

IBSSS - 609

**News Objectivity and Its Relevance in this Age of the Internet and Social Media:
The case of Malaysia**

Wong Kok Keong Sunway University, Malaysia wongkk@sunway.edu.my

This paper¹ examines the role of news objectivity in Malaysian journalism by drawing evidence from a comparison of the coverage of the general election in Malaysia in May 2013 by traditional, mainstream news media and alternative online news portals. News objectivity—as in fair and balanced coverage—has long being a contentious feature of journalism. Detractors (e.g. Overholser, 2004) believe it defies human nature, a waste of time, effort and resources, and the quicker it is abandoned the more productively and honestly journalists could perform their work. Besides, the newer media have allowed for ever more diverse views to be made available, ensuring democracy will be maintained if not flourish further. Proponents (e.g., Berry, 2005) insist objectivity is a cardinal principle of journalism and consider the wider and more ready availability of diverse viewpoints aided by the rise of the internet as an added reason to strive harder for it rather than retreat from it.

In Malaysia, the Barisan Nasional controlled government since the country's independence from Britain in 1957 has had direct or indirect influence on the media, especially traditional, mainstream media of newspapers, radio and TV, such that many even claimed that the traditional media have very much served as its mouthpiece. The rise of the internet and social media has seen more news coverage focused on the opposition parties, in particular the coalition party of Pakatan Rakyat. The BN government has typically treated such news portals with

¹ This paper benefitted from a research grant from Sunway University and the assistance of Vijaya Sooria Sangarn Kutty.

contempt as they see them as purveyors of distortions and lies for PR. Nonetheless, it has also made use of news portals' PR bias to undermine critics who chastise them for restricting freedom and democracy as proof to the contrary. In the process, news objectivity is assumed to be irrelevant/unnecessary as Malaysians can access diverse views freely.

But has news objectivity become irrelevant/unnecessary in Malaysia? This is the focus of this paper and the discussion will draw from a research on the coverage of Malaysia's 13th general election in May 2013 by *New Straits Times*, *The Star*, and *The Sun* and news portals *Malaysiakini* (or MKINI), *The Malaysian Insider* (TMI) and *Free Malaysia Today* (FMT). But, first, it is necessary to examine the role of journalism within Malaysia's political economy.

MALAYSIA'S POLITICAL ECONOMY AND MEDIA:

A British colony until 1957, Malaysia is a formal democracy. While Article 10 of its Constitution allows for freedom of expression, this freedom is restricted by several national considerations premised especially on maintaining peace and harmony among three of the major racial and religious groups: the Malays/Bumiputera (about 67% of Malaysia's population of about 30 million), the Chinese (about 25% of the population), Indians (about 7%), and others (about 1%). Barisan Nasional (BN or the National Front), which largely comprises three major race-based parties of the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), has controlled the government since the country's independence. Only beginning at the turn of this century that it has faced a sustained challenge from Pakatan Rakyat (PR or the People's Alliance), which comprises the multi-race based Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR or People's Justice Party), the largely Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP) that aspires for a Malaysia not based on race and religion but on

justice, freedom, accountability and good governance; and the Malay led Islamic party of PAS (or the Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party). Of the 13 general elections to date, Barisan Nasional (or BN) had won at least two-thirds of the seats in Parliament in all but three: in 1969, 2008 and 2013. The shocker for the BN was the 2008 election because, for the first time, they not only lost two-thirds control of Parliament but also five of the 13 states in the federation to the opposition.

Malaysia's traditional print and broadcast media have long being directly owned and/or influenced heavily by the ruling BN. The BN government, especially during the time of Mahathir Mohamad as the fourth prime minister (1981 – 2003), promoted developmental journalism that requires media to partner with the government to maintain stability and peace among the three races, and to grow and develop the economy (Wong, 2004). The three newspapers chosen for this study are all known for their support or promotion of the BN.

BN's heavy influence on traditional media is also effected through a slew of media laws, e.g. the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), Sedition Act and Official Secrets Act (OSA). Critics claim that the problem is BN's selective application of the laws to criminalize speech or information critical of them. Furthermore, editorial leadership changes in newspapers are directly determined by leadership changes in the component parties of BN, ensuring political leaders receive deferential or supportive coverage.

The advent of the internet has witnessed some changes to the media landscape but not BN's overall view of media's role. In the mid-1990s, PM Mahathir embraced the new information and communications technology (ICT) for transforming Malaysia into the K-economy through his grand Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) Program. To attract major figures (like Bill Gates of Microsoft) to the MSC's advisory board, Mahathir assured the

Malaysian government would not censor the internet. To this day, the BN government has kept that promise although some of the older laws (like Sedition Act and Official Secrets Act) and newer laws under the Communication and Multimedia Act (1998) still apply (e.g., online content should not be obscene, false, or offensive with a malicious intent).

METHOD:

A content analysis was performed on the coverage of the May 2013 general election by the three traditional mainstream newspapers and three news portals from 4 April 2013 until 5 May (polling day). Election related items selected for analysis were news reports, editorials, commentaries and letters to the editor (or letters). Online readers' comments provided at the end of every online report are excluded. MKINI routinely compiled a selection of representative comments from all readers' comments on a news story for publication as a news item the following day. Such an item is included in this analysis. Analysis of all selected items was guided by categories developed in a 2004 study (Wong, 2004a & 2004b):

BN (F) and PR (F): Coverage Focused on BN or PR.

BN (P) and PR (P): Coverage Positive on BN or PR

BN (N) and PR (N): Coverage Negative on BN or PR

B + F: Coverage that is Balanced and Fair

NPR: Election-related coverage but not about BN or PR

BN (F) or PR (F) coverage focused only on campaign activities of either BN or PR, including speeches made by either party; it is straightforward reporting devoid of positive/negative depictions of either party, e.g. coverage of a political candidate in a food court meeting the public. BN (P) or PR (P) coverage refers to items that overtly or subtly promotes or positive on one party, e.g. coverage that includes quotes from the candidate's speech praising or exalting that political party, and without any attempt on the part of the reporter to seek out or

include opposing views. Another example is a report that interviews people and includes only quotes promoting only one political party while the other party was ignored or superficially depicted as a straw man for an argument. This is the opposite of BN (N) or PR (N) with coverage that criticized one party without including any kind of responses or rebuttals from the party criticized, and no attempts made by reporters to seek out the party criticized for comments. Balanced and fair (B+F) reports consider the views of both parties seriously coverage items could be seen to treat opposing parties equally or fairly even though they may conclude more favorably towards one party. Finally, NPR refers to items that touch on the election but is not about BN or PR. Examples include getting everyone to vote in the election and the police making sure the election was carried out peacefully.

FINDINGS:

Tables 1 and 2 below indicate that *NST* was clearly the most partisan towards BN (45.8% focused and positive on BN) followed by *The Star* (33.5%) and *The Sun* (33.0%). They

TABLE 1: NEWSPAPER COVERAGE

NEWSPAPERS (4APRIL – 5 MAY)		BN (F)	BN (P)	BN (N)	PR (F)	PR (P)	PR (N)	B & F	NPR	TOTAL
<u><i>NST</i></u>	NUMBER OF ITEMS	278	345	1	39	0	424	65	209	1361
	PERCENTAGE	20.4	25.3	0.0	2.9	0.0	31.2	4.8	15.4	100
<u><i>STAR</i></u>	NUMBER OF ITEMS	235	70	5	139	6	195	60	201	911
	PERCENTAGE	25.8	7.7	0.5	15.3	0.6	21.4	6.6	22.1	100
<u><i>SUN</i></u>	NUMBER OF ITEMS	125	14	14	65	1	59	50	93	421
	PERCENTAGE	29.7	3.3	3.3	15.4	0.2	14.0	12.0	22.1	100

TABLE 2: ONLINE NEWS PORTAL COVERAGE

NEWS PORTALS (4 APRIL – 5 MAY)		BN (F)	BN (P)	BN (N)	PR (F)	PR (P)	PR (N)	B & F	NPR	TOTAL
<u>MKINI</u>	NUMBER OF ITEMS	100	31	139	136	26	70	257	122	881
	PERCENTAGE	11.4	3.5	15.8	15.4	3.0	7.9	29.2	13.8	100
<u>TMI</u>	NUMBER OF ITEMS	36	14	18	26	11	10	64	28	207
	PERCENTAGE	17.4	6.8	8.7	12.6	5.3	4.8	30.9	13.5	100
<u>FMT</u>	NUMBER OF ITEMS	51	29	81	56	27	68	106	47	465
	PERCENTAGE	11.0	6.2	17.4	12.1	5.8	14.6	22.8	10.1	100

registered a very low negative coverage of the BN—3.3% for *the Sun*, 0.5% for *The Star* and 0% (or just one item) for *NST*. The latter also provided 2.9% items focused on PR and nothing positive on PR, *The Star* at 15.3% and 0.6% respectively, and *The Sun* at 15.4% and 0.2% respectively. This was unlike news portals. *TMI* carried 24.2% of all items focused and positive on BN followed by *FMT* (17.2%) and *MKINI* (14.9%). On the other hand, *FMT*'s negative coverage toward BN, at 17.4%), was about the same as its coverage focused and positive on BN. *MKINI*'s negative coverage towards BN, at 15.8%, was slightly higher than its focused and positive coverage of BN. And *TMI* provided merely 8.7% BN negative coverage compared to 24.2% focused and positive on BN. Regarding coverage focused and positive on PR, *TMI* and *FMT* provided 17.9% each followed by *MKINI* at 18.4%. Meanwhile, *FMT* had the largest amount of negative PR coverage (14.6%), followed by *MKINI* (7.9%) and *TMI* (4.8%).

Regarding B+F (Balanced + Fair) coverage, it is hardly the largest percentage of all items in the newspapers: *theSun* carried about 12%, *The Star* 6.6% and *NST* 4.8%. But it was for each

of the news portals, with *TMI* providing 30.9%, *MKINI* 29.2% and *FMT* 22.8%. These findings are corroborated by Lumsden's study (2013). The papers clearly demonstrated a strong institutional commitment to biased coverage towards the BN whereas the news portals displayed an institutional commitment to objectivity.

CONCLUSION: POLITICIZATION OF OBJECTIVE JOURNALISM

The irony of objective journalism in Malaysia is that, contrary to Western countries, it is particularly relevant or important to news portals not mainstream papers where objective journalism has been politicized by the BN to help secure its control of the government all these years. The BN has largely justified its control in the name of developmental journalism. The watershed event of May 13, 1969 also has been similarly manipulated. That year saw the worst race riot ever between Malays and Chinese in Malaysia's history that ended up with 200 plus people killed. It was confined to the Kuala Lumpur area following the 1969 general election that witnessed the most serious challenge to the BN (at that time known as the Alliance Party) up until then. The opposition parties of PAS, DAP and Gerakan (which later joined BN in 1973) succeeded in denying the Alliance its two-thirds majority control of Parliament as well as winning four states in the federation. A major election campaign strategy of the largely Chinese-based DAP and Gerakan was to attack the special privileges of the Bumiputera. Their victory celebrations in the streets of Kuala Lumpur presumably further upset the Malays, triggering bloody riots. A major response by the Alliance government was to limit press freedom and independence further by tightening media laws. The Alliance which became BN in the 1970s would frequently use the idea of preventing another May 13 race rioting to justify their media restriction. Any kind of discourse on race became too sensitive for public discussion, feeding into a culture of self-censorship in the papers, and consolidating BN's hegemony based on its

political framework for the three races to be represented by its respective parties within its coalition. Anything else is deemed unworkable or a possible challenge to the Constitutional agreements among the three races before Malaysia's independence.

The mainstream papers thus never had a chance to be institutionally committed to objective journalism. BN ownership control and influence of them and the many laws that shackled them make sure of it. But the continuing growth of traffic to all three news portals unlike the declining readership of all three mainstream papers (with NST, among the papers, experiencing the largest drop) suggests public demand for objective journalism (NST Group Papers Lead, 2014). Perhaps a stronger reason is the fact that the online portals are free to the public. But, then, MKINI is a paid-subscription service for about 10 years now, and its readership has been steadily increasing. It became the number one news site of Malaysia in 2008, according to Alexa.com and Google Analytics (Celebrating 10 Years, 2009), and registered 2.7 million unique visitors in 2011 (About Us, 2014)). Today, it also offers Malay and Chinese online versions for free, a paid-subscription business portal called KiniBiz and a free internet TV news site called Kinitv. Nonetheless, research needs to be done to determine the extent to which objective journalism contributes to the increasing popularity of news portals and the lack of it to the declining readership of the mainstream papers, especially *NST* and *The Star*.

REFERENCES

- About Us. (2014). Malaysiakini. Retrieved from <http://mkini.blogspot.com/p/about-us.html>
- Berry, S. J. (2005, Summer). Why Objectivity Still Matters. *Nieman Reports*. The Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard.
- Celebrating 10 Years of Independent News. (2009, Sept. 16). Malaysiakini. Retrieved from <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/112996>
- Lumsden, L. J. (2013). How Independent? An Analysis of GE13 Coverage by Malaysia's Online News Portal Coverage. *Jurnal Komunikasi/Malaysian Journal of Communication*. 29(2), 1-30.
- NSTP Group Papers Lead Circulation Plunge. (2014, June 4). Malaysiakini.com. Retrieved from <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/264720>
- Overholser, G. (2004, Winter). The Inadequacy of Objectivity as a Touchstone. *Nieman Reports*. The Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard.
- Wong, K (2001). Unfair Coverage: A Look At the Mainstream Media's Bias In the 1999 General Election. *Aliran Monthly*. 2(1), 15 - 17.
- Wong, K. (2004a). Asian-Based Development Journalism and Political Elections: Press Coverage of the 1999 General Elections in Malaysia. *Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies*. 6(1), 25 – 40.
- Wong, K. (2004b). Propagandists for the BN (Part 1). *Aliran Monthly*. 24 (5), 14 - 17.
- Wong, K. (2004c). Propagandists for the BN (Part 2). *Aliran Monthly*. 24(6), 13 - 17.