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Propagandists For The BN (Part 1)

RTM and TV3 were the main culprits

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TV1 and TV3 performed a BN propagandist role

Before the 11th general election on 21 March, many already knew the Barisan Nasional would be easily returned to power largely because it had more of the 3 Ms than the opposition—money, machinery and media. While the three overlapped, the focus here is on the third M, specifically their coverage of the election. More accurately, the third M is the mainstream media, so as not to confuse with two other types of media.

One type refers to publications of political parties meant for party members. A law forbids them from being openly sold to the public and restricts the frequency of publication. Examples of such publications are PAS'

Harakah, DAP's *The Rocket* and MCA's *The Guardian*. Equating these party organs to the likes of *Utusan Malaysia*, *The Star*, and *China Press* is ridiculous, like comparing apples to oranges.

The other type not considered part of the “mainstream media” are those available only through the Internet such as *Malaysiakini.com*. This is because of the low Internet penetration or usage. In June 2003, there were only 2.6 million Internet subscribers with about 7.8 million users or about 32% of the Malaysian population. News on the Net is still outside of the experience of mainstream Malaysians unlike those from daily newspapers and radio and TV. It is still at the fringe of the Malaysian culture and consciousness. What's more, the majority of Internet users use e-mail and chat rather than surf news websites.

As for the mainstream media themselves, they have two major characteristics. There are, first, the various media laws and regulations—the Printing Presses and Publications Act, Internal Security Act, Officials Secret Act, Broadcasting Act, and the Communications and Multimedia Act. They directly or indirectly restrict what the mainstream media can publish or broadcast.

The various print and electronic media are also BN owned or connected. BN leaders like the prime minister are known to change top editors - For example, the replacement of Abdullah Ahmad by Kalimullah Hassan as Group Editor-in-chief of the New Straits Times. Some say it was because Abdullah ran articles critical of the Saudi royal family, who then pressured Abdullah Badawi, having just taken over as prime minister, to remove Abdullah. Others said premier Abdullah wanted someone more supportive of him to helm the UMNO-connected English daily than Abdullah Ahmad, who was more pro-Mahathir. Whatever the reason, top editors of mainstream media are typically political appointees.

Why bother?

One would thus be naive to assume the mainstream media would think of doing a fair and balanced coverage of the election. Just as the foregone conclusion of the election was a comfortable victory for the BN, the foregone conclusion of the mainstream media's election coverage was their bias towards the BN. So why bother with a study of their coverage? What is the point?

The main aim is to show how or to what extent the mainstream media were unfair and unbalanced. Points or arguments could be better made with data or evidence systematically gathered. Anecdotal evidence gleaned here and there might be telling but does not reliably yield an overall pattern or picture of a situation. The purpose of this study is to help provide stronger evidence for making arguments and, in turn, raise the level of discourse into a more rational, objective one.

Some comparison of the coverage by the different media would also be undertaken. Finally, it is helpful to see how candidate Abdullah Badawi was covered. Before the election, he was merely seen as someone to whom the prime minister position was handed down. He needed to secure a strong mandate at the polls for himself as well as his BN to show he deserved to be the leader of UMNO and prime minister of the country as well. The election was very important to him.

The focus of this study is on the English news bulletins on TV1, TV3, and ntv7 as well as the English papers New Straits Times (NST), The Star and theSun. TV2 and channel 9 do not carry English bulletins. 8TV carries it at 8:00 - 8:30pm during weekdays but it is excluded from the study here because this new channel, which is currently targeted at young urbanites in the West coast of the peninsula, is not yet part of the mainstream.

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The first part of the study presented below deals only with TV's coverage.

Throughout this article, the following denotations are used. “BN” stands for Barisan Nasional, “OPP” for the opposition parties (including Independent candidates or parties), “BAL” for balanced or news or views incorporating at least two opposing positions, and “NPR” for non-party related items that focused on election issues but not the political parties (e.g. the Election Commission reminding the parties of the election rules). Also, “F” stands for focus as in items focusing on the BN; “P” for positive as in items supportive of or positive toward the BN; and “N” for negative as in items critical of the BN, but whose response or rebuttal was not given (if given, the item would be considered BAL).

TV coverage

TV1 offered its English bulletin at 6pm - 6:30pm throughout the week-long election campaign. Normally, the bulletin ends at 6:45pm. But TV1 ran a special half-hour program at 6:30 - 7pm during the campaign week. Called "Bersama Mu Malaysia" it was about the election but was only interested in projecting the BN from among the parties. ntv7's English bulletin was only 20 minutes long each and would appear as early as 12:10am and as late as 12:40am but not on Saturdays and Sundays. TV3 presents its half-hour bulletin daily starting at midnight. This study examined the election coverage of these various stations from nomination day on 13 March to the last day of the campaign on 20 March. The focus is on their new items since they do not present opinions or commentaries.

In addition to news items throughout a news bulletin, it is also important to examine the first three items of a particular day's coverage. The first three items are equivalent to the items on the first page of a paper. Those not presented as the first three TV items or on the front page would be considered buried. Examining the first three items would give an idea of what the TV stations considered to be more important items of the campaign coverage.

TV1: Mouthpiece of the BN

	BN (F)	BN (P)	BN (N)	OPP (F)	OPP (P)	OPP (N)	BAL	NPR	Total
Top 3	15	8	0	0	0	0	0	1	24
Items	(62.5%)	(33.3%)	(0%)	(0%)	(0%)	(0%)	(0%)	(4.2%)	(100%)
All	30	16	0	1	0	1	1	14	63
Items	(47.6%)	(25.4%)	(0%)	(1.6%)	(0%)	(1.6%)	(1.6%)	(22.2%)	(100%)

TV1 acted essentially as a mouthpiece of the BN. About 73% [BN(F) + BN(P)] of all items were about the BN and only a little over one per cent of the items focused on the opposition. All but one of the top three news items were about the BN. Candidate Abdullah Badawi appeared in 17 (about 71%) of the top 3 items and 23 (about 37%) of all items, while none of the candidates from the opposition appeared in any of the 24 top 3 items for the period of coverage.

The sole BAL or balanced item was on the arrests of two UMNO supporters for allegedly trying to bribe PAS candidates to withdraw from contesting. (It was coded as a balanced item because TV1 did not mention the parties involved.) Even NPR or non-party related items were given a lot more airtime than the opposition.

Clearly, TV1's idea of coverage was to focus on the BN, with the remaining coverage devoted to election-related issues such as the Election Commission reminding the parties of the various campaign rules and regulations. This is highly problematic. TV1 is part of RTM, which is funded largely by taxpayers. It is thus a public station (as opposed to private). As such, it was downright wrong or abusive of public funds and facilitates to give nearly all the political coverage to just the BN. Do members and supporters of the opposition parties not pay taxes?

TV3: Bombarding the public with BN propaganda

	BN (F)	BN (P)	BN (N)	OPP (F)	OPP (P)	OPP (N)	BAL	NPR	Total
Top 3	8	8	1	0	0	1	1	2	24*
Items	(33.3%)	(33.3%)	(1.2%)	(0%)	(0%)	(1.2%)	(1.2%)	(2.4%)	(100%)
All	22.5	22	1	3	0	9.5	1	11	70
Items	(32.2%)	(31.4%)	(1.4%)	(4.3%)	(0%)	(13.6%)	(1.4%)	(15.7%)	(100%)

The other three items were not related to the election and they all appeared on 16 March—one on the fatal Piper 28 plane crash in Malaysia, another on Canny Ong's murder trial, and the third on a young girl missing from home.

Of the 2 private stations of TV3 and ntv7, the former's coverage was arguably even more zealous than TV1 in promoting BN. Close to 64% of all items and 67% of the first three items were focused on or positive towards the BN, while only about 4% focused on the opposition and not one opposition news item made the top 3 items for the entire coverage. There were about 8 more negative items on the opposition than the BN—the single negative BN item being the arrest of two UMNO men for allegedly bribing PAS men to drop out of contesting. On the other hand, only one item could be considered BAL and this was when Najib Razak (in a separate story) reportedly said PAS could have been playing politics with the issue of the arrest of the two UMNO supporters. As to NPR items, they outnumbered BAL plus OPP (F) and OPP (P) items.

Among the various election candidates, Abdullah Badawi was featured most frequently and prominently on TV3. He was in 10 (about 42%) of the top 3 items and 24 (about 34%) of all election items. None from the opposition appeared in any of the top 3 items.

In a way, TV3's idea of coverage was similar to TV1's—focus on the BN and give much of the remaining airtime to NPR items. But while TV1 basically ignored the opposition, TV3 was interested in the opposition mainly for negative stories about them. As the most watched free-to-air TV station in the country, TV3 certainly gave BN a huge outlet to bombard the public with their propaganda, while leaving the public largely with a negative view of the opposition. In this sense, TV3 outperformed TV1 in cheerleading for the BN.

ntv7: A flicker of fairer journalism

	BN (F)	BN (P)	BN (N)	OPP (F)	OPP (P)	OPP (N)	BAL	NPR	Total
Top 3	5	5	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1	3	15*
Items	(33.3%)	(33.3%)					(6.7%)	(20%)	(100%)

All	13	6	0	2	0	3	6	6	36
Items	(36.1%)	(16.6%)	(0%)	(5.6%)	(0%)	(8.3%)	(16.7%)	(16.7%)	(100%)

* The one other item, which appeared on 15 March, was on the fatal Piper 28 plane crash in Malaysia.

ntv7 also carried most items about the BN, with close to 53% of all items and about 67% of the top 3 items on BN(F) and BN(P). Its coverage of the opposition also did not fare any better than the other two stations. Compared to TV3, ntv7 carried about 8% of OPP (N) items (compared to 14% for TV3 and about 2% for TV1) and proportionally about the same amount of NPR items (bear in mind ntv7 did not run English bulletins on Saturdays and Sundays).

However, ntv7 carried a significantly larger amount of BAL items, about 17% compared to less than 2% each by TV1 and TV3. It also had the lowest number of items featuring Abdullah Badawi, i.e., 5 (about 33%) of the top 3 items and 6 (about 17%) of all the items. But not one of the top 3 items featured any of the opposition candidates.

Although ntv7 was more willing than the other two stations to present balanced news items, it showed only a flicker of a fairer, more balanced journalism. A lot more was needed in its OPP (F) and OPP (P) coverage.

BN propagandists

The above findings quite clearly show that the state-run taxpayer supported station (TV1) and the most-watched private station (TV3) gave a much more lavish and positive coverage to the BN than the opposition. They performed as BN propagandists not journalists striving to be fair and balanced to inform the public adequately on the election, a major pillar of democratic governance.

The idea of fair and balanced coverage is not some lofty, unattainable ideal. It is achievable. Indeed, ntv7, the newest of the three stations studied, showed it could be done with its larger amount of balanced news items. However, if only ntv7 did not also give that much more coverage to BN than the opposition.

And so, taking the inadequacy of ntv7 and the BN propagandist role performed by TV1 and TV3, these major TV stations contributed to the election being fought in a highly unlevel playing field that overwhelmingly favoured the BN. They, therefore, have to be held partly responsible for holding back democratic advancements in Malaysia.

This is the first of a two-part analysis on the media coverage during the 2004 Malaysian general election campaign

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