From Gender Stereotyping to Constructing Political Identity: Changes in *Malaysiakini*'s Portrayal of Women Candidates during Malaysia's 2008 and 2013 General Elections

USHA DEVI RAJARATNAM
Taylor's University, Malaysia

ANTOON DE RYCKER
BERJAYA University College, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The under- and misrepresentation of women politicians and electoral candidates in the news media has been well documented. Much less is known, however, about how news providers portray women politicians differently over time, either in tandem with developments in the political and media landscape — e.g., the presence, visibility, and role of women in politics — or to reflect changes in internal newsroom policies. Against this background, this study aims to compare and contrast the news coverage of female candidates in two successive general elections, using multiethnic Malaysia as its case. Samples of news articles from *Malaysiakini* — one of Malaysia's major independent online newspapers — were collected for the election periods of 2008 and 2013 and subjected to qualitative content analysis, with a focus on headlines. Findings suggest that the more recent reporting of women candidates helps position women as competent professionals compared with the more gendered portrayals five years before. At the same time, there is a trend away from descriptive to interpretive journalism, putting the many challenges that Malaysian women face as candidates in a wider societal and international context. The implications of the study are that also in Malaysia, individual newspapers can change over time, revise their gender stereotypes and overall play a stronger role in enhancing women's electoral viability.

Keywords: *Malaysia, general election, women politicians, news coverage, Malaysiakini.*

INTRODUCTION

The press coverage of politicians and political candidates receives much scholarly attention. One of the reasons is that voters see the political landscape largely through the lens of the mainstream news media (Kahn, 1994); the quantity and quality of electoral news coverage affects voters but also candidates and their chances of (re)election. As Usman (2013, p.149) points out, "[d]uring election campaigns, three of the most important political components in a country — the media, candidates and voters — all intersect." The news media portrayal of *women* politicians and *women* political candidates especially constitutes an important research area: studies at the crossroads of gender, politics, media, and identity help understand more clearly the challenges that women face in electoral politics, and more broadly, the success or failure of a democratic society. To quote McQuail (2013, p.65), diversity — and thus, also gender diversity in election news coverage — "is a particularly important value in the context of

democratic politics, where competition for popular support between different voices and parties requires a diverse dissemination of information and news."

Effects of media reporting on political participation and election results may be particularly noticeable in Malaysia. First, Malaysians display a relatively high level of (mass) media dependency. Annual reports compiled by the Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia (www.abcm.org.my) suggest that dependency on (mass) media for information is still considerable. Despite slower growth, Malaysia's newspaper industry "continues to defy the wider trend of declining readership throughout the Asia-Pacific region" (Oxford Business Group, 2010, p.217). Following McCombs et al. (2011, p. 138–139), this high media dependency is not atypical in light of the country's complex social systems (e.g., multiethnicity) and intermittent periods of change, conflict, and confusion (e.g., political protest rallies or high-stakes elections). Secondly, the "need for orientation" is especially high during election campaigns that are marked by uncertainty (Van Aelst et al., 2012, p. 52–53). In regard to media effects, it is especially when media dependency is high — as in Malaysia — that media portrayals may influence people's cognitions, attitudes, and behavior (McCombs et al., 2011, p.138).

In the present study, our interest is not so much the *quantity* of women's newspaper coverage — their media visibility compared to that of men — but the *quality* of their portrayal: How are women candidates represented? Much research into women politicians' press treatment is comparative across two or more news media (e.g., pro-government vs. pro-opposition) and/or limited to a single election cycle. By contrast, the current study has adopted a longitudinal two-cycle design based on one newspaper, namely, the portrayal of female election candidates during Malaysia's general elections of 2008 and 2013 in Malaysia's popular English-language news portal *Malaysiakini*. The focus will be on significant themes — including gender stereotyping — in *Malaysiakini*'s representation of female candidates. To guide the analysis further, we will draw on Kittilson and Fridkin's (2008) theorization of the connection between women candidates, media texts, and sociopolitical context. Their work will help formulate deductive hypotheses regarding the Malaysian case as well as offer a useful explanatory framework.

Malaysiakini was selected as our data source for the following reasons. First, to gain an adequate understanding of the media portrayal of women candidates over time, the newspaper should cover the broadest possible spectrum, not just the dominant or most controversial political figures. Houghton (2013) reports that *Malaysiakini* mentions and discusses independent political figures more frequently than Malaysia's news agency *Bernama* or any of the mainstream print and broadcast media (e.g., *Utusan Malaysia*). Secondly, even though independent news websites like *Malaysiakini* devote the largest proportion of their mention-level coverage to independent candidates and others, they still provide considerable reporting on politicians belonging to the government coalition. For more information about the news site's history, editorial stance, online activities, and impact on Malaysian politics, see Tong (2004), Steele (2009), Griffiths and Chinnasamy (2014, p. 42–43), and Khoo (2016, p. 79–81). Finally, online news media are increasingly playing a major role in political communication (Vowe & Henn, 2016). As for Malaysia, Abdesselam (2017) found that especially independent online journalism has the power to influence the public mindset, with consequences for Malaysia's political balance of power. In light of this, our choice of *Malaysiakini* lends further

significance to the present study. Characterized as "daring, democratic, investigative, and critical", independent news websites together with social media technologies can create "a new generation with a different kind of thinking" (Abdesselam, 2017, p.185), also about the role of women in politics.

Previous scholarship into politics and news media during Malaysia's recent general elections is limited (e.g., Abbott, 2011; Mohd Khairie & Mohd Baharudin, 2014; Abbott & Givens, 2015; Aini Maznina & Nerawi, 2015; Azahar & Mohd Azizuddin, 2016). The focus is on censorship, political bias in print and online media, and issue framing (e.g., religion). Only few studies, however, examine gendered mediation, notably, Rajaratnam (2009; 2010). Building on these two publications, the objective of the present study is to examine changes in the quality of women politicians' press treatment during Malaysia's two most recent general elections. To achieve this objective, a comparative analysis will be conducted of the news media construction of female candidates running for office in 2008 and 2013, using *Malaysiakini* as our point of entry.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY

The background information consists in an overview of the political landscape, women's representation in Malaysian politics, and the media coverage of female political leaders. Within Kittilson and Fridkin's (2008) theoretical framework, the first two can be regarded as contextual influences on the latter. Patterns of press coverage — including gender stereotyping — can be explained in terms of media-level factors (e.g., political stance or editorial policies) and candidate-specific characteristics; however, also the broader political, economic, and sociocultural environment plays a significant role (on the "lines of influence" affecting the character of journalistic practice, see McQuail, 2013, p.119). Note that the concept of stereotype will be taken to refer to the "knowledge structures that associate members of social categories with specific attributes" and that are "widely socially shared"; with gender being one of those social categories. "Gender stereotypes" then are those psychological traits that are typically associated with men and women (Rudman & Glick, 2002, p.82). Prentice and Carranza's (2002) study concluded that insofar as they prescribe or proscribe traits, gender stereotypes can be both intensified (e.g., what women must be) and relaxed (e.g., what women do not have to be); for example, women "must be" warm and kind, interested in children, friendly and patient but "do not have to be" intelligent, principled, efficient, rational or concerned about the future (see also Rudman & Glick, 2001, p.120).

Political Landscape

Malaysia's system of government is a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarch; its political structure consists in a federation with 13 states and 3 federal territories (Malaysia, Official Portal of Parliament of Malaysia, 2016). Malaysia's political system is also known for the complex interconnections among its ruling party, the military and police, the judiciary, the bureaucracy, and other key societal institutions (on the media, see below). The country has been governed by the same coalition since its independence in 1957.

Given our interest in the media portrayal of women running for parliament, it is important to first introduce the major political parties that these women belong to. The

coalition that has been in power for the past six decades is made up of UMNO (United Malays National Organization), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association), and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress). Collectively, the coalition is known as *Barisan Nasional* (BN), or National Front. The Prime Minister is Najib Tun Razak (UMNO). Note that BN also includes smaller or regional parties such as SUPP (Sarawak United People's Party) — Sarawak is one of Malaysia's states on Borneo. The main opposition parties are PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), DAP (Democratic Action Party), and PKR (*Parti Keadilan Rakyat*, or People's Justice Party). Some political scientists and commentators argue that Malaysia is developing into a two-coalition system in view of the emergence of *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR) — or People's Alliance — in 2008 and its success in mobilizing dissenting voices (e.g., Ooi, 2011; Weiss, 2013; Saravanamuttu, Lee & Mohamed Nawab, 2015; Khoo, 2016), and more recently in 2015, also *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) — literally Hope's Pact—which groups together a number of political movements left of center.

The question is whether this multiparty but increasingly two-coalition democratic system influences the media coverage of women candidates in Malaysia's general elections. Kittilson and Fridkin (2008, p.376) argue that during elections, some political and/or electoral systems will be more likely to focus on individual candidates than on parties, or vice versa. The more candidate-centered the political system, the more likely there will be gender differences in the news coverage. An example is the presidential elections in the United States. On the other hand, where parties dominate, and especially when these parties form pre-election alliances or coalitions as in Malaysia, their elite leadership will generally exert more top-down control over nominations, candidates, and core messaging. In this case, the expectation is that there will be "fewer gender differences in news treatment" (Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008, p.376).

Women Representation in Parliament
Following Kittilson and Fridkin (2008), women's presence in politics can be theorized as a second contextual factor influencing news coverage. The hypothesis is that if more women are elected officials, they will generate less curiosity, and as a consequence, fewer gender differences and stereotypes will show up in their news treatment.

In Malaysia, women have been actively involved in politics and leadership positions since independence. They have the right to vote and to hold political office. Moreover, Malaysian women play a pivotal role in politics as active party members and loyal supporters. At election time, women can be actively involved as campaigners, voters, and candidates. Though women's role in electoral politics was initially confined to cooking, preparing posters for plastering or doing work behind the scenes of a male candidate's campaign, the general elections of 1999 witnessed the emergence of a different brand of gender politics, with women being wooed as both voters and candidates (Abdullah, 2004). The overall trend over the past sixty years has been a steady increase in women's participation in Malaysia's general elections.

As for the past two elections, a total of 222 parliamentary seats and 405 state seats were contested in 2008, with 120 women candidates, of whom 40.0% (or 48) were successful (Koh, 2013). The 2013 elections counted 168 women candidates, of whom 47.6% (or 80) were elected at either parliament or state level (Lim, 2013). A significant difference between the 2008 and 2013 elections is the much higher proportion of women nominated as candidates: 168 compared with 120, or an increase of 40% in five years' time.

Election News Coverage
On the basis of the previous two subsections, it can be expected that the news treatment of individual female politicians in Malaysia will be relatively limited (due to the strong coalition system) but also that stereotypes and gender-specific reporting will be relatively pronounced (due to the relatively low participation of women in electoral politics). Given our research objectives, the following observations will be limited to the quality of the news reporting only.

i) Quality of Election News Coverage
There is a solid body of evidence that the gendered mediation argument is valid for the quality of election news content. Our review of the literature suggests that the press treatment of women candidates is marked by a high degree of uniformity and reductionism. Insofar as diversity is a criterion of news quality (McQuail, 2013), the conclusion is that the electoral news coverage of women is not only lacking in terms of media access and visibility but also content.

Research shows that women candidates receive less favorable coverage than men — not only in terms of gender stereotyping but also access to media, media bias, and news frames (e.g., Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991; Gidengil, 2008; Lawrence & Rosen, 2010). Skalli's (2011, p.485) recent analysis of Moroccan election news coverage found "quasi-silence" on women candidates' suitability for office (e.g., professional trajectories, educational degrees, current leadership positions) and no information on what women actually *do*. In a context of mediated politics, it is difficult for women candidates to raise their profile, "especially during an election period and within an environment of rampant skepticism about women's capabilities to manage public affairs" (Skalli, 2011, p.486).

Secondly, there is general agreement that much election news coverage consists in "personalization," i.e., the reporting of women candidates or politicians tends to focus on gender, appearance, personality, marital status, and other personal or private aspects (Trimble et al., 2013). This tendency is motivated by culturally prevalent stereotypes about "public man, private woman" (Besco et al., 2016, p.4642) and the two-sphere or separate-spheres ideology (e.g., Hufton, 1995). Personalization is one of the elements in "media logic" theory, i.e., "a set of principles […] believed to maximize public impact and appeal;" others include visualization, dramatization, and narrativization (McQuail, 2013, p.114). For present purposes, it is sufficient to note that personalization can be related to the gender-based *trait coverage* (Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008, p.392) typical of election news: on the whole, women candidates are more frequently associated with "expressive strengths" (e.g., honesty) and "communal traits" (e.g., sensitivity, empathy) than with stereotypically male "instrumental traits" (e.g., experience) or "agentic traits" (e.g., rationality, boldness) (Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008, p. 372–373; p. 381–382).

Finally, election news can be characterized in terms of *issue coverage* (Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008, p. 391–392), i.e., public policy matters such as the economy, pensions, education, LGBT rights or the environment. Also in this case, prior research has overwhelmingly shown gendered mediation: women candidates are more likely to be linked to health care, education or poverty while for male candidates it is the economy, security, foreign policy or defense (Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008, p.373; p.381).

ii) Quality of Election News Coverage over Time

Research into election news coverage changes over time is both vast and varied (Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008). Comparison of over fifty years of predominantly single-election studies suggests, however, the following broad trend. Skalli (2011, p.477), among others, concludes that over time, "[s]ymbolic annihilation seems to be weakening in contexts where the media are readjusting to the growing presence of women in politics" but that "trivialization and condemnation are more resilient." Golder (2012) reports similar developments, citing, among others, an interesting early study by Robinson and Saint-Jean (1995); they found that with 1970 as a watershed year, electoral news reporting had shifted — since the 1950s — from a focus on private aspects of a woman candidate (e.g., appearance or family status as a "spinster") to equally gender-specific "superwoman" stereotypes associated with power and a discourse of masculinity. Trimble et al.'s (2013) longitudinal study found that over a period of almost four decades, gender stereotyping (e.g., policy priorities) and trait-based reporting have indeed remained strong features of campaign news coverage. The conclusion seems to be that despite persistent differences in personalization and gendering of candidates, women candidates are "no longer heavily penalized with […] stereotyped coverage" (Besco, et al., 2016, p.4642) and "in more recent elections, […] the magnitude of any differences may be quite modest" (Besco et al., 2016, p.4644). As Kittilson and Fridkin (2008, p.373) put it, "gender differences in [election] news coverage may have become less pronounced."

Note that the reporting trends and patterns mentioned above do not apply equally to all countries. Deniz (2010), for example, did not observe any substantial differences in the media coverage of women candidates in two successive general elections in Turkey. Within Kittilson and Fridkin's (2008) theory, the absence of change in press treatment may be an indication that the country's media and broader societal structures have stayed the same as before. Whether or not Malaysia presents a similar case will be examined in the following sections.

METHODOLOGY

The research design is qualitative in nature, aimed at discovering patterns and trends in the newspaper coverage of female candidates and politicians in Malaysia during the last two general elections. Data in the form of news articles were collected from *Malaysiakini*'s online archives, covering the campaign periods of respectively February 24 – March 7, 2008, and April 20 – May 4, 2013. During the final weeks leading up to election day, the various candidates, their personal viewpoints, policy statements, and party manifestos received coverage that was the most extensive and detailed (Van Aelst et al., 2012, p.50).

Using "general election" as the search term and "news" as the category filter, a total of 331 newspaper articles were sampled for 2008 and 216 for 2013. The content of these news items was analyzed inductively, i.e., by progressively coding the portrayal of women candidates, in order to identify recurrent themes and topics but also significant changes in coverage between the two election periods. The strength of qualitative content analysis lies in its focus on the overall interpretation of a phenomenon, that is, on identifying its so-called "patterned" meaning as opposed to "anecdotal" meaning (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.10; see also Krippendorff, 2012, p.24). As such, general statements and interpretations of common themes are derived "bottom up" from reading and re-reading the news stories themselves rather than

"top down," setting out from a particular theoretical framework (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.12; see also Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Note that a similar approach was used successfully in an earlier, more general, and comparative media treatment study of the 2008 general election by Rajaratnam (2009) as well as other newspaper content analyses (e.g., Griffiths & Chinnasamy, 2014; Besco et al., 2016; Azahar & Mohd Azizuddin, 2016). More specifically, the *Malaysiakini* data in our study were coded thematically for issue and trait coverage as defined by Kittilson and Fridkin (2008, p. 381–382/ p. 391–392) and discussed in the previous section. More specifically, for every one of the 331 articles, analysis consisted in identifying the women candidates being portrayed (e.g., *Barisan Nasional* or opposition), the electoral issues covered (e.g., foreign policy or health care) and the personality traits linked with the women candidates (e.g., experience or compassion). By cross-tabulating the findings along those three dimensions, patterns could be detected in how the election news recurrently linked certain political issues with certain categories of female politicians and which of their traits were emphasized.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Given our interest in the theoretical contextualization of the findings, we will only report the general summary findings rather than the empirical detail of close textual and visual analyses. Patterns and trends will be primarily illustrated through exemplar headlines from the articles analyzed as headlines "represent the most important items of the news" (Yazgan & Utku, 2017, p.151). The following major themes could be identified in the news coverage across both election cycles: leadership, competence, inequality in political representation, women as targets and women resisting role-stereotyping. Interestingly, not all of these themes characterized the press treatment of women candidates equally prominently in 2008 and 2013. In what follows, we will only focus on the dominant themes per general election.

i. The General Election of 2008

Two major themes emerged, especially in the articles about female political leaders in the opposition. The following exemplar headlines highlight that *Malaysiakini* covers these women politicians predominantly as "spirited leaders" (energetic, enthusiastic, and determined). What is more, these qualities come to the fore most prominently in response to adverse political circumstances.

Table 1: Spirited leadership

Headline	Date
Lembah Pantai: Izzah's induction of fire	February 24, 2008
Anwar confident of daughter's victory	February 25, 2008
Reversal of roles in Titiwangsa	February 25, 2008
Kok raps rival over "sexist" posters	March 3, 2008
Seputeh: Lamb no match for the lion	March 3, 2008

In the case of Nurul Izzah Anwar (PKR), for example, news stories like the first two in Table 1 emphasize how her inexperience in politics did not prevent her from successfully contesting the Lembah Pantai parliamentary seat against a female Federal Minister and that

her victory is just one sign of how she can take on any challenge. Also Dr. Lo'Lo' binti Mohd Ghazali (PAS) is portrayed as a force to be reckoned with, breaking the ruling coalition's mold of fielding a secular candidate against an Islamic one. The article on Teresa Kok (DAP) illustrates the resilience of women politicians in the face of political attacks. The article clears Kok as free from blame, representing her as fighting back against the sexist posters. A similar form of resilience can be found in the Seputeh news article: the opposition women leader (MCA) is untouchable even though she is publicly vilified. What ties these and other representations together is the perhaps surprising strength of women candidates when overcoming inexperience, gender-role stereotyping, and symbolic violence.

A second strand in *Malaysiakini*'s portrayal of women politicians is that of outstanding personal leadership qualities (see also Rajaratnam, 2009). Women are not only "spirited fighters," they are also intelligent, knowledgeable, able, and visionary; some — like Nurul Izzah Anwar — are ascribed celebrity status due to their popularity to impress the electorate. However, these strong political leadership qualities are especially invoked insofar as they are necessary to help promote women's issues and a gender-based agenda (e.g., "housing woes" or reduced dowries). This focus on women-only politics manifests itself in an attendant but stereotypical gender-trait portrayal of these women politicians as sensitive and caring.

As the following headlines show (see Table 2), these positive qualities are predominantly used to describe opposition women leaders; their counterparts in the *Barisan Nasional* coalition tend to receive more critical or negative coverage: "divorce" or "cats and dogs" (see also Rajaratnam, 2009, p. 49–52).

Table 2: Outstanding leaders … or not

Headline	Date
"Divorce Umno," Zuraida tells Malay voters	February 26, 2008
"Husband, wife"? More like cats and dogs	February 27, 2008
Nurul Izzah gets celebrity greeting	March 5, 2008
Lo'Lo' woos Kg Pandan Indian Settlement	March 2, 2008
Chew Mei Fun, "Which planet are you on?"	March 4, 2008
Lembah Pantai: Mud-slinging in the rain	March 7, 2008

Note that the pro-opposition stance taken by *Malaysiakini* functions as a counterweight against the more pro-government electoral news reporting found in *The Star* and other Malaysian media channels (e.g., Rajaratnam, 2009, p.54).

ii. The General Election of 2013
Coverage of female candidates and politicians during the 2013 general election campaign can be summarized under the following rubrics: women politicians as a *minority* and women politicians as *targets* (two negative or unfavorable themes) and women politicians as *role-resistant* and women politicians as *competent* (two positive and favorable themes).

MINORITY

A first observation about *Malaysiakini*'s coverage of the 2013 general election is the attention paid to issues of inequality in the proportion of women candidates, both locally and globally. The *Malaysiakini* article "Only One in 10 GE13 Candidates is a Woman" (Koh, 2013), for example, shows—for each political party—the number of women candidates and their percentage in the total number. Though UMNO has the largest absolute number of women standing for office, they only represent 9.1% of the total of 460, i.e., the lowest percentage except for PAS (8.1%). The highest percentage can be found in DAP's electoral list: 14.4% of a total of 153.

Equally importantly, *Malaysiakini* seeks to frame the usual local divisions within a wider perspective: women's political participation and recognition in 2013 are still below the target of "having 30 per cent women in positions at decision-making levels" as adopted by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (United Nations, 1995, p.79). At other times during the 2013 general election, *Malaysiakini* highlights how the "baton of political empowerment of women is moving from the National Front to the opposition," largely owing to the more credible leadership of the latter ("BN's femme fatale — the power of women," April 27, 2013). Despite *Barisan Nasional*'s long-standing demographic advantage among women voters, the female electorate — with 51.7% of the vote — has changed, with different grievances, expectations, and demands in 2013 than in 2008. The way that the Lembah Pantai seat was contested between Raja Nong Chik Zainal Abidin and the incumbent MP, Nurul Izzah Anwar, proved a case in point.

In terms of the reporting of these electoral facts and figures and the events and developments in Malaysian politics, the news articles co-construct the image of the typical Malaysian woman politician as being at a systemic disadvantage: no matter her political affiliation and credentials, and regardless of her race and religion, she not only has to endure a male-gendered and male-dominated political arena but also to compete and succeed in it.

TARGETS

Forming only a minority in politics, women politicians and candidates are often seen as legitimate targets, a situation which arises — almost naturally — from a polarized media landscape and a discourse of confrontation. A sizeable proportion of the 2013 general election coverage — at least in the *Malaysiakini* articles that were analyzed — deals with *Barisan Nasional*'s challenges and overt attacks aimed at female opposition politicians. A particularly nefarious example was the series of pamphlets about DAP MP Teo Nie Ching's recent motherhood. As the selected headlines in Table 3 make clear, most of the reporting is, however, about the "hot seat" in the Lembah Pantai constituency referred to in the previous section.

Table 3: Targets

Headline	Date
'What have you contributed?' Nong Chik asks Nurul	April 23, 2013
"Nurul has to work twice as hard," says dad Anwar	April 29, 2013
Nurul worries over 16k new voters, high-handed tactics	May 1, 2013

Our analysis shows that *Malaysiakini* portrays the Nurul Izzah Anwar vs. Raja Nong Chik Zainal Abidin contest in terms of target vs. challenger but also victim vs. attacker and personal traits such as less advantaged vs. more advantaged or privileged (e.g., wealthy, influential, with extensive government support). The (male) opponent's dismissal of the (female) opposition politician as "someone who makes a lot of noise" illustrates the gendered character of this contrast. Nurul Izzah Anwar emerges as the underdog who is "faced with overwhelming odds in a David vs. Goliath fight" ("Nurul has to work twice as hard,' says dad Anwar," April 29, 2013). Also the third news story emphasizes the lack of a level playing field, reporting Nurul Izzah Anwar's "genuine" concerns over the existence of phantom voters, threats to her supporters, and other "high-handed tactics." For these reasons, she deserves the readers' empathy and—for those who are nonpartisan or undecided — even their vote.

It should be emphasized, however, that portrayals like these are usually integrated into the narrative of spirited leadership that was identified in the electoral news coverage in 2008. *Malaysiakini* reminds its readership that Nurul Izzah Anwar is "no greenhorn" (April 29, 2013), and that five years before, she had managed to defeat the then Minister for Women, Family, and Community Development, Tan Sri Shahrizat binti Abdul Jalil. We will come back to this parallel discourse of empowerment below.

RESISTANCE

A third prominent theme is that of role-resistance, a category that groups together news stories of women's disobedience, rebellion, and defiance. What unites Kamilia, Guan Eng's wife, and Beng Hock's widow (see the headlines in Table 4 below) is their refusal to play their stereotypical roles of respectively loyal and compliant party member, polite and soft-spoken politician, and wife-in-the-background and powerless widow.

Table 4: Resistance

Headline	Date
Kamilia quits UMNO Wanita, stands as Independent	April 20, 2013
Netizens crown SUPP Wanita chief "Kak Angry"	April 22, 2013
Guan Eng's wife goes bald over money politics	May 3, 2013
"Lend me your votes," says Beng Hock's widow	May 4, 2013

Without going into descriptive detail, *Malaysiakini* reports various episodes in the 2013 general election campaign in light of how Malaysian women choose to adopt the positions of power, political leadership, and social influence traditionally reserved for men.

– When *Barisan Nasional* denied *UMNO Wanita* deputy chief Kamilia Ibrahim the opportunity to run for office, she decided to quit and compete in the election as an independent.
– In a Facebook video clip, Amy Tnay Li Ping (SUPP) uses offensive language ("s**t") and imagery when criticizing Malaysian expatriates: these Malaysians come home to cast their ballot in the general election but have no real interest in national politics, let alone, the threat of Islamic law and PAS. Her portrayal by Internet users as "Kak Angry" (angry older sister) and subsequent online media representations—also in *Malaysiakini*—both reinforce

and contest the preferred gender stereotype of women politicians. On the one hand, Amy Tnay lacks etiquette and professionalism; on the other, being so direct and using profanity takes courage and is in fact no different from the speech habits of many male political leaders.

− Alongside other DAP party members, Betty Chew Gek Cheng had her head shaven in protest at "money politics"—the way cash is influencing the democratic process—even in her husband's own constituency. *Malaysiakini* highlights her righteous anger and moral rectitude in the face of government machinations and abuse of power.

− Finally, there is the case of the widow of Teoh Beng Hock, a Malaysian journalist and political aide, who died in MACC (Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission) custody in 2009. Despite her agony and pain, Soh Cher Wei refuses to be silenced in her search for justice and truth, speaking at a political rally and encouraging people to vote for the opposition.

These and similar portrayals show that Malaysian women — whether in the heart of politics or at its margins, whether by choice or force of circumstance — are capable both of self-empowerment and of empowering others. In giving editorial space to these forms of political participation, *Malaysiakini*'s news site helps construct women as politically and socially active.

COMPETENT LEADERSHIP

Competent leadership plays a dominant role in the representation of especially Nurul Izzah Anwar. Articles like "Nurul worries over 16k new voters, high-handed tactics" (April 29, 2013), for example, not only compare her limited funds and manpower with the lavish campaign conducted by her opponent, Raja Nong Chik Zainal Abidin, but also question the latter's electoral promises and competence in getting things done. The promises are about a very local issue, i.e., bringing three MRT stations to Lembah Pantai. By contrast, when covering Nurul Izzah Anwar's campaign, *Malaysiakini* foregrounds her visionary blueprint not just for the constituency but for the nation: her calls for fighting corruption and respecting human rights touch upon two extremely popular issues that directly appeal to voters across the political spectrum.

Table 5: Competent leadership

Headline	Date
Bersih condemns bombings targeting Barisan Nasional	April 25, 2013
Bersih frowns on flying BN-1 Malaysia flag	April 25, 2013
"Hold public demo on indelible ink," Bersih asks again	May 1, 2013
Bersih Ambiga turns up at MCA event	May 2, 2013
Bersih slams the thousands of air-flown dubious voters	May 4, 2013

Most articles in this category, however, are about *Bersih*, a citizens' coalition promoting free and fair elections, and its then co-chairperson, Ambiga Sreenevasan. Though Ambiga is not a politician nor regarded as one, it is nevertheless striking — compared to 2008 — that the media portrayal of Ambiga and other prominent women is more focused on their overall political leadership competence and proven track record (i.e., their achievements) than their private lives or personal and gender-centric attributes.

In Ambiga's case, the headlines in Table 5 show that *Malaysiakini* underscores her impartiality and neutrality (e.g., condemning the bombings, speaking at the MCA event) as well as her ability to weigh on the agenda and raise important issues to do with the upcoming elections (e.g., violence against party candidates, misuse of government machinery, preserving sanctity of polls and the indelible ink fiasco).

iii) Developments in News Treatment between the General Elections of 2008 and 2009
Rather than discuss trends in electoral news treatment of female candidates theme by theme (see the two previous subsections), we will generalize over all prominent themes. Comparative analysis suggests that between the past two general elections, three major developments took place.

A first significant change lies in the relative de-emphasizing of personal attributes that are stereotypically seen to qualify female candidates for political leadership (e.g., intelligence, family connections or physical attractiveness). In 2008, election news stories foregrounded women's compassion, enthusiasm in championing women's issues or resilience in overcoming challenges (e.g., sexual slurs). In doing so, *Malaysiakini*'s reporting of women candidates is not completely free from a form of hidden stereotyping. These events are only newsworthy insofar as they seem to depart from an implicit cultural norm (namely, that women are not usually so strong). Five years on, these gender-stereotyped qualities are, however, replaced by an emphasis on *professional leadership*, competence, and outcomes. A such, *Malaysiakini* is in keeping with the more general trends in gendered mediation discussed above. The average woman politician is no longer just "spirited;" she is a potential front-runner, a credible candidate with a track record of success or a force to be reckoned with. As a consequence, candidacy is not so much a matter of political expediency or equal opportunity but rather a decision motivated by electoral viability. To quote former Federal Minister, Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz, the "National Front is focusing on winnable candidates" (The Malaysian Insider, April 4, 2013).

Secondly, this shift from personal to professional leadership qualities goes hand in hand with more prominent coverage of female politicians' *presence in the national political scene*, both inside and outside of government and parliament. *Malaysiakini*'s electoral coverage reports women's viewpoints about the "bread-and-butter issues" that concern all voters—once a male prerogative—rather than childcare, education or other "feminine" issues (Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008, p.373). In this respect, the results again correspond to those found in the literature elsewhere. Whether they are members of *Barisan Nasional*, the opposition or independents, female politicians are no longer exclusively associated with women-related issues. Moreover, for all of them, the media portrayal includes women's shared concerns over free and fair elections. Activism for women's issues has given way to raising awareness of "dirty politics" and formulating policies to put an end to the influence of money or the use of phantom voters. Finally, the increased reporting of women's contribution to national issues reflects the increased resistance among women to traditional role expectations. In 2010, the women that got media attention were mainly celebrities or victims (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2015); it seems that at least in the context of electoral politics and *Malaysiakini*'s journalism, a wider range of role types and identities is being featured.

A third development between 2008 and 2013 relates to the type of reporting. Unlike five years before, *Malaysiakini* offers more analytical, explanatory and/or *interpretive journalism* rather than pure fact-based description of campaign events (Salgado & Strömbäck, 2011). Journalists try to interpret and understand the unique position of women politicians and candidates against the backdrop of both Malaysian and international trends in politics. This is especially apparent with regard to the minority status of women candidates and politicians. There is growing concern — across parties but also ethnicities (Welsh, 2013) — over women's underrepresentation in politics. In 2013, prominent coverage is given to this phenomenon as well as how the electoral disparity among men and women seems to legitimize the way the latter are targeted or treated during general elections. Ironically, women's shift to professional leadership and national issues has led to a perception of equality among their male counterparts that may partly explain the dirty tactics used against them.

Before moving on to explanations, the previous comparative analysis only reports on the salient developments; finer-grained thematic analysis as well as a larger set of articles (including the press treatment of male candidates) might require qualification of the general findings.

iv) Explanatory Factors

In trying to account for the differences in news treatment between the two election cycles, reference will be made to Kittilson and Fridkin (2008). In their theoretical understanding, variation in the press coverage of male and female candidates is at least partially determined by the *political and media systems* within which the coverage takes place. If so, changes in the media portrayal of women candidates might be indicative of changes in these underlying macro-level systems. However, it is not the case that either has transformed significantly between 2008 and 2013. Malaysia's main institutional structures are in fact deeply entrenched — on the "longevity, institutionalisation, cohesion and internal loyalty" of its core political parties, see, e.g., Weiss (2013, p.21).

There is, however, one critical development that affected the political and media landscape, and may explain some of the changes in the news treatment of women candidates: the emergence of a "culture of platformed connectivity" (Van Dijck, 2013). As Frantz (2011) observes, the online social network phenomenon "has heavily affected its citizens' informal, social network;" in addition, it has given Malaysian voters access to a wider, more diverse range of voices (e.g., alternative news sources), effectively "linking PR's [*Pakatan Rakyat*, the opposition coalition] organizers and supporters into an imagined community of dissent" (Khoo, 2016, p.73). Insofar as social media and the emancipative values they may support are more prevalent among younger and first-time voters, this "community of dissent" will continue to grow, seeing that Malaysia's median age is 28.0 years (Malaysia, Department of Statistics, 2016). On the impact of social media in Malaysia's 2008 and 2013 elections, see Liow (2012) and Mohd Azizuddin (2014) respectively.

Steele's (2009, p.108) study concludes that the real challenge to the political status quo did not come from *Malaysiakini*'s availability online but from its "norms and values of independent journalism." Our own analysis shows that between 2008 and 2013, *Malaysiakini* itself did not undergo any radical changes in its editorial mission or journalistic practices. In

both 2008 and 2013, and in keeping with its political stance, *Barisan Nasional* candidates tended to receive less coverage than those who are independent or with the opposition. This observation may be seen to confirm Shor et al.'s (2015, p.977) finding that a newspaper's political slant or changes in individual editors or newsroom composition (e.g., in terms of gender) cannot explain in themselves how that newspaper covers women candidates.

Following Kittilson and Fridkin (2008), it seems more likely that other contextual influences have to be considered: the *historical sociopolitical and economic context* at the time of the elections, *women's presence and role in politics* or *attitudes toward women*. As for the first influence, among developing countries, Malaysia is considered an upper-middle-income country. Though its economy was impacted by the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 (Goh and Lim, 2010), around the time of the elections—May 5, 2008 and March 8, 2013 respectively—World Bank data show that Malaysia's economic prospects were very similar: forecast annual GDP growth rates were 4.8% (2008) and 4.7% (2013). In fact, though GDP dropped from $230.8bn in 2008 to $202.3bn in 2009 (due to the worldwide crisis), this key economic indicator recovered relatively quickly, climbing to $323.3bn in 2013.

Politically, however, the inroads the opposition parties made in the general elections of both 2008 and 2013 (for the results, see, among others, Welsh, 2013) created a context of renewed hope that may have encouraged *Malaysiakini* to engage in an even bolder and more mature kind of journalism in regard to women candidates. More than in the earlier general election, the online articles may have deliberately shaped women's political identity as change agents and future leaders. *Malaysiakini*'s news coverage may also have been motivated by the fact that unlike 2008, the 2013 elections were less focused on constituency candidacy, ethnicity or gender and more on national issues, political platforms, and policy ideas, with more voters than before identifying as Malaysians rather than belonging to this or that ethnicity (Welsh, 2013).

As for the second influence, i.e., women's presence in politics, there is the 40% increase in women candidates between 2008 and 2013 (see above). It can be speculated that since 2008, a larger number of more highly qualified and suitable Malaysian women — along the political-party spectrum — became motivated to participate in the political process, and that this development contributed to some of the media coverage changes that could be identified. On the other hand, putting (more) women on the ballot also has considerable political utility, and — as Deniz (2010) argues — media utility: their media presence may reflect a kind of "instrumentalization" of women politicians with a view to maintaining a patriarchal ideology.

Finally, changes in media coverage may also stem from changed attitudes toward women as part of a broader set of cultural values, norms, and beliefs. In terms of the two dimensions used by the World Values Survey (Welzel, 2013), Malaysia can be characterized as *traditional* rather than secular-rational (e.g., patriarchy, strictly defined gender roles) and more oriented toward survival than self-expression (e.g., prioritizing security over liberty). Even so, Malaysia's cultural landscape also displays a kind of within-societal ambivalence, with the paradoxes and tensions typical of a multispeed, multiethnic, and multilingual former colony under British rule. Self-expression values such as an enhanced sense of individual agency are in evidence, with significant numbers of people across all social categorizations emphasizing freedom of choice and equality of opportunities. Tuchman's (1978) study suggests that such

changes in society will eventually result in more equitable media coverage although a period of "cultural lag" needs to be endured. *Malaysiakini*'s differential coverage of women candidates in 2013 as compared to 2008 may not yet point, however, to a fundamental cultural shift in how Malaysians understand politics, gender equality or empowerment of women. At best, the case study shows that emancipative forces are present in society, offering an alternative to the dominant portrayals of women in Malaysia's news media.

CONCLUSION

Kittilson and Fridkin's (2008, p.387) study on gender, candidate portrayals, and election campaigns concludes by calling for future research into "a wider variety of democratic systems." As our study has shown, Malaysia offers a political system and a political reality that are different from, for example, Canada's or Australia's. The unique ownership structure of Malaysia's media combined with sedition laws and restrictive media legislation creates a polarized pluralist media landscape, different from the liberal models that emerged elsewhere in the world. Within this context, our analysis of *Malaysiakini* news articles shows that—also in the independent, more impartial press — personal and gendered reporting occurs but also that the quality of election coverage can improve over time. Despite Malaysia's deep-seated "competitive parallelism" between media and politics (McQuail, 2013, p.123), there is room for individual newspapers to play a role in shaping and re-shaping the political identity of women and enhancing their electoral viability. Taken together, the differences in *Malaysiakini*'s news coverage of Malaysia's general elections of 2008 and 2013 suggest that—at least in one newspaper—the media portrayal of women politicians has changed from gender stereotyping to constructing political identity.

One limitation of the study is that *Malaysiakini* cannot stand for the entire news media sector in Malaysia. Moreover, we are aware that *Malaysiakini* is not fully representative of dominant journalistic practices in Malaysia. To improve the external validity of the findings, other Malaysian media organizations will have to be considered as well as data from across a larger number of election cycles. A second limitation is that key themes based on traits and issues are not the only indicators of such a complex, multicomponent phenomenon as media portrayal. For a more comprehensive description, other aspects of media portrayal will have to be examined (e.g., prominence, valence, agency, metaphors or fallacies), using different methods such as framing or discourse analysis.

Whether the observed trends — focus on women's professional and leadership qualities, the discussion of substantive issues, and an increase in interpretative journalism — will continue into the next general election is an open question. After all, the factors affecting the press treatment of female political candidates are many and varied (e.g., societal-level vs. media-level), and rarely within the control of only one social actor in the electoral process.

BIODATA
Usha Devi Rajaratnam is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Communication at Taylor's University, Malaysia. Her research interests are political communication and women's issues. Email: ushadevi.rajaratnam@taylors.edu.my

Antoon De Rycker is an Associate Professor and Head at the School of Humanities & Social Sciences at Berjaya University College, Malaysia. His work is located within discourse analysis and social practice theory. Email: antoon.derycker@berjaya.edu.my

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