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The 2013 general elections in Malaysia: An analysis of online news portals

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzed the coverage of online news portals during the election campaign in Malaysia's 13th General Election on 5th May 2013. There were two types of news portals chosen for this research: 1) the mainstream online news portals, namely The Star Online, Berita Harian Online, Bernama Online and Utusan Online; and 2) the alternative news portals consisting of political parties' publications: the Harakah Daily, Rokatkini and Keadilan Daily; and the independent news portals of The Malaysian Insider and Malaysiakini. This study was conducted starting from the nomination day on the 20th April 2013 until the polling day on the 5th May 2013. Results obtained were based on the frequencies of articles covering the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) party and the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) party. Each article was coded and labeled as positive, negative, or neutral coverage for each political party. The Content Analysis method was applied where the researchers chose and analyzed each election article and placed it in one of five categories; +BN (positive report), –BN (negative report), +PR (positive report), –PR (negative report) and N (Neutral). The results showed that the four mainstream online news portals favored the BN with their coverage. However, the parties' online news portals clearly owned by PR alliance parties had completely opposite, bias toward their owners. The two independent news portals seemed to give more balanced coverage to both sides.

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Introduction

On the 5th May 2013, approximately five years after the narrow victory of the ruling party in 2008, Malaysians once again voted in their 13th general election. It was the first general election for Najib Razak as Prime Minister of Malaysia after he took over in 2009 from his predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, one year after the 12th general election in 2008. Najib led the ruling-party coalition

Barisan Nasional (BN) and its 14 component parties campaigning on a platform to promote economic growth and political and social security. The incumbent BN party hoped to win many seats in 2013.

The opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR), a loose coalition of three political parties, namely the Pan-Islamic Party (PAS), the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and the People Justice Party (PKR), raised the issues of political freedom and abuse of power committed by the ruling BN. The opposition accused the ruling government of suppressing and controlling the media, especially the print and broadcasting media. Therefore, for the opposition, freedom of the media was in jeopardy as they considered the media's roles of

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check and balances were almost non-existent. People have always questioned the level of bias for and against certain political parties practiced by the local media, especially during the election campaign.

The level of bias or favoritism during the election period has made this research very important. This research measured the bias in media reporting on the Internet by the online news portal. Therefore, the main objective of this paper was to scrutinize the favoritism of online news portals toward political parties during the election campaign period in order to measure the level of bias of each news portal. The chosen online news portals for this study were the Berita Harian Online (bharian.com.my, 2013), Utusan Online (utusan.com.my, 2013), Bernama Online (bernama.com, 2013) and the Star Online (thestar.com.my, 2013) considered as the mainstream news portals because, except for Bernama Online, they also publish their own printed versions. Bernama Online was however chosen because it is the official/national wire service, unlike the other news portals. It does not have a print version unlike the mainstream and opposition news portals but it does have a TV channel via Channel 502 on Astro, a Malaysian Direct Broadcast Satellite Pay TV service. Alternative news portals were the Harakah Daily (harakahdaily.net, 2013) owned by the opposition PAS, Keadilan Daily (keadilandaily.com, 2013) owned by the PKR, and the Rokatkini (roketkini.com, 2013) in the possession of DAP. The two independent online news portals chosen for this research were the Malaysiakini (malaysiakini.com, 2013a) and the Malaysian Insider (themalaysianinsider.com, 2013a). This research also chose to study the Berita Harian Online, Utusan Online, the Star Online, Malaysiakini and the Malaysian Insider because according to comScore Media Matrix, they were among the top twenty websites in Malaysia (Tan, 2014). The Star Online was actually the most popular news portal in Malaysia (Table 1).

Table 1
Malaysian Websites, comScore Media Matrix 2014

Top 20 local websites for Malaysia (April 2014)		
Rank	Property	Unique visitors ('000)
1.	Maybank2u.com.my	2,139
2.	Mudah.my	2,089
3.	Cimbclicks.com.my	1,108
4.	Airasia.com	1,062
5.	Thestar.com.my	971
6.	Cari.com.my	923
7.	Malaysiakini.com	897
8.	Hmetro.com.my	824
9.	Themalaysianinsider.com.my	789
10.	Paultan.org	745
11.	Utusan.com.my	681
12.	Jobstreet.com	649
13.	Bharian.com.my	633
14.	Carlist.my	577
15.	Pbebank.com	575
15.	Sinarharian.com.my	574
17.	Lowyat.net	560
18.	Tonton.com.my	559
19.	Mylaunchpad.com.my	545
20.	Maxis.com.my	543

Source: Marketing Magazine (2014)

Moreover, in order to understand the popularity of these news portals, Facebook and Twitter as the two most popular social media today were able to provide data on the numbers of Likes and Followers of their sites for these news portals. Table 2 is the data for 18 February 2015. Although the Star Online was the most popular website, Berita Harian Online was the most popular on Facebook and Twitter. In addition to the Harakah Daily, the Keadilan Daily and the Rokatkini seemed struggle to get unique visitors on Facebook and Twitter.

The 13th general election was crucial for both the ruling and opposition parties after the poor performance of BN in the 12th general election in 2008. In 2008, five states out of 13 in Malaysia fell to the opposition parties—the PAS, PKR and DAP. These opposition parties later tried to strengthen themselves by establishing an alliance called PR in 2009. Among the five states, PAS won the state of Kelantan which was not a surprise because it had been under its control since the 1990 general election. However, the BN lost the states of Perak, Kedah, Penang and Selangor to the opposition which was a general shock. This marked the biggest failure in BN's history. Furthermore, BN merely won a simple majority, not a two third majority as before, ending up federally with 142 parliamentary seats out of 222.

However, in the 2013 general election, BN managed to re-capture Kedah and Perak from PR. The PR government in Perak was actually toppled by BN after ten months in power through the defection of three PR members of the state assembly in 2009. This triggered the Perak constitutional crisis where the BN government in Perak and the post of *Menteri Besar* or Chief Minister were decided by the Federal Court (Malaysiakini, 2009). Although performing well at the state level, BN continued to perform poorly at the federal level after it lost more parliamentary seats dropping from 140 seats in the 2008 general election to 133 seats in the 2013 general election. One of the reasons why the ruling BN performed poorly in the 2013 general election was because of the influence of the online media via the Internet. In fact, Prime Minister Najib even admitted on 3 June 2013 in the Prime Minister's departmental gathering that the failure of BN government to handle the public, negative perception on online media such as the social media had cost them the election. He explained that "Perception can be formed in many ways. Maybe not through face-to-face meetings, but through (news portals and) Facebook If there is any weakness in the

Table 2
Facebook and Twitter unique visitors, 18 February 2015

News portals	Facebook: Numbers of likes	Twitter: Numbers of followers (,000)
Berita Harian Online	2,718,005	786
Utusan Online	1,401,578	231
The Star Online	392,752	491
Bername Online	203,619	280
Malaysiakini	901,701	323
The Malaysian Insider	276,088	135
Harakah Daily	841,782	76.9
Keadilan Daily	63,883	41.8
Rokatkini	66,271	17.7

Source: Facebook and Twitter

government, it could be that we are not so good in dealing with the war on perception” (The Malaysian Insider, 2013b).

Therefore, this current study is important as an aid to understanding the coverage of the online news portals toward the political parties and how that coverage contributed to the 2013 general election result. This paper contains a literature review, the research methodology, and the findings of the research which help us to understand the impact of these news portals on the general election result in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Many researchers have commented on how the Internet has changed the public sphere of Malaysian media (Azizuddin, 2010; George, 2006; Gomez, 2013; Nain & Kim, 2004). It has resulted in more rigorous public debate on many issues, particularly often challenging the state. Thus, it was no wonder that Prime Minister Najib said that the 13th general election was the Malaysia's first social media election. After launching the Malaysia Social Media Week 2013 summit on 27 February 2013, Najib emphasized that “Of course, it (social media) will not be the biggest factor in the elections, but it is certainly increasing the tempo of political debate” (Lim, 2013). The Internet has become the battleground for the domination of public opinion by the political parties, especially the opposition after the print and broadcasting media became mostly controlled by the ruling BN.

In Malaysia, arguably the monopoly of the print and broadcasting media was inevitable. For instance, all main broadcasting stations—RTM 1, RTM 2, TV3, NTV7, 8TV and TV9—are under BN party ownership and government control whether directly or indirectly through close-linked companies. Radio and Television of Malaysia (RTM) is a public channel under the direct control of the Ministry of Communication and Multimedia. RTM has been used by the ruling BN to spread the coalition's messages and propaganda. The dominant Malay-language newspapers *Utusan Malaysia*, *Utusan Online*, and *Kosmo* are published by *Utusan Melayu*, which is affiliated with the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the main component of the BN (Azizuddin, 2014). In October 2006, a business deal between the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA, a BN component party) and media tycoon Tiong Hiew King solidified the monopolization of the Chinese press, with all top-four Chinese dailies now concentrated in the hands of a firm politico-business alliance (Azizuddin, 2014). On 4 November 2010, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a component party of BN, bought a 42.4 percent share in Malaysia's largest-circulation English daily *The Star* and *The Star Online* (*The Star Online*, 2013), saying it wanted to reorganize its investments and allow its investment arm, *Huaren Holdings*, to seek other assets. In 2007, *Media Prima Berhad*, which enjoys close links with UMNO, acquired all the private television stations including TV3, NTV7, 8TV and TV9. It also has a 43 percent equity interest in *The New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Berhad* (NSTP), one of Malaysia's largest publishing groups that publishes leading newspaper titles such as the *New Straits*

Times, *Berita Harian*, *Berita Harian Online*, and *Harian Metro*. The Group also owns two radio networks, *Fly FM* and *Hot FM* (Azizuddin, 2010; *Media Prima*, 2007). Both the print and broadcasting media's news coverage and editorials generally support the government line and agenda (Freedom House, 2007).

Independent news portal *The Malaysian Insider* was acquired by *The Edge Media Group* (TEMG) in 2014, a group that also owns several business and investment weeklies, *The Edge Financial Daily*, *Personal Money* and online news portals such as *The Edge Malaysia* (2014), *The Edge Property* (2014), *FZ* (2014) and (*The Malay Mail Online*, 2014). *Malaysiakini* is owned by *Mkini Dotcom Sdn Bhd*, co-founded by *Premesh Chandran* and *Steven Gan* in November 1999. *Premesh Chandran*, the CEO of *Malaysiakini* said that *Malaysiakini* is 70 percent owned by its co-founders and staff. But in September 2012, *Malaysiakini* admitted to receiving grants from the National Endowment for Democracy and other organizations (*The Star Online*, 2012). *Berita Nasional Malaysia* (*Bernamea*) is an autonomous body placed under Malaysia's Ministry of Communication and Multimedia. It is clear, as mentioned before, that the *Harakah Daily* is owned by PAS, *Keadilan Daily* is owned by PKR and *Rocketkini* is owned by DAP.

The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) is the regulator for the converging communications and multimedia industry, including the Internet. At the time it was created, its key role was the regulation of the communications and multimedia industry based on the powers provided for in the Communications and Multimedia Act (1998). Pursuant to the Act, the role of the MCMC is to implement and promote the government's national policy objectives for the communications and multimedia sector and it is also charged with overseeing the new regulatory framework for the converging industries of telecommunications, broadcasting and online activities. Its social regulation roles include the area of content development as well as content regulation. The latter includes the prohibition of offensive content as well as public education on content-related issues (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2004). Section 211 of the Communications and Multimedia Act (1998) in Malaysia provides: “No content applications service provider, or other person using a content applications service, shall provide content which is indecent, obscene, false, menacing, or offensive in character with intent to annoy, abuse, threaten or harass any person” (Communications and Multimedia Act, 1998). It is clear that one of the reasons the Internet worked so well and vigorously is that it has been free of government regulation (Biegel, 2001). However, it is believed that rules and regulations will reduce the passion for using the Internet. Ironically, the use of websites has flourished since 1998. In 1996, when former Prime Minister, *Mahathir Mohamad* launched the ambitious *Multimedia Super Corridor* (MSC) project to attract the world's leading Information Technology (IT) companies, the government came up with the *MSC Bill of Guarantees*, which included a commitment that the Malaysian government would never censor the internet. This policy continues until today. The irony is that this policy has benefited the opposition and civil society

movements by creating a new public sphere of the Internet after mainstream broadcasting and printed media became hostile to them (George, 2006).

The use of information technology and communication in mass media started in the 1980s. During that period, press companies began to use computers for writing and editing the news. Now, information technology and communication are essential in searching sources and spreading news to the readers. Press companies have developed websites and have introduced online news portals. In Malaysia, the mainstream press has pioneered this approach. For instance, The Star Publications, the company that publishes the newspaper called The Star, was the first to introduced an online newspaper called the Star Online in 1995 (The Star Online, 2013). Others followed such as the Utusan Online (2013), Berita Harian Online (2013), and New Straits Times Online (2013). Not only the mainstream media, but alternative media were also developing their own websites such as the Harakah Daily (2013) and Keadilan Daily (2013). This phenomenon of mainstream and alternative media developing their own websites and combining Internet technology with broadcasting is called 'netcasting'. This combination then produced 'video-streaming' which broadcasts video via the computer screen (Badarudin, 2002). However, during the 2013 Malaysia's general election, there was one online news portal, the Malaysiakini, which was so dominant, some even argue it was one of the determining factors of people's decision to vote for the opposition.

Malaysiakini expected that "over 15–20 million unique devices, about 80 percent of adult Internet users, to access Malaysiakini during the election period, up from 2.8 million on normal days" (Asohan, 2013). On the polling day, 5th May 2013, over 4.3 million users visited Malaysiakini. Three million of them accessed Malaysiakini's live report page on its website and another 1.3 million accessed it through Malaysiakini's mobile version. A further 1.3 million users visited Malaysiakini's undi.info, which provides information on seats and candidates. According to Google Analytics, at the height of the vote count, Malaysiakini's readership hit 500,000 users per minute. Since allowing free access to its website on the 17th April 2013, Malaysiakini's daily readership has doubled to 500,000 (Malaysiakini, 2013b).

Freedom of speech on the Internet is one of the essential issues that requires close attention. Although Malaysian governments have realized the importance of free cyberspace and they do not want to hamper the phenomena for market reasons, they have attempted to regulate and dictate its proper use politically. Based on the Freedom House's report entitled Freedom of the Net 2011 and 2012, Malaysia prior to the 2013 general election was in the status of 'Partly Free' (see Table 3).

Freedom of the press and an open public sphere are almost non-existent in Malaysia, where the government has full control over the media and restricts the alternative or opposition media. Clearly, the policy to control the media in Malaysia is a way to deter dissent and criticism of the government, and thus can be considered as undemocratic. Although the issue of racial harmony is a determining factor of the policy, the government manages to

Table 3

Freedom on the net 2011 and 2012: Malaysia

	2011	2012
Internet Freedom Status	Partly free	Partly free
Obstacles to access (0–25)	9	10
Limits on content (0–35)	11	14
Violations of user rights (0–40)	21	19
Total (0–100) ^a	41	43

Population: 29 million

Internet Penetration 2011: 61 percent

Web 2.0 Applications Blocked: No

Notable Political Censorship: No

Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested: Yes

Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Notes: Each country is ranked on a scale of 0–100, with 0 being the best and 100 being the worst. A combined score of 0–30 = Free, 31–60 = Partly Free, 61–100 = Not Free. Under each question, a lower number of points is allotted for a more free situation, while a higher number of points is allotted for a less free environment. Unless otherwise indicated, the sub-questions listed are meant to provide guidance as to what Issues should be addressed under each methodology question, though not all will apply to Malaysia

^a 0 = most free, 100 = least free

Source: Freedom House (2012)

manipulate this issue, by controlling the media, to strengthen its power (Azizuddin, 2004). However, Malaysia maintains its free cyberspace policy through the Communications and Multimedia Act (1998) (Act 588). The lack of clear legal provisions authorizing the filtering of online content in Malaysia may not be equated with total freedom of online speech because the state may rely on other laws such as the Sedition Act (SA), the Official Secrets Act (OSA) and the Penal Code or adopt different methods of silencing opinions expressed online. In July 2008, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) blocked access to many websites and blogs including the controversial Malaysia Today website (Farrah, 2008). However, it did not stop the social media developing and progressing as the channel for Malaysian citizens to express themselves politically either for or against the government.

Research Method

The research involved the analysis of articles published during the 13th general election by the selected online news portals from the nomination day on 20th April 2013 until the polling day on 5th May 2013. The main objective of this research was to examine the coverage and favoritism of online media toward the political parties contesting this election. Specifically, the research focused on the tendency of these online news portals to give positive, negative, or neutral reporting about political parties. The results were produced based on the frequencies and percentage of the news portals' coverage on the BN and PR parties. This research applied the Content Analysis method where the researchers chose and analyzed each of the election's articles and classified or coded them into five categories, +BN, –BN, +PR, –PR, and N, where: +BN was positive reporting such as praising, support or mere reporting on policy and activities for BN; –BN means negative reporting such as criticism and condemnation for BN; While the same

categorization applied to PR with regard to +PR and –PR; N indicated a neutral report, favoring neither party. The articles selected from the news portals were articles that covered and reported issues regarding the general election only. In terms of the political parties' news portals, the Harakah Daily, Keadilan Daily and Rocketkini, the analysis was divided into three categories only, –BN, +PR and N, because they were biased toward their parties-cum owners of the news portals and +BN and –PR became irrelevant. The N coverage was related to articles linguistically not leaning towards supporting or criticizing either party such as articles about the election process conducted by the Election Commission (EC).

All the news portals selected for this research were published bilingually in the Malay and English languages except for Utusan Online and Berita Harian Online which published only in Malay and Malaysiakini that had three language versions consisting of Malay, English and Mandarin. For this research, only the articles from the Malay version were studied for all news portals, except for the Star Online where the articles from the English version were examined because the Malay version via <http://www.mstar.com.my> gave more coverage on the latest entertainment issues rather than election issues which were widely covered by the English version. For the Malaysiakini, the Malay version was only used because it is free-to-access and does not require a subscription fee like the English version.

In conducting the research, four post-graduate students from the Universiti Utara Malaysia were trained as coders. They were selected based on their proficiencies in the Malay and English languages. The data were coded using sentence-level content analysis (providing examples of a +BN, –BN, and N sentence). This is crucial especially in determining whether, for instance, the article was coded +BN or –PR because it can go either way unless sentence-level analysis can show that the article was leaning more toward +BN rather than –PR after calculation of sentences were made and decided. Coders had to calculate the words and sentences before determining the correct category for each article through sentence-level content analysis. Team leaders played a major role in monitoring closely the processes of coding to ensure reliability of the research. Two team leaders checked thoroughly the processes of coding to ensure that they were performed correctly by the coders. Random checking was also performed after the preliminary results were compiled. These tendencies were then summed up to show the total stance of each news portal, whether it favored the ruling party, the opposition, or was neutral.

Results and Discussion

Online news portals became more essential in the 13th general election where we can see both the ruling and opposition parties trying very hard to dominate this new medium. This research found that the mainstream news portals favored the BN against the PR. In their reporting, BN received more than 50 percent positive coverage. In terms of negative coverage to the BN, surprisingly The Star Online produced only 1 percent of negative coverage while Bernama Online had only 0.5 percent. Unlike BN, PR received only 7 percent positive coverage by The Star Online and 0.2 percent by both Bernama Online and Berita Harian Online. However, PR received a higher percentage of negative coverage in Utusan Online with 51 percent, in Berita Harian Online 27 percent, Bernama Online 19 percent and The Star Online with 17 percent. Neutral coverage was in the range of 17–49 percent for all news portals. Overall, it can be concluded that the mainstream online news portals were biased toward the ruling BN party (see Table 4 for further details).

Furthermore in this research, the alternative online news portals referred to the opposition parties' online news portals such as the Harakah Daily, Keadilan Daily, and Rocketkini, and independent news portal like the Malaysian Insider and Malaysiakini. These news portals were important in contributing alternative views and ideas and debating the political issues especially during the general election. Although the impact of these media could be less than the mainstream media, especially for the opposition parties' news portals, they could offer significant information especially from the opposition parties which were denied any campaign coverage in the mainstream media. In comparison with the mainstream media, the alternative media which belonged to the PR—the BN does not have its own party online media—played a significant role as an alternative to the mainstream media which were biased toward the ruling BN. However, these alternative type of media are still unable to challenge the strength of the mainstream media supported by the ruling BN. These alternative online news portals also have a print version such as the weekly publication for Harakah and Suara Keadilan and monthly for the Rocket, but these are sold only to party members. In fact, the Harakah circulation reached 180,000 copies during the 13th general election (Razak, 2013). Since the 12th general election, Suara Keadilan's circulation has grown to 150,000 copies per edition (Siew, 2009). These circulation levels indicate why the alternative newspapers can only contribute to the political debate and discussion in a limited public sphere in the Malaysian media. With limited circulation, the alternative

Table 4
Mainstream online media and the 2013 General Election: Number and percentage coverage of and favoritism toward political parties

Online mainstream media	+BN	%	–BN	%	+PR	%	–PR	%	N	%	T	%
Bernama Online	183	43	2	0.5	1	0.2	81	19	158	37	425	100
Berita Harian Online	183	40	0	0	1	0.2	121	27	150	33	455	100
The Star Online	239	26	12	1	66	7	154	17	444	49	915	100
Utusan Online	154	32	0	0	0	0	248	51	83	17	485	100

Source: Azahar and Azizuddin (2013)

Table 5

Alternative online media and the 2013 General Election: Number and percentage coverage of and favoritism toward political parties

Online alternative media	+BN	%	–BN	%	+PR	%	–PR	%	N	%	T	%
Harakah Daily	0	0	111	42	84	31	0	0	73	27	268	100
Keadilan Daily	0	0	56	44	40	31	0	0	32	25	128	100
The Malaysian Insider	33	19	11	7	27	16	28	17	70	41	169	100
Malaysiakini	29	10	31	11	40	14	41	14	143	51	284	100
Roketkini	0	0	11	46	10	42	0	0	3	12	24	100

Source: Azahar and Azizuddin (2013)

media have been given limited press freedom in Malaysia. Therefore, by developing the online version of these newspapers, these opposition parties hoped they could reach the public more easily.

During the 2013 general election, the Harakah Daily, Keadilan Daily, and Roketkini were critical of the BN and supportive of the PR. The coverage of election issues from 20 April 2013 until 5 May 2013 consisted of 268 articles by Harakah Daily, 128 articles by Keadilan Daily, and 24 articles by Roketkini. None of these articles contained positive coverage for the BN. In fact, there was 42 percent negative news for BN in Harakah Daily, 44 percent in Keadilan Daily and 46 percent in Roketkini. This makes them less relevant in analyzing their favoritism toward political parties contesting the 2013 general election. However, the Malaysian Insider and Malaysiakini, which did not have print versions of their news portals, produced a significant amount of neutral coverage, with the Malaysian Insider producing 41 percent and Malaysiakini 51 percent, plus quite a balanced coverage—positive and negative—toward both political parties. This indicated that both online news portals were trying to give balanced or non-biased coverage to their readers, so the voters could choose independently which party would best serve the nation (see Table 5).

Conclusion

Overall, the results showed that the coverage and reporting of both sets of online news portals—either mainstream online media or alternative online media—reflected the ownership of the respective media with the exception of the Malaysiakini and the Malaysian Insider where the neutral coverage was rather high, indicating that they tried to provide equal coverage for both the ruling and opposition parties. In future, perhaps we will see more of these kinds of online news portals emerging in the public sphere because their impact on public opinion can be huge. Therefore, attention should be given to online media in future research by the media scholars because definitely online media can be a tool for democratization and transformation in society.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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