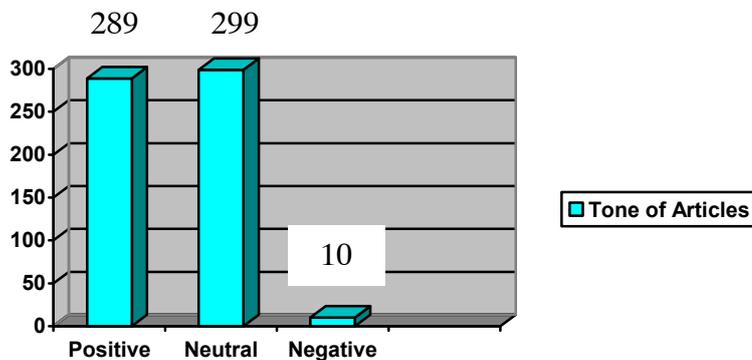
October 2010



November 2010



December 2010



The above results especially in reducing the negative write-ups on the MACC had shown an excellent progress. By using social media as a platform of providing fast and accurate responses to all issues related to the MACC, the MACC managed to reduce the negative write-ups in January 2010 from 112 write-ups to a minimum average of 15 negative reporting through out the year of 2010.

The MACC had identified advantages of using the social media for anti-corruption campaigns and platforms for building MACC's image and reputation as follows:

- Increasing social networking between the MACC and the targeted group;

- Developing public trust by providing accurate responses to any queries;
- Gathering information and feedback directly from the public;
- Free of charge;
- Forming support group;
- Reaching out to bloggers who have very high influence on the society especially the cyber community;
- A platform for voicing out opinion and ideas regarding issues relating to the commission;
- Speed of information flow; and
- Personal, engaging and involving.

VI. CONCLUSION

The responsibility of combating corruption in this era of technology has become more challenging and complex. The advancement of technology creates a huge platform for fast and accurate responses. It sometimes provides a huge opportunity for certain groups of people with evil intentions to disseminate lies and hatred information in order to weaken the image of enforcement agency such as the MACC. By weakening the credibility and reputation of so called “sensitive and important” agency, it will also reflect the negative image and credibility of the government. In order to win a war on corruption, the commission must also take into consideration the war against perception. Without public support and confidence, there is no way the commission can manage to achieve its vision and mission in creating a corruption-free society.