HOW INDEPENDENT?
AN ANALYSIS OF GE13 COVERAGE BY MALAYSIA'S ONLINE NEWS PORTAL COVERAGE

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Abstract

The May 5, 2013, general election in Malaysia may have marked the move of the nation's alternative news media—online, unlicensed news portals that challenge the hegemony of the party that has ruled the nation since 1957—into the mainstream. *Malaysiakini, The Malaysian Insider*, and *Free Malaysia Today* editors pride themselves on their independence and journalistic role as government watchdogs, a role they claim has been abdicated by newspapers and broadcast outlets. This article critiques the self-professed editorial independence of these three online news portals through analysis of their GE13 campaign coverage. This research will expand knowledge about Malaysia's evolving news environment and will add to research on media coverage of previous Malaysian elections. The study employs two research methods: content analysis and personal interviews with news portal editors and media scholars. Following an overview of Malaysia's historically hegemonic mainstream news media, the article traces how the Internet facilitated the introduction of Malaysia's counter-hegemonic online news portals. Its basic research question is: Did Malaysia's leading independent news portals provide unbiased news coverage of GE13? The hypothesis was that the sites would be negatively biased against the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition and positively biased toward opposition coalition candidates, However, the study found 8.2 percent more positive BN stories than negative BN stories in overall coverage. A greater disparity appeared in opposition coverage, where positive stories as predicted outnumbered negative stories by 56.1 percent.

News portals criticized both parties, leading to the conclusion that they add to the political discourse that is requisite for successful participatory democracy.

Keywords: *Malaysia news media, Malaysian online news portals, alternative media, Malaysia GE14, online journalism*

SEJAUH MANA KEBEBASAN? SATU ANALISIS LIPUTAN PRU13 OLEH PORTAL BERITA ATAS TALIAN

Abstrak

Pilihanraya umum 5 Mei 2013 Malaysia mungkin menampakkan pergerakan berita alternatif media atas talian, portal berita tanpa lesen yang mencabar kedaulatan parti yang telah memerintah negara sejak 1957 – kedalam arus perdana. Editor *Malaysiakini, The Malaysian Insider*, dan *Free Malaysia Today* merasa bangga dengan kebebasan dan peranan jurnalistik mereka sebagai pemerhati kerajaan, yang didakwa telah diabaikan oleh media cetak dan badan penyiaran. Artikel ini mengkritik tindakan kebebasan editorial tiga portal berita atas talian ini melalui analisis liputan kempen PRU13. Penyelidikan ini akan menambah maklumat mengenai iklim berita Malaysia yang sering berputar dan akan menambah kepada penyelidikan liputan media pilihanraya Malaysia yang lepas. Penyelidikan ini menggunakan dua kaedah kajian: analisis kandungan dan temubual bersemuka bersama editor berita portal dan para ilmuan media. Ikutan dari pandangan keseluruhan berita media arus perdana pemerintah Malaysia, artikel ini meneliti bagaimana Internet memudahkan pengenalan portal berita atas talian kontra-hegemonik Malaysia. Persoalan asas nya ialah: Adakah portal berita bebas utama Malaysia menyediakan liputan berita PRU13 yang tidak berpihak? Penyelidikan ini mendapati 8.2% cerita BN yang lebih positif berbanding negatif dari liputan keseluruhan. Percanggahan yang lebih besar terdapat dalam liputan pihak pembangkang dimana seperti dijangka cerita positif melebihi cerita negatif sebanyak 56.1%. Portal berita mengkritik kedua dua parti yang membawa kepada satu rumusan yang menambah wacana politik yang menjadi syarat kearah demokrasi penyertaan yang berjaya.

Kata kunci: *Media berita Malaysia, portal berita atas talian*

Malaysia, media alternative, PRU13 Malaysia, kewartawanan atas talian.

Introduction

The 2013 general election on May 5 in Malaysia may have marked the move of the nation's so-called alternative news media—online, unlicensed news portals that challenge the hegemony of the party that has ruled the nation since 1957—into the mainstream. Together, the three largest and most influential exclusively online news websites attracted millions of page views daily during the official two-week GE13 campaign. *Malaysiakini, The Malaysian Insider*, and *Free Malaysia Today* editors pride themselves on their independence and journalistic role as government watchdogs. It is a role they claim has been abdicated by the so-called mainstream media, government-dominated print and broadcast news outlets. This article critiques the self-professed editorial independence of these three online news portals through analysis of their GE13 campaign coverage. The long-time ruling Barisan Nasional (National Front) coalition experienced its worst showing since it began its reign after independence in 1957, although it retained control of Parliament. The Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance) opposition coalition, comprising Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party), the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party, and Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), won eighty-nine of 222 seats, up seven from the 2008 election. For the first time, the PR also won a majority of the nationwide popular vote (50.87 percent versus the BN's 47.38 percent) following an unprecedented voter turnout of 84.84 percent. (Special Reports)

   The phrases "mainstream media" and "alternative media" are slippery. The former traditionally have been defined as media boasting the greatest distribution and which reflect and promote the views and values of a society's dominant power structure. (Chomsky, 1997) Alternative media usually are defined as outside or in opposition to the mainstream. (Atton, 2004; Downing, 2001; Hamilton) 2000) Long-time Malaysian journalist and online pioneer Jacqueline Ann Surin, however, is among those who object to classifying news portals as alternative journalism. "Alternative to what?" she asked in a February 25, 2013, interview with the author. "I think there's good media and bad media. New media is not an alternative to bad journalism."

Research Methods

This inquiry aims to illuminate the journalistic ecology of Malaysia, a prospering Southeast Asian nation of thirty million people that professes democracy but tends toward authoritarianism. In light of the Internet's profound influence in Arab Spring, the potential of Malaysia's independent online news portals to help effect political change cannot be overstated. ("The Role of the Internet…" and

"Arab Spring") This research will expand knowledge about Malaysia's evolving news media environment because only the fourteen-year-old, pioneering *Malaysiakini* has been the subject of academic inquiry. It will add to research on media coverage of previous Malaysian elections. It will help fill a gap in scholarship on Malaysian journalism as the news portals' editorial content is virtually unexplored, in contrast to numerous studies on mainstream media. The topic is important because diverse news media are considered requisite for successful participatory democracy, which from GE13's historic voter turnout appears to be much desired by Malaysians.

The study employs two research methods: content analysis, a social-science method to make inferences about characteristics of communication (Krippendorff, 2012), and personal interviews, which are a useful qualitative method to elicit insights from subjects, in this case, nearly a dozen Malaysian news portal editors, media critics, and communication scholars. (Mosley, 2013) The study is limited to *Malaysiakini*, the *Insider,* and *FMT* because they appear exclusively online and during the campaign period had the most users of any exclusively online news portal. Each professes to fulfill the democratic function of providing citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing through the journalistic imperatives of verification and neutrality (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). The study omits blogs and NGO websites or related social media, which also are key actors in Malaysian civil society, because such outlets are unabashed about pushing their agendas. Each portal studied publishes in English, and *Malaysiakini* also publishes in the nation's three other main languages (Bahasa, Chinese, and Tamil). The *Insider* and *FMT* also publish some articles in Bahasa.

The analysis period ran for fifteen days from April 21, 2013, the first official day of campaigning following the April 20 nomination day, through Election Day. Headlines and body text were examined among the top ten news stories published daily in Malaysiakini, the Insider, and FMT. Each of the 450 total articles was considered a unit of analysis and was coded as negative or positive according to its theme and vocabulary. To make the findings comprehensible to readers unfamiliar with the complexities of Malaysian politics, the thirty stories examined daily were placed into seven categories: Positive BN, Negative BN, Positive Opposition, and Negative Opposition as well as Election, Media, and Multiple. Election stories were articles on the electoral process, while "Media" included articles about election coverage, both controversial topics in Malaysia. The Multiple category included stories that discussed two or more parties or candidates in a balanced manner. Some entries in those categories also were identified on the web sites as commentary or analysis, and are listed in this study under Commentary, although they were counted in the content analysis under one of the seven main categories The content analysis counted commentary only if it appeared in the news blocs described below; the study did not include sections labeled opinion.

As other scholars have noted, content analysis is more challenging online than

in print. (Herring, 2004; and McMillan, 2000) Home page content constantly changes. Some stories are repeated from previous days, and breaking stories usually appear at the top of their homepages regardless of their importance. Sometimes only images that link to major feature stories appear on the homepage. This researcher examined the web pages' ten most prominent articles daily between approximately 7:30 and 9 a.m. in Malaysian Standard Time: those closest to the top of the page located in the portals' space reserved for news that had not previously appeared in the newspaper. The study is limited to ten new stories in the news section per portal per day because of the sheer number of election-related material generated by the portals.

Following an overview of the historically hegemonic role of mainstream Malaysian news media, the article traces how the Internet facilitated the introduction of Malaysia's counter-hegemonic online news portals. It details the three news portals' mission and practice before devling into the content analysis of their GE13 coverage. The study's basic research question is: Did Malaysia's leading independent news portals provide unbiased news coverage of GE13? The hypothesis is that the sites were negatively biased against the ruling coalition and positively biased toward the opposition candidates.

Background

Malaysian Media and Politics

Malaysia's political quilt is kaleidoscopic: The BN comprises thirteen ethnic-based parties dominated by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), followed by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), representing the Muslim nation's three main ethnic groups. The second-longest-ruling political entity in the world has prompted political scientists to create new terminology to describe the Malaysian political sysgem: "quasi-democracy"; "semi-democracy"; "fettered democracy"; "pseudodemocracy': "soft authoritarianism" or "authoritarian democracy." (Zakaria, 1989; Case, 1993, 2001, 2011; Crouch, 1993; Means, 1996; Netto, 2002) BN for its part claims credit for the nation's economic transformation over the past thirty years and insists only it can provide the political stability that will protect Malaysians' improved standard of living and future economic progress. ("Old vs. New")

Media have been instrumental in maintaining BN hegemony for more than a half century, according to scholar John Hilley. "Linking state and corporate elites, media institutions represent a vital part of the UMNO network, helping to filter information, entertainment and civil values," he writes. (Hilley, 2001) Mainstream newspapers and the four main television stations are owned by BN or dominated by corporations closely tied to it. Pro-BN media conglomerate Media Prima controls more than half of Malaysian media. Although UMNO sold its 43 percent share in 2009, it retains strong links with the political party. Media

Prima owns the New Straits Times Press, publisher of the Bahasa-language *Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro*, whose Sunday version (*Metro Ahad*) circulation hit 434,988 in 2012, and the 100,382-circulation English-language *New Straits Times*. *The Star,* however, dominates the English-language market with its 290,566 circulation. Established in 1971 as an independent newspaper, BN's MCA bought it in 1979. ("Circulation Figures," 2012) *The Sun* is a free tabloid owned by a businessman with close ties to UMNO leaders. (Brown, 2005) The morning daily *Sin Chew* dominates the Chinese-language press with its 389,840 circulation. Owned by a Sarawak timber tycoon and the MCA, it criticizes the BN more than other dailies. As Singapore-based media scholar Cherian George notes, "The Chinese press has a long tradition of helping to safeguard the rights of the Chinese minority against Malay hegemony." (George, 2007)

Print journalists face many legal constraints. The Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) gives the home minister absolute discretion to grant or deny a license to publish. In 2000, the government tightened the license of the popular Islamic party newspaper, *Harakah*, to limit publication to bimonthly from biweekly in reaction to its circulation surge to 700,000. (Cole, 2006) Although the PPPA was revised in 2012 to eliminate annual applications, the license can be revoked or suspended at any time. The Internal Security Act has been used to detain journalists, and libel is a criminal offense. Mega-defamation civil suits also have a chilling effect. ("Libel Award," 2000)

Numerous scholars have discussed the various ways that the government controls Malaysian media through legislation as well as ownership ties to the BN. (Abbott, 2009; Anuar, 2000; Brown, 2005; Case, 1997; Gomez, 1994; Gomez & Jomo, 1997; Hilley, 2001; Jesudason, 1995; Loh, 2009; Nain, 2002; Netto, 2002b; Sani, 2005; Welsh, 2006) Malaysian election coverage especially is widely considered to be heavily biased toward the BN. The ruling party benefits from its "three Ms": money, media and machinery, according to political scientist Meredith Weiss. (Weiss, 2006) As *The Economist* observed in a pre-GE13 analysis, "UMNO (the BN's largest party) and its friends in the press and television have been relentless in their assaults on any organization . . . deemed to be sympathetic to the opposition." {"No Times Like," 2012) In the 1999 election, Kokkeong Wong found a "strong bias" toward the BN in *The Star, The Sun* and the *New Straits Times*, and scholar Mustafa Anuar made similar findings in his studies of election coverage in 1999 and 2004. (Wong, 2004 & Anuar, 2003) Jason Abbott found "considerable" pro-government bias during the 2008 election in his study of two Malay-language newspapers. (Abbott, 2011)

The trend continued as GE13 approached. Watching the Watchdog, an independent project to gauge media performance in its treatment of political figures and parties, as well as key policy issues, monitored GE13 coverage in twenty-nine news outlets for a month. During the week of April 7-15, five days before nomination day, it determined that newspapers and television news heavily favored BN in terms of both the quantity and quality of its coverage. ("Preliminary Results , 2013) "Newspapers in Malaysia have, for all intents and

purposes, become an extension of the ruling Coalition," observed Rob O'Brien of *Asian Correspondent* on the eve of GE13, "and the rising popularity of alternative news platforms and social media shows Malaysians are turning their backs on this cozy power alliance." (O'Brien, 2013)

The Internet and the Reformasi

Numerous observers have commented on how the Internet has transformed the Malaysian media and political landscape by opening political discourse. (Ahmad *et al*, Brown, 2003; George, November 2005; Guan, 2010; Lopez, 2012; Liow, 2012; Kenyon & Marjoribanks, 2007; Sani, 2009; Subramaniam, 2011; Tan & Ibrahim, 2008; Ufen, 2009) Unlike print media, online news sites need no license. In a bid to lure global investors to its Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) aimed to propel Malaysia into a high-tech industrial nation, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad pledged in 1996 to protect free expression on the Internet. The 1998 Communication and Multimedia Act forbade Internet censorship, and it exempted online media from the PPPA. The hands-off Internet policy had the unintended effect of opening a crack in governmental barriers to political expression during the "Reformasi" (reform) movement in the late 1990s that opened a flood of challenges to Malaysia's media and political hegemony.

The Reformasi witnessed a broadening political consciousness among Malaysians that paralleled the rise of online communication. New online media were "crucially linked" to the Reformasi, according to Andrew Kenyon and Tim Marjoribanks, because it freed citizens to write publicly against the ruling party in unprecedented numbers. (Kenyon & Marjoribanks, 2007). Email, websites, and online forums fueled dissent and facilitated large protests against the government. The simmering Reformasi exploded when Deputy Prime Minister Anwar bin Ibrahim fell out of favor with Mahathir. Accused of corruption and sodomy, the ousted official was arrested on September 20, 1998. Within months more than fifty web sites had sprung up to support him. "The media were so controlled leading up to the Anwar trials," recalled pioneering Malaysia media scholar Zaharom Nain in a March 5, 2013, interview with the author. "People were just hungering for something different." After Anwar was sentenced to six years in prison for sodomy in April 1999, the public shaming fueled public anger that found an outlet online. Nain is among numerous scholars who believe the Internet facilitated the Reformasi. Jason Abbott agrees it had "an important catalytic effect on critical social voices in Malaysia." (Abbott, 2004; Seneviratne, 2007; Smeltzer, 2008)

The Reformasi marked a watershed for Malaysian journalism. On May 3, 1999, journalists presented the home minister with a memorandum signed by 581 of their colleagues calling for the PPPA's repeal. Civil society also called for press freedom, such as the Charter 2000 citizen's group that campaigned for independent news media. The nonprofit Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) in Kuala Lumpur launched its web site to advocate for more press freedom and

less news bias. Further feeding the online media were a number of disillusioned newspaper journalists, particularly at *The Star*, who left and moved online. Former *New Straits Times* reporter Sabri Zain, for example, mixed eyewitness accounts with political commentary in his popular online *Reformasi Diary*. (Zain, 2000)

The most momentous journalistic event occurred November 20, 1999, with the launch of *Malaysiakini* by Steve Gan and Premesh Chandran, former investigative editors at *The Star*, financed in part by the Southeast Asian Press Alliance. CIJ Executive Director Masjaliza Hamzah said in a January 23, 2013 interview, "Since *Malaysiakini* came into the picture, there's been a real challenge to the hegemony." She is seconded by Surin, like Hamzah a former *Star* reporter and Reformasi veteran. Surin founded and edits thenutgraph.com, a small news portal that posts several in-depth stories weekly. She said, "Politicians now know they cannot control the message so much." (Surin, 2010)

Editor Gan recently said he would have laughed back in 1999 if someone had predicted the site, then operating via a 56K modem, would become so influential. "When we launched *Malaysiakini* I just thought it was the right thing to do," he said in a January 29, 2013, interview with the author. "Today *Malaysiakini* is an institution." The site epitomizes what George labeled "contentious journalism" to describe the online challenge to Malaysia's media hegemony. Contentious journalists "challenge the authority of elites in setting the national agenda and in forging consensus," according to George. (George, 2006) That challenge exacted a price. Police took nineteen computers and servers in a January 2003 raid of *Malaysiakini*'s office. ("Malaysian News," 2009) In 2001, columnist Hishamuddin Rais was detained without trial for two years under the Internal Security Act. *Malaysiakini* has been fighting for a printing license since 2002. A decade later, an appeals court quashed the home minister's rejection of *Malaysiakini*'s application. ("In Malaysia," 2012) The government has appealed the ruling, tying up the issue for years more.

Malaysiakini is widely regarded as the nation's "most important alternative media." (Smeltzer & Lepawsky, 2010; Beers, 2006; Chin, 2003; and Steele, 2009) Even though it charges a subscription fee, it is Malaysia's most-visited online news site—surpassing even the print giant *Star's* online audience. On election night, *Kini* reported its usual quarter million daily page views surged to 4.3 million, a half million per minute at its height, according to Google Analytics. ("Top Sites," 2013) Its newsroom employs forty people who focus on political issues—it ignores sports and most crime stories, unlike the other portals and newspapers. It alone among the three portals exhibits significant structural differences from mainstream media. Employees own seventy percent of the company. *Malaysiakini* also relies on the New York-based Media Development Investment Fund and grants to make up the gap in its finances despite its large audience, paywall, and related revenue streams like MalaysiakiniTV.com and KiniBiz.com. Another unique feature is Citizen Journalists Malaysia, which at the bottom of *Malaysiakini*'s homepage showcases the best of some 1,900

stories created by graduates of workshops the site has conducted since 2008 in newswriting, video production, and journalism ethics. ("About Us")

While the BN won the 1999 election despite its online critics, the opposition coalition secured more than 23 percent of Parliament seats and 44 percent of the popular vote, up ten percent from 1995. Nonetheless, the BN rebounded in the 2004 election with more than 90 percent of parliamentary seats, thanks to incoming Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's promise to end corruption, aided by election irregularities and mainstream media boosterism. Five months later, Anwar was released, emerging as the opposition's leader and unifying force. The lopsided election results helped spark the 2005 creation of Bersih ("clean"), the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, a loose alliance of eighty-four organizations that forced the government to create an Election Commission. Since Bersih's first rally in November 2007 helped galvanize opposition voters in the 2008 election, the group's big protest rallies have become a "ritual" in Malaysian politics, observes *The Economist*, whose impact has grown in proportion to the government's heavy-handed attempts to quash the gatherings with tear gas and riot police. ("It's That Time," 2012)

The March 8, 2008, Malaysia election was a "political tsunami" in which the opposition captured 37 percent of Parliamentary seats, its best showing since the first federal elections in 1959, and eliminating the BN's two-thirds majority required to change the constitution. (Tan & Lee, 2008; Chin & Huat, 2009; Guan, 2010; Mohamad, 2008; O'Shannassy, 2008; Pepinsky, 2009; Singh, 2010; Weiss, 2009) BN lost five states. Post-election, the opposition re-organized into the PR. Anwar won a seat in Parliament in a by-election, enabling him to serve as Parliament's opposition leader. New media in 2008 were a boon to the opposition, which used it to critique the government and BN. Independent websites and blogs mushroomed. (Ooi, 2007) The most important was *Malaysia Today* by Raja Petra Kamarudin. "No other blogger had RPK's *attitude*," observes scholar Khoo Boo Teik. "Others might be critical but tread cautiously near matters such as interethnic or interreligious relations. RPK alone would seize every sensitive political bull by the horns." (Teik, 2010) Unlike today's independent news portals, the bloggers were unabashedly partisan. Significantly, five of 2008's newly elected opposition representatives were bloggers. In the run-up to GE13, however, blogs diminished in importance because they are so biased, in the view of observers such as University of Malaya political scientist Terrence Gomez. Both sides employ "cybertroopers" who write under pseudonyms, he said in a February 15, 2013, interview. "It's hard to decipher truth from fiction."

In contrast, the number of independent online news portals has increased. The *Malaysian Insider* appeared just weeks before the 2008 election, financed by a group of businessmen and journalists to reportedly counter *Malaysiakini*. ("The *Malaysian Insider*," 2013) "There was a market for a middle of the road independent news source," explained chief executive officer and editor Jahabar Sadiq, a former Reuters television producer, in a February 14, 2013, interview near his Bangsar office, a stone's throw from *Malaysiakini*.. The *Insider* had

attracted 1,117,500 unique visitors as of February 2012, according to the Malaysian Digital Association. Its thirty employees during the election period included four editors, ten reporters, eight sub-editors, two photographers, and three graphic designers, as well as IT and salespeople. Advertising pays for about half of its expenses, with unnamed investors making up the difference, according to Sadiq. "We're a very middle-of-the-road, independent, sober portal," he said. "It's run by people who love the idea of journalism in its purest form, which is to tell stories. I get flack from everyone. I love it—it means I'm doing my job."

Free Malaysia Today is the newest and smallest of the three online news sites examined here. It began as a blog operated by members of the opposition, but editor K (he goes by the initial only) Kabilan claims he cut all ties with the PR when his team took over *FMT* in 2010. The *FMT* staff comprises thirteen journalists, including five editors, three technical experts, three videographers and two administrative assistants. Going into the election, *FMT* averaged 118,000 visitors per day, Kabilan said. Like the *Insider*, *FMT* is financed by undisclosed investors whom the editors said share their ideal of opening up political discourse. Kabilan, who earned graduate degrees in journalism in the United Kingdom, prides himself on the site's independence. "I brought in journalists, not activists," he said in a February 27, 2013, interview at his Petaling Jaya office. "We hit BN and we hit Pakatan."

Surin, however, points out the news portals are far from perfect: "There's not enough quote and fact checking; there's a lot of 'he said, she said.'" She is among critics who complain of *Malaysiakini's* anti-BN bias. Gan waves off charges that *Malaysiakini* is a mouthpiece for the opposition: "It's only when you compare *Malaysiakini* to mainstream media it seems we're pro-opposition." He acknowledges the site takes strong positions on its pet causes: press freedom, good government, anti-corruption, and a strong judiciary. Gan said *Malaysiakini* fills the void left by TV and print media that ignore the opposition when not criticizing it. "We see Malaysiakini as a watchdog," he said. "In a post-BN world, we'll have no problem giving BN politicians their side of the story."

New media thus were well-established going into what some dubbed "the mother of all elections." GE13 was Najib's first electoral test as prime minister, an office to which he was appointed in 2009 to replace Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi following the disastrous 2008 election. BN has since embraced social media: Najib has a Facebook page, a Twitter account, and the "1Malaysia," web site, a public relations initiative to improve ethnic and religious relations. Najib pronounced GE13 the "social media election" in an appearance at the Malaysia Social Media Week 2013 summit, where he posted his first Instagram photo and met his millionth Facebook follower. He is one of Malaysia's 13,085,000 Facebook users as of January 2013, ranking the small nation eighteenth in the world. ("List of Countries," 2013) Najib said social media "will not be the biggest factor in the elections, but it is certainly increasing the tempo of political debate and bringing more voices into it." ("PM: GE13," 2013)

The big dailies threw their weight into the election both in print and online. Both the *New Strait Times* and *The Star* created their own election portals, as did *Malaysiakini*. It also dropped its paywall and offered free access during the election period. *The Insider* doubled its bandwidth in anticipation of doubling its usual traffic, and it created new election apps. ("GE13: Eyes") One indication of the online portals' increased political clout is that the BN advertised in each of them.

Results: GE13 content analysis, April 21-May 5

The overall content analysis results showed that the online portals were generally even-handed in their BN coverage, thus living up to their claims of independence. Their opposition coverage, however, was significantly more positive than negative, indicating they did provide alternative news to the mainstream media that ignored or demonized the opposition. The three portals also differed in the amounts of positive and negative coverage each accorded the two sides, indicating editorial diversity within their ranks.

Table 1: Total Distribution of Articles by News Portals April 21-May 5, 2013 (No=150; COM excluded)

PORTAL	POS BN	NEG BN	POS OPP	NEG OPP	Election	Media	Multi	COM*	No.
KINI	23	35	28	19	28	3	14	7	150
MI	41	19	37	15	33	1	4	1	150
FMT	28	31	33	21	23	1	13	13	150
Total	92	85	98	55	84	5	31	21	450
%	20.44	19	22	12.22	19	0.011	7		99.671

POS=Positive NEG=Negative OPP=Opposition COM=Commentary
*COM articles counted in other categories

Contrary to the hypothesis, 8.2 percent more of 450 new portals articles analyzed covered BN positively (ninety-two) versus eighty-five that covered BN negatively.
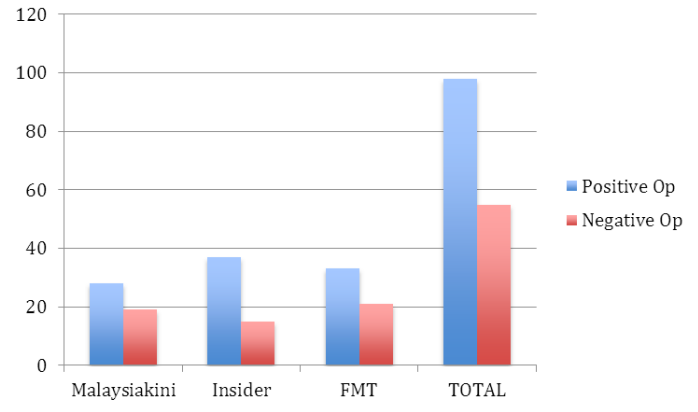
Chart 1. Comparison of News Portal Coverage of BN Coalition

A much greater disparity appeared in opposition coverage, which revealed a strong tendency toward portraying the opposition in a positive light: positive stories (ninety-eight) outnumbered negative stories (fifty-five) by 56.1 percent. The portals also published 64.7 percent more negative (ninety-eight) stories about the BN than they did negative stories (fifty-five) about the opposition.
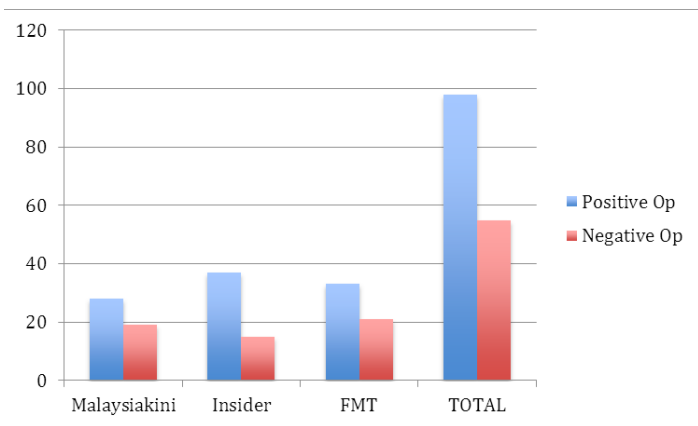

Chart 2. Comparison of News Portal Coverage of Opposition Coalition

On the May 4 election eve, the portals' Positive Opposition stories outnumbered Positive BN stories by a 7:1 ratio; in fact, only the Insider published any Positive BN stories that day. As the polls closed on May 5, coverage of the historic election itself dominated all three portals: six of the top ten stories in the Insider; seven in

FMT; and nine in Malaysiakini. The results indicate the portals offer audiences a variety of views on both sides of Malaysia's political divide, although they are softer on the opposition. The results also reveal variations among the three independent news portals.

Discussion

The *Insider* appeared to be the least biased toward either side.

Table 3 Distribution of *Malaysian Insider* Articles (No=150; COM excluded)

DATE	POS BN	NEG NEG BN	POS OPP	NEG OPP	Election	Media	Multi	COM*
21-Apr	2	1	1	4	1		1	
22-Apr	5		3	1	1			
23-Apr	2	2	2		4			
24-Apr	1	2	5		2			
25-Apr	3	3	2	1	1			
26-Apr	1	2	4	1	2			
27-Apr	2	4	2	1	1			
28-Apr	3	1	1	2	3			1
29-Apr	4	1	2	2	1			
30-Apr	3		1	1	4		1	
1-May	3		5	1	1			
2-May	6		4					
3-May	3	1		1	4		1	
4-May	2	2	3		2	1		
5-May	1		2		6		1	
TOTAL	41	19	37	15	33	1	4	1
%	0.2733	0.1266	0.2466	0.1	0.22	0.0066	0.0266	

POS=Positive   NEG=Negative   OPP=Opposition   COM=Commentary
*COM articles counted in other categories

It published both the most positive BN stories (26.6 percent) and the most positive opposition stories (24.6 percent) as well as the fewest negative BN and negative opposition stories (12.6 percent and 8.6 percent respectively). The *Insider*, however, was the only site of the three that published more positive BN

stories (forty-one) than positive opposition stories (thirty-seven) Nonetheless, the latter figure was higher than the number of Positive Opposition stories in either *Malaysiakini* (twenty-eight) or *FMT* (thirty-three).

   Malaysiakini overall proved to be the most critical of all candidates regardless of party.

Table 2: Daily Distribution of Malaysiakini Articles
(No=150; COM excluded)

DATE	POS BN	NEG BN	POS OPP	NEG OPP	Election	Media	Multi	COM*
21-Apr	1	1	1	3	1		3	1
22-Apr	2	2	2	3			1	
23-Apr	3	3	2	1	1			1
24-Apr	3	2	3				2	1
25-Apr	1	2	1	1	4		1	1
26-Apr	3	2	1	3	1			
27-Apr	1	1	3	1	2	1	1	1
28-Apr	3	2	1		2	1	1	
29-Apr	3	2	3		2			
30-Apr	1	2	1	2	2		2	1
1-May	1	5	2	2				1
2-May		5		1	1	1	2	
3-May	1	3	3		2		1	
4-May		2	5	2	1			
5-May		1			9			
TOTAL	23	35	28	19	28	3	14	7
%.	0.1533	0.2333	0.1866	0.1266	0.1866	0.02	0.0933	

POS=Positive NEG=Negative OPP=Opposition COM=Commentary
*COM articles counted in other categories

  It published the fewest positive stories about either side (15.3 percent and 18.6 percent respectively). A much larger gap occurred in its negative coverage, with nearly double the Negative BN stories (thirty-five) than Negative Opposition stories (nineteen). An example of the latter was the April 23 lead story, "Dr M: Pakatan Rule will Herald 'Failed Islamic State,'" one of several instances in which *Malaysiakini* offered a voice to BN leaders critical of the opposition. *Malaysiakini* also published the most stories in the "Multiple" category

(fourteen), in part because of its frequently updated "LiveBlog," a daily roundup of news briefs featuring campaign incidents and candidates' comments from around the nation. The May 2 blog, for example, included reports from the DAP campaign in Segamat at 8:10 p.m.; BN in Penang at 7 p.m.; MCA in Kuala Lumpur at 4 p.m.; an Independent candidate in Lenggeng at 3:30 p.m.; and PKR in Sabah at 3 p.m. ("Police Escort," 2013)

Free Malaysia Today published slightly more negative opposition stories than the other news portals (14 percent), but it was the most equitable and middle-of-the-road in its coverage in the other three categories: positive BN (18 percent); positive opposition (22 percent); and negative BN (20.6 percent).

Table 4. Daily Distribution of *Free Malaysia Today* Articles (No=150; COM excluded)

DATE	PRO BN	NEG BN	PRO OPP	NEG OPP	Election	Media	Multi	COM*
21-Apr	5	1		2	2			2
22-Apr		2	2	4			2	1
23-Apr	1	4	4	1				1
24-Apr		4		3	1		2	
25-Apr	2	4		2	1		1	
26-Apr	1	3	2	1	2		1	
27-Apr	2	3	1		1		3	
28-Apr	4		2	2	2			3
29-Apr	2	1	4	2	1			1
30-Apr	2	3	3		1	1		1
1-May		2	5	2			1	
2-May	6		4					
3-May	3	1		1	4		1	
4-May		2	6		1		1	4
5-May		1		1	7		1	
TOTAL	28	31	33	21	23	1	13	13
%	0.1866	0.2066	0.22	0.14	0.1533	0.0066	0.0866	

POS=Positive NEG=Negative OPP=Opposition COM=Commentary
*COM articles counted in other categories

Still, *FMT*'s lead story on the first official day of campaigning was headlined "BN wants change too, says Najib," alongside a photo of the prime minister. The story was one of five positive BN stories counted among *FMT*'s top ten

stories that day, compared with zero Positive Opposition stories. But that figure is deceptive: *FMT* coverage trended toward more positive coverage of the opposition the closer it got to May 5. During the week of April 21-27, *FMT* published eleven Positive BN versus nine Positive Opposition stories, but the following week the trend reversed to nineteen Positive BN and twenty-four Positive Opposition stories. *FMT* also published half again as many Negative BN stories (thirty-one) as Negative Opposition stories (twenty-one) during the campaign.

FMT editor Kaliban was the most likely to choose non-election stories for its top news articles. Beneath its lead story link, the bottom row of *FMT*'s nine-square layout of photo links to news stories always linked to global news or lifestyle stories. The portal's emphasis on Sabah and Sarawak, the two Malaysian states on Borneo, also diverged slightly from the other news portals. On May 3, for example, both *Kini* and the *Insider* led with the national vote outlook (*Insider* placed BN and PR "dead even"; *Kini's* headline stated "Najib's Ratings Slide"), while *FMT* led with a Sabah election story. ("BN, Pakatan," 2013; "Najib's Ratings," 2013; "Sabah in," 2013")

FMT also published nearly double the commentary and analysis in its top ten news slots (8.6 percent) than *Malaysiakini* (4.6 percent) and far more than the *Insider*, which published only one opinion piece in its top ten news slots during the campaign. *Malaysiakini* arguably provided the most in-depth campaign analysis in its top ten news slots, however, boosted in part by the hiring of a prominent political scientist to contribute more than a dozen explorations of campaign issues. Among Singapore Management University Professor Bridget Welsh's pieces were "BN's Femme Fatale—the Power of Women," and "Inside the 505 Generation—the Youth Vote." *Kini* also published election analysis from the Reuters news agency, including a balanced pair of analyses of both Najib and Anwar. ("BN Faces," 2013; "Caution May," 2013; "Time Running," 2013)

One shortcoming of content analysis, however, is that it does not measure whatever meaning audiences derive from media messages. Online news' interactivity especially cultivates the active audiences that cultural theorists influenced by Stuart Hall argue are not the passive recipients of media messages described in traditional media effects theories. (Hall, 1973) On its face, for example, the April 22 *Malaysiakini* lead article that declared "Najib: Zul Noordin Will Take Care of Indians' Welfare" is a positive report of the prime minister's support for a candidate accused of racism against Indians. But the site's readers almost uniformly gave it a counter-hegemonic reading, as demonstrated by the outpouring of outrage at Najib's purported insensitivity, hypocrisy, or ignorance expressed in the comments section at the end of the story. "Engaging a fox to look after chickens," is a mild example of nearly five hundred comments. That number illustrates how online journalism's instantaneity and interactivity has created public space for counter-hegemonic discourse in Malaysia.

Although the opinion sections of the news portals are beyond the parameters

of this study, it is worth noting they comprise a significant portion of their content. *Malaysian Insider* runs several opinion pieces daily in its "Side Views" on the right side of the news columns, above "Letters from readers" and op-ed pieces. A link on the top menu also leads to "Opinion." Sadiq is the only one of the three editors who signs columns (his byline occasionally occurs above news stories, too). It published several editorials during the two-week campaign. While the *Insider* publishes occasional unsigned editorials, *Malaysiakini* does so rarely if ever. Disclaimers follow its signed opinion columns that note the views expressed reflect only those of the authors. *FMT* sometimes runs "Comment" pieces in its "Top News" squares of nine stories, such as a May 3, 2013, anti-BN piece, but occasionally neglects to label the homepage link as such.

The most egregious example was *FMT*'s lead story on election eve headlined, "Is There Life After BN?" that tore apart "BN vultures." Columnist Iskandar Dzulkarnain concluded: "GE13 could be the rebirth of a new nation or just another ordinary day with the same old s..t. The choice is yours." Although the actual story inside was labeled "Comment," the home-page photo link in the valuable journalistic real estate normally reserved for the day's most important news was not. Two other top stories labeled "Comment" that day predicted PR wins, and a third was Anwar's personal appeal to voters. ("Pakatan Wave," 2013; "Malays Will," 2013; "Seize Your," 2013) The aggregate pro-Opposition coverage was almost the polar opposite of the pro-BN stories that dominated *FMT*'s first-day campaign coverage.

Malaysiakini led on election eve with a story that seemed to follow the "he said, she said" model that Surin criticized. It reported a late-breaking insinuation by PKR incumbent Nurul Iazzah Anwar that her opponent was improperly involved in a lucrative land deal. The story included the opponent's denial of wrongdoing and omitted the name of the company involved, but the opposition leader's daughter got the last word: "It is time that these immoral and even illegal dealings stop once and for all." ("Nurul Queries," 2013) The *Insider* was more balanced on the campaign's final day, leading with a story about the influence of Malaysians returning from Singapore to vote. Its "Big Pictures," a daily slide show of news events, scrupulously included four BN and four PR photos, unlike other days that might feature one side or the other. No "Side Views" appeared that day, but managing editor Joan Lau penned a prominent "What I Think" brief that lambasted a police investigation of an informal group of pro-opposition supporters. In possibly the independent portals' most controversial editorial comment during the campaign, she praised the Arab Spring. "People rose up against oppression," she wrote. "What's so bad about that?" ("What I")

During the campaign, Najib enjoyed a media advantage as the incumbent because his announcements were deemed news—by both newspapers and online news portals—as when he pledged to build one million affordable homes. ("In GE13," 2013; "Najib Set," 2103") Anwar also drew abundant coverage as opposition leader. *FMT*'s "Anwar Rocks Seremban" was typical of news portal

coverage of his large rallies. Routinely criticized or ignored in the big dailies, Anwar was not immune from criticism in the online portals. An example is *Malaysiakini's* April 26 lead story, "'Anwar's Government Will Be Another Pak Lah Government," which quoted the BN's MCA party president at length on his belief that the opposition leader would focus on Islamic issues instead of the economy if elected prime minister. Some of Anwar's star power rubbed off on his daughter. A Watching the Watchdogs survey found she received the most coverage of any female candidate in the first half of the campaign, even though her 0.66 percent "value of coverage" score was minuscule compared with those of male candidates. ("Preliminary Results—Release 3," 2013)

In addition to coverage of parties and candidates, a significant portion of coverage was devoted to the election process, especially controversies over its fairness. These stories illustrated one way in which the portals act as watchdogs of government. The Insider devoted slightly more coverage to the process (22 percent versus 18.6 percent in Malaysiakini and 15.3 percent in FMT). Additionally, Insider editor Sadiq twice posted brief nonpartisan notes at the top right of its home page urging readers to vote, and Kini columnists made at least one non-partisan appeal to vote. ("People Have," 2013) The government-appointed Election Commission came under fire on a variety of charges, including that the indelible ink supposed to prevent vote fraud could be washed off. ("EC Blames," 2013; "Amid Protests," 2013; "EC Inconvenienced," 2013; "EC Officials," 2013) The portals broke several stories charging that the BN was flying "phantom" voters into Kuala Lumpur, which accounted for many negative BN stories. ("Explain PM's Role," 2013; "PKR: PM's Office," 2013)

The stories demonstrated the online portals' increased news clout in setting Malaysia's political agenda, as when the government news agency Bernama responded with a press release that denied the phantom-voter charges, which was published by both *The Star* and *New Strait Times*, as well as the online news sites. ("'Explain PMO's Role," 2013; "PKR: PM's Office," 2013) *FMT*, however, tacked on the denial at the end of an accusatory story in which Anwar demanded Najib explain the flights. ("Explain PMO's role") The salient point is that Malaysian newspapers never would have reported on the charges had not the online portals broken the story. Similarly, the only newspaper stories on the online revelations about the faulty indelible ink were official denials of malfunctions. ("EC chairman," 2013; "GE13: EC," (2013)

Social media played a role in making news. *FMT* readers sent in cell-phone images of passengers wearing BN t-shirts arriving at Kuala Lumpur International Airport, an example of the audience's active role in online journalism. ("Are These," 2013) On Election Day, citizens bombarded social media with photos of suspected phantom voters with "foreign" facial features, a tactic some criticized as xenophobic. ("Pictures of," 2013) Social media played a significant role in other aspects of campaign news coverage. The *Insider* posted its Twitter feed as well as a Youtube video illustrating how the Internet was leveling the political

playing field. ("The Insight," 2013)The ruling coalition also engaged in social media. Najib, for example, urged youths to protest not in the streets but to "videotape their hopes and dreams" and send them to a government Facebook page. ("PM Tells," 2013) Both sides satirized each other's videos to sabotage their message, a trend the portals deemed newsworthy..("Copycats," 2013; "Beribu-ribu," 2013)

Online news portals reported on themselves when mysterious "deliberate denial of service" cyber-attacks hit all three sites. *Malaysiakini* devoted the most space to the Media category (2 percent). As its site had been attacked in both the 2004 and 2008 elections, it and the *Insider* established mirror sites to protect access on May 5. ("Online GE13 Battles," 2013; "Access to *Malaysiakini*," 2013; "Mkini Twitter," 2013; "GE13: Evidence," 2013) *Free Malaysia Today* listed six alternatives for users to access its news in light of "continuous cyber attacks from unknown sources." ("How to," 2013) Local ISPs also blocked KiniTV videos, according to its website. ("China-Style Censorship," 2013) The editor of *Digital News Asia* called for an investigation of what he termed a "serious issue," especially for the opposition, which he pointed out relies on online news media for coverage. "GE13: Evidence," 2013) While the attacks illustrate how the online portals continue to face attempts at suppression, their many alternatives for users to access their election news demonstrates the difficulty of suppressing information in the Internet age.

The independent online news media also played a watchdog role over mainstream media. *FMT* ran one of its infrequent editorials lambasting "state-controlled media" for sensationalizing and exaggerating campaign violence against BN, which it charged was a "pretext to spread panic" for the BN's benefit. "The opposition will be blamed for every blast including firecrackers even though it could be the work of the other side," it stated. "The ever-vigilant press will be ever ready to distort, twist, manipulate every incident in an all-out bid to poison and influence the minds of the voters." ("Violence Won't," 2013) Sadiq also chided the UMNO-controlled *New Strait Times*' allegedly sensationalist headlines on the specter of the institution of Islam criminal law (*hudud*) should PAS win. He wrote: "Newspapers can do better than frightening people about the possibility of hudud and fear-mongering about the country's security, especially those controlled by those who have been in power for so long." ("Hudud and Violence," 2013; "Getting Religion," 2013)

Conclusion

This content analysis shows that, while not perfectly neutral in their GE13 coverage, Malaysia's online news portals offered a diversity of news and views about all parties and candidates that general supports their claim of editorial independence. That does not mean they lack a point of view. Their contents appear to be performing the classic liberal journalistic mission to provide citizens with information they need to be free and self-governing. Their revelations

about possible electoral irregularities in GE13 demonstrate how they fulfill the traditional government watchdog role of journalism. Follow-up stories by *The Star* and *New Strait Times* show that the news portals help set the Malaysian news agenda. The content analysis shows the portals offer a diversity of news and views and a range of coverage of all actors in national politics—both positive and negative.

The content analysis indicates that the online news portals are a significant source of news about opposition candidates—both positive and negative. Although their coverage is significantly more critical of the ruling BN coalition than of the opposition, they nonetheless publish slightly more positive BN stories than negative ones, an indication of their willingness to provide a diversity of voices to the public. That trend is significantly influenced by contents of the *Insider*, which published positive BN stories nearly twice as often as negative BN stories.

It is significant that the analysis shows the portals also covered the opposition critically, such as stories in which BN leaders attacked the opposition. Given TV and the newspapers' well-documented bias toward the BN, and their virtual blackout of positive news about opposition candidates, the online news sites' emphasis on the opposition parties and candidates can be viewed as a positive corrective that adds some balance to the electoral news menu. They have provided political challengers to the ruling coalition with a forum for bringing their views before the public, helping to move Malaysian politics beyond a static one-party political system. Perhaps as important as the news the portals break is the public space they create for users to discuss and challenge political hegemony in their interactive comments sections. While those sections are beyond the scope of this study, they could be worthwhile subjects of future research.

By opening up political discourse in Malaysia, the independent news portals may be viewed as contributing to participatory democracy, which depends on diversity of news and views. Their willingness to publish negative articles about the opposition in their news columns demonstrates that they are not just mouthpieces for the opposition but are willing to play the role of journalistic watchdog in politics. The independent news portals also exhibited a respect for the election process by covering charges of election irregularities and emphasizing commentary that called for free and fair elections. Their coverage reveals a faith in the electoral process that demonstrates the portals' strong reformist rather than revolutionary streak, which places them at the conservative end of so-called alternative media.

The Malaysian online news environment continues to evolve and expand, evidence of its conflation with the mainstream media. A major development occurred soon after the election with the announcement of a new independent news portal, *The Malay Mail*, to be headed by two top *Insider* editors, the brother-and-sister team of Leslie Lau and Joan Lau. The owners of the *Mail* hired most of the *Insider* staff, which reportedly had been unhappy with the site's editorial

direction. *Insider* CEO Sadiq pledged to keep it operating and promptly hired journalists from competing news sites. ("Malay Mail," 2013; "What Caused," 2013) After the election, Najib quickly nixed a government official's suggestion the nation license online media following a public outcry, an indication of online news portals' hard-won legitimacy in the media landscape. ("PM Najib," 2013) The *Singapore Times* reported that perceived bias in Malaysian newspapers' GE13 reporting has further eroded their credibility. ("Malaysia's Mainstream," 2013) Meanwhile, former Prime Minister Mahathir said he regretted his decision to grant Internet freedom. ("Dr Mahathir," 2013) By all indications, the independent online news portals will continue to be a dynamic force in Malaysia's media environment.

Because of the limitations of content analysis stated above, a suggestion for future research is to apply active audience theory to a study of the portals' comments sections. Another fruitful avenue could be critical discourse analysis of the portals' editorial content and/or comments sections to better understand their role in resisting Malaysia's dominant political powers. (Deuze, 2003)

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