

# OBJECTIVE REPORTING OR MOUTHPIECE FOR THE OPPOSITION GROUPS?: A STUDY OF *MALAYSIAKINI* COVERAGE OF THE 2013 MALAYSIAN GENERAL ELECTION

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## **Abstract**

*MalaysiaKini* is regarded by political communication scholars as an influential online news medium in Asia. Within the restricted environment of Malaysian media, *MalaysiaKini* is able to provide critical reports of the ruling authorities and gives voice to the marginalised opinions of the opposition groups. *MalaysiaKini* is often praised for its high standards of journalistic practice based on the norms and values of independent journalism. Some however argue that as the platform for marginalised voices, the news portal is also, by default, seen as pro-opposition and acts as an opposition mouthpiece in Malaysia. This article examines the coverage of the news portal, and the 2013 Malaysian General Election will be used as a case study. Drawing on one of the important concepts in modern journalistic practice, namely objectivity, this study attempts to explain the extent to which *MalaysiaKini* fairly represents each leading side in the political controversy and in the impartial reporting of news. Through qualitative analysis, this study found that *MalaysiaKini* largely upholds the voice of the opposition parties. The study concludes that rather than offering objective reporting, *MalaysiaKini* contributes to an environment of a multiplicity of ideas and plurality of news coverage in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** *Political Communication, online journalism, Objectivity, MalaysiaKini, mouthpiece*

## PEMBERITAAN OBJEKTIF ATAU LIDAH RASMI KUMPULAN PEMBANGKANG?: SATU KAJIAN LIPUTAN PILIHANRAYA UMUM MALAYSIA 2013

## **Abstrak**

Sarjana komunikasi politik menganggap *MalaysiaKini* sebagai saluran berita yang berpengaruh di Asia. Dalam persekitaran media yang terhad di Malaysia, *MalaysiaKini* boleh menyediakan laporan kritikal terhadap pihak pemerintah dan memberi suara kepada pendapat pembangkang yang dipinggirkan. *MalaysiaKini* sering dipuji kerana amalan kewartawanannya berkualiti dilihat dari norma dan nilai kewartawan bebas. Ada pula yang mengatakan sebagai landasan untuk suara terpinggir, portal berita, secara *default*, dilihat sebagai pro-pembangkang dan berdiri sebagai lidah rasmi pembangkang di Malaysia. Artikel ini meneliti liputan berita portal, dan pilihanraya 13 menjadi kajian kes. Mengambil kira salah satu konsep amalan jurnalistik moden, iaitu, objektiviti, kajian ini cuba menjelaskan sejauh mana *MalaysiaKini* ada mewakili kedua-dua belah pihak dalam kontrversi politik dan dalam pemberitaan yang tidak berpihak. Melalui analisis kualitatif, kajian ini mendapati

MalaysiaKini banyak berpegang pada suara parti pembangkang. Kajian ini merumuskan bahawa dari menawarkan pemberitaan objektif, MalaysiaKini menyumbang kepada persekitaran ide yang berganda dan peliputan berita yang majmuk di Malaysia.

**Kata kunci:** *Komunikasi politik, kewartawanan atas talian, objektiviti, MalaysiaKini, lidah rasmi*

## INTRODUCTION

The rise of the internet has changed the media landscape particularly in Asian countries where the majority of governments has traditionally exercised strict control over the media. Malaysia is the best example where the internet has become a channel for challenging the authority of elites and breaking the political reality that powerful interests try to shape and sustain through the mainstream media (George, 2007). Although the internet has been seen as a liberating force in Malaysia, the ruling government has embraced the internet to ensure that Malaysia is at the forefront of the knowledge-based economies and of global technological innovation.

One website that has been regarded as an influential online news medium in Asia is *MalaysiaKini* (Abbot, 2012; George, 2007; Steele, 2009). *MalaysiaKini*, together with social media, are believed to have played an important role in 2008 when Malaysia's ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN), were denied its two-thirds majority in Parliament for the first time since 1963 (Steele, 2009).

*MalaysiaKini* is regarded as an anomaly in the Malaysian media system mainly because of its critical reports of the government which gave space to the opposing groups when all of the mainstream media openly practiced a pro-government policy. As of January 2015, *MalaysiaKini* was the most visited news portal in Malaysia with more than 1.2 million visitors every month (comScore, 2015).

*MalaysiaKini* is also praised for its journalistic practice. Janet Steele (2009) explains that although *MalaysiaKini* operates online, it practices high standards of journalism and upholds the norms and values of independent journalism such as covering both sides of stories, providing documentary evidence, and giving voice to the voiceless. This, in turn, legitimises alternative views of events, thus challenging the authoritarianism of the ruling parties of Barisan Nasional.

Steele (2009) further argues that *MalaysiaKini* shares a similar sense of professionalism amid the government control of the press, and laws prevent journalists from reporting on 'sensitive' issues such as ethnicity and religion that might result in ethnic disturbances.

Given that *MalaysiaKini* emerged as the platform for opposition views and marginalised voices (Teik, 2010), the news portal is also, by default, seen as pro-

opposition (Abbott, 2012; Brown 2005). Johan Fischer (2009) even argues that *MalaysiaKini* acts as an opposition mouthpiece in Malaysia. A study by Usha Devi Rajaratnam (2009), comparing the strategies used by *The Star*, a mainstream newspaper indirectly owned by the ruling authorities, and *MalaysiaKini* during the campaign period of the 2008 Malaysian General Elections, found that as *The Star* was setting the agenda for the ruling parties, *MalaysiaKini* favourably reported the opposition thus appearing to set the agenda for the opposition parties. This, again, raises the question as to what extent *MalaysiaKini* is as objective and non-partisan as claimed by previous scholars.

To date, no-one has closely examined how *MalaysiaKini* actually reports its news, particularly in terms of linguistic practice based on the conception of objective reporting. This article, therefore, aims to examine the reporting of *MalaysiaKini* during the 2013 Malaysian General Election based on a textual analysis of selected news samples from 1 May 2013 to 7 May 2013. It attempts to investigate *MalaysiaKini*'s construction of texts and is based on the norm of objectivity, fairly representing each leading side in a political controversy and reporting news without 'commenting on it, slanting it, or shaping its formulation in any way' (Shudson, 2001, p. 150).

## **OBJECTIVITY**

The professional model in journalism, known as the 'Anglo-American' model of journalism, mostly refers to the British and American media experience. Although there are substantial differences, both media systems share the idea that the professionalisation of journalism is essentially synonymous with 'objectivity' and political neutrality (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 38).

The concept of objectivity is regarded as a significant part of the occupational ideology in Anglo-American journalism which is widely shared by newsrooms across the globe (Hanitzsch, 2007) and has become the 'dominant model of professional journalism' (Mancini, 2005, p. 78). Surveys carried out across regions and countries such as China (Wu & Weaver, 1998), Indonesia (Hanitzsch, 2005; Manzella, 2000), India (Rao, 2009), Uganda (Mwesige, 2004) and Spain (Sanders & Canel, 2006) found that journalists more or less share the concept of objectivity and the ideals of the Anglo-American professional culture of journalism, such as the practice of reporting based on facts.

Schudson (2001) defines the notion of objectivity, which originated from the occupational values of American journalism, as the 'norm that guides journalists to separate facts from values and to report only the facts. Objective reporting is supposed to be cool, rather than emotional, in tone. Objective reporting takes pains to represent fairly each leading side in a political controversy. According to the objectivity norm,

the journalist's job consists of reporting something called "news" without commenting on it, slanting it, or shaping its formulation in any way' (p. 150).

Objectivity, however, has a problematic status in journalistic practices due to the impossibility of value-neutrality through the positivist assumptions in the journalist's ability to represent the world 'as it is' without affecting it. For that reason, more than 40 years ago, research on the sociology of news journalism demonstrated that news is a construct. Gaye Tuchman (1976), in her studies on news organisations and the professional ideologies of news workers, argues that the news media are constructing and reconstructing reality by 'constituting an event as news' (p. 1065). This is being done through the journalist's 'typification' of the everyday world such as categorising events as hard news or soft news (Tuchman, 1973, p. 112).

There are basically four general institutionalised practices in journalism (Ekström, 2002, p. 270). They are: (1) 'belief in the news', better known as newsworthiness; (2) the established practice of classifying sources which teach journalists to differentiate them based on different knowledge status; (3) conducting news interviews, which is an interactional form involving the interviewer who is 'a professional journalist and the interviewees who have links to recent events as primary agents or informed commentators' (Kroon-Lundell & Eriksson, 2009, p. 2); and (4) constructing texts based on certain techniques such as presenting information in an inverted pyramid format (Ekström, 2002, p. 270). Tuchman (1973) explains that these shared practices of the routinisation of news work (p. 112) are the key elements that enable journalists to maintain the degree of objectivity in their day-to-day job. Marilyn Lester (1980) further argues that these news processes are 'reality-making activities and not simply reality-describing ones'. She argues that news workers' 'accounts of newsworthiness do not present reality; rather, they forge it' (pp. 984–985).

Despite resistance, backlash, and ongoing academic and professional discussions, objectivity is still alive as an ideological cornerstone of journalism (Blaagaard, 2013). The term 'objectivity' has been changed to less positivist sounding terms such as 'impartiality' or 'balanced' and synonymous concepts such as 'fairness', 'professional distance' and 'detachment'. Moreover, objectivity was underscored as a way of gaining the readers' trust. Brian McNair (2006) explains that the 'critical scrutiny of political elites' and the 'visible display of freedom and independence' have become the marketing tools for news media (pp. 60–61). News organisations are, therefore, required to brand themselves as producers of 'quality' news in the marketplace. Each news organisation should demonstrate reliability, authority, independence and diversity regardless of its place on the political or ideological spectrum that more or less constitutes objectivity in reporting.

## **JOURNALISM IN MALAYSIA**

The mass media in Malaysia is expected to play its role to be catalysts for national development and to focus on nation-building and 'responsible' journalism (Weiss,

2012). For that reason the media are required, not challenge the state and to support the government to impart information and disseminate its policies toward nation-building (Anuar, 2005).

Concern over racial antagonism within the multiracial societies in Malaysia has always been a major reason for the government to keep the press in check (Azizuddin, 2005; Ezhar et al., 2012). Government control of the media operates at two levels. The first is at the media content where various laws allow the authority to impose restriction on publication and penalties for the acquisition of official information. Among the censorship laws that govern the media practices are Official Secrets Act (1972), Sedition Act (1948) and Defamation Act.

The second level is that of media access: the ownership of media production. For mainstream press in Malaysia, the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) 1984 is a primary piece of legislation that governs and shapes the press industry. PPPA stipulates that all newspapers and regular publications should possess a publishing permit issued by the Home Affairs Ministry. PPPA also empowers the minister of internal security to revoke the permit of a publication should he decide that the publication concerned has acted in a manner prejudicial to the nation's security. In 2012, the PPPA was amended to remove the home minister's 'absolute discretion' over printing press licences. The amendment do away with the need for annual renewal of printing licences, which means once a licence has been granted by the government; a newspaper would not need to renew it until it is revoked by the minister (Printing Presses and Publications (Amendment) Act 2012). It also reinstates judicial oversight over the minister's decisions. However, the PPPA still empowers the minister to have absolute discretion over the approval of publishing permits and to prohibit the printing, sale, import, distribution or possession of a publication.

The hegemonic effect of licensing is that it heightens the barriers to entry, to the benefit of players that closely are allied to the ruling elite (George, 2007). This promotes the concentration of press ownership in the hands of a few who are closely aligned with the government. As a result, most print and broadcast media are closely tied to the ruling parties, with ownership concentrated in party-linked holding companies. As a result, Malaysia's political parties have become the nation's largest shareholders of media. Together, the UMNO-linked conglomerates, Media Prima and Utusan Melayu group, for instance, own nearly all mainstream Malay and English language newspapers, as well as a number of television channels and magazines. Besides this, the Ministry of Information manages the national television and radio networks, Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) which consists of TV1 and TV2, and 32 radio channels (George, 2007; Anuar, 2005; Weiss, 2012).

The Internet which is less closely regulated has witnessed the development of a vigorous alternative media web presence (George, 2007). It plays an increasing role in facilitating online and offline political expression and action in Malaysia (Tan & Ibrahim, 2008). It gives voice to marginalized opinions and acts as a provider of information and communication channels for the civil society (Giersdorf & Croissant,

2011). As a result, internet news portals and social media have given the opposition parties a medium to engage with their supporters. One of the reasons why online news media are to a certain extent outside of the bounds of authoritarian control is due to the Malaysian government pledged not to censor the Internet (Giersdorf & Croissant, 2011). It is part of an initiative to attract high tech companies to invest in Malaysia. As a result, it has opened up a raucous and democratic online platform (Abbott, 2012).

*MalaysiaKini* which was formed by Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran in November 1999, is widely regarded as a leading independent news source on Malaysia, and has become the country's most used online news sites (Kenyon, 2010). *MalaysiaKini* started as a free service and initially received funding from press-freedom and democracy-advocacy groups, namely the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA), and the Media Development Loan Fund (MDLF). In 2004, it became a subscription service (Abbott, 2012; Steele, 2009). Janet Steele (2009) described *MalaysiaKini* as practicing “norms of good journalism to legitimise alternative views of events, thus challenging the authoritarianism of the Barisan Nasional” (p.91). Jason Abbott (2012) regarded *MalaysiaKini* as an example of the manner in which the Internet may have “a democratising effect on the region’s authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes by opening up a permissive online public sphere in which traditional hierarchies of power are challenged” (p.333).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodological framework for this study is based on the discourse analysis approach to news. This analysis of knowledge, opinions and ideas emphasises ‘language in use’ — how language relates to social, political and cultural formations, and how language reflects and shapes social order and the individuals’ interaction with society (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999, p. 3). Roger Fowler’s (1991) seminal work, *Language in News*, lays down the initial framework for a ‘critical’ study of news. He argues that linguistic structure plays an important role in news construction. Fowler (1991) regards news not as ‘facts about the world’, but as a construction of ‘idea’, ‘beliefs’, ‘values’, ‘theories’, ‘propositions’ or ‘ideology’ (p. 1). Fürsich (2009) further explains that ‘media texts present a distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding ... and its potential as a site of ideological negotiation and its impact as mediated “reality” necessities interpretation in its own right’ (2009, p. 238).

The samples of news articles from the 2013 Malaysian General Election from *MalaysiaKini* were accessed from its news portal. The time frame of the sample selection is one week between 1 May 2013 and 7 May 2013. The sample was chosen from the NEWS section of *MalaysiaKini*, which is known to include breaking news, and the choice of writing styles were of particular interest to the study.

*MalaysiaKini* news reporting was subjected to both qualitative and quantitative analyses. For the quantitative analysis, stories were categorised as one of the

following: type of article, representation of sources, and location of direct quotations. The analysis of type of article was intended to ascertain the form of the reporting produced by the online news organisations. The purpose of the examination of sources was designed, *inter alia*, to identify the voices represented by the news organisations during the election. The consideration of the location of direct quotations was for the purpose of ascertaining the extent to which the reporting of *MalaysiaKini* adhered to the inverted pyramid format of traditional news writing. The inverted pyramid format of newswriting mainly refers to the rules of source attribution for information which are arranged in descending order of importance (van Dijk, 2013). The lead, which is usually the first two or three paragraphs of the news item, is seen as an important device in the inverted pyramid format for giving a story its angle, suggesting a particular perspective for viewing the event reported. To ensure empirical validity or facticity, the lead is usually supported by quotations of experts from official sources linking certain points of view to corroborating authority (Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

For the qualitative analysis, the selected *MalaysiaKini* news reporting was subjected to critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA is generally concerned with how language represents social practice and creates meaning in social processes (Chouliaraki, 2000, p. 297). The analysis examines the lexical features and sentence construction of texts, particularly at the level of quoting and paraphrasing. Lexical analysis explains the usage of words that may 'convey the imprint of society and value judgment' (Richardson, 2007, p. 47). This includes the way that people are named in the news script and the manner in which social actors are referred to. Fairclough (2001) explains that the analysis of vocabulary could show three things: (1) how 'ideological differences between texts' in the representations of the world are coded; (2) how the choice of words 'creates social relationship between participants'; and (3) the author's evaluation through the expressive value of words (pp. 94–98). The analysis of sentence construction will be based on the analysis of transitivity. Transitivity explains the relationship between participants in a news report, including the role they play and how actions that appear in a text are represented (Richardson, 2007, p. 54). Analysis of transitivity investigates the process and participants in the sentence, the agency of the sentence, the usage of nominalisations, how sentences are connected, and the usage of the active/passive voice and negative/positive sentences (Fairclough, 1989, pp. 101–110).

The analysis also looked at a text, applying the concept of "intertextuality", which refers to the idea that texts cannot be viewed or studied in isolation and must be understood in relation to other texts (Richardson, 2007, p. 100). Intertextuality "stresses the historicity of texts and how they always constitute additions to existing chains of speech communication" (Fairclough, 1992, p.84). John Richardson (2007) noted that, in news reporting, intertextuality, among other things, constitutes reproducing the opinions of others such as reproducing a speech or a quotation from a source involved in the reported events. The way journalists quote their sources is important at this level of analysis because "the further away from direct quotation that

reported speech moves, the greater the interpretative influence of the reporter, hence the greater the potential for distortion and representation” (Richardson, 2007, p.106).

## FINDINGS

There were 288 articles produced by *MalaysiaKini* in the period from 1 May 2013 to 7 May 2013 during the 2013 Malaysian General Election. Of the 288 articles produced by *MalaysiaKini*, more than 23 per cent of the news was syndicated articles from a local news agency, BERNAMA (55 articles), and other news agencies such as Reuters and Bloomberg (10 articles). More than 10 per cent (33 articles) of the articles were written by outside columnists. Twenty-six of the total articles were in the form of a collection of readers’ comments and six of them were in the form of chronological events or provided background information during the election period. This means that only 156 of the articles, or about 55 per cent of the overall articles, were produced by *MalaysiaKini* journalists during the 2013 Malaysian General Election.

TABLE 1: TYPES OF ARTICLE PRODUCED BY *MALAYSIAKINI*

Article types	MalaysiaKini	
	%	n
News	54%	156
Syndicated from BERNAMA	19%	55
Syndicated from other news agencies	4%	12
Commentary/features	11%	33
Readers’ comments	9%	26
Chronology of events	3%	6
<b>Total</b>	100%	288

In terms of the diversity of sources in the news reporting, excluding the editorial writing from the columnists and readers’ comments, there was a total of 163 sources for *MalaysiaKini* and all of the sources were quoted directly. As shown in Table 2, most of the sources of *MalaysiaKini* were from the representatives of Pakatan Rakyat, accounting for 28 per cent of the overall sources. Sources from the ruling parties, Barisan Nasional, were second with 21 per cent.

TABLE 2: DIRECT SOURCES FROM *MALAYSIAKINI*

Sources	MalaysiaKini	
	%	n
Barisan	21%	34



Nasional	(10.5% from BERNAMA)	(17 from BERNAMA)
Pakatan Rakyat	28%	46
Police	8%	13
Malaysian Electoral Commission	3%	5
BERSIH	5%	8
Public	2.5%	4
<b>Total</b>	100%	163

The simple quantitative analysis shows that *MalaysiaKini* gave greater priority to sources from the opposition parties. Although from the outset there was not much disparity in terms of the representation of sources from the ruling and the opposition parties, it is important to note that the majority of the sources from the ruling party were provided by BERNAMA. BERNAMA, a government-owned agency, is seen as the most important provider of news for mainstream news media in Malaysia. It is also regarded as a conduit between the government and the local mass media (Ali Salman, 2009). There are two possible arguments why news syndicated from BERNAMA appears prominently in *MalaysiaKini*. First, syndicated news from BERNAMA makes the news portal appear to be balanced in terms of its representation of sources. As the news portal represents voices from the opposition groups, BERNAMA provides the voice of the government. Second, *MalaysiaKini* reporters may have difficulty in gaining access to the sources from Barisan National because of their reputations for being pro-opposition party. Syndicated news from BERNAMA is a way of representing the story from the side of the ruling party.

A perusal of direct quotations (Table 3) provides greater insight into the diversity of sources provided by the news portals. Excluding news syndicated from BERNAMA, the most quoted individual by *MalaysiaKini* was the leader of the opposition party, Anwar Ibrahim (15 times). This was followed by the secretary-general of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), *Lim Guan Eng* (eight times). *Prime Minister, Najib Razak*, and the co-chairperson of BERSIH, Ambiga, were quoted three times each.

Table 3: Individual sources for *MalaysiaKini*

	<i>MalaysiaKini</i>	
	%	n
Najib Razak (Barisan National)	1.8%	3
Anwar Ibrahim (Pakatan Rakyat)	9.2%	15
Ambiga (BERSIH)	1.8%	3

Lim Guan Eng (Pakatan Rakyat)	5%	8
Total		163

The quantitative analysis also examined the location of the direct quotations. This issue was perceived as important in order to understand the extent to which news from *MalaysiaKini* still adhered to the formula of the inverted pyramid format, which is regarded as one of important elements that enable journalists to maintain a degree of objectivity (Tuchman, 1973). The inverted pyramid format refers to a sequential organization of structural elements in which the most important information concerning an event is supposed to be presented in the first paragraph, and each succeeding paragraph should contain information of decreasing importance (Tuchman, 1972). A lead, which refers to the earliest paragraphs in the news, is one of the most important devices used in inverted pyramid format. A lead gives a story a newsworthy angle, suggesting a particular perspective to view the event reported (Pan and Kosicki, 1993). In this regard, it was assumed that the earlier the article cited sources in a story, the more factual it appears. Therefore, this article posited that if the direct citation of the sources was introduced in the first four paragraphs of the news item, it was more likely to be following the inverted pyramid formula to news reporting than a more conversational and narrative approach.

The quantitative analysis in Table 4 shows that for *MalaysiaKini*, only 71 out of 156 news articles had direct citations in the first four paragraphs. This indicates more than half of the news of *MalaysiaKini* was not based on the inverted pyramid format or traditional forms of news writing, wherein the story lead was anchored in the sources. This means that there was a tendency to adopt a narrative structure in the reporting by *MalaysiaKini* since more than 50% of the direct quotations were introduced late in the paragraphs.

Table 4: Location of first-level sources

	<i>MalaysiaKini</i>	
	%	n
1st–4th paragraph	45%	71
Total articles	100%	156

There are two important conclusions that can be drawn from the simple quantitative analysis. First, the news produced by the resident journalists of *MalaysiaKini* relied heavily on cited sources from the opposition and attached only secondary importance to sources provided by the government – which were largely attributable to news syndicated from BERNAMA. Second, although the traditional form of news reporting was still dominant in *MalaysiaKini* – which necessarily excluded contemporary elements such as features, opinions and commentary pieces – both news providers tended to eschew an approach to news writing using the typical inverted pyramid

format. The majority of the cited news sources were introduced late in the report, indicating the merging of news reporting with a feature style of writing.

The discourse analysis of the selected articles from *MalaysiaKini* further supports the findings of the quantitative analysis which showed its support for the opposition's viewpoints. Twelve articles produced by *MalaysiaKini* residential reporters were selected for textual analysis based on several key events before, during, and after the election that were covered by *MalaysiaKini*. The events are Anwar Ibrahim's campaign trail, a survey by the Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research, coverage of the transition to power if the opposition party were to win the election, coverage of the results of the election, and issues over Najib's statement that the poor performance of the ruling parties was due to the 'Chinese Tsunami'.

Analysis of the lexical structure of *MalaysiaKini* clearly showed that reports prepared by its in-house journalists relied heavily on direct quotations and indirect quotations of the sources of the opposition parties. There were two reports on political campaigns on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2015, both covering the campaign of the opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar's direct and indirect quotations dominated two of the reports. Although, representation of Anwar quotations in these reports contained fewer adjectives and used more neutral reporting verbs such as 'he said', there are parts of the reports that contain evaluative comments.

Paragraphs 1, 2 and 3 which paraphrased the Anwar statements using the verbs 'delivered' and 'urged', indicated 'how the writer intrudes the event via what amounts to an evaluative comment' (Barkho, 2007, p. 15) and somehow provided an authoritative stance and factual feel to the statements from the opposition leader. Notice the phrase '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 demonstrated that the *MalaysiaKini* discursive patterns were closer to the opposition viewpoints in their interpretation of events.

1. ... Anwar delivered a warning to his supporters not to be 'careless' (Anand, 2013a).
2. He urged everyone to check the status of their names on the electoral roll (Anand, 2013b).
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... (Anand, 2013a).
4. At the end of the *ceramah*, Anwar worked up the crowd by leading the cry of "*Reformasi*"... (Fadli, 2013).

The agenda of *Malaysiakini*'s coverage on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2015 was mainly about the claim that the Prime Minister's office was involved in transporting dubious voters to the Peninsula. Four articles reported on the issue. An article on the 2<sup>nd</sup> May carried Anwar Ibrahim statement that the opposition parties had evidence that more than

40,000 voters had been flown in by chartered flights, allegedly supported by the Prime Minister's office (Razak, 2013). Another report by *MalaysiaKini* balanced out the claim by carrying 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, he 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' (*MalaysiaKini*, 2013a). Notice that the usage of quote/unquote in 'friends of BN' and 'registered' are laden with expressive value and contain presupposition that the readers already know who the 'friends of BN' and the 'registered' voters are. The inclusion of 'quote/unquote', to position its use to demonstrate that these are the words of others, shows the writer's disagreement with them. A report on the 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2013 featured a statement by the opposition incumbent MP asking the Barisan National to prove that they were flying in legitimate voters and not illegitimate voters as claimed by Anwar Ibrahim. The fourth article featured a 'vox-populi' or interviews with those who took the chartered flight (Razak, 2013). Based on the direct and indirect quotations of the passengers on the flight, the report adopted positive framings towards opposition parties and 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 negative presuppositions and incorporates an 'implicit claim embedded within the explicit meaning of a text or utterance' (Richardson, 2007, p. 63). This negative meaning towards Barisan Nasional may have an ideological function in that the evocation of specific texts or textual series frame the reader's textual experience and background knowledge (Fairclough, 2001, 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.

*MalaysiaKini* used a more critical tone in their coverage of the ruling party and its leader (*MalaysiaKini*, 2013b). The reporting of the results of a survey by the Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research on 3 March 2013, best illustrates this. The report of the poll results opened with the lead '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* *IMalaysia (BRIM)*'.

*MalaysiaKini's* attitude when presenting the detrimental results of the polls on Barisan Nasional's chances of winning the election, was also reflected in the headline of its news. It was written as 'Najib's rating slide, BRIM not working', which shows the use of negative verbs towards the subject and, at the same time, upholds the results of the poll.

Paragraphs 1–5 further show the opposition’s indirect quotations in *MalaysiaKini*’s (Loone, 2013) report on 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’ (Barkho, 2007, 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 further attribution, shows the reporter’s support of Anwar’s stance and position.

1. 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 (Loone, 2013).
2. He also urged Malaysians not to fear (Loone, 2013).
3. ... he said in assurance (Loone, 2013).
4. He repeated his warning to the Election Commission ... (Loone, 2013).

*MalaysiaKini*’s reporting of the election results clearly showed a tone of ‘disapproval’. There were three news reports produced by *MalaysiaKini* on 6 May 2009, one day after the election results were announced. Two of the reports immediately opened with direct quotations and indirect quotations from the opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim. One of the reports opened with an indirect quote from Anwar Ibrahim stating that Pakatan Rakyat ‘refused to submit to the announced result [...] claiming electoral fraud and irregularities’ (Zakaria, 2013). This was followed by his direct quotation. The rest of the news was mainly based on direct and indirect quotations from Anwar. Another report, entitled ‘PKR chief to hold rally to protest electoral fraud’ (Anand, 2013b), opened with an indirect quotation from Anwar calling for a rally. In addition to featuring direct and indirect statements from Anwar Ibrahim regarding his claims of electoral fraud, the reporting also included background information that indirectly quoted statements from BERSIH, a coalition of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) aimed at reforming the current electoral system in Malaysia, which had ‘warned of electoral fraud’. The third report from *MalaysiaKini* featured statements from BERSIH’s co-chairperson, Ambiga, which mainly explained the process of setting up a people’s tribunal to investigate the extent of electoral fraud (Chie, 2013).

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have proved that *MalaysiaKini* lived up to its niche reputation for exposing citizens to competing constructions of political reality and challenging the political reality created by the ruling authorities through the mainstream media. It also gives voice to marginalised opinions from the opposition groups and the civil society groups and connects the political centre with the periphery (Giersdorf & Croissant, 2011; Pang, 2006). The findings of the textual

analysis, however, also show that in an opposite side of mainstream media, *MalaysiaKini* mainly upholds the voice of the opposition parties, namely Pakatan Rakyat.

This partial and one-sided reporting is in conflict with arguments that *MalaysiaKini* practices the important aspect of norms and values of independent journalism, namely objectivity, which expect its journalists to fairly represent each leading side in a political controversy and to report news without slanting or shaping its formulation in any way. It also brings into question the extent to which *MalaysiaKini* could become a platform in promoting a blueprint for democratic civic discourse in Malaysia (Steele, 2009).

Findings based on the quantitative analysis of *MalaysiaKini* was in line, to some extent, with arguments advanced by Johnston (2007) that online news tend to incorporate a more conversational and narrative approach to news, signifying a move away from the news writing format of the inverted pyramid. In many of the articles, the late citation of sources indicated a more interpretative style of news writing. This could also explain, as shown in textual analysis, why the journalists' voices of *MalaysiaKini* and their evaluative comments through the usage of verbs regularly appear in the reporting. The move towards interpretative style of reporting could also indicates the lack of "objectivity". This is because constructing texts based on an inverted pyramid format is seen as one of important elements that enable journalists to maintain a degree of objectivity (Tuchman, 1973).

Placing the study's findings into a wider perspective, the question remains as to whether the concept of journalistic objectivity, which was originally established based on the social functions of the objectivity norm in American journalism, is needed in the context of political communication in Malaysia and in the practice of online journalism as a whole. The Lippmann-espoused objectivity, which has become a part of the working vocabulary of journalists, was originally seated in the broader cultural movement of scientific naturalism (Streckfuss, 1990). In its original sense, 'objectivity' meant finding the truth through the use of rigorous scientific methodologies. Richard Streckfuss (1990) contends that such a conception of objectivity within the realm of journalistic practice was 'rigorous and difficult' (p. 982). As a result, objectivity in journalism has shrunk from a methodology needed to preserve democracy to a practical posture of day-to-day production that includes keeping journalists and their opinions out of their stories.

In addition, the emergence of online journalism itself has challenged conventional notions of professionalism. The professional ideals of objectivity have been seen as a barrier to contentious journalism (George, 2006, p. 179) which allows a more transgressive form of contention, such as reporting on controversial issues, especially those touching on political economy or ethnic politics. The professional ideals of disinterestedness in objectivity would make journalism elitist and exclusive rather than inclusive (Zelizer, 2009).

Brian McNair further explains that one of the normative expectations of political journalism in a democracy is for journalists to take a position as advocate or champion of particular political positions. In this way, journalism is persuading the public to support a particular view but still providing factual accuracy in reporting. Although it appears contradictory with the notion of objectivity, which expect its journalists to fairly represent each leading side in a political controversy and to report news without slanting or shaping its formulation in any way (Schudson, 2001), McNair (2006) argues that, base on the features of political journalism in a democracy, it is still possible to separate fact from opinion. This analysis has shown that although *MalaysiaKini* mainly represented the voice of the opposition group, it did not give opinionated coverage. The online news provider still works in the context of the separation of fact and opinion, which is a structural feature of political journalism in a democracy. Since *MalaysiaKini* have a clear stance on issues such as human rights and a free press, which are being advocated by the opposition parties, it naturally upholds the views of these groups.

Chris Atton (2009) further argues that the 'regime of objectivity' which is seen as the normative ideal of professionalised journalism, emphasises the factual nature of news (p. 272). However, the ideal of reporting entirely objectively without any emotion and bias is impossible. The normative ideal of alternative journalism, which *MalaysiaKini* is part of, argues the opposite: that reporting is always bound up with personal, professional, and institutional values and that it is, therefore, never possible to separate facts from values. This leads to change in the epistemology of journalistic practice where instead of looking for the truth, different forms of knowledge may be produced which present different and multiple versions of 'reality'. These multiple versions demonstrate the social construction of news that, according to Alton (2009), means there is no master narrative or single interpretation of events. In the scenario of the Malaysian media, the findings of this study further support the argument that the news landscape, where mainstream and online news players compete side-by-side in the news markets, creates the environment for a multiplicity of ideas and a plurality of news reporting.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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