Whither Objective Journalism in Digital Age: Malaysia's Mainstream versus Alternative Media

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In this digital age of online news, objective journalism is increasingly treated as unnecessary, if not obsolete. In the liberal West, news portals can offer different views to counter the political economic status quo proffered by traditional hyper-commercial corporate media. In more authoritarian Asian countries like Malaysia, "alternative" news portals are assumed to provide opposition political parties with favourable coverage to balance whatever bias the traditional, mainstream print and electronic media might have displayed towards the ruling political party. As a result, Malaysia's ruling political party, including many from the critical mass, has claimed that Malaysia's "mainstream" and "alternative" media, collectively, have attained the democratic principle of offering diverse, balanced and fair news coverage. This has strengthened the view that there is no need for objective journalism-as in providing fair and balanced news coverage. To what extent then are Malaysia's "mainstream" print media biased towards the ruling political party and to what extent Malaysia's "alternative" news portals biased towards the opposition party? Has the digital age finally rendered objective journalism obsolete, at least in Malaysia? These are key questions examined in a study that content analysed the coverage of Malaysia's general elections in 2013 performed by three "mainstream" newspapers and three "alternative" news portals based in Malaysia. The results show that even though partisan journalism continues to dominate, especially the "mainstream" newspapers, objective journalism is far from being abandoned. It is rendered unnecessary only by being politicized by the ruling political regime.

Keywords: Objective journalism, partisan journalism, mainstream, news media, news portals, election coverage, Malaysia, Barisan Nasional, Pakatan Rakyat

Ever since the rise of online news, now enhanced by social media, it has often been promoted and perceived as an alternative to news provided by traditional print and broadcast media1. In several western democracies such as the United States, online news is considered an alternative to the hyper-commercial traditional media whose fundamental mission has increasingly come to serve corporate need for large advertising revenue and market share above public need for socially meaningful and useful information (McChesney, 2004). Certainly, the idea that what is meaningful or useful to one may not be to another has made it convenient for corporate media to focus on the bottom line. In more authoritarian societies, news portals that have emerged are often considered as an alternative to traditional media that largely serves, directly or indirectly, as a mouthpiece for the ruling

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political regime. Malaysia is one such example where the traditional print and broadcast media are considered "mainstream" for being supportive of the ruling regime while news portals are "alternative" for being friendly to parties that oppose the ruling political party. Such a development has even led some to argue that the rise of online news has promoted wider freedom and democracy. The more favourable coverage given by the alternative media to opposition parties is accepted as a balance to traditional media's biased towards the ruling regime. There is no necessity for any single media organisation to strive for balanced and fair coverage for itself. Along with that is a further rejection of objective journalism—in terms of balanced and fair coverage—as unnecessary or irrelevant.

The long simmering debate on objective journalism has escalated and intensified ever since the advent of the Internet and growing popularity of online news portals, blogs and social media. Critics (Overholser, 2004) have sharpened their calls to put an end, once and for all, to any pretence to objective journalism as the newer media have made available ever more diverse views, thereby ensuring democracy will be maintained if not flourish further. Proponents (Berry, 2005) who have long held that objectivity is a principle journalists need to strive for as a mark of their professionalism consider the wider and more ready availability of diverse viewpoints aided by the rise of the Internet as an added reason for journalists to work harder to practice and champion their principle of professionalism rather than retreat from it. The facts of the matter must be even more clearly demarcated from a plethora of opinions lest the digital age of information descends into a mere cacophony of views unsupported by or uninterested in facts. The debate used to draw more interest and passion from more democratic societies with more institutional support for press freedom, like those in the West. But, in more recent years, it has also attracted people in more authoritarian societies where some—for example, in Malaysia - are championing the idea that diversity of viewpoints, thus representations, has been made readily available thanks to the Internet.

But are traditional media a mouthpiece of the ruling political party and news portals a propagandist for the opposition party so that the politically biased journalism of both media platforms, taken together, have come to offer a balanced diversity of political viewpoints that finally renders objective journalism unnecessary or obsolete? This would be examined through a content analysis of the coverage of Malaysia's 13th general election on 5 May 2013 by three traditional Malaysian newspapers: *New Straits Times* (NST), *The Star*, and *The Sun* and three Malaysian news portals: *Malaysiakini* (MKINI), *The Malaysian Insider* (TMI) and *Free Malaysia Today* (FMT). It is important to review first the political economy of Malaysian media and the past few general elections in the country to establish the context for the research.

Malaysia's Political Economy and Mainstream Media

A British colony until 1957, Malaysia, which is located in Southeast Asia, is a formal democracy in the sense that while Article 10 of its Constitution allows for freedom of expression, this freedom is tempered or restrained by several national considerations premised especially on maintaining peace and harmony among three of the major racial and religious groups: the Bumiputeras comprising Malays and native populations of East Malaysia of Sabah and Sarawak (making up of about 67 per cent of Malaysia's population of about 30 million) with Malays as Muslims by birth; the Chinese (about 25 per cent of the population), many of whom are Buddhists; and Indians (about 7 per cent), many of whom are Hindus; and others (about 1 per cent). The coalition party of 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 determined challenge from the coalition party of Pakatan Rakyat (PR or the People's Alliance), which comprises three political parties: 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 (the Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party). Before the 13th general election in May 2013, Barisan Nasional (BN) had won at least two-thirds of the seats in Parliament in all but two of the elections: in 1969 and 2008. The outcome of the 2008 election was the real shocker for the BN because, for the first time, they also lost political control of five of the 13 states in the Malaysian federation. This was the year that PR gained significant political ground to present a serious challenge to BN control and hegemony. Constitutional changes can be enacted only when supported by at least two-thirds of the members of Parliament (or 148 members out of the current total of 222 members).

The emergence of PR can be traced to the shock sacking of Anwar Ibrahim in 1998, by then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, as Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia. Mahathir publicly accused Anwar of sodomy thereby raising questions about his Islamic faith and dismissing him as unfit to succeed him as prime minister. Many, however, believed the reasons were differences Anwar had with Mahathir in the handling of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Immediately following his sacking, Anwar and his supporters initiated the "reformasi" (reformation) movement that aimed to get rid of corruption, cronyism and nepotism of which the Mahathir-led BN government was accused. Anwar's charisma and his skills at making fiery public speeches quickly won him large support from the masses in and around the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. Just as mass support began to galvanize for him, Anwar was Gestapo-like arrested in September 1998 and charged with corruption for allegedly interfering with police investigations into allegations of sodomy made against him. While in custody, he was beaten up by the Inspector General of Police. Among the injuries Anwar suffered was a black eye. When Prime Minister Mahathir cavalierly responded by saying Anwar could have inflicted it on himself to gain public sympathy, it further incensed Anwar's supporters who intensified their call for "reformasi". It was in this condition that a new political party emerged, Parti Keadilan Nasional (PKN or National Justice Party).

After Anwar was tried, found guilty of corruption as well as sodomy, and jailed, Prime Minister Mahathir called for a general election in 1999. PKN (then headed by Anwar's dentist wife) joined DAP, PAS, and Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM or Malaysian People's Party) to form Barisan Alternatif (BA or the Alternative Front) to take on BN. But several PKN leaders were arrested just prior to the election campaign resulting in PKN winning only five parliamentary seats while PAS won 27 seats and DAP, 10. In 2002, PKN merged with PRM and became known as PKR. The following year, PKR, DAP and PAS teamed up to become the coalition party known as PR. This was in time for the 2004 general elections. By then, Abdullah Badawi had taken over from Mahathir as prime minister and secured a major mandate for his BN while PR fared worse than in the 1999 election, managing to win only 20 seats. Shortly after the elections, the Federal court (the highest court in Malaysia) overturned the lower courts' conviction of Anwar for sodomy. By then, he was also released from jail having served his sentence for corruption. However, according to the law, he was ineligible to contest in the 2008 election. Even so, PR would score unprecedented victory at the 2008 election with many analysts citing Anwar's leadership role as a major reason.

According to Malaysian law, the incumbent government must call for a general election every five years. Najib Razak, who succeeded Abdullah Badawi as prime minister in 2009, apparently had some difficulties deciding on the date to dissolve parliament to pave the way for the next election. Speculation on the election date was rife for about a year before he dissolved Parliament on 3 April 2013. By then, Anwar was eligible, again, to contest in it, and his continuing leadership in PR had helped the coalition of PKR, DAP and PAS not only to stay together but also to believe in the possibility of taking over Putrajaya or the federal government located there.

A major reason for the long-standing political dominance of BN is that it has heavily owned and/or influenced the country's traditional print and broadcast media. Indeed, many have long pointed out that BN's strengths that gave them victory in election after election could be summarized into three Ms—they had more money than the opposition for their political campaigns, a much more established election machinery especially in the rural areas, and they owned or controlled the traditional print and broadcast media. The ideology of "developmentalism" of growing the economy following BN's blueprint, especially during the time of Mahathir as prime minister (1981–2003), also contributed to BN's electoral victories (Loh & Khoo, 2002). As much as it was promoted by the mainstream media, it was BN's major rationale for controlling them. This gave rise to the ideology of developmental journalism whereby media are to partner with the government to maintain stability and peace among the Malays, Chinese and Indians so as to grow and develop the economy (Wong, 2004a).

The watershed event of May 13, 1969 also had been similarly manipulated by the BN. 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, up until then, the most serious challenge to the BN (then known as the Alliance Party). 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 three traditional newspapers chosen for this study are all known for their developmental journalism and support for the BN. NST (New Straits Times), the oldest newspaper in the country that first began in Singapore as The Straits Times, has been owned by companies that are an investment arm of Umno or known for their staunch support for Umno (the latest company being Media Prima). *The Star* is owned by the MCA; and *The Sun* is owned by a Malaysian Chinese Vincent Tan who is believed by many as BN friendly. However, *The Sun* has demonstrated in recent years to be more objective in news coverage than the other two mainstream papers (Wong, 2004b; Wong, 2004c). Opposition parties are allowed to make available their weekly or monthly publications (but not radio or TV stations). The BN government considers these publications as newspapers to justify

its democratic claim that other viewpoints (including those that challenge their views) are allowed to be made available. But these publications are actually internal organs of the opposition parties distributed to party members and cannot be sold at newsstands to the public, unlike NST, *The Star* and *The Sun*.

BN's heavy influence on traditional media is also manifested in other ways. There is, to begin with, a slew of media/communication laws, chief among them the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), Sedition Act, Official Secrets Act (OSA), and the Internal Security Act (ISA) that was around since before independence in 1957 until 2012 when it was replaced with the Securities Offences and Special Measures Act (SOSMA). Critics charged that a main problem has been the selective application of the laws to criminalize speech or information critical of the BN. Under the PPPA, for example, a newspaper or magazine must obtain a licensing permit from the Home Ministry to publish. The license must also be renewed yearly until 2012 when the annual renewal was not mandatory unless the Ministry requests it. Publications found critical of the BN government could have their license suspended or revoked. *The Star*'s license was suspended in 1987 during the time of OperasI Lalang under PM Mahathir that also saw 106 people who were mainly from the opposition parties and NGOs arrested under the ISA and jailed without trial.

In addition to the laws, news editors are known for being summoned by BN authorities to explain reports the latter is unhappy with or to remind them of what angle or emphasis coverage of governmental issues should take. Furthermore, editorial leadership changes in newspapers (e.g., NST and *The Star*) are directly determined by leadership changes in the parties of the coalition BN (like Umno and MCA), thereby ensuring political leaders and their parties receive at least a deferential coverage without having to summon editors to account for their coverage or remind them of their politically supportive role.

Rise of Alternative Media

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 his economic transformation of Malaysia into the K-economy through his grand Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) Program that aimed to attract world-class technology companies while grooming the local ICT industry. In attempting to attract major industry leaders (like Bill Gates of Microsoft) for MSC's advisory board, Mahathir assured that the Malaysian government would not censor the Internet. Up until 2013, the BN government had, by and large, kept that promise on news and views critical of the BN although some of the older laws (like ISA and now SOSMA, OSA) and newer laws under the Communication and Multimedia Act (1998) still apply (e.g., online content should not be obscene, false, menacing or offensive in character with intent to abuse, threaten or harass any person).

The first Malaysian online news portal was created in November 1999 by Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran—both of whom had experience working for newspapers in Malaysia and were unhappy with government restrictions and self-censorship of the editors. Called Malaysiakini (MKINI), the portal claims to be politically independent and adopts an editorial policy that supports justice, human rights, democracy, freedom of speech and good governance. But it had been the target of criticism from members of the coalition parties of BN and investigation by the police on a few occasions. In 2003, it was raided by the Malaysian police, who carted away four servers and 15 personal computers from its office; they were not returned. The raid came about after Umno youth accused MKINI of

sedition for running on its webpage a letter written by a MKINI reader who questioned the special rights enjoyed by the Bumiputera (which mainly included the Malays), rights enshrined in the Malaysian Constitution. Early in its existence, MKINI was also accused of being a political stooge of the U.S. for receiving funding from the U.S. philanthropist George Soros's Open Society Foundation and the U.S. non-profit National Endowment for Democracy (NED) that was set up in 1983 to promote democracy and had receive funding primarily through an annual allocation from the U.S. Congress. MKINI had admitted to having received funding from NED but said it was for only a small amount whereas the portal was 70 per cent owned by its co-founders and staff. As a portal that focuses almost exclusively on Malaysian politics (its motto is "News that Matter"), MKINI began as a free service but a few years later shifted to subscription service (readers' comments on stories are, however, free to netizens).

Following Malaysiakini, several other online news portals were soon set up. Another major portal is The Malaysian Insider (TMI), which was created in December 2007 by a group of journalists and businessmen led by Png Hong Kwang and Sreedhar Subramanian, a journalist and a former Chief Operating Officer for NTV7, respectively. The portal is known to take political sides. It was first close to Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi after the latter took over from Mahathir as prime minister. But after Badawi stepped down and was replaced by Najib as prime minister, TMI has claimed to be politically aligned with PR. The news portal is a free service. (TMI ceased publication in March 2016.)

The third major news portal chosen for this study is Free Malaysia Today (FMT). It started in 2009 as a sister portal to Malaysia Today (owned by Raja Petra Kamarudin and was a wildly popular website soon after Anwar was sacked as deputy prime minister until just after the 2004 election). It is today owned by MToday and claims to be independent politically.

First Study to Focus on Directly Comparing Malaysian Media

Academic studies of media coverage of general elections began only in the 1990s, but none has directly compared/contrasted coverage of them by traditional media and news portals to determine their partisanship or objectivity. Regarding studies of media coverage of the 13th General Election on 5 May 2013, only two have been published or publicly made available so far. One is entitled "How Independent? An Analysis of GE13 Coverage by Malaysia's Online News Portal Coverage" by Linda J. Lumsden (2013). The three news portals picked for her study are the same three picked for this study but she did not study any of the mainstream traditional news media. While the similarity of the news portals picked in a way supports the view that the three portals are the strongest online news choices among many in Malaysia, it is rather odd that Lumsden assumes TMI is politically independent when it claims to be aligned to PR.

The other major study was undertaken at the University of Nottingham, Malaysia Campus, led by Tessa Houghton and Zaharom Nain. As the title of the project, "Watching the Media", suggests, it is a broad study looking into "29 different Malaysian media, from Peninsular Malaysia to Sabah and Sarawak; across print, television and online media; and in 4 languages (English, Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin and Tamil)" ("Watching the Watchdog", 2013). While the project has come up with a wealth of good information, the use of "watchdog" in its title can be misleading as it assumes Malaysia's mainstream traditional media have played the watchdog role when they have not (Wong, 2001; Wong, 2004a; Wong, 2004b; Wong, 2004c). In any case, the difference between that project and

this study is that this study is more specific as it makes direct comparison of three English language mainstream newspapers and three English language online news portals to see whether they were strictly partisan in their reportage and eschewed objective journalism.

Methodology

This study would perform a content analysis of the three traditional mainstream newspapers—NST, *The Star* and *The Sun*—and the three alternative online news portals—Malaysiakini, TMI and FMT. All six were chosen because their content is available in English and they are based in Peninsular Malaysia (excluding Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo). *The Star* is the largest selling English daily in the country with a daily circulation of about 289,000 copies (its Sunday edition has a circulation of about 290,000) while *The Sun* is the largest English daily in the country that is available for free only on weekdays with a daily circulation of about 300,000 copies and confined to the Klang Valley area or Kuala Lumpur and its vicinities (NSTP Group Papers Lead, 2014). Although the oldest paper in the country, NST has the lowest circulation of the three with about 115,000 daily circulations; its Sunday edition has about 130,000 (NSTP Group Papers Lead, 2014). As for readership for the three online news portals, Malaysiakini registers the highest traffic of all the news portals in Malaysia, followed by TMI as the second highest and FMT as the third (The Edge Buys Over, 2014).

This study would analyze coverage of the election by the mainstream newspapers and the online news portals from 4 April 2013 until 5 May (polling day), a total of 32 days. Although political campaigning did not officially begin until 21 April, this study chose to start the analysis on 4 April, the day after the prime minister dissolved Parliament, because it had come to be accepted by political parties and the public as *The Star*t of electioneering. The election related items selected for analysis were news reports, editorials, commentaries and letters to the editor (or letters). However, online readers' comments provided at the end of every online report are excluded. In the case of MKINI, its editors have compiled a selection of representative comments from all the readers' comments on a news story for publication as a news item the following day. Such a news item is included in this analysis. The analysis of all selected items was guided by the following categories adapted from a past research on Malaysia's 2004 election (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: Non-Party Related or election-related coverage but not about BN or PR

BN(F) or PR (F) coverage comprises items only on a campaign activity of either BN or PR, including quotes from speeches made by either party; it is straightforward reporting and does not overtly or subtly (e.g., through nuances) present any positive or negative words or descriptions of either party. As an example: a BN or PR candidate had a walkabout in a "coffee shop" (a popular type of eatery that is between a restaurant and a hawker's stall) to meet and chat with the public. The report would merely report the event as a news story without any positive or negative comments on it from the people interviewed for the story.

BN (P) or PR (P) coverage refers to reports/editorials/commentaries/letters that overtly or subtly promotes or positive on one party. Taking the "walkabout" example given

above, an example of BN (P) or PR (P) would find only positive comments offered by people interviewed for the story on the political candidate involved in the walkabout. Another example is coverage of a political candidate that includes quotes from the candidate's speech praising or exalting his/her political party, and without any attempt on the part of the reporter/media to seek out or include opposing views. A third example is a report that interviews people (e.g., political analysts, academics, corporate leaders, popular personalities like actors or singers and just ordinary folk especially senior citizens or young people not yet eligible to vote) and presents only quotes that promotes or exalts a political party. Editorials/commentaries/letters would either ignore opposing views or superficially consider them only to serve as a straw man for an argument (e.g., a party accusing an opposition party of quietly supporting a particular policy even though the party has openly rejected the policy).

This is the opposite of BN (N) or PR (N), in which reports/editorials/commentaries/letters overtly or subtly criticizes one party without including any kind of responses or rebuttals from the party criticized, and no attempts were made by reporters to seek out the party criticized for comments. Thus, in the "walkabout" example, the news account would report only on the public booing the political candidate involved in the walkabout or only criticism of the candidate from the people interviewed for the story.

Balanced and fair (B+F) reports consider the views of both parties seriously. Editorials/commentaries/letters could be seen to treat opposing parties equally or fairly even though they may conclude more favorably towards one party over the other. In the "walkabout" example given above, the news story would include positive and negative comments on the political candidate doing the "walkabout".

Finally, NPR refers to reports/editorials/commentaries/letters that touch on the election but is not about BN or PR. Examples include getting everyone to vote in the election, the police making sure the election was carried out peacefully, an independent candidate (one who was neither a BN or PR member) campaigning in the election, an elderly senior citizen or a first-time voter looking forward to voting on election day, and the Election Commission declaring the color of the indelible ink to be used for the first time in Malaysia's elections would not be known until people started to vote(even though the PR and many members of the public had cast negative aspersions on the Commission for what they believed to be the Commission's record of bias towards BN in the past).

News reports/editorials/commentaries/letters were first picked out from the mainstream newspapers and online portals by the two researchers here—the author here with the assistance of a colleague Vijaya Sooria Sangaran Kutty. However, only the author here content analyzed each and every item selected because he is the only one with the experience of performing such an analysis (Wong, 2004b & 2004c). Using one researcher would also ensure consistency in the application of the categories.

The BN government has long accused the news portals as biased towards the PR sometimes in response to accusations of the mainstream media, including newspapers, as being its mouthpiece. This accusation appears to be accepted by many among the masses. Thus the main hypothesis or *Hypothesis 1* of this study is that the three mainstream newspapers' coverage of the election on 5 May 2013 would be biased towards the BN while the news portals' coverage would be biased towards the PR. Also, as stated above, because *The Sun*, unlike NST and *The Star*, has been shown to be more independent of the BN in its coverage in recent years, *Hypothesis 2* states that *The Sun* would have (i) the most negative coverage of BN and (ii) the most B+F coverage among the mainstream publications. And among the news portals, since TMI is the only news portal that has openly declared itself

to be politically aligned with PR, *Hypothesis 3* states that it would have (i) the most negative coverage of BN and (ii) the most coverage focused and positive on PR.

Findings

Table 1. Newspaper coverage

Newspapers (4 April – 5 May)		BN (F)	BN (P)	BN (N)	PR (F)	PR(P)	PR (N)	B & F	NPR	Total
NST	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
STAR	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
SUN	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
MKINI	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
TMI	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
FMT	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

Tables 1 and 2 indicate that *NST* was clearly the most partisan towards BN of all the six media studied—with 45.8 per cent of all items focused and positive on BN—followed by *The Star* (33.5 per cent) and *The Sun* (33.0 per cent). In terms of their negative coverage of BN, *The Sun* registered the highest amount among the mainstream papers (at 3.3 per cent) while *NST* and *The Star* registered0 per cent and 0.5 per cent respectively. Part (i) of Hypothesis 2—that *The Sun* would be the most negative on BN among the traditional papers—was only slightly supported. Meanwhile, *NST* provided 2.9 per cent items focused on PR and nothing positive on PR, *The Star* 15.3 per cent focused on PR and 0.6 per cent positive on PR, and *The Sun* 15.4 per cent focused on PR and 0.2 per cent positive on PR. Finally, *The Sun* had the highest percentage of B+F (Balanced + Fair) coverage (at 12.0 per cent) among the three traditional papers, followed by *The Star* (at 6.6 per cent) and *NST* (at 4.8 per cent). This supports Part (ii) of Hypothesis 2—that *The Sun* would have the most B+F coverage compared to the other two mainstream papers.

All three papers clearly provided significantly more BN focused and positive items than the news portals: *TMI* provided 24.2 per cent of all items focused and positive on BN followed by *FMT* (17.2 per cent) and *MKINI* (14.9 per cent). On the other hand, *FMT* coverage

was the most negative toward BN (at 17.4 per cent), followed by *MKINI* (15.8 per cent) and *TMI* (8.7 per cent). This fails to support Part (i) of Hypothesis 3, that *TMI* would be most negative towards BN. However, regarding coverage focused and positive on PR, Part (ii) of Hypothesis 3—that *TMI* would give most PR focused and positive coverage compared to the other news portals—was not clearly supported because *TMI* and *FMT* provided 17.9 per cent each followed closely by *MKINI* at 18.4 per cent. Meanwhile, *FMT* registered the highest percentage of negative coverage towards PR (at 14.6 per cent), followed by *MKINI* (7.9 per cent) and *TMI* (4.8 per cent). Finally, *TMI* came up with the highest percentage of Balanced + Fair (B+F) items at 30.9 per cent followed by *MKINI* (29.2 per cent) and *FMT* (22.8 per cent).

What about the main hypothesis (Hypothesis 1) that the three mainstream newspapers' coverage of the election would be biased towards BN while the news portals' coverage would be biased towards PR? To begin with, the mainstream papers gave at least almost twice as much BN focused and positive coverage (ranging from 33 per cent to 45.8 per cent) than the news portals to PR focused and positive coverage (ranging from 17.9 per cent to 18.4 per cent). The mainstream papers also gave rather insignificant negative coverage to BN (ranging from 0 per cent to 3.3 per cent) whereas the news portals gave significantly larger negative coverage to PR, with its lowest at 4.8 per cent and highest at 14.6 per cent. Quite clearly, readers of the three mainstream papers would have to look hard for negative BN stories (in the case of NST, they would not be able to find any) while they could easily come across BN focused or positive stories on any given day. Netizens looking for negative PR stories in the three news portals, however, should not have to look hard.

Furthermore, netizens should not have any difficulties coming across BN focused and positive coverage in the news portals, whose BN (F) and BN(P) coverage ranged from 14.9 per cent to 22 per cent. *TMI* actually had significantly lower percentages of BN negative coverage than BN(F) and BN(P) coverage, namely 8.7 per cent to 22 per cent., while *FMT* had an almost even amount at 17.4 per cent for BN(N) and 17.2 per cent for BN(F) and BN(F). *MKINI* gave a tiny amount more to BN(N) coverage than BN(F) and BN(P) coverage at 15.8 per cent to 14.9 per cent. On the other hand, *NST*'s non-negative coverage of PR amounted only to 2.9 per cent, all of which PR(F) only. The other two mainstream papers gave about equal amounts of PR(F) and PR(P) coverage, in the 15 percentile region, which is at the lower end of the percentile range for the news portals' coverage of BN(F) and BN(P).

Thus, while netizens should not have difficulties finding PR (F) and PR (P) items on all three news portals, neither should they have to look hard for BN (F) nor BN (P) items on all three portals. They should also be able to come across BN (N) items as easily as BN (F) and BN (P) in *MKINI* and *FMT*, but not so in the case of *TMI*, which registered a significantly lower percentage of BN (N) than BN (F) and BN (P) items. On the other hand, while readers should easily find BN(F) and BN(P) items in all three mainstream papers, they would rarely come across PR (F) and PR (N) items in *NST* but more frequently come across PR (N) in NST with 2.9 per cent to 31.2 per cent; would be able to find PR (N) items a bit more easily than PR (F) and PR (P) in *The Star* with 21.4 per cent to 15.9 per cent; and would be able to find PR(F) and PR(P) items a bit more easily than PR(N) in *The Sun* with 15.6 per cent to 14 per cent. In short, there is good evidence to support Hypothesis 1.

But the strongest evidence to support Hypothesis 1 could be easily observed when considering Balanced and Fair (B+F) coverage. *NST* provided merely 4.8 per cent such items, *The Star* 6.6 per cent and *The Sun* 12 per cent. On the other hand, *FMT* provided 22.8 per cent, *MKINI* 29.2 per cent and *TMI* 30.9 per cent. This finding is also supported by Lumsden's findings that all three news portals' claim to independent journalism is

supported (2013). What's more: each of the three news portals provided significantly more B+F items than PR(F) and PR(P) items while each of the three mainstream papers provided significantly more BN(F) and BN(P) items than B+F items. The mainstream papers demonstrated a strong institutional commitment to biased coverage towards the BN whereas the online news portals demonstrated a larger institutional commitment to balanced and fair coverage than biased coverage towards the PR.

Politicization of Objective Journalism

Quite clearly, objective journalism, as in balanced and fair coverage, is hardly a myth. It is so only because journalism has long been politicized or redefined by BN to serve its political agenda and stay in power since political independence in 1957. Malaysian mainstream media 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. Still, this never deterred the BN government, especially under Prime Minister Mahathir, from claiming that Malaysia practiced press freedom and independence. For evidence, the internal publications that are organs of the opposition parties, such as DAP's *Rocket* and PAS's *Harakah*, have often been cited. Never mind that these publications of the opposition parties are never the same as *NST* or *The Star*, but the fact that senior journalists and editors at the mainstream media are known to have used the same argument as the BN government is indication of the extent to which they have assimilated BN's politicization or redefinition of journalism or their willing complicity in promoting it. Objectivity in journalism never had a chance to be attempted, let alone institutionalized.

BN's usual response to *MKINI* and the other online portals has been to depict them as irresponsibly biased towards PR. But this study shows that its characterization of the three online portals is quite off the mark. Furthermore, the continual growth of traffic to all three news portals when compared to the declining readership of all three mainstream papers (with *NST*, the most biased of them all that has been declining steadily since the turn of the millennium, taking the largest dive in circulation after the election on 5 May 2013) suggests there is some public demand for objective journalism (NST Group Papers Lead, 2014). Perhaps a stronger reason is 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 and a free Internet TV news site called *Kinitv*. Still, research needs to be undertaken to determine the extent to which objective journalism contributes to the increasing popularity of online news portals and the lack of it to the declining readership of the mainstream papers, especially *NST* and *The Star*.

A key challenge to the news portals has been reaching out to the more rural areas of the country as Internet penetration, while steadily increasing, is now about 67 per cent (Spykerman, 2014). Analysts have argued BN is still able to control the Federal government mainly because it can still count on capturing the rural votes that comprise largely Malays. And this goes along with their control or influence of the mainstream papers, more so in the Malay language, that are easily available in rural areas not yet served by the Internet. This could be a reason why the BN has repeatedly rejected *MKINI*'s application for a license, dating back to 2010, to start a traditional newspaper version despite the Malaysian courts having ruled that *MKINI*'s right to publish a newspaper is protected by the Constitution

(Home Minister Must Now Give, 2014). BN rejection is arguably another way of politicizing objective journalism, not to mention fear of losing even the rural vote.

Objective Journalism in the Digital Age

The emphasis given to objective journalism by the three news portals in Malaysiahad gone against the growing trend of moving away from it as opponents of objectivity appear to be armed with more ammunition in their opposition. Some considerations of objective journalism are appropriate, therefore, to cast new light on the debate given research findings here.

Opponents of objective journalism tend to premise their argument on the fact that human beings are subjective in nature, making it impossible or deceitful for journalists to claim the ability to report or write fairly and in a balanced way. While humans are, of course, subjective beings, is there no value for journalists to be trained to strive for fair and balanced reporting? Is there no value in requiring journalists to approach facts factually. If facts do not have a place in the digital and physical world, how can one be certain or convinced about one's argument, let alone comparing it to other arguments since any opinion can be rejected by another simply by being different? Is factual information deriving from fair and balanced accounts not crucial for negotiating or reconciling differences? Humans are surely subjective by nature just as surely as abandoning objective journalism because of it is really about giving in to self-serving inclinations. How different is it then from encouraging people with, say, sociopathic tendency to give in to it?

Of course, every day when news media makes a choice to cover some stories over others, it involves human, subjective judgment. But can there be no difference between professional journalists committed to the craft of objective reportage and anyone having the ability to write well making that decision? If there is none, news media and journalism as an institution are meaningless. Is any democracy prepared to go without them? What then is the point of requiring authoritarian governments to loosen their grip on communication when facts do not matter or have no value in any discourse?

Corporate media have been reeling from the impacts of the Internet and social media. U.S. bloggers and other online media entrepreneurs and enterprises have tapped into and exploited popular disaffection with corporate "mainstream" media by coming up with their own dispensation of the news. In order to stand out in an ever more crowded and competitive news media field and to attract large netizens, they typically make use of their strong opinions/perspectives (conservative, liberals, etc) to brand and market themselves. Add to that, the public, especially the younger, digital generations; have come to expectnot to pay for news. At the same time, it is the opinions/perspectives that routinely draw them in now. The exception is breaking news, which explains why CNN, which normally fares lowly at the U.S. ratings, would outperform all other news sources in the ratings when covering major news events live such as the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines 370.

The corporate craze of branding has also caught up with hyper-commercial corporate media. News sources with strong opinions/perspectives have become a major means of branding for them the better to commoditize their news. Such a corporate agenda is the new context within which the viability of objective journalism has come to be questioned more intensely. Objective journalism, in short, is increasingly corporatized, especially in Western nations like the U.S.How professional journalists there push back to claim their professionalism based on objective journalism and make it to work is the crux of the matter now.

Perhaps the politicization of objective journalism in Malaysia and the increasing attempt to undermine it through the new media can serve as a reminder to journalists in Western corporate media about why objective journalism is not only viable but also vital for freedom and democratic enhancement. What Malaysia's online news portals have shown is just the beginning for Malaysia and for the mainstream media/journalists to take a more serious look at objective journalism. Their efforts surely could be bolstered by other countries coming up with newer and creative ways to address new challenges to it and enhance it in the digital age. As Berry (2004) states, in debating Overholser (2004), just because objective journalism is never easy as it is constantly faced with challenges, it is no reason to junk it. It simply means new or creative ways need to be developed to address them.

Note

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