Journalism and Democracy: A Study of Online News and Print News Coverage of the 2013 Malaysian General Election

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Abstract: Journalism is seen as an important factor in fostering the conditions necessary for democracy to thrive. Dominant scholarship on journalism has tended to adopt the connection between journalism and democracy as a naturalised part of understanding the value and norms of journalism practices. However, there are considerable differences in how journalists understand their role based on social, cultural, historical and political contexts. This study looks into the coverage of two Malaysian news providers, namely *MalaysiaKini* which represents online journalism, and *Sinar Harian*, which represents press journalism in Malaysia. The 13th Malaysian General Election will be used as a case study. Both news organisations are regarded as models of emerging free and independent journalism practice in Malaysia. Based on Brian McNair's (2003) normative understanding of political journalism, this article attempts to understand how normative expectations of journalism in an emerging democracy such as Malaysia are practised and understood. Findings show that although *Sinar Harian* provides a more balance coverage and attempts to provide objective reporting of the political reality in Malaysia, *MalaysiaKini* is more effective in playing the role of a watchdog over ruling authorities.

Keywords: Journalism, Democracy, Online News, Malaysia, Election.

INTRODUCTION

Like many developing countries in Asia, journalism practice in Malaysia is believed to be rooted in the concept of 'developmental journalism' where journalism is expected to be constructive in reporting the development process of the country [1]. Critics of developmental journalism argue that such a concept acts as a camouflage for government control of the media through a combination of media regulations and political-based ownership [2, 3]. The implication is that such controls result in limiting opposition voices in mainstream media, restricting access to alternative voices and presenting uncritical coverage of government policies.

Although there are strong limitations on the practice of independent journalism in Malaysia, it is important to recognise that for the past two decades there have been contentious dynamics in Malaysian politics [4]. The expansion of civil society organisations, particularly since the 1980s, has witnessed a growing competition between political elites within parties and other political movements within society. The contentious elements in competitive elite politics and the expansion of civil society organisations have presented the media in Malaysia with possibilities for change in the way that news is created, presented and consumed [5].

The internet has been important in underlying the changes in political communication in Malaysia. It has opened a new space for speech, particularly in facilitating offline political expression and action [6, 7]. The lack of any legal requirement for licensing online publications, and the government commitment not to govern the internet as part of an effort to attract international investment, have facilitated the rise of independent news portals [8; 9]. This has created a boisterous and democratic online media environment in contrast to a much more controlled mainstream media environment in Malaysia [10, 8].

One website that has been regarded as an influential online news medium in Asia is *MalaysiaKini* [10, 8, 11]. *MalaysiaKini*, a daily news site launched before the 1999 elections, is seen as the example of independent media in Malaysia. It is regarded as an anomaly in the Malaysian media system mainly because of its critical reports of the government which give space to the opposing groups, whereas all of the mainstream media openly practice a pro-government policy. As of January 2015, *MalaysiaKini* was the number one most visited news portal in Malaysia with more than 1.2 million visitors every month [12].

MalaysiaKini is also praised for its journalistic practice. Janet Steele [11] explains that although *MalaysiaKini* operates online, it upholds high standards of journalism. She argues that *MalaysiaKini* practices the norms and values of independent journalism such as covering both sides of the political argument and giving voice to the voiceless. *MalaysiaKini* is credited with sustaining a generally pro-democratic, secular,

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multiracial perspective and for promoting a non-particularistic collective identity among its readers [9].

Although much attention is given to online news with regard to independent news practices in Malaysia, this does not mean that the mainstream media, in particular the English and Malay newspapers, are unaffected by the expansion and liberalisation of the news space in Malaysia. This change has become more prominent particularly since 1998 which saw a shift in the battleground of opinion towards cyberspace, triggered by the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim. Although most of the newspapers, particularly the Malay newspapers, still maintain a pro-government stance mainly due to the concentration of press ownership in the hands of a few who are closely aligned with the government, one of the newspapers that could be seen as pushing towards an independent form of reporting is the Malay daily *Sinar Harian*. *Sinar Harian*, which began publication in 2006, is increasingly acquiring a reputation for presenting fair coverage of both the ruling and opposition parties [12]. It is published by the Karangkra*f* Group, owned by Dato' Hussamuddin Yaacub who has been operating in the publishing business for the last 35 years. The newspaper describes itself as a newspaper that is 'transparent and neutral' [13]. A study by Wan Rohila, Nurul and Ilyas [14] that undertook a content analysis over a 15-day campaign period during Malaysia's 2013 General Election, found that *Sinar Harian* attempted to present balanced reporting by giving space for both parties to present their ideas and defend their stance.

Media ownership and control continue to play a pervasive role in restricting journalistic practices in Malaysia. For print media such as *Sinar Harian*, the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) 1984 governs and shapes the newspaper industry where the ministers have the power to grant or revoke the permit of a publication. Although online media is not subjected to PPPA, there are at least three laws governing online and traditional media, namely the Official Secrets Act (1972), the Sedition Act (1948), and the Defamation Act (8).

However, the growth of civil society and the dynamic of political contentiousness, together with increased use of the internet, is a powerful force in widening participation and empowering the press to question and challenge the authorities as never before [10]. Jason Abbott [10] argues that the impact of the internet and social networking are playing a crucial role

in nurturing and enabling the dissemination of democratic norms, institutions and practices.

This article proposes that despite the modern notion of free and open political journalism, initiated by western scholarship and closely linked with the development of democracy, the connection between journalism and democracy is not fixed and universal but influenced by cultural traditions, historical experiences and political values [15]. This article investigates how *MalaysiaKini* and *Sinar Harian*, both regarded as a elements of emerging free and independent journalism in Malaysia, have understood and practised the normative expectations of political journalism in a country where the practice of democracy is described as a 'facade' and where control of the media is still pervasive. The discussion will be based on Brian McNair's [16] normative understanding of political journalism in a democracy, namely journalism as a source of information in a deliberative democracy, journalism as a watchdog, journalism as a mediator or representative on behalf of the citizenry, and journalism as participant/advocate.

JOURNALISM AND DEMOCRACY

Malaysia is an example of 'Asian democracy' which stresses the virtues of 'Asian communitarianism' and good governance [8, 17]. In countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, Asian democracy was matched by impressive economic results and rising standards of living. Critics, however, argue that such 'Asian values' were used to justify human rights violations [17]. In the more economically advanced Singapore and Malaysia, although civil liberties are violated less openly, the democratisation process is still resisted. Diamond [18] has described Malaysia and Singapore as examples of hybrid 'electoral autocracies' where multi-party elections take place but there has never been alternation of political power in office.

Although its neighboring countries, particularly Singapore, continue to be more or less couched in Asian democratic practice, Malaysia has seen a more democratised political opening. The triumph of the opposition groups in 2008, who manage to deny Malaysia's ruling coalition — the Barisan Nasional (BN) — its two-thirds majority in Parliament for the first time in 40 years and again in 2013 when the opposition groups gained more seats, are an early sign of the downfall of Asian democracy which, among other factors, justified the crackdown on political opposition and the resistrictions on press freedom. Such changes

are credited to a vibrant civil society and political opposition, aided by the emergence of the internet which has been highly significant in the development of diverse media content in Malaysia [18].

Although Mustafa Anuar [2] argues that the journalistic fraternity was built on the hierarchical nature of Malaysian society where there is so much respect and deference given to political leaders, resulting in a submissive newsroom culture, the current opening of public speech in Malaysia has raised the discussion about independent journalism practice. Political communication scholars argue that elements of resistance or dissent have always existed in Malay political culture [20] and impulses toward adversarial journalism remain, even within mainstream media [4]. Malaysian politics has also seen a longer history of factional rivalry both within and between the parties of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition and its dominant element, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). From the late 1990s this was followed by more substantial civil society developments and by the *reformasi* movement which was initiated by Anwar's arrest (8).

The political opening, which has partly been credited to online and other diverse media in Malaysia, has raised an interesting question about journalism practice, particularly within Asian countries. The concept and practices of adversarial journalism which are critical and independent of the state are believed to have been formed simultenously with the birth of democratic societies in the early seventeenth century during the French Revolution and also during the American War of Independence [16]. Since then, journalism has contibuted to the strengthening of a functioning public sphere [21] which has been an important feature of democratic political and media cultures [16]. The American scholars who were the leading researchers in the field mostly regard the relationship between journalism and the state in terms of classical liberal thought in which the role of the press was to critically scrutinise the authorities, carried by an adversarial stance [22]. This also means that the journalism/democracy nexus was mainly based on a particular version of liberal understanding to which most western scholars subscribed. This version of modernity is associated with rationality, reasoned thought and the objectivity which journalism was expected to promote [23]. Journalism, therefore, has been seen as an important factor in fostering the conditions necessary for democracy to thrive. As a result, dominant scholarship on journalism has tended to adopt the connection between journalism and democracy as a naturalised part of understanding what journalism is for [23].

Previous research into the culture of journalism has revealed considerable differences in how journalists understand their role, including the ethical norms that guide their practices as well as the social and political context which affects their journalistic work [15]. In other words, the meaning of journalistic concepts such as press freedom is not fixed but influenced by social, cultural, historical and political contexts [24]. In the case of non-western journalistic practices, such as in Asian countries, the consensus about the meaning of basic norms in journalism such as objectivity, impartiality and balance, have not yet been found [15]. This also means that in the newly emerging practice of democracy, journalistic practices might be functional and legitimate in their own right and context. There are, therefore, different interpretations and practices of press norms and freedom that exist between and within the emerging democracies [15].

Although the discourse of journalism, which propagates a model based on the practices of detachment and adversarialism, is seen as the dominant paradigm that guides the relationship between media and politics, this study believes that journalistic institutions and norms are continuously re-created through collective discourses and social interactions unique to each society [15] and that they mean different things in different cultural contexts.

At the same time, this study understands that the rise of professionalism in global journalism is closely related to the conceptualisation of a shared occupational ideology that is based on the idea that journalists all over the world share the same understanding of values, practices and strategies that characterise their profession. This shared occupational ideology is seen as an intellectual process in which the collective ideas and views of a particular group, mostly on social and political issues, are shaped and shared by its members [25, 26]. Brian McNair [16] postulates that in a democracy the normative expectations of political journalism are defined according to four headings. First, they are based on the understanding of journalism as a source of information in a deliberative democracy. In this regard journalism is expected to function as a reliable and accurate information provider to help citizens make informed choices. Journalism is tasked with providing high-quality and independent news which is crucial to enabling the public to

participate effectively in political activities. Reporters, therefore, should strive to be objective in representing political reality and should try to be as neutral and detached as possible. McNair [16] explains that partisan journalism, although permitted, should be differentiated from detached, balanced reportage.

Second, journalism functions as a watchdog over the authorities. This assumption is based on the role of the press in a democracy which is to critically scrutinise the elite groups or other influential sectors of society. Journalism is tasked with checking-up on the activities of powerful groups, including goverments, and monitoring the exercise of power on behalf of the citizen.

Third, journalism is a mediator or representative on behalf of the citizenry. In this respect journalists should act as a mediator between the citizen and the politician as well as ensuring that the voice of the public is heard. This includes allowing users to contribute to the news content. Online news in particular, is expected to provide space for this kind of dialogic system of journalism which offers the possibility of a collective effort by both news producers and news consumers to re-negotiate how news is produced through interactivity and hyperlinking [27]. Matheson [28] explains that one of the possibilities of online journalism is that the readers and users are active players in the production and delivery of the news.

Fourth, journalism takes a position as advocate or champion of particular political positions and is partisan with respect to the public debate. In this way journalism is persuading the public to support a particular view but still provides factual accuracy in reporting. Although this appears to contradict the notion of objectivity, which expects journalists to fairly represent each leading side in a political controversy and to report news without slanting or shaping its formulation in any way [29], McNair [16] argues that, based on the features of political journalism in a democracy, it is still possible to separate fact from opinion.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework of the analysis in this study is based upon Roger Fowler's [30] seminal work, *Language in News*, which lays down the initial framework for a 'critical' study of news. He argues that linguistic structure plays an important role in news construction. Fowler [29] regards news not as 'facts about the world', but as a construction of 'ideas', 'beliefs', 'values', 'theories', 'propositions' or 'ideology'

[30, p. 1]. He views news as a 'particularly important example of the power of all language in the construction of social reality', articulated from a particular ideological position based on the social, political and economical positions of the news institution [30, p. 10].

Therefore, this study investigates the news language employed within the coverage of *MalaysiaKini* and *Sinar Harian* during the 2013 Malaysian General Election. It is based on the assumption that journalism constructs 'facts' based on the 'values' and the 'ideology' of the normative expectations of political journalism in a democracy, namely journalism as source of accurate information, journalism as a watchdog over the political elites, journalism as representative of the public, and journalism as advocate [16].

The analysis of the textual features of the *MalaysiaKini* and *Sinar Harian* news, which is conducted by the author, will be based on lexical features, sentence construction of texts, and analysis of direct quotations and indirect quotations. Lexical analysis is concerned with the usage of words that may 'convey the imprint of society and value judgment' [31]. This includes the way that people are addressed and how sources are referred to. The analysis of sentence construction looks into transitivity, which explains the relationship between representatives in a news report, including their role and their actions in a news text [31, p. 54]. It also investigates the agency of the sentence, how sentences are connected, and the usage of active/passive voice and negative/positive sentences [32, pp. 101–110). The analysis of direct quotations and indirect quotations in this research will be adapted from Leon Barkho's [33] conception of layers of hard news discourse in which he argues that different grammatical, lexical and semantic characteristics exhibit different social practices and assumptions.

The result of the textual analysis was triangulated with interviews with the founders of *Sinar Harian* and *MalaysiaKini*, Stephan Gan and Husamuddin Yaacob respectively. The interviews were conducted by the author at the headquarters of *Sinar Harian* in Shah Alam, Selangor and *MalaysiaKini* in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, in July 2014 and May 2015 respectively.

FINDINGS

This article examines *MalaysiaKini* and *Sinar Harian* discursive strategies and practices in representing the

13th Malaysian General Election. The duration covered by the analysis was the campaigning period from 1 May 2013 until one day after the election on 6 May 2013. Ten news articles published in *Sinar Harian* and ten articles from *MalaysiaKini* produced by its residential reporters were selected for textual analysis. The selection of the articles is based on several key events before, during, and after the election.

MalaysiaKini

There were 137 news articles produced by the journalists of *MalaysiaKini* during the 2013 Malaysian General Election, excluding editorial writings, comments and syndicated news from news wire services. Looking at the direct quotation of the news as shown in Table **1**, most of the sources of *MalaysiaKini* were from the representatives of the opposition party, Pakatan Rakyat, accounting for 51 per cent of the overall sources. Sources from the ruling parties, Barisan Nasional, were second, accounting for 21 per cent of sources.

Table 1: Sources from *Malaysiakini*

Sources	MalaysiaKini	
	n	%
Barisan Nasional	16	21
Pakatan Rakyat	39	51
Police	4	5.5
Malaysian Electoral Commission	5	7
BERSIH	8	10
Public	4	5.5
Total	**76**	**100%**

The discourse analysis of the selected articles from *MalaysiaKini* further supports the findings of the content analysis which showed that reports prepared by its resident journalists heavily supported the voices of the opposition parties. Two reports on the 1st of May 2013, which covered the campaign trails of the opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, are the best examples. Anwar's direct and indirect quotations dominated two of the reports where part of the reports contains the use of verbs that supported Anwar's point of views.

Paragraphs 1, 2, and 3 (reproduced below) which paraphrased Anwar statements using the verbs 'delivered' and 'urged' indicated 'how the writer intrudes the event via what amounts to an evaluative comment'

[33, p. 15) and somehow gave an authoritative standing to statements from the opposition leader. Notice that the phrases 'where the crowd turnout was also good despite it being an early morning programme', in paragraph 3 and 'Anwar worked up the crowd by leading the cry of "*Reformasi* …"' in paragraph 4, demonstrate that the *MalaysiaKini* discursive patterns were closer to the opposition viewpoints and their interpretation of events.

1. … Anwar delivered a warning to his supporters not to be 'careless' [34].

2. He urged everyone to check the status of their names on the electoral roll [34].

3. He earlier spoke to a jam-packed crowd of around 500 people in a small field in Seri Setia, where the crowd turnout was also good despite it being an early morning programme … [34].

4. At the end of the ceramah, Anwar worked up the crowd by leading the cry of '*Reformasi*'… [35]

The *Malaysiakini* coverage on the 2nd and 3rd May 2013 mainly discussed the issues of dubious voters, who were allegedly being transported to the Peninsula. An article on the 2nd May carried Anwar Ibrahim statement that more than 40,000 voters had been brought over by chartered flights funded by the Prime Minister's office [36]. Another report on the 2nd May carried a reply from Barisan National secretary-general, Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor, which denied Anwar's claim. Through his indirect quotation, which was taken from BERNAMA, Tengku Adnan was paraphrased as saying that the flights were 'organized and paid for by "friends of BN" to send "registered" voters back to their hometowns to vote' [37]. Notice that the usage of quote/unquote in 'friends of BN' and 'registered' are laden with expressive value and contain the presupposition that the readers seem to already know who the 'friends of BN' and the 'registered' voters are that the clauses are referring to. The inclusion of 'quote/unquote', as a way of positioning its use to demonstrate that these are the words of others, shows the writer's disagreement with them.

An article on the 3rd May 2013 featured a 'vox-populi' or interviews with those who took the chartered flight [38]. Based on the direct and indirect quotations of the passengers on the flight, the report adopted positive framings towards opposition parties and a negative framing towards Barisan Nasional. Although it clarified that those who took the flight 'had to prove

they were registered voters before being included on the list', the article also explained through an indirect quotation from one of the passengers that 'the trip home was paid for by "BN people"'. Again, the usage of quote/unquote in 'BN people' triggers a negative presupposition and an 'implicit claim embedded within the explicit meaning of a text or utterance' [31, p. 63]. This negativity towards Barisan National may have an ideological function in which the evocation of specific texts or textual series frame the reader's textual experience and background knowledge [32, p. 127]. The article also featured a direct quotation from one of the passenger, stating that, 'I just can't wait to vote! *Ini kalilah*!'. The phrase *ini kalilah!*, or 'this time!', refers to the opposition slogan of the 2013 election.

Paragraphs 1–5 (reproduced below) further report the opposition's indirect quotations in *MalaysiaKini's* [39] coverage of Anwar's campaign one day before the election. Anwar's statements were paraphrased using the verbs 'has vowed', 'urged', and 'repeated his warning', indicating 'how the writer intrudes the event via what amounts to an evaluative comment' [33, p. 15]. This demonstrates that *MalaysiaKini's* discursive patterns were closer to Anwar's viewpoints and his interpretation of events. In addition, the usage of a direct quotation at the end of the news — 'seize your destiny. Ini Kalilah!' — without any attribution further shows the reporter's support of Anwar's stance and position.

1.   defacto PKR leader Anwar Ibrahim urged the country's 13 million voters to turn up and cast their ballots with 'faith, courage and vision' [39]

2.   He also urged them not to get involved in the shredding or hiding of government documents if Pakatan were to seize Putrajaya from the BN tomorrow, after polling day [39].

3.   He also urged Malaysians not to fear [39].

4.   … he said in assurance [39].

5.   He repeated his warning to the Election Commission … [39].

MalaysiaKini reporting on the results of a survey by the Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research on 3 May 2013 shows a critical tone of coverage towards the ruling parties. The headline of the article — 'Najib's rating slide, BR1M not working', shows the usage of negative verbs towards the subject [40]. The coverage of the poll results began with the statement that 'BN

chief Najib Abdul Razak's approval rating sliding down a further 3 per cent from its last poll'. It then followed with a statement: 'Pakatan Rakyat ahead of BN in terms of the favoured party to form the government'. The report further explained that the figure 'reflects the slide in the "feel good" factor that was previously generated by the large-scale distribution of Bantuan Rakyat's 1Malaysia (BRIM)'.

There were three news reports produced by *MalaysiaKini* on 6 May 2009, one day after the election results were announced, and all show a clear tone of 'disapproval'. One of the reports opened with an indirect quote from the opposition leader that Pakatan Rakyat 'refused to submit to the announced result […] claiming electoral fraud and irregularities' [41]. Another report, headed 'PKR chief to hold rally to protest electoral fraud' [34], also opened with an indirect quotation from Anwar Ibrahim that called for a rally and 'warned of electoral fraud'. The third report from *MalaysiaKini* mainly featured statements from BERSIH's co-chairperson, Ambiga, which explained the process of setting up a people's tribunal to investigate the extent of electoral fraud [42]. BERSIH is a coalition of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which aim to reform the current electoral system in Malaysia.

Sinar Harian

A simple quantitative analysis of the representation of sources by *Sinar Harian* from 1 until 6 May 2013, showed that there was a total of 128 sources quoted by *Sinar Harian* from 114 news reports taken from the national section of the newspaper. The sources from Pakatan Rakyat took up 17 per cent, 3 per cent more than sources form Barisan National. Sources from the police and the public came second and third with 21

Table 2:   Sources from *Sinar Harian*

Sources	*Sinar Harian*	
	n	%
Pakatan Rakyat	22	17
Police	21	16.4
Public	19	14.8
Barisan Nasional	18	14
Expert sources	16	12.5
SPR	14	10.9
Others	18	14.4
Total	**128**	**100**

per cent and 18 per cent respectively. These were followed by expert sources which consisted of academics from local universities and Muslim religious scholars with 16 per cent.

Textual analysis of *Sinar Harian* reports show that although it attempted to give balanced coverage of both sides, it tended to give more space to coverage of the ruling parties as compared to coverage of the opposition groups. News items featuring BN were given twice the length and had more space than news items on Pakatan Rakyat.

Reports on 2 May 2013 of the campaign trails of the Prime Minister, Najib Razak, the Deputy Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, and the opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, are the best examples. The article on Najib's and Muhyiddin's campaign were twice the length and larger than the article on Anwar Ibrahim's campaign. Articles about Najib and Muhyiddin were accompanied by images but there was no image for Anwar's article.

The language construction of *Sinar Harian* reporting on Najib and Anwar stories, however, show clear differences. The lead on Najib's speech contains clear transitivity and attribution with little interference from the reporter's point of view [43]. Najib was quoted as 'admitting that the rural people are the hardcore supporters of the government, hence they are capable of contributing to a big win for BN'. The second paragraph stated that Najib 'explained two factors why rural communities must continuously place high confidence in BN'. The use of the verbs 'admit' and 'explain' portrayed Najib as yielding and submitting to the support of rural people. The word 'continuously' triggered a presupposition that Barisan Nasional could not have continuous support from rural people.

In contrast, the reporting on Anwar's campaign in the state of Putrajaya, which is the federal administrative centre of Malaysia, contains adjectives that describe his campaign positively [44]. The lead article began with the clauses 'with blazing passion to overthrow the current government', Anwar was said to have 'urged the citizens of Putrajaya to create history by sinking BN' in the 13th General Election. In the second paragraph, Anwar 'urged the voters in Putrajaya to give their support' to the incumbent PR to bring about change. In the fifth paragraph, the reporter interpretatively described that 'Anwar is seen fully injecting commitment into the people of Putrajaya to make a difference'.

Sinar Harian reporting on 1 May of a dialogue session entitled 'PRU13 Manifesto: Barisan Nasional vs Pakatan Rakyat', again shows the newspaper's propensity to present the opposition parties in a positive light. The session, which was held by *Sinar Harian*, involved local political analysts discussing Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Rakyat (PR) manifestos. One of the articles on the main page contained a lead — 'Manifesto presented by Pakatan Rakyat (PR) is closer to young people' — which immediately shows support for the opposition group's political pledges [45]. Notice the adjective 'closer' which shows the reporter's attitude in endorsing the manifesto of the opposition group.

Another story on the main page of the 1 May reports of *Sinar Harian* discussed the need to have an open debate about the manifesto pledges of BN and PR [46]. The argument was that if the debate was carried out in public, that would give Malaysian citizens a fair chance to deliberate on the manifesto and to make informed choices. In the middle of the article the report highlights arguments from a political analyst that the PR manifesto is more convincing in fulfilling the people's need whereas BN's manifesto is described as having a top-down approach and as being very much dependent on government agencies.

Although *Sinar Harian* reports indirectly show its support towards Pakatan Rakyat, at times the newspaper reporting showed 'backtracking' or inconsistencies in the editorial. Coverage of the controversy over colourful mini-flags placed around the capital Kuala Lumpur, shows the newspaper's polarity in its reporting. The main news item on page two, entitled 'Muhyiddin asks KPN to investigate', reports that the Deputy Prime Minister had asked the police to probe allegations that the flags placed around the capital were the focal point for demonstrations by the opposition should they lose [47]. The article also explained that the flags may be affiliated to the movement called the 'Malaysian Spring'. The article did not explicitly mention who was responsible for the flags. However, most of the paragraphs insinuate that the flags are the work of the opposition parties.

Page two also featured an editorial on the colourful mini-flags controversy [48] which clearly displayed disapproval of the movement to plant the coloured flags. The lead interpretatively questions 'why it needs to be placed, whereas there was no logo for which party it stands for'. The writings show concern over the coloured flags which could lead to demonstrations. The

article on the next page, however, confusingly featured a story with pictures of the coloured flags in different locations. It included the image of the Deputy President of The People's Justice Party holding the flags with the caption, 'Nurul Izzah launched "Malaysian Spring" campaign as part of the PRU13' [49]. The lead begins with, 'it is understood that this movement was initiated by a group of individuals who want to enliven the 13th General Election campaign, voluntarily'. The words 'enliven' and 'voluntarily' cast a positive twist on the article. In the following paragraph, Izzah was quoted as saying that the flags have nothing to do with the 'Arab Spring Demonstration' and that 'attempts to relate the programme with the "Arab Spring" is the work of those who fear losing power' and with 'attempts to scare the people'.

One clear feature of *Sinar Harian* reporting of the election is that its coverage of an issue mainly consists of arguments and counter-arguments between opposition leaders and government agencies. *Sinar Harian*'s report on 3 May 2013, for example, basically gives the Malaysian Electoral Commission (EC) more space on its pages to address the criticism hurled at them on the issues of migrant workers as illegal voters and on the introduction of indelible ink for voting. However, the overall tone of the article saw the EC on the defensive. The most dominant news item on the 3rd May [50] featured leads from the Chairman of the EC, Abdul Aziz Mohd Yusof. Abdul Aziz defended that voters coming from Sabah and Sarawak returning to the Peninsular 'are the registered voters' and not 'phantom' voters as claimed by the opposition groups. The fourth paragraph featured quotations from the opposition leader Anwar, arguing that 'the EC and the Prime Minister's Office masterminded a large number of dubious voters to come from Sabah and Sarawak to Peninsular Malaysia'. For a mainstream Malay newspaper, featuring claims by the opposition group using the word 'mastermind' hurled at the PM's Office and the EC is seen as bold and brazen. Besides having to answer opposition claims about the incoming voters from Sabah and Sarawak, paragraph eight of the news saw the EC defend itself by stating that it is 'not on anybody's side, even the government'.

Sinar Harian's main reporting on the result of the 13th General Election on the 6 May 2013 shows that Barisan Nasional gets the dominant news space as compared to the news on Pakatan Rakyat. The main title of the news, 'BN remain in power' [51], however, shows the newspaper's attempt to appear not to be on the side of the ruling authorities. The word 'remain' in

the headline indicates the closeness of the election result which saw BN again denied the two-thirds majority by opposition parties. The lead of the news stated that 'BN managed to defend the federal government and will continue to administer the Putrajaya after beating rival PR in the 13th General Election'. The words 'defend', 'will continue' and 'rival' are significant, indicating that the government is no longer in a position that holds absolute power in the country's political arena. In addition, the word 'rival' put Pakatan Rakyat and BN in an almost equal position of rivalry. Najib Razak was indirectly quoted as saying he was 'hoping that the opposition parties would accept this decision with an open mind and allow the democratic process to run smoothly'. This quotation is significant in indicating the ruling parties' awareness of the close competetion from the political forces of Pakatan Rakyat.

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study have proved that *MalaysiaKini* lived up to its niche reputation of exposing citizens to competing constructions, and of challenging the political reality created by the traditional media. It also gives voice to the marginalised opinions of the opposition groups and to civil society groups and brings them into the centre of political disocurse [6]. The findings of the textual analysis, however, also show that, at the same time, *MalaysiaKini* mainly upheld the voice of the opposition parties.

Findings of the textual analysis of *Sinar Harian* show that it did not demonstrate a clear pro-government, anti-opposition bias. The newspaper featured voices not only from the government, but also from opposition groups that are critical of the government. Analysis, however, shows that *Sinar Harian* gave more space to the coverage of the ruling party as compared with coverage of the opposition groups. News items featuring BN were evidently twice as long as news items on Pakatan Rakyat. This also means that news on PR would always be less dominant and would not define the news of the day. An attempt by *Sinar Harian* to give voice to the opposition groups, at the same time ensuring that the ruling party were given the dominant news space, also leads to inconsistency in their editorial. Many of the articles have an unclear tone of reporting and go back and forth in either 'defending' or 'criticising' the opposition groups. This muddled writing may be explained by the newspaper's attempts to be objective and neutral whilst at the same time adhering to the media laws and

particularly to the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) which empowers the minister of internal security to revoke the permit of a publication.

The findings show that in some ways both *MalaysiaKini* and *Sinar Harian* fulfill the four normative expectations of political journalism in a democracy as defined by Brian McNair [16]. First, both news organisations attempt to provide reliable and accurate information to help Malaysian citizens to make an informed choices in elections. Both news providers try to present the facts independently as the law permits and to provide accurate and thoughtful information about events during the elections. However, analysis shows that although *Sinar Harian* tended to give more space to the ruling parties, *Sinar Harian* shows a more balance coverage and attempt to provide an objective reporting of political reality in Malaysia. It strives to be as neutral and detached as possible by providing competing claims from both sides. *MalaysiaKini*, on the other hand, is more partisan towards the opposition parties and the analysis has shown that although the reporting is of high quality and independent, it did not present detached or balanced reportage. One of the reason for this is because of resource limitations. Unlike *Sinar Harian*, which is owned by the printing and publishing company Karangkraf, with an annual revenue of more than RM100 million, *MalaysiaKini* depends on subscriptions and advertising which contribute only about 50 per cent of its operation. The rest of *MalaysiaKini's* operation is supported through the help of funding agencies from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and other international donors [52]. Such limitations, according to its co-founder Stephan Gan (personal communication, 30 April, 2015) mean that *MalaysiaKini* can only afford a small number of reporters producing the news and, since the news portal raison d'être is to uphold the voices that have been marginalised in the media, it naturally opts to send its resources to cover the opposition parties campaign or events which will not have been covered by the mainstream media.

> *Basically our English desk has no more than 10 journalists. Given that kind of situation, we have to decide on what is important. There is always a lot of news during the campaign period and you have to decide how to use your resources. Given the fact that mainstream media have not been reporting so well when it comes to opposition news, and I think we can do better, in that sense our focus is on*

> *covering the opposition news and using BERNAMA very much as the balance. Look, we are willing to publish the BERNAMA news, despite the fact that they are maybe attacking the opposition. It is up to our readers to decide.*

MalaysiaKini not only had limited resources, it also faced restriction in terms of gaining access to government events and campaigns due to its critical stance towards the ruling authorities. This could also explain why they tended to use sources from Pakatan Rakyat who were willing to be interviewed. In contrast, in terms of resources *Sinar Harian* was better equipped to cover both sides of the stories during the election campaign and, as explained by its news editor Norden Mohamed (personal communication, 30 August, 2014), this gave them enough information to do so.

> *We have a team of reporters that cover Barisan Nasional and team of reporters that cover Pakatan Rakyat, and they will come back with their reports. When it comes to the same issue, we will portray both sides.*

Second, *MalaysiaKini* functioned much more effectively as a watchdog over the ruling authorities although, as a mainstream newspaper, *Sinar Harian* did a commendable job in providing critical coverage of the ruling authorities. This was mainly due to the fact that as an online news provider, *MalaysiaKini* is relatively free of government censorship as a result of the government's pledge not to restrict the internet, particularly the licensing law. As a mainstream newspaper, *Sinar Harian* is still restricted by the Printing Press law which empowers the ministers to revoke the permit of a publication at any time. Therefore, the newspaper was more cautious in its reporting of the tit-for-tat between the ruling authorities and the opposition parties and tended to give a more dominant voice to the ruling parties. Although its founder Husamuddin Yaacob (personal communication, 15 October, 2014) did not concur with the findings that *Sinar Harian* gave more dominant space to the ruling parties and insisted that they were balanced, he admitted that the newspaper was aware of the 'do's' and 'don't's' imposed on the press in Malaysia.

> *We know what we can do and what we can't do. We practice the concept of moderation. We did not push the limits.*

There are some news portals that push the limit to an extent that they don't appear objective … We have general guidelines where we don't touch racial issues, religion and the right of Bumiputera or Kings in Malaysia. We have experience in publication for more than 30 years in Malaysia. That's why we tend to be cautious.

Third, *Sinar Harian* did a better job than *MalaysiaKini* as as a mediator or representative on behalf of the citizenry. This view is based on the sources from the public which were minimally represented in *MalaysiaKini* with about three per cent as compared to *Sinar Harian* with more than 14 per cent. However, for both news providers, readers still did not contribute much to the news content. Looking at the diversity of sources, both *MalaysiaKini* and *Sinar Harian* continued to prioritise elite sources, which mainly consisted of political representatives.

Fourth, analysis shows that *MalaysiaKini* appeared to function as participant and advocate of the political positions of the opposition party during the 2013 election coverage. Textual analysis shows that *MalaysiaKini* was seeking to persuade the reader of the political viewpoint of Pakatan Rakyat. In contrast, *Sinar Harian* tried to appear balanced in its reporting of the political voices of both sides. *Sinar Harian's* stance to ensure it is seen as neutral was clearly reflected in Husamuddin's Twitter posts a couple of days before the election. On 1 May 2013, his Twitter account stated that as both sides of the party 'are confident to win', they should also 'ready themselves to accept defeat'. On 3 May 2013, Hussamuddin (personal communication, 15 October, 2014) again reasserted in his Twitter account that '*Sinar Harian* is the true voice of the Malaysian Citizen … fair and transparent' and does not 'take sides'. He reiterated this stance in his interview.

Of course there are times during the elections where the ruling parties or the opposition parties wanted us to support them 100%, but we would not do that. We will remain fair forever.

However, this does not mean that *MalaysiaKini* presented opinionated coverage. The online news provider still worked in the context of the separation of fact and opinion which is a structural feature of political journalism in a democracy, despite showing more

support for the cause of the opposition parties. Stephan Gan (personal communication, 30 April, 2015) agreed that *MalaysiaKini* had a clear stance on issues such as human rights and a free press, both of which were being advocated by the opposition parties.

We all know media organisation do have a certain stand on issues. We are different from The Star, we are different from the News Strait Times, they all have editorial positions. For MalaysiaKini, what I can say is that, and something that I always tell my reporters, that we are independent in the sense that we are not linked to any political parties, but it doesn't mean that we are apolitical. We take a very political stance on a lot of issues that we feel very strong about — press freedom, anti-corruption issues, human rights, good governance … things like that.

LIMITATION OF STUDY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH IN THE FIELD

In a semi-democratic country like Malaysia, where freedom of expression is somewhat limited and journalists are expected to exercise self-censorship, journalism finds itself in a deeply dialectical position. On the one hand, journalists are supposed to support government policies and to preserve the peace and harmony of the multiracial society and, on the other, they should monitor the conduct of the government to help the public to make informed choices [22].

Many interpretations could be made as to why the *MalaysiaKini* and Sinar Harian cover their news the way they do based on a discourse analysis of the 2013 election. Although the analysis only concentrated on a specific duration of news coverage of both *MalaysiaKini* and Sinar Harian, it is hoped that the depth in which the samples were analysed and triangulated with the interviews, give credence and validity to this study. As media texts present a distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding, it is therefore important for future researchers to further investigates media discourse as a potential sites of ideological negotiation and analyze its impact as mediated 'reality' in its own right [53, p. 238].

The findings from this study prove that independent news judgments exist in places that are deemed less democratic. Although restricted, the ideology of independent news judgments as illustrated by

MalaysiaKini and *Sinar Harian*, has managed to find its way through the support of those who are dare to champion such a service, in this case the founders of both news organisations. Not only does independent journalism also receive the support of the public, but elected politicians, political elites and rulers also see value in the provision of independent information and credible news judgement. This shows that Malaysian journalists have ample knowledge of journalistic practices in providing high quality and independent news coverage [22].

Placing this study in the wider context, the findings support the argument that similarities and differences in journalistic values are not dictated by political systems but are based on a desire for the independence and autonomy of journalism. This is in line with the argument put forward by Hanitzsch [26] that the term journalism culture refers to a plurality of 'worlds of journalism' rather than the idea of one single notion of journalism. Although the rise of professionalism in global journalism is closely related to the conceptualisation of a shared occupational ideology, based on the idea that journalists all over the world share the same understanding about values and practices, the meaning of abstract concepts such as press freedom is not fixed and universal, but is influenced by cultural traditions, historical experiences and political values.

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