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

Azahar Kasim <sup>a</sup>, Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani <sup>b, c, \*</sup><sup>a</sup> School of Multimedia Technology and Communication (SMMTC), Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia<sup>b</sup> School of International Studies (SOIS), Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia<sup>c</sup> Graduate School of Public Administration, National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), Bangkok 10240, Thailand

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### ABSTRACT

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

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### Introduction

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

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

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

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [azizuddin@uum.edu.my](mailto:azizuddin@uum.edu.my) (M.A. Mohd Sani).

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

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

**Table 1**  
Malaysian Websites, comScore Media Matrix 2014

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

Source: *Marketing Magazine* (2014)

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

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

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

**Table 2**  
Facebook and Twitter unique visitors, 18 February 2015

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

Source: Facebook and Twitter

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