'Watching the Watchdog 2.0' Report on the Malaysian Media Coverage of GE14

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Executive Summary

Newsmaking is a constructed process. Decisions about what and whom to cover and how to portray the actors or issues are deliberate. The coverage of political events, especially general elections, provides a useful lens into the workings of the media, especially against the backdrop of media control through ownership and legislation.

This report presents key findings from the monitoring of news media coverage of the 14th General Election in 2018 – from the dissolution of Parliament on 7 April 2018 until 12 May 2018, three days after the elections on 9 May 2018. It was conducted by the Centre for the Study of Communications and Culture under the School of Media, Languages and Cultures at the University of Nottingham Malaysia. The monitoring, with the help of 50 volunteers, covered a total of 24 outlets from the state and private media. The content was selected from the home/national pages/segments and coded to assess the coverage of 20 categories of information that are explained in detail later.

For more than 60 years, the state and market scrutinised and regulated the media in Malaysia in varying degrees, depending on the media. Direct political party ownership and control of the media began with the print media. This was initially marked by a struggle for editorial control of the leading national Malay daily, *Utusan Melayu (Utusan)*. It was eventually taken over in the 1960s by UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), the Malay party that formed the national alliance post-independence. The Chinese and Indian parties in the coalition - the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) – followed suit when they took over the ownership of several Chinese, Tamil and even English language newspapers. Broadcasting was under direct state control from inception. The mid-1980s saw the emergence of private but politically-linked - broadcasters and trends towards a conglomeration of media and cross-ownership of media and other businesses. Besides, there was a range of laws that restrict reporting and expression. The details will be discussed separately in the section on the legal framework.

This media landscape provides the backdrop for the study, which follows the monitoring framework during the general election in 2013. The trends in reporting in 2018 differed very little when compared to the findings in 2013, and other academic analyses of media coverage of polls over the years.

Below are some key points that emerged from the analysis in 2018:
- Bias was most evident in the state-owned media and some of the private media aligned to the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, based on how they covered the political parties, coalitions and politicians.
- Media outlets within the same media groups - especially those in the Media Prima and Media Chinese International Limited (MCIL) groups - tended to be consistent in terms of coverage and tone of coverage. There were some differences in the Sarawak-based KTS stable - *Oriental Daily* gave a much more balanced coverage while *Utusan Borneo* published high levels of pro-BN content. The news coverage in RTM showed a slight variation across the different languages.

- Chinese language newspapers appeared fairer when it came to quoting politicians from both BN and opposing Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition as sources.
- Regional newspapers were prominent in focusing on local interests or issues, as shown by the Sabah-based publications. However, the four that were monitored tended to be favourable to BN in their coverage.
- Media coverage of the election prioritised parties and politicians rather than policies.
- Top political leaders dominated the narratives in most of the media outlets with a few exceptions such as *Malay Mail Online* that featured a wider variety of sources and political figures.
- The public voice was minimal, and sources tended to be male-dominated.

As the patterns of reporting across the mainstream media showed very little change between 2013 and 2018 despite the growing public calls for independent and fair coverage, we list here a set of recommendations for the various stakeholders.

To the media (owners, publishers, editorial):
- Enforce and defend editorial independence to ensure free and fair coverage
- Focus on issues and policies to encourage a more informed electorate rather than personalities in elections coverage
- Provide more critical and evaluative reporting programmes for media personnel
- Ensure the highest standards of ethical and professional reporting
- Introduce gender-sensitive reporting in newsrooms

To legislators:
- Enact laws or policies to prevent political party monopoly ownership of public media
- Reform laws that restrain open and critical media coverage
- Legislate protection for media professionals in the course of conducting their professional duties
- Legislate for transparency and accountability in political advertising through the media

Recommendations to political parties, government and state bodies:
- Ensure equal access to state and other political functions for media professionals, especially during election campaigns
- End harassment of and attacks against media workers

Recommendations to academia, civil society, public
- Enhance and expand media literacy programmes
- Hold media accountable for ethical and professional reporting

Chapter 1: Report of the media coverage of the 14th General Election

By Gayathry Venkiteswaran

1.1 Introduction to the Watching the Watchdog 2.0 (WtW2.0) project

The Centre for the Study of Communications and Culture, under the School of Media, Languages and Cultures at the University of Nottingham Malaysia, decided to monitor media coverage of the 14th General Election. The project built on an earlier project of ours, Watching the Watchdog: Media Monitoring of the 13th General Election in 2013, done in collaboration with the Centre for Independent Journalism. The main objectives of the project were to gauge media performance in its treatment of political figures and parties as well as key policy issues. The data from two general elections provided information on trends that could provide a better understanding of media performance during political events.

Method and data collected for WtW2.0

In monitoring the media coverage, our team analysed news, editorials and interviews (with a total of 274,285 data points[1] from 24 media sources, including television, print and online media, in four languages (Bahasa Malaysia, English, Chinese, Tamil). The monitoring covered 35 days from the dissolution of Parliament on 7 April 2018 (see Table 1 for the list of 24 media outlets selected for the media monitoring). In 2013, the project involved monitoring 29 media outlets nationwide from 7 April – 7 May 2013. Some of the outlets excluded this time round were *Harian Metro, Tamil Nesan* and the Sarawak-based newspapers, due to the unavailability of coders at the last minute. *The Malaysian Insight* (under the name of *The Malaysian Insider* in 2013) was offline during the election and was also not monitored. Several newspapers had regional editions such as *Sinar Harian*, but only the central version was analysed. In East Malaysia, where the *Borneo Post* and *See Hua Daily* are available in Sabah and Sarawak, only the Sabah versions were analysed.

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[1] Data points here refer to the items (politicians, political parties, issues etc) analysed in this research and the tone of coverage for each item, taking into account how frequent they were mentioned in the news, editorial or interviews selected.

Table 1

List of media sources

	ENGLISH	BAHASA MALAYSIA	CHINESE	TAMIL
Newspaper	🔴 New Straits Times The Sun The Star Daily Express 🔵 Borneo Post	Utusan Sinar Harian 🔵 Utusan Borneo	🟢 Sin Chew Daily 🔵 Oriental Daily 🟢 China Press 🔵 See Hua Daily	Makkal Osai
Television broadcasts	🟠 TV2 English 🔵 NTV7	🟠 TV1 Berita Nasional 🔴 TV3 Buletin Utama	🟠 TV2 Berita Mandarin 🔴 8TV Mandarin News	
Online	Malaysiakini Malay Mail Online	Malaysiakini BM		
News Wire	–	🟠 Bernama		

Owned by 🟠 Government
🔴 Media Prima
🟢 MCIL
🔵 KTS

Categories of data collected

The content was selected from the home/national pages/segments and coded to assess the coverage of 20 categories of information. The first four categories focused on the actors, while the rest were a range of policy and non-policy issues that were expected to be addressed in the elections coverage. Each category contained a list of specific names or issues (known as operators) that the coders then noted and analysed. We used sentence-level analysis and assigned tones to provide a more accurate representation of the content. The tones were positive, negative, neutral, attacking or attacked, replicating the GE13 media monitoring method.
1. Positive – When a positive frame is used in combination with one of the categories/operators
2. Negative – When a negative frame is used in combination with one of the categories/operators
3. Neutral – No positive or negative frame used, and no attack going on
4. Attacking – When a politicians/source is attacking someone else
5. Attacked – When a politician/source is being attacked.

Actors:
        Category 1: Politician/Political figures mentioned
        Category 2: Politician/Political figures cited as sources
        Category 3: Political parties and coalitions
        Category 4: Organisations
Policy Issues:
        Category 5: Manifestos, vision or other policy programmes
        Category 6: Environment
        Category 7: Economy/Development
        Category 8: Education

Category 9: Foreign Policy
Category 10: Domestic Policy, Crime & National security
Category 11: Legislations (particularly oppressive laws)
Category 12: Religion (introduction of laws, impact of court decisions, apostacy, Hudud law)

Non-policy issues:
Category 13: Ethnicity
Category 14: Religion (reference to someone's religion but not related to policy) issue/statement
Category 15: Democracy and human rights
Category 16: Socioeconomic sectors
Category 17: Territory (reference to states and discussions of MA63, Bangsa Johor)
Category 18: Mudslinging
Category 19: Gender
Category 20: Electioneering

The selection of the media and categories was consistent with the monitoring of the GE13 coverage. Still, specific operators were amended and updated to reflect the individuals and issues that the team felt would be prominent in GE14. The apparent changes involved new political parties formed since the last elections, with Bersatu, Amanah and Warisan added to the list. In the category on oppressive legislation, the new additions were the National Security Council Act, Security Offences and Special Measures Act (SOSMA) and the Anti-Fake News Act. On religion as a policy area, we included a reference to the court decision in the *Indira Gandhi* case, which we anticipated would be an issue for some parties and constituents.

Coders

A total of 50 volunteers were involved in the research (*see Appendix 1*). We maintained inter-coder reliability through regular clarification and discussion through emails and a WhatsApp group dedicated to the research project. We conducted training for coding in Kuala Lumpur and Penang, although they were too close to the monitoring period. We also had debriefing sessions in Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Kota Kinabalu to gather the observations of the coders, the challenges faced and recommendations for further research.

Report period

The data collection covered 35 days but the overall research project covered the period post GE14 until July 2020 given the political and media-related changes and developments. Both the Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Harapan coalitions underwent significant changes after GE14, the former seeing the exit of many member parties while the latter breaking up in February 2020. The situation continues to evolve and we note that there may be gaps in the information regarding laws and ownership that affect the media as well as the political parties and coalitions.

1.2 Context of the 14th General Election

The 13th Parliament was dissolved on 7 April 2018, and a general election was set for 9 May (Wednesday) at the federal and state levels, except for Sarawak (its state legislative election is due in 2021). Candidates had 11 days to campaign between 28 April and 8 May.

Changes in political parties and coalitions

There were already several changes in political parties and the coalitions since the last election, by the time the 14th General Election was called.

Parti Islam Se Malaysia (PAS)
- PAS leaves the Pakatan Rakyat coalition
PAS left Pakatan Rakyat in 2015 because of differences with DAP on the implementation of hudud law. The alliance, which comprised Parti Keadilan Rakyat and DAP, was formed after the 2008 election as the opposition front. The cooperation between the three parties began in 1999 under the umbrella of Barisan Alternatif. Its predecessor included Parti Rakyat Malaysia which later merged with Parti Keadilan Nasional to form Parti Keadilan Rakyat.)

- Split in PAS
The moderates in the Islamist party were ousted during its congress in 2015 before the split in the PR coalition that year. The moderates went on to form a new political party - Parti Amanah Nasional - and planned to work with PKR and DAP.

Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia
- Bersatu formed
Ex-prime minister Mahathir Mohamad resigned from UMNO in February 2016, citing the party's support for Najib Abdul Razak and refusal to hold him responsible for the 1MDB scandal as grounds. In September 2016, Mahathir and other ex-UMNO leaders set up Bersatu.

- Bersatu joins the opposition coalition
In March 2017, Bersatu announced it would join the opposition coalition, which had been renamed Pakatan Harapan (previously known as Pakatan Rakyat) after PAS' departure in 2015.

Parti Warisan Sabah
- Ex-UMNO minister Shafie Apdal, who questioned the scandal-ridden 1MDB, formed Warisan in October 2016 after he left UMNO. Warisan

agreed to campaign with Pakatan Harapan during the election formally and was seen as an ally in the since toppled PH government.

Voter issues

Critics complained that polling day, set on a Wednesday, was an attempt to discourage turnout. Several campaigns were launched by citizens to help voters who were based overseas and in different states to return home to vote. These were widely mobilised over social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, using the hashtags #UndiRabu, #PulangMengundi and #CarpoolGE14. Others raised funds to support the purchase of flight tickets for those travelling between the peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak. Voter turnout on Wednesday, 9 May, was 82.3%, compared to the 80% on a Sunday in 2013.
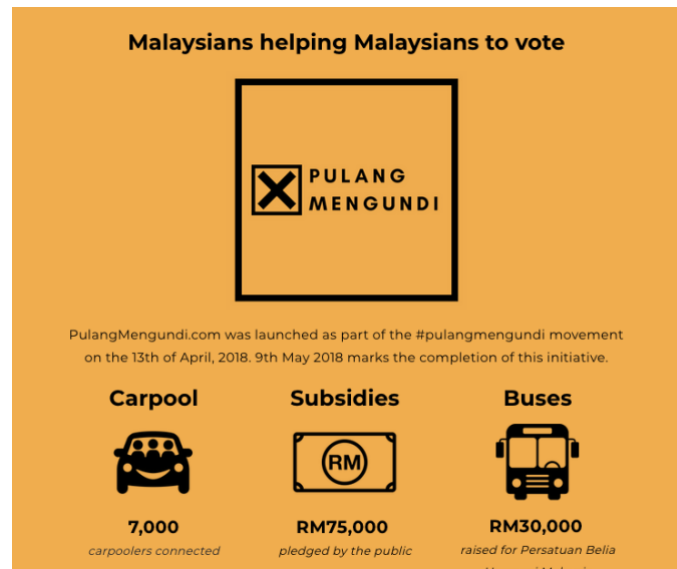
(Screenshot of the #PulangMengundi website, as of 14/8/2019)

Pollsters' predictions

The PH coalition used the 1MDB scandal involving ex-Prime Minister Najib to unseat the BN coalition. There was mixed speculation on the outcome of the election. Polling organisation Merdeka Centre reported that BN would retain its power but with reduced seats in Parliament[2]. The PKR-linked Invoke forecast that PH would win 89 seats in the peninsula, an additional 15 from East Malaysia and control of five states, and that PAS would suffer major losses.[3] PH would eventually win a simple majority on 9 May and take control of seven states in the peninsula and Sabah, through its partnership with Parti Warisan Sabah. BN won only 79 parliamentary seats (compared to the 133 in the previous election) and held Perlis and Pahang. While the state election was not held in Sarawak, four Sarawak BN parties would leave the coalition after GE14 and form Gabungan Parti Sarawak.

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[2] *Malaysiakini*. (2018, May 8). "Merdeka Centre's final poll: BN 100, Harapan 83, 37 too close to call", https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/423763.

[3] Augustin, R. (2018, March 10). "Invoke predicts 5 states to PH, PAS to lose everything", *FMT News*. https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2018/03/10/invoke-predicts-5-states-to-ph-pas-to-lose-everything/

1.3 Findings of the monitoring

The media coverage of GE14 in 2018 shows similar trends to that observed in previous elections, that is, a consistent and predictable bias and an overwhelming focus on politicians, political parties and electioneering. The following sections discuss the main findings from the monitoring.

1.3.1 BN receives most space and overall favourable coverage

Figure 1 shows that Barisan Nasional received the most coverage (55.27%) across the media, followed by Pakatan Harapan (32.36%) and Gagasan Sejahtera (9.77%). Mentions of independent candidates were 2.6% of the total monitored.

Figure 1

Volume of Coverage of Political Parties and Coalitions

Barisan Nasional 55.27%

Pakatan Harapan 32.36%

Gagasan Sejahtera 9.77%

Independent Candidates 2.6%

Media
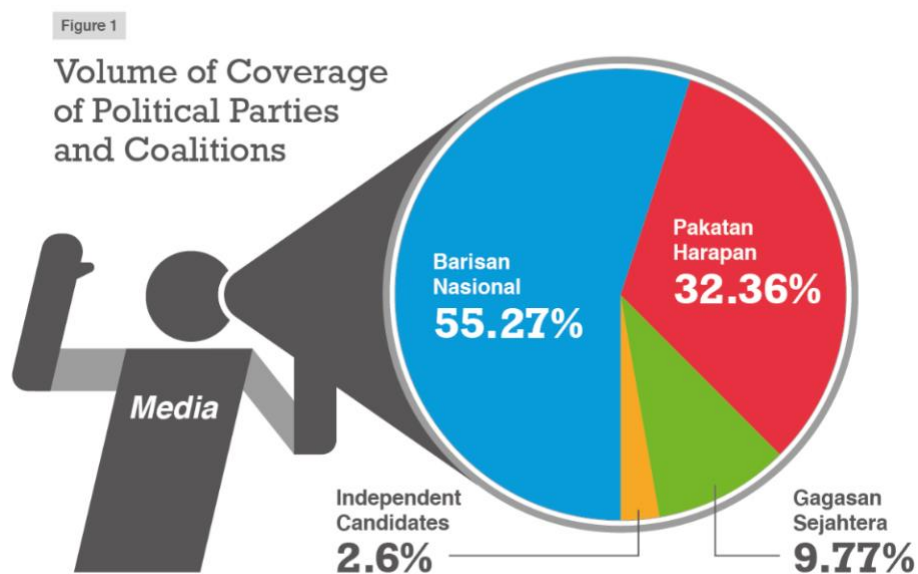
As expected, portrayals of BN and its coalition parties tended to be positive while PH received the most attacks. When it came to individual politicians and political figures, overall, PH was covered more but BN politicians were used as sources more often. Between the two, BN politicians also engaged more in attack politics. The findings show some variation - where PH received slightly more coverage, it was not always in its favour. It was not just the state media's coverage that was pro-BN. Private media linked to BN also showed a high volume of mentions and positive tones when reporting on the BN coalition and its member political parties.

Figure 2

Tone of Coverage of
Political Parties and Coalitions

BARISAN NASIONAL
- 63.66%
- 51.18%
- 47.39%
- 42.32%

PAKATAN HARAPAN
- 48.87%
- 41.72%
- 35.80%
- 26.30%

GAGASAN SEJAHTERA
- 11.66%
- 9.74%
- 7.99%
- 6.03%

INDIE
- 2.36%
- 2.06%
- 1.70%
- 1.16%

Neutral Positive Negative Attacked
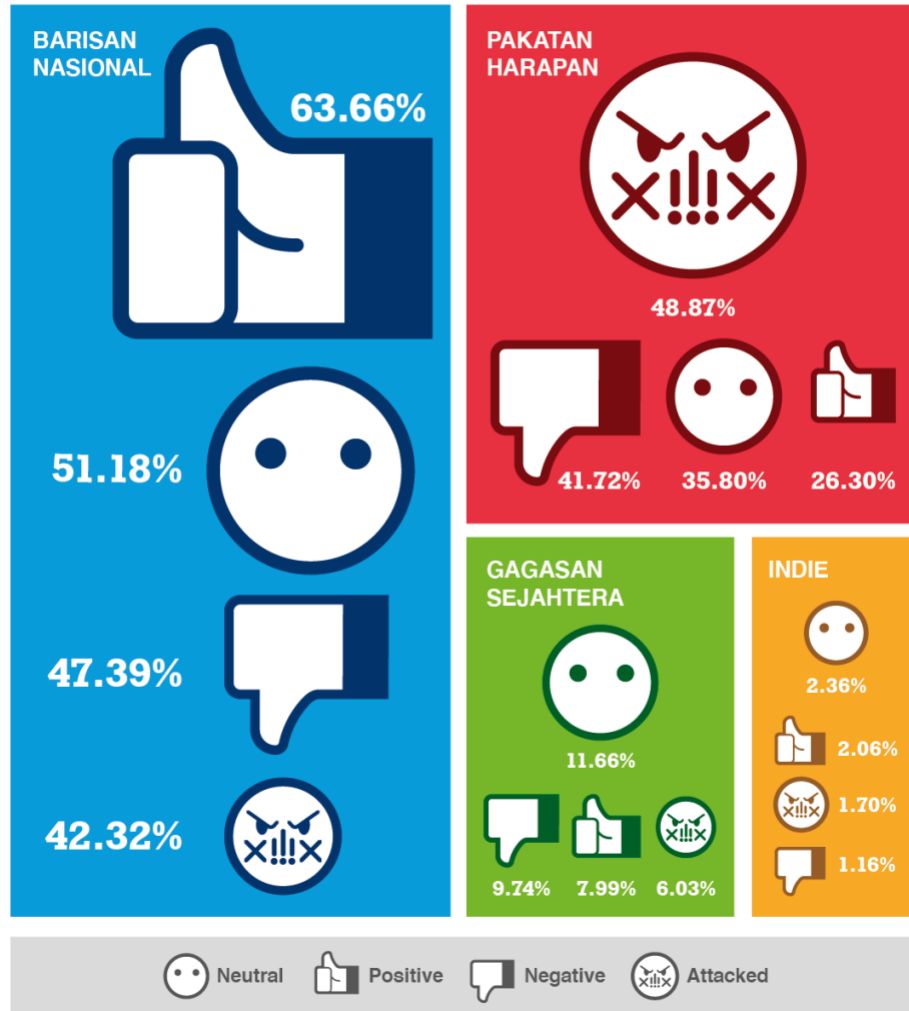
The following summarises the coverage of the political parties, coalitions and politicians according to language and media type.

<u>Print</u>

There were 13 newspapers monitored in the four languages. Figures 3-5 below show how they covered the coalitions and the tone of their coverage.

Bahasa Malaysia:

Utusan Malaysia's coverage favoured BN. Making up 60% of the volume of coverage of political parties and coalitions, it portrayed BN mainly positively and in neutral tones. There were also instances of negative tones and attack politics, but PH received more than half of such mentions. In the mention of politicians and political

figures, it was evident that those from PH received the bulk of the negative or attack tones, even though there were positive and neutral portrayals as well.

Sinar Harian also favoured coverage of the BN, which made up 52.77% of overall coverage, followed by PH (24.48%) and GS (18.28%). BN and GS had their share of positive, negative and attack tones. But in the case of PH, the newspaper tended to portray it more negatively. However, when it came to covering individual politicians and political figures, the tone was more spread out across the political spectrum.

Utusan Borneo had among the highest coverage of BN at 80% of mentions of parties and coalitions and generally reported in positive tones. PH received just over 16% in terms of coverage. While BN dominated in the mentions, reports on it were mixed. While all attack politics targeted it, BN also had the most favourable coverage when compared to the others. Warisan, together with PH, received the most negative mentions. Likewise, when there was mention of politicians or figures from PH, they tended to be portrayed negatively or in attack tones. The rest were portrayed positively or in neutral tones.

English:

The Star had more coverage of BN (61.35%), which was also portrayed more positively or in neutral tones, as opposed to the high levels of attacks against PH, which received 24.32% of the volume of coverage. However, when it came to covering individual politicians and political figures, the newspaper tended to be fairer across the political affiliations. BN politicians tended to receive slightly more attacks than their PH counterparts.

In the *NST*, BN received 55.14% of coverage, compared to 35.41 for PH and 8.69% for GS. The tone of the coverage was overwhelmingly biased in favour of BN. Overall, PH received a majority of the attacked and negative coverage while BN received most of the neutral and positive coverage. The trend continued; politicians from BN were portrayed favourably while those from PH were cast negatively or subject to most of the attacks.

The Sun's coverage of the coalitions was balanced; 47.17% for BN and 46.13% for PH, with GS receiving 6.25% of the coverage. The newspaper tended to portray PH in more neutral tones while BN was mainly portrayed positively or targeted for attack politics. When it came to politicians, individuals from PH were twice as likely to be attacked, but they received as much positive coverage as BN politicians.

The two Sabah-based newspapers also had more coverage of BN. In *Borneo Post*, BN received up to 67% of the overall coverage of political parties and coalitions. BN was twice as likely to get covered as PH in the *Daily Express*. The portrayal of the coalitions was slightly more mixed in the *Daily Express* but, overall, PH politicians tended to be covered unfavourably.

Chinese:

Oriental Daily provided more or less equal space to BN (46.15%) and PH (45.07%). The difference was also small in terms of how they were covered, whether in neutral, positive, negative or attacked tones.

Sin Chew Daily and *China Press,* which are part of the same media group, were more balanced in providing space for the two major coalitions. *Sin Chew* offered more neutral coverage of the coalitions although PH politicians tended to be portrayed negatively or attacked more than their BN counterparts. On the other hand, *China Press* portrayed PH politicians slightly more favourably than those from the BN. There were as many sources from BN as from PH who engaged in attack politics (roughly 40%). In *Sin Chew*, BN sources were five times more likely to engage in attack politics compared to those from PH.

The Sabah-based *See Hua Daily*'s coverage of the two main coalitions was relatively close, although it was slightly more favourable to the BN. It was clear that there was more coverage of state-based political parties and politicians, and chief among them were Shafie Apdal, Musa Aman and Yong Teck Lee.

Tamil:

The only Tamil media analysed was *Makkal Osai*. Overall, the newspaper provided balanced coverage of the coalitions – BN (51.46%), PH (30.25%) and GS (13.7%), and presented them mostly in neutral tones (98%). There was more mention of PH politicians but BN politicians were quoted more than the others.

Figure 3

Breakdown of coverage by the newspapers (%)

- BN
- PH
- GS
- Others

New Straits Times
The Star
The Sun
Sinar Harian
Utusan Malaysia
China Press
Oriental Daily
Sin Chew Daily
Makkal Osai
Borneo Post
Daily Express
See Hua Daily
Utusan Borneo

0   20   40   60   80   100

Figure 4

Positive coverage by the print media (%)

Figure 5

Negative coverage by the print media (%)

New Straits Times
The Star
The Sun
Sinar Harian
Utusan Malaysia
China Press
Oriental Daily
Sin Chew Daily
Makkal Osai
Borneo Post
Daily Express
See Hua Daily
Utusan Borneo

BN
PH
GS
Others

TV

A total of seven television stations broadcasting in Bahasa Malaysia, English and Chinese were monitored. Figures 6-8 below show how they covered the coalitions and the tone of coverage.

Bahasa Malaysia:

TV1 and TV3 were biased in favour of BN. It was clear, in terms of the volume (54.3% and 54.23%) of coverage, the positive coverage given to BN and negative portrayals of PH. Astro Awani's coverage was also skewed towards BN in terms of volume at 53% while PH received 30% and GS, almost 16% of the mentions, the latter much higher when compared to TV1 and TV3.

English:

TV2 English covered BN more prominently, representing 68.58% of mentions of political parties and coalitions, compared to 22.61% for PH and 8.81% for GS. Most of the coverage for PH was in attack tone while the BN received the most neutral and positive portrayals. It was also the only coalition to receive negative coverage. GS was portrayed positively or in neutral tones. The pattern was similar for politicians from the respective parties and coalitions.

NTV7's coverage of the parties and coalitions was similar in terms of the volume but carried fewer attacks of PH even though it was supportive of BN overall. Yet, when covering individual politicians and political figures, 75% of the PH politicians were

portrayed negatively or were subject of attacks. In contrast, two-thirds of the BN politicians received positive or neutral coverage.

Chinese:

TV2 Mandarin was skewed towards BN in terms of coverage (56.87%), receiving two-thirds of the overall positive coverage. PH as a coalition received almost 80% of all the attacks. It was the same in the coverage of PH politicians. Interestingly though, BN politicians were those who got the most negative portrayal.

8TV covered BN more than the other coalitions, but the gap was narrower with 47.9% for BN and 38.6% for PH; GS received 9.54% coverage. Almost two-thirds of the coverage of the parties and coalitions were neutral. However, most of the coverage of PH was as attack targets, with DAP receiving the most. BN did receive negative coverage even though it was portrayed more positively than the others overall.

Figure 6

Breakdown of coverage by the TV stations (%)

Figure 7
Positive coverage by the TV stations (%)

Figure 8
Negative coverage by the TV stations (%)

TV1
TV2 English
TV2 Mandarin
TV3
NTV7
8TV
Astro Awani

● BN ● PH ● GS ● Others
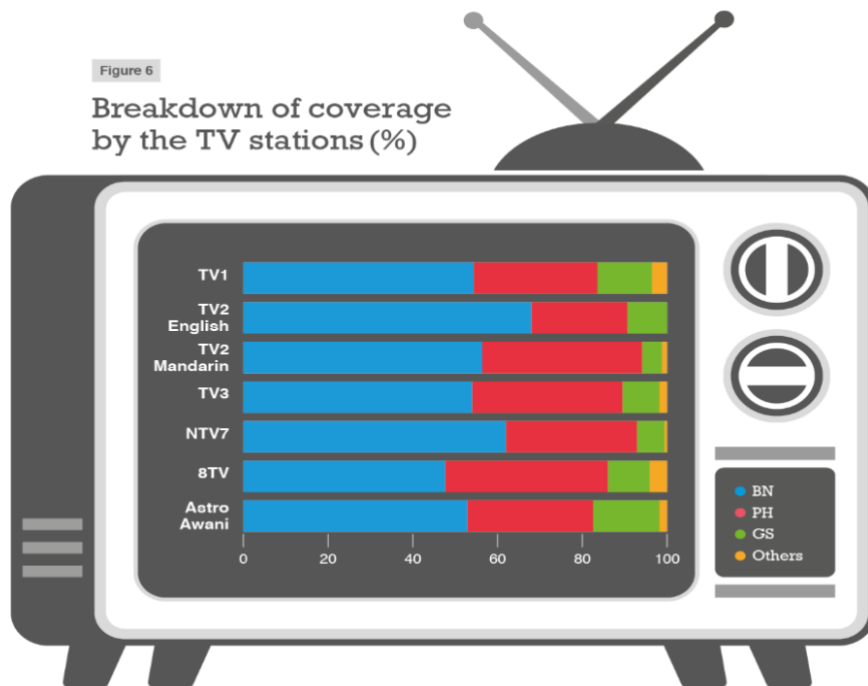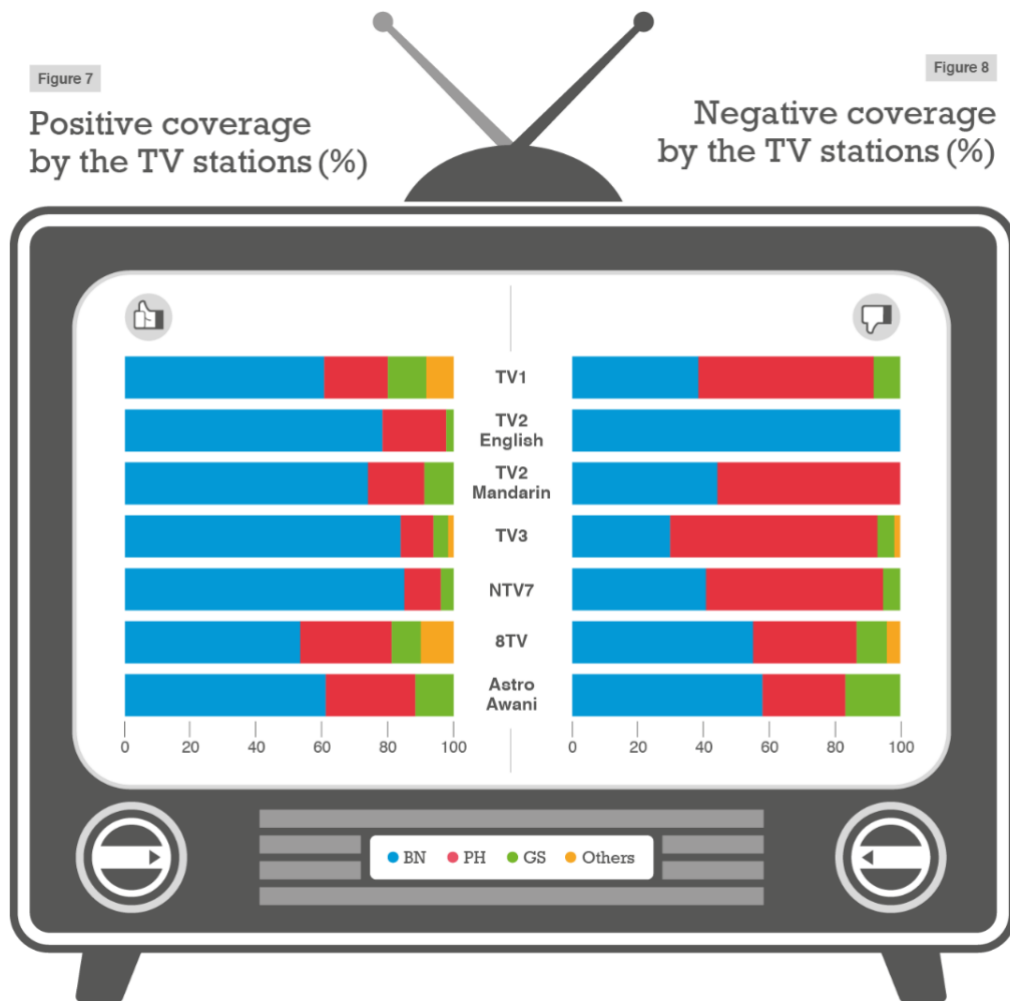
Wire/Online

Two private online media were monitored together with the government wire agency. These were for the Bahasa Malaysia and English versions. Figures 9-11 below show how they covered the coalitions and the tone of coverage.

Bahasa Malaysia:

Bernama mentioned BN the most at 57%, but it featured GS more frequently than PH (24.23% vs 16.37%). Interestingly, all parties and coalitions had their share of positive and negative portrayals even though the bulk of the mentions went to BN.

Malaysiakini (BM), like its English page, covered PH (42.65%) slightly more as a coalition and the political parties that were a part of it, including Warisan, while BN had 38.92% of the mentions and GS, 17.75%. The tone of coverage of PH was mainly negative, attacked or neutral while BN had the most positive tones when mentioned. Analysis of reports on politicians and political figures showed that those from PH had

four times more positive mentions than those from BN, but were as likely as them to be subject to attack politics or to be portrayed negatively.
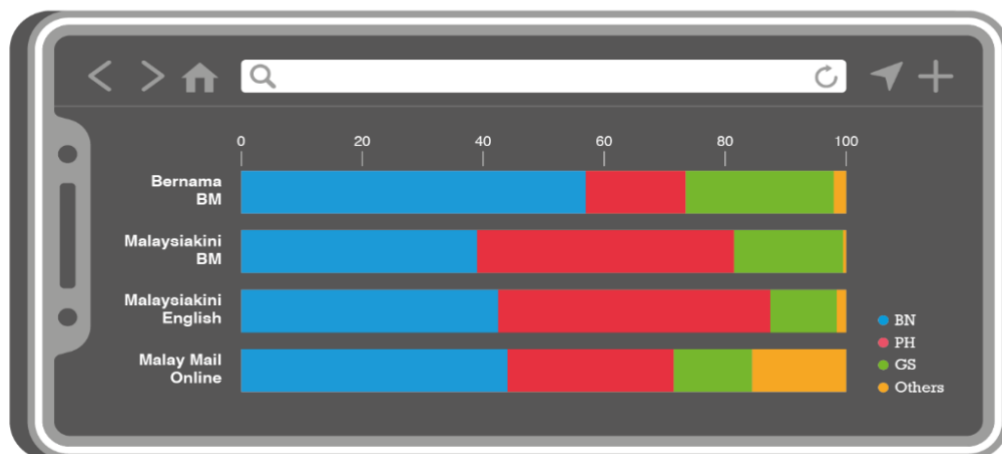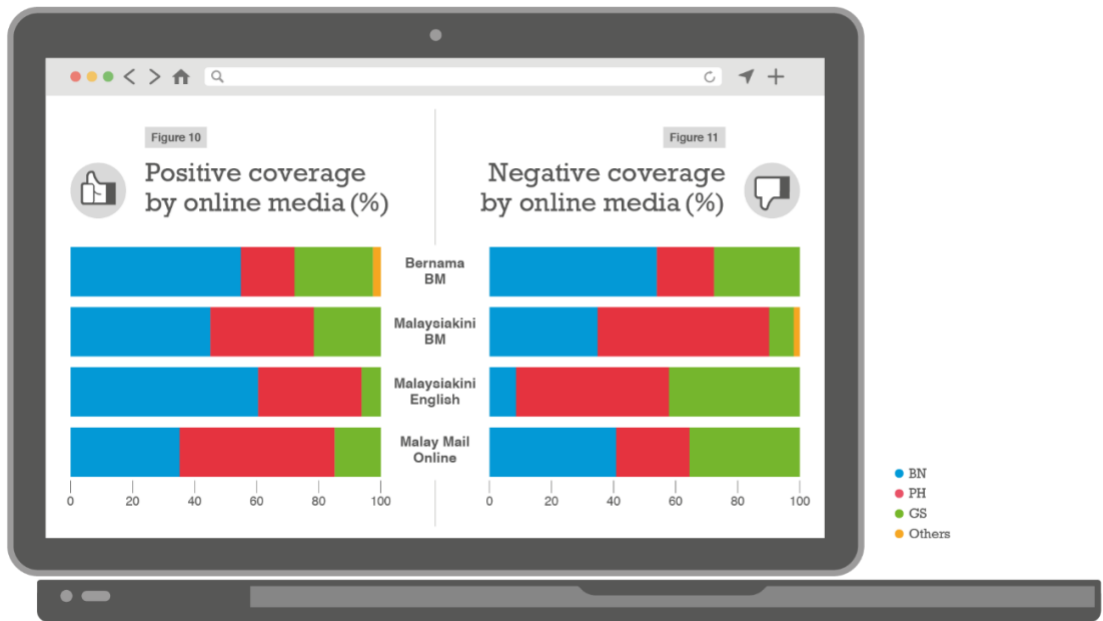
English:

Malaysiakini gave PH slightly more coverage (44.5%) compared to the BN (42.81%), and a significant amount of mentions of GS (11.29%). However, the BN was portrayed more positively while PH had significant coverage that was either negative or of being attacked. As far as politicians were concerned, most of the individuals were portrayed in neutral, negative or positive tones, and no attack politics were recorded.

Malay Mail Online's coverage of the coalitions and independents was more spread out, with BN receiving the highest reference (43.87%), PH next at 27.53%, Independents at 15.44% and GS at 13.15%. But when analysed against the tone of coverage, PH was portrayed more favourably compared to the others. Attack politics were targeted at BN, GS and Independents. The trend was slightly reversed when analysed against the politicians and political figures from the different coalitions/affiliations. PH individuals were frequently attacked even though they also received positive portrayals. Notable in MMO's case is the high number of individuals not from the top leadership of the parties who were featured.

Figure 9

Breakdown of coverage by online media (%)

Figure 10 — Positive coverage by online media (%)

Figure 11 — Negative coverage by online media (%)

Bernama BM
Malaysiakini BM
Malaysiakini English
Malay Mail Online

- BN
- PH
- GS
- Others

Ratio of tonal coverage for BN and PH

Table 2 below, on the ratio of tonal coverage between BN and PH, shows that most media carried positive or neutral coverage of BN. At the same time, PH and its politicians tended to be portrayed more negatively. While the pattern did not change dramatically from the 2013 election, outlets like wire agency Bernama showed some improvement in its coverage by reducing the attacked coverage against PH or increasing favourable mentions of it.

In the 2018 coverage, *NST* showed the widest gap; it consistently disadvantaged the PH in its coverage, choosing to amplify the attacks against PH or downplaying positive mentions. For instance, PH politicians and political figures were 129 times more likely to be attacked compared to those in BN or 40 times more when the coverage mentioned the coalitions. Also, for every one positive mention of BN, PH politicians were portrayed positively only 0.07 times. While the ratio was not as bad, other Media Prima companies such as TV3 and NTV7 showed similar trends.

Table 2: Distribution of tonal coverage of BN and PH parties/coalitions/politicians

Region/ Language	Media Outlet	Political Parties & Coalitions				Politicians and Political Figures			
		Positive	Neutral	Negative	Attacked	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Attacked
Peninsular Print English	*New Straits Times*	1: 0.15	1: 0.54	1: 3.25	1: 40.48	1: 0.07	1: 1.9	1: 14.54	1: 129
	The Star	1: 0.33	1: 0.4	1: 0.46	1: 7.3	1: 1:41	1: 1.34	1. 0.98	1: 0.81
	The Sun	1: 0.24	1: 1.14	1: 0.68	1: 0.43	1: 1	1: 1.56	1: 4.33	1: 2
Peninsular Print Malay	*Sinar Harian*	1: 0.44	1: 0.46	1: 1	1: 1.41	1: 0.55	1: 0.74	1: 67	1: 0.64
	Utusan Malaysia	1: 0.14	1: 0.37	1: 0.93	1: 1.85	1: 0.61	1: 1.34	1: 2.1	1: 2.58
Peninsular Print Chinese	*China Press*	1: 1.44	1: 0.94	1: 0.4	1: 0.74	1: 1.43	1: 2.2	1: 1.3	0
	Oriental Daily	1: 1.06	1: 1.05	1: 1.25	1: 0.8	1: 1.19	1: 1.44	1: 1.71	1: 1.24
	Sin Chew Daily	1: 0.58	1: 1.18	1: 1.28	1: 1.07	1: 0.77	1: 1.69	1: 2.65	1: 4.4
Print Tamil	*Makkal Osai*	1:1	1: 0.58	1: 0.56	1: 0	1: 1	1: 1.25	1: 0.67	1: 2
Television English	NTV7	1: 0.13	1: 0.65	1: 1.3	1: 0.38	1: 0.22	1: 0.74	1: 0.82	1: 4
	TV2 English	1: 0.25	1: 0.44	1: 0	1: 1.6	1: 0.04	1: 0	1: 0.5	1: 5.5
Television Malay	TV1	1: 0.32	1: 0.76	1: 1.38	0	1: 1.08	1: 1.34	1: 1.16	0: 1
	TV3	1: 0.12	1: 0.92	1: 2.12	1: 0.67	1: 0.34	1: 2.04	1: 3.28	0: 1
	Astro Awani	1: 0.44	1: 0.81	1: 0.43	1: 4	1: 0.64	1: 2.29	1: 0.85	1: 1.3
Television Chinese	8TV	1: 0.53	1: 0.86	1: 0.57	1: 3.22	1: 0.39	1: 0.76	1: 0.5	1: 0.33
	TV2 Mandarin	1: 0.24	1: 0.77	1: 1.25	1: 3.75	1: 0.63	1: 0.72	1: 0.22	1: 3
Sabah English	*Borneo Post*	1: 0.26	1: 0.4	1: 0.66	1: 9.5	1: 0.13	1: 0.65	1: 3.41	1: 4.8
	Daily	1: 0.34	1: 0.5	1: 0.66	1: 1.43	1: 0.68	1: 1.1	1: 1.78	1: 2.17

	Express							
Sabah Malay	*Utusan Borneo*	1: 0.1	1: 0.34	1: 2.02	1: 0	1: 0.28	1: 0.46	1: 4.3	1: 3.5
Sabah Chinese	*See Hua Daily*	1: 0.75	1: 1.05	1: 0.53	1: 2.27	1: 0.86	1: 1.88	1: 0.78	1: 2.52
Online Malay	Mkini BM	1: 0.55	1: 1.06	1: 1.57	1: 1.79	1: 3.47	1: 1.85	1: 0.94	1: 1
	Bernama	1: 0.32	1: 0.36	1: 0.34	1: 0.32	1: 0.74	1: 0.98	1: 1.94	1: 20.2
Online English	Malay Mail	1: 1.42	1: 1.1	1: 0.58	1: 0	1: 1.9	1: 1.88	1: 0.86	0: 1
	Mkini Eng	1: 0.55	1: 1.06	1: 1.57	1: 1.179	1: 1.1	1: 1.98	1: 1	0

1.3.2 Most popular politicians and political figures

As anticipated, Najib and Mahathir were the most popular politicians to be mentioned, much like the conclusions in 2013. But the difference was in the tone of the coverage. Apart from them, prominent leaders in Sabah and Sarawak topped the list of most cited politicians and also quoted as sources. Mahathir topped the list of most mentioned politicians (8.69% compared to Najib at 8.29%). While he was quoted as a source only 2.9% out of the overall sources, Najib was the most cited political leader. Figures 12-17 show how the top politicians were covered.

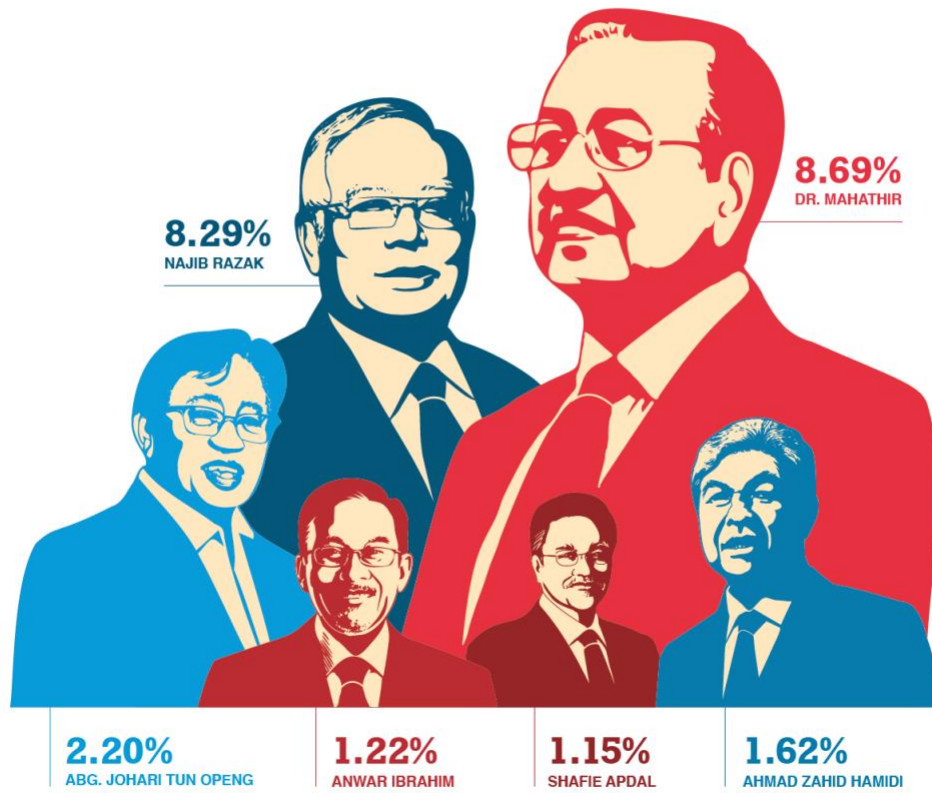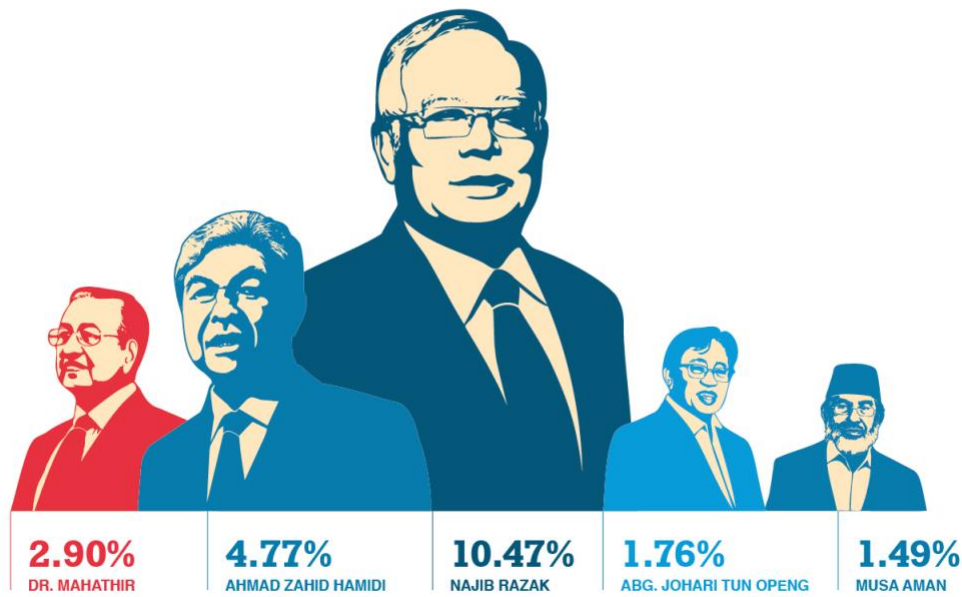Figure 12

Coverage of politicians and political figures

8.29%
NAJIB RAZAK

8.69%
DR. MAHATHIR

2.20%
ABG. JOHARI TUN OPENG

1.22%
ANWAR IBRAHIM

1.15%
SHAFIE APDAL

1.62%
AHMAD ZAHID HAMIDI

Figure 13

Use of politicians and political figures as sources

2.90%	4.77%	10.47%	1.76%	1.49%
DR. MAHATHIR	AHMAD ZAHID HAMIDI	NAJIB RAZAK	ABG. JOHARI TUN OPENG	MUSA AMAN

Najib tended to be portrayed positively while Mahathir received the most negative mentions. In general, a few leaders dominated the narratives. Apart from the two, from BN, the other figures were Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, Abang Johari Tun Openg and Musa Aman, while from PH, they were Shafie Apdal and Anwar Ibrahim. The portrayal was mixed as some actors had shifted political sides since the 2013 general election. Rosmah Mansor was the only woman to receive significant mention when aggregated across the 24 media outlets, and she was generally portrayed negatively.
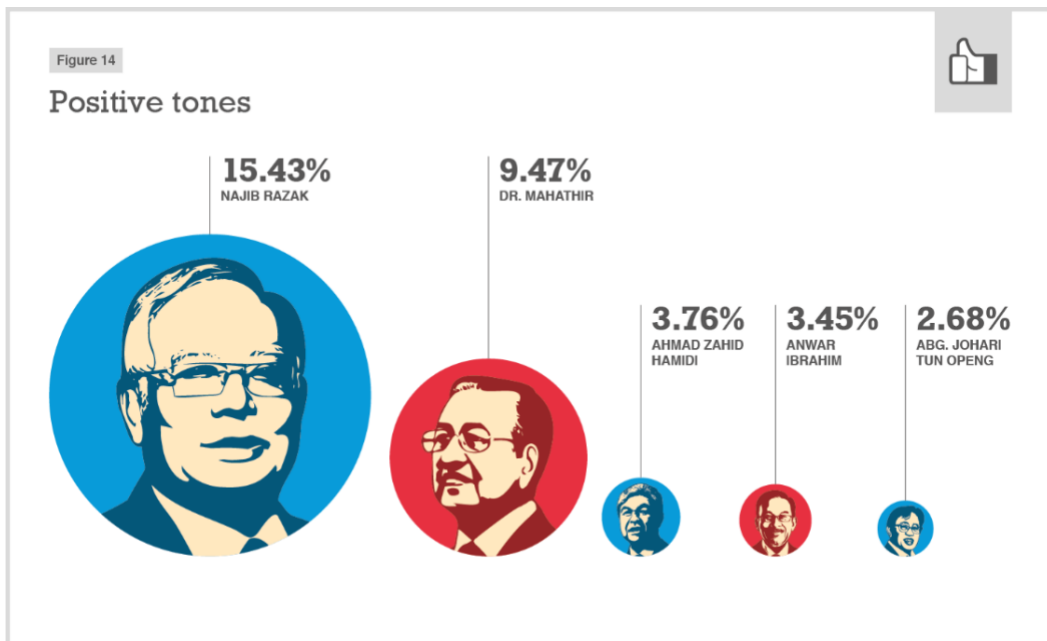
Figure 14

Positive tones

15.43%	9.47%	3.76%	3.45%	2.68%
NAJIB RAZAK	DR. MAHATHIR	AHMAD ZAHID HAMIDI	ANWAR IBRAHIM	ABG. JOHARI TUN OPENG

Figure 15

Negative tones

16.56%
DR. MAHATHIR

10.36%
NAJIB RAZAK

3.16%
SHAFIE APDAL

2.94%
ABG. JOHARI TUN OPENG

1.72%
ROSMAH MANSOR

1.66%
MUSA AMAN

1.41%
ABD. RAHMAN DAHLAN

1.34%
ANWAR IBRAHIM

1.28%
AHMAD ZAHID HAMIDI

1.19%
HUSAM MUSA

1.19%
ANTHONY LOKE

1.03%
WEE KA SIONG

Figure 16

Neutral tones

6.79%
DR. MAHATHIR

6.53%
NAJIB RAZAK

2.23%
ABG. JOHARI TUN OPENG

1.69%
AHMAD ZAHID HAMIDI

1.02%
ANWAR IBRAHIM

Figure 17
Politicians who received most attacks

31.36%
DR. MAHATHIR

7.08%
NAJIB RAZAK

6.48%
SHAFIE APDAL

5.26%
CHOW KON YEOW

2.08%
ABD. RAHMAN DAHLAN

2.00%
NGA KOR MING
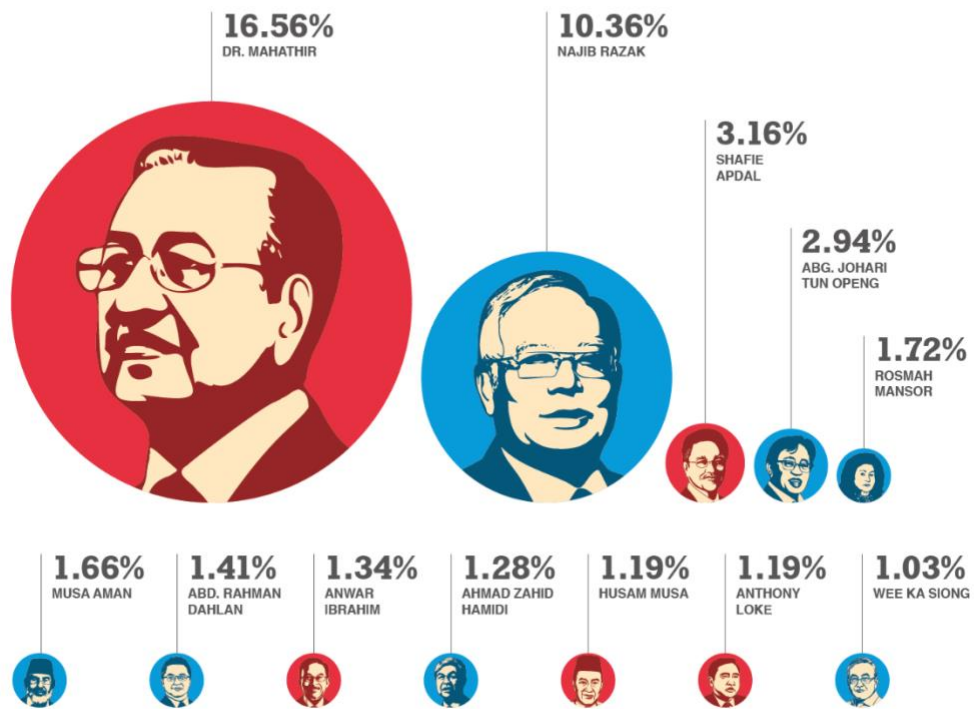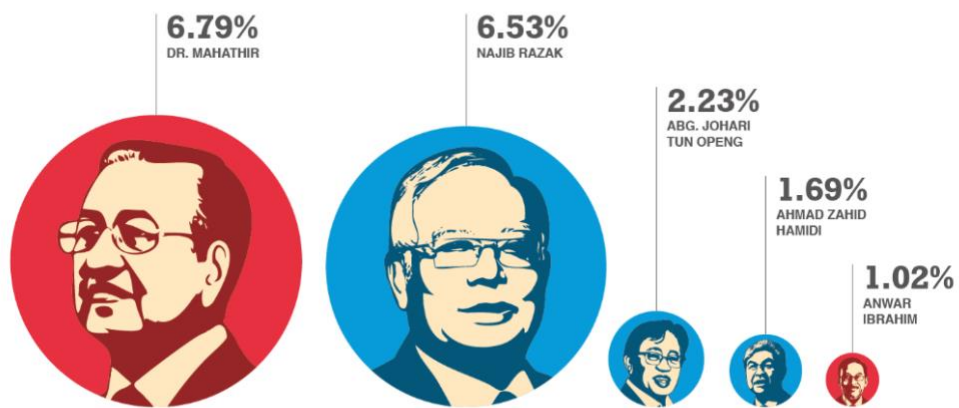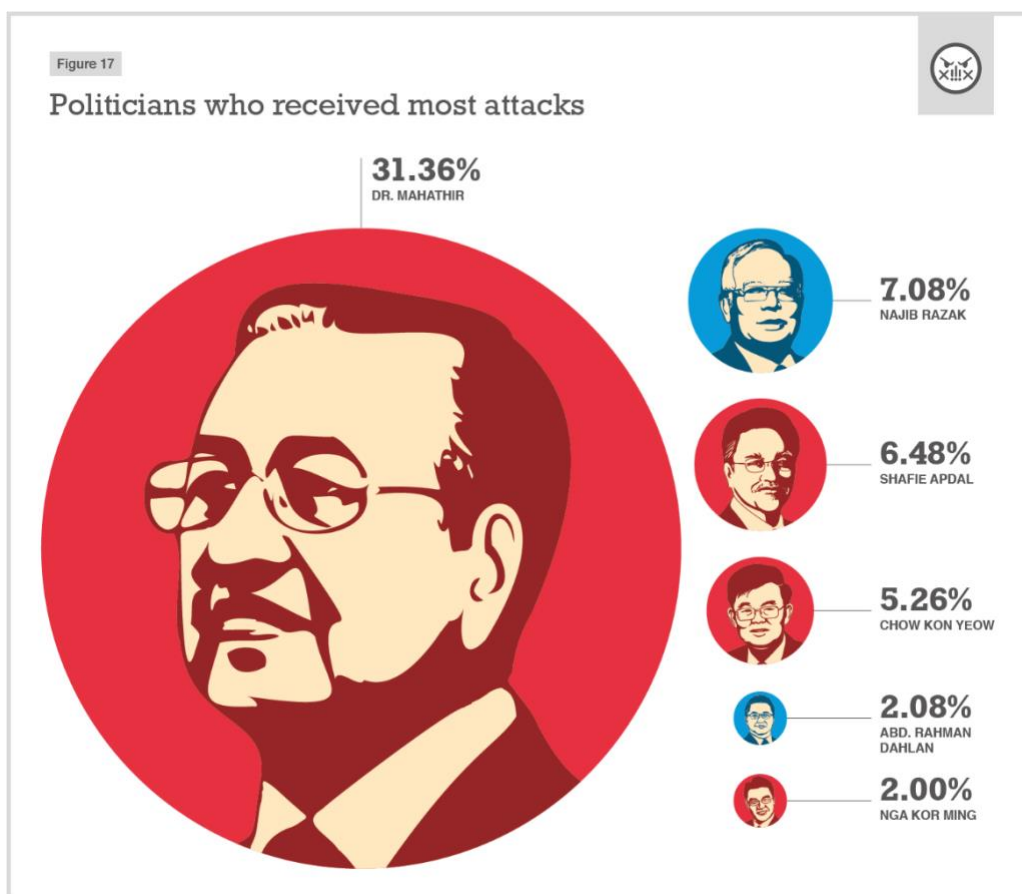
This pattern was observed in many of the media outlets but there were interesting differences/diversions from the expected tone of coverage. For example, Najib was not among the top politicians mentioned or used as the main source in *The Star*, despite its ownership by a BN party. The newspaper had a diverse picture when it came to individuals who were mentioned from among the various party leaders and how they were portrayed. Those who received the most favourable coverage were Anwar, Azmin Ali, Abdul Rahman Dahlan, Abang Johari, Darrel Iking and Chow Kon Yeow. Ahmad Zahid did get positive coverage, but he came after his colleagues from Sabah. BN leaders were among those portrayed negatively as well and were subject to attack politics. The main sources of attacks were Mahathir, Abang Johari, Liow Tiong Lai, Rais Husin, Hadi Awang and Anuar Tahir.

China Press had a significant number of mentions of DAP leaders, as well as using them as sources. There was a mix of DAP, MCA and PKR leaders besides the two top political figures - Najib and Mahathir - in its coverage.

Makkal Osai featured a different list of top politicians mentioned or cited, compared to the overall findings. Among them were Azalina Othman Said, Chew Mei Fun and Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman.

Unlike other media outlets which showed politicians from all coalitions receiving attacks, *NST* highlighted PH leaders much more than the others. Those who were portrayed unfavourably most often were from PH, namely Mahathir, who had the bulk of the negative coverage.

TV1 had only one politician who was attacked in its coverage and that was Chow Kon Yeow from DAP. Chow was also the subject of attack in *Utusan Malaysia* but he was not targeted as bad as former Bersih chair Ambiga Sreenivasan, who received 28.57% of all the attacks.

The picture was nevertheless quite varied in *Utusan Malaysia* in terms of the politicians who were featured the most as PH leaders did have their share of positive coverage. For example, Anwar got the most positive coverage while the politician most mentioned was Abang Johari. Najib did not get into the top lists except where he was the politician who most used attack politics against others.

In *Sinar Harian*, Abang Johari dominated the coverage as the politician who was mentioned the most and cited as a source. He generally received positive or neutral coverage.

Overall, BN politicians were generally cited more often as sources in the coverage, with the *NST*, NTV7, TV2 English, TV1, TV3, TV2 Mandarin, Bernama and *Utusan Borneo* having the most disparity. On the other hand, the peninsula-based Chinese-language newspapers, as well as Astro Awani, displayed what could be described as a balanced ratio of sources from the two coalitions, as highlighted in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Distribution of Use of BN and PH Politicians as Sources

Coalition Media	BN	PH	Ratio (BN:PH)
New Straits Times	32	7	1 : 0.22
The Star	39	31	1 : 0.79
The Sun	41	18	1 : 0.44
Sinar Harian	32	25	1 : 0.78
Utusan Malaysia	39	23	1 : 0.59
China Press	40	39	1 : 0.98
Oriental Daily	22	22	1 : 1
Sin Chew Daily	31	28	1 : 0.9
Makkal Osai	43	28	1 : 0.65
NTV7	40	7	1 : 0.18
TV2 English	37	4	1 : 0.11
TV1	46	31	1 : 0.67
TV3	35	6	1 : 0.17
Astro Awani	15	17	1 : 1.13

8TV	30	8	1 : 0.27
TV2 Mandarin	36	7	1 : 0.19
Borneo Post	44	13	1 : 0.3
Daily Express	25	11	1 : 0.44
Utusan Borneo	31	5	1 : 0.16
See Hua Daily	37	15	1 : 0.41
Mkini BM	11	17	1 : 1.55
Bernama	62	6	1 : 0.1
Malay Mail Online	12	9	1 : 0.75
Mkini Eng	15	20	1 : 1.33

Box 1: Talked about but less chance to be heard

Utusan's coverage of politicians is a good example of the disparity between being talked about and opportunities to be heard. For instance, PH leaders were quoted less often as sources compared to those in BN, but news coverage would often refer to them, and unfavourably. On 6 May, 2018, a Sunday, when newspapers tend to have more pages, *Mingguan Malaysia* (Utusan's Sunday edition) dedicated a spread on the evils of PH leaders. The spread purported to publish comments from social media, mainly from Facebook and was headlined: "'*Kaki pusing*' + '*kaki fitnah*' = '*kaki tipu*'" ("Spin doctor + slanderer = liar"). It featured so-called public comments about PH leaders such as Lim Guan Eng, Azmin and Rafizi Ramli. At the same time another page in the home news section was dedicated to exposing Mahathir's 'anti-Islam' stand resulting from his collaboration with the DAP. On that day, Mahathir, Guan Eng and Kit Siang were referred to 115 times out of 382 (30%) instances of a politician named, and out of this, two-thirds were neutral and the rest, negative. They were not quoted as sources in any of the 59 stories analysed that day.

(*Mingguan Malaysia, 6 May 2018 – pages 16, 17, and 25)*

1.3.3 Public voices

As elections are about the choices people make about the government or representatives they want, interviews with the public/voters would be one way of gauging sentiments, preferences and expectations. Yet, public voices hardly featured in the media; *vox populi* only made up 2.77% of those interviewed as sources during the campaign and post-GE14. Of those interviewed, more than two-thirds were men, similar to the overall trend of male-dominated coverage. Chapter 6 briefly discusses coverage of women by the media during the election.

1.3.4 Politicians over policies

Across the board, media coverage prioritised individuals and the political parties, represented by the frequency of the mentions in the stories. Journalism practice demands attribution, which explains the mentions involving politicians as sources. Nevertheless, the spaces given to policy issues were far less at 6% compared to the political figures and parties combined at 72.7%. The high percentage of non-policy issues was mainly due to references to constituencies in the respective states (territories), electioneering and the ethnic breakdown of voter population in the respective constituencies. The following chart shows how the media covered the election.

Breakdown of categories of media coverage

21.55%
Politicians and political figures (mentioned)

24.37%
Politicians and political figures (as sources)

26.65%
Parties / Coalitions

3.97%
Organisations

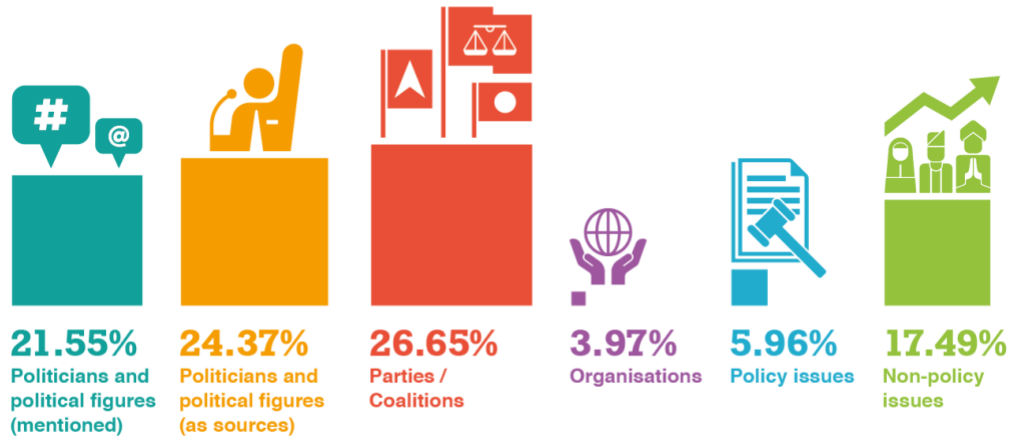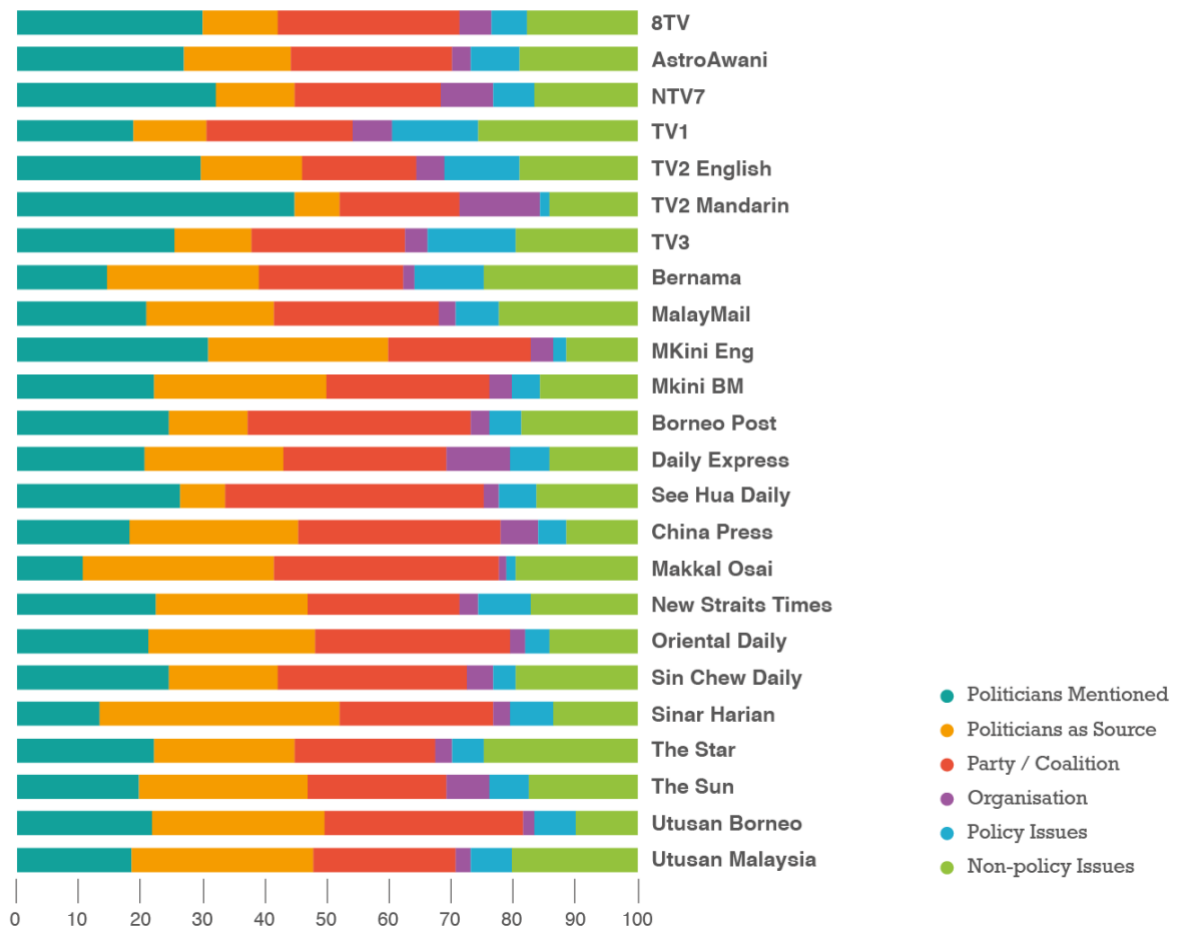**5.96%**
Policy issues

17.49%
Non-policy issues

Figure 19 below shows how each media covered the election. Of all the media, at least 10% of the coverage in TV1, TV2 (English), TV3 and Bernama touched on policy issues. However, these were primarily on the economy/development and party/coalition visions. These issues tended to favour BN's manifesto as well as its programmes such as 1Malaysia and TN50. The rest made fewer mentions of policy issues.

GE14 coverage by media (%)

Legend:
- ● Politicians Mentioned
- ● Politicians as Source
- ● Party / Coalition
- ● Organisation
- ● Policy Issues
- ● Non-policy Issues

Categories (top to bottom): 8TV, AstroAwani, NTV7, TV1, TV2 English, TV2 Mandarin, TV3, Bernama, MalayMail, MKini Eng, Mkini BM, Borneo Post, Daily Express, See Hua Daily, China Press, Makkal Osai, New Straits Times, Oriental Daily, Sin Chew Daily, Sinar Harian, The Star, The Sun, Utusan Borneo, Utusan Malaysia

Of the policy issues (vision, the environment, economy/development, education, foreign policy, domestic policy and national security, oppressive legislation, and religion), those related to economy and development were the most visible at 45% of total coverage, followed by party/coalition vision/manifestos at 25%. The following figure shows the breakdown of sub-topics that were covered.

Figure 20

Overall coverage of policy issues

1%
Religion

6%
Oppressive
Legistration

4%
National Security

7%
Foreign Policy

9%
Education

25%
Vision

3%
Environment

45%
Economy /
Development

POLICY
ISSUES

As anticipated, BN policies and manifestos gained the most coverage across the media, with a few exceptions where the PH and GS also received significant mentions. BN announced its manifesto after the dissolution of Parliament and the pro-BN media provided a lot of space for the coalition's manifesto, announced on 7 April, which also included state-level manifestos and the BN youth manifesto. These were reported as lengthy news articles, in infographics, and advertorials. On the other hand, Pakatan Harapan's manifesto, which was announced in March, received considerably less coverage throughout the media monitoring period. For example, media outlets under the Media Prima group clearly showed a bias towards BN's agenda in their coverage of manifestos and policies, with high levels of positive portrayal, whereas the PH manifesto was given either neutral or negative coverage. State-run RTM and Bernama also carried more items that were favourable to BN's policies but they generally refrained from using negative tones in the coverage. By comparison, media such as *Sinar Harian* and *China Press* showed more diversity in their coverage of manifestos and policies. These were mostly portrayed in a neutral tone, while *Malaysiakini* Bahasa Malaysia also tended to use neutral tones for similar stories.

Figure 21

Media coverage of manifestos / visions (%)
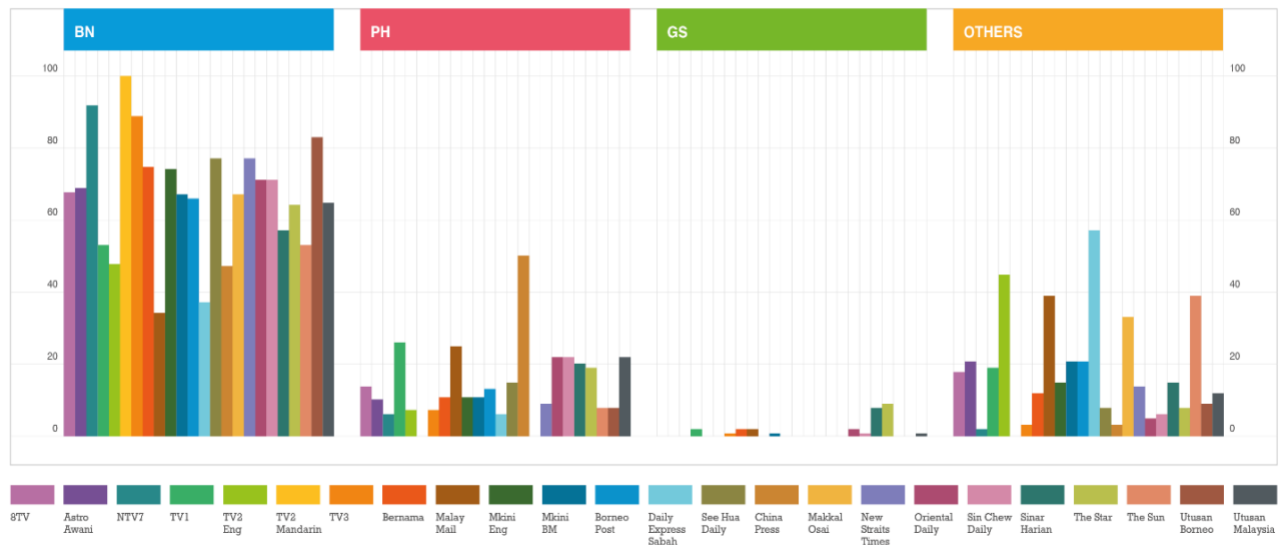
Under the category of economy/development, the overwhelming focus was on infrastructure (24%) - which included politicians making promises about projects involving road construction, hospitals, bridges and housing, economic growth (12%) and 1MDB (11%). The four Sabah-based newspapers in particular dedicated a lot of space for infrastructure issues, partly to coincide with the attention on the state, which saw the split in UMNO and the formation of the Warisan under Shafie. Matters related to inflation or the GST (pros and cons) did not receive the expected attention (only 7% of coverage related to the economy). Still, they did emerge more significantly in *See Hua Daily, Malaysiakini, The Sun* and *The Star*.

Box 2: The GST battle

Just days before the elections, several newspapers used the same sleeve advertisements to drive home the benefits of the GST. In its election manifesto, PH promised to abolish the GST which was introduced in 2014. In countering the PH manifesto, on Sunday, 6 May 2018, almost all the newspapers carried sleeve advertisements to "explain" how the earnings from GST were spent. The front pages of the newspapers had a similar message: "GST money, where did it go?" In reports, the pro-BN media quoted politicians criticising PH's promises on the GST. On 20 April, 2018, *Utusan Malaysia* under the headline: "Hapus GST, tol, PTPTN polisi 'Pak Pandir'" (loosely translated as "Naive to abolish GST, toll") attacked PH's manifesto to abolish the tax as folly and costly for the economy. However, the tax did not feature highly in terms of the most discussed policy issues.

Sleeve ads for newspapers on 6 May 2018 for The Sunday Star and New Sunday Times

A week before the polls, Merdeka Centre's survey[4] showed that economic issues were among the top concerns in several states. In terms of media coverage, the economy and development were the main topics of coverage, although overwhelmingly related to infrastructure projects as part of electioneering. There was less coverage touching on the cost of living or job opportunities/unemployment.

Table 4: Merdeka Centre's survey on top issues for voters vs media coverage ahead of GE14

Voters' Top Issues	Average (%)	Media coverage	Overall (%)
Economy (inflation, job opportunities, low income)	39	Inflation/GST/ unemployment	0.28
Corruption	16	Corruption	0.27
Housing	10	Housing	0.2
Malay rights	6	1MDB	0.2
Leadership	5		
Political stability	4		
1MDB	3		

1.3.5 Non-policy issues

Overall references to territory received the most mentions, understandably, given the reports about constituencies and candidates vying for those seats. At the same time, politicking was targeted at areas/regions - as seen through mentions - to develop specific

[4] Merdeka Centre. (2018, May 2). Malaysia General Elections XIV Outlook Prospects and Outcome II. Available at: http://merdeka.org/pages/02_research.html

constituencies or regions. BN's manifesto, for example, was also launched at the state-level and this took up space in most of the pro-BN media. Sabah was the most mentioned state in media coverage. This can be attributed to two factors: one was the focus of the political parties in the state especially with the strong challenge posed by the new party Warisan; and the second was the volume of data from the Sabah-based newspapers which tended to focus on the state. Where we had anticipated more references to the Malaysia Agreement 1963 and mentions of independence for Sabah and Sarawak, the monitoring found that these made up less than 4% of all mentions in this category.

Next, coverage also focused on various aspects of electioneering and references to ethnic identities in relation to the electoral constituencies. References to non-policy issues – many of which are essentially labels – were three times that of policy issues. This can be attributed to the emphasis on reporting that describes factual details of the events taking place during the election campaigns.

Figure 22

Overall coverage of non-policy issues

Electioneering[5]

Under electioneering, coders looked for references to politicians giving handouts, mentions of special events, promises or announcement of development projects and attempts at appealing to voters, including photo opportunities and 'baby-kissing'. Mentions of cybertroopers or social media war were also included in this category. Usually, the media would report these as news and not query whether these could violate election laws.

[5] Media reports on electioneering were shared with Bersih 2.0 which coordinated election monitors around the country as part of their verification of potential electoral offences.

During the period of monitoring, there were at least 40 incidents of electioneering noted in the media coverage that could be considered problematic under electoral laws. They ranged from offering money, food and other goodies at 'ceramahs' (rallies), promising development projects such as building new roads, schools and hospitals if voted in, scholarships for students, houses, grants and business licenses. There were only a few news articles that reported these as potential violations.

Ethnic identities

Ethnic-based politics has dominated mainstream politics in Malaysia. However, the monitoring of the media coverage during GE14 showed that the question of ethnicity was not as prevalent as expected. Firstly, the number of news coverage on ethnic issues was rather small compared to the overall data. There 6,917 data points mentioning ethnicity as opposed to the 274,285 total data points (2.5%).

Secondly, race or ethnic identities were generally not used to fan racial hatred against the respective ethnic groups in the overall coverage. Instead, ethnic identities were used for politicking or electioneering in luring voters to support the respective political parties or coalitions. In speeches or interviews, politicians tended to label their opponents as not defending the interests of a particular ethnic group or claimed that they were better in representing the interests of certain ethnic groups. For example, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) was labelled as not defending the rights of the Malays, or politicians from MCA claiming that they would advance the interests of the Chinese in the area of education if they won.

Another type of report focused on the phenomenon of the "Malay Tsunami". In it, UMNO politicians tried to downplay the probability of this outcome or the impact of this outcome on the interests of Malays or Malay institutions. Even *Utusan Malaysia*, a newspaper owned by UMNO, which had been fanning racial and religious sentiment, was restrained during the elections. The paper mostly focused on the benefit of voting for Barisan Nasional and warned that institutions such as MARA could close unless the then ruling coalition was re-elected.

1.3.6 Bumping up the pro-BN narrative

It was evident in the election coverage that the news hierarchy in Malaysian media continued to prioritise government leaders. Most BN candidates were presented earlier on the television news or the first to the third pages of the newspapers. The pattern was familiar - BN candidates would be featured first and only then were others introduced (TV3), or non-BN candidates would be mentioned but the accompanying photos tended to be of BN candidates (NST). When the opposition did get featured in the front pages of the newspapers, they were portrayed in the negative. For example, on 21 April, *The Star* front-paged the axing of DAP incumbents in Penang, indicating discontent within the party.

In addition to the slant and placement of the reports, the monitoring also revealed two other phenomena which, within the context, served to populate the media coverage

with pro-BN stories. Whether these were deliberate efforts to fill in the pre-set pages with election stories, or due to oversight, cannot be determined as yet. Nevertheless, it raises questions about gaps in the quality of Malaysian journalism. One pattern identified by volunteers was the writing of several stories from one source or quote, often referred to as follow-up pieces in newsrooms. A typical example was the criticisms levelled against DAP's Guan Eng or Bersatu's Mahathir. In such cases, a story can generate up to two or three other 'follow-up' stories. One example is a quote from a top BN leader like Ahmad Zahid criticising Guan Eng. Reporters then solicited comments from other leaders from BN or those who are opposed to DAP or Bersatu and their collaboration, resulting in additional separate stories that reinforced the position or criticism.

Volunteers observed how different journalists from the same establishment would cover an issue on different days and presented as them as new stories. In some instances, the 'news' can be from several months earlier and covered by regional reporters. One example is the ground-breaking ceremony of Hospital Pendang in Kedah on 22 April 2018 by then caretaker prime minister Najib. The project was part of the 11th Malaysia Plan announced in May 2015 and was reported several times in 2017, including the call for tenders and details of the facilities to be offered. Most media outlets published the ground-breaking ceremony on 22 April, including *Sinar Harian*, which also published the story but written differently on 29 April 2018. Several stories in the Chinese-language *Sin Chew* were re-published in full on separate days and in different pages, for instance, appearing one day on page 7 (18 April) and a day later on page 11. In other examples, stories are rephrased and presented as "new". Re-publishing stories or expanding a comment to two or three stories, has the effect of "increasing" coverage to give the impression of noise and reinforcement of selected narratives: in this case, the pro-BN, anti-DAP, and anti-Mahathir lines.

1.3.7 Political ads bursting at the seams

The BN and its member political parties took out a range of advertisements that promoted BN manifestos or its leaders across the media outlets. BN leaders like Ahmad Zahid, Hishamuddin Hussein, Nancy Shukri, and Rohani Abdul Karim featured in ads talking about party accomplishments without naming BN or UMNO. In the print media, sometimes the manifestos were presented as news stories with *vox populi*, making it difficult to distinguish between news and advertorials. In *NST*, the layout and placement of the advertorials were such that readers would not have readily recognised such copy as them.

Organisations that endorsed BN placed full-page advertisements in various media but went "missing" after the elections. One such example is Nijam (meaning truth in Tamil), which expressed support for Najib's contribution to the Indian community and maintained a website to showcase these developments. In its full-page advertisement in selected newspapers, Nijam asked readers to think about all the benefits given to the Indian community in the eight years of Najib's government and the Malaysian Indian Blueprint, as opposed to the few initiatives under Mahathir's 22-year rule. Almost immediately after the elections, content on the Nijam website was stripped away and left in construction mode.

1.3.8 1MDB defended

Ahead of the election campaign, BN leaders warned that any information about the scandal-ridden 1MDB that did not come from authorised sources would be deemed as fake news.[6] Several journalists shared that they were informed by their respective newsrooms to avoid the covering issue. It was expected that coverage of 1MDB would be affected due to threats of legal action under the Anti-Fake News Act 2018. To a large extent, it was confirmed by the media monitoring, whereby pro-BN media quoted leaders in defence of 1MDB or in criticising the opposition who questioned the project. For example, *NST* cited Najib and Ahmad Zahid from BN, and Arul Kanda, the CEO of 1MDB, when talking about the success of the rationalisation or in challenging their opponents to pursue legal challenges.

NST used 1MDB CEO Arul Kanda as its top source on the issue and made headlines almost daily since campaign began on 28 April up to polling day, as a roadshow was organised to explain the 1MDB scandal to the public. The stories were written in-house or sourced from Bernama, and the CEO was often the only one cited in the stories.

21 April: "1MDB rationalisation successful"
23 April: "1MDB public talks vital"
26 April: "Opposition not keen on truth"
28 April: "Portal's article unethical"
30 April: "Arul Kanda: Audit firm can refer to original 1MDB documents"
2 May: "Ask me anything, Arul Kanda tells DAP leaders"
3 May: "Arul: Rafizi a liar, instigator on 1MDB"
4 May: "Opposition shunning 1MDB dialogues"
6 May: "Opposition harping on 1MDB half-truths"
7 May: "1MDB CEO mulling legal action against columnist"
9 May: "1MDB roadshow a success"

Najib's support of DAP stalwart Tan Seng Giaw, who was dropped as a candidate after he said that the former prime minister did not commit any wrongdoing in the 1MDB case, received wide and pro-BN coverage in most of the media. Examples of headlines included this in *Utusan Malaysia* on 21 April ("PM simpati nasib Seng Giaw"), *Sin Chew* ("Najib in solidarity with Seng Giaw") and Malaysiakini BM on 19 April ("Najib: Pemimpin DAP cakap benar tentang 1MDB tapi kena buang"). Malaysiakini BM which provided significant coverage on the topic carried views from across the political parties commenting on the scandal.

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[6] Hemananthani Sivanandam. (2018, March 21). 'Unverified info on 1MDB is fake news, says deputy minister', The Star. Available at https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/03/21/unverified-info-on-1mdb/.

Conclusion

- Bias was most evident in the state-owned media and some of the private media aligned to the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, based on how they covered the political parties, coalitions and politicians.
- Media outlets within the same media groups - especially those in the Media Prima and Media Chinese International Limited (MCIL) groups - tended to be consistent in terms of coverage and tone of coverage. There were some differences in the Sarawak-based KTS stable with *Oriental Daily* having a much more balanced coverage while *Utusan Borneo* published high levels of pro-BN content. The news coverage in RTM showed a slight variation across the different languages.
- Chinese language newspapers appeared fairer when it came to quoting politicians from both BN and opposing Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition as sources.
- Regional newspapers were prominent in focusing on local interests or issues, as shown by the Sabah-based publications. However, the four that were monitored tended to be favourable to BN in their coverage.
- Media coverage of the election prioritised parties and politicians rather than policies.
- Top political leaders dominated the narratives in most of the media outlets with a few exceptions such as *Malay Mail* that featured a wider variety of sources and political figures.
- The public voice was minimal, and sources tended to be male-dominated.

Chapter 2: Mayday for the Mainstream Media? Malaysia's Media and the GE14

By Zaharom Nain and Gayathry Venkiteswaran

On 10 May 2018, Malaysians woke up surprised but with a sense of optimism. Their votes in the 14th general election (GE14) had resulted in a new government, and that new regime would be bringing in fundamental freedoms long denied to them. Even until the very last minute, there was no hint in the mainstream media of the historic change that was to take place. It went into overdrive with pro-Barisan Nasional (BN) propaganda during the election period. Post-election, netizens and commentators shared anecdotes about how they were now keen to read the newspapers or watch television news because they perceived that the media could now report freely and fearlessly. How far actual changes match this perception in the media remains to be seen. Indeed, recent events – precipitated by what is now widely called the 'Sheraton Move'[1] of 1 March 2020 – indicate that much of the optimism as regards to a more independent media might need a re-examination now. For one, the 'Move' led to the collapse of the democratically-elected Pakatan Harapan (PH) government.

Nonetheless, the election period and the days immediately after the GE14 polls provide an interesting and useful milestone in the analysis of media and politics in Malaysia. Particularly noteworthy is the question of why voters chose differently from the dominant narrative that the mainstream media were peddling. How far did the mainstream media go in its pro-BN coverage? Based on the election results, has the news media become redundant?

This paper discusses the media coverage of GE14 and the preliminary results of a media monitoring project we conducted, which was a follow up to similar research done for GE13.[2] Our findings mainly support those from the monitoring of the GE13 elections coverage, but there was a significant change in the immediate days after polling on 9 May; negative tones about the then opposition coalition turned positive as the national leadership changed hands. While we recognise the importance of analysing social media use, we have not focused on this aspect in our research, due to resource and time limitations. The discussion is contextualised within the political-economy structures of the media in Malaysia, which we argue must be significantly reformed if Malaysia is to see greater media freedom and freedom of expression.

Media Bias in Malaysia

Elections are special political events that provide an opportunity for the electorate to know more about policy issues, and media outlets typically dedicate pages or segments to discuss the elections. They are also indicative of how partisan the media outlets are or can be, and how newsrooms negotiate within the limitations set by political and business interests. The bulk of research on media coverage of elections in Malaysia has mainly found media bias in support of BN.

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[1] *The Edge Financial Daily*. (2020, March 2). "A tumultuous week of political upheavals". *The Edge Financial Daily*. https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/tumultuous-week-political-upheavals

[2] See Houghton, T.J. and Nain, Z. (2015). Watchdogs or lapdogs? Monitoring Malaysia's media coverage of GE13. In Saravanamuttu, J., Lee, H.G. and Mohamed Osman, M.N. (eds). *Coalitions in Collision: Malaysia's 13th General Elections*. SIRD/ISEAS: Petaling Jaya/Singapore. 159-180

This pattern has been prevalent over several electoral periods,[3] and political scientists have attributed BN's control of the mainstream media as challenges faced by the opposition parties.[4]

The earliest critical study of the media and elections in Malaysia arguably was the seminal work done by Mustafa K Anuar on media coverage of the 1990 General Elections.[5] Mustafa's study validated much of what many observers felt about the role of the Malaysian media during general elections; it outlined the skewed nature of media coverage and made links with their ownership and control. Other critical studies of previous Malaysian General Elections have taken on board Mustafa's theoretically-informed stand, all indicating an imbalanced coverage by the mainstream media.[6] Our wide-ranging study of the 2013 General Elections reinforced these earlier works[7]. The arrival and spread of the internet, online news portals, and, more recently, social media in the form of, for example, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, have made election coverage more varied.

Malaysian media and a history of control

State influence on – and interference with – the mainstream media[8] in Malaysia goes back a long way. While some would suggest that the UMNO takeover of Utusan Melayu in 1961 was the precursor to political intervention in the media,[9] Mustafa's useful study of the Malaysian press indicates that interference and controls by the (British) colonial administration pre-dated all this.[10] Be that as it were, the state and market have scrutinised and regulated the media in Malaysia to varying degrees, depending on the media, for more than 60 years. Direct political party ownership and control of the press began with the print media, initially marked by the struggle over and eventual takeover of Utusan by UMNO in the 1960s. The MCA and MIC later duplicated UMNO's actions by taking over ownership of Chinese, Tamil and even English language newspapers.[11]

In 1963, television was introduced in the country. Created through a Cabinet decision, right at the beginning, the broadcast media – Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) - was directly under the control of the government. RTM's government-service role – providing top-down information, especially about government 'development' policies and strategies – began to be translated by the authorities as a public service. This role, of course, ran quite contrary to the broader notions of

[3] Abbot, J.P. (2011). Electoral Authoritarianism and the Print Media in Malaysia: Measuring Political Bias and Analyzing Its Cause. *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 38(1), pp.1-38; Anuar, M.K. (2005) Politics and the Media in Malaysia. *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies*, 20(1), pp.25-47; Anuar, M.K. (1990) The Malaysian general election: The role of the BN mass media. *Kajian Malaysia*, 8(2), pp.82-102; Kasim, A. and Mohd Sani, M.A. (2016) The 2013 general elections in Malaysia: An analysis of online news portals. *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, 37(2), pp.119-125.

[4] Khoo, B.T. (2000) The Malaysian General Election of 29 November 1999. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 35(2): 307. DOI: 10.10807/713649324.

[5] Anuar (1990).

[6] See, for example, Wong, K.K. (2017) Whither Objective Journalism in Digital Age: Malaysia's Mainstream versus Alternative Media. *Media Watch*, Vol 8, Issue : 1, 30-43 and Gomez, J., Anuar, M.K. and Yuen, B.L. (Eds.)(2018) *Media and Elections: Democratic Transition in Malaysia.* SIRD: Petaling Jaya.

[7] Houghton and Nain (2015).

[8] By `mainstream media', unless defined otherwise, we mean the old, non-digital media of television and newspapers.

[9] See http://www.thenutgraph.com/strike-for-press-freedom/ for a first-person account of the takeover and the strike by the Utusan journalists.

[10] See Anuar, M.K. (2002). Defining Democratic Discourses: The Mainstream Press, in Khoo, B.T. and Loh, F. (Eds). *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices*. London:Routledge-Curzon.

[11] Ibid

public service, as envisioned then in, for example, the Royal Charter of the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation).[12]

During his first stint as Prime Minister (1981-2003) Mahathir Mohamad's policies on Privatisation and Malaysia Inc., saw new media organisations and patterns emerging. It was in this period of 'regulated deregulation',[13] that commercial television took off, with the then UMNO controlled TV3 going on air in 1984. Twelve years later, in 1996, the All-Asian Satellite Television and Radio Operator (ASTRO) was launched as Malaysia's first direct broadcast satellite Pay TV service.

Far from privatisation liberating the broadcast system/industry in Malaysia, the opposite happened. New laws were enacted, such as the Broadcasting Act 1988, and those providing these services were very much linked to the Barisan Nasional (BN) regime. Hence economic control over the (new) commercial media became more pronounced, complementing the regime's political and legal control over the media.

The creation of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) in 1996 saw a crucial development for Malaysia's media. The Bill of Guarantees that came with the launch of the MSC stated that the internet would not be censored. Of course, there was ongoing surveillance by the state and continued harassment by the authorities over the years. Nonetheless, new spaces opened up. The emergence of Malaysia's first independent news portal, *Malaysiakini*, illustrated this.[14]

Towards the end of Mahathir's first stint as premier - and with *Reformasi*[15] - large numbers of the Malaysian public were angry and upset about the turmoil caused by the Asian financial crisis and also with the way Mahathir's sacked and imprisoned deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, was treated. It was arguably during this period that the mainstream media began to suffer from trust issues due to the unbalanced reporting of what many considered to be the sham trial that Anwar went through. Mahathir stepped down in 2003 and was succeeded by Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. He projected the image of a soft-spoken, kind uncle, in contrast to Mahathir's steely, sneering, no-nonsense public persona. This image of him contributed significantly to BN winning by a landslide in the 2004 general election, Malaysia's 11th. However, Abdullah failed on his promises to deliver reforms, which did not prioritise the media.[16] Like his predecessor, he wished to control the media, even new media. At the end of it all, Abdullah led the BN regime to its dismal performance in the 2008 General Election. BN lost its coveted two-thirds majority in parliament for the first time since 1969 – Abdullah himself admitted how out of touch he and his administration were

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[12] For an extended discussion of these developments in Malaysian television, see Nain, Z. (1996). The impact of the international marketplace on the organisation of Malaysian television. In French, D. and Richards, M. (eds.) *Contemporary Television: Eastern Perspectives*. Sage: New Delhi. 157-180.

[13] Nain, Z. (1994). Commercialisation and control in a 'caring society' - Malaysian media 'towards 2020'. *SOJOURN (Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia)* (Singapore). October: Vol. 9, No. 2. 178-199.

[14] See Steele, J. (2009, November 11). How Malaysiakini challenges authoritarianism. *Malaysiakini*. https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/117130

[15] The period (1998-2000) when a reform movement emerged, sparked off by the dismissal, arrest, trial and detention of Malaysia's then deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim. The over-the-top public shaming of Anwar by the media and other state apparatchiks was unprecedented for a Malay leader. It galvanised support for Anwar and the movement, and made more people turn to the alternative media, such as the party newspaper of the Islamic party, PAS, Harakah, and anonymous blogs that mushroomed on the internet.

[16] This is discussed in great detail in Nain, Z. (2008). Regime, media and the reconstruction of a fragile consensus in Malaysia. In Sen, K. and T. Lee (eds.) *Political Regimes and the Media in Asia*. Routledge: London. 156-169.

with new media.[17]

A year later, in April 2009, he stepped down, and Najib Razak took over as Prime Minister. Najib was never a proponent of freedom of speech or a friend of free media. From GE12 in 2008 onwards, what Malaysia witnessed was the growth and influence of news portals. At the same time, over the past couple of years, especially since the 1MDB and other financial scandals (such as those involving Tabung Haji, Felda and MARA) became daily fodder for the online news sites, social media in Malaysia virtually exploded on the scene. WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram arguably have become the new providers of 'news' for many in Malaysia, especially those who want instant, compacted news with the obligatory 'click baits'. News/gossip aggregator sites, such as *Siakap Keli* also came into the picture, 'borrowing' from numerous sources and summarising and compiling them. Authoritative yearly studies by the Reuters Institute in Oxford University depict a pattern of increasing migration by Malaysians from traditional news providers and brands to online providers, certainly over the two years leading up to GE14.[18] The digital sphere, it would seem, has become the new media battleground. Observers speculated that GE14 would be a social media election, with more people accessing information via WhatsApp. And the odds were in favour of BN, which possessed more resources and an increased online presence.[19]

Aware of this, the BN regime under Najib made numerous attempts to police social media by prosecuting individuals under the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) and the odious Sedition Act and taking down online content.[20] The culmination was the heavily criticised and rapidly passed Anti-Fake News Act, a week before GE14.[21] Yet, the fear tactics did not work. Instead, the draconian attempts at silencing critiques combined with the economic woes of Malaysians, and the arrogant responses to these hardships by Najib and his political elites when massive financial scandals were being unearthed all seemingly acted to disgust the rakyat and embolden them on 9 May. While mainstream media outlets might have responded to the shifting public sentiments, notably since the reformasi period, most remained overtly partisan to their owners or ruling elites. And at times, they ignored basic journalism ethics and standards to fit the pro-BN agenda.[22]

[17] *New York Times*. (2008, March 25). "Malaysian leader admits ignoring the Internet was a mistake". https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/25/world/asia/25iht-malay.1.11396684.html

[18] See Digital News Report: Malaysia. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2018/malaysia-2018/

[19] *Free Malaysia Today*. (2018, April 3). "Social media, the No.1 battleground in GE14?" https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2018/04/03/social-media-the-no-1-battleground-in-ge14/; Abdullah, N. and Anuar, A. (2018, May 8). "Old Politics and New Media: Social Media and Malaysia's 2018 Elections". *The Diplomat*. https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/old-politics-and-new-media-social-media-and-malaysias-2018-elections/

[20] Human Rights Watch. (2016, October 12). *Deepening the Culture of Fear: The Criminalization of Peaceful Expression in Malaysia*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/12/malaysia-crackdown-free-speech-intensifies

[21] *Malaysiakini*. (2018, April 25). "Human rights group calls for repeal of Anti-Fake News Act". https://m.malaysiakini.com/news/421491

[22] In defamation cases brought by activists and politicians against the media, courts have noted the absence of professionalism and ethics in the mainstream media – calling out on failures to verify or get comments and to make claims as facts rather than opinions in the allegations (example Irene Fernandez v Utusan Melayu (M) Sdn Bhd & Anor, High Court Malaya Kuala Lumpur, Civil Suit No: (S7) S4-23-14-1996, 26 October 2007 – Judge Tee Ah Sing In Current Law Journal (2008) 2 CLJ 814-852) http://www.malikimtiaz.com.my/doc/irene-fernandez.pdf)

Dazed and Confused

Barely 20 months after GE14, the democratically-elected PH government collapsed in late February 2020 following defections from the coalition to the opposition. This situation led to the setting up of what has been derisively called 'a backdoor government'. The 20 months was a period of adjustment for the media. Years of loyalty to the government now meant supporting a new ruling coalition for the first time at the federal level. It was most evident in state-linked media such as the wire agency, Bernama, where the negative portrayal of Mahathir during the campaign period instantly turned into a positive tone after he was appointed Prime Minister. Noticeable changes included the choice of photos to ones that were more complimentary of him. Others were caught in a bind too, even if only for a few days. How were they to report on leaders who, until recently, were demonised? A volunteer who coded the NST said: "Prior to May 9, the paper featured BN in the first half of the paper and the PH in the second half; then this was reversed after the elections." Television station NTV7's coverage of party manifestos quickly changed in its tone. During the campaign, on 12 April 2018, the manifesto was reported as bringing "negative harm" and was "detrimental to the economy". The day after elections on 10 May, the manifesto was reported as being what "the people have been waiting for."

Astro Awani stood out in its coverage of the GE14 results and the morning after. It still suffered from issues of verification and single-source coverage, as did many others, but was quick to embrace the new mood and slogan of *Malaysia Baru* (New Malaysia). For others, the change was not as quick or as easy. In an interview, The Star Online news editor, Martin Vengadesan, was quoted as saying: "Up until May 8, the mainstream media was used by the government to create an alternative reality which no thinking person could really have believed in."[23]

In the lead up to the elections, newsrooms were told to avoid reporting on the 1MDB scandal. The fact that the Anti-Fake News Act was passed and already in force during the campaign raised concerns that reporting on 1MDB, especially when raised by PH candidates, could be a risk for the media. When still in government, BN announced that any information on 1MDB that was not sanctioned by the authorities would be considered fake news.[24] However, the incoming PH government, which contested on the promise of anti-corruption reforms, made investigations into 1MDB one of its top priorities, paving the way for the media to report on it more openly. Even the visit of controversial Sarawak Report editor Clare Rewcastle-Brown made the news in a number of the media outlets that previously employed a cautious approach. The Star Online's Vengadesan, who had interviewed Rewcastle-Brown, told Reuters he had to check himself as he was not used to the level of openness in talking about corruption in the government.

We began the report by raising two issues: how far the mainstream media would go to publish pro-BN content, and whether the elections signified the coalition's end. The pro-BN and state media reported as though the coalition was not facing a crisis a credibility among voters and the public. Instead, the media depicted the BN as having widespread support. The study did not conduct a comprehensive audience survey, still, there is enough evidence to show that the

[23] Westbrook, T. and Geddie, J. (2018, May 25) "Telling truth to power still no easy task for Malaysia's revved up media". *Reuters*. https://www.yahoo.com/news/telling-truth-power-still-no-easy-task-malaysias-100713096.html

[24] Tay, C. (2018, March 22) "Jailani: Unverified 1MDB news considered fake". *The Edge Financial Daily*. http://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/jailani-unverified-1mdb-news-considered-fake

Malaysian public had no trust in the mainstream media, and sourced their information from online social networks, often accepting content shared by trusted individuals or personalities. During this period, the mainstream media stopped being the sole source of political information as more and more people turned to social media. As in the 2008 elections, PH's online campaign resonated louder with the voters, with its broader messages, as opposed to the Najib-focused content of BN's campaign.[25] The 20 months following the change of government in May 2018, to its collapse in February 2020, saw greater freedom for the media in most areas. The challenge has been for the media to rebrand itself to meet the public expectations and its renewed interest in politics and governance.

Wish You Were Here?

The election results point to the failure of BN's strategy and most importantly, the inability of the mainstream media to respond to public sentiment and to be independent of BN's political hegemony. Post-GE14 witnessed resignations in the media, coinciding with the removal of top leadership in government-linked companies and public offices. The departures have included Media Prima Bhd chairman Ismee Ismail, a week after its Television Networks Group Managing Editor Ashraf Abdullah stepped down. Utusan, which was suffering financial losses, saw four of its directors, including a former press aide of Najib Razak, and board chairman Mohamad Fatmi Che Salleh, resign a week barely after the elections.[26] On 9 October 2019, Utusan officially shut down.[27] Since then, a new owner, businessman Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary, has emerged. Syed Mokhtar, allegedly linked to Mahathir, bought the majority of shares in Utusan through a closely linked company, Aurora Mulia, of which his son is a director.[28]

New Straits Times Press, the country's oldest publisher, announced in July 2020 that it was selling off its Kuala Lumpur headquarters, and its printing plant. The New Straits Times, like other pro– and often owned by BN related media companies, has been experiencing dwindling circulation due to political and technological reasons for many years. Up until February 2020, with the election results and the new, reform-minded PH government, it seemed inevitable that the oldest print media still existing in Malaysia would have to undergo drastic changes, just as it appears to be taking place worldwide.

The Pakatan Harapan Minister of Communications and Multimedia, Gobind Singh Deo, made the right announcements about media reform as well as media freedom and autonomy under the (then) new PH regime. The Anti-Fake News Act was repealed, although it was the only major legal change made. Mahathir, who was Prime Minister for the second time during the 20 months, brought a large delegation of journalists with him on his official trip to China in August 2018, including one from Malaysiakini. This speaks volumes about the acceptance of critical voices by the brief regime.

[25] Ruban, A. (2018, May 17). "How social media helped Pakatan win GE14". *Malay Mail*.
   https://www.malaymail.com/s/1631921/how-social-media-helped-pakatan-win-ge14
[26] Azman, S. (2018, May 15) "Four directors resign at Utusan as part of restructuring plan". *The Edge Markets*.
   https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/four-directors-resign-utusan-part-restructuring-plan
[27] Malay Mail. (2019, October 9). "Utusan Malaysia Shuts Down"
   https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/10/09/utusan-malaysia-shuts-down/1798567
[28] Malaysiakini. (2019, October 8). "Syed Mokhtar-linked firm now owns Utusan's print permit".
   https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/494879. The newspaper and its sister publication, *Kosmo*, were relaunched on
   19 July 2020.

There appears to have been much hope after PH swept to power. For 20 months, groups and individuals from Malaysia's civil society banded together to urge for – and offered assistance towards – reforms, including media reform. Proposals to develop Malaysia's state broadcaster, RTM, for example, into a genuine public broadcaster were publicised in the media and also submitted to the minister.[29] A self-regulated Media Council was proposed by groups of academics, practitioners and civil society to Gobind and he urged the setting up of an independent pro-tem committee to come up with the necessary guidelines which would then be submitted as a bill to parliament. The process was going smoothly until the collapse of the PH government. Since then, the new minster, Saifuddin Abdullah, has reassured the media and civil society that he will not stand in the way of reform. Time will tell. Malaysia, like other countries around the world, is now virtually locked down because of the deadly Covid-19 pandemic.

Be that as it may, it is quite unlikely that an old media – press, broadcasting – made subservient to the dictates of an authoritarian regime, will change, let alone reform overnight or by its own volition. Rather than expecting the media to change itself, the public must demand greater media professionalism and accountability. The board resignations, the change of the guard, are a good first step. But we believe that after GE14, the feel-good, almost sycophantic, coverage of the former opposition now in government needed to be replaced by critical coverage based on issues. This may no longer hold, given the new regime. Nonetheless, hopefully in a post-Covid 19 pandemic future, reform and change can - and will - come about through media re-education for current practitioners; the setting-up of institutions, like the work-in-progress independent, self-regulating media council to monitor and improve standards; and the development and advancement of a public service ethos for media – old, new and social.

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[29] *Reforming Malaysia's Media and Communications Environment*. Proposal Submitted to the Secretariat, Committee for Institutional Reforms by ALIRAN and the Centre for the Study of Communications and Culture (CSCC) (2018, unpublished).

Chapter 3: Media Laws in Malaysia

By Chen Shaua Fui

Command and control have always been the approach adopted by the Malaysian government towards the media. This approach can be traced back to colonial-era laws like the Sedition Act 1948 that was enacted to curb opposition to British rule and the Emergency Regulations Ordinance 1948 (ERO) for use against those supporting the insurgency of the Malayan Communist Party. Laws aimed at controlling the dissemination of information and political ideologies are still in force six decades after independence. While laws such as the Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA) and the Emergency (Essential Powers) Act 1979 were repealed in 2012, they have been replaced by other security laws, including the Official Secrets Act 1972 (OSA), the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 (PPPA) and the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA) that have been used against journalists, media outlets and critics in general. These laws have prevented the media from carrying out their role effectively without fear and favour. The two main legislations governing the print and broadcast/digital media are the PPPA and CMA, respectively.

Significant changes have yet to take place, although many in the media say they have faced fewer threats or pressure from the government. At the end of 2019, the Anti-Fake News Act was repealed and discussions about replacing the OSA with a freedom of information law and for setting up a media council ensued.

This section provides an overview of the laws that directly and indirectly affect the news media in Malaysia.

Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 (PPPA)

The PPPA was passed in 1984 to govern the use of printing presses and the printing, importation, production, reproduction, publication, and distribution of printing materials in Malaysia. It was to synchronise the overlapping jurisdiction of three laws: the Printing Presses Act 1948, Control of Imported Publications Act 1959 and Section 22 of the Internal Security Act 1960, aimed at controlling subversive publications that affect national security (Parlimen Malaysia 2012).

The PPPA required printers to apply for a licence for their printing presses, for the media outlet to apply for a publication permit and to renew it annually. This provision nurtured a culture of self-censorship in the newsroom, especially after Operasi Lalang in

1987. Since its enactment, the government has often slapped media publishers with show-cause letters. According to anecdotal evidence, editors have and do receive instructions from the Minister of Home Affairs on the coverage of specific issues.

During Ops Lalang, the government arrested 106 activists under the ISA. The other casualties were two dailies – *The Star* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* – and two weeklies – *The Sunday Star* and *Watan* - whose publication permits were suspended. Some of the journalists and editors were forced to resign (Knirsch & Kratzenstein 2010). After Ops Lalang, the then Mahathir administration amended the PPPA to remove the provision that allowed judicial review of decisions made by the Home Minister.

In 2012, the PPPA was amended to remove the requirement to renew the licence or permit annually, until the minister revokes it. It still requires the print media to apply for a publication permit, which is subject to the approval of the Home Affairs Minister. The amendment also removed the absolute discretionary power of the minister to approve licences and permits. The minister's decision concerning an approval, cancellation, suspension of a permit can now be reviewed in a court of law. This was part of former Prime Minister Najib Razak's Political Transformation Programme when he took office in 2009. He announced the programme on 15 September 2009, a day before Malaysia Day.

However, the amendment does not stop the government from taking action against the media via show-cause letters. On 24 July 2015, the Home Ministry suspended the publishing permit of *The Edge Weekly* and *The Edge Financial Daily* for three months from 27 July. Their coverage of the state investment fund 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB) was deemed "prejudicial to the public and national interest." The Edge Media Group challenged the suspension, and the High Court lifted it on 21 Sept 2015 (Anbalagan 2015). The court ordered the government to pay RM11.7 million to the media group as compensation for loss of revenue (Karim 2019).

The Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) and other journalist groups have long called upon the government to repeal the PPPA which has been used to stifle media freedom in Malaysia. Although media and civil society welcomed the 2012 amendment of the PPPA, the suspensions of The Edge publications showed that the media could still come under attack if its reports held the government accountable for its actions.

Cases related to the portrayal of Islam in the media are also closely monitored, especially those considered "offensive" to the Muslim community here. For example, in June 2017, *The Star* was issued a show-cause letter for a front-page which featured a photo of Muslims ushering in Ramadan and the headline "Malaysian terrorist leader" for an unrelated news article. *The Star* suspended two editors pending an investigation. However, *The New Straits Times* and *Utusan Malaysia*, which published similar front-pages, did not face any investigation (Alhadjri & Lee 2017). This raises the question of whether the authorities act selectively.

Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA)

The CMA was enacted in 1998 to regulate the information, communication technology and multimedia and broadcasting sectors in Malaysia. It replaced the Broadcasting Act 1987 and broadened its scope to cover matters related to the internet. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) regulates the communications and multimedia industry and enforces the law. It is entrusted with approving, amending, or revoking broadcasting and other licenses.

Although the CMA states that it should not be "construed as permitting the censorship of the Internet," Section 233 of the CMA - governing the "improper use of the network" – has been used to control the content being broadcast or circulated on the internet. The authorities often cite this provision when they censor, block and filter content on the internet or take action against online media, bloggers or commentators.

Section 233(1) criminalises "any comment, request, suggestion or other communication which is obscene, indecent, false, menacing or offensive in character with intent to annoy, abuse, threaten or harass another person." The offence carries a fine not exceeding RM50,000 or imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year or both. If convicted, there is a further fine of RM1,000 for every day the offence continues.

Against the backdrop of these legal challenges is the rapid growth of internet penetration here. According to the Department of Statistics, internet penetration rose to 85.7% in 2017 from 70.0% in 2015, and smartphone usage for internet access reached 97.7% in 2017 (Alias 2018). More and more Malaysians are going online to obtain news or analyses that are thought-provoking and critical of the establishment. The political situation heated up with the competition between the former longest-ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) and the opposition and activists to capture the hearts of the voters. The new battleground was social media platforms like Facebook, Facebook Live, Twitter, YouTube and so on, and the competition was between the fairly-new-kids-to-social media (BN) and those who have been using these platforms to spread information the past 10 years.

Several online media such as *Malaysiakini*, *TMI, Malay Mail Online* and blogs such as Sarawak Report became the primary source of information for many readers the past few years. Their popularity led to MCMC exercising closer scrutiny of online media, which resulted in raids of newsrooms that published reports deemed "sensitive or detrimental" to the government, or blocking of the website. In September 2009, *Malaysiakini* was investigated over two video reports which depicted people carrying the decapitated head of a cow in protest over the relocation of a Hindu temple to a Muslim majority neighbourhood. The second video was of a press conference by then Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein who supported the move. The MCMC ordered the portal to take down the videos (Malaysiakini 2009). However, no charges were filed afterwards.

Then in 2015, the 1MDB scandal exploded. It was alleged that a sum of US$972 million (RM2.6 billion) was transferred into then-Prime Minister Najib's AmBank account between 2011 and 2013, but he claimed the money was a donation from the Saudi royal

family. Several media and blogs that reported the news faced legal action from the government. TMI, a general news portal owned by The Edge Media Group, was reporting the scandal closely. MCMC blocked the website from the Malaysian public on 25 February 2016, for allegedly violating Section 233 of the CMA, that is the "improper use of network services". Subsequently, the website closed on 15 March 2016. TMI's Chief Executive Officer/Editor Jahabar Sadiq told Reporters Without Borders that "*The Malaysian Insider* suffered from the block, and an already softening advertising market in Malaysia." (Reporters Without Borders 2016). Back in July 2015, MCMC blocked the Sarawak Report, a blog penned by Clare Rewcastle Brown under the same provision, also for its exposes on 1MDB.

Section 233 has been used against netizens who comment on issues related to race, religion, and royalty. A prominent example was in 2009, after the Perak state government, marginally won by the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) fell back into the hands of BN following the departure of three state assemblypersons from PR to become BN-friendly "independent" lawmakers. The role of then Perak Sultan, Sultan Azlan Shah, was questioned and criticised. Dozens of internet users were charged in court on March 13, 2009, in different parts of the country. Among them was a school laboratory assistant who pleaded guilty and was fined RM10,000 in default five months jail for posting comments insulting the Sultan of Perak on a website. His was the first such case on Section 233 in Malaysia (Surin 2009).

Evidence Act 1950, Section 114A

In 2012, the government introduced Section 114A, which creates a presumption that any registered user of a network service is the publisher of a publication appearing on a network unless it is proved otherwise. The provision states that any "person whose name, photograph or pseudonym appears on any publication depicting himself as the owner, host, administrator, editor or sub-editor, or who in any manner facilitates to publish or re-publish the publication is presumed to have published or re-published the contents of the publication unless the contrary is proved".

In other words, the burden is on the accused persons to prove that they did not publish the content in question. This provision may be used together with section 233 of the CMA on online content, including comments online. The CIJ launched an "Internet Blackout Day" campaign on Aug 14, 2012, calling internet users to blackout their page or post banners protesting the amendment. About 200 online media, bloggers, online community, NGOs and Facebook users supported the campaign. Regardless, Parliament passed the amendment.

The presumption of publication under Section 114A was used in a few civil suits over the publication of email or website contents like Stem Life Berhad v Mead Johnson Nutrition (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd & Anor [2013] MLJU 1582. There, "the High Court held that an owner of a website was unable to rebut the presumption of publication of impugned statements

made by users of its website" as the website owner has editorial control over the comments on the website. This role is akin to the editor of a media (Lim 2019).

Sedition Act 1948

The Sedition Act is a legacy from the British colonial period.[1] The law is frequently used to control freedom of expression in the country. The problem with the law is the vague and broad definition of what constitutes a "seditious tendency". Section 3(1) of the Act defines seditious tendency as a tendency to cause hatred, contempt and dissatisfaction against the ruler, government, administration of justice; to promote feelings of ill will and hostility between different races or classes of the population of Malaysia; or challenge any matter, right, status, position, privilege, sovereignty or prerogative protected under Articles 152, 153 and 181 of the Federal Constitution.

In 2012, Najib announced the abolition of the Sedition Act. He reiterated it in 2013 but did not honour his promise. The Najib administration instead tightened the law in November 2014 in the name of "maintaining national harmony." Further amendments in 2015 empower authorities to block and reprimand online content that they consider seditious. The penalty was also increased from three to seven years in jail (Wok & Mohamad 2017).

The Sedition Act is used frequently to silence activists or opposition politicians, especially on issues related to race, religion, the rulers or communism. One of the prominent cases involving the media in 2015 was the arrest of Ho Kay Tat, publisher of *The Edge*; TMI CEO Jahabar Sadiq; and three TMI editors - managing editor Lionel Morais, Bahasa-language editor Amin Shah Iskandar and features and analysis editor Zulkifli Sulong – between 30-31 March. They were detained for a night. The news site reported that the Conference of Rulers rejected proposed amendments to the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965 during a meeting on 11 March. The article cited an anonymous source. TMI was also investigated under Section 233 of CMA.

On 4 Sept 2014, *Malaysiakini* assistant editor Susan Loone was arrested under the Sedition Act over her interview with Penang state executive councillor Phee Boon Poh who claimed that he was treated like a "criminal" while he was under arrest overnight on 31 August 2014, in relation to his role in Penang's Voluntary Patrol Unit (PPS). The PPS was deemed illegal by the inspector-general of police. She was released on police bail after nine hours of interrogation.

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[1] The British, who introduced sedition law in the Penal Code in India in 1870 and the Sedition Ordinance in Malaya in 1948 when it faced rebellion and opposition in its respective colonies, repealed its own sedition legislation in 2009. But their legacy lives on in India and Malaysia, post-independence (Dutta, 2012; Pang Jo Fan, 2015).

Official Secrets Act 1972 (OSA)

The OSA, which provides for the classification of official information and documents as secret, top secret, confidential or restricted, is one of the more restrictive laws when it comes to discussions and reporting of public interest issues. Examples of official information that can be classified are health, the environment (air pollutant index and environmental impact assessments), defence deals and public-private contracts, all of which affect public engagement and scrutiny of those in power.

Politicians, activists, journalists and bloggers (Article 19 & Suaram 2005) have been prosecuted under the law over disclosure of information. A culture of secrecy is very much alive in public discourse in Malaysia. In a parliamentary reply in 2016, the government confirmed that at least 28 people were investigated under the OSA, of whom six faced trial (Arbee 2016).

Among the cases involving the media were the convictions of journalists from the *New Straits Times* (Sabry Sharif) and the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (James Clad) in 1985, in relation to stories they wrote that queried irregularities in defence contracts and Malaysia's relations with China, respectively. The journalists were fined and as a result of these cases Parliament amended the law in 1986 to make a jail sentence mandatory upon conviction. A decade later, two journalists from *Harian Metro* were investigated for reporting on a kidnapping but they were eventually released. In 2007, blogger Nathaniel Tan was arrested for comments posted on his blog that shared information about corruption investigations involving a deputy minister.

Public campaigns for a law for freedom of information began in the 1980s but gained little political support. The 2008 general elections saw two states under the federal opposition – Selangor and Penang – enact state-level freedom of information laws. Despite their flaws, the laws were significant milestones in enhancing transparency and good governance. With the BN government replaced at the federal level in 2018, there were signs that the Malaysian public could get a national law on freedom of information, which will also allow the media to perform its watchdog functions more effectively. At the time of writing, the Perikatan Nasional government has not indicated its plans but discussions were ongoing between civil society and ministry officials responsible for considering legal changes.

Defamation Act

Apart from the many laws that govern the working of the media, the Defamation Act 1957 and Section 499 of the Penal Code allow a private person and public officer to seek recourse for libel if they feel that the media has intentionally tarnished their name in bad faith. However, the Defamation Act in Malaysia does not define the term "defamation." It follows the common law system which refers to defamation as the publication of untrue

statements of fact which lower a person's reputation in the society or tends to make right-minded people shun or avoid him (Masum & Md Desa 2014).

In the case of MGG Pillai vs Tan Sri Vincent Tan Chee Yioun and others in 1995, the plaintiff did not need to prove any damage to bring a libel action against another party because the law presumes damages ensue when a person's reputation is affected. However, the plaintiff must establish that: (i) the words are defamatory, and (ii) the words refer to the plaintiff, and (iii) the words have been published (ibid).

The year 1996 was a landmark of sorts; more than 10 libel suits were filed seeking damages of between RM30 million and RM100 million. Between 1999 and 2001, the situation escalated to an unprecedented level when a claimant sought RM1.3 billion (Bar Council Malaysia 2001). In 2001, the claimant, Badrul Zaman PS Md Zakariah sued the Malaysian government, the then Home Affairs Ministry Secretary-general Aseh Che Mat and nine media outlets for defamation over a report on his arrest related to an allegation that he issued false work permits to foreign workers in 1998. He claimed RM50 million in general damages, aggravated and special damages from each of the defendants. In 2002, the case was thrown out by the Senior Assistant Registrar and affirmed by the High Court in Badrul Zaman's appeal in 2003 (Nexnews Bhd, 2005). In a separate RM400 million defamation suit against TV3 which allegedly showed visuals of Badrul Zaman in handcuffs while he was in remand, the High Court ordered the station to pay RM100 million in damages to him when TV3 failed to enter an appearance (Pillai, 2001).

Fast forward to 2008 when politicians from PR and the subsequent Pakatan Harapan sued *Utusan Malaysia*, *New Straits Times Press (NSTP),* and *TV3* for defamation as a result of their coverage. Notably, on 14 May 2018, the High Court awarded RM1.1 million in damages to former deputy prime minister and PKR president Anwar Ibrahim for a news report linking him to the 2013 Lahad Datu intrusion in Sabah (Bernama 2018). Additionally, on 5 March 2019, the court ordered NSTP and Utusan Melayu (M) Sdn Bhd to pay damages totalling RM400,000 to Finance Minister Lim Guan Eng for news reports labelling him a "Singapore agent" (Bernama 2019).

In 2012, the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections (Bersih 2.0), CIJ, Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Suaram) and Merdeka Centre filed a defamation suit against NSTP for the news report "Plot to destabilise govt" that it published on its front page on 21 Sept 2012. The media organisation settled the case out of court and issued an apology to the plaintiffs, acknowledging that the report was "baseless" and "false". It agreed to pay RM120,000 to the four plaintiffs (Nazlina 2013).

The selected cases show that courts have not been awarding damages of more than RM2 million in recent defamation suits, which is a stark difference and reduction from the megasuits era. However, because of a lack of self-regulation among the media linked to the then ruling BN coalition, defamation suits were the last resort for some victims to force the media to report ethically.

Opportunities for self-regulation?

In place of laws, international best practices in journalism point to the value of self-regulation in the form of press councils or commissions to uphold and monitor professional and ethical standards of the news media. Suggestions to form a press council have been around in Malaysia since the 1970s but gained little currency, especially when some of these were initiated and dominated by the government. Post GE14, there have been serious efforts by the media and civil society to respond to the government's call for a media council to be established. Civil society groups and journalists want the body to be independent, so that it can promote and regulate media freedom and ethics (Randhawa 2018, NUJ et al., 2019). The council will likely follow a co-regulation model, whereby the independent body will be formed through legislation (Harun 2020). Even with a council in place, it remains to be seen whether there will indeed be legal reforms, given the volatile situation of national politics post-GE14.

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Chapter 4: Ownership and operations background of selected media outlets
By Teoh Sing Fei[1]

This section maps the ownership and operations background of seven media outlets that were among those analysed as part of the media monitoring project. It complements the detailed write-up on the state of the Chinese language media in the country.

NSTP and Media Prima

The English-language newspaper, *New Straits Times*, is one of the oldest in Malaysia, starting in 1845 as *The Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce.* The newspaper reported in both Malaysia and Singapore until the two countries split in 1965, which also saw the paper becoming separate entities: *The New Straits Times* for Malaysia and *The Straits Times* for Singapore. Subsequently, in 1972, the New Straits Times Press (M) Berhad (NSTP) was established.

NSTP was controlled by UMNO's Fleet Holdings Sdn Bhd during the 1970s and later by UMNO's then treasurer Daim Zainuddin through the 1980s, until then UMNO president Mahathir Mohamad intervened in the 1990s (Gomez 2018: 119-121). In 1993, NSTP—encompassing the *Malay Mail*, *Berita Harian*, and TV3—was bought by Realmild Sdn Bhd, which had close links to former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim. NSTP was later transferred to Realmild's Malaysian Resources Corporation Berhad (MRCB) (Nain 1994: 183; Gomez 2018: 119). In the early 2000s the then heavily indebted MRCB transferred NSTP to its new subsidiary, Media Prima Berhad (Rosidayu 2016: 607).

Having demerged from MRCB in 2003, Media Prima Berhad began expanding "under the control" of Barisan Nasional (Gomez 2018: 119-121). Today, as the most extensive media conglomerate and a Top 100 corporation in Malaysia, it owns a complete repertoire of media-related businesses: television and radio networks, digital media, advertising, content creation, and print media. In terms of print media, Media Prima Berhad owns a 98% equity interest in NSTP, which in turns publishes four print titles: *Berita Harian*, *Harian Metro*, *The New Straits Times*, and the Sunday edition *New Sunday Times*. It also has online versions of the print content, all of which are among the top 10 most frequently visited news websites in Malaysia (Nain 2018: 133). Media Prima also has outdoor advertising, digital companies, broadcasting and content production.

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Officially, until February 2017, there were five substantial shareholders in Media Prima, amounting to a 44.83% ownership (Media Prima 2017: 213). Media reports suggest that Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group (through Morgan Stanley & Co. LCC) became the largest of the substantial shareholders of Media Prima in 2017 (Lee 2018). Other significant shareholders are the Employees Provident Fund (though its shares went down from 22.11% in 2009 to over 13% in the last few years) and Gabungan Kesturi Sdn Bhd and Altima Incorporation, which had strong ties to the former BN federal government (Ding, Koh, Jacqueline 2013: 27; Gomez 2018: 119-121). Gabungan Kesturi's director Shahril Ridza Ridzuan has been "on the boards of EPF and Media Prima" since 2013 (Gomez 2018: 121). Media Prima reported a loss of RM669 million in 2017, and BN lost power the year after in GE14 (Nain 2018: 132).

Two months post-GE14, *BFM* interviewed Media Prima TV Network CEO Johari Ishak about how its news production team would adapt to the change (Kuttan and Goh 2018). The CEO stated three principles as Media Prima's current objectives: "the accuracy of the news," "the speed of the news," and "the impartiality of the news." Johari further stressed: "May 9 has presented to us opportunities to revamp ourselves, restructure and look forward [to] the best method for […] news."

Astro

Astro Malaysia Holdings Berhad is 'Malaysia's leading content and consumer company'. In 2018, Astro produced 12,000 hours' worth of original content. It currently penetrates a staggering 75% of Malaysian households (a 4% increase from 2017). Roslina, Wan, and Ali (2013: 52) describe it as "the brand name of Malaysian direct broadcast satellite pay-television service".

Astro has had three prominent owners since its establishment in 1996. First is Ananda Krishnan, a state-funded businessperson, courtesy of Mahathir's first administration (Gomez 2009: 361; Roslina, Wan, Ali 2013: 52). In 1995, he received a licence to operate MEASAT before he launched Astro. His share of Astro fell from 70.66% (2013) to 40.91% (2018) because "publicly listed firms are required to have a wide shareholding spread as defined by listing rules" (Astro Malaysia Holdings Berhad 2013: 229-230, 2018: 315-316; Gomez 2018: 9). Second is Khazanah Nasional Berhad (KNB). This sovereign wealth fund owns a 20.67% of Astro. It has been publicly listed as a Government-linked Investment Company (GLIC)[2] since 1993 (Astro Malaysia Holdings Berhad 2018: 248; Gomez 2018: 3). Third, is the Employees Provident Fund (EPF). It has a 7.79% stake in Astro and is also a GLIC.

Astro produces TV and radio programmes through various subsidiaries. Astro produces Astro *Awani*. Astro Productions Sdn Bhd produces Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil TV programmes in sports, news, and entertainment (see Astro Production Sdn Bhd 2018). Astro's MEASAT Broadcast Network Systems Sdn Bhd broadcasts sports

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[2] See Gomez (2018: 7-8) for the definition of GLIC.

news and games live through *Astro SuperSport* and *Astro Arena*. In terms of radio content, *Astro* Radio Sdn Bhd operates eleven radio channels. Several of these channels were non-Astro radio stations that were bought over and rebranded by Astro.

After GE14, Astro's CEO Rohana Rozhan announced her resignation effective 31 Jan 2019 as part of an official succession plan (Tan 2018).

The Star

The Star's ownership structure has undergone minor shifts, but the most substantial shareholder in the company has been the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). In 1971, The Star Publications (M) Berhad introduced *The Star* newspaper. It soon achieved nationwide patronage, challenging the position of *The New Straits Times* in the domain of English newspapers. In 1977, MCA—through Huaren Holdings Sdn Bhd—purchased "a 78% stake" in The Star Publications (M) Berhad (Star Media Group 2010: 77; Chin 2006: 74). In 2011, MCA transferred the Star Publications (M) Berhad from Huaren Holdings Sdn Bhd to AMSEC Nominees. In 2015, the firm's name changed from Star Publications (M) Berhad to Star Media Group Berhad "to reflect the transformation in an age of digital media" (*Star Online* 2015).

The current substantial shareholders of the Star Media Group (2017: 216) include the following five:

1. MCA (through AMSEC Nominees) (42.462%),
2. Amanah Saham Bumiputera (10.03%),
3. Employees Provident Fund (8.387%),
4. Lembaga Tabung Haji (5.395%),
5. Aberdeen Asset Management (5.031%).

Today, Star Media Group Berhad produces content across three different media:

1. Print (*The Star*),
2. Digital content (*R.AGE*, *StarBiz*, *Star Online*, *mStar*, *Star2*, *StarTV.com*, *dimsum*),
3. Radio (*988*, *Suria*).

The Star is the second most widely circulated English newspaper in Malaysia (second only to the freely distributed English newspaper, *The Sun*), and the most widely circulated among paid newspapers. It recorded a nationwide daily circulation of 201,943 between July 2017 and December 2017. At least in 2017 and 2018, *Star Online* received the second largest number of visits, only behind *Malaysiakini* (Nain 2018: 132-133).

Utusan Malaysia

Kumpulan Utusan was established in Singapore in mid-1938 and began publishing *Utusan Melayu* and *Utusan Zaman* in the Jawi language in 1939 (Kumpulan Utusan 2014). Kumpulan Utusan moved to independent Malaya in 1959. In 1961, after *Utusan* grew into a Malay favourite, UMNO began eyeing it. The outcome was a 'Mogok Utusan Melayu'. Led by editor-in-chief Said Zahari (or 'Pak Said'), *Utusan* journalists and supporters went on strike for a month against UMNO's move to monopolise the press (Siew 2008). UMNO went ahead and seized *Utusan* and barred Pak Said from re-entering Malaya by executive order of Malaysia's first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman. In Malaysia, Pak Said argued, "the death of press freedom started with the *Utusan* strike" (*Ibid*.).

UMNO's Kumpulan Utusan was incorporated as Utusan Melayu (Malaysia) Berhad in 1967 under the Companies Act. Infrastructure expansions in Utusan then followed: expansion of its headquarters; constructing new printing plants; formalising new subsidiaries and publication titles. However, Utusan lost to Syed Mokhtar Albukhary in the bid in 2017 to take control of Percetakan Nasional Sdn Bhd., the national printer that was a subsidiary of the Minister of Finance Inc. (Farah 2017).

Utusan Melayu (Malaysia) Berhad (2017) has the same two substantial shareholders over the past decade: RHB Nominees (Tempatan) Sdn Bhd. directly representing UMNO (49.77%), and Nilam Setar (M) Sdn Bhd. (14.76%). Directors from Nilam Setar reportedly have connections with BN, including then UMNO chairperson and then prime minister Najib Razak (Barrock 2017).

The Utusan conglomerate produces content in four media categories: newspapers, magazines, digital, and advertising. In terms of print media, it publishes two dailies and two weeklies, which are the most widely read Malay-language newspapers. The dailies are *Utusan Malaysia* and *Kosmo!* The weeklies are *Mingguan Malaysia* and *Kosmo! Ahad*. Jawi-script titles *Utusan Melayu* and *Utusan Zaman* ceased publication in 2006. When the number of Jawi readers declined (Chew 2013: 84), so did the commercial and advertising value of these titles.

On 12 Feb 2019, UMNO gave up its 31.6% or 35 million shares of Utusan Melayu (Malaysia) Bhd to Abd Aziz Sheikh Fadzir's company Opulence Asia Sdn Bhd. It did this after BN's defeat on 9 May, 2018 (FMT, 2019). By yearend, Utusan found itself in more considerable financial trouble, which included not being able to pay its staff. In October, media reported that business tycoon Syed Mokhtar Albukhary took over control of the newspaper through a company called Aurora Mulia. Utusan and Kosmo ceased operations, but they were relaunched from the premises at NSTP in July 2020.

Sinar Harian

> "*Sensitive political, religious, and social issues are covered by us objectively and neutrally without fear of favour. This made many of our*

readers which include academicians, businessmen, professionals, the man on the street and politicians—not just from the ruling parties but also from the opposition—to respect us."—*Karangkraf* (2008), 'Editorial Philosophy'

Sinar Harian, a daily published by *Karangkraf* since 2006, is widely deemed as politically or electorally 'neutral'. At least two academic studies conclude that Sinar Harian does take a 'neutral' stance on writing political issues (Wan, Nurul, and Ilyas 2013; Azizuddin 2016). *Karangkraf* director Hussamuddin Yaacub was honoured as 'Tokoh Media' during the Malaysian Journalism Awards because of *Karangkraf* and *Sinar Harian*'s "independent and consistent" performance (Nina 2017).

Karangkraf expanded rapidly. It began as a small bookstore by Hussamuddin Yaacub in 1978, whose first product was *Mingguan Kanak-Kanak*. Today, it boasts an annual revenue of RM400 million (*Karangkraf* n.d.: 2). It produces original Malay-language magazines, digital content, newspapers, advertising, books, and novels, through an array of publishing subsidiaries: *Alaf 21*, *Karya Bestari*, *Grup Majalah*, *Grup Percetakan*, *Grup Buku*, and *Grup Sinar*.

Sinar Harian, in particular, is a '100% Hyperlocal', 'state-customised' newspaper. The first edition of *Sinar Harian* was introduced in Kelantan in 2006. Today, it reportedly sells 160,000 copies per day, or 1.12 million copies per week, across the peninsular (*Karangkraf* n.d.: 3). It publishes eight daily editions for the eleven peninsular states: Johor; Kelantan; Melaka-Negri Sembilan; Pahang; Selangor-Kuala Lumpur; Terengganu; Kelantan; and Kedah-Perlis ('Utara').

Sinar Harian emerged as a "top brand" in 2018, claiming a 20% of the total weekly usage of 'TV, Radio, Print' among Malaysians, while it was neither tabulated nor mentioned in the previous year (Nain 2017: 123, 2018: 133). Online, *Sinar Harian* garnered 17% of the total consumption among Malaysians in 2017, and it enjoyed a 3% rise to 20% in 2018 (*Ibid*.).

Makkal Osai

Makkal Osai is one of the five Tamil newspapers[3] in Malaysia. It was first published as *Tamil Osai* in 1981. Its publisher Makkal Osai Sdn Bhd. was incorporated in 1992. *Tamil Osai* was changed to *Makkal Osai* in 2005. The newspaper was a weekly for 15 years until 2005 when it became a daily (*Star Online* 2005). It has an approximate daily circulation of 34,143, last reported by the Audit Bureau of Circulation Malaysia (2015).

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[3] The other four titles are *Malaysian Nanban*, *Thinakurral*, *Tamil Nesan*, and *Tamil Malar*.

Latest in 2018, the substantial shareholders of *Makkal Osai* are Thrinakarasi Munisamy (25%), Thirumaren Munisamy (25%), and Athi Rajakumahran Ilanckoh (50%).

There are four key figures in *Makkal Osai*'s internal operations. Former deputy president of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) Subramaniam Sinniah, having funded *Makkal Osai* (Kuppusamy 2013; *Malaysiakini* 2008) reportedly, appointed his son Sunther Subramaniam as managing director in 2012. Periasamy a/l Munisamy, who was the general manager since 1992, challenged Makkal Osai Sdn Bhd over the loss of his "functions and authority" in the Industrial Court (Periasamy a/l Munisamy v Eden Value Sdn Bhd and Makkal Osai Group of Companies 2013). Besides Subramaniam, Sunther, and Periasamy, another leading figure is Athi Rajakumahran, who was appointed director in 1992.

Makkal Osai has reportedly been antagonistic towards the MIC. In the 1980s, *Makkal Osai* published in favour of MIC deputy president Subramaniam against then MIC president S. Samy Vellu (Kuppusamy 2013; *Malaysiakini* 2008). The rivalry went beyond the leadership. In 1999, five MIC committee members filed a suit against *Makkal Osai* seeking RM100 million for alleged defamation (*Utusan Online* 1999). In 2007, a caricature of Jesus smoking on the front page of *Makkal Osai* drew adverse reaction from the government and observers noted that the hostility towards *Makkal Osai* could have come directly from the MIC (Samy 2007). *Makkal Osai* has remained critical of MIC even after the 2010s (Uthayakumar 2007; Mageswari 2010; *Malaysiakini* 2017). It has been described as 'the People's Voice', 'the People's Paper', 'the Voice of the Ordinary People', and 'the Voice of the Downtrodden Indian Malaysians' (Samy 2007; Uthayakumar 2007).

The Sun

The Sun is a free-of-charge daily newspaper published in Peninsular Malaysia by the Sun Media Corporation Sdn Bhd since 1993. It has a circulation of 307,785 copies per day, highest among English papers in Malaysia (Audit Bureau of Circulation Malaysia 2018). Online, *The Sun* Daily—as a 'top brand'—records a 10% of the total consumption of online news among Malaysians weekly (Nain 2018: 133).

The only substantial shareholder of the Sun Media Corporation Sdn Bhd is Vincent Tan's Berjaya Media Berhad, which in turn is part of Tan's conglomerate Berjaya Corporation Berhad. Tan, who established *The Sun* in 1993 and allowed *Edge* to take control for several years, regained control of the newspaper in the 2000s. Tan's 2008), cosy relations with Mahathir's administration from the 1980s tend to feed speculation of the political pressures or interests in maintaining control of the newspaper (Gomez 2009, 2018; Abbott 2011). Today, Tan's Berjaya has 100% ownership of the Sun Media Corporation Sdn Bhd, and therefore, of *The Sun* also.

Post-monopoly manipulation was evident. Initially, in the early 2000s, *The Sun* was widely recognised as "independent and aggressive" in their reporting on

Malaysian political affairs (Cooper 2002). There are two examples from 2001: *The Sun* reported an (1) "assassination plot" of the police against then deputy prime minister Abdullah Badawi and (2) the "busloads of phantom voters" during a by-election in Kedah (Tapsell 2013: 11; Cooper 2002). Soon, The Sun's Board of Directors dismissed a group of senior journalists and/or editors and replaced them with a new team (Ibid.). The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)'s executive director Ann Cooper (2001) wrote a letter to Mahathir vis-à-vis the editorial overhaul and directly mentioned Tan as a "close associate" of the ruling party.

On the Board of Directors of the Sun Media Corporations Sdn Bhd are Azlan Meah Ahmed Mean, Chan Kien Sing, Freddie Ng Chee Hock, Ching Chun Keat, and Robin Tan Yeong Ching. These five were only appointed either in/after 2008.

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Chapter 5: The Ownership of Chinese Newspapers in Malaysia

By Dr Chang Teck Peng[1]

The Chinese newspaper industry in Malaysia has a history of more than two hundred years. *The Chinese Monthly Magazine was* first published in 1815 in Malacca by a London Christian missionary, William Milne (Tang, 1988, p. 95; Wong, 2013, pp. 33-34). During that era, Chinese newspapers were published mainly for propagating religion or promoting culture; profitability was not an essential factor for its founders (Tang, 1988, pp. 94-95). From the late 19th century to early 20th century, it was run by Chinese intellectuals and businessmen who advocated political ideas, publicity for industrial goods, or making money, etc. A good example was Penang-based *Kwong Wah Yit Poh*, the oldest existing Chinese newspaper in the world, first published in 1911 by the Chinese revolutionist Dr Sun Yat Sen who supported the overthrow of the 268-year-old Qing dynasty.

The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) tried to control Chinese newspapers in the 1980s when Permodalan Nasional Berhad (Pernas) - the government-owned investment arm - acquired 30% of the stake in Nanyang Press Holdings which published the then No. 1 Chinese newspaper, *Nanyang Siang Pau*. A Malay tycoon, Wan Azmi Wan Hamzah, took over Nanyang Press Holdings when it became a public listed company in 1988. However, a Chinese banking tycoon Quek Leng Chan took the helm in 1990, ending UMNO's control of Nanyang Press Holdings.

UMNO also, via the New Straits Times Press (NSTP), controlled another Chinese newspaper, *Shin Min Daily News* in the 1980s. Prominent Hong Kong *wuxia* writer, Jin Yong (Louis Cha Leung-yung), co-founded the paper in 1967 in Singapore. The newspaper became two separate entities and publications in Singapore and Malaysia from 1971 under with Malaysian government policy (Yap, 1996, p. 168). In 1976, the Malaysian publication came under the control of (Malaysian businessman) Tan Koon Swan, who went on to become the 5th president of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) from November 1985 to September 1986. However, it was then sold off to NSTP in 1986. *Shin Min Daily News* underperformed even in the hands of NSTP and ceased operations in 1994.

 MCA, via its investment arm, Huaren Holdings Sdn Bhd, owned *Malayan Thung Pao*, a daily, from 1981-1992. First published in 1957 by a former newspaper vendor, Chiew Swee Peaw, the newspaper was renamed *Tong Bao* by MCA after it took it over in 1981. It did not do well in the hands of MCA and the Chinese political party, which was in the then ruling coalition, eventually disposed of its entire stake. The new owner of *Tong Bao*, Stocktrade Sdn Bhd, also failed and the paper ceased publication in 1994.[2]

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[2] Property developer Sin Heap Lee Group is the parent company of Stocktrade Sdn Bhd. It bought the newspaper from Huaren Holdings for an undisclosed sum (Tan, 1992).

The most controversial newspaper deal by MCA was the takeover of the public-listed Nanyang Press Holdings in 2001.It gave the party control over *Nanyang Siang Pau*, *China Press*, and several other publications. It was widely speculated that the owner of Sin Chew Media Group, Tiong Hiew King, was involved in the deal (Ho, 2001, pp. 11-12) but he denied it. Regardless, MCA sold its shares in Nanyang Press Holdings to Tiong in batches in 2006 and he obtained full control over Nanyang Press Holdings just after five years of the controversial deal.

Nowadays, no Chinese newspaper is directly owned by political parties. It is, however, interesting to note that the key figure(s) of most Chinese newspapers have varying political backgrounds and connections.

Chinese Newspapers in the Peninsula

After Tiong acquired Nanyang Press Holdings, he merged it with the Sin Chew Media Group, the publisher of *Sin Chew Daily* and *Guang Ming Daily*, and then established Media Chinese International Limited (MCIL). The MCIL was listed in both Hong Kong and Malaysia in 2008. Hence, four major Chinese newspapers in the peninsula, namely *Sin Chew Daily*, *China Press*, *Guang Ming Daily* and *Nanyang Siang Pau,* are now controlled by the Sarawakian logging tycoon.

Tiong is ranked by Forbes Malaysia's 50 Richest 2020 as the 17th richest person with a net worth of US$976mil. He holds forestry concessions in 16 countries and has stakes in property, oil-and-gas, and palm oil and his four daily newspapers comprise 70% of Malaysia's Chinese newspaper business ("*Tiong Hiew King*", n.d.).

Though not active in politics, Tiong Hiew King was one of the vice-presidents and treasurer of the Sarawak United Peoples' Party (SUPP), a Barisan Nasional component party in Sarawak, for a short while. A two-term Senator (1985-1991), Tiong is also known for his close ties with the ruling elites at both federal and state level, including but not limited to Mahathir Mohamad (then Prime Minister); Abdul Taib Mahmud, the former Chief Minister of Sarawak and now Yang Dipertua Negeri of Sarawak; as well as the late Wong Soon Kai, the former deputy chief minister of Sarawak and former president of SUPP.[3]

Tiong Hiew King's younger brother Tiong Thai King[4] was also a central committee member of SUPP and Lanang Member of Parliament (MP) for four consecutive terms from 1995 until his defeat in the 2013 general election.

Tiong Hiew King reportedly suffered a stroke and was admitted to hospital in Singapore for "special treatment" in April 2017. Since then he has not appeared in public.

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[3] Tiong appointed Wong Soon Kai as chairman of his public-listed company, Subur Tiasa Holdings Berhad, right after Wong was defeated in the 1996 Sarawak State Election and lost his position in the state government (Chang, 2004, p. 115). Wong served the company until he passed away in 2017.

[4] The younger Tiong left SUPP and joined the newly-formed United People's Party (UPP) in 2014, he took part in the 2016 Sarawak State Election as a "Direct BN Candidate" and was elected State Assemblyman for the Dudong constituency.

His youngest daughter, Tiong Choon was redesignated from non-executive director to executive director of the group just three months after he was admitted to hospital. She is widely seen as his successor at MCIL[5] (Liew, 2017, September 6).

Another major Chinese daily in the peninsula, *Oriental Daily News*, is owned by KTS Group, one of the largest Sarawakian timber conglomerates founded by another Sarawakian tycoon, Lau Hui Kang. A fierce rival of Tiong Hiew King in Sarawak, Lau founded the *Oriental Daily News* in 2002 to counter his business competitor's involvement in the MCA takeover of Nanyang Press Holdings in 2001. Henry Lau Lee Kong, the second son of Hui Kang, is the successor and managing director of KTS Group. Lau, who passed away in 2006, was not active in politics but his family members[6] have close ties with SUPP.

Dr Sun Yat Sen founded *Kwong Wah Yit Poh*, the only Penang-based Chinese newspaper and mainly circulated in the northern states in 1910. It is one of the oldest surviving Chinese newspapers in the world, and the oldest surviving Chinese newspaper in Malaysia. Kwong Wah Yit Poh Press Bhd now owns it. The company is largely controlled by the family of the late Penang tycoon Loh Boon Siew aka "Mr Honda", through Boon Siew Sdn Bhd (57.91%).

The company's chairman, Lim Su Tong, is the third son-in-law of Boon Siew. Though there is no record of his ties with political parties, it is interesting to note that deputy chairman Ong Gim Huat was one of the non-executive directors of the scandal-ridden 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB). Ong is a friend and business partner of 30 years of Larry Low Hock Peng, the father of the infamous Jho Low ("*1MDB director Ong is business partner of Jho Low's father*", 2015, February 17).

Meanwhile, one of the directors, Loh Nam Hooi, was vice-chairman of MCA Youth, vice chairman of MCA Youth Penang and deputy treasurer of MCA Penang State Liaison Committee. He was also a Barisan National candidate for Seri Delima state constituency in General Election 2008.

Chinese Newspapers in Sarawak and Sabah

Sarawak

There are four Chinese newspapers published and circulated in Sarawak, namely *See Hua Daily News*, *Sin Chew Daily*, *International Times*, and *United Daily News*.

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[5] Furthermore, Tiong Hiew King was re-designated from Executive Chairman to Non-independent Director while his other younger brother, Tiong Ik King was made Non-Executive Chairman effective 1 April 2018.
[6] Hui Kang's younger brother, Robert Lau Hoi Chew was active in politics. He was a vice-president of SUPP and served as chairman of the Sibu Municipal Council from 1994-2004. He was also a five-term MP for Sibu from 1990. As a parliamentarian, he served as Deputy Minister of Housing and Local Government, and Deputy Minister of Transport, until his passing in 2010. A cousin of the late Lau brothers, Robert Lau Hui Yew (whose father Lau Swee Nguong is KTS Group chairman), is SUPP assistant treasurer and was a Barisan Nasional (SUPP) candidate for the Sibu parliamentary by-election in 2010 but he failed to win the seat vacated when Hoi Chew passed away.

A sister newspaper of the *Oriental Daily News* in the peninsula, *See Hua Daily News* has a longer history, as it was first published on 1 April 1952 in Sibu. Lau Hui Siong, a media mogul in East Malaysia and a younger brother of Lau Hui Kang, took over the newspaper in 1955 when he was 26 years old (Yap, 1996, p. 232). The daily became the best-selling Chinese newspaper in Sibu in the late 1950s (Lau, 2005, p. 207). Hui Siong also began publishing of an English paper, *Borneo Post*, from 24 April 1978. It is the sister newspaper of *See Hua Daily News* (Liu, 2000, p. 16). He also has control of *Utusan Borneo*, a Bahasa Malaysia newspaper.

See Hua Daily News, however, faced stiff competition after *Sin Chew Daily* extended its business to Sarawak in 1997. Furthermore, it was accused of being pro-opposition and responsible for the defeat of the then Deputy Chief Minister Wong Soon Kai, in the 1997 state election. It suffered heavy losses when the state government boycotted *See Hua Daily News* and its sister newspapers. In a move to save *See Hua Daily News*, Lau Hui Kang decided to take over the company in 2000 and the KTS Group has owned it since then (Lau, 2005, p. 209).

International Times was first published on 1 October 1968 in Kuching by the late Wee Boon Ping, another timber tycoon in Sarawak. It is published by International Times Sdn Bhd, a member of the Wee Boon Ping Group of Companies. The Wee family controls 99.78% of the shares. Kok Tiong, the eldest son of Boon Ping, took over the company after his father passed away in 1998. Though he was not so active in politics, the younger Wee was appointed a Senator in 2001. He was a BN (SUPP) candidate for the Kuching parliamentary constituency in the 2004 general election.

United Daily News, the result of a merger between *Chinese Daily News* and *Miri Daily,* began publishing on 1 January 2004. United Borneo Press Sdn Bhd owns it. The company has 10 shareholders but the two largest shareholders - Plus Sunshine Sdn Bhd (53.21%) and Miri Daily Sdn Bhd (45.68%) - control 98.89% of shares in total. Also, Sunshine is fully controlled by the family of Ling Chiong Ho, the chief steward of Miri-based conglomerate Shin Yang Group of Company. Forbes ranked him as the 48th richest in Malaysia in 2017. Ling is one of the four directors of United Borneo Press Sdn Bhd.

Another shareholder and director of the United Borneo Press Sdn Bhd, Pau Chiong Ung has a direct political connection with the pro-BN party Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP). He is the party's Kidurong division chairman. He was a Senator (2010-2013) and was a direct BN candidate for Tanjong Batu constituency in the 2016 state election 2016.

Sabah

In Sabah, the state-wide circulated Chinese newspapers are *See Hua Daily News*, *Sin Chew Daily*, *Asia Times* and *Oversea Chinese Daily News*. Also, one Chinese newspaper, *Merdeka Daily News*, is published and circulated in Sandakan, while *Morning Post* is the only Chinese newspaper published and distributed in Tawau.

Asia Times was founded by Chinese businessman Tiong Tan Hua and his wife Foo Choon Pang. It was first published on 7 August 1976 in Kota Kinabalu, under Asia Times Sdn Bhd. According to the information submitted to Companies Commission of Malaysia, the company is a family business, in which the couple controls 45% and 22% of the shares respectively. Their three children and T. H. Tiong Holdings Sdn Bhd hold 8.25% each. The Tiong family does not seem to have close ties with political parties.

Oversea Chinese Daily News was first published on 1 March 1936 by the late Li Yulin. It was not only the first Chinese newspaper in Sabah but also the pioneer of the newspaper industry in Sabah (Yap, 1996, p. 216). It was taken over by the late Yeh Pao Tzu in 1949, and his family now has full control of the publisher, Sabah Publishing House Sdn Bhd. The company also publishes an English newspaper, *Daily Express*.

Yeh was a journalism graduate from Fu Tan University, China, and he served as its publisher-cum-chief editor after taking over the ownership of the newspaper. Yeh served in various capacities in political parties such as Sabah People's Party, Parti Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah (BERJAYA), Sabah National Party and Sabah Democratic Party (Yap, 1996, p. 219). He was also a Sabah State Assemblyman, Senator, and MP for Tawau (1963-1984).

Yeh died in 1987, and his wife succeeded him as the chairman. His son, Clement Yeh Chang became the publisher. Active in Chinese associations, Clement was appointed by Sabah state government as Kapitan for Kota Kinabalu in 2017.

First published on 1 December 1968 and owned by Syarikat Berita Harian Merdeka Sdn Bhd, *Merdeka Daily News* is a Chinese newspaper published and circulated in Sandakan. It was founded by the then Deputy Chief Minister Khoo Siak Chiew, who was also elected an MP in 1963 and two-term Minister of Transportation of Sabah before being appointed Deputy Chief Minister of Sabah in1967 (Yap, 1996, p. 223).

The company is now controlled by Siak Chiew's son John (Cheo Ping). Nominated by Barisan Rakyat Sabah Bersekutu (BERSEKUTU or the Federated Sabah People's Front) - the then opposition party founded by former Chief Minister Harris Salleh, in 1998 - John contested in the Tanjung Papat constituency in the 1999 state election but lost to the BN candidate. His elder brother Edward (Keok Hai) was MCA Sabah's Liaison Chief, as well as State Assemblyman for Kapayan and Assistant Minister to the Chief Minister of Sabah.

Morning Post is the only surviving Chinese newspaper published and circulated in Tawau. Founded by Sabahan businessman Qiu Min Yang, the newspaper was first published on 18 April 1981. It was owned by Morning Post Sdn Bhd. The majority shares of the company, however, have been acquired by Sarawakian businessman Pau Chiong Tai, who is also a Kapitan in Sarawak.

Table 1: Ownership of Malaysian Chinese Newspapers

Owner	Largest shareholder(s)/ Key Figure(s)	Newspaper Title	Circulation*
Peninsular			
Media Chinese International Limited	Tiong Hiew King Dr Tiong Ik King Tiong Choon	Sin Chew Daily Guang Ming Daily China Press Nanyang Siang Pau	288,920 49,712 127,822 n.a.
Penerbitan Cerdas Maju Sdn Bhd (KTS Group)	Henry Lau Lee Kong	Oriental Daily News	n.a.
Kwong Wah Yit Poh Sdn Bhd	Lim Su Tong Ong Gim Huat Loh Nam Hooi	Kwong Wah Yit Poh	n.a.
Sarawak			
Media Chinese International Limited	Tiong Hiew King Dr Tiong Ik King Tiong Choon	Sin Chew Daily	45,720
See Hua Daily News Sdn Bhd (KTS Group)	Henry Lau Lee Kong	See Hua Daily News	63,549
International Times Sdn Bhd (Wee Boon Ping Group of Companies)	Wee Kok Tiong	International Times	30,266**

United Borneo Press Sdn Bhd	Ling Chiong Ho Pau Chiong Ung	United Daily News	31,910

Sabah

Media Chinese International Limited	Tiong Hiew King Dr Tiong Ik King Tiong Choon	Sin Chew Daily	2,769
See Hua Daily News (Sabah) Sdn Bhd (KTS Group)	Henry Lau Lee Kong	See Hua Daily News (Sabah)	23,901
Sabah Publishing House Sdn Bhd	Clement Yeh Chang	Oversea Chinese Daily News	n.a.
Asia Times Sdn Bhd	Tiong Tan Hua Foo Choon Pang	Asia Times	n.a.
Syarikat Berita Harian Merdeka Sdn Bhd	John Khoo Cheo Ping	Merdeka Daily News (Sandakan)	4,518**
Morning Post Sdn Bhd	Pau Chiong Tai	Morning Post (Tawau)	n.a.

* Circulation figures for January 2018 to June 2018, Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia.

** Circulation figures for 2018 is not available. The figures stated were for January 2017 to June 2017, Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia.

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Chapter 6: GE14- Women, Politics and the Media in Malaysia*

By Wang Lay Kim

The nation prepared for the 14th general election in 2018 (GE14) against a backdrop of high profile political and economic corruption. It was dubbed a do-or-die election or the "Mother of Elections" by critics and opponents of the Barisan Nasional (BN) government (Kassim, 2017). BN wanted to win back the seats it lost in the two previous elections and to recover its two-thirds majority in parliament. In a hegemonic crisis faced by the ruling government, coercive measures were taken to maintain power, and these included arresting key people, such as politicians or editors (NST, 2016), restricting media access, and using the media to peddle discourse that would support the government. GE14 was a fiercely contested election. The coalitions and candidates wooed people from different ethnic groups, first-time young adult voters, and women who made up slightly over 50% of the 14.9 million registered voters. Out of the 2,333 candidates who stood for the 222 parliament and 505 state legislative assembly seats, only 251 or 10.7% were women. This was a marginal increase from 2013 when women made up only 8% of the total number of candidates for both parliament and the state legislative assemblies.

This report specifically focuses on women and investigates media coverage of women during the GE14 campaign through quantitative and qualitative analyses. The quantitative analysis measured, among others, how frequently women were cited as sources as well the inclusion of issues with a gender dimension. The qualitative analysis assessed the headlines and language used as a gauge of the media's reflection and re-creation of society's norms and ideologies.

Numbers make a difference: Quantitative analysis

As the main report shows, media coverage favoured the BN over Pakatan Harapan (PH) and the latter also received most of the attacks in the election coverage. Apart from monitoring politicians, political figures, civil society representatives and members of the public, the project documented coverage of or references to gender, sexuality and sexism explicitly. Gender was one of the 20 categories analysed, where monitors coded items that contained references to sexuality, women in politics, balancing the personal and private lives of female public figures, women's issues and rights, LGBTQ, the physical appearance of female public figures, and sexism. For this analysis, comparisons between how often women or men were quoted as sources were limited to political leaders and public voices.

The most apparent finding, regardless of whether it was for a news story or an interview, was the stark disparity between the use of men and women as sources. On the whole, most of the sources quoted were men, especially when they were politicians and top leaders of political parties. The top five most quoted politicians/political figures were all male – Najib Abdul Razak, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, Mahathir Mohamad, Abang Johari Tun Openg and Musa Aman. Of these, Najib was he quoted the most at 10.47%, followed by Ahmad Zahid Hamidi at 4.77%. They were the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, respectively. Even

though all media cited women, the fact that men were the primary source of information meant that women were less likely to have a voice in news stories. As a result, there were fewer possibilities of providing a different interpretation or priority for voters. The few exceptions when a woman's voice was heard was that of female candidate Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, who was also the president of the People's Justice Party or Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). However, she was not among the top five figures in the news, despite being the leader of one of the largest political parties.

Tone of coverage of women politicians and political figures

When Wan Azizah appeared in print or on the air, the tone used was mixed. For example, she was generally reported in a neutral tone over TV3, a pro-BN media, like the English version of the online portal Malaysiakini. However, the portal's Malay pages carried stories that showed her being attacked. The prime minister's wife, Rosmah Mansor received positive coverage, albeit with a tiny percentage on TV3 (2%), but coverage of her was negative on TV2's English news (14.3%). She was also portrayed negatively on 8TV and TV2's Mandarin news, although this was only half as much as her husband Najib. Azalina Othman Said who was then a Minister at the Prime Minister's Department received just 1.67% positive coverage compared to Najib's 42.5% positive coverage on TV2 English news.

In the Malay newspapers, Ambiga Sreenivasan, a prominent human rights lawyer and former Bersih 2.0 chairperson, received the most attacks (28.57%) in *Utusan Malaysia.* In comparison, the frequency of male sources also targeted for attacks in news stories, such as Chow Kon Yeow (DAP) and Baru Bian (PKR) was half of what Ambiga faced. Other women leaders whose coverage was relatively significant were Azalina and Chew Mei Fun – both from BN - in *Sinar Harian*, with a mixed share of positive, negative and neutral tones. Interestingly, *Sinar Harian*'s portrayal of PKR leader Nurul Izzah Anwar was mainly as a source who employed attack politics in her speeches or quotes.

Among the English newspapers, *The Sun* portrayed Maria Chin as a source who employed attack politics (4.55%). Her quotes were targeted at the authorities over the arrests of four women who had taken down election banners. MCA's Chew was a recipient of attacks from other sources but in both cases, it only occurred once. *The Star*'s use of sources included Azalina, who was portrayed in neutral and negative tones. Ambiga was also among top figures cited as a source (4.71%). However, the highest was Rais Hussin Mohamed Ariff from Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia at 7.46%

In the Chinese newspapers, *Sin Chew Daily* portrayed Wan Azizah mainly in a negative tone, but she received relatively more favourable coverage in the *Oriental Daily News*. On the other hand, Rosmah was portrayed negatively, closely followed by Mahathir and Najib in *Oriental Daily*.

In Tamil newspaper *Makkal Osai*, Chew and Azalina were among those most covered in a mix of neutral, negative and positive tones.

In East Malaysia, *Utusan Borneo* portrayed Wan Azizah negatively but portrayed BN's Shahrizat Abdul Jalil as the target of attack politics.

Similarly, in Bernama, Shahrizat was among the politicians who were used as a source (1.44%), but this can be considered insignificant compared to Najib Razak (40.55%).

In the coverage of voters and public opinion, or what is known as *Vox Populi*, more men tended to be quoted at 78% compared to 22% of women.

It is apparent, from looking at the quantitative data, that men were more visible compared to women as sources of news and opinion, whether from among political leaders or the general public.

Gender as an under-reported issue

As per the charts below (Figures 18 and 22 as also discussed in Chapter 1 on the data analysis), non-policy issues were covered more than policy issues (17% vs 6%). Eight categories were coded for non-policy issues, and items that referred to gender or women's issues were among the lowest at only 2%. The results show that the media in Malaysia were under-reporting gender issues at a very critical point of Malaysian politics. Despite promises of greater involvement of women or the empowerment of women at every general election, the discourse on or implementation of gender policies pertaining to women remains negligible. It is safe to say that the media do not accurately reflect women's experiences, apart from the presentation of women in politics and general bread and butter issues. The following section elaborates this.

Figure 18

Breakdown of categories of media coverage

| 21.55% | 24.37% | 26.65% | 3.97% | 5.96% | 17.49% |
| Politicians and political figures (mentioned) | Politicians and political figures (as sources) | Parties / Coalitions | Organisations | Policy issues | Non-policy issues |

Figure 22

Overall coverage of non-policy issues

- **14%** Ethnicity
- **19%** Electioneering
- **2%** Religion
- **2%** Gender
- **10%** Democracy & Human Rights
- **2%** Mudslinging
- **10%** Socioeconomic Sectors
- **41%** Territory
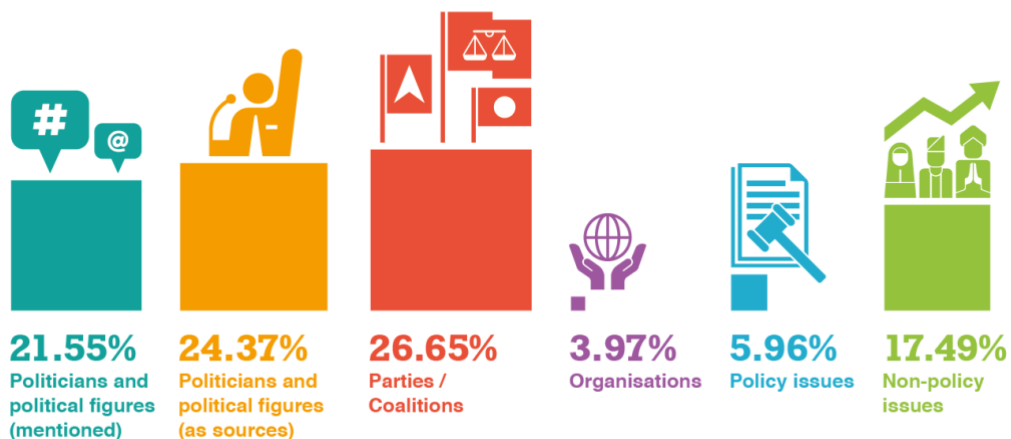
NON-POLICY ISSUES

How women and gender are covered: A qualitative analysis

Out of the 889 items/sentences analysed across the selected media that contained references to gender, 127 were marked for a more detailed analysis. These were then given specific identifications - two items contained references to sexuality, 51 on women in politics, 72 mentioned women's issues, and two touched on women's physical appearance. In this part of the qualitative analysis, only women's issues and women in politics will be discussed. The discourses that were generated in the category of women's issues mainly focussed on the struggles of women in their everyday socio-economic situation and women's participation in politics as candidates.

Women are often framed within the domestic or family context, in subjugated and marginalised positions. The qualitative analysis shows that news reports did refer to women, women entrepreneurs, women and children, single mothers, and pregnant mothers. Among the most mentioned groups were single mothers and women entrepreneurs. Related to that were the use of positive phrases such as "to strengthen the welfare", "to boost income", "to provide childcare services", "to propose flexible working hours and longer maternity leave", "to ensure women's happiness", "to develop family institutions", "to encourage women's entrepreneurship", "to safe keep the dignity of women", "to ensure women's safety", to boost the socio-economic welfare of women in general and single mothers in particular. Ideologically, the very notion of "women" mentioned in these narratives was associated with women being "recipients" or "beneficiaries" of government programmes and welfare handouts. The representation here is that women are vulnerable and fall under the social welfare category. However, a welfare approach to women and women's issues hardly empowers women.

To further stress the support for women during the general election, one article headlined *"Johor BN helps all"* carried the narrative of helping women by turning an R&R stop along the highway for them to be entrepreneurs. This support was part of a more significant commitment to empower women and push women's agenda in an industry long dominated by men. It said that many women were qualified and should be given the opportunity but appropriating feminist values of egalitarianism and empowerment is problematic within a state-funded, patriarchal structure. As Lazar (2007) aptly points out, notions of equality and freedom for women premised on abstract universalism and sameness - that women are becoming like the men in the industry - are problematic because these notions still fit into the prevailing structures. Many modern women gain access to employment and enter the public sphere but the gendered social structures that remain benefit men. Media discursive strategies should question those structures and not merely report them as a given.

Looking at the news reports that were generated in the category of "women in politics" and the ideas and ideologies associated with it, the headlines reflected a lot of positive phrases and framed the position of respective political parties in support of women candidates and a call for voters to support them too. Phrases that framed the political parties' support of women candidates and consequently women's agenda included headlines such as "women-friendly ecosystem", "women's voices being heard", "women are not left behind", "women at the forefront for decision-making", "more seats for women", "more opportunities for women in cabinet", and "new faces and more women as candidates". These messages were celebratory in the media across all languages. Both the media and the sources exaggerated what was only a marginal increase in the number of women candidates in GE14, to convey the meaning that women were now occupying top positions in electoral politics. In other words, the naturalised meaning of these headlines and the narratives was that "a vote for the said political parties is a vote for women's empowerment".

Another news writing pattern noted was the use of active forms of verbs in discursive practices. For example, verbs such as "prioritise", "benefit", "fight", "promote", "empower", "increase", "bring change", and "recognise" were used to blur the fact that women's capabilities as leaders in the political and economic fronts have been misrepresented at best, and misinformed at worst. The analysis showed gaps in the mainstream media's coverage of gender issues during GE14.

The ideology made available to the readers and voters, particularly women voters during the event of a general election, presents particular ways of looking at and talking about women. Yet, despite the talk of doing something for women, none of the political parties successfully achieved the minimum 30% representation of women in parliament or other levels of governance. The gender gap in Malaysian politics remains and the media, while citing equality in the coverage, do not challenge political actors when it comes to dismantling the structures of power and relations that create and maintain a patriarchal system (Lazar, 2007). The research argues that the media is complicit in reinforcing unequal gender structures.

Contrary to the rhetoric of empowering women in politics, the findings imply that particular ideologies have been (re)produced to mask the structural imbalance of power in terms of women's representation in politics. In the coverage of GE14, the qualitative analysis has shown the difficult struggle women have in fighting the systemic bias of media representation of the participation of women in the arena of politics.

Conclusion

The media make choices daily as to what they report and the reproduced text constitute actors, actions, source, agents, events, which highlight some ideas about men and women and exclude other aspects. There is no single way of being a woman, or of being feminine or being a successful woman. But the use of familiar, repeated patterns and words and preferred source can reinforce power and domination as the quantitative and qualitative analyses demonstrated.

Note

*A longer version of this paper titled 'Competing Discourses and Misinformation: Women, Media and GE14' was presented at the University of Nottingham Malaysia Panel for the Asia Centre's International Conference on Fake News and Elections in Asia (10-12 July 2019, Bangkok).

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APPENDIX 1: LIST OF VOLUNTEERS

1. Olivia Jessica Peter
2. Tan Wan Har
3. Maisarah Muhd Najib
4. Liow Moi Lee
5. Tung Wan Qing
6. Xavier Devasagayam Anthony
7. Malathi Mohan
8. Gowri Arumugam
9. Cheh Mae Sum Samantha
10. Rosnani Husin
11. Jason Wee Chong Wai
12. Kew Si Cheng
13. Chin Lee Kee
14. Ahmad Jauhary bin Ahmad Fahmy
15. Nur Asila binti Abdul Jalil
16. Liow Sze Xian
17. Nur Ainaa binti Abdul Jalil
18. Cissy Armico Sami
19. Oscardela Sami
20. Mohd Fariz Azwan bin Abdul Wahab
21. Sim Kai An
22. Ruhil Amal binti Abdul Razak
23. Lau Han Shaun
24. Syibratul Fauzana binti Mohd Fauzi
25. Rachel Serna
26. Ronald Beti
27. Maryam Lee binti Mohamad Ramli Lee
28. So Soon Yuan
29. Teoh Sing Fei
30. Janarthani Arumugam
31. Pauline Leong

Universiti Sains Malaysia:
Coordinator: Wang Lay Kim
32. Fiqrie bin Mohd Firoz
33. Chia Song Tat
34. Phan Chung Wen
35. Nur Syaza Aqilah binti Mohamed Fuhat
36. Siti Fatimah binti Huzaidi
37. Kairunnisa binti Abdullah
38. Vinnie Lim Wei Yee
39. Florence Ann Henry

40. Bavitrasri a/p Narayanasamy
41. Chong Hwai Yee
42. Kor Weini
43. Lau Kai Xian
44. Soniajit Kaur Sandhu a/p Manjit Singh
45. Satiaselan Ravindren
46. Teshveen Kaur Chaal
47. Angeline Fong Horyan
48. Carmen Goo Hsu Yue
49. Leong Nuo Qing
50. Yeoh Pheih Ling

Appendix 2: Charts

Watching the Watchdog 2.0: Combined analysis of media coverage during GE14

List of figures:

Data analysis

The following figures provide a combined overview of how the media covered i) political parties and the coalitions, ii) politicians and political figures, and iii) issues that are both policy-based and non-policy based. The combined numbers are based on the mean calculation across the 24 media outlets analysed in this research project. In Section 1, the data describes the frequency of coverage of the different political parties and coalitions and the tone of the coverage. Section 2 addresses the same questions – how often and the tone of coverage – for politicians and other political figures. For Sections 1 and 2, coders were required to identify references to political parties, coalitions, politicians, individuals with political profiles and other civic, community or professional organisations that made representations in relation to the elections. In Section 3, the data shows how the media covered issues related to the general election campaigns. These are divided into policy and non-policy issues. The detailed categories in Section 3 that were coded are listed below.

Policy Issues	Non-policy issues
5. Vision or other policy programmes such as TN50, 1Malaysia, welfare programmes in Selangor	13. Ethnicity – references to someone's ethnicity but not related to policy issue/statement
6. Environment	14. Religion – reference to someone's religion but not related to policy issue/statement
7. Economy/Development	15. Democracy and human rights including acts of corruption, references to media freedom, electoral laws, protests/rallies
8. Education	16. Socioeconomic sectors
9. Foreign Policy	17. Territory – with reference to states
10. Domestic Policy, Crime & National security	18. Mudslinging
11. Laws – typically oppressive legislation	19. Gender
12. Religion – introduction of laws, impact of court decisions, apostacy, Hudud law	20. Electioneering

Section 1: Media Coverage of Political Parties & Coalitions

1.1 Volume of Coverage of Parties & Coalitions

Figure 1: Volume of Coverage of Political Parties & Coalitions
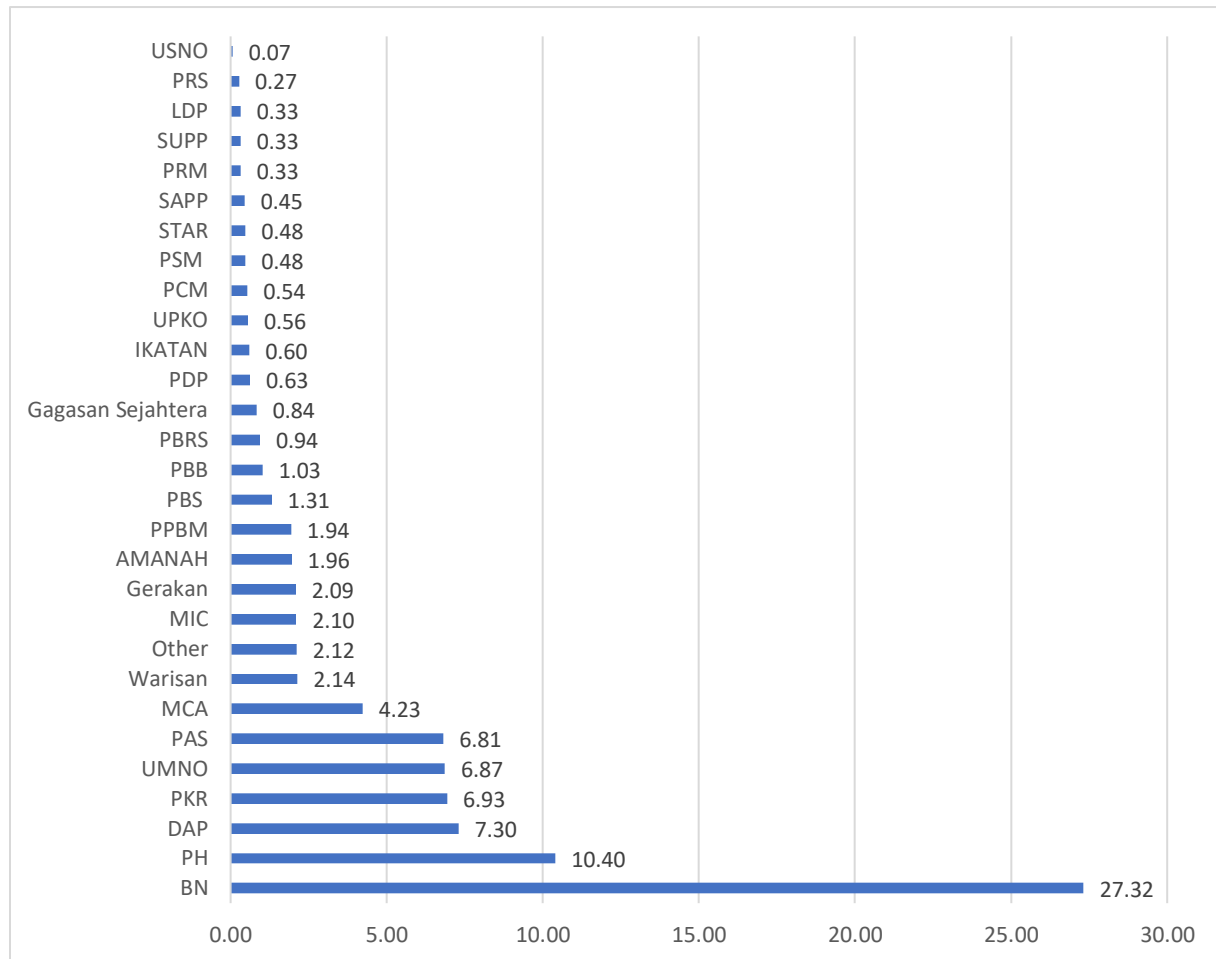
- BN received the most coverage (27.32%), followed by PH (10.40%) and DAP (7.30%). The individual political parties are coded even though they can be members of coalitions based on how they are reported or referred to.

Figure 2: Volume of Coverage of Political Parties & Coalitions: Government vs. Opposition vs. Independent/Other
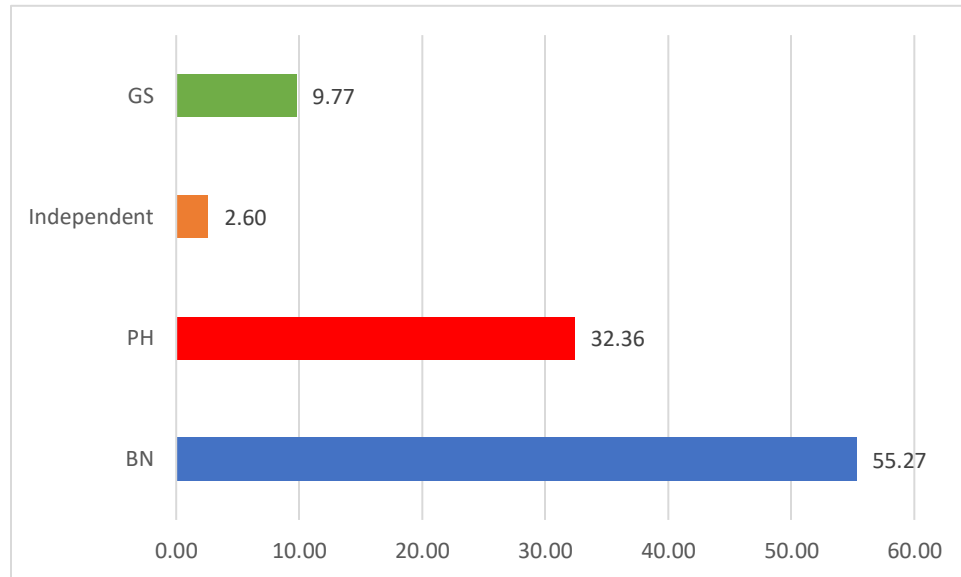
- Once parties/coalitions' coverage volumes are combined, BN received the highest level of coverage (55.27%), followed by PH (32.36%) and GS (9.77%).

1.2 Tone of Coverage of Political Parties & Coalitions

Figure 3: Raw Tonal Coverage Volume of Political Parties & Coalitions
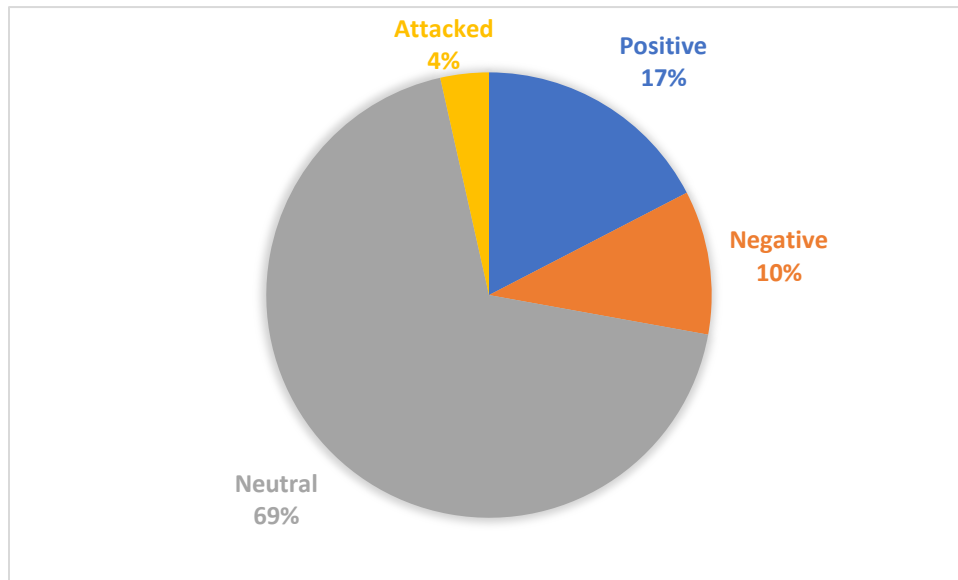
- The Neutral tone was used the most (69%), followed by Positive (17%) and Negative (10%)

The following two charts show the attacked and negative tones in the coverage of political parties and coalitions.

Figure 4.1: Attacked Tones in Political Party & Coalition Coverage

Party	Value
USNO	0.00
SAPP	0.00
PRS	0.00
Gagasan Sejahtera	0.02
PRM	0.02
PCM	0.07
UPKO	0.08
PSM	0.13
PDP	0.18
SUPP	0.19
PBB	0.22
STAR	0.29
MIC	0.40
IKATAN	0.40
LDP	0.45
PBRS	0.66
Gerakan	0.81
PPBM	0.93
AMANAH	1.35
PBS	1.66
Other	1.68
Warisan	1.75
PAS	2.75
MCA	3.00
PKR	3.93
UMNO	7.80
PH	11.67
BN	14.68
DAP	16.70
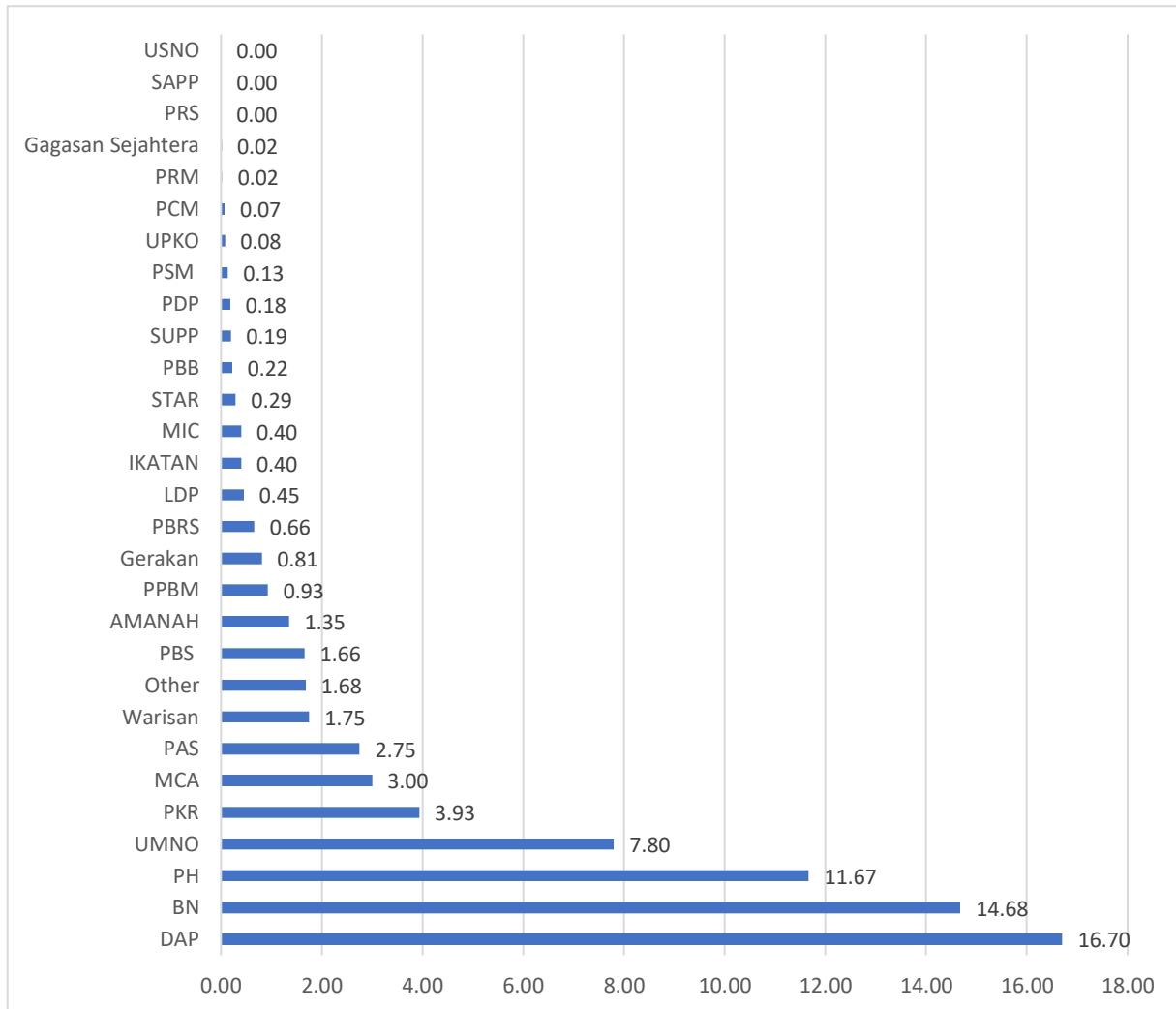
- DAP was attacked the most (16.70%), followed by BN (14.68%) and PH (11.67%).

Figure 4.2: Negative Tones in Political Party & Coalition Coverage
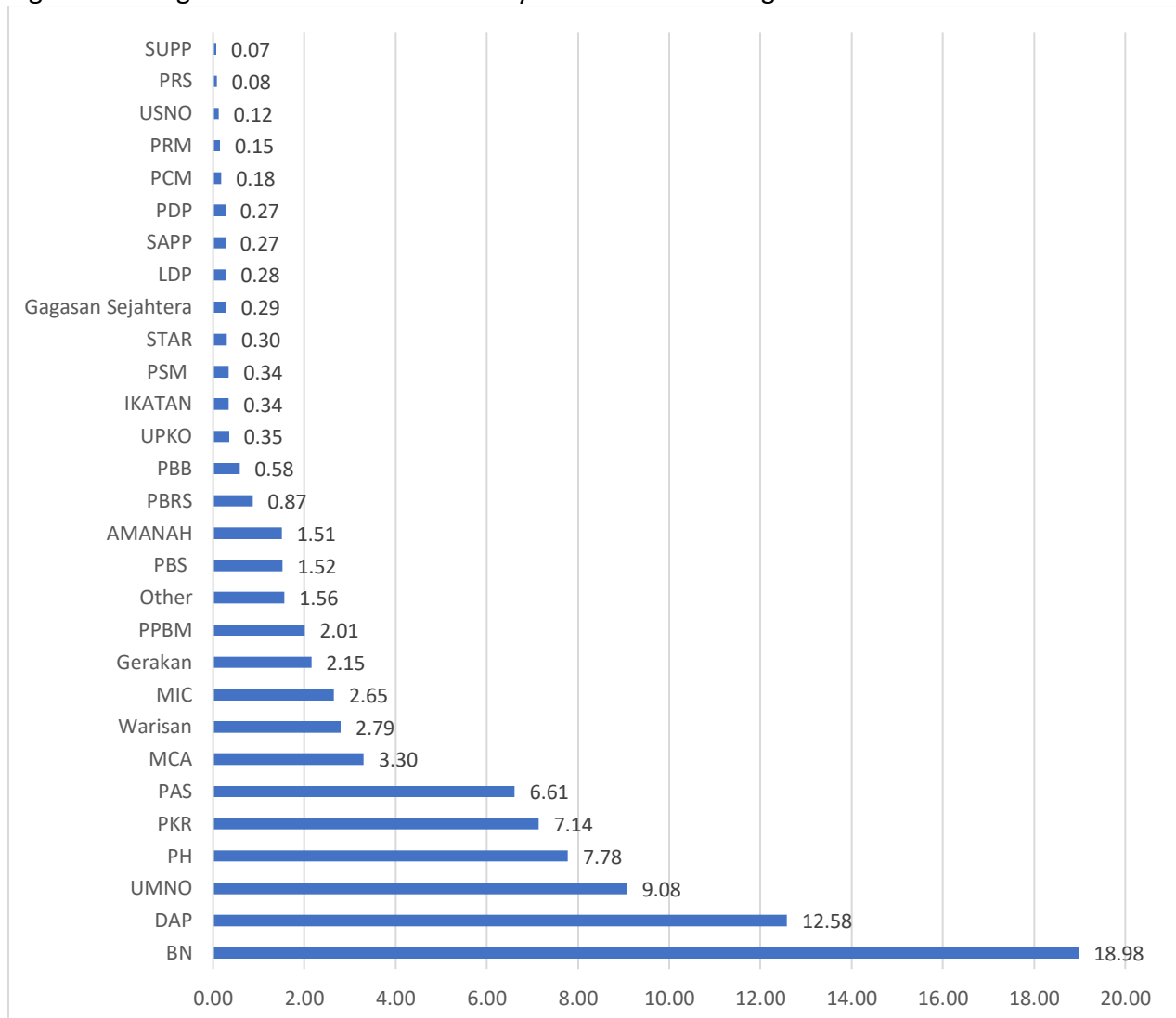
- BN received the most negative coverage (18.98%), followed by DAP (12.58%) and UMNO (9.08%) respectively.

The following two charts show the positive and neutral tones in the coverage of political parties and coalitions.

Figure 5.1: Positive Tones in Political Party & Coalition Coverage

Party	Value
USNO	0.00
SUPP	0.11
STAR	0.15
PRM	0.20
LDP	0.20
SAPP	0.21
UPKO	0.38
IKATAN	0.39
PSM	0.49
PRS	0.57
PBB	0.62
PDP	0.64
PBRS	0.74
Other	0.81
AMANAH	0.96
Gagasan Sejahtera	0.97
PCM	0.99
PBS	1.12
Warisan	1.54
PPBM	1.76
Gerakan	1.92
MIC	3.11
PKR	3.49
MCA	4.20
UMNO	4.59
DAP	4.71
PAS	5.27
PH	11.10
BN	39.96
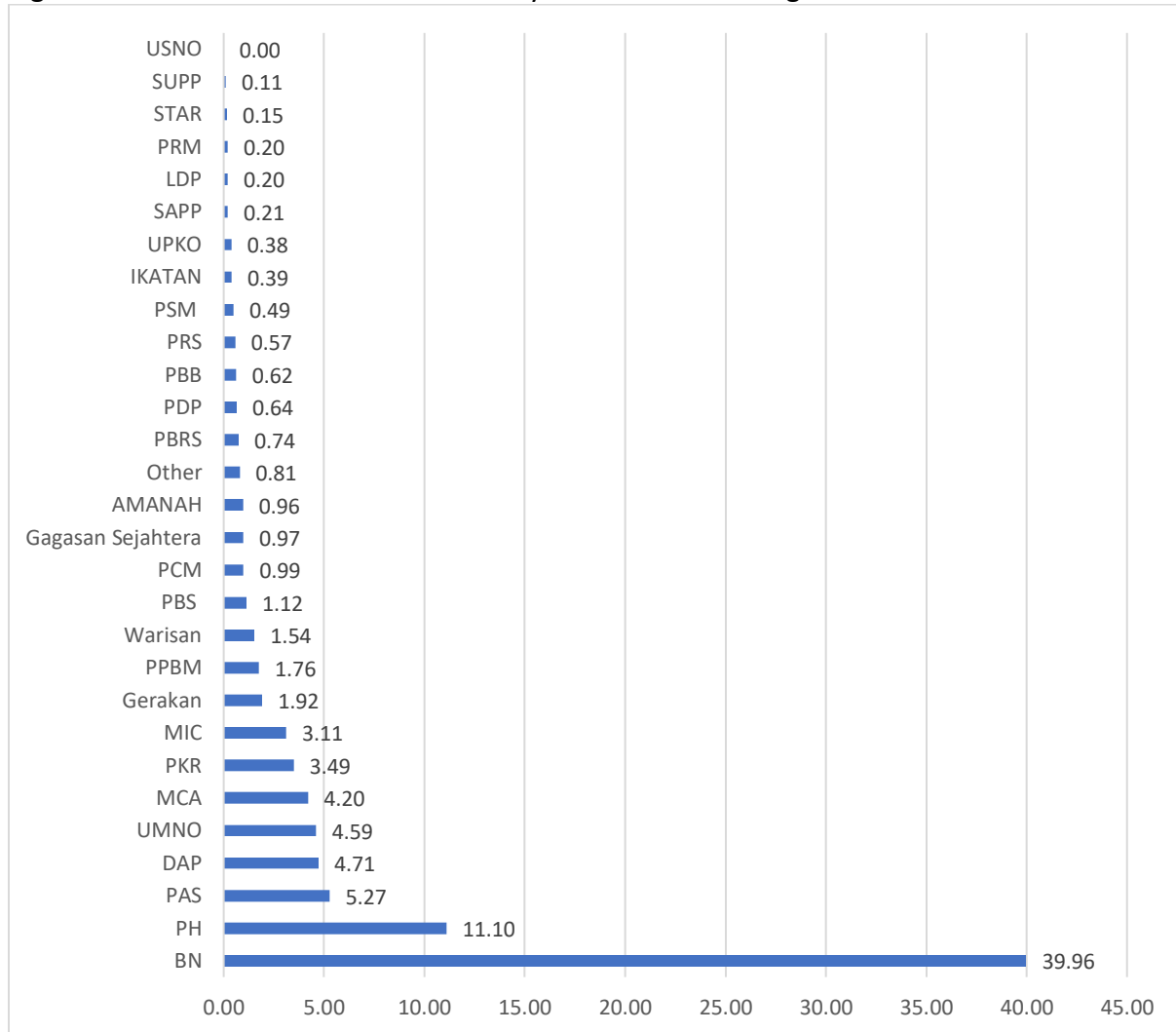
- BN received the most positive coverage (30.96%), followed by PH (11.10 %) and PAS (5.27%).

Figure 5.2: Neutral Tones in Political Party & Coalition Coverage

Party/Coalition	Value
USNO	0.08
PRS	0.33
LDP	0.36
PRM	0.44
SUPP	0.45
PCM	0.50
PSM	0.51
SAPP	0.61
STAR	0.65
IKATAN	0.66
UPKO	0.72
PDP	0.74
Gagasan Sejahtera	0.84
PBRS	0.98
PBB	1.19
PBS	1.42
MIC	2.07
PPBM	2.17
AMANAH	2.19
Gerakan	2.19
Warisan	2.35
Other	2.75
MCA	4.37
DAP	6.91
UMNO	7.12
PAS	7.84
PKR	8.05
PH	10.52
BN	24.86
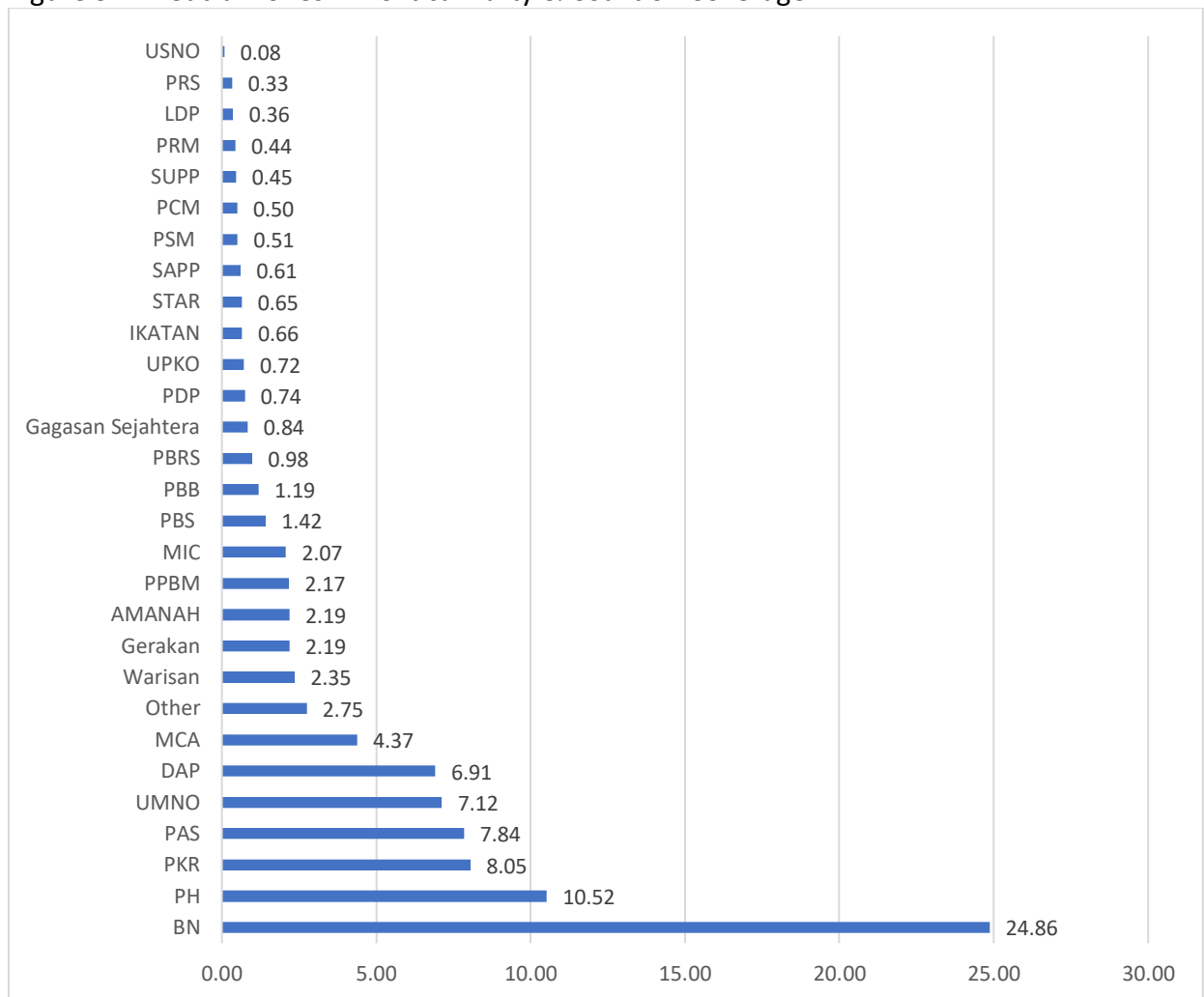
- BN received the most Neutral coverage (2486%), followed by PH (10.52%) and PKR (8.05%).

Figure 6: Tone of Coverage of Political Parties & Coalitions: Government vs. Opposition vs. Independent/Other
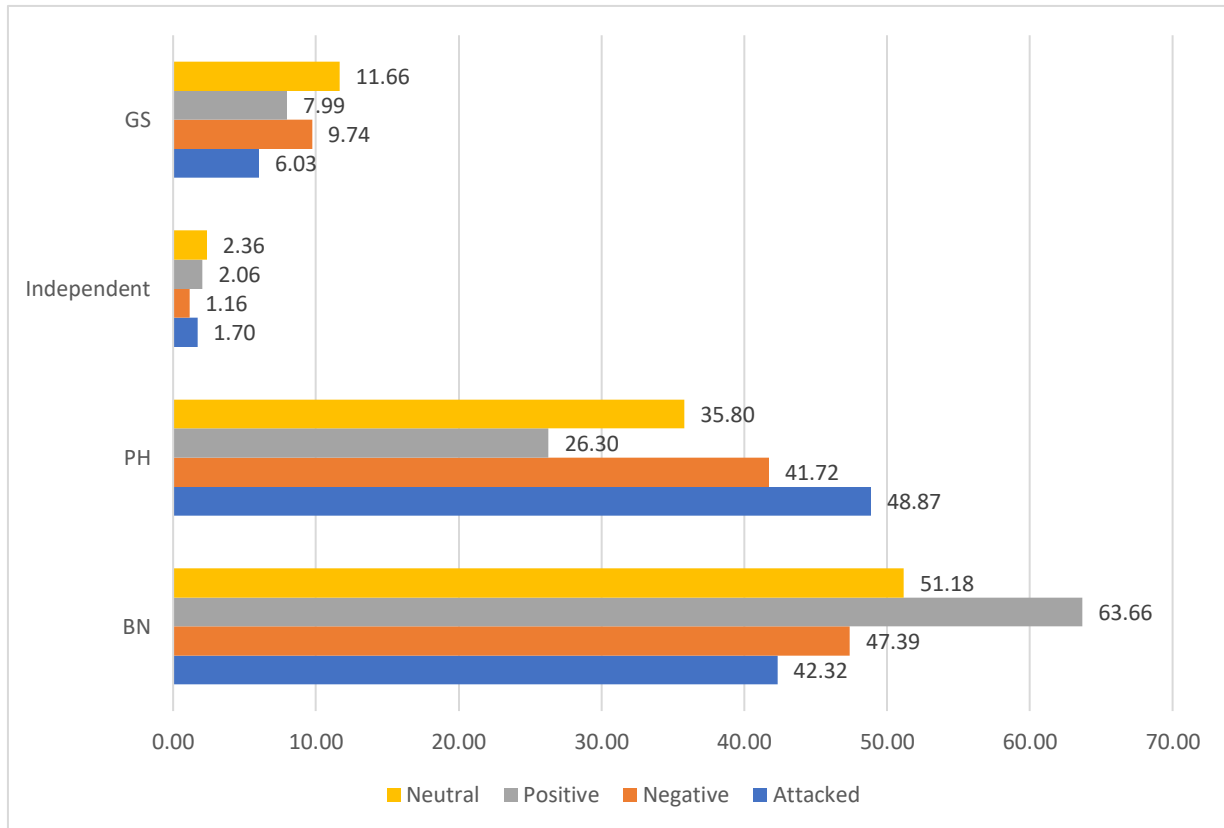
- PH received the most Attacked coverage, while BN received the most coverage for Neutral, Positive, and Negative.

Section 2: Media Coverage of Politicians & Political Figures

2.1 Volume of Coverage of Politicians & Political Figures

Figure 7: Volume of Coverage of Politicians & Political Figures
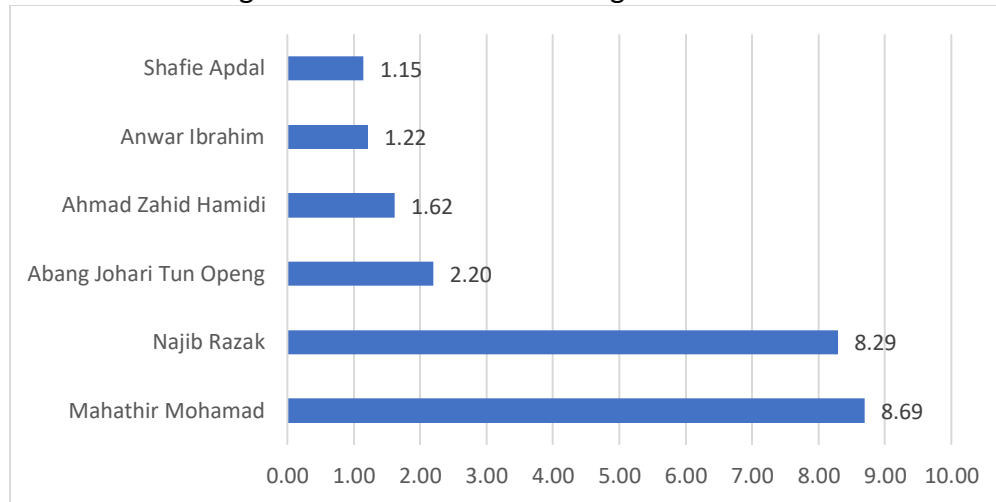
- Only politicians who score more than 1% threshold are shown on this graph.
- Out of these 5, Mahathir Mohamad received the most mentions by a significant proportion (8.69%), followed by Najib Razak (8.29%).

Figure 8: Volume of Coverage of Politicians & Political Figures: Government vs. Opposition vs. Independent/Other
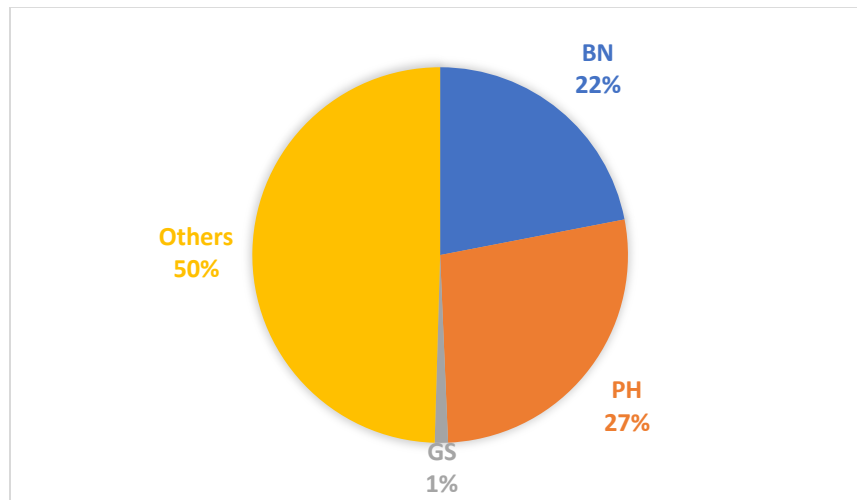
- When the mentions of individual politicians and political figures are combined and merged into their respective coalitions, we can see that coverage of figures from both major coalitions is skewed towards Others (50%). PH received more coverage than BN.

2.2 Politicians & Political Figures as Sources
Figure 9: Volume of the Use of Politicians & Political Figures as Sources
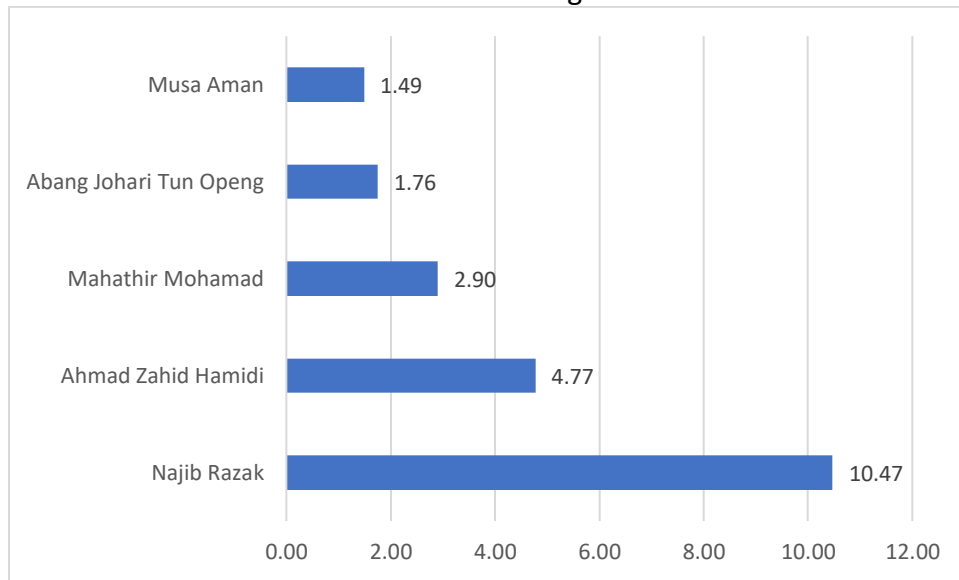
- Only the top 5 most mentioned politicians are shown on this graph.
- Out of these 5, Najib Razak received the most mentions by a significant proportion (10.47%), followed by Ahmad Zahid Hamidi (4.77%).
- A majority of the top 5 politicians belonged to the BN coalition.

Figure 10: Volume of the Use of Politicians & Political Figures As Sources: Government vs. Opposition vs. Independent/Other
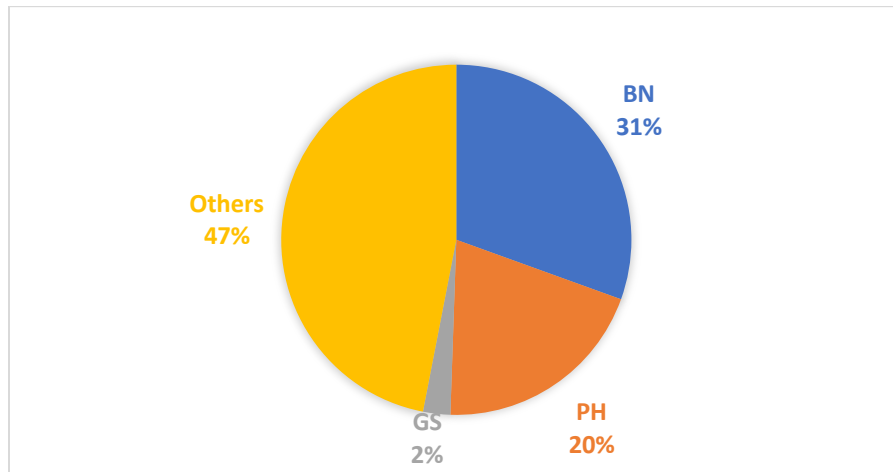
- When the mentions of individual politicians and political figures are combined and merged into their respective coalitions, we can see that coverage of figures from both major coalitions is skewed towards Others (47%). There was more coverage for BN compared to PH.

2.3 Tone of Coverage of Politicians & Political Figures

Figure 11: Raw Tonal Coverage Volume of Politicians & Political Figures
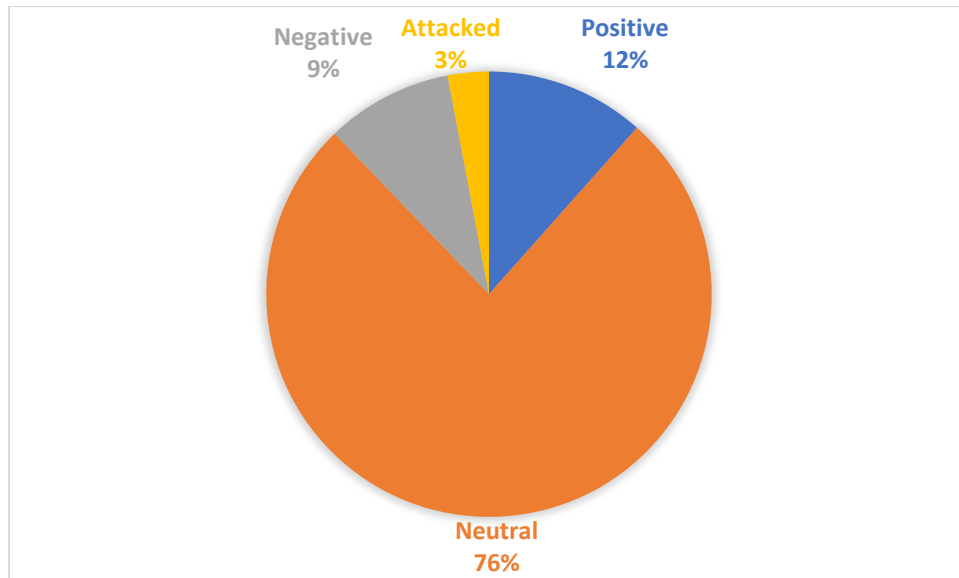
- Of all the tonal categories used in the coverage of politicians and political figures, the neutral category was used the most often (76%), followed by the positive category (12%) and the negative category (9%).

Figure 12.1: Negative Coverage of Politicians & Political Figures
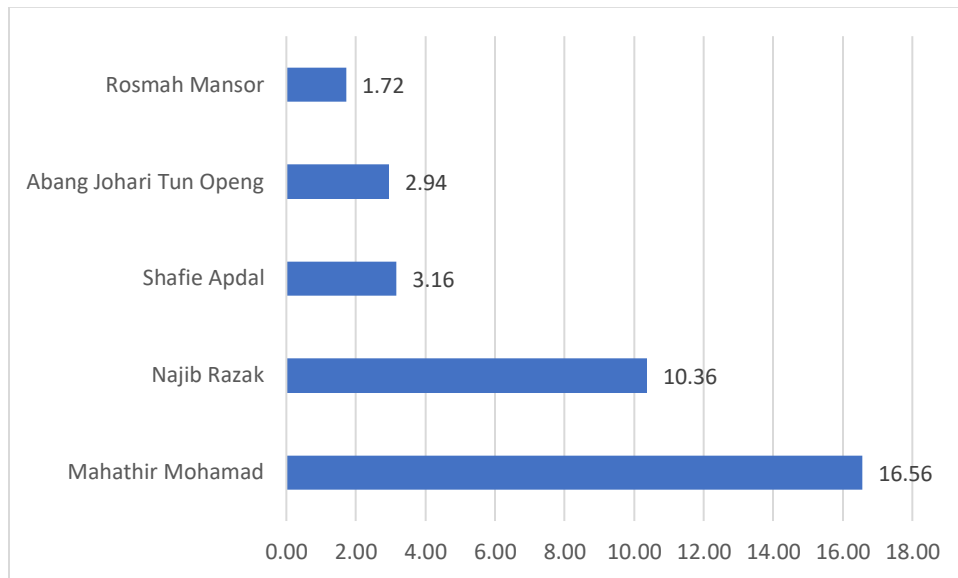
- In terms of the tone of mentions of politicians and political figures, Mahathir Mohamad received the most negative coverage (16.56%), followed by Najib Razak (10.36%)

Figure 12.2: Attacked Coverage of Politicians & Political Figures
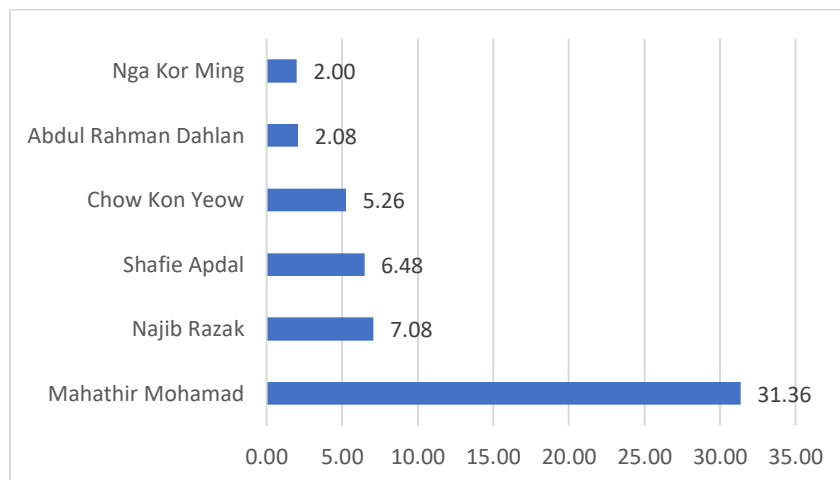
- Mahathir Mohamad was the most attacked (31.36%), followed by both Najib Razak (7.08%) and Shafie Apdal (6.48%).

Figure 13.1: Positive Coverage of Politicians & Political Figures
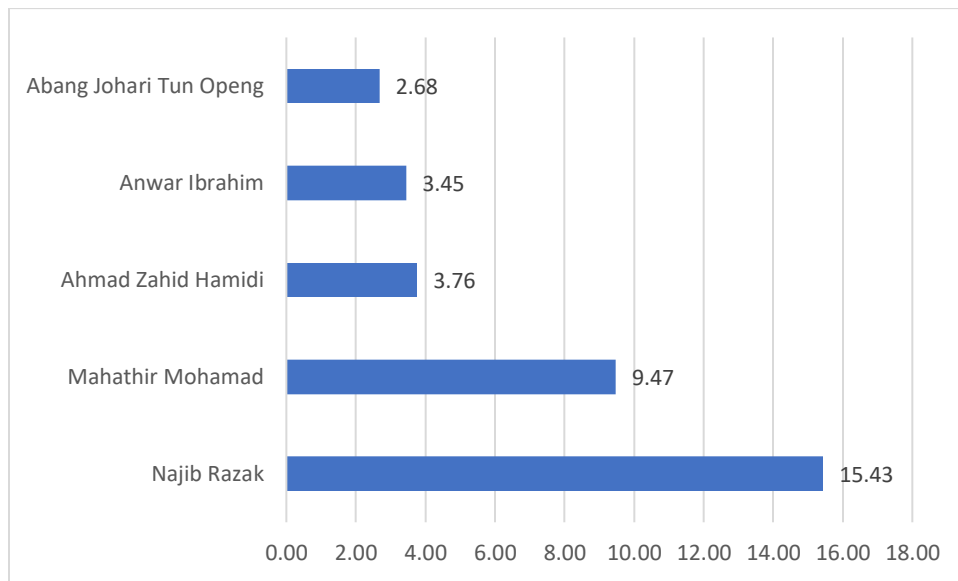
- In terms of the tone of mentions of politicians and political figures, Najib Razak received the most positive coverage (15.43%), followed by both Mahathir Mohamad (9.47%).

Figure 13.2: Neutral Coverage of Politicians & Political Figures
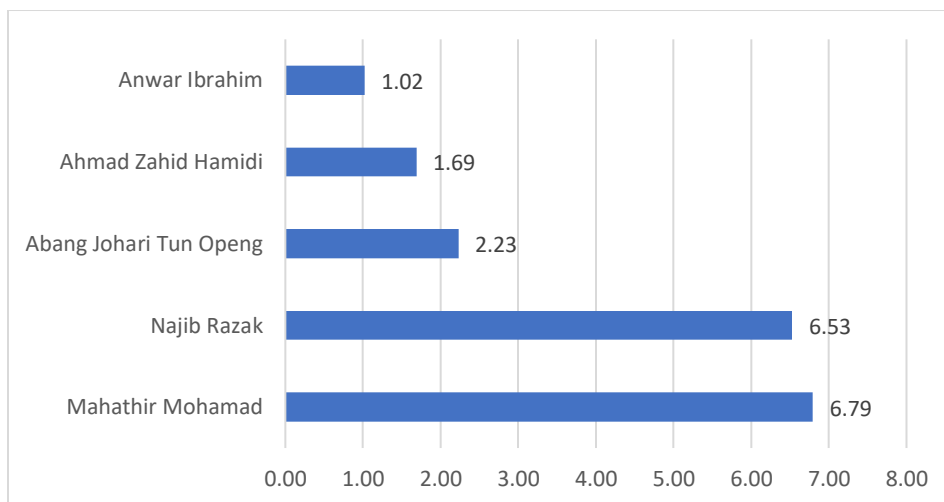
- Mahathir Mohamad received the most neutral coverage (6.79%), followed by Najib Razak (6.53%).
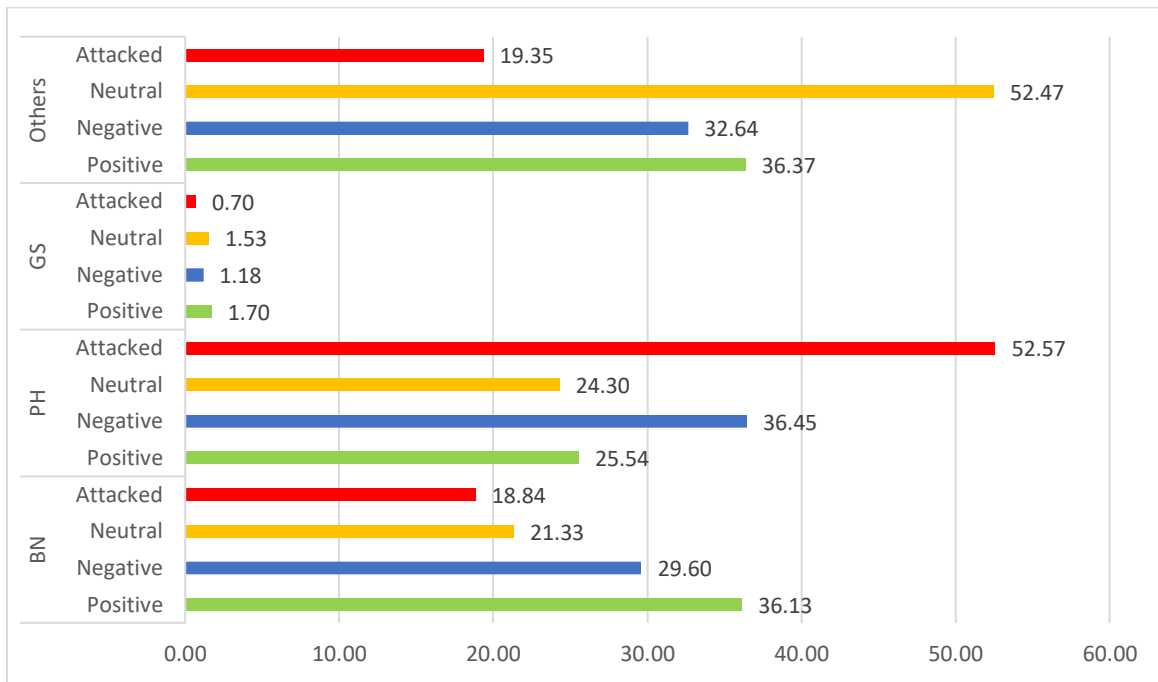
Overall, PH received the most Attacked and Negative coverage whereas BN received the most positive coverage among the three coalitions. Independent/Others received the most neutral coverage.

2.4 Tone of the Use of Politicians & Political Figures As Sources: Attack Politics or Negative Campaigning

Figure 15: Attack Politics: Which Politicians and Political Figures Employ 'Attack Politics' Most Often?
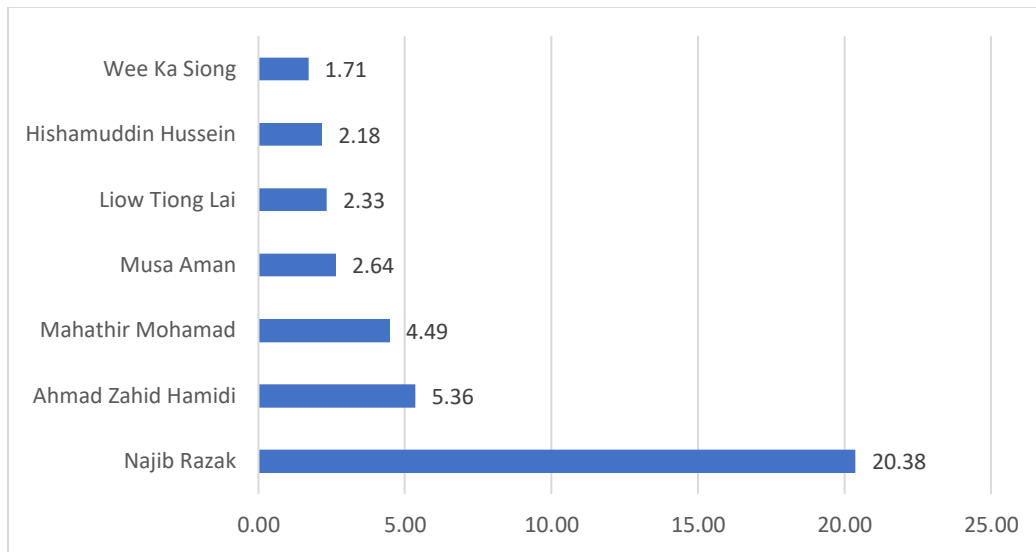
- This graph is weighted to show attack politics as a proportion of overall use as source.
- Najib Razak was the politicians most likely to engage in attack politics (20.38%), followed by Ahmad Zahid Hamidi (5.36%) and Mahathir Mohamad (4.49%).
- A majority of the politicians who engaged the most in attack politics were from the BN coalition.

Figure 16: Attack Politics: Which Coalition Employs Attack Politics Most Often?
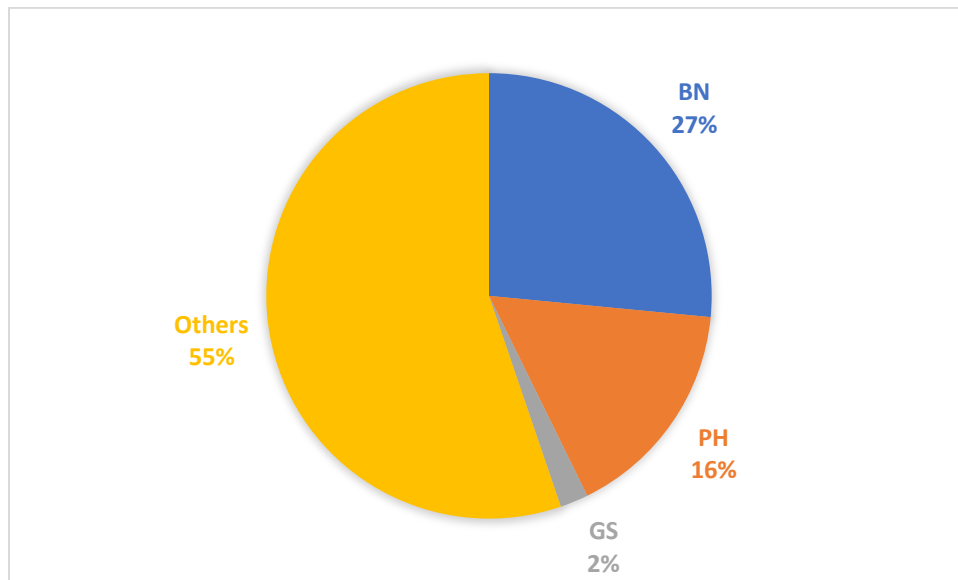
- This graph is weighted to show attack politics as a proportion of overall use as source.
- Overall, Independent/ Other parties (55%) coalition politicians engaged in attack politics more often than BN (27%) and PH (16%).
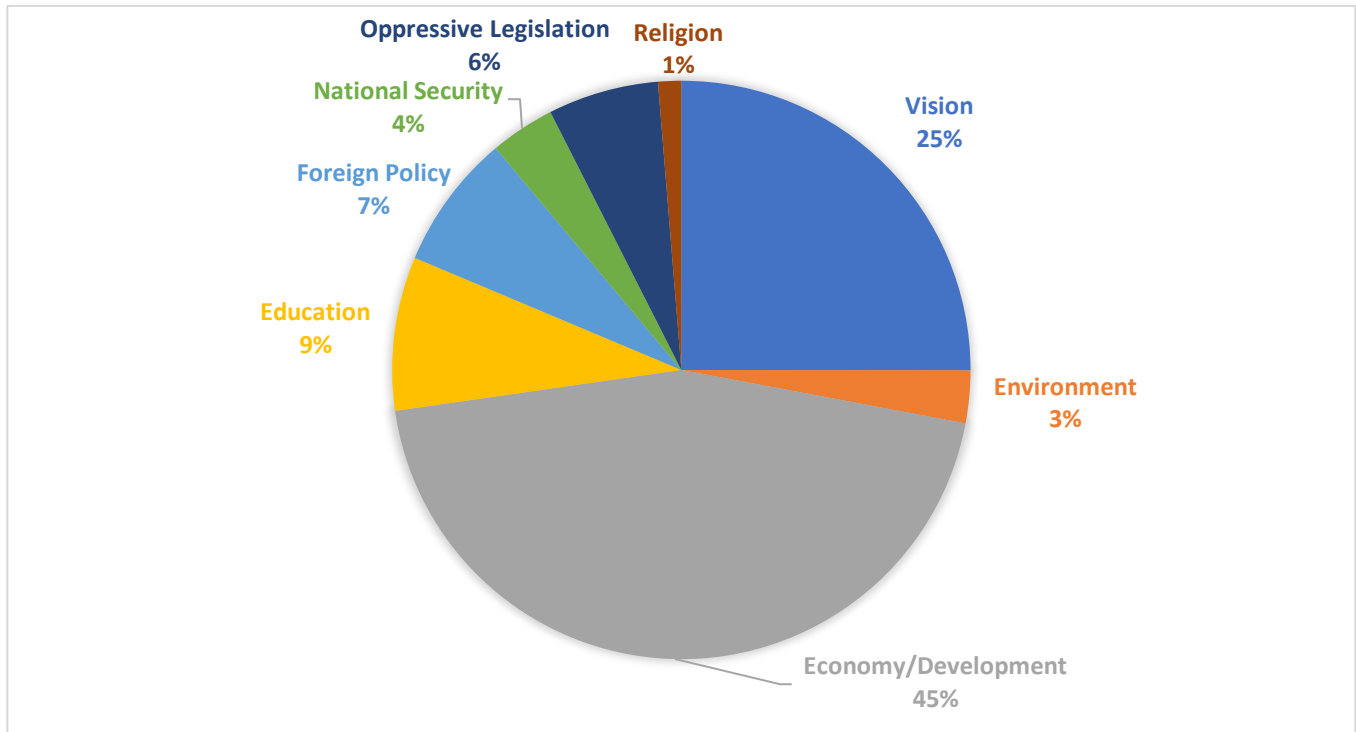
Section 3: Media Coverage of Issues
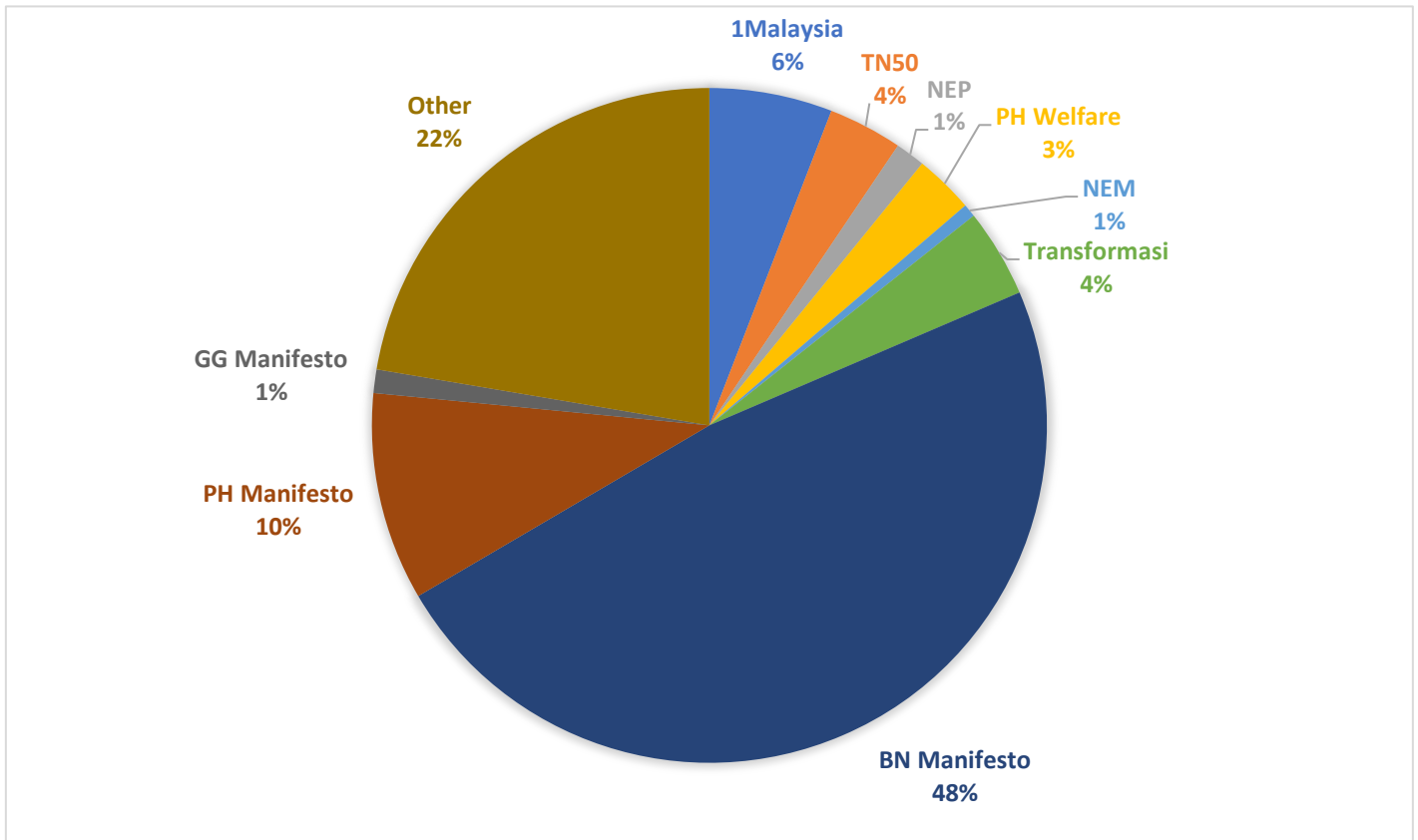
Figure 17: Coverage of policy vs non-policy issues
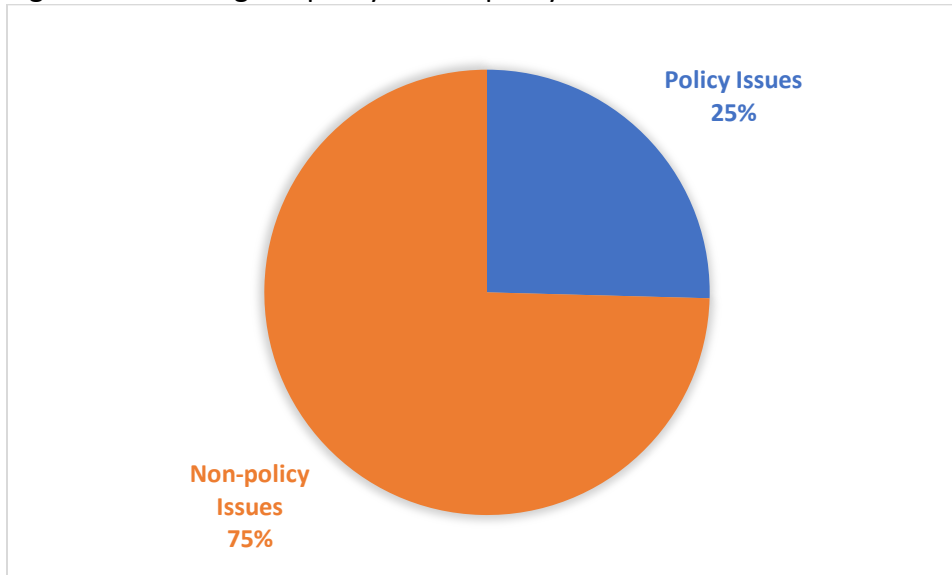
- Overall, there was more coverage of Non-policy issues across all media than there was coverage of Policy issues.

Figure 18: Coverage of policy issues

- Economy/Development was the most covered policy issue across all media, followed by Vision, and Education.

Figure 18.1: Breakdown of vision/policy/programme

- Of all the topics on Vision/Policy/Programme, BN Manifesto received the most coverage, followed by PH Manifesto and 1Malaysia. Gagasan Manifesto received the least coverage of the three coalitions across all media.
- BN initiated programmes such as 1Malaysia, TN50 and references to transformations made up for 14% of the topics in this category, and together with the BN manifesto received a total of 64% of the space.

**F**igure 18.2: Breakdown of economy/development issues
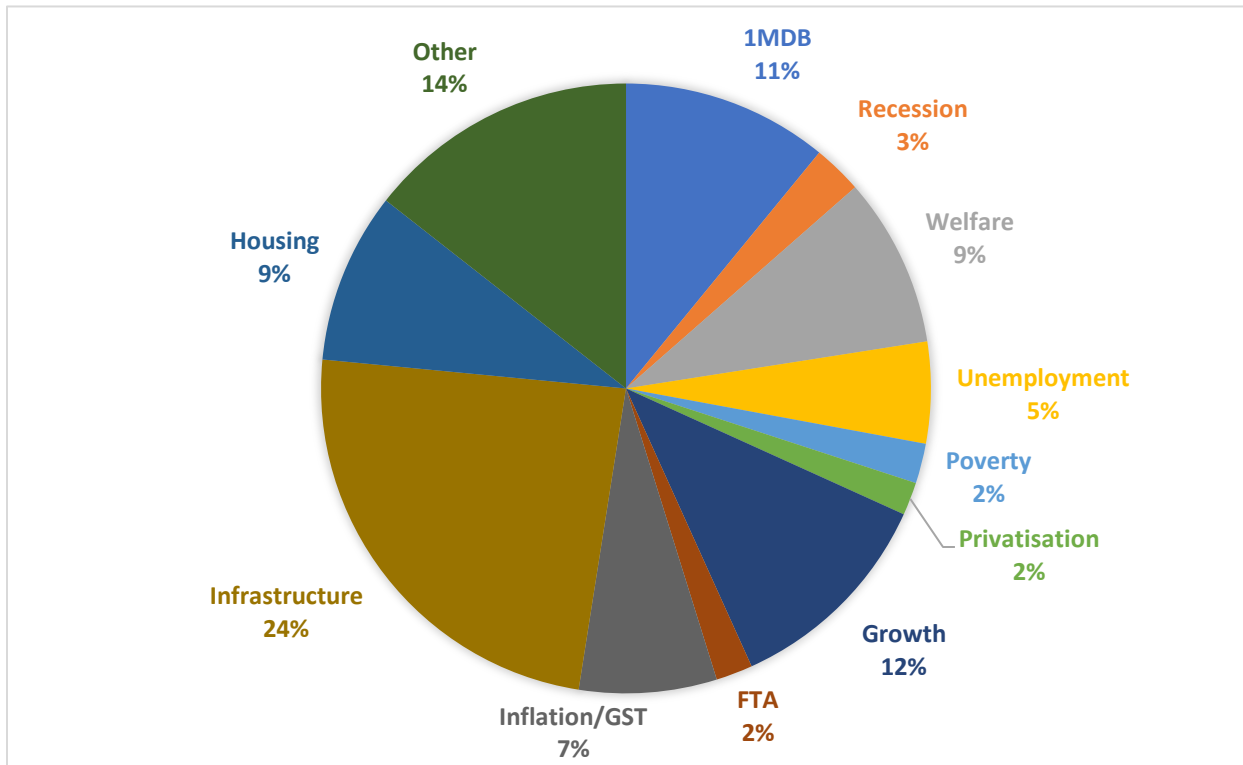
- Of the Economy/Development issues covered by all the media, Infrastructure received the most coverage, followed by Growth and 1MDB. Inflation/GST did not figure highly on the chart as expected during the campaign period.

Figure 19: Coverage of non-policy issues
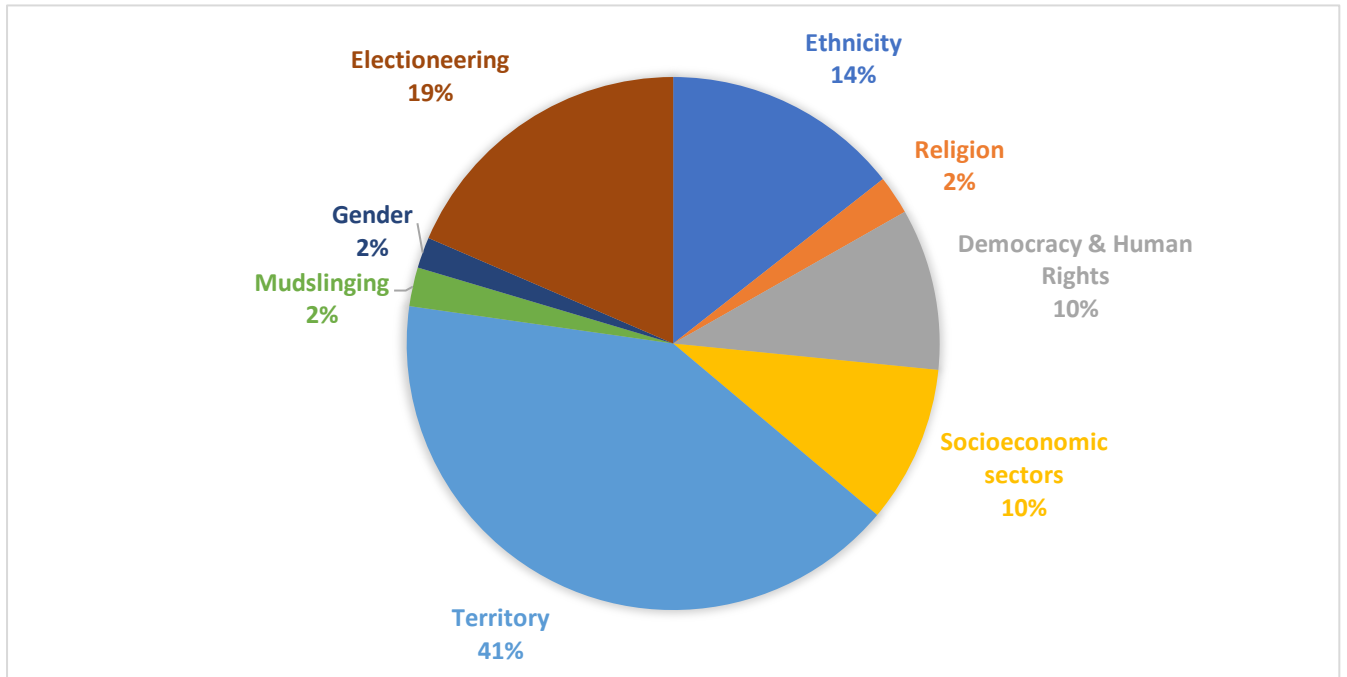
- Of all the Non-policy issues, issues relating to Territory was most covered, followed by Electioneering and Ethnicity.

Figure 19.1: Breakdown of socioeconomic sectors cited
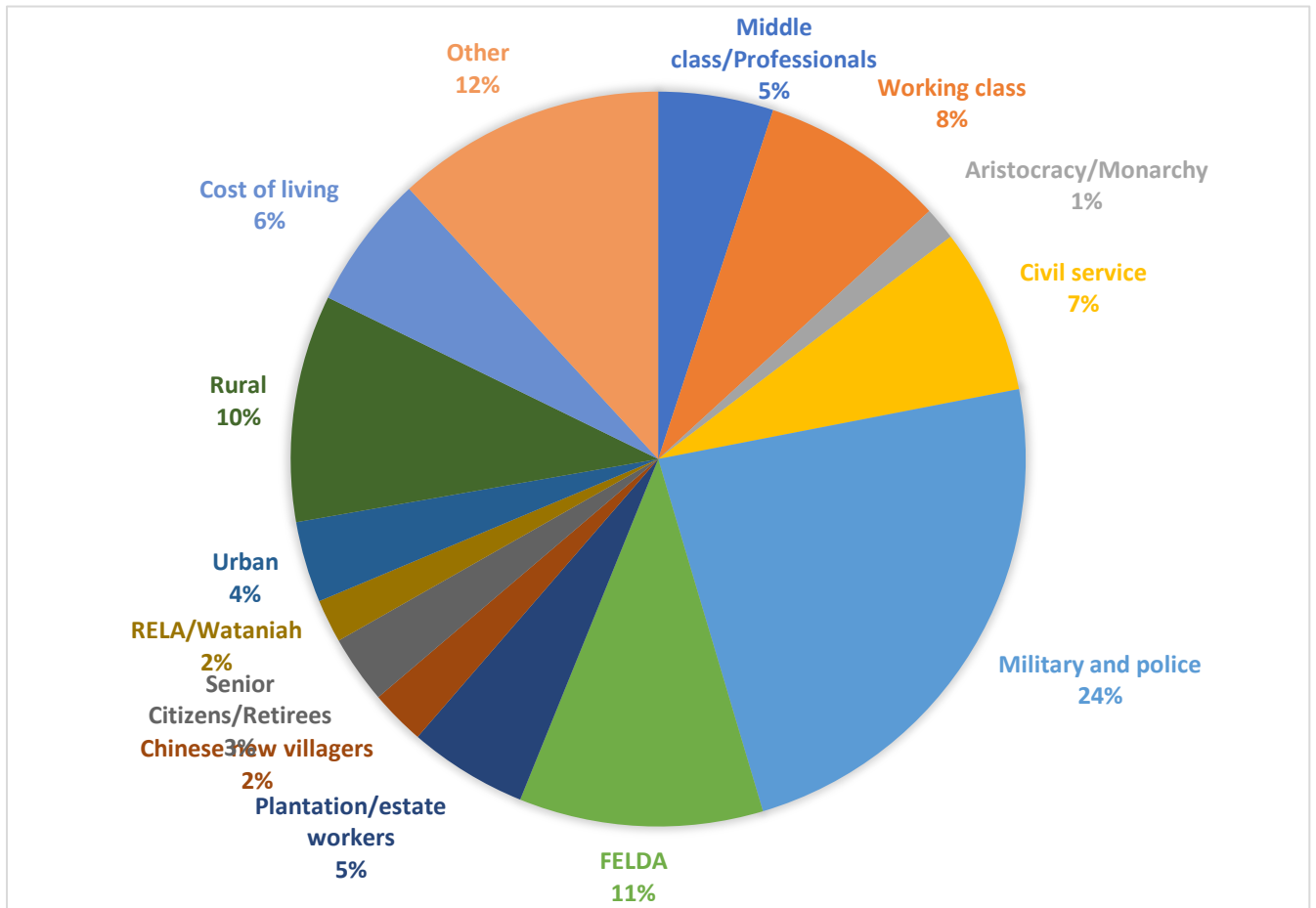
- Of all the Socioeconomic sectors, the Military and Police received the most reference, followed by FELDA and the Rural sector.

Figure 19.2: Breakdown of references to territory or related issues
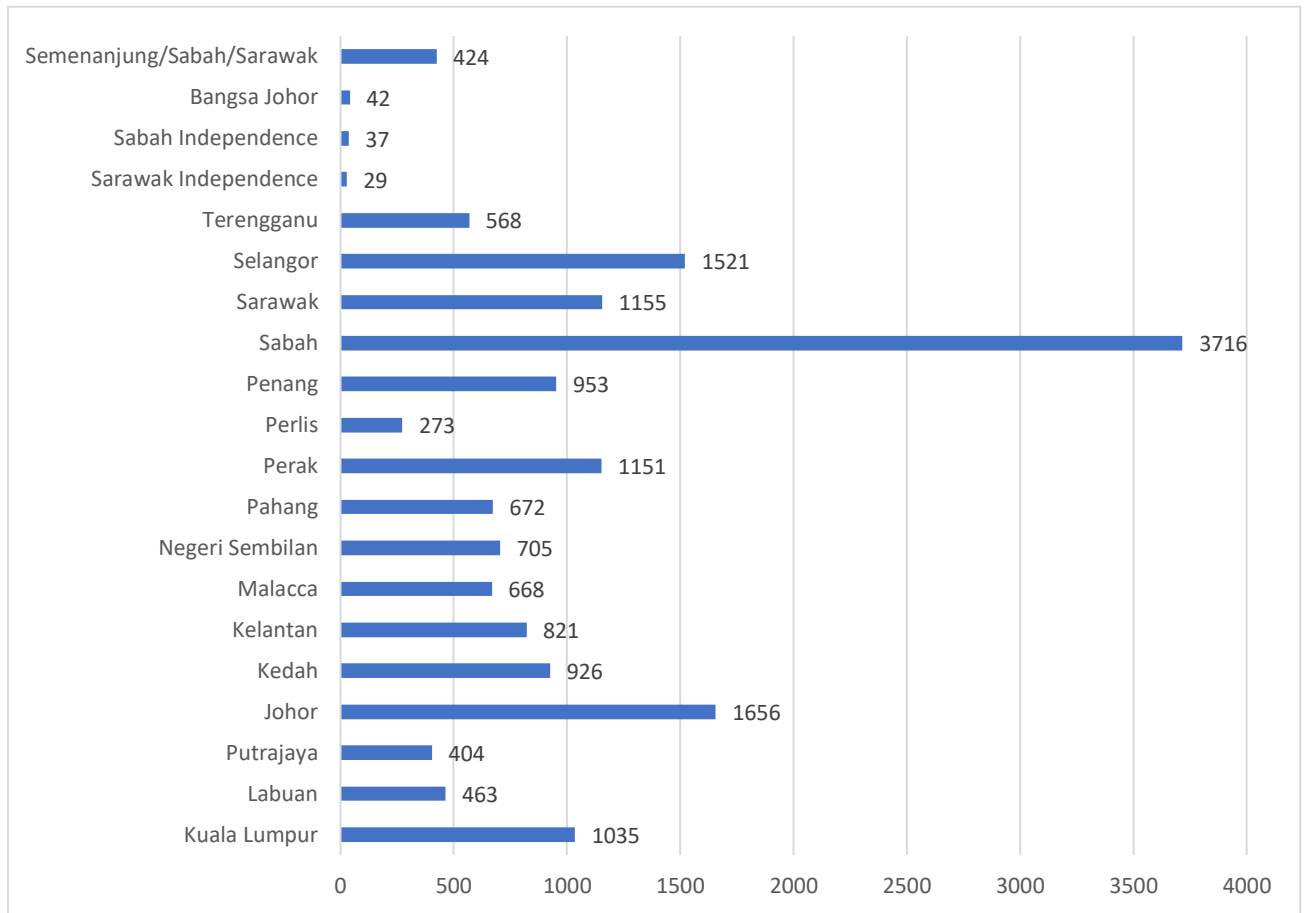
- The territory that received the most coverage on aggregate is Sabah, followed by Johor and Selangor, while Perlis was the least covered state. Issues such as Sabah/Sarawak Independence and Bangsa Johor, which had been discussed in the media in the build up to the elections, did not figure significantly in the total coverage across all media. Relevant to this data is that four of the media outlets analysed were newspapers in Sabah (these operate in both Sabah and Sarawak) and are region specific, compared to the rest of the media which are considered national media.