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Negotiating Media 'Balance' in Malaysia's 2013 General Election

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Abstract: This article will discuss recent trends in Malaysia's media surrounding the 2013 general election (GE13). It will argue that the GE13 produced two important trends in the media industry. First, there was increased political-party participation in social media, citizen journalism and blogging. In fact, it practically led to a 'cyberwar' between political parties, making the realm of the online and social media increasingly polarised and partisan. Second, many mainstream media outlets in Malaysia successfully pursued a platform of more 'balanced' coverage, suggesting an increased space of negotiation and contestation amongst the previously muzzled print, television and radio industry. This article will conclude with an assessment of the future trends in the media industry in Malaysia post GE13.

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Introduction

Malaysia's general election on 5 May 2013 (hereafter the GE13) saw the government defeat the opposition by 133 seats to 89. In doing so, the incumbent government continued its long rule over the country, which began in 1957. The government coalition, or Barisan Nasional (BN), consists of three major parties: the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (the MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) includes the People's Justice Party (PKR), the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). The opposition won the popular vote, which followed continuing erosion of the popular vote for the ruling regime, which had occurred in the previous election in 2008, and an upswing in support for the opposition. Gerrymandering has been cited by many political observers and scholars as one reason for the BN maintaining its rule in an election dubbed by the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs and the Centre for Public Policy Studies as "partially free, but not fair" (*Malaysian Insider* 2013a). This conclusion was supported by numerous political-science scholars who study elections in the Southeast Asian region (Welsh 2013; Weiss 2013a; Aspinall 2013).

Malaysia's political system has been described as "electoral" authoritarianism (Schedler 2006) where the BN "has refrained from grossly rigging or stealing elections, instead perpetuating its dominance through subtler stratagems for more than three decades" (Case 2006: 312). One of these stratagems has been to restrict freedoms of the press, where the mainstream media in Malaysia is "shackled" (Mohd Azizuddin 2005) and subject to "stringent controls" (Abbott 2011a: 16). However, Prime Minister Mahathir's decision in 1996 not to regulate or censor the Internet means the strict laws applied to the print media were less relevant to those who produced news and views online. While the online media in Malaysia is not exempt from legal pressure (sedition and defamation charges have still been used to intimidate those who criticise the regime through the Internet), Malaysia's media has largely been seen as a free and vibrant online space clearly distinct from the restricted, pro-government mainstream media (Mustafa K. Anuar 2005; Jun-E Tan and Zawawi Ibrahim 2008; Mohd Azizuddin 2005). The research presented here will examine how media practitioners and government and opposition media strategists reflect on their roles in the coverage of the GE13. It will do so through targeted personal interviews with those involved in Malaysia's media as well as media managers employed by political

parties.[1] Jason Abbott explained that new technologies such as the Internet and social media were useful in furthering social movements during Malaysia's 2008 election, but concluded "how Southeast Asia's autocrats respond to this and whether they prove any more adept than the regimes that succumbed to popular uprisings in North Africa in 2011 remains to be seen" (Abbott 2011b: 27). The next section will answer the question of how the Malaysian government in particular has responded to the challenge of new media in the lead-up to the 2013 election.

Online and Social Media

In the past, the term "Fifth Estate" has been used to describe NGOs, trade unions and even organised crime (Bequai 1979). More recently, however, the expression has come to mean reporting via the Internet and related digital media, which includes bloggers, citizen journalists and social media, and thus is seen as separate from the industrial, mainstream media, previously the realm of the "Fourth Estate". Scholars claim this "Fifth Estate media" is creating a space to enable a new source of accountability in government, politics and other sectors and therefore supports liberal democracy (Dutton 2009; Newman, Dutton and Blank 2012). Malaysian bloggers have deemed their role in "the Fifth Estate" as crucial for the push towards media freedom and balance in the public sphere. Popular blogger Raja Petra Kamaruddin wrote in 2012:

> the rise of the fifth estate […] gives people the ability and function to share and disseminate thoughts on a global scale. This in turn has made governments and their monopoly of the fourth estate irrelevant, thus leading to governments and leaders themselves moving onto cyberspace in order to stake their claim (Raja Petra 2012).

This section will examine online and social media during the GE13 and explain that cyberspace is becoming increasingly manipulated and polarised by political-party discourse.

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1   22 personal interviews were conducted in Kuala Lumpur in June 2013. Due to time constraints, not all media outlets were able to be targeted for personal interviews. Those chosen were outlets considered to have attempted to provide reasonable coverage of both the opposition and government. They included *Astro Awani* (TV), *BFM* (radio), *Sinar Harian* and *Oriental Daily* (Malay and Chinese print newspapers) and *Malaysian Insider* (online news). Media strategists from the main government party UMNO and from the main opposition parties DAP and PKR were also interviewed.

There is little doubt the online and social media has become increasingly important in political discourse in Malaysia. Total Internet penetration in Malaysia increased from 1,718,500 in 2008 to 5,839,600 in 2012 (Gomez 2013). Malaysia has 13 million Facebook users and two million Twitter users (Social Bakers 2013) in a population of 29 million. Social media is particularly popular amongst Malaysian youths. 64 per cent of Facebook users in Malaysia are between 18 and 34 years old, while 62 per cent of the total unique visitors to the Internet were aged between 15 and 34 (Social Bakers 2013). With first-time voters making up approximately 30 per cent of the 13.3 million registered voters in Malaysia for the GE13, the Internet was considered an important tool in influencing voter choice, particularly in urban areas. Prior to the GE13, social media had played a predominant role in mobilising events such as the Bersih rallies and in the flourishing of anti-government material spread by young urbanites. In her article published before the GE13, Meredith Weiss (2013b: 3) argues that new media "does seem more likely than their progenitors to help shift the political ground in Malaysia", but that effects "are more likely to be subtle and gradual rather than immediate and cataclysmic". She concludes by explaining that young voters' "political identities will have been moulded in a fundamentally different discursive environment than those of their elders" (Weiss 2013: 19). Pepinsky (2013) agrees that new media has created "new challenges" for the BN and "new tactics" for the opposition, but in itself is unlikely to cause political liberalisation in Malaysia. Research on the GE13 conducted for this article supports this argument and will show that the UMNO in particular is embracing cyberspace as a "new challenge" to master.

After the BN won the 2008 election but lost their crucial two-thirds majority,[2] President Abdullah Badawi stated that his government had "lost the Internet war, the cyberwar" and said of new media:

> We didn't think it was important. It was serious misjudgement. We thought the newspapers, the print media, the television were important, but young people were [actually] looking at text messages and blogs (Ahmad Fauziah et al. 2012).

Abdullah Badawi was replaced as Prime Minister in April 2009 by Najib Razak (hereafter Najib). Many BN officials believed the government was inadequately adept in the space of Internet news and views in 2008, and were looking to maintain a greater presence in cyberspace during the GE13. In the lead-up to the election, Najib said the election will be "Malaysia's first social media election" (*Free Malaysia Today* 2013). The Deputy Prime Minister's political strategist, Marzuki Mohamad, argued:

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2   To change the constitution in Parliament, a two-thirds majority is required.

> To a certain extent, this was the social-media election: we had young urbanites, IT-savvy, sometimes with two or three mobile phones, impacting the messages on social media, which we believe affected the voting pattern. The role of social media was certainly more prominent than it was in the last election (interview, 15 June 2013).

The result was increased mobilisation of political supporters through Facebook and Twitter. What followed was described as a 'cyberwar', involving 'cybertroopers', fake Twitter accounts, deliberate misinformation and increased paid mobilisation of online participants for direct political causes.

The GE13 saw many pro-government bloggers gain prominence. They included Papa Gomo, Rocky's Bru, Helen Ang, The Choice and The Mole. Since *reformasi* in 1998, the BN has recognised that blogging is an important way of disseminating viewpoints online, but traditionally, it has not been particularly active in producing its own bloggers and online commentators. Gong's (2008) study showed that during Malaysia's 2008 general election, those candidates who maintained a blog were more likely to succeed in being elected than those who did not. In the 2008 election, political bloggers who criticised the government included some prominent names: Raja Petra Kamaruddin (*Malaysia Today*), Haris Ibrahim (*People's Parliament*) and Jeff Ooi (*Screenshots*), plus opposition leader Lim Kit Siang. This "helped to create a major shift among the middle class and sent many concerned citizens into political action" (Chin and Wong 2009: 80). Tun Faisal was head of the 'UMNO Cybertroopers' during the GE13. He said: "There is a change in that people are less dependent on traditional media for information. We wanted to increase the pro-government news portals [in the GE13]" (interview, 15 June 2013). Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's blog was again a popular choice for many Malaysians, while a considerable number of Malaysian MPs maintained a blog for the GE13, including Najib himself at <www.1Malaysia.com.my>. Marzuki (interview, 15 June 2013) said what the result of this increase meant to his party: "In the blog war, BN has the upper hand. We are there." Pro-government bloggers were said to earn about 10,000 MYR (3,036 USD) per month, with bloggers who were prominent being paid more for their writing. While these sites were nowhere near as popular as the independent news sites *Malaysiakini* or *The Malaysian Insider*, the step does reflect a more centralised, nuanced BN online media campaign than in previous elections.[3] The Malaysian government had em-

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3   Alexa has Malaysiakini.com ranked the 18th most popular website, with Malaysianinsider.com ranked 39th. In contrast, 1Malaysia.com.my is ranked 2,230th. Previous online campaigns by the BN have focused around the distribution of fake sex videos of opposition candidates, including opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim. The GE13 saw the occasional attempt at this form of online slander, but internal polling

ployed British- and American-based public-relations companies ApCo and the Renden Group, which were awarded multi-million-dollar contracts by the Malaysian Prime Minister's office to assist with the government's media campaigns, amongst other tasks. The group had fifteen people and six local hires to establish internal communications and media monitoring, for example.

In addition to blogs, the BN was looking to maintain a greater presence in the realm of social media. In 2010, Prime Minister Najib issued a directive that all government ministers should have a Facebook account, and preferably a Twitter account as well. A Twitter account was created for Najib in September 2008 and his office started to tweet as @PMOMalaysia from September 2010. Tun Faisal's 'UMNO Cybertroopers', a team unofficially established in 2004, was moved within a special new media unit [Unit Media Baru UMNO] headed by UMNO Youth leader Khairy Jamaluddin. As Tun Faisal explained:

> There is a change in that people are less dependent on traditional media for information. BN understood going into the elections that social media was important, not just blogs. The PM believes this. Khairy [Jamaluddin] knows the importance of social media and we brief the PM about it (interview, 15 June 2013).

At the age of 37, Khairy Jamaluddin was considered a key candidate in appealing to Malaysia's youth. Popularly known as 'KJ', he is particularly active on Facebook and Twitter.[4] The @barisannasional Twitter account was created in May 2012 and was reportedly promoted for a three-month campaign at a cost of 15,000 USD (*The Malaysian Insider* 2013b). In a medium where numbers are considered currency, Najib currently has 1,667,961 followers on Twitter. Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim has around 359,280. Yet research from the organisation Politweet found that 52.5 per cent of Najib's then 1.2 million Twitter followers were actually inactive [0 tweets and 0 followers, or suspended users].[5] Reports had surfaced online that Najib had the most fake Twitter followers (*Malaysiakini* 2013a). It is possible some of these accounts do belong to real users who employ Twitter to follow people and not to tweet or be followed, but even so, 52.5 per cent is dubious at best.

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by both the government and opposition found that attacks on character through sex videos were not of interest to voters in the GE13.

4   After winning the seat of Rembau in Negri Sembilan at GE13, he was appointed Minister for Youth and Sport.

5   Another way to test Twitter followers is to see when they signed on to Twitter. When five accounts are created at one time (albeit with separate names) to immediately follow one particular politician and no-one else, it looks suspicious, to say the least.

The suggestion that both the government and the opposition specifically employed people to slander politicians online was a feature of the GE13 social-media campaign. Bloggers started to circulate warnings of paid 'cyber-troopers' nearly two years before the actual election took place (*Malaysia Today* 2011), with estimations that one full-time 'cybertrooper' would receive about 5,000 MYR (1,518 USD) per month. Tun Faisal estimated that the UMNO had about 45 paid full-time workers, 175 part-timers and 750 volunteers in his UMNO Cybertroopers Club for the GE13. He said:

> The Internet was previously dominated by the opposition. It allows them so much space. Now *we* have a presence. Our bloggers – our cybertroopers – are on the ground, too. We post on issues [and] we provide information (interview, 15 June 2013).

Faisal also added that the creation of a more systematic and extensive group of cybertroopers was necessary for the GE13 because "the opposition were releasing lies through Facebook, Twitter and through blogs" and it was important the government was able to "counter false news more quickly" through social media.

The opposition also increased its role in cyberspace. The PKR employed the former *Malaysian Insider* sub-editor Praba Ganeshan as a social-media strategist from April 2012. He managed a team of about four people. Ganeshan (interview, 17 June 2013) argues that most of the campaign on social media was "powered organically by thousands of Malaysians" and that the party "mostly went along for the ride". The opposition did, of course, have tactics and strategies to use the space effectively. The PKR had an election smart-phone app showing the locations of future *ceramah* [public talks]. One of the opposition's most effective uses of social media was to use Twitter as a pseudo-media centre. As press conferences were not well-attended by many government-owned or -controlled news sites, Twitter attempts to facilitate the distribution of information that the mainstream media ignores. Fahmi Fadzil was Political Secretary Information Chief for Keadilan (based in Kuala Lumpur) and a former presenter of 'The Fairly Current Show', which was uploaded and distributed through YouTube. Fadzil explained:

> We know the algorithm of these tools is what is popular, but this is not reflected in the other mainstream media. We are leveraging on personality and celebrities. We tried to explicitly use satire, which is the essence of the culture of social media, particularly amongst young people (interview, 12 June 2013).

Medaline Chang, who worked as the DAP's social-media officer, said: "We geared everything in our social-media strategy towards creating visuals for

Facebook. We wanted people to share information from our own pages as it draws them back to our main sites" (interview, 18 June 2013). The DAP also put a significant proportion of their advertising funds into Facebook advertisements, having realised the importance of maintaining a social-media presence.

Yet claims of opposition 'cyberwar' activities were raised by UMNO officials and published in mainstream newspapers. Marzuki Mohamad said:

> The opposition has done a good job of demonising us on social media. They had a Red Bean Army – 1,000-2,000 people. We started late and had fewer people, and [so] our cybertroopers were blasted out (interview, 15 June 2013).

Tun Faisal believes these social-media sites were an important reason why Chinese votes went to the opposition, claiming "ethnic sentiments to get Chinese and Indian votes" were common on these sites (interview, 15 June 2013). After the election, Shahidan Kassim, a minister in the Prime Minister's Department, called for a Royal Commission Inquiry into the opposition's use of social media – in particular the DAP's 'cybertroopers', popularly known as 'The Red Bean Army'. The term was pushed by blogger Helen Ang and by pro-government newspapers *Utusan Malaysia, The Star* and *The New Straits Times*.[6] Some websites even published a list of Facebook pages and names of the people involved in the so-called 'Red Bean Army'. After the election, Home Minister Zahid Hamidi told Parliament that "the Red Bean Army and its ilk" of 3,000 'cybertroopers' should face criminal and civil action for spreading lies through the Internet (*Malaysia Chronicle* 2013). The existence of the group has been strongly denied by the DAP, who argue it is made up of pro-government media (*The Malay Mail* 2013).

The DAP's Medaline Chang said the 'Red Bean Army' was a group of pro-oppositionists who were regularly active online and in political social-media networks. Chang said they were not paid by the DAP and were mostly "angry Chinese young men who were active online, writing anti-government stuff on social media" (interview, 18 June 2013). One pro-DAP Facebook page, 'We Fully Support <PKR>DAP', had Chinese-language commentary and photos on it, and as of July 2013 it had over 460,000 likes, only slightly fewer than the DAP's main Facebook page (with 510,000). In a

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6   For example, 'Beware of DAP's cyber-troopers', *New Straits Times*, 5 June 2013; 'DAP's "Red Bean Army" firing on all cylinders', 3 June 2013 and 'Cybertroopers stooping low with personal attacks and wild celebrations', 3 May 2013, both published in *The Star*; 'DAP upah Red Bean Army 'bunuh orang'', 3 May 2013 and 'DAP taja 'Red Bean Army' burukkan kerajaan', 4 May 2013, both published in *Utusan Malaysia*.

personal interview in 2013, Ganeshan estimated that an individual MP might hire two or three people to attend Pakatan events and to support their boss by "making a lot of noise online" about an event or policy. However, most DAP 'cybertroopers' who slandered politically active people online were unlikely to be paid by the political parties. Ganeshan agreed there were "grey areas" where the PKR would seemingly encourage the spread of anti-government slogans and rhetoric through its own social-media platforms, admitting to "fuelling the fire on many occasions", but he claimed these were "initially started by individual people, not by our parties. Mostly, it's people passing information on to other people, not party to party" (interview, 17 June 2013).

Both the government and the opposition had certainly paid people to further their cause on social media during the GE13, and they both encouraged their supporters to be more pro-active politically in the realm of cyberspace. This is not to dismiss the broader BN public-relations 'machine' in rural areas, where large amounts of money were spent on flags, banners and the general 'campaign trail' (Aspinall 2013). However, political-party politics is increasingly being fought through the domain of online and social media. The ruling government, who often felt defeated by the opposition in previous elections in this space since 1998, is becoming increasingly determined to develop strategies to compete for voters' hearts and minds through these new media platforms.

When an organisation or political party is looking to manipulate the flow of information, two main methods are employed. The first is to attempt to limit information by hindering, censoring or creating an environment of self-censorship. During the GE13, there were only a few instances of information being hindered online and sporadic attempts to create an environment of self-censorship through social media. The Malaysian Communication Multimedia Commission (MCMC) and the police had announced they were going to monitor users of social media for possible abuses during the election, with senior police officials declaring they would arrest anyone who produced defamatory and provocative comments through social media (*ABN News* 2013). However, there were few signs this statement actually affected the way people interacted online during the GE13. The use of 'deep packet inspection' was reported by the DAP on 20 May 2013, which stated that "the interest of all Malaysian Internet users is at risk with Deep Packet Inspection equipment checking every click on the Internet [made by] unsuspecting Malaysians" (Goh Kheng Teong 2013) and YouTube videos and Facebook pages of opposition parties and online news media were occasionally blocked through ISP-level packet filtering of network traffic. Meanwhile, Mahathir Mohamad (rather ironically) complained

that hackers had tampered with his blog so that people could not access it, and claimed he was being "silenced" (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 2013). While these are instances of information being limited online, the main feature of the GE13 'cyberwar' was the producing and manipulating of information rather than the use of blatant and archaic censorship methods.

Thus, the second option is to 'flood the market' with your own information so that alternative information is lessened or lost in a sea of one's own content or misinformation. Louw (2010) has argued that in Western democracies since the late twentieth century, public-relations offices and media managers in government departments have been hired to produce press releases and "spin" mainstream media reports. This has led to a decline in the amount of independent reporting and in the quality of news and information, which is drowned out by political-party public-relations content. As political parties in Malaysia are becoming increasingly involved in cyberspace, the medium is becoming a place of manipulated content facilitated by political staff, public-relations experts, paid bloggers and 'cybertroopers'. Malaysia's GE13 shows the ability of political parties to drown out the potential for truthful, fair and independent information and analysis – key features of the Fifth Estate concept.

Mainstream Media

The notion of the media as the 'Fourth Estate' has never really held sway in Malaysia, especially since the racial riots of 13 May 1969 (Mohd Azizuddin 2005: 347) when the media was placed under tight state control. Since that time, print and television media has been muzzled – its role projected by the government and many within the industry as predominantly to report "good news" regarding government policy, racial harmony and national identity. The media's role as a "watchdog" was seen as a 'Western' notion of the role of journalism and news reporting. Malaysian leaders (and those elsewhere in Asia) advocated 'developmental journalism' – a form of journalism which assists in the process of nation-building and development and where the press is not a natural adversary of the government (see Loo 2000: 216–218). Malaysia's current Prime Minister, Najib Razak, echoed this sentiment in 2010 when he said: "A symbiotic relationship between the press and the government is absolutely critical for our future and development as a nation" (CIJ 2011: 34). While there were periods of increased media freedom before *reformasi* in 1998, the official line has traditionally been that the country is not ready for greater freedom of the press yet as that would lead to political instability and inter-ethnic unrest (Mahathir 1989: 107–117; Mohd Azizuddin 2005: 345). Of course, many Malaysian media practitioners have

been advocating greater press freedom and a more independent, balanced media for decades, but their efforts have largely been subverted by the BN (Tapsell 2013). Furthermore, the BN has often used 'developmental journalism' to deny the opposition broadcasting time on national radio and television stations. While the Internet has led to more openness online, the lack of Internet access in rural areas means voters there encounter less diverse viewpoints. The opposition does publish party-owned print news, namely *Harakah* (PAS) and *The Rocket* (DAP), but prior to the GE13, deputy opposition leader Nurul Izzah, daughter of Anwar Ibrahim, was denied a permit to start a newspaper (*Utusan Rakyat*). She made the following prediction recently:

> The mainstream press will continue to stay relevant, especially for the rural constituency in Malaysia – a crucial block for us, considering their continuing loyalty for the current establishment. As such, the only way to counter the current spin and hate-mongering by the Malay print medium is to provide an alternative for the Malay electorate (e-mail correspondence, 25 July 2013).

Media-freedom activists and journalists in Malaysia and elsewhere have focused on the notion of 'keeping a political balance' as a key professional practice in journalism. That is, the ability to report on the opposition as well as the government, or to 'balance' positive pro-government voices with critical ones. The GE13 did see some privately owned mainstream media companies look to be more balanced in their coverage. This drive for fairness can be attributed to a number of factors outlined below.

Some mainstream media companies in Malaysia are pushing a business model of 'balanced' coverage in order to increase sales and profits. This model is to distinguish themselves from the other players in the media market which are predominantly pro-government in their coverage. For example, the daily Malay-language newspaper, *Sinar Harian*, is published by Kumpulan Karangkraf, a company owned by Hussamuddin Yaacub. Chief editor Abdul Jalil Ali said in an interview on 22 June 2013: "We believe if the newspaper is government-friendly, it won't be reader-friendly. Our readers determine our survival." According to Jalil, the government and opposition placed advertisements in his newspaper during the election period:

> During the election, we played aggressive, in part to get sales. We could see ad revenue from UMNO, because they thought that non-pro-government people were reading it. We think neutrality means advertising revenue (interview, 22 June 2013).

Another newspaper which trumpeted balance and truth during the GE13 was the *Oriental Daily*. Established in 2003, this Chinese-language newspaper

is owned by the KTS Group, which also owns a Sarawak timber company and has close links to Abdul Taib Mahmud, who has been in power for over 30 years in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. Thus, the *Oriental Daily* is not without political connections or free from ownership persuasions.[7] Still, chief editor Ding Lee Leong said the aim of the paper was predominantly about making a profit, and that the owner, Henry Lau, "is a businessman – [so] as long as you are making money, he is happy" (interview, 20 June 2013). Recent changes in the Malaysian media suggest an increasingly transformative landscape. Tong Kooi Ong controls The Edge Media Group, which publishes *The Edge* in Malaysia and Singapore. *The Edge*, launched in 1994, only has a circulation of 20,000, but in March 2013 it nonetheless launched a digital regional news weekly called *The Edge Review*. It also established a magazine specifically for the iPad called *Bumble Bee*, run by media-freedom campaigner Jason Tan. *The Edge* is now in competition with *Focus Malaysia*, an English business weekly launched in December 2012. Tong Kooi Ong established *FZ*, a free online daily newspaper, in October 2012. Its masthead reads "Freedom of Expression, Fairness in Articulation". *The Malay Mail* was taken over by Redberry (owned by Siew Ka Wei) in 2009. It buys content from *Malaysiakini* and the pro-government blog The Mole <www.mole.my>. Chief executive officer Phillip Karuppiah said it was "in line with the editorial strategy of the new *Malay Mail*, which is to give readers both sides of the story pertaining to an issue" (*Malaysiakini* 2013b). After the GE13, it hired ten journalists from *The Malaysian Insider* to further professionalise its model of online journalism.

The daily sales of most English- and Bahasa-language newspapers decreased in the period from 2006 to 2012, with only the tabloids *The Sun* and *Harian Metro* achieving a growth in circulation during this time.[8] *The New Straits Times*' circulation was 100,382 in 2012, lower than any main English-, Malay- or Chinese-language daily newspaper in Malaysia (*Malaysia Media Planning Guide* 2013). Shares in the newspaper *Utusan Melayu* were trading at 62 cents in July 2013, down from 86 cents in March 2012 (*The Wall Street Journal* 2013). While the decline in share price and circulation of newspapers is hardly unique to Malaysia, it is important to recognise that in the more privately owned media, circulation revenue is of a higher percentage than

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7   The KTS Group also owns *See Hua Daily News* (in Chinese), *The Borneo Post* (in English) and *Utusan Borneo* (in Malay) published in Sabah and Sarawak. The KTS Group has been criticised for its conflict of interest in media and palm-oil plantations in the region.

8   According to the Malaysian Audit Bureau Circulations, circulation of *The Sun* rose from 256,486 in 2006 to 301,853 in 2012. *Harian Metro*'s circulation rose from 289,315 in 2006 to 394,026 in 2012.

advertising revenue. For example, in the *Oriental Daily* and *The Edge*, circulation sales account for 30 per cent of overall profits, while only 16 per cent of *Sin Chew Daily*'s revenue comes from circulation sales, and in the *New Straits Times* and *The Star* it is only six per cent. With Malaysia's overall media-advertising revenue dropping 1.2 per cent in 2012 and advertising revenue in newspapers declining continually (*Media Planning Guide Malaysia* 2013: 26), there is increased pressure on print publications to make more profit from circulation sales.

According to a recent study by Nottingham University, all the chief editors of these aforementioned news organisations believed that 'balance' was what separated them from other media companies in the market. *Sinar Harian* is looking to establish itself as more 'balanced' than its Malay-language newspaper rivals *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian*, for instance, which have been consistently pro-government in their coverage.[9] Ding from the *Oriental Daily* claims 'balance' separates his paper from other Chinese-language dailies, which are closely tied to the MCA.[10] He often attended meetings with the government where he responded to criticism by stating: "You have to let the print media have more freedom because we are losing credibility." He said it was clear from his internal surveys that "people get annoyed if you don't say what things you want them to say" (interview, 20 June 2013). With around 90 per cent of the Chinese going to the opposition at the GE13, it is clear that being pro-government would not be good for sales. On election day, independent online news source *Malaysakini* drew 2.6 million unique visitors, while *The Malaysian Insider* saw a 55 per-cent jump to nearly a million visitors. In contrast, *The Star*, which is 42.5 per cent owned by the MCA, saw its online visitors drop 22 per cent to 1.4 million (*The Sunday Times* 2013). After the election, *The Star* invited Fahmi Fadzil and Ong Kian Ming (a DAP election strategist) to write for it as opinion columnists. Chief editor Wong Chun Wai said after the election it was clear *The Star* needed to go for "more independent and bold coverage" (*The Sunday Times* 2013).[11]

The main television stations in Malaysia are all owned by the government-controlled Media Prima Berhad. However, Ananda Krishnan, Malaysia's second-richest person, controls Astro, a satellite-television operator

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9   Nottingham University (2013). Its 'Watching the Watchdog' project showed that the government gets the most coverage and the most favourable reporting in the Malay-language newspapers.

10   The *Oriental Daily*'s two main competitors are *Sin Chew* and *China Press,* both owned by Media Chinese International Bhd.

11   In addition, *Malaysiakini* (2013c) reported on 26 August 2013 that *The Star*'s net profits were down 29 per cent in the six-month period from January to June 2013 (which included the GE13), while its revenue fell 10.9 per cent in the same period.

with a subscriber base of three million people. Its news station, *Astro Awani*, was established in late 2007 largely to cover international news, but in 2008 it also covered the general election and changed its business plan to hire more journalists to cover Malaysian news. Astro had tried to be more balanced in its coverage of the GE13 to improve its subscriber base and to compete with government-owned news station TV3. A meeting prior to the election determined that coverage would be focused on interviews of voters rather than politicians.[12] The media company had tried to be 'balanced' by hearing from voters who were pro-BN, pro-opposition and undecided. Managing editor and news presenter Suhaimi Sulaiman explained Astro's approach: "Seventy percent of our news content is about the people. We focus on people's stories, airing their views and saying what they expect from political candidates" (*The Star* 2013). When questioned by the government as to why they were covering voters who sided with the opposition, *Astro Awani*'s management attempted to explain that balanced journalism was both crucial for gaining more subscribers and inherent in their editorial policy. As we shall see later, this met with mixed success, but the important conclusion here is the potential change in the television industry due to the arrival of cable subscription. Another new cable-television operator is going to be established in 2014: ABN Media Group owned by Kenneth Eswaran. Television in Malaysia has been the realm of state-owned enterprises, but subscription-based television means a more detailed understanding of the market, which will pay for television stations. The *Astro Awani* example shows that its model is to push for more balanced journalism to separate its business model from state-owned free-to-air television.

BFM, the radio station, was also considered to be more balanced in its coverage during the GE13. It was explicitly told by the MCNC that its licence did not include a discussion of politics (only business and finance) and that it should not cover the election. *BFM* owner Malik Ali subsequently wrote a letter of objection to the MCNC, which did not respond, so his network covered the election anyway from nomination day until election day. A section on *BFM*'s website on 'GE13' saw video interviews uploaded, including one with opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim. *BFM* presenter Sharaad Kuttan, a long-term advocate of press-freedom movements in Malaysia, said:

> I think you see the practice of the media as 'fourth estate' in pockets across all media. But perhaps *BFM*'s cache as an organisation dedicat-

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12   The sources from *Astro Awani* who were interviewed preferred to remain anonymous.

ed to this function of the media is more pronounced (interview, 21 June 2013).

A further sign that mainstream media might be able to reject appeals from the government to report anti-opposition stories and thus report with more 'balance' has been the apparent emancipation of the Malaysian judiciary and legal restrictions, which previously muzzled the press. Newspaper editors interviewed for this research admitted there were still concerns with laws which cover the mainstream media, but changes to the PPPA (where licences do not need to be renewed on an annual basis) had meant they are more willing to publish stories which were not positive towards the government. However, strict government regulations still dictate the operations of the mainstream media. *BFM*, for example, is only allowed to broadcast in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur and its surrounding area; it is not allowed to do so in other parts of the country, in particular the rural areas of Sabah and Sarawak. Mainstream media owners in Malaysia still need relatively close ties with influential elites in power in order to keep their media organisations running. While these companies are permitted licences to publish and broadcast, online news portal *Malaysiakini* was forced to take the government to court in an attempt to obtain a print licence of its own. Thus, the government seems to be selective in the issuance of printing licences, yet recent court rulings project a more liberal approach to the mainstream media industry.

Editors interviewed for this research admitted to rejecting government-created stories designed as "anti-Anwar" or "anti-opposition" pieces. They did so by checking these stories with their legal departments, where the response was often to be wary of defamation suits. To avoid defamation, the accused (in most cases opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim) should receive a right of reply. When the government would not agree to allow Anwar this right, the story could not run for fear the company would be sued. The government-owned paper *Utusan Malaysia* had previously been sued by the opposition party, the DAP, and editors claimed this action set an important precedent for other newspapers in the country.[13]

This is not to say that these companies were able to resist all forms of government control during the GE13. The main pressures were officials making calls to newsrooms with instructions on what and what not to publish. Editors admitted to pressures from government bodies such as the

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13   Karpal Singh sued Utusan Melayu, publisher of *Utusan Malaysia*, for ten million MYR (over 3 million USD) in 2008. The DAP sued Utusan Malaysia again as recently as August 2013, claiming its source of information was a "Father Augusten Chen", but the purported fraud allegations against the DAP turned out to be completely fictitious.

MCMC, the police and specific politicians. Ding (from the *Oriental Daily*) said:

> We can't say that we were completely neutral during the GE13; we were slanted towards the government. I don't deny that we compromise with the government on stories, but comparatively [speaking], we feel we were much better than others in the Chinese-language press (interview, 20 June 2013).

Jalil was often called up by government officials and occasionally by opposition officials, who reprimanded him for certain stories. He claims this showed his news organisation was "balanced" if both parties were complaining (interview, 22 June 2013). *BFM* is currently being investigated because of an interview on the Economist Intelligence Unit's democracy index, which aired just before the general election. Melisa Idris (the presenter) and Malek Ali (the owner of the radio station) have both been interviewed by the MCMC over the matter. During the GE13, *Astro Awani* was appointed a news controller by the MCMC; every potential story had to be run through this government 'employee' for approval. Online news copy was censored. Astro also had a five-minute delay on broadcasts,[14] although censorship through this method was less about political stories and more due to "moral" coverage.[15] Both Jalil and Ding spoke of "softening the situation" by publishing information about the opposition on page three. Jalil said that when complaints came through from the government about *Sinar Harian*'s coverage, his response was to state that other media, including international networks such as the *BBC* or *Al Jazeera*, were doing the same thing and that he would lose sales if he chose not to cover the story. He said his consistent line towards both parties was "news for the value of news, not to back Najib or Anwar" (interview, 22 June 2013).

This section has shown that amongst media which is privately owned rather than government-owned, there is a movement in the direction of balanced coverage of politics and elections, if for no other reason than to improve the financial position of the media organisation. Further research could investigate government-owned media during the GE13 and the potential for change within these companies as the media landscape changes. Testimony from the chief editors and media practitioners interviewed for this paper showed that pressure was still being applied on them to be pro-

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14   *Astro Awani* did manage to convince the government that on election night, a five-minute delay would see them lose viewers and defeat the purpose of their so-called 'live coverage', so election night was covered live.

15   For example, footage showing the performer Shakira dressed provocatively and displaying a body tattoo was censored.

government in their coverage, but their business model of reporting with balance was, for the most part, maintained. This research has shown that some mainstream Malaysian media outlets are attempting to move away from the overt pro-government messages. However, this process is both sporadic and gradual in the mainstream media industry.

Conclusion

This article has analysed two important trends in Malaysia's media during the GE13. First, online and social media have been increasingly influenced by political parties, in particular UMNO, to create greater polarisation and sensationalism rather than accurate and fair reporting. Despite the hope that the "Fifth Estate" is providing a voice for ordinary citizens to report the truth, political parties gained greater control over this space and manipulated it more during the GE13. This led to an increasingly partisan and polemic cyberwar between political parties and their supporters. This is not to say that the Internet and social media are not challenging the monopolisation of the production of media content which previously existed in Malaysia. As this article has shown, the increased diversity of viewpoints now available online has led to changes in thinking about the nature of journalism within the mainstream media outlets and by government officials. Yet as Pepinsky (2013) and others have argued, there is little indication that the Fifth Estate itself has fundamentally changed the way the BN regime has ruled since the 1970s. This article has shown that the increased role of political parties in manipulating content online suggests that any conclusions that the Fifth Estate might lead to drastic political change in Malaysia are somewhat premature.

Second, within some mainstream media organisations, there was a desire to become non-partisan, despite attempts at control by the government. In many cases, these news organisations were able to report more freely than the government would have wished. The relative success of media organisations in Malaysia that attempted a more balanced form of journalism during the GE13, mostly with support from their private owners, suggests this could be a growing trend. While many newspapers previously could – and for the moment still can – survive as partisan pro-government news providers in a marketplace without competition, the rise of alternative sources of information via the Internet has meant this business model has been increasingly difficult to sustain. However, the question remains as to whether the Malaysian government will crack down on non-partisan media companies in the future. The BN has a history of "backlash and retaliation" after a period of liberalisation in order to preserve their electoral authoritari-

an regime (Case 2010). This has included crackdowns on any potential liber-
alisation of the media (Tapsell 2013). Yet the decline in readership and circu-
lation of government-owned newspapers suggests Malaysians with access to
the Internet are increasingly moving away from government-controlled news.
This has actually been accepted in some government circles; in an interview
held on 19 June 2013, for example, UMNO's Saifuddin Abdullah said:

> We overspin. For example, like we did with the Bersih rallies, saying
> there were only 20,000 people [when there were approximately
> 50,000]. It doesn't work – people switch off. We lost the mainstream.

Marzuki said in an interview on 15 June 2013 that the relevance of the main-
stream media was diminishing:

> It's becoming futile for the government to attempt to control the
> [mainstream] media. Do newspapers like *Utusan Malaysia* really domi-
> nate the discourse? They only have a circulation of about 400,000.
> Meanwhile, social media is growing and becoming more political.

This article has provided glimpses into the Malaysian mainstream media
industry as providing spaces of negotiation and contestation, while con-
versely, it has demonstrated the possibility of cyberspace being manipulated
and partisan, thus giving voice to existing elites in Malaysian society. The
question remains whether these circumstances will be able to provide an
impetus in the direction of media liberalisation in Malaysia. That the main-
stream print media is undergoing rapid change is not limited to Malaysia, of
course; newspaper circulation is decreasing worldwide. As a result, newspa-
pers around the globe are increasingly attempting to adapt their business
models to become more "multi-platform news services". Malaysia's media is
also changing in this way, which is already being reflected in the newsrooms
of *Astro Awani*, *BFM* and *Malaysiakini* (Tapsell 2012). As all platforms con-
verge, so, too, will the distinction between the so-called "Fifth Estate" (so-
cial media, citizen journalism and blogging) and the traditional mainstream
media. As these platforms collide, there may only be one winner in the battle
for media power and control.

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