Media Framing on 2018 General Election: A Comparative Content Analysis on Newspapers Coverage Toward Political Parties in Malaysia

AINIS AZREEN ROSLI
MOHD AZIZUDDIN MOHD SANI
Universiti Utara Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This article explores the mainstream media favorability towards political parties in the context of newspaper coverage in Malaysia during the 14th general election in 2018 (GE-14). The newspapers selected for this study are three Malay, two English, two Mandarin and two Tamil newspapers namely: *'Utusan Malaysia*,' *'Berita Harian'*, *'Sinar Harian'*, *'New Straits Times'*, *'The Star'*, *'Nanyang Siang Pau'*, *'Sin Chew Daily'*, *'Nanban'* and *'Osai'*. The background of the newspapers was explored in order to understand the ownerships and approaches in covering the news about GE-14. This study was carried out in two separate phases, in which the data were derived from both periods before and after the GE-14. The data were classified into few categories based on reports on Barisan Nasional (BN), Pakatan Harapan (PH), Gagasan Sejahtera (GS) through the frequencies and percentages of the positive, negative, and neutral forms of coverage. The result of this study implies that in 2018, most of the mainstream media reporting was pro-government, which attributed to the linkage to political parties. Surprisingly, the unprecedented victory of the opposition can be seen to relate to the growth of positive coverage towards Pakatan Harapan, subsequently after the general election. Through content analysis of these selected newspapers, the author discussed gender-related coverage and general issues during the chosen period of the study.

Keywords: *Mainstream media, media ownership, political partisanship, general election, Malaysia.*

INTRODUCTION

In a democratic country, the media's primary and most important function is to provide adequate information to the public. The role of media during elections is crucial as it conveys an ample message to the voters through election coverage and political events. More than any medium of political communication, the mainstream newspapers have always become a central focus during the election period. News coverage is significant for political actors and election candidates to convey their political viewpoints to the electorate. Positive visibility in the media might ultimately contribute to electoral success, which stipulates the political parties to consume media usage during the election campaign (Park & Suiter, 2021). In such a scenario, media owners are likely to have a subsidiary linkage to political parties to be able to exert political agendas in their respective media.

Malaysia's fourteenth general election, held in May 2018, is definitely an election to remember. During the 2018 general election, for the first time in history, Malaysia had seen a turnover of its government since independence in 1957. The opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH), scores the historic victory by winning 121 seats, over the threshold of 112 seats required to form a new government. Meanwhile, the incumbent government of six decades, Barisan Nasional (BN), was ousted from power for the first time after a significant loss in both parliamentary and *Dewan Undangan Negeri* (DUN) (Moniruzzaman & Farzana, 2018). In the cutting-edge victory in 2018, PH won a total of 113 seats through the alliance parties – People's Justice Party (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP), Malaysian United Indigenous

Party (PPBM), and National Trust Party (PAN). The political coalition was formed in September 2015. On the contrary, the other opposition pact – Gagasan Sejahtera (GS) was established in early 2016 between Islamic political parties, namely Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), Parti Ikatan Bangsa Malaysia (IKATAN), and Pan-Malaysian Islamic Front (BERJASA).

Reflecting on the previous years, there are numerous factors that facilitate the result of an election. Welsh (2018) describes multiple frameworks that rationalise the elections into five interrelated areas: 1) agency (role of leadership and opposition pact-making), 2) rules of the game (electoral system), 3) campaign mobilisation (money, machinery, and media), 4) voting behaviour (along ethnic and regional lines), and, 5) broader socio-political features. Of these, the media environment is seen as a key platform for political actors during the election campaign. The affiliation between media and political parties will be discussed in the further section.

In order to examine how the mainstream media plays their role during the 2018 general election, there are three significant questions that will be covered in this study: to what extent were the mainstream media biased towards political parties during the 14th general election? Were the election results determined by the linkage and domination by any political party? How did the media respond to the defeat of the ruling government in the 2018 general election? For this purpose, thorough content analysis is performed on every election article published in the newspapers in the specific period: before and after the general election.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The rise of mass media in the twentieth century enhanced the power and visibility of political leaders and diminished the power of others. There are plenty of sources of empirical evidence that suggest the function of the mass media is more than delivering the information to the people. Scholars began studying the influence of the media as soon as radio became widely used in the 1920s. One of the anchor studies, The Media Game (Ansolabehere, Behr & Iyengar, 1993), emphasises on the relationship between political figures and media has changed dramatically since the advent of technologies. Elected representatives, political figures, and their consultants have developed intricate strategies by using or evading the media for their own benefit and advantage.

In Malaysia, the role of mass media in politics traces a path back to the colonial period, where Malay nationalism started to rise in *Tanah Melayu*. This hegemony was largely mobilised by political factions to spread awareness on freedom and independence through writings and journalism. Newspapers and magazines acted as a medium to raise the spirit of Malay nationalists. Some of the popular publications are *Al Imam, Saudara, Warta Malaya, Majlis*, and *Utusan Melayu*. Prior to independence in 1957, the function of mass media, especially newspapers, radio, and television, in spreading news and political agendas, was clearly visible (Achie, 2017). Likewise, in any democratic society, the media is responsible for serving the public with government actions and information to help them make a thoughtful decision. Ideally, political figures and organisations consistently use the media platform to engage with the public, especially during the election seasons, as the widespread use of mass media as providers keeps the public informed and conscious of their role as citizens.

Utusan Malaysia strove in the early days as *Utusan Melayu*, the first Malay-owned newspaper published in 1939. In particular, *Utusan Melayu/Malaysia* has been championing Malay rights and supremacy from the beginning. In his book, *Di Depan Api Di Belakang Duri*,

Zainuddin (2013) described the main objectives of the print was scribbled in its first edition in 1939 – to serve the *bangsa* (nation/race), *agama* (religion), and *watan* (country). Throughout the years, *Utusan Malaysia* became the official platform to spread the Malay consciousness in politics, economic and social being in the country. The fact that it was brought under the control of UMNO in the 1950s, *Utusan Malaysia* continued to spark waves in Malay society. However, the unprecedented defeat of BN in 2018 has sparked a critical condition for the company and stakeholders. After several attempts to ensure its survival, finally, *Utusan Malaysia* ceased its operation and closed down on October 9, 2019. Shortly afterward, Utusan Melayu (Malaysia) Bhd had sold 70% of its equity interest in its wholly-owned subsidiary, Dilof Sdn. Bhd to Aurora Mulia Sdn. Bhd. (which later renamed as Media Mulia Sdn. Bhd.), which is linked to the business tycoon Syed Mokhtar Albukhary (News Straits Times, 2019). After nine-months of shutdown, *Utusan Malaysia* restarted its publication under the new ownership in July 2020, bracing the new tagline – "*Pemikiran Baharu* (New Thinking)".

Meanwhile, *Berita Harian* was first published in 1957 and has appeared to be one of the mainstream Malaysian newspapers ever since. Owned by New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Bhd. (NSTP), it appeals to position itself as a newspaper of choice as it speaks on behalf of the people. True to its tagline, *Merentasi Generasi*, *Berita Harian* serves the needs of Malaysians in delivering the news. *Berita Harian* and *Sinar Harian* are still operating and making copies, a sign that demonstrates both newspapers are still relevant and will continue to be in demand.

News Straits Times was founded as *The Straits Times* in 1845 and later re-established as NST in 1975. Abbott and Givens (2015) stated that during the years, the press had undergone a number of revamps, including names, ownerships, and locations. In 1972, the business and ownership were transferred to a wholly-owned subsidiary – NSTP, by the government-owned Pernas. Subsequently after, the operation of NSTP was taken over by UMNO investment company, Fleet Group Sdn Bhd until 1990, before Renong Bhd stepped in and bought out NSTP. Eventually in 1993, Malaysia Resource Corporation Berhad (MRCB) took over its operation until 2001. Corporate restructuring (demerger) of MRCB took place in 2003 under the new group, Media Prima Bhd (Mat Nor, Alias & Yaacob, 2008). Although *Berita Harian* and *New Straits Times* are not publicly state-owned, throughout the period, both have been linked to UMNO and BN as the ruling coalition. (Abbott & Givens, 2015).

Just like *News Straits Times*, *The Star* is recognised as one of the top English-language newspapers in Malaysia. Founded in 1971, *The Star* made it to the best-selling English daily, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations. The press is associated with the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a political party in BN, through its investment arm, Huaren Holdings Sdn. Bhd. (Abbott & Givens, 2015). With MCA as its major stakeholder, which owns 43.1% of Star Media Group Bhd., The Star had been seen as a cash cow to the political party between 2013 and 2017.

As for the Chinese dailies, *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Sin Chew Daily,* both revolve around two tycoons – Tiong Hiew King and Quek Leng Chan. In 1988, the timber tycoon Tiong branched out in requiring *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, which previously had been closed down following the infamous "Operasi Lalang" crackdown in 1987, leading to the arrest of 119 activists and opposition politicians under the Internal Security Act (ISA). Apparently, back in his hometown in Sibu, Sarawak, Tiong and his family are related to *Sarawak United People's Party* (SUPP), a major party of Sarawak's state government. His younger brother Tiong Thai King has been the Member of Parliament in Sibu from 1995 until 2013. While *Nanyang* and *China Press* were

owned by Quek Leng Chan, he later sold the two papers to Huaren Holdings, making Tiong the major owner of all four dailies, including *Guang Ming Daily* (Anuar, 2000).

As compared to other dailies, *Malaysia Nanban* and *Makkal Osai* were found rather late during the 1980s. Founded in 1981, *Makkal Osai* has built a close link with S. Subramaniam, former president of Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). Inspired to become an independent press with balanced reporting, *Makkal Osai* was always seen as a rival to *Malaysia Nanban* and *Tamil Nesan,* which were more likely seen as MIC's propaganda papers through Maika Holdings. In sum, the largest papers in Malaysia often have some links or close connections with major holding companies, individuals, and political parties.

From the perspective of previous studies, the media landscape is often seen as unbalanced and too favourable to the ruling party (Ahmad & Othman, 2014). Abbott (2011), in his paper examined a number of similar studies carried out by various authors in measuring the frequency and the biases of mainstream media during the election period in Malaysia. His study on the 2008 election concluded the newspapers displayed a strong bias toward the ruling party and were critical towards the opposition. The previous study by Mohd Azizuddin (2014) also indicates the same findings in reviewing the mainstream newspaper coverage in the 2013 election.

METHODOLOGY

The 14th general election in 2018 is an exemplary case because, for the first time in history, Malaysia experienced the first government's turnover through an election. As this paper seeks to examine the media representation of mainstream newspapers from before and after the election, both periods are significant to this study where they showcase how the government in power is controlling the mainstream media during the election campaign and how the latter responded to the shocking defeat in the 2018 election. Given this is the first reshuffle of the government, there was no reference to the same methodology earlier. The data collection for this study was carried out in two different periods: from April 28, 2018, to May 9, 2018, and from May 21, 2018, to May 27, 2018. A total of nine printed media has been selected to be examined, and they are:

i)   Malay newspapers: *'Utusan Malaysia', 'Berita Harian',* and *'Sinar Harian'*.
ii)   English newspapers: *'New Straits Times'* and *'The Star'*.
iii)   Chinese newspapers: *'Nanyang Siang Pau'* and *'Sin Chew Daily'*.
iv)   Tamil newspapers: *'Nanban'* and *'Osai'*.

The selection of these printed media was made based on their status as leading newspapers representing four major vernaculars in Malaysia – Malay, English, Chinese, and Tamil. In this particular study, the key concerns are whether the ruling government is practising a free and fair media coverage to all political actors and parties at the same weight before and after the election, as well as how the reporting behaviour of vernaculars media towards the new government (former opposition) in the impactful outcome. In order to define the media behaviour of these selected vernacular prints toward political parties, this study is composed of seven categories:

- BN+: positive coverage for BN
- BN-: negative coverage for BN
- PH+: positive coverage for PH
- PH-: negative coverage for PH
- GS+: positive coverage for GS
- GS-: negative coverage for GS
- N: neutral coverage

To measure the election coverage in the selected press, a total of nine students (three post-graduates and six undergraduates) have been selected and trained as coders. The selection of these students is based on their proficiencies in Malay, English, Mandarin, and Tamil languages. Furthermore, four of them had previous experience in newspaper coding in a similar study. The coders were provided with their corresponding newspapers on a daily basis for nineteen days. News articles on elections were identified and categorised into their types of main categories: editorials, opinion columns, election advertisements, arts and cartoons, and news features (see Table 1 and 2). A total of 5,923 articles have been identified and met the inclusion criteria. Thus, they were eligible for detailed coding and analysis.

To systematically and comprehensively code and analyse the press articles, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to explore how mainstream newspapers in Malaysia are reporting the news in the context of the electoral campaign. Sentence-level content analysis was used to classify them into their own sub-categories. By using this method, they are required to quantify the usage of words and sentences before determining in which sub-category each news article belongs to. From this perspective, the articles were divided and documented whether they were positive, negative, or neutral towards BN, PH, and GS (see Table 3 and 4). Through this in-depth analysis, the coders need to be firm in recording each news article into relevant sub-categories. If the situation were deemed to have reached uncertainty, the team leader would assist in the process. Also, to emphasise the reliability of the result, a standard format of the coding frame has been set and distributed among the coders to fill in accordingly.

During the in-depth content analysis, the words and sentences in the news articles were quantified, and the result was interpreted by the coder concerning the following steps: (a) political affiliation such as the political actors, political parties and organisations, constituencies and states; and (b) political issues such as race and ethnicity, religion, ideology, social, economy, politics, security, policy, legislation and local issues. Then, each article made to the list was coded based on three elements:
1. Which political party was the article intended for?
2. Under which sub-category would the article be identified?
3. Was the article intending to support, be neutral, or be critical towards any party?

For this analysis purpose, a total of 169 newspapers have been analysed by nine respective coders in the nineteen-day period. The newspapers were provided and delivered daily from April 28, 2018 to May 9, 2018 and from May 21, 2018, to May 27, 2018 except for *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Sin Chew Daily,* which were not published on May 2, 2018. The results were compiled by an assigned leader who was responsible for verifying the reliability of the coded data and its authenticity. Due to the high volume of articles, this process was meticulously performed and verified in a month.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
GE-14: Facts and Figures
In the 2018 general election, there were 687 candidates contesting for the 222 seats at the parliamentary level, and a total of 1,646 candidates were contesting for 505 seats at the assembly level. From the total, BN contested in all 222 parliamentary seats and 505 state seats, respectively. In contrast, PH fielded its candidates in 191 parliamentary seats and 448 seats at the state level, while PAS contested in 158 parliamentary seats and 393 state seats

(New Straits Times, 2018). As a result, PH won 113 seats, leaving behind BN with only 79 seats. The third coalition GS won 18 seats. The remaining 12 seats were won by Warisan (8), STAR (1) and independent candidates (New Straits Times, 2018). While PH scored a simple majority, Warisan claimed their support to PH in forming the new government, which raised their winning seats to 121 seats. Therefore, the implications of these figures are equally important to determine how the mainstream newspaper reporting reflects into the election result.

Mainstream Newspaper Coverage in 2018 General Election

During the period of study of 18 days, the data were recorded in two phases, pre-election and post-election. Pre-election took place from April 28 until May 9, 2018 (11 days), while post-election took place from May 21 to May 27 (7 days). During the pre-election period, a total of 4,237 articles were explicitly written on the GE-14, while 1,686 articles were covered during the post-election. Table 1 indicates the total and percentage of coverage and tendency toward political parties and coalitions during the election campaign (pre-election) period. The data shows *Sinar Harian* topped the others by scoring 798 (18.8%) articles in total. Meanwhile, *Osai* was the lowest by scoring 168 (3.96%) articles. During the same period, the data reveals *The Star* scored the highest percentage of articles favouring BN with 48.2% articles, leaving *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia* at second and third, with 47.4% and 40.8% consequently. In terms of ill-favour towards BN, *Nanban* was recorded to be at the top of the list with 20.5%, followed by *Nanyang* and *Sinchew Daily* with 17.1% and 7.0% of the articles.

Table 1: Mainstream newspapers and 2018 general election: Total and percentage of coverage and tendency toward political parties (election campaign)

Newspapers	BN+	BN-	PH+	PH-	GS+	GS-	N	Total
Utusan Malaysia	313 (40.8)	4 (0.5)	10 (1.3)	317 (41.3)	6 (0.8)	5 (0.7)	112 (14.6)	767 (100)
Berita Harian	275 (47.4)	1 (0.2)	3 (0.5)	158 (27.2)	8 (1.4)	7 (1.2)	128 (22.1)	580 (100)
Sinar Harian	280 (35.1)	21 (2.6)	152 (19.0)	40 (5.0)	79 (9.9)	6 (0.8)	220 (27.6)	798 (100)
New Straits Times	179 (40.4)	3 (0.7)	5 (1.1)	99 (22.3)	4 (0.9)	4 (0.9)	149 (33.7)	443 (100)
The Star	230 (48.2)	30 (6.3)	70 (14.7)	44 (9.2)	12 (2.5)	6 (1.3)	85 (17.8)	477 (100)
Nanyang Siang Pau	79 (25.0)	54 (17.1)	66 (20.8)	54 (17.1)	4 (1.3)	4 (1.3)	55 (17.4)	316 (100)
Sinchew Daily	110 (23.5)	33 (7.0)	110 (23.5)	58 (12.4)	9 (1.9)	6 (1.3)	143 (30.4)	469 (100)
Nanban	65 (29.7)	45 (20.5)	40 (18.3)	22 (10.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.5)	46 (21.0)	219 (100)
Osai	64 (38.1)	10 (6.0)	57 (33.9)	4 (2.4)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	33 (19.6)	168 (100)

For PH, the result recorded *Osai* with the highest percentage of articles favouring the PH coalition with 33.9% of coverage, followed by *Sinchew Daily* (23.5%) and *Nanyang Siang Pau* (20.8%). For least-favour towards PH, *Utusan Malaysia* leads the list with 41.3% coverage, followed by *Berita Harian* (27.2%) and *New Straits Times* (22.3%). The third coalition GS however, managed to score only 9.9% coverage for the tendency of favouring them during the period and interestingly, there were no positive remarks on GS in both Tamil editions, *Nanban* and *Osai*. For the negative remarks on the GS coalition, three dailies shared the highest percentage which were *The Star, Nanyang and Sinchew*. Meanwhile, the result suggested *New Straits Times* recorded the highest number of neutral coverages with 33.7% articles in total, followed by *Sinchew Daily* and *Sinar Harian* with 30.4% and 27.6% articles accordingly.

Equally important as the pre-election period, the data for the post-election period was recorded in the same methodology. From Table 2, the data indicates a few changes in reporting style by the mainstream newspapers after the election. During the period of seven days, *Utusan Malaysia* recorded the highest coverage for positive remarks on BN with 17.4% articles, as compared to *Sinar Harian* with only 12.6% articles and followed by *New Straits Times* with 11.3%. In the same category, both *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Nanban* recorded no articles at all. At the same time, *Nanban* topped the others in the ill-coverage of BN, leaving behind *The Star* and *Berita Harian*, as well as *Osai* with no coverage at all.

Table 2: Mainstream newspapers and 2018 general election: Total and percentage of coverage and tendency toward political parties (post-election)

Newspapers	BN+	BN-	PH+	PH-	GS+	GS-	N	Total
Utusan Malaysia	42 (17.4)	50 (20.7)	111 (45.9)	12 (4.9)	1 (0.4)	1 (0.4)	25 (10.3)	242 (100)
Berita Harian	13 (6.1)	49 (22.9)	57 (26.6)	15 (7.0)	1 (0.5)	0 (0.0)	79 (36.9)	214 (100)
Sinar Harian	47 (12.6)	66 (17.7)	165 (44.2)	5 (1.3)	14 (3.8)	0 (0.0)	76 (20.4)	373 (100)
New Straits Times	22 (11.3)	39 (20.0)	93 (47.7)	8 (4.0)	5 (2.6)	0 (0.0)	28 (14.4)	195 (100)
The Star	7 (4.2)	46 (27.7)	66 (39.8)	10 (6.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	37 (22.3)	166 (100)
Nanyang Siang Pau	0 (0.0)	20 (14.5)	5 (3.6)	3 (2.2)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.7)	109 (79.0)	138 (100)
Sinchew Daily	1 (0.4)	28 (12.4)	21 (9.3)	8 (3.5)	1 (0.4)	0 (0.0)	167 (74.0)	226 (100)
Nanban	0 (0.0)	23 (34.3)	37 (55.2)	5 (7.5)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (3.0)	67 (100)
Osai	1 (1.5)	0 (0.0)	23 (35.5)	1 (1.5)	1 (1.5)	0 (0.0)	39 (60.0)	65 (100)

Meanwhile, PH seems to gauge more positive coverage post-election. Remarkably, *Nanban* leads the highest coverage that favours PH coalition with 55.2% coverage, followed by *News Straits Times* and *Utusan Malaysia* recorded with 47.7% and 45.9% articles correspondingly, while *Nanyang Siang Pau* recorded the lowest coverage with only 3.6% articles favouring the coalition. In contrast to it, negative feedback on the PH coalition recorded a significant decrease as compared to the positive ones. Apparently, Nanban topped the others with 7.5% articles, recorded the highest poor -coverage on PH, followed by *The Star* and *Utusan Malaysia*.

Similar to the pre-election period, GS coalition remains to be under the radar as compared to BN, and PH coalition with a few mainstream newspapers preferred to be on neutral mode rather than picking a side between favouring or reproving the political composition. For impartial coverage, both Chinese editions – *Sinchew Daily* and *Nanyang Siang Pau* recorded the highest two with 79% and 74% articles, respectively. In precise, both tables indicate a significant peculiarity on the news coverage in the mainstream newspapers in the two study periods, pre-election and post-election.

With attention to the details, Table 3 provides a brighter comparison of the news reporting for each newspaper in this study. According to the table, all Malay newspapers *(Utusan Malaysia, Berita Harian* and *Sinar Harian)* and English dailies *(News Straits Times* and *The Star)* provided higher favorable coverage for the ruling party, BN and lesser coverage on other coalitions – PH and GS before the election took place. As opposed to the Malay and English dailies which were seen as favouring BN, both Chinese and Tamil dailies – *Nanyang Siang Pau, Sinchew Daily* as well as *Nanban* and *Osai* recorded a more balanced coverage that stipulated both positive and negative remarks on BN and PH during the election campaign.

Table 3: Comparison of news coverage during pre-election and post-election
in mainstream newspapers in General Election 2018

Newspapers		BN+	BN-	PH+	PH-	GS+	GS-	N	Total
Utusan Malaysia	*Pre-Election*	313	4	10	317	6	5	112	767
	Post-Election	42	50	111	12	1	1	25	242
Berita Harian	*Pre-Election*	275	1	3	158	8	7	128	580
	Post-Election	13	49	57	15	1	0	79	274
Sinar Harian	*Pre-Election*	280	21	152	40	79	6	220	798
	Post-Election	47	66	165	5	14	0	76	373
News Straits Times	*Pre-Election*	179	3	5	99	4	4	149	443
	Post-Election	22	39	93	8	5	0	28	195
The Star	*Pre-Election*	230	30	70	44	12	6	85	477
	Post-Election	7	46	66	10	0	0	37	166
Nanyang Siang Pau	*Pre-Election*	79	54	66	54	4	4	55	316
	Post-Election	0	20	5	3	0	1	109	138
Sinchew Daily	*Pre-Election*	110	33	110	58	9	6	143	469
	Post-Election	1	28	21	8	1	0	167	226
Nanban	*Pre-Election*	65	45	40	22	0	1	46	219
	Post-Election	0	23	37	5	0	0	2	67
Osai	*Pre-Election*	64	10	57	4	0	0	33	168
	Post-Election	1	0	23	1	1	0	39	65
Total	*Pre-Election*	159!	201	513	796	122	39	971	4237
	Post-Election	133	321	578	67	23	2	562	1686

As seen in Table 3, once the ruling party had lost in the election, the news coverage in these mainstream media also experienced a new stance of media reporting. During the post-election period, PH received a tremendous amount of constructive reportage by almost all mainstream newspapers studied, although the frequency was lower than pre-election. Intriguingly, all newspapers reported to log positive remarks on PH more than BN and GS and the total of negative annotations towards BN was slightly higher than the positive ones after the election.

Another key point to highlight in this study is how each mainstream newspaper covered their electoral articles in their respective agency. Table 4 and Table 5 show a detailed comparison between all newspapers in providing political information to the people. In short, a total of 5,923 electoral articles have been studied in both periods. From the number, the sum of pre-election articles is 4,237 which equals to 60.2% as compared to post-election articles which are 1,686 articles that equals to 39.8%.

Table 4: Mainstream newspapers and 2018 general election: Total and percentage of
content articles in the newspapers (pre-election)

Newspapers	E	OC	EA	AC	NF	Total
Utusan Malaysia	1 *(0.1)*	36 *(4.7)*	73 *(9.5)*	34 *(4.4)*	623 *(81.2)*	767 *(100)*
Berita Harian	7 *(1.2)*	31 *(5.3)*	62 *(10.7)*	6 *(1.0)*	474 *(81.8)*	580 *(100)*
Sinar Harian	0 *(0.0)*	47 *(6.0)*	139 *(17.4)*	10 *(1.3)*	602 *(75.4)*	798 *(100)*
New Straits Times	0 *(0.0)*	11 *(2.5)*	29 *(6.6)*	1 *(0.2)*	402 *(90.8)*	443 *(100)*
The Star	13 *(2.8)*	58 *(12.1)*	43 *(9.0)*	1 *(0.2)*	362 *(75.9)*	477 *(100)*
Nanyang Siang Pau	0 *(0.0)*	13 *(4.1)*	28 *(8.9)*	6 *(2.0)*	269 *(85.1)*	316 *(100)*
Sinchew Daily	11 *(2.4)*	73 *(15.6)*	41 *(8.8)*	2 *(0.5)*	342 *(73.0)*	469 *(100)*
Nanban	0 *(0.0)*	0 *(0.0)*	22 *(10.0)*	1 *(0.5)*	196 *(89.5)*	219 *(100)*
Osai	4 *(2.4)*	16 *(9.6)*	3 *(1.8)*	0 *(0.0)*	145 *(86.3)*	168 *(100)*

Notes: E—Editorials, OC—Opinion Columns, EA—Election Advertisements, AC—Arts and Cartoons, NF—News Features

The result indicates *Sinar Harian* provided the highest number of percentage (27.6%) of electoral content in both pre-election and post-election with 1,171 articles, while *Osai* recorded the lowest number of percentage with only 5.5%. In both periods, News Features recorded the highest category of the content in all newspapers, while E Editorial and Arts and

Cartoons column is the least category recorded during pre-election and post-election respectively (refer Table 6).

In a nutshell, all mainstream newspapers recorded a drastic fall in their content articles after the general election, especially in the News Features category. The highest drop (in percentage) is *Nanban*, which decreased to 30.6% while *Sinchew Daily* is the lowest with 48.1% of the total articles published in the post-election period. This data proves that during the second period of the study (post-election), no mainstream newspapers managed to issue at least 50% of the total articles as compared to the first period (pre-election).

Table 5: Mainstream newspapers and 2018 general election: Total and percentage of content articles in the newspapers (post-election)

Newspapers	E	OC	EA	AC	NF	Total
Utusan Malaysia	24	3	3	9	203	242
	(9.9)	*(1.2)*	*(1.2)*	*(3.7)*	*(83.4)*	*(100)*
Berita Harian	0	25	1	4	184	214
	(0.0)	*(11.7)*	*(0.5)*	*(1.9)*	*(86.0)*	*(100)*
Sinar Harian	0	43	11	6	313	373
	(0.0)	*(11.5)*	*(3.0)*	*(1.6)*	*(83.9)*	*(100)*
New Straits Times	0	3	0	0	192	195
	(0.0)	*(1.5)*	*(0.0)*	*(0.0)*	*(98.5)*	*(100)*
The Star	6	0	4	0	156	166
	(3.6)	*(0.0)*	*(2.4)*	*(0.0)*	*(94.0)*	*(100)*
Nanyang Siang Pau	0	0	0	0	138	138
	(0.0)	*(0.0)*	*(0.0)*	*(0.0)*	*(100.0)*	*(100)*
Sinchew Daily	5	5	15	0	201	226
	(2.2)	*(2.2)*	*(6.6)*	*(0.0)*	*(89.0)*	*(100)*
Nanban	2	0	11	0	54	67
	(3.0)	*(0.0)*	*(16.4)*	*(0.0)*	*(80.6)*	*(100)*
Osai	0	0	0	0	65	65
	(0.0)	*(0.0)*	*(0.0)*	*(0.0)*	*(100.0)*	*(100)*

Notes: E—Editorials, OC—Opinion Columns, EA—Election Advertisements, AC—Arts and Cartoons, NF—News Features

To sum up the findings, all Malay and English dailies are prone to give remarkable favourable coverages towards BN before the general election was held. On the other hand, the Chinese and Tamil dailies were slightly biased and provided more neutral coverage to both BN and PH coalitions during the election campaign (refer Table 3). This finding resonates with a similar result recorded during the election campaign in the previous 2013 general election (Azizuddin, 2014), wherein aforementioned study, all English, Tamil, and Malay newspapers (*Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian*) were found biased towards the ruling party, BN.

Table 6: Comparison of total numbers of content articles in mainstream newspapers
during pre-election and post-election in General Election 2018

Newspapers		E	OC	EA	AC	NF	Total
Utusan Malaysia	*Pre-Election*	1	36	73	34	623	767
	Post-Election	24	3	3	9	203	242
Berita Harian	*Pre-Election*	7	31	62	6	474	580
	Post-Election	-	25	1	4	184	214
Sinar Harian	*Pre-Election*	-	47	139	10	602	798
	Post-Election	-	43	11	6	313	373
News Straits Times	*Pre-Election*	-	11	29	1	402	443
	Post-Election	-	3	-	-	192	195
The Star	*Pre-Election*	13	58	43	1	362	477
	Post-Election	6	-	4	-	156	166
Nanyang Siang Pau	*Pre-Election*	-	13	28	6	269	316
	Post-Election	-	-	-	-	138	138
Sinchew Daily	*Pre-Election*	11	73	41	2	342	469
	Post-Election	5	5	15	-	201	226
Nanban	*Pre-Election*	-	-	22	1	196	219
	Post-Election	2	-	11	-	54	67
Osai	*Pre-Election*	4	16	3	-	145	168
	Post-Election	-	-	-	-	65	65
Total	*Pre-Election*	36	285	440	61	3415	4237
	Post-Election	37	79	45	19	1506	1686

Notes: E—Editorials, OC—Opinion Columns, EA—Election Advertisements, AC—Arts and Cartoons, NF—News Feature

Gender Coverage in Mainstream Newspapers

Over the years, scholars have drawn links between women and media exposure during election campaigns. Scholarly articles pointed out that rather than mirroring the political landscape, news media were shaping the impression of the voters towards the women (Kahn, 1994; Larson, 2001; Dolan, 2014). As the news media play a central role in disseminating the political message during the campaign, some studies suggest there are differences in media presentations for both men and women candidates. As Kahn (1993) explains in his work, he eventually discovered there are ample reasons for gender differences in news coverage of political candidates.

Even though political candidates emphasize their electoral messages in the same way, in most cases their campaign advertising is likely to differ between men and women candidates, and this leads to misconceptions of women. According to Wang (2006), women have often been associated with compassion and other feminine characteristics, while men are often portrayed as masculine and competent in running for the post. These gender stereotypes by the media may influence how the voters perceive the electoral candidates. This section will further investigate how women issues and female candidates are being represented in the mainstream newspaper during pre-election and post-election in 2018.

Framed in the same categories as before, Table 7 illustrates how women's issues are captured during both pre-election and post-election in the mainstream newspapers. The articles assessed are news coverage on women candidates, women issues and any news worth related to women's agenda during the study period. From the data, a total of 177

articles were published. From the number, pre-election articles recorded a higher percentage with 79% compared to the post-election period with only 21%.

Table 7: Women coverage in mainstream newspapers during pre-election and post-election in General Election 2018

Newspapers		BN+	BN-	PH+	PH-	GS+	GS-	N	Total
Utusan Malaysia	*Pre-Election*	9	1	1	12	-	-	-	23
	Post-Election	2	-	4	-	-	-	-	6
Berita Harian	*Pre-Election*	14	-	1	2	1	-	-	18
	Post-Election	1	-	3	-	-	-	2	6
Sinar Harian	*Pre-Election*	4	1	4	-	3	-	2	14
	Post-Election	1	-	4	-	-	-	-	5
News Straits Times	*Pre-Election*	8	-	-	1	-	-	3	12
	Post-Election	-	-	5	-	-	-	-	5
The Star	*Pre-Election*	9	-	8	3	1	-	2	23
	Post-Election	1	-	3	-	-	-	2	6
Nanyang Siang Pau	*Pre-Election*	1	5	7	2	-	-	2	17
	Post-Election	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Sinchew Daily	*Pre-Election*	2	-	9	1	-	-	1	13
	Post-Election	-	1	2	-	-	-	-	3
Nanban	*Pre-Election*	3	3	1	2	-	-	1	10
	Post-Election	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Osai	*Pre-Election*	2	1	6	-	-	-	2	11
	Post-Election	-	-	3	-	-	-	1	4
Total	*Pre-Election*	52	11	37	23	5	0	13	141
	Post-Election	5	1	25	0	0	0	5	36

From the thorough assessment, although it represents more opportunities to women, it is justified that *Utusan Malaysia* gave intense publicity to the ruling party and was biased towards the opposition, as compared to other media news. By comparing the tone of campaign coverage, some of the headlines were misleading and did not rationalise how women candidates' messages should be advertised. While it is certainly accurate that BN women candidates received a constructive media display, it appears that the opposition is unlikely to receive the same media attention. The positive remarks to BN women were captured in *Utusan Malaysia* as follow: *"Program ziarah Wanita BN bukan bermusim"* (BN Women charity visit not a one-off activity) (*Utusan Malaysia*, May 1); *"Misi Shahanim menangkan BN di Sungai Petani"* (Shahanim's mission to ensure BN's victory in Sungai Petani) (*Utusan Malaysia*, May 2); *"Zahida yakin BN tuai hasil di Pandan"* (Zahida confidents of BN in Pandan) (*Utusan Malaysia*, May 3).

Whereas for the opposition, it is noticeable that the tone of coverage sounds prejudiced and lingers around two women figures – Wan Azizah Ismail and Nurul Izzah Anwar, the wife and the daughter of opposition figure, Anwar Ibrahim. Quoting the headlines: *"Cerita sedih Nurul Izzah tidak mendapat perhatian"* (Nurul Izzah's disappointment does not gain attention) (*Utusan Malaysia*, May 1); *"Sibuk di Permatang Pauh, Pandan terbiar"* (Busy in Permatang Pauh, Pandan being left out) (*Utusan Malaysia*, May 1); and *"Penduduk Pandan tertanya-tanya di mana Wan Azizah"* (Pandan constituents' question Wan Azizah's whereabouts) (*Utusan Malaysia*, May 7). These findings suggest that women from opposition

political parties remain silenced and are being criticised in the mainstream news media to display their weakness and incompetence.

In sum, fair media reporting on women candidates in Malaysia is still struggling. Echoing the same struggle, a 2015 report entitled Research Study on Media and Gender in Asia-Pacific addressed the existence of stereotypical views on women, who are deemed as weaker and less effective than their male counterparts. As in the 2018 general election, women who represented the ruling party were given positive remarks while the female opposition candidates meddled with negative and harmful views. The media's characterisation by focusing on the selected political parties as well as winning candidates eventually formed a gender gap in media.

2018 General Election: Issue Coverage in Mainstream Newspapers
The study found that prior to the 2018 general election, politicians used the mainstream media to persuade the masses to vote and support their political parties, in this case – BN and its alliances. The ruling party had successfully maintained its power for 61 years since 1957. In the same way as the political actors, the citizens, too, require the media to engage in political communication through mainstream newspapers, TV, and radios.

During the 2018 election campaign, there were some significant issues circulated by the mainstream newspaper in light of their political support towards BN. Economic development has always become an election highlight in Malaysia. The main headlines of the eleven days have been all about the country's financial stability, the ringgit has rebounded, promoting new ideas to raise the minimum wage, 3 million new jobs will be available provided BN set to retain power in GE-14 (*Utusan Malaysia* & *New Straits Times*, 2018). In the same manner, these newspapers emphasised on the government's workable action plans that helped to strengthen the economic status amongst the plural society in Malaysia, including in Sabah and Sarawak.

Weighing on race and religion sentiment, *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian* stirred the situation by indicting DAP is the mastermind of PH coalition, as well as Islam status will be threatened if PH comes into power. With screaming headlines towards DAP, the BN's controlled media have fanned and incited racial and religious sentiments to win Malay voters, especially from rural households and Felda settlers. The negative remarks towards DAP were mentioned repeatedly in these mainstream newspapers: *"DAP kingmaker pengaruhi gabungan pembangkang"* (DAP is the kingmaker of the opposition pact) (*Utusan Malaysia*, April 28); *"Selamatkan Malaysia dari Ketuanan DAP"* (Save Malaysia from DAP's supremacy) (*Utusan Malaysia*, May 2); *"DAP bawa budaya politik samseng"* (DAP promotes political thuggery) (*Berita Harian*, May 2); *"Kempen agresif DAP boleh ancam perpaduan"* (DAP's aggressive campaign threatens unity) (*Utusan Malaysia*, May 3); *"DAP ancam Melayu, Islam"* (DAP threatens Malay, Islam) (*Berita Harian*, May 4).

The return of Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysian politics in 2015 was indeed, causing troubles to Najib Razak's leadership as Prime Minister. Thus, with Mahathir's decision to contest in the 2018 general election at the parliamentary level under PH flag, almost all newspapers publicly discredited him despite the fact he was the longest-serving Prime Minister. During the middle of the intense election campaign, Mahathir was lashed for his childrens' wealth and their lavish lifestyles. Quoting some of the headlines: *"Dr. Mahathir kuat tentang undang-undang Islam"* (Dr. Mahathir against Islamic law) (*Utusan Malaysia*, April 28); *"Dr. Mahathir tidak boleh lari dari jawab kekayaan anak-anak"* (Dr. Mahathir cannot

run away from responding to his children's wealth" (*Utusan Malaysia*, April 29); *"Kronisme Dr. M lebih buruk daripada rasuah"* (Dr. M's cronyism is worse than corruption) (*Utusan Malaysia*, May 4).

Resembling the similar assault on personal matter, some PH leaders encountered with politically unwise coverage. Nurul Izzah has been criticised for abandoning her two terms parliament constituency, Lembah Pantai and reclaiming Permatang Pauh in 2018, her parents' legacy. These were mentioned a few times in the newspapers, particularly in *Utusan Malaysia*: *"Nurul Izzah sudah lari, saya masih setia – Najib"* (Nurul Izzah has run, while I'm still loyal – Najib) (*Utusan Malaysia*, April 30); *"Nurul Izzah terdesak pertahan kerusi tradisi"* (Nurul Izzah is desperate in defending traditional seat) (*Utusan Malaysia*, April 30) and *"Nurul Izzah lari kerana takut"* (Nurul Izzah ran away because of fear) (*Utusan Malaysia*, May 2). These headlines too, bear a resemblance to critical prejudice to women candidates as discussed earlier.

Unlike the campaign period, which was filled with hatred and racial sentiments towards the opposition pact, the post-election study presented a new dimension of reporting of the mainstream media. During the seven days of post-election qualitative investigation, the content of coverage was narrowed down to specific issues: 1MDB investigation, the appointment of new cabinet members, new government to work on the country's debt, and to rebuild the nation. The aforementioned points were discovered briefly in almost all newspapers under headlines: *"Harapan pasca pilihan raya"* (A hope, post-election) (*Utusan Malaysia*, May 21); *"Siasatan 1MDB dibuat adil"* (1MDB investigation will be carried out justly) (*Utusan Malaysia*, May 22); Dr. M slashes government funding (*News Straits Times*, May 24); Dr. M: Government to reduce debt to RM800B (*News Straits Times*, May 27).

In brief, the mainstream newspapers were extremely biased towards BN during the campaign period of eleven days, with almost no constructive coverage on the PH coalition. This reverberates to the previous studies, which echoes the fact that mainstream media in Malaysia is reportedly to become severely unfair in reporting political news during an election (Anuar, 2005; Azizuddin, 2014; & Nadzri, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Taking the cue from the 2018 results, mainstream media coverage is usually characterised by heavy ruling party intervention while its political opponents often face limited reporting and selected coverage. Corporate ownership that is associated with political institutions is significantly related to the news coverage in Malaysia during the 2018 general election. This article furthers our understanding of the relationship between media organisations and the news content they produce in both pre-election and post-election periods. Regardless of the existence of alternative media, mainstream media still plays a significant role in disseminating political information to the people, especially in the rural and under-developed areas. The ruling party candidates are portrayed as efficient and capable of handling a better policy while the opposition candidates are depicted as reckless and inefficient leaders. In terms of women coverage, this study confirms that media news is likely to stress issues that voters associate favourably with women's agenda and feminine characteristics.

Despite the intense coverage that favours the incumbent ruling party, the result of the 2018 general election turned out unexpected and shockingly incredible. The fall of BN reflects the idea of imprudent and irresponsible news coverage by the mainstream media that was not gladly accepted by the voters. In conclusion, media ownership proves to be one of

the main factors of political biases in media reporting and directly affects how the news are advertised. The concentration of negative campaigning tactics indicates immaturity and delivered more harm than good to society. With less information being conveyed necessarily, the people are less informed and becoming unaware of the current state of national affairs. Finally, this article provides a detailed description of how mainstream newsprint in Malaysia is fundamentally biased towards political institutions attached to the media agency. Factoring in the existence of alternative media, mainstream media is seen to be withdrawn by the voters on May 9, 2018.

BIODATA
Ainis Azreen Rosli is a PhD candidate at the School of International Studies, Universiti Utara Malaysia. She writes on gender, politics and democracy. Email: ainis.azreen@gmail.com

Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, PhD, is a Professor of Politics and International Relations at the School of International Studies (SOIS), Universiti Utara Malaysia. He has published on various topics such as political theory, media politics, human rights, democratization and Malaysian politics. Email: azizuddin@uum.edu.my

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