

Role of Traditional and Online Media in the 12th General Election, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia recently concluded its 12th General Election in March 2008. The ruling coalition, National Front (*Barisan Nasional*) has been in power for the past 50 years, since independence in 1957. However this election proved to be a 'political tsunami' as the party lost its two-thirds majority in Parliament as well as lost its control in five out of the thirteen states in the country to the Opposition, People's Alliance (*Pakatan Rakyat*), something unprecedented in the history of political development in Malaysia. This study compares the role of the mainstream media against the online media. Online media though in existence in Malaysia since the early 1990s came to light in 1998 after the arrest and prosecution of former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim for corruption and sexual misconduct charges. Currently Anwar Ibrahim is the Adviser to the People's Alliance. Mainstream media such as *The Star* newspaper will be compared alongside online media, *Malaysiakini*, the country's first commercial online newspaper through a content analysis. A comparative study of the news articles of both the media throughout the campaign period (24 February – 7 March 2008) will be studied. Utilising the theoretical framework of Agenda Setting, *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* will be tested to see the extent of the dominant role played by the Agenda Setting theory in deciding the articles that are published.

Keywords: Agenda Setting, General Election, online media, traditional media

1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's 12th General Election held on 8 March 2008 resulted in an unprecedented setback for the ruling National Front (*Barisan Nasional*) coalition which has been in power since independence in 1957. Media coverage of the recent 12th General Election has been extensive ranging from mainstream media to online media. The varied representations of the General Election have undoubtedly created certain impressions in the minds of the mass media audience. This article compares the role of the mainstream media against the online media. Online media is popularly held to have influenced the results of this election. While mainstream media has existed since the colonial administration, online media is still rather new as it came about in the 1990s. However, the latter came to light in 1998 after the arrest and prosecution of former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim for corruption and sexual misconduct charges. Anwar Ibrahim is currently the Adviser to the People's Alliance (*Pakatan Rakyat*). News articles in the mainstream media, such as *The Star* newspaper will be

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compared alongside online media, *Malaysiakini*, the country's first commercial online newspaper.

2. BACKGROUND

The sections that follow present a background to the study so that the issues discussed are seen in context.

2.1 Recent General Elections in Malaysia

Prior to the 12th General Election, the 11th General Election, 2004 took place in a completely different atmosphere. In fact it was by large the most successful outing for the ruling coalition which won 198 seats, leaving the opposition far behind with only 21 seats. With the authoritarian Mahathir finally calling it a day after 22 years in power, Anwar still in prison and a new leader in charge, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi with his 'Mr. Clean' persona, the National Front had a thumping majority in this election. The 2004 campaign was filled with promises of ending corruption, increased transparency, and, most important, better governance. Malaysians embraced his leadership, giving him a record mandate. But the mandate was not just about Abdullah the man, it was also about issues that he used to get himself and the National Front elected.

The 10th General Election on 29 November 1999 was arguably the most closely fought in Malaysia. It came in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which had increasingly revealed the differences between the then Prime Minister Mahathir and his Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (Wong, 2004). In September 1998, Mahathir sacked Anwar as he was considered to be unfit because he had allegedly engaged in homosexual activities and abused his position in government. (Johnson, 1998 cited in Wong, 2004). Anwar was later sentenced to jail for six years and his supporters formed a political party, the National Justice Party (*Parti Keadilan Nasional*). Thus the 1999 election was held in the midst of a highly charged political atmosphere. However, the election returned the National Front to power once again with a two-thirds majority (Shaari *et al.*, 2005). In 2003, the National Justice Party merged with Malaysian People's Party and underwent a name change to People's Justice Party (*Pakatan Keadilan Rakyat*).

The 12th General Elections held on March 8, 2008 resulted in an unprecedented setback for the ruling coalition with the Opposition gaining a milestone momentous victory while the National Front only managed to obtain 140 out of the 222 parliamentary seats, slightly more than half the parliamentary seats in Peninsular Malaysia (51.5%). The People's Alliance obtained 82 seats (Election 2008). This is the only election besides the one in 1969 where the National Front failed to capture the two-thirds majority. The four 'work with me' years under Abdullah did not reward the Malay and non-Malay voters with promised reforms. Voters voted against Abdullah's inability to deliver the promises he made in 2004.

2.2 Ownership of Media and Media Laws in Malaysia

The mainstream media in Malaysia has been in existence since the British Colonial administration. In print media, major newspapers include three English language dailies, two Malay language dailies, five Chinese language dailies and two Tamil dailies (Kenyon

and Marjoribanks, 2007). While there are numerous media organisations in Malaysia, once their controlling interest is identified, it becomes evident that media ownership is highly concentrated, with the government being a major stakeholder. Malaysia's news media is largely owned or indirectly controlled by the 14 political parties which constitute the ruling National Front (Kenyon and Marjoribanks, 2007). Beyond issues of ownership, a range of legal measures have restrained media in Malaysia, linked to the history of British colonialism, in which the British colonial administration used legal measures such as licensing and censorship to contain media during the communist insurgency period (Anuar, 2000; Khattab, 2004). These legal measures include the Official Secrets Act 1972, Broadcasting Act 1988 and The Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 (PPPA) (Brown, 2005; Khattab, 2004). The PPPA imposes a number of restraints in relation to these activities, and prescribes strong penalties for their breach, including jail sentences. The PPPA gives "the home minister 'absolute discretion' in awarding and revoking permits, and to disallow any judicial review of the process." (Brown 2005: 41). According to Professor Andrew Harding, the restrictions "are considerable enough to make any politician, journalist, academic, publisher, or indeed any citizen, to think twice before placing any controversial views in the public domain" (Tang 2005: 6).

Steven Gan, the co-founder of Malaysia's highly successful online publication *Malaysiakini* remarked cynically in 2002: "Malaysia is a democracy. We have freedom of speech, but no freedom after speech. There is freedom of movement, but no freedom of assembly. We have a plethora of publications but we don't have a free press" (cited in Tang 2005: 6). The depressing picture painted by Harding and Gan have changed slightly for the better in recent times with online media starting to compete with mainstream media in playing a significant role in disseminating information to the public.

2.3 The Role of Mainstream and Online Media in Malaysia

In Malaysia, mainstream media focuses primarily on positive stories for the benefit of the political elite (Anuar 2000: 184). This outcome appears to be related, in part, to newsroom culture in Malaysia, where close links between political leaders, editors and publishers make it difficult for journalists to investigate political leaders (Anuar, 2005). Open-minded journalists did not have a chance to bring their message to the people because of the well-honed and vigilant apparatus of the government.

In Malaysia's fettered democracy (Netto, 2002), mainstream media coverage of government policies is usually uncritical, while political opponents face limited reporting, particularly over calls for political reform. While it is evident that there are strong limitations on media in Malaysia, it is also important to recognise that dynamic but contested elements have emerged more recently (Brown, 2005). The expansion in civil society organisations particularly since the 1980s indicate a changing attitude in Malaysian society in response to their socio-political needs and responsibilities that relies more and more on collective ideas and actions. The media in Malaysia are confronted by the possibilities for change as civil society organisations increasingly mobilise new media technologies to seek information.

Globalisation and global awareness has resulted in escalating growth of the internet. This has created a surge in space for news and political discourse that overrides geography and increases opportunities for online media. Internet access was first introduced in 1996 in

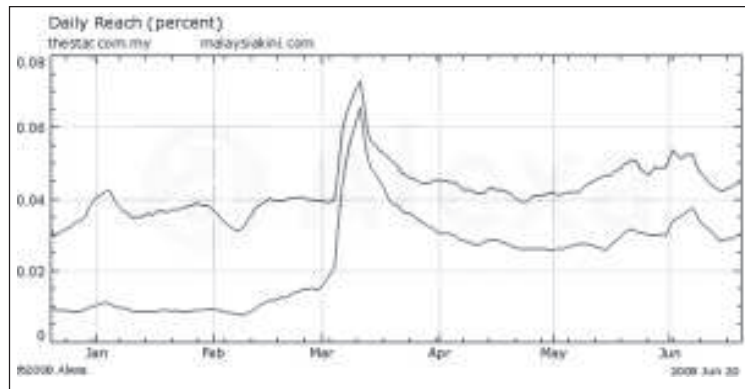


Figure 1. Comparison of readership between *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* (January – June 2008)

Source : <http://www.alexa.com> (accesses on 20 th July 2008)

Malaysia (Brown, 2005). The emergence and development of the Reformation (*Reformasi*) movement from 1998 onwards became crucially linked with online media. The Reformation movement which exploded onto the political scene in 1998 realised the government's worst fears about the Internet. A myriad of web sites sprang up supporting Anwar and his newly adopted cause of Reformation. Over time, the initial barrage of cyber-Reformation subsided, but that had given birth to vibrant alternative media on the Internet, including the online newspaper *Malaysiakini*. *Malaysiakini* was set up in 1999 as Malaysia's first commercial Internet newspaper. When Malaysians began comparing the information from mainstream media with the Internet "many Malaysians for the first time felt they had been misled and began to lose faith in the official media" (Rahim Abdul Samad, 2001: 7). Ostensibly *Malaysiakini*, an independent publication, as the editor admits is "pro-opposition by default" (Brown, 2005: 47). Nonetheless, the influence of the web is such that in 2001, Asiaweek magazine placed *Malaysiakini* and its editors at number 18 in its "Power 50" list of influential 'communicators' across all of Asia (Brown 2005: 47). *Malaysiakini* has claimed credit, among other things, for helping to disclose irregularities in mainstream media reporting. The emerging anecdotal lore of the impact of alternative media has led some to suggest that the online media will supplant the work and value of traditional journalists from the main stream media (Resse *et al.*, 2007).

The role of the media is most evident in the run-up to any election. The 12th General Election proved to be a watershed in the development of media in Malaysia. This was largely due to the role played by the online media. While the mainstream media's role has been evident in every election, the role of online media proved to be a turning point in the recent 12th General Election. The online media became very popular, at times equating the popularity of the mainstream media (*Figure 1*). There seemed to be an increased disillusionment with the mainstream media that was perceived as echoing the voice of the

government, not giving a balanced coverage of issues, and ignoring the opposition's point of view. As online media was accessible to a large segment of the population, it served as a new medium of information. This is of course not to suggest that other forms of campaigning did not make a mark. Thus, even though it had little coverage in the mainstream media, the opposition effectively and essentially relied on online media to counter the National Front onslaught and set its own agenda. While the online media was more influential than in the past elections, National Front's control of the mainstream media remained a critical factor in ensuring its continued success.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study uses content analysis (Holsti, 1969) as a method of investigation. Drawing from this form of analysis, the data is subjected to a detailed analysis to tease out the underlying issues presented. Patterns in the choice of strategies employed to present issues raised by the political parties during the campaign period are clearly identified through content analysis. As defined by Holsti and Stone (1969), content analysis is any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages (Holsti, 1969, cited in Jackson, 2003). According to Krippendorff (2004), content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context (Neuendorf, 2002).

Content analysis is a technique of gathering and analysing the content of text (Neuman, 2003). The content refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or any messages that can be communicated (Neuman, 2003). A number of analysis attempts to relate certain characteristics of the score of a given body of message content to the characteristics of the messages that are produced. This form is used in many studies that test hypotheses of form (Wimmer and Dominick, 2003). Fundamentally, the technique involves analysing the content and hence evaluating the content of communication (Jackson, 2003).

For this paper a latent coding method is used (also called semantic analysis). Here the underlying implicit meaning in the content will be analysed (Babbie, 2004). The coding system is based on the issues mentioned below to guide the interpretation of the text. This method is best used for tapping underlying meaning of communication because people communicate meaning in many implicit ways that depend on content, and not just in specific words (Neuman, 2003). This paper attempts to analyse the strategies used by *The Star* (main stream media) and *Malaysiakini* (online media) to present the issues raised by the various political parties during the campaign period of the 12th General Elections in March 2008.

The aim of this study is to bring to light how the media uses discursive strategies to portray political parties' campaign messages. The period of analysis is from 24 February 2008 to 8 March 2008, a 13-day campaign period. The local daily, *The Star* has been selected because it has the largest circulation in terms of local English dailies in Malaysia. A total of 380 news articles from *The Star* were analysed. *Malaysiakini*, was chosen as the online newspaper as it offered free services during the entire campaign period, thus making it accessible to everyone. A total of 331 news articles from *Malaysiakini* were analysed.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Utilising the theoretical framework of Agenda Setting, two mainstream papers, *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* were tested to see the extent of the dominant role played by the agenda setting theory in deciding the articles that are published. The theoretical framework provided by the agenda setting hypothesis serves as the basis for discussion against the background of the role of the media, and in this case for both the print media and online media.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) coined the term 'Agenda Setting'. It refers to the power to structure issues in the media in such a way that people think about what they are told, but at no level do they think what they are told. Crossberg *et al.* (1998) stated that the idea behind agenda setting is quite simple: The media over time, by featuring some issues more prominently and some issues less prominently and still other issues not at all, gives us a sense of what issues are important or the salience of the issues, namely the amount of political or public importance a particular issue possesses. In other words it refers to the media's capability, through repeated news coverage of raising the importance of an issue in the public's mind (Severin and Tankard 2001, cited in Yuksel, 2003: 219). This theory further supports a statement made by Cohen (1963) (cited in David and Pavlik, 2003) that the news media may not directly affect how the public think about political matters, but they do affect the subjects that people think about. In short, they set the agenda for those political matters that people consider important (Severin and Tankard, 1997 cited in David and Pavlik, 2003). Very aptly, as stated by Cohen (1963: 13) "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about." Evidence suggests that a correspondence exists between the orders of significance attached to these issues by the public (Trenaman and McQuail, 1995 cited in Yuksel, 2003).

5. DATA ANALYSIS - THE STAR

On an analysis of *The Star*, it was apparent that the Malaysian government works on a 'Strict Father' mode (Lakoff, 1995). This is to show that the Government acts as the absolute

Table 1. *The Star* -Wholesome, clean and family-orientated

Category	Headlines	Date
Wholesome, clean and family- orientated	Don't badmouth opponents, Puteri Umno candidates told	25/2
	Shahrizat lends polls rival a helping hand	25/2
	Dropped <i>Barisan</i> leaders rally behind Rahman in Kota Belud	27/2
	Five-minute phone call to child keeps Tiger's son going	29/2
	Campaigning as a family	29/2
	Saripah stands by her hubby	29/2
	Mawi and Betty add star power to BN campaign	4/3
	D.J. Dave is a true friend in need	5/3
	Awang Adek: Mum would have been proud	6/3
	500 Klang Valley cabbies rev up <i>Barisan</i>	7/3

head of the country and makes decisions that are good for them. Articles analysed can be seen in Table 1.

5.1 Wholesome, Clean and Family Orientated Image

It is apparent from an analysis of the articles in Table 1 that *The Star* is used as a political tool by members of the ruling government to portray a wholesome squeaky clean image of its contestants. Through the ownership of the media, the government is able to impose its power in this manner. This analysis shows that the government attempts to employ Lakoff's 'Strict Father' (1995) mode in achieving this image. The government attempts to weave into the hearts of the voting public by displaying its strength in showing care and commitment. This is achieved by showing strong support from (i) family and constituents, (ii) peers and opponents, and (iii) ground support.

5.1.1 Family and Constituents

Evidence can be seen that the National Front leaders wish to be seen as having strong family values. This can be seen in "Campaigning as a family" whereby the mother, father and kids are all on ground to render support to the candidate, "Five-minute phone call to child keeps Tiger's son going" shows how the candidate combats stress by getting a booster in the form of talking to his son, "Saripah stands by her hubby" where the wife is a pillar of strength for the husband, "Awang Adek: Mum would have been proud" illustrates the candidate's love for his mother. Meanwhile it is also apparent that the articles portray the National Front leaders as having strong grassroots support; *The Star* in the article "Caring constituents come to Liew's aid with traditional remedies" reflect how their constituents care about their leaders and want the best for their leaders and in "Volunteers help out," constituents give good endorsement on their performance with rare reviews.

The Barisan Nasional leaders have been projected in *The Star* as leaders who have a strong sense of family values and traditional cultural values. They have clear priorities, are resilient and committed to their job **portfoli'??** mind, depicting very good views of the Barisan candidates.

5.1.2 Peers and Opponents

The articles in *The Star* portray the National Front as a close-knit party whereby ex-Members of Parliament, ex-ministers, current leaders irrespective of their ranking are always there to extend a helping hand, joining the fray to campaign for the candidate. This portrays the solidarity within the party as being strong and that the party comes first. The National Front leaders are advocated as leaders that sincerely believe in a fair contest and respectful of their fellow contestants. They would even go as far as extending their hand to help their opponents as seen in the articles "Shahrizat lends polls rival a helping hand" where she helps the opponent to fill in his nomination forms, "Don't badmouth opponents Puteri Umno candidates told" where candidates are reminded that this is a fair election and told to be mindful of what they say, "Dropped Barisan leaders rally behind Rahman in Kota Belud," expresses how ex-candidates have put party interest before their personal interest. The agenda here appears to be that the leaders are portrayed as moral beings and are thus good examples for peers and opponents alike.

Table 2. The Star -Your race, gender issues and constituency woes

Category	Headlines	Date
Race, gender and constituency woes	Three dialysis machines for centre	26/2
	Grants for NGOs, schools and temples	26/2
	Samy: Indians can count on MIC	27/2
	Army to have recruitment ads in Chinese media	1/3
	Azalina: BN knows women are capable	1/3
	Boost for Tamil schools Puchong	1/3
	Ng: Good government like a good wife	1/3
	BN women who make history	1/3
	RM400,000 for associations, NGOs(Chinese)	2/3
	Abdullah: We will solve woes faced by Indians	3/3
	Preserve your voice in Cabinet, says Chan	3/3
	Koh speaks to Hock Nan, Chang Yeow and Kah Choon on Penang CM's post	3/3
	Help for Indians in Bukit Bintang	4/3
	MCA is the future of Kinta Valley, says Ka Chuan	5/3
	Free tuition classes	5/3
	Vote MIC, Indians told	6/3
	Who will be the loser?	6/3
	A burning desire to serve society	7/3
	Vote for own interest, Chinese told	7/3
	Vote for a voice in the Government, says Abdullah.	7/3

5.1.3 Ground Support

In an attempt to further enunciate the popularity of the National Front candidates, *The Star* sets the platform in revealing how the stars in the music industry, filmmakers, singers, motivational speakers, cab drivers and laymen like roti canai sellers all seem to express confidence in the National Front candidates. This can be seen in “D.J. Dave is a true friend in need” whereby D.J. Dave went on a campaign trail for the National Front candidates who he believes are good candidates, “Mawi and Betty add star power to BN campaign” mentions how the ‘best’ in the industry are there to render their support, “500 Klang Valley cabbies rev up Barisan” display cab drives who pledge their support and are willing to offer their services on polling day. Thus the impression drawn is that the National Front has shown a great track record at ground level. The articles have been well written to conjure in the mind of the readers that the great support given by the voters indicate that National Front leaders are honest and committed wholeheartedly to the cause of providing for the people. Thus the agenda setting by *The Star* attempts to create salience in the eyes of the citizens that they should count their blessings and be thankful for what the Government has implemented to help the country’s economic growth and social standing.

5.2 *Race, Gender and Constituency Woes*

From an analysis of articles in Table 2, it is apparent that *The Star* is used again as a political ploy by the ruling coalition to portray the National Front as a party that caters to the needs of its voters covering a spectrum of issues, be it the needs of the constituency, race, gender issues or deciding the new Chief Minister of Penang. Hence, the National Front has shown care in aspects of (i) race, (ii) gender, and (iii) constituency woes.

5.2.1 *Race*

The ruling government portrays itself as the only one that will address the needs of the various races in this country. Also, it is not possible to ignore minorities during the elections as they could serve as king makers. Therefore the agenda set forth was one to resolve the issue of race which has been bothering minorities for sometime now.

a. *“Look what Barisan National has done for you”*

As a “Strict Father”, National Front provides the support and protection. The public is often reminded of what the government had done for them. These exhortations “Boost for Tamil schools Puchong” where the government makes monetary allocations for the Indian school children; “RM400,000 for associations, NGOs” mentions that Chinese NGOs will benefit from this fund; “Help for Indians in Bukit Bintang” shows that even in a predominant Chinese area, the government has not forgotten the minority Indians; “Army to have recruitment ads in Chinese media” elaborates the sensitivity of the government to place adverts in the Chinese medium so as to draw the Chinese readers’ attention. Hence these proclamations in *The Star* impress upon the voters that they have not been forgotten and indirectly attempt to put pressure on voters that it is now time for them to accept that the ruling party has gone to great lengths for them. Thus the need to vote National Front is an imperative.

b. *You must trust us*

From the analyses of the articles in *The Star*, it is evident that the National Front has been painted as a testimony of reliability and dependability and as such it is vital that the voters must trust and believe in the National Front. In its attempt to sway the support, *The Star* using a host of cues, pressures the voters that they need to trust the National Front. Articles such as “Samy: Indians can count on MIC” where the Indians have been told that MIC will be the only vehicle that will serve their needs; “MCA is the future of Kinta Valley says Ka Chuan” mentions that Chinese needs can only be wrestled by MCA; “A burning desire to serve society,” where the candidate is ever willing to serve the needs of his constituents; “Abdullah: We will solve woes faced by Indians” where the Prime Minister assures that Indian woes will be looked after. It is clear *The Star* was using the Prime Minister who is the main caretaker of the National Front to further enunciate this point.

c. *“You must vote for Barisan National”*

Using the ownership in media to its advantage, the National Front impresses upon the masses the significance of voting for the National Front. This message was very clearly

delivered by instilling fear in the voters. Voters were urged to rally behind the National Front or risk losing their racial representation. Strong, aggressive toned statements are reported.

Articles such as “Preserve your voice in Cabinet, says Chan” urges the East Malaysians to vote National Front who is the only one that will look after their needs; “Vote for own interest, Chinese told” illustrates that the Chinese must vote for National Front to ensure their rights are protected. It is evident that *The Star* used strong statements to warn the Chinese that they will ultimately be punishing themselves and that they should not forget that if DAP wins, they would be the biggest loser and furthermore, they owe their success to the ruling government. There was no shortage of harsh statements to induce fear, whereby the Prime Minister reminded the Chinese that if they gave their vote to DAP, they will end up not having any representation in the Government; thus with no representation in the Cabinet, their requests will never be heard.

“Vote MIC, Indians told” accords a similar treatment to the Indian community whereby they too are reminded that the DAP cannot do anything for them and if the National Front loses, there will be no one to help them. Denying votes for MIC candidates in the elections would only be denying the community a voice, thus the Indians will regret their impulsive decisions. Hence a more coercive style of reporting is seen in *The Star*. In “Vote for a voice in the Government, says Abdullah” mentions that only the National Front can look after the interest of all races. In “Who will be the loser?” it is articulated that the voters will be the loser if they do not vote National Front. It is evident that as the elections drew nearer, the tone of campaigning was becoming more aggressive and *The Star* was using its machinery to the maximum to set the agenda for the public’s attention.

5.2.2 Gender

The articles in *The Star* portray women’s roles, influence and participation as an important element for the ruling coalition. Articles such as “BN women who make history” show that National Front is ready for women power; “Azalina: BN knows women are capable” indicates that the National Front has confidence in its women leaders; “Ng: Good government like a good wife” mentions that women have been likened to good wives. Hence, when you have a good wife you need not seek another one. Instead you hold steadfast and continue to support her through thick and thin. On the contrary, this sexist statement that stereotypes women as home makers could have been a double-edged sword that made the voters shun away from the National Front.

5.2.3 Constituency Woes

National Front candidates have been projected by *The Star* as ones who are highly dedicated and committed to their constituent issues and woes. The government projects an image to show the constituents as part of the family and thus fulfills the responsibility trusted onto the parent. In order to illustrate and prove to constituents that they are men of their words, articles often portray Members of Parliament as men who are poised for action. In “Three

Table 3. *The Star* - Report Card: achievements and blue print for a new future

Category	Headlines	Date
Report Card	Prudent housekeeping helps pay for subsidies to keep prices stable	26/2
	Incumbent expects thumping victory for Barisan	28/2
	Don't sacrifice 50 years of work. Says Johor MB	29/2
	Give Barisan mandate to continue good work	5/3
	Najib: No oil palm miracle DPM: Success due to BN's vision :	7/3
	Hisham: Winning is just the beginning	8/3

dialysis machines for centre,” the National Front candidate helps obtain dialysis machines; in “Grants for NGOs, schools and temples,” the candidate ensures that the constituents are well looked after; in “Free tuition classes,” the candidate helps to provide tuition classes for its students in that area; in “Koh speaks to Hock Nan, Chang Yeow and Kah Choon on Penang CM’s post” (something missing???) *The Star* by zooming into performance and the efforts rendered by the candidates attempts to paint an excellent picture of what the National Front candidates have done and will be doing for the constituents, thus setting the agenda in the readers mind.

5.3. Report Card – Achievements and Blue Print for a New Future

In analysing the articles in Table 3, it is evident that *The Star* is used as a propaganda tool of the ruling coalition. The National Front’s report card is displayed ostentatiously by *The Star* to impress voters on its plans. Besides, once again the National Front’s candidates’ alluring character profile is flaunted as well as the over-riding confidence displayed by the candidates.

In portraying the National Front’s impressive track record, *The Star* prints articles such as “Prudent housekeeping helps pay for subsidies to keep prices stable,” signaling that it was the National Front strategy that helped the state keep petrol prices down; “Don’t sacrifice 50 years of work, says Johor MB” expressing the 50 years of testimony, thus denying National Front the vote signifies sacrificing fifty years of success down the road; “Najib: No oil palm miracle DPM: success due to BN’s vision” elaborates that National Front has a concrete list of plans on how to govern the country with the best interest of the voters in mind; “Hisham: Winning is just the beginning” where the leader is convinced that National Front will win; “Incumbent expects thumping victory for Barisan,” again portraying nothing but victory is to be expected. The articles portray a host of cues about the salience of the National Front report card and confidence and with continuous repetition of articles over a period of time, the agenda sets the priorities of the voters into believing that voting the National Front is the only choice.

However, it is evident at times that the articles in *The Star* are written in a manner that seems to reflect arrogance and condescending in the way it treats the opposition; this could provide the backlash in its quest to convince the voters as to why they should vote

Table 4. *The Star* - Opposition's voices and weakness

Category	Headlines	Date
Opposition	DAP launches an eight-point manifesto	25/2
A. Voices (In support of / favouring)		
B. Opposition weakness – a house not in order		
	Hadi snubs his BN opponent	25/2
	Muhyiddin: Opposition clueless on economy	27/2
	Posters taken down, claims DAP	1/3
	Keng Yaik: DAP playing with fire by teaming up with PKR	2/3
	Guan Eng in Kota Melaka, but where's the candidate?.	2/3
	'Disaster if Anwar is PM'	4/3
	Don't give votes to cheats, urges Ong	6/3
	140 PAS members quit party to join Umno	6/3
	Muhyiddin: Anwar has tarnished Malaysia's good name.	7/3
	Election manifestos as WMD.	7/3
	PKR and DAP will form next Government, say Anwar and Kit Siang	7/3

for the National Front. In "Give Barisan a mandate to continue good work," *The Star* attempts to suggest to the readers that even the blind could feel the hustle and bustle of National Front's good work, thus implying one must vote for National Front. In fact, the over-confident reporting style by *The Star* could be interpreted negatively as being boastful and egoistic by the readers.

5.4. *Opposition – Voices and Weaknesses*

From an analysis of the articles in Table 4, it is evident that *The Star* is being used to paint a negative picture of the opposition parties. The opposition parties were given little coverage, with only a small section of the articles painting them in a positive light while a large number of articles reported them in a negative light. This was seen in (i) voices (in support of) and (ii) opposition – a house not in order

5.4.1. *Voices (In support of)*

The articles in *The Star* attempt to depict that the opposition parties do have a manifesto and the leaders are working hard to garner support. Yet there were instances that they are being victimised. The manner in which these articles are discussed does not impress the voter as they are at surface level and do not reflect depth and analysis. Articles such as "DAP launches an eight-point manifesto" explains DAP's manifesto; "PKR and DAP will form next Government, say Anwar and Kit Siang" where both the Opposition leaders elaborate on how they will wrestle power from the National Front; "Posters taken down,

claims DAP” on how the Opposition has a tough time getting the elections campaign going; Admittedly, while there is an attempt to give the Opposition coverage, the reporting approach used is far from desirable. Except for a few signatory articles as seen above most of them touch on trivial issues.

5.4.2 *Opposition (Weakness) - a House not in Order*

Evidence can be drawn that *The Star* portrays the opposition parties as weak, inexperienced, have a fair number of internal problems and making it clear that National Front is the only preferred choice. This is accomplished by showing (a) weak and lack of credibility amongst its leaders and (b) the Anwar Ibrahim factor.

a. *Weak and lack of credibility amongst its leaders*

The National Front, using *The Star* as a political media instrument, has depicted the opposition as incompetent. Articles such as “Hadi snubs his BN opponent” whereby the opposition leaders fails to greet the National Front candidate; “Muhyiddin: opposition clueless on economy” mentions that the opposition knows nothing on how the country’s economy is run; “Don’t give votes to cheats, urges Ong” implying that the oppositions are a group of cheaters; “Guan Eng in Kota Melaka, but where’s the candidate?” reflecting that the opposition has not got its house in order; “140 PAS members quit party to join Umno” mentions that even its own members have lost faith in the party; “Election manifestos as ‘Weapons of Mass Deception’” illustrate that the opposition’s manifesto is a sham. Thus *The Star* exhorts the readers that the opposition can do nothing right and hence is of no use to vote them, thus setting the agenda in the readers mind.

b. *The Anwar Ibrahim factor*

This is perhaps the strongest and most influential factor in the National Front propaganda against the opposition. The articles that portray Anwar Ibrahim speak with a great deal of vehemence. The message is clear that he is a chameleon who changes colour depending on the type of audience he faces, certainly untrustworthy and unreliable. It is also evident that in the last four days of the campaigning, there is a swell and urgency in anti-Anwar reporting. Articles such as “Keng Yaik: DAP playing with fire by teaming up with PKR,” and “Disaster if Anwar is PM” mentions that the country will be ruined if Anwar becomes prime minister; “Muhyiddin : Anwar has tarnished Malaysia’s good name” illustrates that Anwar has created a bad image for Malaysia. The agenda setting by *The Star* is blatantly displayed as there is a continuous influx of anti-Anwar reporting, a clear intention of smearing his name.

6. MALAYSIAKINI

Since its launch on November 20th, 1999, the *Malaysiakini* website has become the leading source of independent news and views on Malaysia. It currently attracts over “50,000 visits a day and over three million page views a month”(Kenyon and Marjoribanks, 2007 : 8). Its mission is to inform the Malaysian public of the latest and critical issues in an independent and fair manner, carrying news items often neglected or censored by the mainstream media,

Table 5. *Malaysiakini* : Bread and butter ‘hot and critical’ issues

Category	Headlines	Date
Bread and Butter	Inflation likely to rise, warns Bank Negara	25/2
	Kapar will vote for lower prices	28/2
	Why vote for good men?	1/3
	Bersih decries postal vote fraud	2/3
	Oil profits cannot be used to keep fuel prices low	3/3
	Winning over urban votes in Klang Valley	3/3
	Vote opposition , Hindraf tells supporters	3/3
	70% toll hike slated for Penang Bridge	4/3
	‘Silicon Valley’ a hotbed for voters	5/3
	Refurbish disused flats for low income groups	6/3
	It’s time for OUR say now	7/3
	Cut the loose fat, vicious wolf	7/3

thereby challenging the views produced by the government-dominated mainstream media. Unlike the majority of the print and broadcast media, *Malaysiakini* is not owned by any political party, nor does it require annual licensing from the Home Minister. It is owned and operated by Mkini Dotcom Sdn Bhd. (www.Malaysiakini.com.my). All editorial decisions are taken by *Malaysiakini* editors based on *Malaysiakini*’s editorial policy. In line with *Malaysiakini*’s aim, it is quite clear that this online media’s main purpose in the 12th General Election is to fill in the gap left by the main stream media as well as to give the underdog candidates coverage which has been very much neglected by the main stream media, hence an unbiased view for the voters. A majority of the issues voices raised is thus pro-opposition. Access to *Malaysiakini* was offered free for the entire campaign period.

6.1 Bread and Butter/‘Hot and Critical’ Issues

In articulating the issues during the campaign period, *Malaysiakini* has played a pivotal role in addressing bread and butter issues as well as ‘hot’ issues that are very close to the voter’s heart.(Table 5). From an analysis of *Malaysiakini* articles, it is apparent the opposition is portrayed using Lakoff “Nurturant Father’s (Lakoff, 1995) mode. The opposition is depicted as one who cares and protects the children from external danger, and in this aspect, to ward off and warn them of the government’s lack of credibility and misdeeds.

6.1.1 Bread and Butter Issues

An analysis of the articles shows that *Malaysiakini* has used the current economic situation to its advantage. By portraying the opposition as extremely concerned about bread and butter issues and how the voters will weather these issues, it exhorts the readers into believing that the opposition is far more credible, accountable and reliable. The numerous calls by the opposition leaders to the government’s lack of responsibility and transparency

as seen in *Malaysiakini* further strengthens the argument that the opposition has credible leaders, thus ostentatiously showing the weakness in the current government leaders and system. Articles clearly call on voters to consider the failure of the National Front government in addressing these issues. Articles such as “Kapar will vote for lower prices” whereby the constituents show their dismay by mentioning that the government has not done enough to address their grouses when it came to bread and butter issues; “Inflation likely to rise, warns Bank Negara” articulates how inflation is going to hit us; “Oil profits cannot be used to keep fuel prices low” mentions that even the oil profits will not be able to sustain the current fuel prices; “70% toll hike slated for Penang Bridge” discusses how the public will weather the toll hike; “Refurbish disused flats for low income groups” urges the government to convert disused flats for low income groups. While the style of reporting is informative, a more development journalism method is applied whereby the reporter does not just report but probes the issues itself and gets the feedback from the ground on what the bread and butter issues are. *Malaysiakini*, by choosing to highlight these issues, attempts to use the power of the media in such a way that people start thinking about these issues and consequently vote for the opposition.

6.1.2 Vote wisely

Malaysiakini's readers are urged to know their candidates well and to delve into their credibility. The voters have been pressed, in fact many a times into swaying against the National Front candidates This is done by demeaning the National Front candidates. Articles such as “Winning over urban votes in Klang Valley” urges the urban voters to ponder on why BN has not fulfilled its promises and that its candidates are frustrated, as the long campaign has shown cracks in the BN machinery and while the opposition has used this period to get its message out in the urban areas more effectively; “Silicon Valley’ a hotbed for voter dissent” reveals a voter’s comment that life is tough, yet while the layman suffers, the politicians are just filling their pockets instead of taking care of the welfare of the people, that the Government leaders are not as clean as portrayed. The voter goes on further to add that if you are a member of the ruling party, you get all the business. Thus *Matlaysiakini* again exhorts the voters to think wisely about whom they want to vote for.

Besides, *Malaysiakini* has also used its reader’s testimonies to advocate and add credibility to its stand. In “It’s time for OUR say now,” the reader illustrates that “all my life I have voted BN, so have my parents, brothers and sisters, but *maybe* this time, I’ll make a change.” The reader continues to say many Malaysians know in their hearts that it is time for a change. It is perhaps the fear perpetuated by the entrenched powers that prevent us from making that final leap and placing the cross where our hearts truly lie. The reader depicts the arrogance of the politicians who have been sitting on their warm and comfortable seats far too long. The voter implores the readers to wake up and pinch ourselves to realise that the era is long overdue for these ‘rotten eggs’ must go with the garbage trucks to the dump-ground. In “Why vote for good men?”, strong damaging statements by the readers are that good men are powerless to act based on their own conscience as long as they are part of National Front. In “Cut loose the fat, vicious wolf,” the writer writes about “whether we continue to feed our fat and vicious wolf for sentimental reasons or should we cut back

Table 6. *Malaysiakini* – Portrayal of National Front

Category	Headlines	Date
Portrayal of National Front	PM: Stop protesting, my decision's is final	24/2
	Nga: MCA turning into Ong dynasty	24/2
	BN manifesto: Security, peace, prosperity - Pro BN	25/2
	MIC's relationship like husband and wife	26/2
	Report card –Excellence, Glory and Distinction	26/2
	PM : Opposition jealous of BN	27/2
	Samy :PKR samseng behind demos	27/2
	Husband,wife ? More like cats and dogs	27/2
	RM 1 million spent in poll ads first three days	28/2
	Subra: There is a campaign to outs me	28/2
	Coconut trees the limit for PAS	28/2
	MIC candidates dodging the boss	29/2
	Opposition can't accept they are losers	1/3
	Samy: Here's what we have done	2/3
	PM : We have not been sleeping on our job	3/3
	Koh fails to stop, just looks and goes	3/3
	Why Chinese voters may abandon MCA	5/3
	Mahathir: We need an opposition	5/3
	Samy lauds PM's pledges for Indians	6/3
	First Indian woman rep bemoans racial politics	6/3
Dr M on why we 're not feeling good	7/3	
BN's last ditch to counter opposition	7/3	
Have mercy MCA's plea to Kinta Valley folks	7/3	
<i>Bersih</i> slams Najib's jet campaign	7/3	
Indians tipped to desert BN tomorrow	7/3	

on its food to remind it who's the boss?" Between the devil and the deep blue sea, the cool but unpredictable waters for the moment look less treacherous than the waiting fangs of the wolf at home. Thus using its own readers as a benchmark of influence, *Malaysiakini* attempts to influence the readers and hence agenda sets to vote for the opposition.

6.1.3. HINDRAF and BERSIH

By highlighting Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) and Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (*Bersih*), two issues that are hot and have gained wide publicity and support from the people, *Malaysiakini* has set the pace in getting the voters to think about these issues and how the present government has addressed these issues. Articles portray that the ruling coalition has not dealt with these issues and was insensitive in handling their grouses. The articles echo the sentiments of its members in calling the public not to support the National Front and instead rally behind the opposition who it feels will do more for them. Articles such as "Vote Opposition, HINDRAF tells supporters" where HINDRAF leader urges its members to vote the opposition as they are fairer and promise commitment to resolving Indian issues while the BN had cheated, oppressed and misled the community for

a long time. Meanwhile, the *Bersih* message is clear that the ruling government is not to be trusted as there are discrepancies in the voting process, hence a call for a free and fair elections. This is illustrated in “*Bersih* decries postal vote fraud” which illustrates how ballot papers given to police and military personnel come with an accompanying Identity Declaration Form. Hence by concentrating on these two vital issues *Malaysiakini* attempts to lead the readers into perceiving these issues as more important than others, thus setting the agenda.

6.2 Portrayal of National Front

National Front has been portrayed in four different stands: (i) positive, (ii) arrogant, (iii) negative, and (iv) MIC (Table 6). (Check if OK)

6.2.1 Positive Portrayal

Evidence can be drawn that though *Malaysiakini* provided National Front candidates coverage, it was mere surface level reporting of what they were doing for their constituents, their manifesto, their strength and unity and how well their candidates were received. However, the manner of reporting creates a sense of cynicism. This is reflected in “BN’s Manifesto: Security, Peace and Prosperity” where *Malaysiakini* reports on the National Front’s plans and how they will implement it; “Openness in Pak Lah’s website” indicates that the Prime Minister is open to suggestions and wants to hear from the public; “Samy lauds PM’s pledges for Indians” mentions that MIC president praised the pledges made by Prime Minister thus indicating that National Front government looks after the interests of all races in the country; “PM : We have not been sleeping on our job,” indicates that the government is not in slumber but have worked hard, while as Prime Minister these four years, it has not been a time of failure, but of success. *Malaysiakini*, by highlighting this, is actually mocking the government thus indirectly creating a bad impression among its readers. Many of these articles disclose that the ground support is not necessarily loyal towards the ruling government thus attempting to reveal that the constituents are not nearly all convinced. By this manner of reporting *Malaysiakini* attempts to influence the priorities of the public mindset. This is so as elements prominent on the media agenda become prominent in the public mind.

6.2.2 ‘Barisan’ as Arrogant

The analyses of the articles in *Malaysiakini* reveals that the National Front has been portrayed as being arrogant. The manner in which the National Front candidates regard the opposition is that they are fly-by-night candidates and are unworthy. *Malaysiakini* portrays the style of National Front campaigning as one that indicates “you voted me into power, so you listen to me.” In articles such as “Coconut trees the limit for PAS,” Deputy Prime Minister mentions that PAS is playing with the moon, PKR closes one eye, opens one eye and DAP has a rocket that would not take off, pointing out that while the Islamic party’s symbol is the moon, the highest it could go was the top of coconut trees thus indirectly ridiculing the Opposition; “PM : Opposition jealous of BN,” mentions that the Prime Minister states that who would dare to say that his race is not developed or that the Malays

are always at the losing end when in fact they have achieved success in many areas over the past 50 years. Hence who dares to say that his community's wealth and assets have not increased over the years? "Opposition can't accept they are losers" states that the Deputy Information Minister says that the opposition is still dreaming; in "MIC's relationship is like husband and wife," MIC president commands that the Indian community should not ask what the MIC has done for them because MIC has already shown them what they have done. Hence by continuously highlighting the show of arrogance and giving it importance by reporting it, *Malaysiakini* exerts pressure to set the agenda of the voters in convincing them that National Front is indeed arrogant and thus does not deserve a vote.

6.2.3 Negative Portrayal

A majority of the articles in *Malaysiakini* indicate that National Front is unable to carry out its task and has its lost power to deliver. An obvious display of this is seen as in its daily reporting where a significant focus is on National Front's weakness. In "Report card – Excellence, Glory and Distinction" where a thorough study of National Front's 2004 manifesto checklist displays that many issues in the manifesto have not been carried out and even if carried out, have been failures; "Koh fails to stop, just looks and goes" indicates that the Chief Minister is not concerned about spending time with his voters; "Why Chinese voters may abandon MCA," discusses the disgruntled feeling among the Chinese towards MCA. Moreover, within the party itself there are views that the house is not in order. The article, PM: Stop protesting, my decision is final" mentions that the Prime Minister warned party members to stop protesting against his decision to drop some incumbents; in "First Indian woman rep bemoans racial politics", the racial composition of the candidates is obviously an issue; "Mahathir: We need an opposition" and "Dr M on why we're not feeling good" describes the past president of National Front and creates a quandary for the National Front by critically voicing his displeasure and discontentment on the way the National Front is conducting itself.

Besides, articles in *Malaysiakini* portray that as polling day approaches, there seems to be a frantic frenzy in the National Front camp as it is obviously desperate to garner votes. This is seen in "Have mercy: MCA's plea to Kinta Valley folks" which mentions MCA secretary-general pleading with Chinese voters to give MCA their vote; "BN's last ditch to counter opposition" cites an all-out push on the eve of elections by National Front to counter a resurgent strong opposition..

In addition to this, *Malaysiakini* in choosing to highlight the flamboyant spending of the National Front candidates' attempts to stir resentment as in these tiring times when the general public itself is fighting hard to make ends meet. In "RM 1 million spent in poll ads first three days" indicates the advertising cost incurred; in "*Bersih* slams Najib's jet campaign," the Deputy Prime Minister is criticised for using a government Fokker executive jet during the campaign period. In focusing on this kind of news, *Malaysiakini* sends strong signs to its readers that indicate that even the National Front is weak, extravagant and not confident which therefore means many are supporting the opposition. Thus just like the others, the readers too should vote for the opposition, hence setting the agenda in the readers mind

Table 7. *Malaysiakini* - Portrayal of opposition

Category	Headlines	Date
Portrayal of Opposition	PKR promises a new dawn for Malaysia	26/2
	DAP wants dynamic Penang for all	26/2
	Divorce Umno, Zuraida tells Malay votes	26/2
	Why is IGP in BN manifesto, asks PAS	29/2
	Segambut candidate claims political intimidation	29/2
	MCA on equal status with Alam Flora, not Umno	2/3
	Anwar says it again 'I'm no chameleon	2/3
	Split votes could give DAP the headache	2/3
	Seputeh: Lamb no match for the lion	3/3
	Crowd unfazed by heavy downpour	4/3
	Anwar rocks Perak, Pak Lah no-show	5/3

6.2.4 MIC

From an analysis of the articles in *Malaysiakini*, it can be concluded that among the political parties covered, Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), a component party of National Front has gained the most coverage. This could be attributed to the *HINDRAF* issue and by exposing MIC's incompetence and arrogance, *Malaysiakini* attempts to boost the opposition's campaign. The articles denote that the Indians have lost faith in MIC, and have defected to the opposition who are seen as one who will champion their cause. In particular the MIC leader Samy Vellu is mud-slinged by *Malaysiakini* for his lack of leadership and his indifference to addressing the Indian issues. The article "Samy : Here's what we have done" describes Samy Vellu criticising the opposition for telling people that National Front government does not help the Indians and accuses them of being the greatest liars and that he wants to know what the opposition has done for the Indians. He claims that the opposition is interested in attacking and belittling the National Front government but has no plans to help the Indians. In "Samy: PKR samseng behind demos" Samy Vellu accuses the PKR members of using thugs, thus causing fear amongst the public. He adds that even the MIC can do it and if PKR want to have war, MIC can show them war. *Malaysiakini* in depicting these articles attempts to suggest that Samy Vellu's standpoint is seen as "It's my way or the highway," An interesting point to note is that within the party itself, there is a lack of unity and loyalty towards the leaders as seen in "MIC candidates dodging the boss?" which describe that some candidates do not want to be seen as too aligned with the president; the article "Subra: There is a campaign to oust me" elaborates that all is not well within the party while "Indians tipped to desert BN tomorrow" explains that the Indians have lost faith and will not vote for BN. *Malaysiakini* uses its readers' views to further strengthen its stand. The article "Husband, wife? More like cats and dogs" illustrates readers' opinions that the relationship is more like cats and dogs and that even if MIC and the community's ties were like a husband and wife, then the wife should divorce the husband and sue him for everything he is worth. By shifting the readers' focus on Samy Vellu's

arrogant display of power and his kingpin style leadership, *Malaysiakini* attempts to influence the salience of this topic on its reader's agenda.

6.3 Portrayal of Opposition

The opposition has been portrayed in three different manners: (i) positive, (ii) negative, and (iii) anti-National Front (Table 7)

6.3.1. Positive Portrayal

From an analysis of the articles, it is seen that *Malaysiakini* has given the opposition excellent reviews and disclosed that despite the challenges thrown at them, the opposition is performing well. The message is clear - that the opposition has a fine and dedicated team of candidates as seen in "PKR promises a new dawn for Malaysia" which illustrates that it will bring a new constitutional state and a vibrant economy; "DAP wants syanamic Penang for all" explains that progress should be for all; "Crowd unfazed by heavy downpour" where thousands gathered at the DAP ceramah to show solidarity; "Anwar rocks Perak, Pak Lah no-show" portrays that there is a frenzy of crowd at Anwar's ceramah while the Prime Minister has yet to show up to address the people in Perak. In "Segambut candidate claims political intimidation," it is revealed that the candidate's election campaign manager was arrested on nomination day and two days later, the campaign manager's car was splashed with acid and paint thus indicating the arduous times that the opposition faces. Befitting its aim to give the underdog a voice to be heard, *Malaysiakini* over a period of time, by giving constant importance to the opposition's campaign, attempts to agenda set the readers.

6.3.2 Negative Portrayal

In line with *Malaysiakini*'s aim to support the opposition, it is evident that minimal articles were written to portray the opposition in a negative manner. In "Anwar says it again I'm no chameleon," the article does more to defend Anwar than belittle him. Obviously, the intention of the article is to show that it is MCA's leaflet. Anwar's views are strongly advocated, and in fact it served as an excellent platform for him to barb the National Front; "Split votes could give DAP the headache" merely mentions the difficulties for DAP due to the trend of Penang voters opting for the BN in the state and the opposition at the federal level once again looks set to present DAP with a major heartache. Hence, it is evident that the negative view of the opposition is not an imperative part of its election reporting and is downsized to portray the opposition as doing a good job.

6.3.3 Anti BN - Dissension among Partners

In articulating its issues, *Malaysiakini* depicts the Opposition as anti-National Front and attempts to demote National Front in the eyes of its readers. In "I was assaulted by Mat Rempit in BN shirts," the National Front supporters are depicted as ruffians; "Seputeh: Lamb no match for the lion" mentions that MCA is no match to the DAP candidate Teresa who has contributed immensely towards the constituency; in "MCA on equal status with *Alam Flora*, not Umno" it is reported that if the readers believe in the political gimmicks of MCA, then pigs can fly up the tree and that the MCA leadership's claim that they were on

Table 8. *Malaysiakini* - Elections Commission

Category	Headlines	Date
Elections	EC contradicts itself again	25/2
Commission	EC to blame for 100-year-old voters	1/3
	Shock reversal: Indelible ink plan erased	4/3
	Candidate finds 26 'phantom' voters in family home	4/3
	U-turn on ink, a black mark for EC	4/3

equal status with Umno is not true as they can only claim equal status with *Alam Flora* of garbage collection and disposal fame. This certainly demeans the position of the National Front candidate in the eyes of the voters; “Nga; MCA turning into Ong dynasty” clearly reveals cronyism; in “Divorce Umno, Zuraida tells Malay votes” it is mentioned that UMNO will not be able to look after their needs; “Why is IGP in BN manifesto, asks PAS” reflects that the National Front is misusing its power. Weaknesses in the National Front are ostentatiously displayed in the articles. Hence the National Front is portrayed in a total downbeat light thus enhancing the opposition’s cause. *Malaysiakini* with its immense quantity of information available on the Achilles’ heel of the National Front sets the agenda in reporting in an anti-National Front stand.

6.4 Elections Commission

The Election Commission’s role is given prominence by *Malaysiakini*. From the analysis it is obvious that the Election Commission has done brought harm than credibility to itself (Table 8). *Malaysiakini* highlights that the Election Commission continues to “turn a blind eye” which has raised fury among the voters, coupled with the way it is being used by the National Front. Numerous articles are written to question the Election Commission’s integrity as seen in “EC contradicts itself again” which explains that its chairperson and the secretary gave contradicting instructions; “Candidate finds 26 ‘phantom’ voters in family home” describes how a candidate found 26 unknown individuals registered as voters at her family home; the article “Shock reversal: Indelible ink plan erased” describes the shocking announcement of the Election Commission that it will not use the indelible ink for Saturday’s Polls, citing public order and security issues; “U-turn on ink” states that it is a black mark for EC with activists warning this Election could be the ‘dirtiest ever’ after the Election Commission dumped plans to curb fraud by marking voters’ fingers with indelible ink. By emphasising Elections Commission’s inefficiency and its lackadaisical attitude in carrying out its duty, *Malaysiakini* attempts to raise doubts and add fear that the team at the Elections Commission is totally unqualified to run the 12th General Election. *Malaysiakini*, by exposing these news items, attempts to assert pressure on its readers in setting the agenda that EC may not be able to carry out this election in a free and fair environment. Hence the message is clear, your vote is precious, as rigging of votes is highly possible.

7. DISCUSSION

This paper attempts to gauge the effectiveness of two newspapers, that is, one the traditional print media, *The Star* and the other, an online media, *Malaysiakini*. It is obvious that both the media seek to set the agenda for their respective readers. *The Star* being indirectly owned by the National Front attempts to set the agenda in getting its readers to believe that it is vital to vote for the National Front. On the other hand *Malaysiakini* in achieving its aim to fill in the gap left by the mainstream media reports the opposition favourably thus appealing to set the agenda for its readers to give the opposition parties a chance. The effectiveness of the online media is clear as can be seen from the inroads made by the opposition parties in the 12th General Election. The findings indicate the following:

7.1 Differences in the Stance Taken

It is very obvious for any reader to see that neither *The Star* nor *Malaysiakini* were objective on election issues. While *The Star* appeared to have taken a pro-government stance, *Malaysiakini* appears to take on the opposition view. In a country like Malaysia where there has been heavy censorship of the media, it is easy to see why the Malaysian readership would flock to read the *Malaysiakini*. It shows a reaction to the sudden freedom that the new media offers: a government that was never criticised is now being freely criticised. To many, the online media represented an outlet which the public did not have previously. It was through the alternative channels that the public got wind of salient issues that were otherwise not covered by mainstream media.

7.2 Quality of News Coverage

It is evident that *Malaysiakini* focused on previously taboo topics which were prone to being censored by the government. By highlighting important bread and butter issues, issues that are close to the people's heart and the candidates past and current performance, they gained a lot of attention. Prominent coverage was also given to the voice of the voters in terms of what they were expecting from their elected representative. By highlighting hot topics such as those of *BERSIH* and *HINDRAF*, *Malaysiakini* hit the right note among its readers who were hungry for this kind of information which was unheard of in the mainstream. To an audience that has had only one source of information which had been controlled by the government, *Malaysiakini* served as a new inspirational medium of information.

On the other hand evidence can be drawn that *The Star* highlighted marginal issues such as the National Front's candidates competency and commitment, how the candidates and the ruling government were doing a good job, how well they were liked and to ensure this, the public were urged to cast their votes for the National Front. *Malaysiakini* also differed from *The Star* in its coverage by drawing attention to the role of the Elections Commission. *Malaysiakini* had focused a fair bit on the role of the Elections Commission and on its lack of credibility which created so many fiascos. This, to a certain extent painted a very negative impression of the Commission. Thus, it is visible that *Malaysiakini* attempted to sway the readers view. Given the accessibility of the online media, the public, who craved a different style of reporting, took advantage of the services provided by *Malaysiakini* and patronised it well.

7.3 Frequency of Reporting

By updating the articles several dozens of times a day and concentrating on just reporting on the 2008 General Election, *Malaysiakini* created a sense of credibility that made the readers believe in them. Thus *The Star* with its daily morning publication appears to provide stale news for those who were eagerly awaiting political developments. The popularity of online media among youths and the civil society played an important factor in the vote slant in the elections as accessibility to online news was easy. The increase in awareness among youth is due to changing attitudes in Malaysian society in responding to their socio-political needs and responsibilities by relying more and more on collective ideas and actions and not just expecting governmental leadership or familial support (Brown *et al.*, 2004). A 2006 Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission survey stated that Internet use is highest among Malaysians who are under 35 (Heussner, 2008). In fact, statistics showed that 64.5% between the ages of 21 to 30 trusted the online media and blogs while a mere 12.4% depended on newspapers. Meanwhile for the ages 31 to 40 years old, 61.7% believed information in blogs and online media while 14.8% relied on newspapers (*New Straits Times*, 2 April 2008: 13).

8. CONCLUSION

The arrival and spread of the Internet produced a hope that this new, uncensored medium would become a shelter for unbiased and objective journalism (Samad, 2001). The Internet has been credited with playing a pivotal role in sustaining the current reform movement. People dare to speak about an alternative government and toy with the idea of changing the government. The Internet has broken this monopoly of control over free expression. Use of the Internet for news increased markedly in the late 1990s, especially among younger audiences (Flanagin and Metzger, 2000 cited in Lowrey and Anderson, 2005). This phenomenon is nothing new as seen in Korean *Ohmynews*, an online newspaper that is credited with playing a key role in sweeping President Roh Moo -Hyun to power (Chang Woo – Young, 2005). Recent research conducted during the US (2000) and British (2001) elections has shown the importance of the online media as a source of political information and news (Krasnoboka, 2002). However research on the political role of the Internet in Ukraine and Russia reveals the rapid development and the great importance of the Internet as a new information medium in these societies, both in the periods of relative political stability and political tensions (Semetko and Krasnoboka, 2001 cited in Krasnoboka, 2002).

Stevan Gan, the co-founder of *Malaysiakini* suggests that online media certainly has had an impact; it helped break the mainstream media's monopoly on truth, and the government's monopoly on power. It has an impact on the political process in the country (<http://snurb.info/node/789>). Thus, the government has started to pay more serious attention to the Internet as a medium and particularly as a medium of political news and analysis. The Prime Minister of Malaysia "admitted that the National Front government lost in the cyber war and that it was a serious misjudgment on their part" (*The Sun*, 26 March 2008: 2).

However, there is a long way before the so called 'Fifth Estate' plays a dominant role as there are serious worries that the government will not only introduce special legislation for online media but will impose measures of control and censorship over online publications.

As mentioned by Information Minister, the alternative media is not untouchable (*The Sun*, 16 April 2008: 16).

Despite these restrictions on the independence of the media, the fact that there are real limits to press freedom does not negate the fact that there is also real space. How journalists in Malaysia make use of this available space becomes an especially interesting question as society, government and the media itself undergo important transformations.

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