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Propagandists For The BN (Part 2)

***The Star and the NST could learn a thing or two from theSun - though, overall, journalistic integrity was in short supply***

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Aliran Monthly 2004:6

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In [Part I](#), the focus was on coverage of the 11th general election on 21 March by TV1, TV3 and ntv7 (AM24:5). The main findings revealed that they acted as propagandists for the Barisan Nasional although ntv7 showed a flicker of a fairer, more balanced coverage. We now turn to how the New Straits Times, *The Star* and *theSun* had covered the election.

But, first, a couple of reminders:

Newspapers showed scant interest in fair coverage.

One is that the main aim of this study is to come up with data systematically gathered to show to what extent the papers were unfair and unbalanced in their coverage. Points or arguments could then be better or more objectively made. Some comparison of the coverage by the three papers was also made. It also helps to see how candidate Abdullah Badawi was covered. Before the election, he was seen as merely being handed down the premiership by Mahathir Mohamed. He needed 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. The election was very important to him.

The other reminder is that the following denotations are used throughout:

- “BN stands for Barisan Nasional,
- “OPP” for all parties opposed to the BN (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).

- “F” stands for focus as in items focusing on the BN;
- “P” for positive as in items supportive of or positive towards 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).

The three papers’ coverage was studied from 14 to 21 March. *theSun* normally did not publish on Sundays, but made exceptions for 14 and 21 March. Only regular sections of the papers were examined. Election pull-out sections were dropped, e.g. guides to the list of candidates contesting where and score charts. Mere quotes from election candidates or observers accompanied by pictures of them were also ignored.

Four specific items of coverage were examined: news, opinions, letters to the editor, and pictures. The front page of the papers was also looked into, especially for news items and pictures, to get some idea what were considered most important items of the day. Opinion items comprise analyses, editorials, commentaries, etc. Large or small pictures (as small as a mug shot) were included. But cartoons, such as those by LAT, were excluded.

““ The most biased or the least fair and balanced in coverage was *The Star*. This was followed by NST, and then *theSun*. ””

## NEWS ITEMS: Papers project the BN

### ALL NEWS ITEMS

	BN(F)	BN(P)	BN(N)	OPP(F)	OPP(P)	OPP(N)	BAL	NPR	TOTAL
<b>NST</b>	92 (29.6%)	54.5 (17.5%)	2 (0.6%)	27 (8.7%)	4 (1.3%)	20.5 (6.6%)	55 (17.7%)	56 (18%)	311 (100%)
<b>STAR</b>	200 (36.6%)	109 (20%)	4 (0.7%)	41 (7.5%)	3 (0.5%)	39 (7.1%)	68 (12.4%)	83 (15.2%)	547 (100%)
<b>SUN</b>	42 (24.3%)	28 (16.2%)	7 (4%)	26 (15%)	1 (0.6%)	8 (4.6%)	36 (20.8%)	25 (14.5%)	173 (100%)

### FRONT-PAGE NEWS ITEMS

	BN(F)	BN(P)	BN(N)	OPP(F)	OPP(P)	OPP(N)	BAL	NPR	TOTAL
<b>NST</b>	6 (24%)	5.5 (22%)	2 (8%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	1.5 (6%)	1 (4%)	5 (20%)	25* (100%)
<b>STAR</b>	4 (30.8%)	2 (15.4%)	1 (7.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (15.4%)	0 (0%)	13** (100%)

<b>SUN</b>	6	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	8
	(75.0%)	(0%)	(0%)	(0%)	(0%)	(0%)	(12.5%)	(12.5%)	(100%)

\* 3 were not election related: 2 on the Piper 28 plane crash and 1 on the shooting of Taiwan's presidential candidate.

\*\* 4 were not election related: 2 on the fatal crash of Piper 28, one on the weather for the F1 race also on 21 March, and the other one on the attempted shooting of Taiwan's presidential candidate.

NST and *The Star* carried an overwhelmingly larger amount of BN(F) plus BN(P) than OPP(F) plus OPP(P) items, far outnumbering even BAL items. It is the same with front-page items. Only one OPP(F) made the front page of the NST, while none made in that of *The Star*.

NST carried about 10 times more negative items on the opposition than the BN. Of the two BN(N) items, one was on the front page on 14 March about an UMNO candidate in Johor disqualified on nomination day and the other on 18 March about two UMNO members arrested allegedly for bribing PAS members to quit the election.

Among opposition parties, NST gave the most coverage to PAS (at 10.5 PAS-focused items), followed by DAP (at 8.5). There were only three Keadilan (or PKN) -focused items, which were actually two less than Independent (IND) focused items.

But NST also gave PAS the most number of negative items at 14.5, followed by PKN at 3.5, and DAP at 2.5. That it is an UMNO-connected paper and UMNO's main rivals for Malay votes were PAS and PKN would support the claim that the daily gave most negative coverage to PAS and negligible but still mainly negative coverage to PKN.

As for *The Star*, a reason for its conspicuously larger number of BN(F) or BN(P) items was that about 98% of all items appearing in "Metro" and "Section Two" sections were focused on or positive towards MCA candidates such as Chew Mei Fun and Lim Boo Chang. This MCA-owned paper showed hardly any interest in journalistic integrity by turning those sections into what some called MCA newsletters.

Of all the OPP(F) items, *The Star* had the most on DAP (with 20 items), followed by PAS (14.5 items), PKN (4.5 items) and Independent candidates (2 items). Two of the three OPP(P) items were on PAS while the remaining one was split between DAP and PKN for getting support from some members of the Malaysian Trades Union Congress.

Two major conclusions could be made. First, where PAS was given a positive coverage, it was about the party in Terengganu and Kelantan. The paper appeared to give PAS the benefit of the doubt on how it would fare against the BN as it won both states in the 1999 election.

Second, the paper had the most OPP(N) items on the DAP (with 17.5 items), followed by PAS (13.5 items) and PKN (8 items). It had only three fewer DAP(N) items than DAP(F) plus DAP(P) items. Readers thus got a very mixed view of DAP. Compare this to the previous finding of how "Metro" and "Section Two" pages were devoted almost entirely to MCA candidates and an unmistakable impression was conveyed. While the MCA paper cast a glowing spotlight on the MCA, it targeted DAP as MCA's most serious challenger as much for focus as for criticism.

Compared to *The Star* and NST, *theSun* gave a different coverage in at least five areas. It had

the fewest BN(F) and BN(P) items and the fewest OPP(N) items. But it had the most OPP(F) plus OPP(P) items and the most BAL items. It even had the most BN(N) items, suggesting it was most secure with critical coverage of the BN.

*theSun* thus gave proportionally the most OPP(F) plus OPP(P) items as well as BAL items, and the least amount of OPP(N) items. Unlike *The Star*, which showed the most bias against the opposition in those areas.

This was unlike *The Star*, which showed the most bias, of the three dailies, against the opposition in those areas. *theSun* also had the most OPP(F) plus OPP(P) items on DAP (with 16 items), followed by PAS (7.5 items) and PKN (1.5 items). This order was similar to that of *The Star*'s. But, *theSun* had only 5.5 negative DAP items (compared to 17.5 in *The Star*), 1 negative PAS item (compared to 13.5) and 1.5 negative PKN items (compared to 8).

Apart from giving a large amount of space to BN(F) and BN(P) items, *theSun*, like the other two papers, did not front page any news items on the opposition. It even outdid the other two by having 75% of the news items focusing on and positive towards the BN on the front page, compared to about 46% each in NST and *The Star*.

## OPINIONS & LETTERS: Hardly anything critical

### OPINION ITEMS

	BN(F)	BN(P)	BN(N)	OPP(F)	OPP(P)	OPP(N)	BAL	NPR	TOTAL
<b>NST</b>	6 (15.8%)	21.5* (56.6%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.6%)	0 (0%)	3.5* (9.2%)	4 (10.5%)	2 (5.3%)	38 (100%)
<b>STAR</b>	1.5 (4.2%)	11 (30.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (19.4%)	12 (33.3%)	4.5 12.5%	36 (100%)
<b>SUN</b>	0 (0%)	6 (30%)	0 (0%)	1 (5.0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	12 (60%)	1 (5.0%)	20 (100%)

\* Half an opinion piece criticised PAS while the other half praised the BN.

NST ran close to a whopping 75% of all opinion items focusing on or positive towards the BN, with slightly more than half positive. BAL opinion items came in at only 10.5%. Most of the opinion items on the opposition were negative. Out of the 3.5 OPP(N) opinion items, 2.5 were negative on PAS.

The pattern is also largely true of the letters published. Of the 17 letters about the BN, only one was negative towards it, complaining generically about some BN elected representatives as not responsive to public complaint. But it was the other way around for the opposition. The letter with half OPP(N) and half OPP(F) slammed PAS for attacking Syed Husin Ali of the Parti Rakyat as a socialist on the one hand and regretted his withdrawal from contesting a seat in Kota Baru on the other. Of the remaining 11 OPP(N) letters, 9 ripped PAS, 1 DAP, and the

other the opposition in general.

With the NST having the most negative opinion items and letters on PAS among the opposition, it further backs the claim that the anti-PAS coverage by the UMNO-connected paper was no mere coincidence.

Meanwhile, *The Star* ran about equal amounts of opinions on BN(F) plus BN(P) and on BAL. It had only negative opinion on the opposition. Of the seven OPP(N) items, 3 ripped the DAP, 3.5 the PAS and the other 0.5 the PKN

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

	BN(F)	BN(P)	BN(N)	OPP(F)	OPP(P)	OPP(N)	BAL	NPR	TOTAL
<b>NST</b>	5 (11.6%)	11 (25.6%)	1 (2.3%)	0.5 (1.2%)	0 (0%)	11.5 (26.7%)	8 (18.6%)	6 (14.0%)	43 (100%)
<b>STAR</b>	0 (0%)	6 (42.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	3 (21.4%)	4 (28.6%)	14 (100%)
<b>SUN</b>	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	3 (37.5%)	3 (37.5%)	8 (100%)

Letters in *The Star* also showed a strongly positive view towards the BN. There were even twice as many BN(P) letters than BAL letters. Only one letter was on the opposition, and was critical of the opposition in general.

*theSun* again had a different idea in presenting opinions and letters to the editor. While similar to the other two dailies in providing a substantial amount of opinion items positive towards the BN, a good majority of its opinion items were, however, balanced ones. It also offered neither a BN(N) or OPP(N) opinion item. As for the letters, *theSun* had equal numbers of BAL and NPR letters, with each more than BN(N) as well as OPP(N) letters.

*theSun* thus appears more secure in striving for balanced or fairness in presenting opinion items and letters. Even though it has far fewer readers and lower advertising rates, it has more guts than NST and especially *The Star* (the largest selling English daily) in trying to serve the public with more diverse, balanced viewpoints.

## PICTURES: Painting a thousand words for the BN

### PICTURE ITEMS

	BN (F)	BN (N)	PAS (F)	PAS (N)	DAP (F)	DAP (N)	PKN (F)	PKN (N)	IND (F)	IND (P)	BAL	NPR	Total
<b>NST</b>	128 <i>67.7%</i>	1 <i>0.53%</i>	15.5 <i>8.2%</i>	2 <i>1.06%</i>	9 <i>4.8%</i>	1 <i>0.53%</i>	6.5 <i>3.44%</i>	0 <i>0%</i>	4 <i>2.1%</i>	0 <i>0%</i>	15 <i>7.94%</i>	7 <i>3.7%</i>	189 <i>100%</i>
<b>STAR</b>	326 <i>76.7%</i>	0 <i>0%</i>	15 <i>3.5%</i>	2 <i>0.5%</i>	16 <i>3.8%</i>	0 <i>0%</i>	11 <i>2.6%</i>	0 <i>0%</i>	1 <i>0.2%</i>	0 <i>0%</i>	24 <i>5.6%</i>	30 <i>7.1%</i>	425 <i>100%</i>
<b>SUN</b>	56 <i>56%</i>	0 <i>0%</i>	13 <i>13%</i>	0 <i>0%</i>	11 <i>11%</i>	0 <i>0%</i>	8 <i>8%</i>	0 <i>0%</i>	2 <i>2%</i>	0 <i>0%</i>	6 <i>6%</i>	4 <i>4%</i>	100 <i>100%</i>

NST gave a substantial amount of pictures to the BN; the one negative BN picture was on the UMNO candidate in Johor disqualified on nomination day. The paper also carried at least one picture pertaining to the BN everyday on its front page, ending up with a total of 27 pictures out of 30 (the other three were of a pilot killed in the crash of the Piper 28 plane, the incumbent presidential candidate in Taiwan slightly wounded in a shooting, and a cartoon). None of the pictures of the opposition made NST's front page.

Pictures of Abdullah appeared on NST's front page on 15, 17, 20, and 21 March. On the other five days, he was on page 2. All his pictures were in colour, except for three used with an opinion piece penned by NST Group editor-in-chief Kalimullah on 21 March in the op-ed page. Pictures in the op-ed page are typically in black and white.

No other candidates from the BN, let alone the opposition parties, got such a prominent visual display. It supports the argument that the BN used candidate Abdullah as their charm offensive. The UMNO-connected NST could be argued as doing its part by giving him a pervasive visual presence to help him win a big mandate at the polls.

As for *The Star*, it was clearly interested in only pictures of the BN but comparatively little interest in pictures of the opposition. Two were negative pictures towards PAS (one of 3 Chinese men drinking beer in the vicinity of a PAS operations room in Terengganu and the other of a sparse crowd at a PAS ceramah to give a negative impression). Readers were thus constantly reminded of the BN but would have to look hard for pictures of the opposition.

Pictures of Abdullah Badawi were on the front page on six days (14, 15, 16, 18, 19, and 21 March) and on the second page on the other two days (17 and 20 March). All were in colour.

The MCA paper also gave prominent visual presence to MCA president Ong Ka Ting, though not as prominently as Abdullah. There was at least a picture of Ong everyday of the campaign, appearing on page 2 on 15, 16 and 18 March. His pictures were also in colour.

Over in *theSun*, a substantial number of BN-related pictures were also published, but less than NST and *The Star*. Pictures of Abdullah, all in colour, were also conspicuous, though less so

compared to the other two papers. Abdullah was on the front page only on three campaign days – 14, 15 and 16 March – and on the second page on 14, 18, 19, 20 and 21 March. No pictures of the opposition made the front page of theSun either.

But, again, major differences between *theSun* and the other two dailies can be found. It had significantly more pictures of candidates from PAS, DAP, or PKN. Unlike *The Star*, which ran proportionally the fewest pictures of any of these three parties, indicating, yet again, how much of a BN propaganda organ this MCA-owned paper was. Also, *theSun* is the only paper that did not carry any negative pictures of any of the opposition.

### **Conclusion: Lack of journalistic integrity**

The three English-language papers clearly showed bias towards the BN in all four coverage items: news, opinions, letters to the editor and pictures. The most biased or the least fair and balanced in coverage was *The Star*. This was followed by NST, and then *theSun*.

The MCA paper was somewhat like TV3. While TV3 is the most watched TV channel, The Star is the largest selling English daily. And both were the most zealous (among their respective media type) in promoting the BN. The paper's lack of journalistic integrity was seen on several occasions in its crude promotion of MCA candidates or in its eagerness to slam the DAP.

While *The Star* targeted the DAP, among the opposition, for criticism, NST had its crosshair on PAS. No need to think they colluded to take on the two major opposition parties. Rather, they acted very much like puppets with their strings being pulled directly or indirectly by UMNO, in the case of NST, or by MCA, in the case of *The Star*. To hell then with journalistic fairness and independence as a way for democratic enhancement.

As for *theSun*, which offered the fairest and most balanced coverage, it was the same as ntv7 for showing that fair and balanced coverage is not some lofty, pie-in-the-sky idea. Rather, it is do-able. *theSun* could thus teach the other two richer, larger advertising-endowed papers a lesson or two in journalistic integrity. But, while encouraging, its performance does not offer much to shout about as it was measured against the other two papers that showed scant interest in fair and balanced coverage.

### [Part 1: Propagandists for the BN](#)

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

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